

# Civic Education and the Promotion of Participatory Democracy in Uganda

Mr M Katusiimeh  
Lecturer in Mass Communication  
Uganda Christian University  
E-mail [katusiimeh@yahoo.com](mailto:katusiimeh@yahoo.com)

## Abstract

*The paper examines the effect of civic education programs on participatory democracy in Uganda. It is argued that civic education aims at creating individuals with the capacity to go beyond citizens who are passive subjects of the state, to those who are well informed and responsible. It should equip citizens with skills to participate and contribute to the development of and maintenance of democratic governance and citizenship which eventually leads to the establishment of a stable democratic political system. The central argument of the paper is that civic education in Uganda has not been accorded the importance it deserves in building the civic competence of the population and entrenching the democratic culture. Organizations supposed to carry out civic education and those accredited to conduct civic education have been hampered by financial and organizational problems. Focus has mainly been on voter education, which has been hurriedly organized rather than civic education that is more systematic and continuous. Civic education is also mis-used for the interest of special groups in society such as political propaganda. The result is usually tensions in the electoral campaigns that contribute to violent eruptions. The consequence is mostly conflicts and violence in Ugandan elections. The paper concludes that civic education including voter education should be carried out periodically covering the entire country. This will ensure that the population is constantly aware of the issues at hand and know how to exercise their obligations as free people.*

## Introduction

Education is a basic right. It is the right to know one's rights. Article 13 of the Covenant of Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights stipulates that "education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the person's own sense of dignity". Article 13 section 1 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights sets forth the Proposition that every one shall have the right to freedom of expression. This right includes freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds through any media of his/her choice<sup>1</sup>

The Constitution of the Republic of Uganda<sup>2</sup> provides for the creation and nurturing of a democratic society in which all the citizens have the right to participate in the affairs of their government and Civic Education enhances the people's competence and opportunity to participate meaningfully and responsibly in self-governance. Democracy means a system of governance in which power rests with the people. In a democracy, people elect their leadership and their representatives debate and decide on important issues affecting their people such as making laws. Therefore when the people's representatives make decisions, it is assumed that they are expressing the will of the

---

<sup>1</sup> T. Gibson, *Civic Education School Text*, Prepared for the Uganda Electoral Commission, June 12, 1998, pg. 2

<sup>2</sup> The Republic of Uganda, *Constitution of the Republic of Uganda*, 1995

people. These representatives are supposed to be accountable to the people at all times. Democracy therefore entails full participation by the people in the democratization of the political and development process. But in order to benefit from this process, people must participate efficiently, effectively and adequately, and that calls for civic education.

The history of Civic Education in Uganda dates back to the colonial days. There was an attempt in 1958 at Civic Education when the colonial government expanded the Legislative Council (LEGCO) to include more Africans. However it was so fundamentally flawed that it was abandoned before it could take off. The candidates and agents in the 1958 elections did not bother to comprehend the essence and relevance of Civic Education<sup>3</sup>. In the subsequent elections of 1961, 1962, 1980, 1989 there was no meaningful civic education until 1993 when Constituent Assembly elections were about to be organized. Apart from that, there has been a deliberate attempt to teach civics at primary level of education. In fact civics has been part of social studies examined at primary level which gives way to political education a subject examined at Ordinary Level (O-Level).

It has to be noted that since the National Resistance Movement (NRM) took over power in Uganda in 1986, it has initiated several reforms in order to achieve popular participation of the people in socio-political activities. Notable among these was the popular democracy through the Resistance Councils (RCs) now Local Councils (L.Cs)<sup>4</sup>. Although this political reform was preceded by an amount of politicization of the people of Uganda, its coverage was limited and confined to the election of the representatives to the National Resistance Council (NRC). The other attempt at Civic education by the NRM government was the political education courses popularly known as 'Mchaka Mchaka' cadre training. The other more recent political reform was the writing of the new 1995 Constitution for the Republic of Uganda. Civic Education was attempted before the Constituent Assembly Elections in 1992-93 and even in the subsequent elections in 1996 Presidential and Parliamentary elections, 1998 Local Council Elections, Referendum on Political Systems 2000 and then 2001 presidential and parliamentary elections.

This paper argues that civic education has not been accorded the importance it deserves in building the civic competence of the population and entrenching the democratic culture. Focus has mainly been on voter education, which has been hurriedly organized rather than civic education that is more systematic and continuous. Civic education is mis-used for the interest of special interest groups in society such as for political propaganda. The result is usually tensions in the electoral campaigns that contribute to violent eruptions.

This paper is divided into five parts. Part one, which is the introduction, provides a background to civic education in Uganda. The second part is a theoretical analysis between democracy, participation and civic education. Part three looks at role of different actors in Uganda (Uganda Human Rights Commission, Uganda Electoral

---

<sup>3</sup> T. Gibson, *Civic Education School Text*, Prepared for the Uganda Electoral Commission, June 12, 1998

<sup>4</sup> D. Asiimwe, *The Resistance Councils and Committees in Uganda: An Appraisal of a Policy of Democratic Decentralization, Problems and Prospects: A Research Paper presented to the Hague, Netherlands for the Award for Masters degree in Development studies*, 1989

Commission and civil society organizations) in the civic education exercise. Part four is an illustration of how lack of civic education has led to tensions that has manifested itself and translated into violence in Ugandan elections. The paper ends with conclusions and recommendations.

### **Theoretical interface between Democracy, Participation and Civic education**

John Stuart Mill<sup>5</sup>, is perhaps the best known and most influential of the classical democrats. Other significant ideas propounded or elaborated by others will be taken into account to modify and adjust Mill's formulation.

Most of the classical theories of democracy are predicated upon an assumption that even if individual values are not relative, true only for citizens who hold them, then at least absolute values cannot be known or communicated to others. Although they varied in their commitment to this first and most important principle, the classical democrats, Mill in particular, maintained that, lacking knowledge of universal truths upon which to establish political authority, individuals in society must be accorded maximum opportunity to pursue their own goals and self-defined values, and to do so in self determined ways.

Recognizing, however, that the pursuit of individual goals inevitably brings citizens into conflict, the classical democrats established the sum of individual values or majority rule as the basis for resolving disputes and maintaining public order. Conflicts were to be resolved on the basis of laws established by popular consent. The majority preferences were to be identified through citizen participation, and the widest possible involvement of citizens in the political process was to produce a synthesis of the diverse and relative values of individual citizens into a unified, if still not absolute, basis of authority. Thus in classical theories of democracy, consensus replaces truth as the source of authority and individual participation in the polity is the procedure that identifies consensus.

Besides providing the basis for resolving conflict, individual political participation was viewed by the classical democrats as a necessary condition for individual development and moral fulfillment. According to Rousseau<sup>6</sup> participation was educational. It widened the individual's perspectives, enabling him to acquire the "moral freedom which alone makes man the master of himself". Participation "forced man to be free".

Although Mill argued further that nothing less can be ultimately desirable than the admission of all to share in the sovereign power of the state, he also recognized that the blessings of participation are not unmixed. If participation were to succeed in generating an effective base for political authority, Mill realized that citizens needed to possess certain virtues principal among which were tolerance, rationality, and a spirit of civic activism. The classical democrats maintained that members of a democratic polity must have the capacity and motivation to become involved in a variety of political activities; they need to be capable of understanding a wide range of political questions; they must be intensely interested in political affairs; they must be well informed and behave

---

<sup>5</sup> J. Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* in J. Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism, Liberty and Representative Government*, New York page 61

<sup>6</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans by Maurice Cranston, Harmondsworth: Middlesex pg. 67

rationally; and they must be willing not only to tolerate the participation of others but to defer the decision of the majority even when the will of the majority conflicts with their own.

The classical democrats, did not believe that man is by nature a rational, political animal; but they were optimistic that rationality and a spirit of civic activism could be nurtured in man through an enlightened program of civic education. And they viewed the development of such a program as both instrumentally valuable for a just and orderly society and intrinsically valuable for the moral and intellectual development of the citizen.

### **Concept of Civic Education**

Education is the process through which one takes in and builds up knowledge of the aspects of life so that one may live one's life more effectively as an active participant in society<sup>7</sup>. Therefore education enables us to know. Education helps one develop critical understanding of one's position in life e.g. questioning the things in life that are obstacles or barriers in the way of one's rights and freedoms and in the end, will bring about changes in behaviors that will show respect for one another when we disagree.

Civic education is a specialized aspect of general life education. Civic education is the education in citizenship or life of a citizen<sup>8</sup>. Civic education should enable a citizen to be a conscious political player in his or her country's governance. Civic education enables the citizens to appreciate the values of dialogue, negotiation, compromise, tolerance, diversity, democracy, good governance, accountability, participation, rule of law and in the end it promotes a culture of constitutionalism.

The content of a civic education course can be broken into four components, namely human rights and the law; voter's education and elections; community participation and constitution and good governance. Civic education through focusing on democratic values is so diversified that it includes many values<sup>9</sup>. These include among others: Democracy and good governance training; The study of the Constitution; Education in the values and attitudes of good citizenship; Education to form a critical mass which is absolutely necessary for the functioning of democracy; Education for tolerance and respect of other people and their views; Human rights education and inter-group relations; Transparency and accountability education; Peace education and conflict prevention and management; Legal education and awareness campaigns; Environmental protection education; Education on the diversity of the human race and similarities, and the interdependence of all humans; Civic rights, duties and responsibilities; and Education on the rule of law and the functions of public institutions.

Therefore Civic Education aims at creating individuals with the capacity to go beyond citizens, who are passive subjects of the state, to those who are well informed and responsible. It should equip citizens with skills to participate and contribute to the development of and maintenance of democratic governance and citizenship which eventually leads to the establishment of a stable democratic political system.

---

<sup>7</sup> Gibson, *Civic Education School Text*, Prepared for the Uganda Electoral Commission, June 12, 1998 pg. 4

<sup>8</sup> Gibson, *Civic Education School Text*, Prepared for the Uganda Electoral Commission, June 12, 1998 pg. 2

<sup>9</sup> NGOs and Civic Education: A Review of the state of civic education in Uganda (1996-1998) by Human Rights Network Uganda pg. 6

## **Voter education**

Education in support of the electoral process has become known as voter education where the primary target is the voter. There are a number of other areas of education required if an election is to be successful, but these may variously be conducted by political parties and election administration officials. Voter education, on the other hand is considered to be a separate and discreet function. It is usually identified as a function of the electoral authority and is occasionally subcontracted by them to private companies and civil society organizations. It is also fostered by public interest organizations independent of any mandate by the election authority.

## **Is voter Education Sufficient for Democracy?**

Voter education is essential to ensuring that voters can effectively exercise their voting rights and express their political will through the electoral process. If voters are not prepared or motivated to participate in the electoral process, then questions may begin to arise about the legitimacy, representativeness and responsiveness of elected leaders and institutions. At the same time, voter education is a very focused undertaking. It is targeted at eligible voters and addresses specific electoral events as well as the general electoral process. While voter education is a necessary component of the electoral process, it is not sufficient for democracy.

Voter education needs to be supplemented by on-going civic education efforts in order to achieve the democratic participation and culture that flows from and is, in fact, the rationale for periodic elections. Civic education employs a broader perspective than voter education. It is concerned with citizens, rather than voters, and emphasizes the relationship between active citizenship and democratic society. It is understood that citizens must engage the political process routinely, not just at the time of elections.

The scope of voter education efforts required in any given country will depend upon a variety of factors. Does the country have a long history of democratic elections, or this is a founding or transitional election? Is voter registration mandatory or voluntary? Who is responsible for voter registration? Has the franchise been extended to include new groups of voters? Have there been changes to the system of representation or the voting process? Do the electoral process and political institutions enjoy the confidence of the electorate? Is the election campaign open and competitive? Have voter education efforts been undertaken in the past? Is there an on-going civic education effort? The answers to all of these questions and more will impact on the nature and reach of the voter education program.

Voter education is an important element in developing an environment within which free and fair elections may take place. Voter education typically addresses voters' motivation and preparedness to participate fully in elections. It pertains to relatively more complex types of information about voting and the electoral process and is concerned with concepts such as the link between basic human rights and voting rights; the role responsibilities, and rights of voters; the relationship between elections and democracy and the conditions necessary for democratic elections; secrecy of the ballot; why each vote is important and its impact on public accountability; and how votes translate into seats. Voter education requires more lead time for implementation than voter information and, ideally, should be undertaken on an on-going basis. This type of information is most often provided by election authorities and civil society organizations.

## Concept of Elections

Although controversy continues to characterize the debate about the nature of representation, there is one point of near universal agreement: the representative process is organically linked to elections and voting. Elections may not in themselves be a sufficient condition for political representation, but there is little doubt that they are a necessary condition<sup>10</sup>. Indeed, some theorists have gone further and portrayed elections as the rump of democracy. This was the view advanced by Joseph Schumpeter<sup>11</sup>, which portrayed democracy as an 'institutional arrangement; as a means of filling public choice by a competitive struggle for the peoples vote. In interpreting democracy as nothing more than a political method, Schumpeter in effect identified it with elections, and specifically with competitive elections.

While few modern democratic theorists are prepared to reduce democracy simply to competitive elections, most nevertheless follow Schumpeter in understanding democratic government in terms of the rule and mechanisms that structure the conduct of elections.

Since an election can be defined as a device for filling an office or post through choices made by a designated body of people: the electorate<sup>12</sup> some of the following questions may be politically important in determining the form that an election takes. First who is entitled to vote? Secondly, how are votes cast? The secret ballot is usually seen as the primary guarantee of a 'fair' election, in that it keeps the dangers of undue influence and intimidation at bay. Nevertheless, electoral fairness cannot simply be reduced to the issue of how people vote. It is also affected by the voter's access to reliable and alternative information, the range of choice they are offered, the circumstances under which campaigning is carried out, and finally, how scrupulously the vote is counted. Finally, how is the election conducted?

## The concept of participation

United Nations (UN) documents define participation as the involvement of people at different levels in decision-making processes to determine social goals and allocation of resources. In this therefore participation means mobilization of people to implement what government has decided to do. According to Asiimwe<sup>13</sup>, participation is generally referred to as the involvement of significant number of persons in situations or actions which enhance their well being. Peoples participation is said to help identify peoples initiatives in making decisions on the problems confronting them. Citizen participation is not only a right but a responsibility<sup>14</sup>. This includes standing for elections, voting at elections, being informed, debating issues, attending community or civic meetings and paying taxes.

---

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Heywood, *Politics*, Macmillan, 1997 pg. 69

<sup>11</sup> J. Shumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, Allen and Unwin pg. 16

<sup>12</sup> Andrew Heywood, *Politics*, Macmillan, 1997, pg. 211

<sup>13</sup> Delius Asiimwe, 'The Resistance Councils and Committees in Uganda: An Appraisal of a Policy of Democratic Decentralization, Problems and Prospects. Masters Thesis submitted to the Institute of Development Studies, The Hague, Netherlands, 1989.

<sup>14</sup> Gibson, *Civic Education School Text*, Prepared for the Uganda Electoral Commission, June 12, 1998 pg. 15

### **The Need for Civic Education in Uganda**

Due to high levels of illiteracy rates in Uganda, many adults are not aware of their rights and duties since they cannot read or write. This has short comings especially during the elections. For example people are not aware that regular elections are a constitutional right and duty and this needs to be explained to the masses.

Women at the grass root level have not yet realized the importance of taking up leadership positions in society<sup>15</sup>. The majority of the women are generally resigned and feel that they are merely being exploited by politicians or fellow women, 'who got to the top in politics' and forget those who elected them into office. The lack of voter education and poor mobilization, prior to the women, youth and village council elections caused many women to decline from participating in these elections. Many women do not know what was expected of them as candidates or even as voters. The people do not understand that voting for sugar and incentives undermines their development<sup>16</sup>.

Uganda continues to face numerous challenges and barriers in its successful transition to democracy. Uganda's prospects to be a sovereign, stable, secure and prosperous democracy depend not only on politicians activity, but also on ordinary citizens. Uganda is entering a special transitional phase with the forthcoming presidential elections of 2006. A final and likely decisive battle will be fought between the movementists and the multipartists. The success of democratization in Uganda will depend mostly on strengthening civil society. To influence the real development of the situation in Uganda it is necessary to place our stakes not on this or that political person, but on the people as a whole, on improving men's and women's political culture and citizens education, as well as cultivating the values of open society. Civic education is one way to develop civil society since it is able to provide an essential antidote to political destabilization, confrontation, and threats to national security. Civic education must help people overcome political apathy, teach more peaceful forms of political and civic behavior, and help provide tools to solve social problems in non-violent ways.

### **Civil society organizations in Uganda**

Like other African countries, building democratic institutions and democratic politics remains a major challenge in Uganda. Uganda has what is described as a 'no-party' democracy implying that full political contestation is restricted. Similar descriptions of other countries include, 'guided democracy', 'low intensity democracy' and 'democradura', or 'dictablanda'<sup>17</sup>. These 'democracies with adjectives' as they have been called, lack some aspect of the common features of liberal democracy, or the lack of democratic politics within the institutions.

Notwithstanding the restriction on political party activities, the Human Rights Chapter of the Ugandan 1995 Constitution provides a solid framework within which civil society in Uganda can operate. Article 29 (1) (a), (d) and (e) guarantees rights of expression, assembly and association.

---

<sup>15</sup> S. Kawamara, *Women Emerging in Uganda's Democracy: A Documentation of Women's Experiences in Uganda's Local Government*, Kampala, UWONET, 1998

<sup>16</sup> See the Report by the Human Rights and Peace Center, *Civic Education and the Quest for Sustainable Constitutionalism*, 1997

<sup>17</sup> Winnie Byanyima, *Involving Civil Society in the Legislative Process*. In the Second handbook on Effective Legislative Representation: A Compendium of Conference Proceedings held at the Uganda International Conference Center Kampala, August 24-25, 2000.

There is considerable debate about the meaning of civil society, its relevance, and its conceptual usefulness in the African context<sup>18</sup>. There is lack of theoretical clarity and conflicting understandings of the word civil society. Since civil society was first mooted as an important actor in African politics in the early 1990s, its main role has been seen in terms of democratic consolidation. It is widely believed that a thriving civil society can widen democracy by promoting pluralism, and it can deepen democracy by embedding the values and institutions of liberal democracy within society at large, not simply at the same level.

Civil society comes from the Latin notion of *civilis societas* referred to communities which conformed to norms that rose above and beyond the laws of the state<sup>19</sup>

As Write writes, the use of civil society “implies a certain power relationship between state and society such that there are limitations on the state’s capacity to pervade and control society, and a certain power on the part of members of a society to insulate themselves from, and exert influence upon, the state”<sup>20</sup>

### **What is Civil Society Supposed to do?**

A strong civil society is considered one of the prerequisites for democracy. Diamond identifies at least six functions of civil society in shaping democracy<sup>21</sup>:

1. Civil society is a reservoir of political, economic, cultural and moral resources to check the power of the state.
2. The diversity of civil society will ensure that the state is not held captive by a few groups.
3. The growth of associational life will supplement the work of political parties in stimulating political participation
4. Civil society will eventually stabilize the state because citizens will have a deeper stake in social order. Further, while civil society may multiply the demands of the state, it may also multiply the capacity of groups to improve their own welfare.
5. Civil society is a locus for recruiting new political leadership.
6. Civil society resists authoritarianism

However, too little caution is exercised in jumping from this list of potential activities and roles to the actual formation of democracy – the causative links between civil society and democracy are by no means clear for example Hutchful notes that in Togo and Nigeria, the success or failure of democratization was quite independent of the strength of civil societies in those countries.<sup>22</sup>

Certain strands of western liberal political theory divide the democratic state into four spheres namely:

---

<sup>18</sup> M. Robinson, *Civil society in Africa: a conceptual overview*, mimeo, 1998

<sup>19</sup> Civil Society: The Developmental Solution? Working paper presented at a civil society seminar, held at the Institute of Development Studies, Sussex, England, June 1996.

<sup>20</sup> White Gordon, “Prospects for Civil Society in China: A Case Study of Xiaoshan City,” in the *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, number 29, January 1993, pp.375-90

<sup>21</sup> Diamond, Larry (editor), *The Democratic Revolution: Struggles for Freedom and Pluralism in the Developing World*, Perspectives on Freedom no. 12, Freedom House 1991 pg 7-11

<sup>22</sup> Hutchful, Eboe, “The civil society debate in Africa,” in *International Journal*, volume 51, Winter 1995-96.

- the state: which includes the executive, legislative (parliament), administrative (civil service), judicial, and security (police and army)
- The public sphere: which is made up of political parties and parliamentarians;
- Civil society: which, is an arena where manifold social movements – and civic organizations from all classes attempt to constitute themselves in an ensemble of arrangements so that they can express themselves and advance their interests.
- The primary or individual sphere: which is ascriptive by nature and constituted by the family, clan or individual citizen

Drah<sup>23</sup> argues that civil society is not entirely “separate” from the state and identified two conceptions of the relationship that civil society can have with the state, namely corporatist and voluntary-pluralist.

With regard to the “corporatist” type, the institutions of CS, who usually have a proven constituency that they can deliver and hold to certain agreements are “incorporated” into decision making processes and institutions by the state. These are strategically placed groups, such as business and labour, and as a result the state “has gained greater social control in return for giving functional representation to such groups in economic management.

According to N. Steytler and G. Hollands,<sup>24</sup> the voluntary pluralist type of CS is the classic liberal model where voluntary associations of individuals operate at a greater distance from the state, and “implies a strong sentiment of “anti-statism” – a disillusionment with parliamentary democracy, the welfare state, and the alienation engendered by vast government bureaucracies.

This means that citizens should be effectively empowered, especially through collective action and solidarity in pursuit of shared values. An important definitional aspect of the associations or organizations of CS is that they have no intention of “claiming the state”, that is taking over the state.

To draw up a comprehensive list of the types of associations which make up civil society would be futile, as by their nature these organizations are interest-based and as such many are volatile and fluid, forming and disbanding around different issues which are important at the time.

Atkinson<sup>25</sup> makes what she calls a broad distinction between “profit making” and “non-profit” organizations. The former refers to the private business sector. The latter are those organizations distinct from this sector. They are associations of professionals, workers, women, students, employers, journalists and consumers, religious organizations, recreational and cultural clubs, human rights groups and, some would add, even political parties.

---

<sup>23</sup> K. Drah, Civil society: Lessons and comparisons from elsewhere in Africa” in Humphries, R. and Reitz, M (eds) *Civil Society after Apartheid*. Johannesburg: Freidrich Ebert Stiftung, 1995

<sup>24</sup> N. Steytler & G. Hollands, D. Savage, L. Heideman, M. Rooodt, R. Mastenbroek (1995) State – Civil society relations in South Africa: towards a model of good governance in Glenn Hollanda and Gwen Ansell, *Winds of Small Change*

<sup>25</sup> D. Atkinson. 1996. “Civil Society After the Transition”, in Coetzee, J. and Graaf, J. (eds) 1996. *Reconstruction, Development and People*, Johannesburg: International Thompson Publishing  
Page 290

The concept of civil society is defined to include, free association such as churches, Non governmental organizations (NGOs), political parties, trade unions etc. and other organizations not controlled by the state and which are self-organizing. A civil society organization (CSO) is a political community, which can organize and co-ordinate its activities for the purpose of influencing state policies. Civil society does not contest for power but seeks to check abuses of it and to influence public policy.

There are very many CSOs in Uganda (e.g. NGOs, private sector associations, community-based groups, religious organizations, media etc.) which bring together activists around common issues such as health care, education, children, youth, disability and gender issues, human rights and democracy, income generation and other economic issues, religion and culture. Among these are professional and business associations such as those of lawyers, journalists, accountants and economists, traders and industrialists. Umbrella networks to co-ordinate and encourage collective action by CSOs in the same field also exist. The NGO forum tries to bring all NGOs together under one umbrella to have a collective voice when speaking with government and for self-regulation.

It should be noted here that civil society is not non governmental organizations (NGOs) howsoever they may be defined and despite the frequent temptation to collapse the one into the other. NGOs comprise only a segment of what may be considered as civil society, albeit an important section of it. It should however be noted that the phenomenon of NGOism has had a considerable effect on the growth and character of civil society as well as the state. NGOs however are seen to some extent as the “flag bearers” of CS and its associated values. NGOs are viewed as a sub-component of other organizations within civil society which are characterized by four attributes. They are voluntary, independent, not for profit and not self serving<sup>26</sup>. In order to be regarded as “legitimated”, NGOs, in addition to their non profit character, are required to demonstrate their accountability to a genuine constituency. These constituencies are identified by some degree of need of marginalization which the state cannot fully address. NGOs are therefore expected to prove that they act “in the public interest”.

What role does civil society have to play in building democratic governments? White<sup>27</sup> suggests four main arenas: altering the balance of power between state and society; improving the accountability of both politicians and administrators; acting as an intermediary between state and society; and legitimating the political system by promoting values of liberal democracy.

### **Civil society, Political transition and the NRM Government**

Historically, modern state structures in Uganda were designed as the pivot for development processes, resulting in the construction of authoritarian state institutions. Civil society was never seen as playing any partnership role and instead was always viewed with hostility because the colonial and post colonial states did not desire

---

<sup>26</sup> See Definitions of NGOs and CBOs and Implications for Registration Procedures, Source, Uganda Gender Resource Centre.

<sup>27</sup> G. White, Civil Society, democratization and development in R. Luckham and G. White (eds.) Democratization in the South: The Jagged Wave, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996

competitors. Under colonialism, civil society in Uganda was marginalized and conscripted into the state machinery to contain the African majority which was completely excluded from any institutional role in governance.

As Uganda moved closer to independence, the institutions of civil society were weakened to the point where political parties battled each other rather than advancing the common cause of democratic participation. Independence saw the complete demise of these institutions of civil society. Most were either incorporated into the state machinery or severely restricted in their operations.

Even after the National Resistance Movement (NRM) under President Museveni came to power in 1986 on a ticket of democratization and the strengthening of popular participation, many institutions of civil society did not wake up from the slumber of containment; adopted by the British and perfected by the post-independence regimes. Against the backdrop of the several decades of misrule and economic destruction, the NRM ascendancy to power witnessed a mixed context for the operation of civil society.

The NRM has sometimes allowed the enhanced growth and evolution of civil society, and at others operated as a barrier to its free expression and development. The current Museveni government opposes political parties, and this position has been entrenched<sup>28</sup> in the Constitution of the Republic of Uganda. On the NRM assumption of power in 1986, political party activity was proscribed ostensibly on the grounds that it was a significant contributory factor to the chaos of the past several years. As a consequence, political society since 1986 has been dominated by the NRM, the traditional political parties being relegated to a state of political limbo<sup>29</sup>.

As regards the media, the number of newspapers that have sprouted since 1986, exceed twenty in number. The broadcast media has been freed of state control and monopoly, and political commentary over virtually any issues is widely tolerated. Yet at the same time, at least 40 journalists have appeared before the courts of law charged with a variety of criminal offences since 1986; new laws governing the media have been enacted enshrining several questionable provisions, and punitive economic measures (such as depriving private papers of government advertisements, and increasing taxes on news print) have been deployed with the intent of curtailing the operation of the free press.

It is a truism therefore, that since 1986 civil society activity in Uganda has literally exploded. There has been an enhanced interest of the donor community in such activity leading to the conclusion that in some instances, the growth of civil society action on issues such as the environment, women, population and governance is directly related to donor interest in this area and to the funding that accompanies it. But the NGO explosion has been primarily in the area of social and economic welfarism – a sphere of operation in which the state feels little challenge and indeed often welcomes the filling – in of the breach that NGOs carry out through their multifarious activities. NGOs are consequently praised by agents of the state for their “facilitative role” in the alleviation of

---

<sup>28</sup> See article 269 of the Constitution of the Republic of Uganda, 1995.

<sup>29</sup> Oloka Onyango and J.J Barya, Civil Society and the Political Economy of Foreign Aid in Uganda, Revised Edition of the paper presented at a workshop on strengthening civil society through foreign political aid, Accra, Ghana July 8-1, 1996.

poverty, improving conditions of health and education and proselytizing on the environment.

Mamdani as cited in Oloka Onyango and J.J Barya's article is of the view that one must greet the growth of civil society in Uganda with some caution. Reflecting on the particular issue of NGOs, Mamdani puts his ambivalence eloquently.

*NGOs, in my opinion, are a mixed blessing whose main effect is to worsen our dilemma. On the positive side, the proliferation of NGOs has liberated middle class entrepreneurial talent; but on the negative side, it has left NGOs wholly unaccountable to the people at home. An NGO is not like a co-operative. In a co-operative, members have the right to hold their leaders accountable. The intended beneficiaries of an NGO are not its members. They receive a charity, not a right. An NGO is accountable not to the people it intends to benefit, but to those who finance it, the overseas donors.*

As NGOs have attained prominence in the economic and political life Uganda, the NRM government is determined to control them. The government of Uganda has proposed or enacted legislation designed to strength official authority over NGOs usually under the guise of developing a national regulatory framework for associations. Relationships between civil society and government is characterized by suspicion and confusion about roles and rights. For example it took four years to register the NGO Forum. In numerous instances, some CSOs have withered or changed character as key leaders have taken posts in the government.

A major reason for the slow development of Ugandan civil society has been the lack of a strong private economic sector. Vast swaths of the working and middle classes are still tied to government through employment, and the private sector is still acutely dependant on government for contracts, subsidized credit, foreign exchange, and protection from foreign competition. As a result, key social groups and their organizations are ultimately dependent on government and vulnerable to governmental arm-twisting.

The middle-class professionals and intellectuals who run key public institutions tend to be understandably preoccupied with their own economic survival, often preventing them from helping to check state hegemony. For example, judges depend on government for their appointments and for their operational budgets, and have few opportunities for lucrative private practice should they resign; they can scarcely afford to maintain a posture of strict independence. Private newspapers fear losing much-needed revenue from government advertisements and will engage in self censorship rather than displease high officials. Private businessmen, fearing the loss of profitable government contracts, may not place advertisements in private news papers that the government sees as insurbordinate.

Business groups in Uganda are also not in the best position for sustained support for democratic consolidation. This is because some of the business groups tend to avoid confrontation with the state or involvement in politics as they are state funded or state-created. They find themselves confined to behind-the scenes lobbying on behalf of their own, narrowly defined interests.

Ugandans are still emerging from the shadow of repressive rule. They still fear to take on the state. Traditionally, CSOs and government have had a problematic relationship. Given Uganda's history, the state has been a major player in the social, economic and

political arena for along time, an NGOs have – rightly or wrongly – regarded the state as being bureaucratic, corrupt and not sympathetic to the needs of the poor. The CSOs attitude has varied between benign neglect to outright hostility. Because of Uganda's political history, political activism and political advocacy have not been widely embraced by CSOs. CSOs are timid and do not effectively call on Government to account to their constituents.

Negative political experiences have created some apathy and wariness resulting in many CSOs maintaining that they are apolitical. It is only very recently that some CSOs have realized that their work is by its very nature political. It is increasingly clear to many CSOs that no meaningful change can take place unless it is structural and that any organization attempting to improve the well being of its members and society in general will have to ask critical questions about power relations in Uganda.

## **The Role of Different Actors in the Civic Education Exercise in Uganda**

### **The Uganda Human Rights Commission (UHRC)**

The Uganda Human Rights Commission was established as An act of Parliament in 1996 as an independent body. The Commission has as one if its functions<sup>30</sup> to formulate, implement and oversee programs intended to inculcate in the citizens of Uganda awareness of their civic responsibilities and an appreciation of their rights and obligations as free people.

In 1997, a committee was set up under the auspices of the Uganda Human Rights Commission. This committee brings together a number of constitutional bodies established by the 1995 Constitution of Uganda to carry out civic education. These constitutional bodies are, the Electoral Commission of Uganda, the Judicial Service Commission and the Inspectorate of Government) and the two bodies representing civic groups involved in civic education i.e. Human Rights Network (HURINET) and the Uganda Women's Network (UWONET).

Though the committee was established, it has never worked and as a result civic education has hitherto been fragmented. There is no civic education programme in Uganda. Civic education providers, particularly CSOs have always pursued individual civic education programs without consulting the UHRC. As a result CSOs emphasize aspects of the civic education program considered important to them and which in many cases has led to a disproportionate focus on voter education.

### **The Electoral Commission of Uganda**

The Electoral Commission established under Article 60 (1) of the 1995 Constitution and the Electoral Commission Act of 1997 as amended, has the responsibility of formulating and implementing civic education programs relating to elections. For some time now, the Electoral Commission has delegated its powers under section 12. (1) (I) to accredited NGOs to carry out this function under its supervision. However, civic education availed is not adequate. While there may be other factors that explain the inadequacy of civic education campaigns undertaken by the Uganda Electoral Commission, government takes much blame. The Electoral Commission has made unsuccessful attempts to

---

<sup>30</sup> See the other functions of the Uganda Human Rights Commission in the 1995 Constitution of the Republic of Uganda, Chapter four.

secure funds for civic education from Parliament<sup>31</sup>. A budget of Shillings 3,139,340,000 Uganda shillings was drawn up reflecting the activities to be accomplished if the Commission was to conduct successful voter education programs for the Presidential and Parliamentary elections for 2001 elections. Only 650,000,000 Uganda shillings were released by the Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development.

Due to little funding<sup>32</sup> for the exercise of civic education, there is the involvement of the Local Council (LC) 11 executives in the identification of parish civic educators. This practice enhances nepotism in the exercise because some LC executives recommend their wives, children and relatives who are below the required standards. Also due to financial constraints, the civic educators have always worked for less time than the time planned.

### **Civil society organizations and civic education**

Some NGOs have been accredited to carry civic education. Some of those mandated by the Electoral Commission to conduct civic education in 1996 are: Uganda Women's Network (UWONET), FIDA (U) Federation of Women Lawyers, Organization of University Moslem Women of Uganda (OUMWU), Action for Development (ACFODE), National Association of Women Organizations in Uganda (NAWOU), Uganda Joint Christian Council (UJCC), Uganda Media Women Association (UMWA), National Organization for civic and Election Monitoring (NOCEM)<sup>33</sup>. It is striking to note that those CSOs accredited mostly were women organizations and then Uganda Joint Christian Organization, a religious organization.

### **Women Organizations**

Perhaps the most dramatic growth of any sector in civil society in Uganda has been witnessed in the women's movement. However there are significant problems in the fashion the women's movement has grown and developed. This is true of the fact that the movement has failed to mark distance from the NRM in a manner which affirms its autonomous and independent growth. In other words, the women's movement considers that it owes the advances made for women to the NRM<sup>34</sup>. Ultimately such a posture undermines the women's cause and confines the development of the movement to issues that do not fundamentally challenge or affect the status quo. This was evident in the run up to the Presidential elections in 1996 and 2001 when women organizations conducting civic education were accused of campaigning for President Museveni.

### **Religious organizations**

The Christian churches appear to suffer the fewest organizational and financial handicaps. Their large memberships; strong, complex, and capable national organizations; politically sophisticated leaders; considerable financial security and independence; and international contacts allow them to maintain their autonomy from

---

<sup>31</sup> See 1999 Annual Report of Uganda Human Rights Commission.

<sup>32</sup> For the 2001 presidential and parliamentary elections and even the 2000 referendum on political systems there was absence of donor funding which, greatly affected civic education delivery since government could not fill the gap

<sup>33</sup> See the Report by the Human Rights Network, Uganda, NGOs and Civic Education: A Review of the State of Civic Education in Uganda (1998-1998) pg 15

<sup>34</sup> Oloka Onyango and J.J Barya, Civil Society and the Political Economy of Foreign Aid in Uganda, Revised Edition of the paper presented at a workshop on strengthening civil society through foreign political aid, Accra, Ghana July 8-1, 1996 pg. 14

government. These strengths, combined with civic-mindedness make Christian bodies important parts of Uganda's civil society, capable of breaking the "culture of silence" imposed by years of authoritarian rule.

Yet in the context of democratic consolidation, religious bodies in Uganda have suffered underlying weaknesses. Nationalists view them with suspicion because of the colonial origins. They often compete fiercely among themselves (or with other religions such as Islam) for state support and recognition, thus compromising their non partisan credibility and moral authority and may be for reasons of innate caution and self-preservation, these established religious bodies tend to prefer ad hoc rather than prolonged involvement's in national politics.

In addition, the explosive growth in Uganda of "independent" or millennial Christian churches and new age religions appears to present a threat to the political influence of the "orthodox" Christians and their organizations. Ultimately, the willingness of these newer churches and their leaders to align with governments for reasons best known to themselves could undermine the work that "Orthodox" Christian groups do to counter governmental hegemony.

### **Limitation of civic education programs**

Within the confines of the movement government the future of civic education is oblique because it is always unclear and misleading. It is difficult to know whether the civic education imparted to the public is for democratic purposes or National Resistance Movement civic education. Many seem to perceive that the teaching of civic education is to adopt the movement's political ideology. The approach and timing of many civic education programs by the government tend to emphasize what movement needs to stay long in power.

There is also poor co-ordination efforts. In 1996, organizations accredited to carry out civic education formally adopted CEJOCU (Civic Education Joint Co-ordination Unit) as an umbrella body to plan, oversee and implement civic education activities in the whole country. The limitation of the body was the failure to treat all its members equally and to provide timely information to all that is necessary for their effective development. Lack of a clearly defined agenda, financial transparency and limited consultations and relational issues were also some of the hindering factors.

There is a problem of concurrently conducting Civic Education and campaigns<sup>35</sup>. This confuses the electorate very much, not only by failing to distinguish between the two, but also some candidates exploit the situation to their advantage. It also leads to low turn up in Civic Education rallies. There is competition in terms of time allocation between survival needs and Civic Education. For instance at 11 O'clock most of the rural populace is still in the garden. This is so, especially since civic education is restricted to the activities of the polling day, such as how to tick the right photo, how to conduct oneself in the polling booth etc. Also other related vital information, such as the essence of that particular election is left to the candidates, who interpret and disseminate it as they wish or in a manner which benefits them.

---

<sup>35</sup> E. H. Kintu, Political System: A Twisted Proposition for the Forthcoming Referendum, Kampala: Monitor Publications Limited, pg. 54

Other barriers to effective civic education in Uganda, include mass rallies instead of door to door mobilization; the districts being suspicious of civic education from 'outside'; officials who are directly appointed by the Electoral Commission are faced with communication barriers<sup>36</sup>. Others have very big areas of operation allocated to individual civic educators which often results in poor and rushed performance. There is also lack of materials in local language; poor incentives in voter's education as grass roots educators are paid a nominal fee which at times is received belatedly and the fact that some areas are inaccessible due to civil strife and the poor road networks<sup>37</sup>.

The consequence of not taking civic education seriously has impacted negatively on the conduct of elections in Uganda.

### **Tensions and Violence in Uganda's Elections**

A Parliament report<sup>38</sup> showed that violence rose by 512% during Presidential polls as compared to 1996. The implication of this is that people will increasingly lose faith that their votes can change Uganda's leadership. Election violence has become more widespread, fatal, destructive and threatening the democratization process and the report says a number of people thought that since elections do not reflect the free will of the people, they should be scrapped "to save Ugandans from the pain and suffering from election violence"<sup>39</sup>. Among the causes of violence identified include sectarianism, lack of democratic culture and ignorance among Ugandans and state inspired violence through Presidential Protection Unit (PPU), Uganda Peoples Defense Forces (UPDF), Internal Security Organization (ISO), Local Defence Forces (LDU) and Kakooza Mutale's Kalangala Action Plan.

It is my belief that if meaningful civic education is conducted such tensions and violent eruption in Uganda's elections will be done away with in future electoral campaigns. If such intimidation and violence continues, it will endanger Uganda's on-going democratization process and might plunge the country "back into the abyss of anarchy and dictatorship."

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Democratic modernization involves a process of social transformation in which policy formation to facilitate changes in political and civic culture must occur alongside economic and technological development. Indeed, civic and political culture is an important indicator of constitutional order and social stability. National security, respect for law and order and the success of policy are determined by citizens readiness to obey these laws and at the same time to monitor and criticize the authorities

For a long time we had a one-party propaganda instead of real education for citizens. With the possible demise of the movement system of government in 2006, we need to urgently establish a nation-wide structure for civic education.

---

<sup>36</sup> S. Kawamara, *Women Emerging in Uganda's Democracy: A documentation of Women's Experiences in Uganda's Local Government Elections*, Kampala: UWONET, 1998

<sup>37</sup> See the Report by the Human Rights and Peace Center, *Civic Education and the Quest for Sustainable Constitutionalism*, 1997.

<sup>38</sup> Uganda's parliament instituted a 15 member committee chaired by Augustine Nshimye, member of Parliament for Mityana South February 2002. The Committee was mandated to investigate causes of election violence and other related matters concerning last years presidential and parliamentary elections and 2003 local council elections.

<sup>39</sup> Denis Owich, *Poll Violence Up, Democracy Questioned* in the New Vision September 25, 2002.

Financing civic education is a serious problem. Numerous programs are supported by donors. But our further development should have more sustainable character. Therefore, building private sector support for this process is essential for civic education in Uganda. In order to develop materials, training, and concepts of citizenship on our own ground and make them more effective it's necessary to mobilize broad support for civic education from government, financial institutions, and for-profit companies.

There is not any CSO with the mission of conducting civic education in Uganda. There should be an organization purely established for the improvement of teaching about democracy and civics, and facilitate the development of democratic awareness and citizens politic culture, their increased, informed, and responsible participation.

There is need for civic education providers to agree on a broad based National Civic Education Framework through which funding – partners can channel funding for civic education delivery in Uganda. This programme needs to adopt a rights-based approach that will highlight human rights, domestic law (including the constitution), regulations and principles of participatory government as mechanism for enforcement and the realization of the values and priorities of the community. Civic education messages need to focus also on issues of national importance as informed by the Government of Uganda (GOU) policy framework.

The content and method of delivery of civic education should be informed through a strategy using district-based information to ensure that it is relevant and appropriate. Although civic education content will focus on key messages of national importance, the priorities and values of a given community will inform delivery in that community.

Civil society organizations need to improve their knowledge of one another and deepening their collective awareness of the pivotal role that they must play in fostering democratic governance. This greater knowledge and deeper insight promise to bear fruit in the form of greater cooperation, assertiveness, confidence and perhaps efficacy.

In light of the importance of civic education in the electoral process, it is important that government should in future pay due attention to this matter and provide ample resources for civic education so as to empower the electorate and enable them make informed choices at elections.

Civil society Organizations need to evolve an internal culture of adherence to democratic process and respect for human rights before they can hope to effectively and genuinely contribute to the wider course on the same issue. They must devise means of being substantive more participatory, and to relate more directly to the target groups they are designed to support by directly involving them in all stages of the planning and execution of their projects. In sum the exercise of democratic rights must be given full expression. At the same time there is a great need for establishing and fortifying sustainable links with other actors in the arena, both those operating within a similar sphere of action, and those outside.

If CSOs were able to organize themselves into a representative body that could interact with government this would substantially increase their legitimacy. Because of this disunity amongst CSOs in Uganda it is very difficult for them to take on a unified position on specific issues. Under these circumstances many CSOs prefer not to speak at all. One

idea is to have a designated APEX (or lead) institution working around particular issues or sectors that could prepare background information and 'drive' the debate forward.

Such an institution would address the following problems:

- Disunity within the CSO 'community' resulting in the absence of a clear and more effective 'voice'.
- Difficult working relations between CSOs the Government of Uganda and other stakeholders;
- An ineffective and inefficient use of resources because of duplication of actions and activities between CSOs.

There is need for a Civic Education Committee to co-ordinate civic education programs. CSO organizations should be part of this Civic Education Coordination committee. The Ministry of Education and Sports should become a member and the committee should harmonize civic education programs conducted by various stakeholders so as to avoid duplication of activities.

Civic Education including voter education should be carried out periodically covering the entire country. This will ensure that the population is constantly aware of the issues at hand and know how to exercise their obligations as free people.

There is need for formulation of civic education in schools and tertiary institutions.

## References

Asiimwe Delius, (1989), The Resistance Councils and Committees in Uganda: An Appraisal of A Policy of Democratic Decentralization Problems and Prospects. Being a Research Paper presented to the Hague, Netherlands for the Award for Masters degree in Development Studies.

Atkinson D., (1996). "Civil Society After the Transition", in Coetzee, J. and Graaf, J. (eds) **Reconstruction, Development and People**, Johannesburg: International Thompson Publishing.

Byanyima Winnie (2000), Involving Civil Society in the Legislative Process in the Second handbook on Effective Legislative Representation: A Compendium of Conference Proceedings held at the Uganda International Conference Center Kampala, August 24-25, 2000.

Civil Society: The Developmental Solution? Working paper presented at a civil society seminar, held at the Institute of Development Studies, Sussex, England, June 1996.

Diamond, Larry (ed.s) (1991), **The Democratic Revolution: Struggles for Freedom and Pluralism in the Developing World, Perspectives on Freedom** no. 12, Freedom House 1991

Drah K., (1995) Civil society: Lessons and comparisons from elsewhere in Africa" in Humphries, R. and Reitz, M (eds) **Civil Society after Apartheid**. Johannesburg: Freidrich Ebert Stiftung.

Gibson, T. (1998), Civic Education School Text, Prepared for the Uganda Electoral Commission.

Hague, Rod and Harrop Martin (1992) **Comparative Government and Politics: An introduction**, London : Macmillan Press LTD.

Hey wood, Andrew (1997) **Politics**, London: Macmillan

Human Rights Network Uganda (HURINET(U)), (1999), NGOs and Civic Education: A review of the State of Civic Education in Uganda (1996-1998).

Human Rights and Peace Center, (HURIPEC) (1997), Civic Education and the Quest for Sustainable Constitutionalism. Compiled by Human Rights and Peace Center

Human Rights and Peace Center, (HURIPEC) (1997), Civic Education and the Quest for Sustainable Constitutionalism: A needs Assessment for Capacity Building in Uganda; A Report prepared by Human Rights and Peace Center.

Hutchful, Eboe, "**The civil society debate in Africa**," in International Journal, volume 51, Winter 1995-96.

Kawamara Sheila (eds.) (1998), **Women Emerging in Uganda's Democracy: A documentation of Women's Experiences in Uganda's local Government Elections**, Kampala: UWONET

Kintu, E., H., (1999), **Political System: A twisted Proposition for the Forthcoming Referendum**, Kampala: Monitor Publications Ltd.

Mill, Stuart, J., (1951), Utilitarianism, in John Stuart Mill, **Utilitarianism, Liberty, and Representative Government**, New York.

Mishler, William (1979) **Political Participation in Canada: Prospects for Democratic Citizenship**, Toronto: Macmillan of Canada.

Ochola, Charles W. (2000), The impact of Campaign Messages on Voters in Relation to the 1998 Local Councils Elections: A study of Posters as a Civic-Voter Education. A Research Project Submitted as a Partial requirement for the Award of a Degree of Bachelor of Mass Communication of Makerere University (un published).

Ojo and Oluwaseyi (1999) "Military Language and Democratization in Nigeria" in Oluwu, D., AND Adebayo Williams and Soremekun Kayode (eds), **Governance and Democratization in West Africa**, Dakar: Codesria

Omole Tale and Olukotun Ayo (1999) "The media and Democratization in Nigeria (1984-1996)" in Oluwu, D., AND Adebayo Williams and Soremekun Kayode (eds), **Governance and Democratization in West Africa**, Dakar: Codesria.

Onyango Oloka and Barya J.J., (1996) Civil Society and the Political Economy of Foreign Aid in Uganda, Revised Edition of the paper presented at a workshop on strengthening civil society through foreign political aid, Accra, Ghana.

Owich Denis (2002), **Poll Violence Up, Democracy Questioned** in the New Vision September 25, 2002

Robinson M., **Civil society in Africa: A conceptual overview'**, mimeo, 1998

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, (1968), **The Social Contract**, Trans. By Maurice Cranston, Harmondsworth: Middlesex.

Steytle N., & Hollands G., D. Savage, L. Heideman, M. Rooodt, R. Mastenbroek (1995) State – Civil society relations in South Africa: towards a model of good governance in Glenn Hollanda and Gwen Ansell, **Winds of Small Change**

Schumpeter, J., (1942), **Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy**, Allen and Unwin

The Republic of Uganda, (1995), Constitution of the Republic of Uganda.

The World Bank Participation Source Book (1996), Washington D.C.

Young Marion Iris, (2000), **Inclusion and Democracy**, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

White Gordon (1993) ,**“Prospects for Civil Society in China: A Case Study of Xiaoshan City,”** in the Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs, number 29