



Unleashing Potential

Policy Brief 006

**MASSIVE VOTER EDUCATION AS
A PIVOTAL PREVENTIVE TOOL
TO VIOLENCE IN 2021 ELECTIONS IN
UGANDA;
A QUESTION OF ELECTION FUNDING**

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Preventing Election Violence in Uganda

Executive Statement

Voter education is an important aspect that promotes the credibility of an election as it empowers citizens with knowledge on how to exercise their right to vote in any election with acceptable voter behaviour and integrity. In the previous General Elections in Uganda, violence was cited at almost every level of election. Election periods are critical moments that need a tactical approach to register free, fair, safe and secure elections. It is the mandate of the Electoral Commission to organize, conduct and supervise free and fair elections.

The Covid-19 pandemic situation has dictated the scientific manner in which the 2021 elections have to be organized by embracing and observing all the Standard Operating Procedures(SOPs) emphasized by the Ministry of Health in Uganda so as to permit secure and safe elections. This necessitates the use of law enforcement officers during elections coupled with the massive civic education even on the polling days to minimize election violence. . Sensitization should be extended to all stakeholders including the electorates, polling officers, security agencies, election observers,

candidates or aspirants, special interest groups such as youth, women, People with Disabilities and other stakeholders. To avoid committing the same mistakes and ferocity over and over, massive voter education is not optional and huge funding must be accorded priority. *Candidates and aspirants should strictly follow the guidelines of the Electoral Commission and have voter safety and security management plans approved by the Electoral Commission in order to maximize the safety and credibility of 2021 elections.*

BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

Article 1 of the Constitution of Uganda provides that “All power belongs to the people who shall exercise their sovereignty in accordance with the constitution”, and that is; “The people shall express their will and consent on who shall govern them and how they should be governed through regular, free and fair elections of their representatives or referenda”. The Electoral Commission (EC) has the mandate to organize, conduct and supervise free and fair elections. This is usually done after five years under normal circumstances. The election period in Uganda is such exciting but tensional. Sometimes elections are marred by chaos and irregularities

even in the post-election periods as a result of candidates being dissatisfied with the election results, voter bribery, vote rigging and other forms of election fraud.

Uganda’s elections have been commercialized and are presumed to be an investment for returns with a minimum investment period of five years and unknown payback period and thus losing an election is seen as though it is a taboo.

Voters are used to handouts and petty gifts like sugar, soap, maize flour, beans, cooking oil and other consumables in exchange for their votes. Failure to give out these handouts by the aspiring candidate may result into no success registered. This trend kicks out competent but financially handicapped would-be leaders from the political race but only to choose incapable though financially strong candidates. Voters are so ignorant about the consequences of voting incompetent leaders, the adverse effects of voter fraud and electing opportunists. They are naive of what to consider before choosing candidates who are not suitable for high profile leadership positions. *Voters are used as vessels for political success and later on dumped.* Voters are the major victims as they sometimes lose their lives while fighting for their dear candidates. One of the causes of this, is the insufficient voter education.

For an election to be successful and democratic, voters must; (i) understand their rights and responsibilities (ii) have sufficient knowledge of the election process following the election road map and (iii) understand the roles and acceptable voter behaviour before, during and after elections.

‘In every general election, the Electoral Commission usually endeavours to improve its performance and service delivery though there is always insufficient funding to have the best level of voter education which accentuates the existence of several controllable loopholes in pre, during as well as in post-election periods. These include election violence which the EC can overcome if voter education is intensely funded to create a remarkable change in voter behaviour. Even though the election processes often involve malpractices, loss of lives and ascension of incompetent leaders into power, it is inevitable to have them since they are conventionally the most trusted virtuous features of a modern democratic society. Election violence was evident in the general elections of 2001, 2006, 2011 and 2016 and it is most likely to happen in 2021 if there is no massive injection of funding in nation-wide

voter education in Uganda. In the recently concluded party primaries, malpractices and violence were intense. Perpetrators of violence were imprisoned and some sustained injuries. These consequences indicate that there is need for massive voter education as the pivotal preventive tool to 2021 election violence because Uganda needs free, fair, secure and safe credible elections. This has always been and still remains the major goal of the Electoral Commission.

Election violence in Uganda

To win elections in Uganda, it has become a ‘do or die’ scenario. Candidates do whatever it takes to emerge winners in politics. This involves use of violence to distort the normal voting process by unscrupulous candidates by creating loopholes to dishonestly win elections. On many occasions, aspiring candidates ferry voters from other areas who cause confusion and violence at the polling stations claiming they are denied their right to vote for their candidate or they create anarchy if their candidate loses. *The main fueling factor for election violence and malpractices is the mentality that politics is a source of wealth and employment.* Aspiring candidates invest a lot of money in

elections expecting huge returns upon political success. Aspiring candidates are the masterminds of election violence since they lead their electorates to violence upon dissatisfaction. Practices of sectarianism, malice, defacing posters, abusing others, beatings and other demeanors reduce the credibility of elections.

Election violence especially in urban centers of Kampala, Wakiso, Jinja, Arua, Bushenyi, Mbarara, Mbale, Gulu, Lira and in suburbs and trading centres, involves fighting such as between voters (voter to voter), voter to election officials, agent to agent, agent to election officials, voter to security officers, voter to candidate and candidate to candidate physical fighting. These consequently lead to loss of lives, body impairments and disabilities, damages and nullification of the polls. *The physical assaults, damages and cancellation of the elections not only cause personal, family or community setbacks but precede economic inhibitions to the country.* This is because the Electoral Commission has to organize by-elections that call for huge financial injections and hence it has to make supplementary adjustments in its budget to manage such circumstances and this is a mockery

to its reputation. This calls for Electoral Commission's intervention to invigorate voter education to outwit politicians who may use voters' ignorance to carry out violence in elections.

Most of the voters are not aware of the implications of election malpractices. This is why such tendencies like voter bribery occur without forecasting the repercussions. The Electoral Commission and other key players in elections should ensure that the electorate is aware of the possible forms of voter bribery or election anomalies and how these can be avoided.

Voters are for example bribed with material items such as sugar, liquid cash and domestic consumables in a bid to induce them to support certain candidates. The voters presume the election period as a money making period while candidates consider it a period of sowing seeds of gold. Voters deduce that they vote to send people in political offices to 'eat money' rather than service delivery. With the disappointments,

they decide to revenge during the campaign period as though it is an opportune time to benefit from the leaders by asking for material gifts. No wonder, candidates are at times lured to borrow and finance their elections. Eventually, they have to ensure the debts are repaid. This is why they do not find time to mobilize resources for their electorate to develop their areas due to pressure to recover the amounts spent in elections. *Elections in Uganda have become a business as some people have a false belief that joining politics is a passport for getting free money.*

It is unlikely that the leaders can provide the needed services yet they have to encroach on the coffers of their respective offices or departments in order to recoup the amount lost during elections. Thus, elections are an investment to the extent that candidates first calculate the expected returns on investment in politics for the subsequent five years before they decide to contest. Such leaders can't be productive to the community since they largely become introverts; they use all the funds for personal benefits rather than social development. That's why leaders such as Local Council Chairpersons (LCs) who are supposed to ensure that social

services like roads, hospitals, water sources are constructed don't perform well and hence districts lag behind in development.

Possible legal implications upon violent voter behavior

During campaigns and election days, there is a lot of excitement among voters as they portray their support to candidates through awkward acts such as over speeding, burning car tires, over drinking hence endangering their lives. By law, all these are illegal though voters are unaware of the legal implications from the misbehavior or misdeeds during election periods. There are cases where voters resort to fighting during elections. This sometimes results into imprisonment and trial or indictment in courts of law and families of the accused are bound to suffer the consequences of their family member(s) being incarcerated. Others end up selling off their property when they are asked to pay some money to be released on bail and yet such money may not be available.

The Electoral commission can exercise its mandate to curb such occurrences and salvage the situation only if there is sufficient funding of voter education across Uganda. A lot

of lessons should be drawn from other African countries such as the post-election violence of 2017 in Kenya, 2019 in Democratic Republic of Congo, 2018 in Zimbabwe and others like Guinea Bissau, Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire, Nigeria, Angola, Sierra Leone, Gambia and Mali (NAI, 2013). These have had many ill-behaved electorates ending up in prison and in some instances others killed in the process of post-election violence.

Strengthening Voter Education: A Catalyst to a Reputable Election Process in

The goal of voter education is to make information available and accessible to all voters. Voter education campaigns should seek to achieve universal coverage of the electorate (Birch S & Muchlinski D, 2018). To do this effectively, it requires reaching out to the disadvantaged groups as well as mainstream voters. For example, voter education should take into account factors such as high rates of illiteracy or the use of different languages. *Effective and Comprehensive voter education is needed to improve stakeholders' participation in the electoral process and promote principles of democratic governance.*

Given the complexity and sensitivity of electoral processes, it is of great importance that all electoral actors are acquainted with the procedures and have relevant, timely and accurate information, in particular about the registration, polling and counting processes (IDEA, 2018). *Adequate knowledge and skills about the electoral process reduce the likelihood of procedural anomalies that may arise.*

Voter education should continue even during post-election periods. Families breakup, relationships end, bankruptcy, hatred, loss of jobs arises and therefore to preclude such circumstances, there has to be a strong voter education for Uganda to attain a reputable election process in 2021. The Electoral commission resolved that due to the breakdown of COVID-19 pandemic in Uganda and the world at large, 2021 elections will inevitably be scientific and strong measures have been put in place to control the spread of the virus. However, the electorates need much voter education to minimize the violation of regulations towards having safe and secure elections. There will be no public rallies and gatherings but rather use media houses like TVs, radios and social media. It's not easy for people to

follow campaigns on media platforms since it is expensive in terms of buying internet data bundles and some have no TVs and radios. Potential voters may lose the passion to vote unless the Electoral Commission does intensive nationwide voter education prior to voting days for a reputable election process.

Election Irregularities in the Previous Elections

In the 2016 general elections, fifteen million two hundred seventy-seven thousand one hundred ninety-eight (15,277,198) were the confirmed registered voters. With a voter turnout of 67.62% for the presidential elections, the total number of ballot papers counted were 10,329,131, the total number of valid votes cast was 9,851,812, rejected (invalid) ballot papers 477,319, spoilt ballots 29,005 (EC, August 2016). There were 135 parliamentary election petitions filed in the High Court and 85 Local Government Council election petitions filed in courts of law.

The common grounds for the petitions following the general parliamentary elections included among others; bribery by candidates, fighting and vote rigging. The high

Policy Recommendations to Prevent Violence in 2021 General Elections in Uganda

numbers of invalid and spoilt votes with low voter turnout and high rates of voter bribery by candidates are attributed to inadequate voter education due to the limited budget allocation accorded to the activity during the election period. A total of 805 National and 101 International Press while 1,436 national observers and 404 International Election Observers observed the 2016 General Elections (EC, August 2016). Election Observers especially international observers should go beyond observing elections and unreservedly fund the general elections specifically voter education to minimize election violence. *Election flaws and violence arise largely due to voter ignorance.* With a total expected expenditure of Uganda Shillings One Trillion Five Hundred Two Billion Four Hundred Eighty-Eight Million Three Hundred Ten Thousand Five Hundred Seventeen only (UGX 1,502,488,310,517) (EC Strategic Plan, 2015/16-2021/22), a large part of the strategic plan's funding needs to be allocated to voter education though the entire electoral process is paramount. The 2021 general elections in Uganda need huge voter education funding and execution like never before to minimize violence especially from youths.

i) The general elections should be considered a project such that they are funded and executed in phases. *Voter education should form a strong part of the election project and thus huge funding should be solicited.* Credit has to be accorded to International agencies and developed countries such as Government of the Peoples' Republic of China, The European Union, Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA) who extended financial and non-financial assistance in the 2015/2016 general elections. International agencies should not only send election observers at the time of elections, but also mobilize a large of pool of finances to have successful comprehensive voter education before and after elections and to streamline voter behaviour.

ii) The Electoral Commission should carry out massive voter education and sensitization to create awareness about the possible and common election malpractices and their impact on individuals, society and the nation at large. Voter education has to be done intensely and extensively on radios, Televisions, YouTube, social media platforms and physically through observing the

Covid-19 social distancing and other health regulations. There is need to have daily announcements across all media houses and platforms on prevention of election violence. The EC can also use Short Message Service (SMS) to convey information about elections on cellphones.

iii) Develop and disseminate comprehensive programmes of voter education, starting well before each election and continuing throughout the election process, and ensure that the material used is accurate and politically neutral. Also printed material about the election process, common predictable malpractices and their impact have to be distributed to the electorates in all parts of Uganda and well customized in the respective local languages.

iv) Special interest groups such as women, youths, Persons With Disabilities (PWDs) and the elderly have to be considered during voter education. These are marginalized groups which are sometimes not given priority yet they contribute a big percentage of the voters. Each group has to be trained independently because they need different appropriate sensitization approaches given their varying capacities to grasp concepts.

v) Ensure the training for election officials is of high standard and timely. These should then provide voter education at national and sub-national levels to voters, political party representatives, aspiring candidates, media houses, Civil Society Organizations, security forces and electoral observers.

vi) The Electoral Commission should maximize privacy and neutrality. Employees stand high risks of being fired because they may support candidates different from those of their bosses. They should be sensitized on how to have maximum emotional intelligence to prevent workplace misunderstandings arising from differences in political ideologies.

vii) The Electoral Commission should amend its policies to include and emphasize official training of agents of candidates before elections and awarding certificates of merit upon completion of the training. They should have these certificates to be allowed to serve as agents. Candidates who fail to have their agents trained, should not raise queries on any irregularities at polling stations where they have no agents trained in supervising the voting process.

This would minimize the chances of these agents indulging in any form of violence since they are aware of the minimum acceptable election ethics.

viii) *The Electoral Commission should make it a requirement for the candidates to present a voter safety and security management plan before the voting days as a prerequisite by every aspiring candidate.* This would include the conduct of polling agents if violence arises and a mitigation strategy. The security agencies should enforce this at village level and all local leaders right from LC.1 to L.C 5 need to be well sensitized by the Electoral Commission. This calls for massive injection of funding and use of well-trained human capital to run this activity across Uganda.

ix) *Voters should be sensitized on the quality of manifestos candidates present to vote for them in order to elect competent leaders with the desired qualities to address their society development problems.* The electorates may not be aware of how to identify competent leaders and hence a need for intense voter education.

x) Educate the electorates on social media usage and the mushrooming election propaganda. A lot of junk, fabricated and concocted information is spread via social media channels

especially facebook, WhatsApp and twitter. During election periods, social media has increasingly become a platform for cyber-crimes such as “cyber-bullying”, stalking, defamation and malice to demean political opponents. These channels are turned into pseudo tally centres which voters especially youths and other propaganda-vulnerable persons claim to be the basis for winning elections. This unauthentic information can incite violence before authentic results are released by the EC. This calls for frequent sensitization sessions on social media usage by the electorates.

xi) The scientific voting practice which is to be executed in the 2021 elections needs to be accorded the desired attention. With the danger of exposing the electorates to Covid-19 and other communicable diseases during election periods, the EC should relentlessly sensitize the electorates about the dangers of gathering for campaigns, failure to use masks and taking social distancing as though it is for granted.

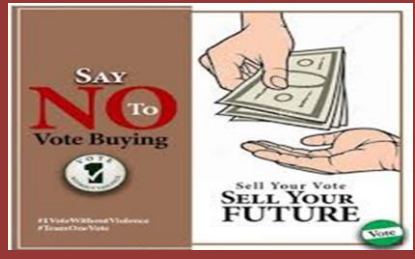
xii) The Electoral Commission should come up with conflict prevention policies and strategies in advance as opposed to post, ad hoc and reactionary measures which instead worsen election violence and kill the integrity and efficacy of the

Election Process.

xiii) The Electoral Commission should conduct conflict analysis of the local context in each polling area to have a clear understanding of the local dynamics so as to determine the best polling approach to use to prevent election violence. This can help in minimizing the chances of by-elections arising from violence.

xiii) *The Electoral Commission should make mobile audio-visual display messages and short video films by engaging experts in performing arts especially drama to produce video clips in line with the election process.* These should clearly show the acceptable voter behaviour, forms of election malpractices, how they can be avoided and the possible legal implications of election violence among the electorates and candidates. These should be displayed on screens at village level, streets as well as on Televisions. This is quite expensive and needs a lot of funding using both domestic and international funds.

Conclusion



The General elections should be treated as a project and not just an event. Much emphasis should be put on the entire election process in the pre, during and post-election periods since all of them especially during and after elections, can be marred by violence. *A lot of funding should be injected in voter education to have massive civic education and sensitization to minimize violence in Uganda's 2021 elections. Donor agencies and international stakeholders should go beyond sending election observers during election periods, but ought to start with heavy funding in voter education to maximize nation-wide sensitization of the electorate prior to, during and after elections as well as having continuous voter education.* This is what would lead to credible safe and secure elections in 2021. The Electoral Commission should be funded to an optimal level like it has never been before in order to streamline voter behaviour especially among youths.

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