Recent elections in Uganda produced the outcome “everyone expected”: President Museveni and the NRM-party won. After 25 years of Museveni in power, the opposition has failed to pose any significant and real challenge to President Museveni’s rule. Rather than a democratic contest for power, elections in Uganda appear to be tools for consolidating power. The election reflects the NRM and Museveni’s continued control of the political game. Albeit internal weaknesses in the political opposition, we argue that a hostile operating environment makes it impossible for the opposition parties to compete.

The international community, monitoring teams and the opposition have all lamented that there was an uneven playing field in the 2011 elections, and that the results were fraudulent (box 1). Yet, the election results also revealed a fragmented and weak opposition in Uganda. While claims of ballot stuffing, a faulty voters’ register and uneven distribution of voting material to the polling stations, dominated the discussion on election day, the large difference between the NRM candidates and the candidates of the other parties in both the Presidential and Parliamentary race, seems to indicate that the opposition failed to mobilise voters to challenge President Museveni and the NRM.

Six years after the re-introduction of multiparty politics in Uganda, the opposition parties have not managed to attract enough members and voters due to poor party organisation and infrastructure. Lack of access to both financial and human resources within the parties have been compounded by within-party splits, making already fragile organisations weaker. With the failure of the Interparty Cooperation (IPC), the opposition parties have also failed to create a credible, monolithic opposition alternative to the NRM (see box 2). “Opportunistic ambitions” have caused the opposition parties to attack each other rather than to unite against the NRM.
When the elections consolidate power

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restricts fundraising. It is poorly and selectively
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Simultaneously, the law contains clauses that
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“The use of state resources
A fusion between the state and the NRM party
creates opportunities for the NRM to use and
distribute state resources. These resources are
either used to buy votes, positions or policy.

The importance of money in politics in Uganda
is increasing, and vote buying is pervasive.
NRM has been named top vote buyer in both
surveys as well as focus groups. Money is
funnelled through the State House, which has an
item in the budget called to “Presidential
Gifts”; the President himself can grant
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A “hostile” operating environment

The legal and institutional framework

The manipulation of the legal and institutional
framework surrounding the election process has
contributed to a “hostile” operating environment.
The number of electoral and bureaucratic
districts has increased dramatically since
elections were reintroduced in 1996 (see box 3).
This has increased the costs of the actual
election and of participation because the number
of positions the opposition has to compete for
increases. This hurts opposition parties with
weakly developed party structures. While
decentralisation has been a goal of the Ugandan
government and international donors since the
late 1980s, research has shown that NRM and
President Museveni enjoy significantly higher
electoral support in newly created districts.

The single-member district plurality electoral
system for Parliament creates a candidate-
centred system where many opposition
candidates campaign against each other.
This creates disgruntled losers and spreads
their resource, which is detrimental for the
opposition. A split opposition simply cannot
compete with the monolithic NRM. While
this has also haunted the NRM-sponsored
candidates who have faced former NRM
Independents, it has highlighted the splits both
within and between opposition parties.

According to the Afrobarometer, when voting
for president, voters consider personality and
leadership skills more important than ability
to deliver on issues like employment and
development. The candidate’s party affiliation is
less important. The opposition failed to convince
voters they could ensure peace and security.
Without support from a powerful coalition,
Besigye did not manage to convince voters he
could beat Museveni and be a strong leader.
Voters did not buy Besigye’s vision of change.
This seeming failure of the opposition, we will
argue, is a result of Museveni and the NRM
using the state apparatus and their incumbency
advantages strategically to distance the
electorate from the opposition. How have they
taken control of the electoral contest?

Box 1: Monitoring reports
Commonwealth Observer Group:
“The country is still in the
process of consolidating its
multi-party political system...
Some serious concerns remain.
Of particular note are the
overwhelming lack of a level
playing field and the
“commercialisation of politics”.
As a result, the
2011 elections in Uganda
did not fully meet national,
regional and international
standards for democratic
elections.”

EU Observation Mission:
“The 2011 Ugandan general
elections showed some
improvements over the
previous elections held
in 2006... Furthermore,
the power of incumbency
was exercised to such an
extent as to compromise
severely the level playing
field between the competing
candidates and political
parties.”

While this might paint a bleak picture of the
opposition in Uganda, there have been positive
developments since previous elections. Most
of the parties have held delegate conferences
with internal elections. Through new, inventive
schemes to broaden their resource base, they
have shown a willingness to spend some of
their resources on building an organisation
that in time can reach across Uganda. The Inter
Party Cooperation shows that there are ongoing
initiatives within the opposition to create a
credible alternative to the NRM. This kind of
opposition cooperation has been successful in
many other African countries.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidate (party)</th>
<th>Number of votes</th>
<th>Percentage of votes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yoweri K. Museveni (NRM)</td>
<td>5,428,369</td>
<td>68.38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kizza Besigye (IPC)</td>
<td>2,064,963</td>
<td>26.01%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norbert Mao (DP)</td>
<td>147,917</td>
<td>1.86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olara Otunnu (UPC)</td>
<td>125,059</td>
<td>1.58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beti O. Kamya (UFA)</td>
<td>52,782</td>
<td>0.66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abed Bwanka (PPD)</td>
<td>51,708</td>
<td>0.65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jaber B. Ssali (PPP)</td>
<td>34,688</td>
<td>0.44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samuel Lubega (Indep)</td>
<td>32,726</td>
<td>0.41%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Electoral Commission of Uganda

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Regular MPs</th>
<th>Women MPs</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NRM</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independents</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FDC</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DP</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UPC</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JEEMA</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CP</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>237</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>349</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Results of Uganda Presidential election 2011

Table 2: Results of Uganda Presidential election 2011 by party: directly elected MPs
sector for the economy in Uganda, has created an environment where the private sector is dependent on public contracts to prosper. This increases the importance of being on sound footing with the ruling party, and the risk if one is associated with the opposition.

As the ruling party, NRM controls the creation of positions as well as the loyalty of those employed in the state apparatus. The size of both the local, regional and national governments and bureaucracies are extensive and growing (See box 3). This means that it is 1) important to be associated with the party which can provide you with the resources to win elections, and 2) that the winning party can provide other party sympathisers with non-elected positions. This is compounded by the large salaries enjoyed by public officials.

The legacy of the “Movement” system on local and regional government structures and Regional District Commissioners has created many non-partisan government structures that are loyal to the NRM and, more often than not, the President himself. These are often paid from public funds, and should thus be considered public servants.

**The “fear factor” and the “silent threat”**

While the build-up to the election and the Election Day was generally peaceful, security forces were massively deployed on Election Day. The close links between the government and a formal and informal security apparatus capture the essence of how the regime uses elections to consolidate power. Hendrickson and Mutengesa (2008) estimate that Uganda has the largest government-friendly militia in the world. As a response to the fear of violent attacks from an organised youth mob known as “Kiboko Squad” with assumed links to the state apparatus, the opposition mobilised youth wings to “protect the vote”. The use and misuse of the term “vigilante group” and “youth brigade” create both fear and space for the military and the police to intervene in opposition mobilisation. The police was supposed to be responsible for security during the elections because the army is under the command of President Museveni. Yet, the army’s crucial role in the organisation of the security aspects linked to the Election, created an atmosphere of a “silent threat”. This threat became reality in the late aftermath of the election when the opposition organised peaceful “walk to work” protest marches against increasing fuel and food prices. The state’s security apparatus showed its partisan face by violently stopping the protest, arresting protesters including the head of the opposition Dr. Kizza Besigye, and killing at least five people in the streets of Kampala. All in all, this creates a feeling of insecurity in Uganda, a feeling which the NRM and Museveni nurture to strengthen the image of the incumbent president as a “strong leader”.

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**Box 2: The failure of the IPC**

- The Interparty Cooperation (IPC) was an attempt to create a unitary Ugandan opposition for the 2011 election.
- The initiative was supported and funded by the international community.
- It originally included the following parties: FDC, DP, UPC CP, SDP and JEEMA.
- DP quit the IPC in early 2010 and by August UPC has quit as well. Both nominate their own presidential candidate instead.
- SDP quit the Cooperation after seeing FDC support independent candidate Erias Lukwago for the Kampala Mayor’s race, after initially supporting and nominating SDP leader Michael Mabikke as the IPC’s candidate.

**Box 3: The increase in districts and ministerial positions in Uganda**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of districts</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of ministerial positions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Number of administrative districts in Uganda by year**

**Number of junior and senior ministers in Uganda by year**
Looking ahead after the 2011 Elections

After the election, the opposition called for peaceful protests against what they perceived to be rigged elections. Returning to Kampala in triumph the week after the election, President Museveni addressed a large crowd of NRM-supporters: "If anybody jokes with this victory of Ugandans, I will hold him like a samosa or a cake and swallow them up". It is interesting to note that Museveni here appears to allure to the memories of Idi Amin and his cannibal reputation. And indeed, the post-election events have shown that Museveni was not joking. The 2011 election was his and the NRM’s latest “electoral tool” to legitimize and consolidate their hold on power. This suggests that opposition parties are stuck in a “vicious cycle”: their organizations are too weak to effectively compete with the NRM, and the operational environment effectively constrains the opposition’s ability to build organisations that can compete. In 2011, the NRM could hold elections with the certainty that they would win.

To give the 2016 Elections democratic substance and in order to ensure a level playing field between the competing actors in all stages of the process, the rules of the electoral game and the institutions governing the whole election cycle must be changed. The huge incumbency advantages enjoyed by the NRM needs to be constrained. The use of state resources in and before the campaign period needs to be curbed. Money in politics must be controlled either through spending caps or through more transparent spending. The pervasive use of vote buying must stop. The close ties between the security apparatus, the government and the NRM must be addressed. An inclusive and independent Electoral Commission with enough resources to further strengthen the Electoral process would be a good place to start.

References

Afrobarometer (2010) Round 4.5 Pre-Election Survey

Interviews carried out in Kampala, December 2010, as well as newspaper articles from the Daily Monitor, New Vision and the Independent online.