



Chapter 8

Impact of COVID-19 on Campaign Spending

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How COVID-19 Impacted On Election Campaigns

In the wake of the outbreak and coming to Uganda of the COVID – 19 pandemic in March 2020 (hardly 10 months away for the 2021 general elections), President Yoweri Museveni took decisive and drastic actions. These included the closure of all schools and tertiary institutions, closure of national borders, suspension of all forms of passenger transport including international air travels, national lockdowns, enforcement of social distancing, use of face masks, regular handwashing/sanitizing, and evening curfews among others. As it turned out, the pandemic became a driver of campaign spending in a manner no aspiring political candidate had anticipated.

COVID-19 as a Driver of Campaign Spending

As a consequence of the national lockdown, many households especially urban dwellers who live hand-to-mouth, ran out of food and cried out loud, thus creating a challenge and at the same time an opportunity for aspiring candidates to showcase their generosity which would ostensibly grow their political capital. Aspiring candidates were observed investing money in the massive purchase and distribution of posho, beans, cooking oil and other relief items and donating to the electorate that had been locked down in their homes in their respective constituencies. In addition, some further procured ambulances and handwashing equipment which they emblazoned with their campaign messages and donated to markets, health centres and other social places. The lure of making a donation towards the District COVID-19 Taskforces also became difficult for aspiring candidates to resist during the extended COVID-19 lockdown. These unprecedented and unplanned actions, increased the cost of vote canvassing.

In May 2020, the conduct of the general elections hanged in balance after President Yoweri Museveni stated during an interview with NBS Television Journalist that; “To have elections when the (corona) virus is still there... it will be madness,”. However, a few weeks later the Electoral Commission announced that Uganda will hold the general elections between January 10th and February 8th, 2021 albeit without open air campaign rallies. The Electoral Commission Chairman, Justice Simon Byabakama Mugenyi declared that campaign rallies were banned and urged candidates to use media instead to get their messages to voters. As the campaigns unfolded, the electoral management body allowed door-to-door vote canvassing and smaller meetings in playgrounds with social distancing and face masks properly worn.

With the Electoral Commission permitting door-to-door vote canvassing, a number of political candidates recruited agents at parish and sometime village level whom they paid a retainer-fee to carry out door-to-door campaigning on their behalf. Door-to-door also necessitated spending on groceries that were carried and donated by campaign agents to the electorate. This was a very expensive undertaking that drained the campaign finance coffers of candidates.



Conversely, the media owners had also revised upwards their advertising rates in anticipation of making a killing from candidates.

COVID-19 as a Driver of Securitisation of Election Campaigns

Enforcement of COVID-19 preventive measures was left to national security institutions namely the Uganda Peoples Defence Forces (UPDF), Uganda Police Force (UPF) and Uganda Prisons Service (UPS). The spokespersons of these security institutions dominated and monopolized the press conferences at National Media Centre platform as they issued statements on weekly basis responding to such issues of the highhandedness used in enforcing COVID-19 lockdown and similar measures by security operatives – the most notorious of them being the Local Defense Unit (LDU).

Thus, the enforcement of COVID-19 preventive measures which was already securitised and militarized, and the announcement that the elections would be conducted under COVID-19 standard operating procedures, the mandate of the security forces was extended through the campaign period. They were observed to enjoy license to regulate the electoral campaign activities.

Conducting election campaigns under COVID-19 restrictions, infringed on the three fundamental liberties on which democratic elections thrive namely; freedom of movement (mobility), freedom of assembly (campaign rallies and processions), and freedom of association (direct candidate and voter interaction). Without these liberties being enjoyed, the fairness and credibility of Uganda elections 2021 became questionable on the premise of the securitisation and militarisation of the enforcement of COVID-19 preventive measures countrywide.

Opposition presidential candidates were denied access to preferred campaign venues in several districts, forcing them to take detours that became costly in terms of fuel consumption and time. They were further blocked from attending radio talk shows which sometimes they had already paid for in advance. The candidates that were observed to be on the receiving end of these blockades included Hon. Robert Kyagulanyi Sentamu (NUP), Hon. Patrick Oboy Amuriat (FDC), Gen. Mugisha Muntu (ANT), Gen. Henry Tumukunde (independent), Hon. Nobert Mao (DP), Joseph Kabuleeta (independent) and John Katumba (independent). The Resident District Commissioners arrogated themselves the power to deny or grant access to opposition presidential candidates to attend talk shows or access to campaign venues.

On November 12, 2020 the Chairman Electoral Commission wrote to the Inspector General of Police urging the Police to facilitate rather than block Presidential candidates from accessing campaign venue inside the districts. Between November 9th – 30th, 2020 the Police was observed to have unleashed tear-gas and beating up campaign supporters and Journalists covering campaign rallies of the front running opposition presidential candidates namely Hon. Kyagulanyi Ssentamu and Hon. Patrick Amuriat. The most notable event was in Mayuge district on November 18th, 2020 when police stormed the campaign venue on NUP presidential

candidate and arrested Hon. Kyagulanyi, sparking a wave of protests that went on for two days across the country resulting in the death of over 53 people in Kampala capital city. This is the worst violence to erupt on the streets of Uganda.

Subsequently on November 26th, 2020 Hon. Kyagulanyi was forced out of Spice FM radio talk show in Hoima city at the orders of the RDC. The grounds for throwing him out were that his time to be in Hoima district had expired. Two days later in the evening of November 28th 2020 presidential candidate John Katumba was denied entry into Jinja city – a campaign venue he was officially supposed to be in the following day. Thus, the election was characterised by bullets, candidate blockades, and riots, thus qualifying 2021 as the most securitised and violent election Ugandans had ever witnessed.

Some of the photographed moments on Acts of Securitisation of campaigns



A cloud of teargas



Candidate Rober Kyagulanyi's campaign vehicle in a cloud of Teargas



The military chopper that airlifted NUP Presidential Candidate Robert Kyagulanyi from Kalangala islands where he was arrested together with his entire campaign team to Kololo Airstrip in Kampala Kampala before being forcefully driven to his home in Magere, Kasangati in Wakiso district. More than 30 of Kyagulanyi's campaign team including his chief bodyguard Eddie Mutwe were also arrested. Also arrested were journalists, Culton Scovia Nakamya of BBS Tereffayina, Ghetto Media's Ronald Kalyango and Daily Monitor's Derrick Wandera.

