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The fallacy of ‘scientific elections’ in the COVID-era: exploring the challenges of managing the 2020–2021 elections in Uganda

Abstract

COVID-19 broke out in the period that Uganda was due to have presidential and parliamentary elections, posing a very precarious human security challenge. The ruling party (National Resistance Movement; NRM) faced the challenge of passing power to the Speaker of parliament if elections were not to be held. To mitigate the public health challenges and maintain power, the government acquiesced to an election process without public campaigns. Instead, campaigns were to be held over the radio, TV, and social media in what came to be known as ‘scientific elections.’ However, in a country hamstrung by massive political and bureaucratic corruption and an entrenched regime that uses violence against opponents, little attention was paid to the fairness of the process, especially in terms of access to media resources by the opposition. Conversely, as elections are about crowds and showmanship, the Ugandan Electoral Commission struggled with the ever-evolving electoral campaign process, especially as large spontaneous crowds sprang up on the campaign trail of the political candidates. The opposition needs a large crowd for legitimacy

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and a show of popularity. To mitigate this, the ruling party used violence against opposition members as an excuse to enforce standard operating procedures (SOPs) for the prevention of COVID-19, yet its candidates were left to gather crowds. This radicalized some of the opposition that used media outlets to call for violence and ethnic cleansing. This qualitative study delves into the extent to which the 'scientific elections' process was designed to produce a fair outcome of the 2021 elections in Uganda. This study uses the rational choice theory to explore the calculations of different stakeholders. The study relies on secondary data, especially available in media outlets, but also primary data through reports and social media and speeches of key figures in the political landscape in Uganda. The study finds that the Independent Electoral Commission was caught between two highly sophisticated opponents and did not have the capacity and agency to enforce the rules in the political game. In the end, the key facets of the 'scientific elections' process were found wanting and did not produce a fair outcome of the 2021 elections in Uganda.

Keywords: scientific elections, Uganda, National Resistance Movement, COVID-19, Uganda Electoral Commission, election management

JEL Classification Codes: D72, D78, I18

Błąd „wyborów naukowych” w erze COVID. Odkrywanie wyzwań związanych z zarządzaniem wyborami 2020–2021 w Ugandzie

Streszczenie

Pandemia COVID-19 rozpoczęła się w okresie, gdy w Ugandzie miały się odbyć wybory prezydenckie i parlamentarne, co stanowiło wyzwanie dla bezpieczeństwa ludności. Partia rządząca (Narodowy Ruch Oporu) stanęła wobec sytuacji przekazania władzy przewodniczącemu parlamentu, gdyby wybory miały się nie odbyć. Aby złagodzić problemy związane ze zdrowiem publicznym i utrzymać władzę, rząd zgodził się na proces wyborczy bez kampanii publicznych. Zamiast tego miały zostać przeprowadzone kampanie w radiu, telewizji i mediach społecznościowych, w tak zwanych „wyborach naukowych”. Jednak w kraju ogarniętym masową korupcją polityczną i biurokratyczną oraz z zakorzenionym reżimem, który stosuje przemoc wobec przeciwników, niewiele uwagi poświęcono sprawiedliwości tego procesu, zwłaszcza w kwestii dostępu opozycji do zasobów medialnych. I odwrotnie, ponieważ w wyborach chodzi o tłumy i popisy, Ugandyjska Komisja Wyborcza zmagająca się z ciągle ewoluującym procesem kampanii wyborczej, zwłaszcza że na szlaku kampanii kandydatów politycznych pojawiły się spore spontaniczne tłumy. Opozycja potrzebuje dużego tłumu dla legitymizacji i pokazania popularności. Partia rządząca użyła przemocy wobec członków opozycji pod pretekstem egzekwowania standardowych procedur operacyjnych w celu zapobiegania COVID-19, ale jej kandydaci mogli gromadzić tłumy. Doprowadziło to do radykalizacji części opozycji, która wykorzystywała media do wzywania do przemocy i czystek etnicznych. Opisane w artykule badanie jakościowe

sprawdza, w jakim stopniu proces „wyborów naukowych” został zaprojektowany w celu uzyskania sprawiedliwego wyniku wyborów w 2021 r. w Ugandzie. Badanie wykorzystuje teorię racjonalnego wyboru do zbadania kalkulacji różnych interesariuszy. Opiera się na danych wtórnych, zwłaszcza doniesieniach medialnych, ale także na danych pierwotnych z raportów, mediów społecznościowych i przemówień kluczowych postaci ze sceny politycznej Ugandy. Z badania wynika, że niezależna komisja wyborcza miała do czynienia z dwoma wysoce wyrafinowanymi przeciwnikami i nie miała możliwości ani sprawczości do egzekwowania reguł w grze politycznej. Ostatecznie okazało się, że kluczowe aspekty procesu „wyborów naukowych” były niesprawcze i nie przyniosły sprawiedliwego wyniku wyborów w 2021 r. w Ugandzie.

Słowa kluczowe: wybory naukowe, Uganda, Narodowy Ruch Oporu, COVID-19, komisja wyborcza Ugandy, zarządzanie wyborami

Kody klasyfikacji JEL: D72, D78, I18

Since its independence from the British Crown on October 9th, 1962, Uganda has suffered from several dictatorships, coups d'état, and internal instability. It could be said that the milestone in Uganda's history that shaped the actual reality of the nation was the occupation of Kampala by the former National Resistance Army (NRA) leader, Yoweri Museveni in 1986. It was an end to 20 years of violence that had begun with the ousting of the Kabaka Muteesa II in 1966. This was followed by the coup by Idi Amin against Obote in 1971. His 8-year rule came to a violent end with the help of Tanzania in the 1978–1979 conflict. The transition saw three interim presidents appointed and deposed in less than a year. These included Yusufu Lule who lasted 68 days. Godfrey Binaisa managed 327 days, and Paul Muwanga governed for 10 days. The subsequent elections of 1980 saw Milton Obote come to power, but this intensified guerrilla warfare against the regime led by Museveni's NRA.

The motivation of the rebellion by Yoweri Museveni in the 1980s was the outcome of the 1980 election in which he contested under the Uganda people's movement but lost. He claimed that the election had been rigged (The Monitor, 2011). The recourse to violence was justified on the notion that there was no alternative. The system was bad and the wheel had to be broken. Museveni captured power in 1986 and oversaw the writing of the Ugandan Constitution in 1995. Museveni has been the President of the Republic of Uganda for 35 years and is currently starting his 6th mandate, after his alleged victory in the January 14th elections (Oficina de Información Diplomática, 2021).

A history of contested elections

Uganda has had a history of suspicious elections outcome, which has put the masses at odds with the organizers and forces behind the eventual outcome. It has become a rule of thumb that the most popular candidate has not always won the elections, especially in a few instances. For example, when the British were handing over power to the Ugandans, two main political parties were in the run for power. The Democratic Party (DP) led by Benedict Kiwanuka and the Uganda People's Congress (UPC) led by Milton Obote. Although DP was primed to take over power after the initial elections in 1961, it was largely Catholic and was not favored by the protestant part of Buganda. In the final elections held before independence in 1962, an alliance between UPC and the Buganda Kingdom, which constituted a party called Kabaka Yekka (KY), was formed and snatched post-independence power (Hancock, 1970).

Similarly, in 1980, DP under Kawanga Semwogerere had a strong chance of winning the election but the military interference from the occupying Tanzanian forces and open rigging in favor of Milton Obote's political party prevented it. For example, blocking candidates from getting nominated (Sserunjogi, 2014) made the task of getting elected hard. It is also widely acknowledged that the elections in 2001, 2006, and 2011 were massively rigged (Ahluwalia, 2016) in favor of President Museveni. The 2001 voting was marred with violence as presidential allies like Kakooza Mutale led a civilian group known as Kalangala Action Plan (KAP) that beat people in rural areas (Rukooko, 2017).

Moreover, since 1996 Museveni has used his incumbency as an unfair advantage against his opponents in the campaigning process. For example, the military and police have been used to limit the movement of presidential hopefuls. Other tactics have involved the use of trumped-up charges to keep the opponent in court or prison during the campaign process (Tangri, Mwenda, 2010). But this has also served to discredit them in the eyes of the public. In a society built on masculine domination, the brutalization of opponents has displayed them as weak, while portraying Museveni as the only person who can handle power.

Coupled with that has been the notion of controlling the military (Khisa, 2020). In a country that has a history of military abuse of civilians, coups d'état, and violation of the masses, Museveni has tended to portray himself as the only viable candidate for the role as he has control over the army.

Nevertheless, the 1995 Ugandan Constitution developed an electoral system where the candidates had to win more than 50% of the votes to gain power in the executive and Parliament (Oficina de Información Diplomática, 2021). Article 60

of the 1995 Uganda Constitution stipulated that the elections were to be organized, conducted, and managed by the Electoral Commission of Uganda (EC). Other functions included demarcating constituencies, declaring and publishing electoral results. The EC was also tasked with determining the complaints arising from the electoral processes. More to that, the EC was to formulate and implement civic educations and take on other roles as prescribed by the Parliament (Uganda Electoral Commission, 2021). Yet, the Commission has been accused of not being impartial, as will be explained further on.

The key turnabout in Uganda's democratic processes took place in 2005 and 2017. In 2005, the maximum two-term limit in office (ten years) was eliminated by a Parliamentary decision (Library of Congress, 2021). In 2017, the Parliament approved the Law of Constitutional amendment no. 2, which established an upper age limit for the President, changing it from 35 to 18 years old, and removed the lower age limit which was previously set at the age of 75 (Oficina de Información Diplomática, 2021).

The later changes in internal politics drove Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu, better known as Bobi Wine, the actual leader of the National Platform Party (NUP) and greatest opposition in the 2021 elections, to run for President. As he explained in a phone interview to African Arguments, the abolition of the age limit was seen by his then own political pressure group, People Power, as a representation of Museveni's dictatorial tendencies. It was then that he decided to become more than a Parliamentary representative and created his political group in July 2020: the National Unity Platform (NUP). He further explained:

“While I know that pressure groups and political movements are provided for in the law, we had to find something that unifies us, a common symbol and a common agenda. And because business in Parliament is formal, we had to formalize it in such a way. We may have wanted to register the People Power movement as a political party, but for more than a year, we were blocked by the regime. ... I had hoped to run [for president] under the Democratic Party, but the then President of the Democratic Party denied us that opportunity, and so did the Forum for Democratic Change. That is why we, under extreme concealment, went ahead to join the National Unity Platform, which later elected me to be its President and leader, and then I invited masses to join me” (Melchiorre, 2021).

Digital transformation, COVID-19, and the advent of 'scientific elections'

The Ugandan government has been struggling with the rise of social media as a platform for political expression, especially as it cannot be policed. With a subscription of mainly young people, social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook have proved elusive for the ruling regime, especially as it has not fashioned a strong narrative on numerous occasions to steer the debate. Yet before the outbreak of COVID-19, this had not been a debilitating factor for the Museveni government as most people were accessible through campaigns, radios, and TVs. The outbreak of COVID-19 presented a challenge to the ruling government as the need for social media experts was important to access a lot of the population. This was due to the limitations in movement and the fact that campaigns were not to be as pivotal as before.

However, key challenges persisted in that the Museveni government began restricting civil rights in Uganda like the establishment of a tax on social networks and media as well as the surveillance of electronic communications, aiming to control freedom of expression. A year later, Uganda's government issued a daily tax on social media that requisited all users to obtain a license and to agree not to participate in "distortion of facts" of sharing/publishing content "likely to create public insecurity" (Siegle, Cook, 2021). Furthermore, the Freedom House Index also denounced that even though the country holds elections, its credibility deteriorated over time due to the media regulation, the police use of force in protests, the detention of activists and politicians, and the lack of Rule of Law (Freedom House, 2021).

The novelty of this last election is its form. The EC, following Art. 61(2) of Uganda's Constitution, organized Presidential and Parliamentary elections within 120 days before the expiry of the terms. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it decided to create 'scientific elections,' which established the political campaigns through digital and traditional communication sectors, to create "a safe and healthy environment during the pandemic" (Mumbere, 2020). The epidemic in the Republic of Uganda initially had a low impact on hospitalizations and death cases (with less than 50 deaths daily in late 2019). The fact that 78% of its population is under 35 years old led experts to draw a conclusion that there was no collapse of the healthcare system due to the high asymptomatic percentage of this population strip. Moreover, the country had one of the most severe confinements of the continent. Nevertheless, the government aimed to immunize around 20% of the population (Oficina de Información Diplomática, 2021).

Many opponents and international organizations were critical of 'scientific elections' due to their perceived unfairness. For instance, Ms Shamdasani, Spokesperson for the UN Human Rights Office, declared: "We have increasingly observed that the COVID-19 restrictions have been enforced more strictly to curtail opposition electoral campaign activities in a discriminatory fashion" (UN News, 2021). Kyagulanyi denounced that "the scientific election cannot deliver a free and fair election" since the logistics of the country and the restrictive measures previously explained do not enable it to do so. According to Uganda's Communications Commission, in 2019 – the latest date available – the country accounts for 36 TV stations and 309 radio stations, to which, respectively, 70% and 90% of the population have access. The issue with these channels is that they are mostly owned by politicians, hampering fair play in elections. Furthermore, there are just 26.7 million mobile subscribers, of which only 16.9 million have Internet access, representing less than the 50% of the population. It was also criticized for the incongruence of the digital development of the campaigns with the physical voting system (Mumbere, 2020).

Moreover, by moving the electoral date to January 14th, 2021, the EC shortened the campaign period by 3 months. This decision, and the late announcement of the establishment of the 'scientific elections' in June 2020, was also criticized for being a measure to limit the mobilization of opposition parties' supporters. The 2021 elections showed that the National Resistance Movement (NRM), to which Museveni belongs, was fearful of the threat posed by the opposition, especially from NUP (Siegle, Cook, 2021). As Bobi Wine explained in the African Argument's interview, the Ugandan population, which is the second youngest in Africa after Guinea, formed what he coined as 'Facebook generation' that relied on social media platforms to spread their message. This group was born after Museveni seized power with the aim for a non-corrupt democracy, since they saw it as responsible for the economic hardships that they suffered. Therefore, this group made it inevitable for the government to set up measures to control social media and the Internet at large (Melchiorre, 2021).

With a history of poor election management and an electoral system designed for a winner-takes-it-all scenario, the Electoral Commission, and the whole electoral process proved to be caught between a rock and a hard place. A key aspiration of delivering a fair electoral result proved challenging, and the advent of COVID-19 made it more difficult. The key research question, therefore, is to what extent the 'scientific elections' process was designed to produce a fair outcome of the 2021 elections in Uganda.

The study uses qualitative research methods to delve into the role, capability, and capacity of the Uganda Electoral Commission to manage the elections in Uganda in light of the political manoeuvres by the different political players to win the

elections. The work further uses exploratory research design and relies on secondary data, especially presented in media outlets but also primary data through reports and social media and speeches of key figures in the political landscape in Uganda. The study uses content analysis to analyze the data. The paper will proceed with a discussion on the rational choice theory. Thereafter it will continue with a review of some cases where elections have been held or not held to explore the rationale and ability to produce a fair outcome. The rationale for the section is mainly because not enough literature exists on the topic of 'scientific elections.' The paper will then delve into key findings and conclusions.

The rational choice theoretical approach

According to Green (2002), the rational choice theory is based on the idea of the individual's self-interest and the maximization of self-interest, and Sato (2013) further notes that the theory explains the social phenomenon by assuming the rational choice at the actor's level. The theory assumes that an actor chooses an alternative that he/she believes will bring about a social outcome that optimizes his/her preferences under subjectively conceived constraints. A set of various alternatives is available to an actor under subjective constraints. Therefore, if the actor chooses one, the alternative of a social outcome is realized, thus, implying that the outcome is not individual but rather social. This then means that the outcome is a product of alternatives that get to be chosen by more than one actor.

Wittek (2013) concurs with Sato (2013) as he argues that this theory is an umbrella term that encompasses several models which are concerned with explaining a social phenomenon as the outcomes of individual action that can in a way be constructed as being rational. Rational behavior is the kind of behaviour that is deemed suitable for the realization of specific goals, which are thus given the limitations that are imposed by a situation. The main argument of this theory, as stated by Wittek (2013), is that all the rational choice explanations are based on individual preferences, beliefs as well as constraints. The theory is crucial to exploring the different calculations by key actors in the Ugandan political terrain during the 2021 elections, especially the presidential aspirants and the electoral commission.

To hold or not to hold elections during the COVID-19 pandemic: a review of some cases in Africa

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, most African states had been going through a process of consolidating some gains from the democratic process that had been given a new lease of life in the post-Cold War period. Although most African leaders at independence took power through the electoral process (Cowen, Laakso, 1997), this was not straightforward, and the process soon collapsed as many African states got caught up in the Cold War dynamics. Thus, the post-Cold War period proved a turning point as neo-liberal economic and political policies became pivotal to aid (Levitsky, Way 2005; Dietrich, Wright, 2015) allocated to African states. The electoral process entailed the opening up of political space through multiparty democratic elections (Olsen, 1998; Kumah-Abiwu, 2011). By 2019 most countries had had at least 5 cycles of elections. African states use different electoral systems like first past the post, proportional representation, and the mixed electoral system.

Yet the electoral process was not without challenges as election rigging (Adejumobi, 2000; Atuobi, 2008) was prevalent. Moreover, some leaders scrapped term limits (Baturu, 2010) to ensure they get re-elected while others engaged in coups to abrogate constitutions. Still others scrapped the age limit (Reyntjens, 2020) to ensure that they do not get excluded from the electoral list. There was a growing perception that elections were being held without democratization taking place (Levitsky, Way, 2002), leading to the rise of authoritarianism (Morse, 2015).

The COVID-19 pandemic presented different options for different states that were due to hold elections. Some like Burundi (Maizland, 2020), Tanzania, Malawi, and Guinea (International Federation for Human Rights, 2020), among others, went ahead with the elections, including open campaigns, while others chose to postpone the elections. In unpacking the above developments, it should further be highlighted that the 21st century has witnessed an increasing fragility of democracy, which has become a fragile political system. The uprising of the new phenomena of grey zones and hybrid systems have spread illiberal democracies all over the world. Separations of powers, the rule of law, civil rights, and freedoms are often violated by governments, creating an illusion of democracy in the eyes of its population, while transforming the political system into an autocracy. Africa, as it has been analyzed in Uganda's case, suffers from this trend (Matlosa, 2021). Cheeseman and Klass have studied the six steps of the manipulation of election in Africa, concluding that it possesses the features of: "(a) gerrymandering, (b) vote-buying, (c) repression, (d) electronic hacking, (e) ballot box stuffing, and (f) playing the international community" (Cheeseman, Klaas, 2018).

The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened this situation as states have faced a new dilemma of whether to ensure human/health security or protect democracy through the right to vote. In some cases COVID-19 crisis has given some illiberal states a blank cheque to abuse their powers in the name of emergency to constrain political rights in the short and long term (Ellena, 2020: 1). Some international and regional agencies have argued that the challenge could be solved with the mediation of bodies like UNOWAS or the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to establish proper campaigning measures, voter registration, and any other measured needed to assure the good development of elections (Matlosa, 2021).

Furthermore, although the COVID-19 pandemic has not been as devastating as previously predicted in Africa, it has had other socio-economic (Ozili, 2022) effects like food insecurity, diversion of health budget and workforce to fight the pandemic. This diversion of resources has left many people with other diseases unattended. The lockdowns have led to job losses and collapses of companies plus investments. With the largest section of society employed in the informal sector, food shortages (Arndt et al., 2020) and recourse to urban violence have become widespread. Moreover, many African states face infrastructural challenges when it comes to mitigating the dangers of a health crisis like COVID-19 during an election period (Gyimah-Boadi, 2015).

The decisions to hold elections were supported by different motivations ranging from constitutional restriction to desire for normalcy and COVID-19 denialism, as was the case in Uganda and Tanzania. Thus, although postponement of the elections was going to serve President Museveni's interests in keeping the National Resistance Movement in power, he was supposed to hand over power to the Speaker of Parliament. Yet even though Ms Kadaga, the Speaker, was in the NRM party, there was no certainty about her true game plan as she was not within the inner circle of the ruling party.

In Tanzania, the late President Magafuli declared COVID-19 non-existent (Buguzi, 2021), so he proceeded with the elections. This argument was further strengthened by the low number of COVID-19 cases in Africa at that time. Thus, countries like Malawi and Burundi followed the same path as Tanzania and held elections. Something unique to them was that they went ahead with open-air campaigning, unlike Uganda, which introduced the 'scientific elections' perspective.

In Mali, elections were postponed since 2018 due to terrorist activities, especially in the central and northern areas of the territory. Nevertheless, when a final date was settled, March 29 and April 19, 2020 (first and second round), two new factors entered the mix: public protests against the then President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita and COVID-19. The turnout was especially low, with just the participation of around 35% of the eligible voters, accounting for just 13% in Bamako, the capital city, in the

first round and about 23.3% in the second one. This data exposes the reality of Mali's political situation (Matlosa, 2021).

Secondly, Malians were concerned about COVID-19. The country has 14,429 accumulated cases and 3,842 deaths so far. Even though the incidence was low, the accumulated cases represented just 0.07% of the population. A survey conducted by Premise in 2020 denoted that 85% of the respondents were concerned about the spread of COVID-19. Furthermore, even though the government deployed protective equipment at polling stations, Malians were unhappy about the shortages mainly of face masks and disinfectants (Guthrie, Ksenjek, 2020).

Thus, for Mali, the rational choice involved an inability to stave off postponement, especially as elections were not held in 2018. So, using COVID-19 as a pretext to postpone the elections again was going to be difficult to uphold.

Yet, there are countries like Ethiopia that indeed postponed elections in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) argued that COVID-19 had made it impossible to carry out electoral preparations for parliamentary elections (Matlosa, 2021). Opposition parties and part of the population were critical of these measures, arguing that the pandemic was being used as a means by the ruling coalition to repress and centralize power (Matlosa, 2021).

Later, on 10 June 2020, the Prime Minister's tenure and that of the regional and federal governments were extended by a period of nine months by the House of Federations (HoF), with possible revision, under COVID-19 allegations. This decision was taken after Ms Keria Ibrahim, the Speaker of the HoF, resigned and declared: "I can't be an accomplice when the Constitution is being violated and a dictatorial government is being formed ... I have resigned not to be a collaborator with such a historical mistake" (Endeshaw, 2020).

On 29 June, Hanchalu Hundessa, an activist and popular pop star was assassinated. This event led to several protests around the country, public transport, business, and the Internet were shut down, and property was destroyed. Official numbers reported included 166 deaths and 1,084 arrests, although the numbers could be higher. More importantly, among the arrested, there are three Oromo opposition leaders. This growing instability also provoked the displacement of around 10,000 persons. The outcome of these actions is a polarized society over ethnicity, but more importantly, around the prolongation of the current administration by the postponement of the elections due to COVID-19 (Matlosa, 2021).

Another important event took place in November 2020. Abiy launched a military operation, with the Ethiopian National Force, against the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the former ruling party of Ethiopia that follows ethnic nationalist discourse. The Prime Minister justified this decision as a response to the attempt to steal

the Northern Command of artillery and military equipment by the TPLF. Although Abiy was declared winner, the tensions with the TPLF continued (Matlosa, 2021), resulting in a counter offensive, which led to heavy government forces exposing the capital to a Tigray takeover (*The Washington Post*, 2021)

Elections finally took place on 21 June 2021, being the first multi-party ones since 2005. Provisional results were set for 27 June 2021, but NEBE had technical difficulties. Abiy was confident that the will of the Ethiopians was guaranteed regardless. Nevertheless, voters faced harassment and threats of violence. Furthermore, voting was cancelled in 110 of the 547 constituencies of the country. Some due to insecurity and others because they did not receive ballot papers. Finally, the EU's High Representative for External Affairs, Josep Borrell, cancelled the EU observation mission arguing that no guarantees had been given on the independence of the elections (Gaveriaux, 2021).

As it can be seen, the postponement of elections has worsened the situation in Ethiopia. The already existing ethnic-based tensions were triggered, provoking violence, insecurity, and displacements, all in the name of democracy and health security.

Regarding other continents, namely Western countries, the dilemma has not been such a problem. These states account for a stronger democratic base, a greater health infrastructure, and more means to cope with elections and COVID-19. For example, in Israel, polling stations were covered by plastic, and electoral officials wore protective clothing. In the USA, the vote via postal service was encouraged. In Europe and South Korea, masks were obligatory, as well as washing one's hands before entering the polling stations and keeping a safe distance (Ahidjo-Iya Hounkpe, 2021). The African countries faced the challenge of not having enough personal protection equipment. Moreover, they did not have enough personnel and the budget to enforce standard operating procedures like social distancing.

Hence the African states were caught between a rock and a hard place. Postponing elections was seen in some cases as dictatorial, like in Ethiopia. In other cases, they were viewed as opportunistic by the ruling government. Yet holding elections further increased the risk of COVID-19 outbreak in most countries in Africa. This was deemed to be debilitating due to their lack of adequate medical infrastructure to deal with a massive outbreak. This placed Uganda in a unique position when the Electoral Commission came up with the idea of 'scientific elections.'

Key findings on 'scientific elections' in the 2021 Uganda elections

On June 16, the EC issued a revised strategic road map for the Ugandan election. This was dubbed the 'scientific elections,' which was to involve mainly the use of the media channels like TV, the radio, social media to campaign. Candidates would not interface with the public physically but through media channels (Ngubwagye, 2021). The EC argued that this was due to the spread of COVID-19, which required the country to adhere to standard operating procedures, which included, among others, maintaining social distancing.

The presidential election was contested by eleven opposition candidates, certified by the Electoral Commission. Those within political parties included: Yoweri Museveni (National Resistance Movement), Bobi Wine (National Unity Platform), Patrick Oboi Amuriat (Forum for Democratic Change), Mugisha Muntu (Alliance for National Transformation), and Norbert Mao (Democratic Party). The independents included John Katumba, Wily Mayambala, Fred Mwesigye, Henry Tumukunde, Joseph Kabuleta, Nancy Kalemba.

The key challenge with these processes was, firstly, the lack of access of most Ugandans to radio and TV stations to listen to their candidates. Nyagah (2021) notes that in 2014 Uganda had a voting population of 17 million. Only 3.4 million Ugandans had radio access, with only 1 million having access to a television set. Thus, 7 years later, that number could have gone up but not exponentially. Secondly, social media in Uganda had an over-the-top (OTT) tax imposed on it, plus it would get blocked now and then by the government to restrict access. But just like in the case of radio and TV stations, not many Ugandans have Facebook or Twitter accounts to access their candidates. For example, according to a report by Samuel-Stone (2021), Uganda has an Internet penetration of 24%, which amounts to 10.67 million users, of which only 2.5 million are active in social media. Thus, the 'scientific elections' limited the unknown or new candidates, as they were unlikely to introduce themselves to the masses. The incumbent President, who had been in power for over 30 years, had an unfair advantage as being well-known throughout the country. Moreover, his political party had representation at all levels nationwide.

Secondly, elections in Uganda had always been organized on an open campaign basis giving the candidates the ability to reach as many people as possible in a location without spending a lot of resources. Using social media, for example, would require committing a lot of money and workforce to this endeavor. Moreover, the candidates did not receive much funding from the EC. Besides, they needed to mobilize funds

from well-wishers, some of whom were not in social media, for example. Hence most of the candidates were severely handicapped. On the other hand, President Museveni had the state machinery to draw to mount a social media, TV, and radio campaign. Due to the power he has in the country, the privately-owned TV and radio stations could not refuse him or his supporters access to the media to put his message across. Moreover, as a sitting president, he had the unfair advantage of using national emergencies like COVID-19 to spread his message as to why he had to be elected. As noted by Nyagah (2021), Museveni had access to his own media team under the presidential press unit, which transmitted information through state-owned Uganda broadcasting services and the New Vision multimedia network.

Since most radio and TV stations are owned by private citizens who are not compelled by law to allow every presidential candidate to present his or her campaign, the actual campaign period saw most members of the opposition denied coverage on radio and TV stations (*The Observer*, 2021; Wandera, 2021). Sometimes they were chased out of towns (*The Independent*, 2020) and hotels during the campaign period (Reuters, 2020). Thus, it is evident that the 'scientific elections' were a rational choice to curtail the ability of the opposition to President Museveni to provide the most minimal of a challenge to his power.

The media and social media platforms were used by the incumbent Museveni to silence the opposition and the Electoral Commission. A case in point was when Patrick Amuriat was harassed by the security forces on the nomination day, and his shoes were taken. He had to walk barefoot to the Electoral Commission to be sworn in as a candidate in the full glare of the media. On the same nomination day, Robert Kyagulanyi was violently arrested in broad daylight as he drove home from the nomination venue. To the ruling party, this had always been a policy to brutalize the opposition in full view of the masses in a calculated move to get them perceived as weak and unable to protect citizens. The adage was that if they could not protect themselves, how they could protect the state.

The ruling party under Museveni was found to have used fake accounts linked to the Ministry of Information and Communications Technology in Uganda on Facebook to impersonate users, duplicate accounts, attack individuals online, and re-share posts to make them look popular (Reuters, 2021; Samuel-Stone, 2021). At the same time, it was using the state machinery to crack down on the opposition when it deemed them to be going contrary to the rules set out by the Electoral Commission. Thus, Museveni was acting as the enforcer when others were deemed to have broken the rules, while he broke the rules and did not receive any reprimand.

Moreover, the ground was not level, as noted by Samuel-Stone (2021), who argues that although opponents like Kyagulanyi got a lot of coverage in the print media,

most of it was negative contrary to Museveni's positive coverage. Thus, the use of the 'scientific elections' strategy gave Museveni a head start above his rivals due to his unfettered access and control of most media operations.

Furthermore, Museveni went ahead to ban social media before elections in retaliation for the closure of accounts linked to his campaign (Reuters, 2021). However, this seemed to be an over-the-top reaction because it was not a blanket closure but a few individuals. The total blockade of social media showed a deeper fear of the organizing strengths by the opposition through social media. The banning of the social media use further handicapped the opposition in their final push to get votes. Without funds to mount a wider campaign, the blockade on social media disadvantaged them by denying them access to the voters who could at least access the Internet.

Nevertheless, the opposition groups also engaged in social media manipulation and the spread of messages of hate. For example, key social media activists like Fred Lumbuye were active in spreading anti-government propaganda and fomenting sectarianism. This was prevalent in the aftermath of Kyagulanyi's arrest while on the campaign trail. Lumbuye blamed ethnicities like Banyarwanda and Banyankole for the crisis in Uganda and called on the masses to rise and attack government facilities and operatives. Other videobloggers were known for using abusive language x-rated comments against Museveni and his political party.

Hence it became apparent that although Uganda was to engage in 'scientific elections' with mediums like media platforms pivotal to the process, these became contested in the process. The resulting fallout led to government censorship of these platforms, heavily tilting the election in favor of the ruling government. The belated intervention by social media companies to curb government use of the same platforms to spread propaganda only hurt further the opposition as the Internet and social media were shut down by the government.

In conclusion, COVID-19 has posed a challenge regarding the sustenance of democratic systems. This threat has been especially concerning on the African continent, where the lack of basic infrastructure to overcome the risks of the virus has jeopardized the ability of governments to assure a fair electoral process. It could be said that the pandemic has been used by governments with dictatorial tendencies as an opportunity to instore their power. Regardless of the method employed, postponement or the development of 'technological' electoral processes, a general dissatisfaction of the population in the region has sprouted, revealing their exhaustion by the attempts of abuse of power by its rulers.

Regarding Uganda, it can be argued that to a large extent the 'scientific elections' process was designed to produce an outcome that favored President Museveni in the 2021 elections. This was a rational choice by some key stakeholders to tilt the election in their favor. Political actors do not necessarily design a policy to create a level playing field for everyone.

This new electoral process, which could have broadened the presence of the presidential candidates with the technological facilities that are available today, created more inequality regarding political campaigns. The challenge for Uganda is that institutions like the Electoral Commission are not independent, and this makes them ineffective in designing a public policy that creates a level playing field for everyone. Hence, since the Electoral Commission operatives are appointed by the President, they are usually under his or her control during the election process.

Therefore, there is a need for a change in the law concerning the appointing of Electoral Commission officials. The Chair and Deputy Chair of the Electoral Commission should be independently appointed by the Parliament. The Electoral Commission should have equal representation of the ruling and opposition parties in key positions to ensure transparency and equity. The body should also assure an equal national founding to all candidates as well as equal access to national media. This structure will alleviate the mutual suspicion between contestants and, therefore, ensure free and fair elections. Moreover, this will grant the Electoral Commission legitimacy and, as a result, the ability to develop policies on holding, managing, and declaring elections more transparently.

The legislative changes regarding the electoral process in Museveni's last term also denoted the fallacy of the 'scientific elections' process in Uganda. With only 24% of Internet penetration in the country, the tax on social media and Internet multiple shutdowns, it is unreasonable to have expected success with this methodology. Thus, it came as no surprise that the relevance of traditional media in this process left Museveni with a great advantage for his power to use national media or by his influence to use private media.

The final step would be the revocation of the non-age and non-term limit legislation in addition to the social media restrictions. These measures would reinstate the democratic principles of the rule of law, control of the abuse of power, liberty of speech, and transparency, which are all the requirements of fair elections and a democratic state. If this project is carried out, then a fair and equal, thus democratic, process of 'scientific elections' could take place in Uganda.

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