Ugandans in the Diaspora Deserve to Have Their Voices Heard in the 2016 Elections

Ronald Seruyombya laments that there is no provision for Ugandans in the diaspora and in prison to vote in their country's general elections.

Five decades after Uganda gained independence coupled with twenty years after the 1995 constitution came into force; it is remarkable that only free inhabitants of Uganda have full rights as citizens. Those living abroad automatically relinquish their right to vote. In addition, people awaiting trial or in prison lose their right to participate in both local and national general elections.

The architects of the 1995 constitution did not envisage that diaspora and incarcerated people needed to be included. This omission can be excused. However, given that the constitution has been amended several times, there have been multiple opportunities to rectify this exclusion.

Ugandans living abroad have no say in deciding who rules their country

In an interview on the Uganda television station NTV discussing the 2016 elections, the Chairperson of the Uganda Electoral Commission, Hajji Badru Kiggundu reiterated that 'there is no provision for people in diaspora and prisoners to vote'.

The question is: What will it take for this issue to be considered? Many Ugandans abroad have invested their money in businesses at home. Therefore, they have every right to have a say in who leads the country. Democracies like Kenya, India and South Africa among others do have a voting provision for their citizens living abroad. It is even more startling that those who wield political power at all levels from local councils to parliament and the cabinet are aware of this omission but feel no incentive to remedy the situation. This is very disappointing considering how quick many politicians are to act when it is in their own interests.

In 2009, according to Bulwaka, approximately 660,000 (2.2%) of Uganda's population lived abroad. This apparent deliberate neglect of a serious issue has led to a narrowing of the electorate. This is because 1.) Many eligible voters in the diaspora are not allowed 2.) 70 per cent of the population are children 3.) available eligible voters are mostly poor characterised by segmentation/fragmentation (mobilisation challenges), apathy (as they tend to deem election as a waste of time and suffer from loss of confidence in the regime) and a high rate of illiteracy which

makes it difficult for them to marry manifestos/policies to actual service delivery. Ultimately, this means that the determination of Uganda's future rests on those available in its geographical boundary. The ramification is that a competitive democracy that advocates for mass involvement of the citizens, political parties and civil society in the election process, with the goal achieving refined unpredicted outcomes, is thwarted.

At this point, I wonder whether poor, weak and small economies prone to corruption need democracy. Though Larry Diamond believes that democracy can be exercised in poor economies (Mali, Benin, Malawi etc.), I tend to agree with Martin Seymour Lipset's claim in the late 1950s that democracy was a western ideology and therefore worked better in strong and established economies. Diamond lists some poor countries with democracy but their level of effectiveness is highly questionable as corruption, patronage and clientelism over shadow them. Uganda is no exception.

In conclusion, Ugandans go the polls to decide the next government on 18 February 2016. I am an eligible voter in the diaspora. Unfortunately I am not permitted to vote, yet it is my right. A more caring and responsible government would have organised diaspora voting through Embassies or High Commissions abroad or online.

Ronald Seruyombya is a PFAL scholar and masters student at LSE.

The views expressed in this post are those of the authors and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.

February 18th, 2016 | African Elections, Featured, International Affairs | 1 Comment