

Queries as Electoral Commission bans phones at polling stations

The measure. The EC says phones can only be on during tallying.

BY FREDERIC MUSISI
musisif@ug.nationmedia.com

KAMPALA. An advisory issued on Friday by the Electoral Commission banning the use of mobile phones and other handheld gadgets at polling stations on polling day has provoked jitters from the public, civil society groups and political parties, who are questioning its motive and logic.

EC chairman Badru Kiggundu neither provided reasons for the ban nor quoted any specific law but simply said voters, representatives of political parties and observers should just switch off their phones once they enter the polling area.

"When you reach the polling area switch the phone off, vote and leave, do not start negotiating or making calls within the polling area," he told journalists, claiming it is an international practice.

The advisory issued four days to the polls, has left a bitter taste especially against the backdrop of the "credibility crisis" that the electoral body is suffering from.

Constitutional lawyer Wandera Ogalo, argued yesterday, the advisory "reinforces what the public already knows that [Mr] Kiggundu has never been and is not independent."

"He issued that order on behalf of someone," Mr Ogalo said. "It is only intended to limit information flow because they want to achieve a certain agenda. The ban infringes on many

rights of the voters, journalists, and candidates' agents."

With a mobile phone or any other internet enabled gadget, he argued, the EC knows the people and candidates' agents are going to photograph declaration sheets and tally sheets, and share them with the polling agents to take record of the results bit by bit and this is in their disfavour. "In otherwards if phones are banned, it means everyone will have to rely on the results as disseminated by the EC."

Opposition candidates had already urged people to take photographs of people they suspect are not voters at polling stations and also use mobile phones to record every action at the polling stations during voting.

Mr Crispy Kaheru, the Coordinator

of Citizens' Coalition for Electoral Democracy in Uganda (CCEDU), said if the EC has embraced technology in the electoral process by introducing the Biometric Voter Verification System and Electronic Transmission, then it defeats logic to ban mobile phones.

"That ban doesn't auger well at a time like this. Disallowing phones is unfair; the electoral process being a delicate one and I think EC knowing it well should only ensure that everything runs smoothly without being seen as if hiding something."

Ec spokesperson Jotham Taremwa told *Sunday Monitor* the ban "strictly" applies during the voting process but during tallying, mobile phones and other handheld devices will be allowed.

Why it applies to only voting, Mr Taremwa said, "it is to avoid circumstances of exposing the voters' choices."

The press and outreach officer of the European Union Election Observation Mission to Uganda, Ms María José Gámez, said they will adhere to the advisory but added, "since we will do an assessment of the EC after the elections, this will be reflected in the report on any impacts if any."

A spokesperson of presidential candidate Amama Mbabazi's Go-Forward camp, Maggie Lukowe, described the EC advisory as an extension of the "everyday impunity."

The FDC external relations coordinator, Mr Sam Makhoha, similarly expressed contempt for the advisory arguing that if it is not catered for anywhere in Ugandan laws.

"There is no way it can apply during the electoral process and most critically if it is being issued in the evening to the polls."

The spokesperson of NRM secretariat, Mr Rogers Mulindwa, said as long as the decision is by EC and it adds to the transparency of the process they will abide by it. "Our support is massive and out there, not in using mobile phones at the polling stations."