

EDITORIAL

Makerere must find lasting solution to campaign disruptions

The memory of 2022 when a student was killed during campaigns for guild presidency at Makerere University have never faded.

That incident prompted the university leadership to suspend all physical campaigning and resort to candidates seeking votes virtually.

This modus operandi lasted until this year when Makerere attempted to revert to the old known system where candidates conduct public rallies and visit halls of residence, hostels and faculties.

Last week, chaos broke out as candidates sought the mandate of students. The debate, organised by the university's electoral commission, was suspended about an hour after it began when rival supporters clashed in the audience.

In a March 28 statement, the electoral commission chairperson, Ms Maureen Owomugisha, warned that any student who defies the directive risks disciplinary action, including disqualification.

"All students' guild elections shall be conducted virtually unless otherwise determined by the university student council," the statement said.

The commission also banned acts such as physical campaigning, violence, hooliganism, and defacement of university property, warning that offenders could face suspension from the university and exclusion from the electoral process.

The disruption marks a setback to efforts by the university to restore open student political engagement after years of restrictions on physical campaigning.

Without any effort to educate candidates and students over an extended period, the same scenes will be repeated the next time physical campaigns are allowed.

To win elections at all levels in Uganda, it has become a 'do or die' scenario. Candidates do whatever it takes to emerge as winners in politics.

This involves the use of violence to distort the normal voting process by unscrupulous candidates, by creating loopholes to win elections dishonestly.

There must be a renewed commitment to a free and fair election and to building faith in the voting process. Most of the violent incidents that arise from feelings of unfairness or impropriety are often strong motivators for violence during and following elections.

There is a need to develop and disseminate comprehensive programmes of education, starting well before each election and continuing throughout the election process.

If the institutions did so, extreme opinions amongst students would be reduced so that they can listen to one another in order to appreciate the contrasting opinions of all the parties involved.

The idea of a joint debate that Makerere tried last week is welcome, but should such a platform only come after nomination? Maybe not. The exercise must be almost permanent throughout the year.

Generalised campaigns that target the wider university community can emphasise the importance of a peaceful election and encourage peaceful behaviour.

The issue:

Guild polls.

Our view:

We, therefore, hope that in pursuit of democracy, the university will develop and disseminate comprehensive programmes of education, starting before each election and continuing throughout the election process.

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