

*Full Length Research Paper*

# Multiparty politics dynamics in Uganda

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In liberal democracy, it is obvious political parties play a critical role in deepening democratic process. Besides, providing veritable avenue for popular participation, they are celebrated mechanism for political mobilization, guiding policy formulation, implementation and much more significant guards against dictatorship. In Uganda, there is evidence that political parties have not been adequately institutionalized. This can be seen in a manner in which they have process in the country. The efforts of political parties to woo supporters in the hope of making a mark at various levels of government, overheats the polity. This been attempting to foster democratic governance in the past and how their current revival to practice multiparty politics fails to strengthen democratic paper advances the position of political parties in furthering democracy in Uganda. It suggests that the current activities of political parties are ill equipped in broadening democratic dividends.

**Key words:** Political parties, democracy and governance.

## INTRODUCTION

### Background to party politics in Uganda

In modern societies Multipartism has proved to be the only viable and possible form of democracy which can address and key in various interests of the citizens to government agenda. In accordance with the Ugandan constitution all political parties are organized as national parties. Each of them is further organized at the various political units in the country such as districts, constituencies/county, Parishes and finally village levels. In this perspective political parties strive to organize branches in these political units. This is a strategic choice compelled by the need for effective mobilization of voters during elections. This electoral imperative has made the various branches of the political parties the most important organizational unit for parties in any democratic process in the country. Political parties became very significant as instrument in Uganda's democratic practice during the preparation transition of colonial rule to self rule in the 1950's. There were hardly many parties at the time but interestingly to note these parties were formed along religious line. Uganda People's Congress (UPC) was mainly dominated by protestant and Democratic Party (DP) attracted the Catholics. Other religious dominations such as Muslim became sympathizers to a party that promised to protect their interests (Karugire, 1980). But the bottom line was that all these parties nursed burning desires to protect and exercise democratic rights

which every person cherish on earth. The idea of self - determination was running fast in the minds of many. There is scarcely any doubt that political parties as institutions have been used and randomly condemned and vocally defended in Uganda. The military governments have been only too quick to decree their demise. However, it should be noted that political parties are generally considered as one of the major institutions that enhance the practice of democratic governance not only in Uganda but the world over. This is because competitive political party system provides physical ground for participation of citizens in the process of governance, in several ways. For example, various political office holders in different elective positions are drawn from the available political parties in the polity. In addition, to serving as mechanism of political mobilization, particularly during elections campaigns the ruling party is expected to trans-late its manifesto into public policies for general welfare of the citizens. While the opposition parties, on the other hand, in no way check the excess of the party in power, which influences governmental, decisions in the interest of the general public. In reality, political parties are central and critical to both installing and deepening of democratic process in any political system. Uganda's democratic experiences, over the years, however, appear to suggest that political parties have not significantly contributed to

cultivating democratic governance in the country. Most often, their activities especially during electoral contests, overheats the polity in ways which mainly affect the sustenance of democracy in the country. A number of factors can be mentioned in the attempt to explain the scenario. Suffice to say, however, that the apparent inadequate institutionalization of the country's political parties Institution can be severally held to account for this fluidity.

Perhaps it is correct to argue that, the philosophical foundations of political parties in Uganda have also added to the crisis of democratic governance in the country. In this perspective, one realizes that the structures and composition of political parties in the country do not portray national outlook. This is because they mostly reflect the appeal to some ethnic, tribal, religious and regional groups depending on the prevailing circumstances. Of recent particularly during the 2006 elections, the idea of independent candidate came up. Despite the fact that multiparty democracy was legally re-introduced in the country after being ban by NRM for nearly more than 20 years. This has made competition for political power very stiff leading to unhealthy pitting varied interests against each other. This greatly is responsible for the collapse of democratic experiments in the country, giving birth to seizure of political power by any means. The gravity of intra and inter - party crisis in the previous and current democratic experiments, needless to argue, sharply undermines the basic principles of democratic process and governance, which is built on freedom and rule of law. Thus, various research studies on the nature of party politics in Uganda reveal how the activities of political parties facilitate the construction of democracy. The objective of this paper against the preceding is: To provide vivid knowledge about party politics in Uganda. To explain the basic principle and fundamental rules of current political contest under multiparty. To analyze the level of institutionalization of political parties in the present national resistance movement (NRM) democratic dispensation, their weaknesses and what can be done to reposition parties in the country to help widen the scope of democratic governance.

From the above lenses the central thesis is that in spite of vested role political parties play in democratic process, these institutions in Uganda's context, have failed to exhibit desirable task of deepening democracy. The central questions answered in this paper are; how has been party politics in Uganda? Are political parties institutionalized? What are their critical weaknesses? The answers to these questions will enable our understanding the nature of multiparty democracy in the NRM era.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study has adopted a comprehensive historical theoretical framework to analyze the study in question. Thus, a contextual analysis is done with the aim of establishing the potential of political

parties in deepening democracy. This is reliable mainly based on content analysis. That is data is obtained through a critical and extensive examination of the available literature on the subject. Therefore, the primary source of data is mainly textbooks, magazines and internet sources.

## **POLITICAL PARTIES IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE**

Political parties have safely become an indispensable determinant of the nature of political interaction in most countries of the world. But there is no generally agreed theory which explains the origin of party politics. However, in this study political party will be seen in the prisms as institution of a social group with common goals, interests and ideologies struggling to gain political power. It is certainly true that political affiliation, political socialization and political attitudes of an individual are to a remarkable extent depend on his durable social ties. The existence of clear and well institutionalized political parties is basic perquisite for the growth and maintenance of representative form of democratic government. Evidence has shown that stable democratic processes like in developed countries in the west benefit from well articulated and competitive political system. For this reason, strong case has been made over the years about the potential of political parties in sowing democracy.

Authorities such as Dahl (1971), Inkles (1998) have highlighted the importance of party system in the promotion of democracy. For example, it is pointed out that: "whether or not a party system significantly contributes to the political process of a country is linked to several factors including the development and maintenance of party organization with the depth necessary for their operation, and the degree of institutionalization of the party as indicated by its historical roots survival and continued support". This submission suggests that, important as parties are, their mere existence, political parties within a democratic dispensation, do not necessarily translate into ideological foundation, capable of attracting citizens' support for their continued survival. The sustainability, longevity and vitality of democracy strives much to the ability of the party system in place to articulate freely, organize and set limits in the quest for the use of political power (Oyediran and Abaje, 1997). Thus, for the party system to be capable of discharging these roles effectively and efficiently, certain criteria, including autonomy complexity and coherence must be met (Ragsdale and John, 1997). Indeed, party system provides the framework within which the interests and demands of the citizens are aggregated and accomplished in a more transparent, participatory and credible manner. Therefore, political parties usually respond to wishes and aspirations of the people, by packaging them into party manifestos, as instruments of mobilization during election campaigns and as policy guideline if endorsed by citizens to govern.

Therefore, the role of parties is perhaps highly recognized when it is understood that democratic political system, itself is built on citizen's participation in the political process. Political parties are organized to provide fertile ground upon which participation of individual citizens and groups is assured. The active involvement of citizens in the political process is energized by the existing political parties in a several and many ways such as attending political rallies and meetings of the same and more importantly, contesting in any election or voting along party lines. Added to the above, is the recruitment into various political offices are effected on the ground of one's loyalty and commitment to the ruling party. On the other hand, opposition parties provide the platform in which the views of the minority groups are echoed using different channels of communication. Also, opposition parties, too, are critical and central in deepening and strengthening of democratic governance, in that they offer constructive criticism against the excesses of the ruling party. Thus, works as a credible tool for checks on undemocratic practices. However, it should be noted, effective citizen participation in the political processes of any political system is dependent in several favorable factors like free and fair election, observance of political rights and freedoms and efficient institutional autonomy (Parry and Moyer, 1994). Indeed, a number of scholars have argued that the efficient participation of citizens in any given political system is attributable to the prevailing character of political institution (Jackman and Ross, 1995). Thus, the tendency for both political actors whether aspirants or electorates, to be fully engaged, is contingent on such institutional factors such as party system, registration process and electoral laws among others, for instance, competitive party system engenders not only partisan mobilization but also serves as pivotal determine of the pattern of electoral participation and contributes greatly to increase turn over at polls (Calderira et al, 1998).

What makes the political parties special and unique is that they are directly engaged in the competition for the legal power positions, and there are several expressions of this basic contention in the political science literature. Robert Dahl, for example, points out that "a political party is first of all an organized attempt to get power. Power is here defined as control of the government. That is the objective of party organization. The fact that the party aims at the control of the government as a whole, distinguishes it from pressure groups." He stresses further that "Since control of a government is one of the most important things imaginable, it follows that a real party is one of the most significant organizations in society." Other writers wrote in a similar vein that "A party is any political group identified by an official label that presents at elections, and is capable of placing through elections ..., candidates for public office". These conceptions of Robert Dahl correspond well to the party concept used here, and political parties are thus more directly attached

to the legal power structure than any other type of organizations. Because of this role of political parties' people holding legal power positions usually belong to a party, and are thereby also controlled by that party to some extent. This control can however vary considerably from being very strong to being quite weak. This is significant since the more control a party has over its representatives in the legal decision - making bodies, the more the party as such can be considered as an actor in its own right in the political game. This also means, in other words, that strong party discipline has the important effect of reducing the number of actors in the political game considerably. Let us consider, as a theoretical extreme, a country in which the political parties are absolutely cohesive and disciplined. In such a case the party's control of its representatives in the executive and legislature is perfect. Whenever the party wants its representatives to behave in a certain way, for example to vote in a specific manner, they will do so. Although the representatives have all the legal power, they are completely in the hands of the party with its overriding influential power. In such a situation it is quite reasonable to consider the party as a unitary actor.

Truly, therefore, the operation of political parties in any political system, gives political enthusiasm, which makes them participative in the political process in their polity. It is perhaps correct to say that, political parties possess institutional capacity of persuading the masses, maximizing factors that influence political participation. For example, parties have potential bargaining power on an active legislature to influence the formation of public policies. It is therefore, imperative to contend that the effectiveness of the political system greatly lies on the parameter where people enjoy freedom to form, join and independently manage their political affairs. This broadens the political cyber place and widens the choice of popular ticket for participation by individual citizens based on their ideological conviction. However, it should be noted that sustenance of veritable and credible party politics in any democratic arrangement cannot be talked about unless there is institutional strength or capacity. Therefore, the mere re-revival of multi party democracy in Uganda without adequate clear will by the ruling party (NRM) that is abandoning its negative attitude of interference and restriction on the activities of political parties undermines the merits of multiparty system. No doubt this puts people oriented good governance far from reality. Important to note is that political parties must operate within the state regulatory framework which must be based on the core principle of rule of law which embeds equality, fairness and justice. This is very relevant to ensure institutional autonomy which should answer the challenges to democratic governance. This is because political parties emerge to engender freedom and popular participation in democratic process.

Therefore, political parties as mentioned earlier, provide linkage between government and its citizens as they

present candidates for competitive elections. But the way opposition parties are treated in the country particularly in regard to access to political resources and incentives and their ability to unite as a block against a common enemy in politics has always constituted a major setback to effective party politics in the country. Thus, parties remain fragmented and this renders them weak to construct concrete ad-hoc coalition to win election. This is ever aggravated by constant division and wrangles within parties themselves.

### **RETURN TO MULTIPARTY POLITICS IN UGANDA: STRENGTHENING OR WEAKENING DEMOCRATIC PROCESS.**

The idea whether the return to multiparty politics after almost two decades under no party politics in the country will deepen democratic process or not is an interesting issue, given the role of political parties in a political terrain. However, with a view to critically understand and analyze it one must come to terms with the structure of Ugandan society and the evolution political parties in the country. This is because the structure of Ugandan society has in some way impacted on the nature of party politics in the country. For example the plurality of Uganda which was occasioned by colonialist loosely amalgamated different societies together. It was such arrangement that right from the inception of political parties in the country were shaped along fluid, particularly as relates to the values of national integration, good governance and more importantly, the sustainability of democracy in the country. But it must be credited that earliest political parties such as Uganda National Congress (UNC), had the spirit of championing peoples' interests. This party was formed in 1952 with Musazi as its President. Besides, there had existed organizations like Uganda African Farmers Union whose primary concern among other things was to champion government policy particularly processing and marketing of cash crops. Along this party organization, there also existed Bataka Party which focused its interests on Buganda's land settlement. Although these organizations were formed on different background, they had common objective of fighting against Asian monopoly in economic activities in Uganda.

On the other hand, Uganda Peoples Congress (UPC) with Late Obote as its leader was formed in 1960 through merger of a section of Uganda National Congress (UNC) and Uganda People's Union a purportedly anti-Buganda political party whose main priority was to address the challenges of Buganda sub-nationalism and Buganda dominance in the independent Uganda (Kasozi, 1994). From this submission one can argue with little fear of contradiction that political parties in most cases are designed and governed by ideas to represent the interest of the masses or its members but political parties place emphasis on religious loyalties and ethnic leanings. This strongly suggests that parties were balkanized along regional, ethnic and religious lines. This no doubt greatly

affects institutionalization of political parties in the country.

### **PARTY POLITICS UNDER NATIONAL RESISTANCE MOVEMENT (NRM): AN APPRAISAL**

Since the installation of democratic governance in Uganda in 1996, a lot of attentions have been placed on the nature and forms of political institutions that could construct a strong democratic government in the country. On attaining political power in 1986, NRM placed a complete ban on the operation of political parties and adopted a no party political system of governance which was popularly known as "all embracing/inclusive government" bringing about a kind of coalition government comprising officials from various political parties. But interesting to note is that this government had all the characteristics of a one party although the architect of it did not want to call it so and it existed for about fifteen years. However, political parties being a veritable institution in many democratic setting kept being a serious subject of analysis by critical individuals and groups in the country compelling the NRM government to hold a referendum about the same in 2000. This became a transition programme that ushered in revival of political parties in the country. The point to note here is that NRM which had been adamant for over a decade about the key role multiparty politics plays in shaping of character and contents of government policies and programmes relaxed its muscles. This notwithstanding, the major political parties in Uganda such as Uganda Peoples' Congress and Democratic Party which enjoyed mass support had for long been set with several ailments whose consequences may be monumental.

Regrettably, political parties under NRM seem to lack convincing manifestoes and also appear not to be committed to the implementation of their party programmes for the general well-being of the citizens. The political parties are merely seen by staunch supporters as a means of acquiring political power and wealth, often for private interest but not as a mechanism to transform society. This is evidenced by internal political crisis that characterize various political parties in the country. The common crises that emerge from personal clashes, has led to break or movement of individuals from one political organization to another or forming a new one for no constructive reason. This has weakened political parties in Uganda as a way of deepening democratic governance. For instance, Col. Dr Kizza Besigye a leading exponent and one of the founding father/fighter for NRM, consequent upon dissatisfaction with NRM government formed a new party, Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) and there have been many persons cross-carpeting to different political parties for personal interests. This practice or exercise raises salient questions about the crucial role of political organization/party in the country. Also, two parallel tendencies which presently tend to

dominate party politics processes in Uganda, candidates at any level of elective position - are either elected or chosen. First, it is true that candidates vying for their parties' at any level of elections in Uganda do campaign vigorously and extensively. However, money undoubtedly plays a major role in the final choice of candidates; because each candidate must have adequate funds to build a campaign machine, produce a range of advertising such as posters to sell him/her self, tour the constituencies, as well as influence candidates before and during the party delegates' congresses or primaries. The electorate's demand for material incentives at every level of the party organization inflates the expenditure level of candidates competing in an election. Hence electoral political activities have become so expensive that candidates are increasingly relying on 'money bags' - wealthy political entrepreneurs to finance their campaigns. It is to mitigate the escalation in the cost of election campaigns that there have been incessant calls across the spectrum of political parties for state funding of political parties. Naturally therefore it is the candidate who is able to sell him/herself who stands the chance of winning. Organizational skills are important; but money is the critical wheel now in Uganda on which any successful democratic organization moves. The power of money has become a decisive factor in Ugandan politics and elections in particular.

Secondly, there is a growing tendency for the party headquarters to impose candidates for constituency elections which in one way is in complete disregard of local preferences. This tendency manifests itself at the party primaries when a candidate is chosen, and has led many contestants to loose election in their constituencies and in some cases this has resulted into internal party rift. Interestingly, quite often when a local favorite is by - passed in the primaries, the unsuccessful candidate has decided to contest the parliamentary elections as an independent candidate and many with overwhelming support of the masses have had to win the elections against the wish of the party.

Critically looking at the various political parties in Uganda, excluding Democratic Party (DP), have had the spirit of hatching a common platform in the 2011 election like Kenya's Narc coalition which brought Mwai Kibaki of Kenya to political power. This platform has more external than internal interests vested in it. At the time when Narc was formed, neither of the parties faced an internal leadership crisis, as it is in the parties nursing ambition to front a common candidate in Uganda. The problem with this kind of arrangement is that once questions of leadership come up, the alliance quickly disintegrates. Uniquely, Kenya was saved partly by two other institutions that retained functionality during the crisis; the military and the civil service.

One of Uganda's oldest parties, the Democratic Party (DP), began with an unnecessary battle to replace its elected Secretary General Richard Ottoo who left the

country and returned to the United States. It is important to note that, Democratic Party (DP) has the least capacity to engage in muscular battles, but it has always stuck to its principle of truth and justice. However, the current President General of Democratic Party (DP), Sebaana Kizito appear to be retiring well ahead of the 2011 election as a result of failing to canvas mass support country wide. One would think failure to sell his candidature countrywide has been a disservice to the party. Uganda's largest opposition party, the Forum for Democratic Change which has outplayed the oldest parties such as UPC, DP and CP appears to be ready for any party cooperation. But the major problem is the leadership crisis that lingers in these parties. Uganda Peoples' Congress once the strongest and dominant party which held power twice has undoubtedly lost proper skills to capture mass support. Important to note is that though opposition parties nurse the spirit of fronting a single candidate in the 2011 presidential election, they remain suspicious of each other and therefore no party is willing to surrender its position for their common enemy. The 2011 election is a very important election which seems to be all about a change, and turning a page of parties' strength in Uganda. We have heard most of the arguments and counter - arguments about Museveni's conduct in the great lakes region in influencing politics, his bush war and what followed. It is perhaps correct to argue that Museveni and his Political party (National Resistance Movement-Organization (NRM-O)) seem to be on the vague of collapse, given the fact that it has abandoned its original mission of the "Ten point Programme" which was its primary focal point to follow in its discharge of state affairs. With this dilemma, the country is desperate for change and needs new choices for competent presidential personnel. But the determination for NRM to grip on power and the unpopular figure nurturing the urge to acquire political positions in the political arena has been made to breed political thugs and militias who are mainly employed to intimidate and unleash violence among political opponents in the quest to win election. For example, the "Kalangala Action Plan (KAP) led by Kakoza Mutale has been alleged or labeled as a coercive and intimidating arm of the NRM which is charged with the responsibility of conscripting the masses into submission to offer support to NRM government. This kind of scenario undermines dividends of multi party democracy. More importantly, opposition politicians basing on President's Museveni's determination to hold onto power in 2011, no doubt has painted a bleak picture of Uganda's multiparty democracy (monitor, Friday, January 2, 2009).

Added to this, technically, President Museveni's style of leadership through the National Resistance Movement caucus in Parliament to get his will done has unwittingly destroyed the institution rendering it to be a rubber stamp organ of government which cannot question the executive and therefore has greatly hampered Uganda's democratic

progress.

## Conclusion

This paper examined the nature and dynamic character of party politics in the democratic process in Uganda. As important as political parties are, particularly in deepening democratic governance, their function in broadening the scope of democratic process in Uganda has not been received with two hands. Significantly, they have promoted divisionism among citizens in the process to acquire and consolidate political power in the country. This largely accounts for failure in achieving genuine multiparty democracy in the country. As discussed, the cross - carpeting from one party to another on personal clashes and interests casts doubts to strengthen and provide readiness of political parties in Uganda to sustain the current democratic experiment. Furthermore, the inter - party conflict mainly coming from unequal distribution of political resources and incentives stands as a major factor responsible for the weakness of political parties in Uganda. More importantly, lack of respect and recognition of the opposition views by the ruling party, undermines democratic values, which in most cases breeds antagonism and makes political institutions in the country very weak.

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