

Book Review - No-Party Democracy in Uganda, Myths and Realities by Senzo Ngubane

No-Party Democracy in Uganda, Myths and Realities - Mugaju, Justus and Oloka-Onyango (eds.)
2000. Uganda: Fountain Publishers, 158 pp.

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The question of democracy, as it relates to the right of people to decide who and how they ought to be governed, still remains one of the thorny issues in African politics. Of course, notwithstanding countries like Botswana, Senegal and South Africa who appear to be consolidating their democratic paths, most African states are still battling with this issue.

The debates as to whether multi-party democracy is an ideal type of political system will surely be part and parcel of African discourse for some time to come. One of the countries in Africa that has been engaged in such a debate both at practical, theoretical and political levels is Uganda. About its no-party democratic system a number of questions are still debated. Is this system relevant? Is it a genuinely African political experiment?

The book entitled No-Party Democracy in Uganda, Myths and Realities, which was published just before the June 2000 referendum, goes a long way towards further expanding on the debates around the movement system (National Resistance Movement) or multi-party democracy. As indicated in the introduction, the book is a collection of essays (eight) by various African academics and politicians. In Chapter two Justus Mugaju outlines Uganda's political history with the aim of reflecting the context within which the movement system was introduced in Uganda. Mugaju argues that because of the manner in which British colonialists treated their colonies the ideals of democracy never flourished in Uganda during the colonial era. He also makes mention of the same phenomenon in the post-colonial era where most political parties which emerged did little, if anything, to foment the seeds of multiparty democracy.

John-Jean Barya's chapter (Political Parties, the Movement and the Referendum on Political Systems: One-Step Forward, Two Steps Back?) traces the debate around the movement and multi-partyism. This is done by outlining the arguments made in favour of the movement system (no-party) and those made in favour of multi-party democracy. Barya states that one of the arguments for the movement system is that it is meant to build solidarity and forge national unity. The argument for multi-party democracy is that the right to associate is fundamental and should not be taken away by the state or by a vote (p 31). Barya contends that the movement (just as multi-partyism) was never meant to be a political system but only an electoral mechanism or a means to acquire or retain state power. He concludes by arguing that instead of adopting an either-or approach it is necessary to find a middle path. This middle road could be somewhere along the lines of retaining the movement through a pluralist political setup that recognises political parties but avoids 'a winner takes all situation'.

Instead of seeking for a middle road between the two systems, Oloka-Onyango argues in chapter four (New Wine or New Bottles? Movement Politics and One Partyism in Uganda) that the movement system needs to open up the political space for other political actors. Through a detailed examination of the Act of the Movement, the author concludes that there is little difference between the current politics of the movement and the single-party state of the past in Africa. He also makes an observation, similar to that of the previous author (Chapter 3), that the victory of the movement system in the June

2000 referendum was a forgone conclusion.

Chapter Five by Nelson Kasfir ('Movement' Democracy, legitimacy and Power in Uganda) notes that the conditions that existed in 1986 when the movement was launched and which might have created a need for a no-party democracy have changed significantly. Kasfir further notes that a closer examination of the movement democracy and its application since 1986 is a reflection of a political strategy to legitimise state power more than being a 'novel form of democracy (p 61). Although Kasfir accepts that, compared to previous governments of Uganda the movement system has done better, he maintains that the activities of some of those in power have tended to undermine the Ten Points Programme.

In Chapter Six, James Francis Wapakhabulo traces the origins, progress, challenges and prospects of the movement democracy in Uganda. According to Wapakhabulo the origins of the concept of the movement could be traced back to the situation immediately prior to the Tanzania-Uganda war of 1979 when the Ugandan liberation movements came together to form the Ugandan National Liberation Front (UNLF). This formation however was not a success and Wapakhabulo gives a number of reasons for the UNLF's failure to meet its objectives. The author is of the opinion that of all the political systems that Uganda has had, no one has given the country more stability, peace and development than the current movement. He sees the movement as an inclusive political system which has succeeded in bringing democracy in Uganda.

Another intriguing chapter is by Tarsis B. Kabwegyere, which deals with Civil Society and the Democratic Transition in Uganda since 1986. The thrust of this chapter is that the emergence and proliferation of civil society structures and their growing political influence are a manifestation of the success of no-party democracy in Uganda. The chapter also states, quite correctly, that because of colonialism civil society never flourished or, to use Kabwegyere's term, civil society was 'suffocated'. He goes on to argue that the same remained true in post-colonial Africa where the leaders viewed civil society as something to control rather than to activate. According to the author this was the case in Uganda before the emergence of the no-party movement which has led to the thriving of civil society.

Sallie Simba Kayunga tackles the issue of armed oppositions in Uganda and their impact on the movement system. He argues that besides the continued existence of old armed formations in the country, there are other new ones, which emerged after 1986. The chapter goes into an in-depth analysis of two such armed groups: the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF). Kayunga is of the view that the movement has not handled the problem of armed opposition in a correct manner. Hence the chapter's proposal that any post-referendum government must adopt measures that would address the various root causes (historical, economic and others) of armed opposition and one way of doing this is by creating institutional mechanisms to isolate 'men of violence' (p 125).

The penultimate chapter, by Ali Mazrui, (Between Domestic Policy and Regional Power: The Role of Ideology in Uganda) argues that President Museveni's Uganda has played a greater role in regional politics under the guise of Pan-Africanism than the erstwhile leaders of the country. To this end, the chapter wants to ascertain whether such regional involvement is an attempt to 'export' his no-party democracy to the rest of the Great Lakes region or whether it is inspired by his ambition to become the

power broker in the region. In trying to offer answers to the question, the chapter provides a comparative analysis of President Museveni's policies, strategies and ideology and that of former President Obote. Over and above this though, the chapter offers an excellent theoretical account and further enlightens the reader's understanding of various debates and ideologies, which shape the course of events in Great Lakes politics and other African regions in general. To this end he examines the role of Pax Africana as an ideology that drives (or that should drive) African regional politics.

The concluding chapter by Mugaju makes broad observations about the necessary steps which need to be taken by all political formations in order to finally arrive at a common ground on the country's future political system. The chapter also raises the often asked question by advocates of multi-party democracy, which is, When will the country be ready for multi-partyism? Ten years? Fifteen years? (p 141).

For scholars of African studies interested in understanding the politics of no-party democracy in Uganda, this is certainly a book to read. Almost all the chapters are written in a straightforward manner, which makes the entire book easy to read. Another positive aspect of the is that it has a full bibliography list of further readings relating to Uganda's political history, socio-political issues and those that deal with Uganda's political landscape since 1986.

Notes

References