

Refugees in northern Uganda now have 'democracy', but no authority

This article is part of our #LSEReturn series, exploring themes around [Displacement and Return](#).

In the wake of a democratic election in northern Uganda's Palabek Refugee camp, Charles Ogeno and Ryan O'Byrne interrogate what this new 'refugee governance' really means for those governed by it.

Refugees and elections

Refugee camps have a bad reputation. Their portrayal is often [one-dimensional](#) and [dehumanising](#). They are rendered as depressing, squalid, and [overflowing with both refuse and humanity's most unwanted](#); places where people fleeing conflict, disaster, and death grow [dependent on international aid](#) and [lose an ability to exercise choice](#).

Such portrayals are not only simplistic but wrong.

In July 2018, for example, around 60% of the nearly 10,000 eligible residents in northern Uganda's Palabek Refugee Settlement engaged in the democratic election of their own representatives. According to the [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees \(UNHCR\)](#) and [The Office of the Prime Minister \(OPM\)](#), something like this had never happened before: no Ugandan settlement has ever elected all their leaders by secret ballot on the same day and without violence.

But, *has* a new era of refugee governance emerged, as UNHCR and the OPM ask us to believe? Does the election *actually* change anything?

We suggest "no", because although the election as an *event* was well run, the wider process was something of a deception, a ploy seemingly designed primarily for better service provision rather than the establishment or transference of refugee-based authority. We provide two examples of exactly why this is the case.

Two reasons the election changes nothing

We had a team of three independent observers present for the entire month-long election process. This team has been undertaking research within Palabek Refugee Settlement for nearly a year. As a team, we feel it is important to highlight that our general assessments about the election *event* are largely positive. There were electoral papers and ballot boxes, impartial polling officers and long queues of voters. Security was accounted for by an obvious police presence. It was well-run, well-organised, and looked and felt legitimate. It did well to ensure transparency and accountability.

Despite this, however, refugees and their newly-elected leaders tell us the election has changed nothing. And interestingly, the organisations involved have no interest in our feedback, even when freely offered.

Maybe such reticence towards external feedback is because claims the election empowered refugee-based authorities are superficial at best.

Power remains unequal:

The tiered arrangement of Palabek's refugee leadership is said to mirror that of the Ugandan system. But there is one big difference: unlike leaders with Ugandan communities, refugee leaders are not given real authority. For instance, during a public meeting declaring election results on 1st August 2018, an Office of the Prime Minister Protection Officer warned the leadership: "*We are here to work together, so if you have any problems, please send it to the partners [NGOs]. Do not take your own decision. You do not have the authority to do that*".

Unfortunately, many of the NGOs only have skeletal offices in the settlement while both the OPM and UNHCR are infamously difficult to access, often turning away even the refugees' own leaders. The settlement also has only about a dozen police, a tiny number when compared to the needs of policing and maintaining security among a community of over 36,000 residents. Where exactly *should* the refugees go with their 'problems', then?

The common story given by existing authorities – that the election was a way of 'empowering' refugees – instead seems a low-cost, low-effort way to maintain order. This is especially so given existing authorities continually demonstrate not only an inability but a lack of desire in engaging in the settlement's everyday governance. Indeed, refugees often note that NGO partners purposefully remove themselves from the daily concerns of most residents.



A staff marking the index finger of a voter. Credit: Ryan O'Byrne

Service provision wearing a democracy dress:

[Despite reports to the contrary](#), refugees in Palabek have never had any real formal authority. Instead, on those occasions when leadership has had to resort to their own methods for overcoming problems like camp-wide sanitation, largescale theft, or even [murder](#), their authority to do so was immediately questioned.

According to one recently elected leader, despite the election, nothing much has changed: "*They still tell us one thing and do another*", he said. Other leaders echo this, maintaining the election changes neither their roles nor the way power actually functions.

In other words, the connection between the election and refugee-authored governance is really just a story residents are told to make it easier for existing authorities. And in this, the election is already quite successful. As the OPM told us afterwards, "*the purpose of the election was to empower the refugees and to ease the operations of the partners. Now the refugees have been engaged with the way the settlement runs, it is easier to provide them with services*". This admission highlights both the main reason for the election and the primary functions of the newly elected leadership: to find issues needing attention and bring them to the relevant (and real) authorities. Those elected were designed, not as figures with direct authority or power, but rather as mediators and intermediaries.

Conclusion: The more things change, the more they stay the same

It is true that this was a significant moment in Ugandan and South Sudanese refugee history. Likewise, that the outcome of these elections mattered to many refugees is also not disputed. It is not particularly obvious, however, that 36,000 South Sudanese were 'empowered' (whatever that means): after all, neither UNHCR nor Uganda *really* want refugees governing themselves.

We, therefore, suggest that being designed more as an exercise in efficient camp management than self-governance, the elections had a more utilitarian basis than just 'refugee empowerment'. In other words, although the election *event* demonstrated many ideals of democratic governance, the reasons underlying the wider *process* were more about service provision than authority transfer. Although the election may have helped such provision, these 'benefits' have come without the transfer of authority or power. More of the same, it seems, just more efficiently. Thus, although refugees now have elected representatives, they really remain *only* representatives. The elections have changed nothing about the settlement's *actual* functioning.

Find out more about the [Politics of Return](#) and our [Trajectories of Displacement](#) research projects, which are based at the Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa and funded by ESRC/AHRC.

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