

## Navigating Multiparty Politics in Local Governments in Uganda

By Eugene Gerald Ssemakula<sup>1</sup>

The year 2021 marks 29 years since the introduction of decentralisation policy in Uganda, and 15 years since the first multi-party elections in 2006. For local governments, this period has been characterized by phases of learning, re-learning, gains and reversals in a mixed bag of experience in the pursuit of delivering the needed services while navigating the existing political realities. This article examines the phases of multiparty implementation, the practice of multiparty politics and makes suggestions on the way forward.

### Phases of decentralisation

The implementation of decentralisation can be divided into two main phases, the movement system period and multi-party system period. The first phase (1992-2005) under the movement system<sup>2</sup> period witnessed the epitome of local governance. This period was characterized by setting the governance blueprint (structures were changed from resistance councils to local government councils and enacting the local governments act in 1997) in addition to building strong governance structure at the local level. As described by Manyaka and Katono (2011)<sup>3</sup> “The “no party” era is remembered as a period when local government revenue collections were at their highest. It was relatively easy to secure donor-funded projects and councillor allowances were satisfactorily funded. Local government councils met regularly, suppliers and creditors were paid, and

service delivery was at its best, all of which made the NRM quite popular”

The introduction of multi-party politics in 2005 meant that political space would not only be contested by various political parties at the national level but also at the local government level. This period also coincided with several policy and administrative changes that inadvertently weakened local governments. The abolition of graduated tax greatly reduced the local revenue base, strongly pegging local government financial survival to the fortunes and dictates of the central government.

Similarly, a number of many fiscal and administrative reforms shifted control over key financial and human resources to the central government. The political sphere for local governments has been characterized by an increase in the administrative units each election cycle (from 56 in 2000 to the current 136 plus 10 cities in 2021) and a high political turnover each election cycle. Political leaders are challenged by several capacity and resource challenges that have been the subject of numerous ACODE scorecard assessments<sup>4</sup> but it is the implementation of multi-party politics at the local government level that is the focus of this article.

### Multi-party politics in practice at local government level

The trends in political party composition since the introduction of multi-party politics at local

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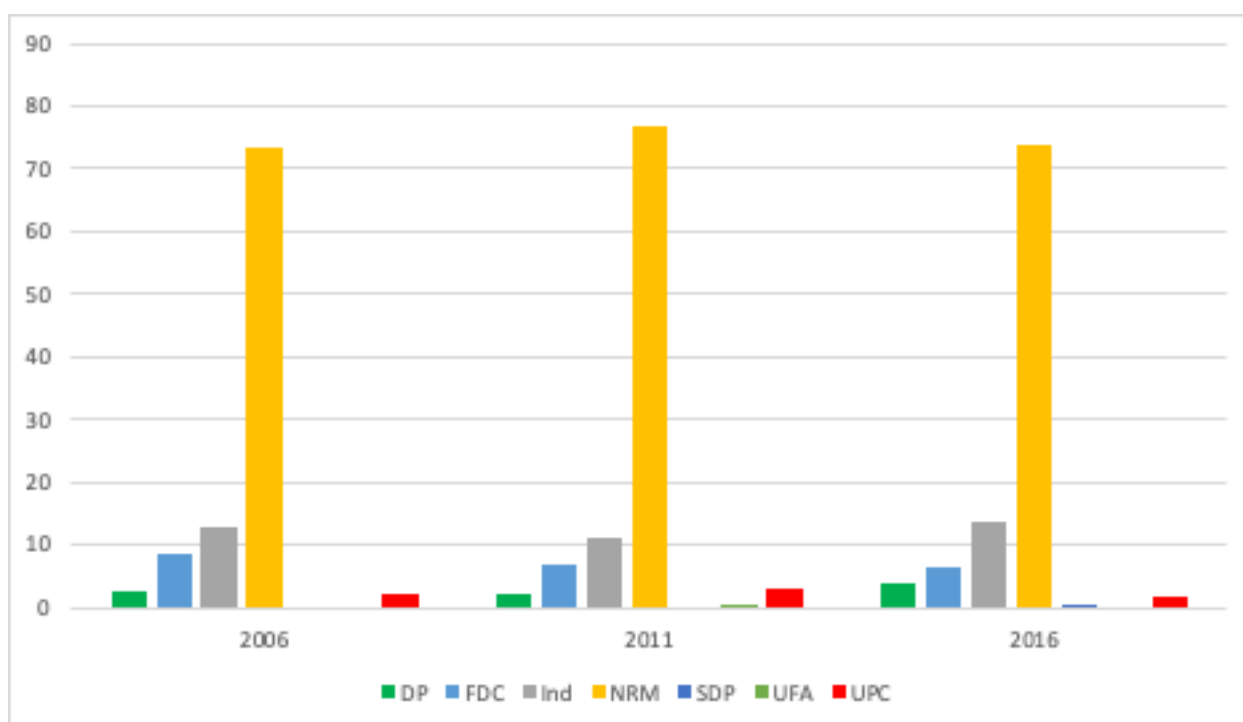
<sup>2</sup> This was a one party system where all Ugandans belonged to the Movement system and election to office was solely based on individual merit.

<sup>3</sup> Manyak, T. G., & Katono, I. W. (2011). Impact of multiparty politics on local government in Uganda. *African Conflict and Peace Building Review*, 1(1), 8-38.

<sup>4</sup> These reports can be accessed at <https://www.acode-u.org/local-government>

government level indicates despite the existence of 26<sup>5</sup> registered political parties only 6 parties have had representation in the previous election cycles 2006, 2011 and 2016 as indicated in *figure 1*.

**Figure 1: Councilor Distribution by political party in District Local Governments (2006-2016)**



Source: Electoral Commission Data for the 2006, 2011 and 2016 elections

As indicated in figure 1, the National Resistance Movement (NRM) dominated local government councils accounting for 73.5% in 2006, 76.6% in 2011 and 74% in 2016 followed by independents that accounted for 13% in 2006, 11% in 2011 and 13.7% in 2016. The statistics also show that the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) has been the strongest opposition party accounting for 8.4% in 2006, 6.9% in 2011 and 6.5% in 2016 elections. The other dominant parties include Uganda People's Congress (2.4%, 3.1% and 1.6%) and Democratic Party (2.5%, 2% and 3.9%) in the 2006, 2011, and 2016 election cycles respectively. The Uganda Federal Alliance managed to front councillors (0.01%) in the 2016 election cycle just as the Social Democratic Party (SDP) that had only one councillor (0.004%) in 2016. This data shows that the combined opposition composition at the district level has since the introduction of multi-party oscillated between 12-13%. The implication of this set up is that in practice, most local governments operate as a one-

party government as the NRM enjoys the majority of councillors.

## Experience of Multi-party Politics at the Local Government Level

The initial conceptualization of the decentralisation

framework as stipulated in the Local Governments Act 1997 was devoid of multi-party politics with an emphasis on the individual merit system. Even when multi-party politics was introduced and enshrined in the subsequent amendments, no deliberate effort was undertaken to explain multi-party politics and its benefits to service delivery. It is for example not clear what roles political parties play in the planning and budgeting processes at the local government level. This is compounded further by the fact that local governments in essence implement the central government priorities that are based on the National Priority Areas and the indicative planning figures provided by the Centre. Even in local governments where the opposition is the dominant party, there is no legroom for pivoting the services to the priorities of their political party. This situation is also not helped by the apparent disconnect between the national level priorities of the political parties and the local realities. Devoid of a clear perspective on their roles as members of political parties, councillors have to a large extent coalesced around

<sup>5</sup>These include Activist Party (AP), Alliance for National Transformation (ANT), Congress Service Volunteers Organisation (COSEVO), Conservative Party (CP), Democratic Party (DP), Ecological Party of Uganda (EPU), Forum for Democratic Change (FDC), Forum for Integrity in Leadership (FIL), Green Partisan Party (GPP), Justice Forum (JEEMA), Liberal Democratic Transparency (LDT), National Convention For Democracy (NCD), National Peasants' Party (NPP), National Resistance Movement (NRM), National Unity Platform (NUP), People's Development Party (PDP), People's Progressive Party (PPP), People's United Movement (PUM), Republican Women and Youth Party (RWYP), Revolutionary People's Party (RPP), Social Democratic Party (SDP), Society for Peace and Development (SPD), Uganda Economic Party (UEP), Uganda Federal Alliance (UFA), Uganda Patriotic Movement (UPM), and Uganda People's Congress (UPC)

political parties for identity politics. A clear example is the evidence from ACODE's Local Government Councils' Scorecard which shows members that identify as belonging to the opposition are more likely to perform better than their NRM counterparts. This performance when analyzed further reveals that this is more attributable to individual characteristics of the councillors as opposed to their political party ideology.

## Replicating Parliamentary Structures and Practices at Local Government Level

In theory, Local Governments are modelled on the national parliamentary procedure. It has been the practice of many local governments to visit the national parliament for orientation and to copy the best practices on issues of debating and running the council. However, there is a big contrast at national and local government level. Suffice to note is that while the national level parliament is purposely operated and modelled on the Westminster parliamentary system that provides for a multiparty system, local governments to a large extent are not. This is particularly true concerning key offices that spearhead multi-partyism, for example, the leader of the opposition, a shadow cabinet and chief whip. These offices at the national level play an important role in providing an official alternative perspective on key policies while providing the needed oversight on accountability committees that are headed by the opposition. In contrast, there is no provision for opposition to purposely make input in local government deliberations as "opposition". In practice councillors belonging to the opposition are at the mercy of first catching the speaker's eye<sup>6</sup> to provide any alternative view. Similarly, since no official response from the opposition is provided for in the procedure, there are no deliberate efforts at local government level for political parties to provide a unified response through a known leader of the opposition or get organised through a recognized whip. It should be noted that although the "Chief Whip" is defined in the rules of procedure, no specific role or further guidance on operations within the council is provided.

## Standard Rules of Procedure for Local Government Councils

Related to the above, there is no clarity on the practical implementation of multiparty system during council proceedings. The Standard Rules of Procedure are the blueprint for guiding interactions, practices and decorum in council, yet these are

largely silent on how the multi-party system should play out. Although attempts have been undertaken to reflect this in the rules of procedure especially in the sitting arrangement and definition of key terms; the standard rules of procedure still fall short of fully guiding the functionality of multi-parties. In terms of the sitting arrangement, for example, Rule 18 (2) guides that a) *The members of the Ruling Political Party in Government shall sit on the right-hand side of the Speaker; and further clarify that the "Ruling Party" as the ruling party in the Central Government, which by extension is the ruling party in all Local Governments.* By implication, the sitting arrangement presupposes that regardless of the numbers of NRM councillors in the council, they sit on the ruling side and opposition sits on the left hand. However, the chairperson and his/her executive occupy the front bench located on the ruling side. This creates confusion on the sitting arrangements and interactions where opposition parties have overwhelming majorities in the council. Similarly, the rules of procedure do not define the relationship between political parties in councils, collaboration/alliances, conflict resolution, and why the policies of the ruling party should take precedence in the council. The rules would also define how the whips of the parties represented in the councils can meet regularly to harmonize issues for debate etc.

## Conflicts in Local Government Councils

The lifting of restrictions on party activities in 2006 was initially viewed with some apprehension (ACCU 2006; IRI 2003). However, most Ugandans appeared willing to allow political parties to compete for political power. One administrator commented at the time, "The people are not used to multiparty politics and need to be stimulated to start appreciating and effectively operating under a multiparty system."<sup>7</sup> Indeed, many local governments have been unable to handle the political conflicts that multiparty systems inevitably generate. The elected leaders who belong to opposition political parties in the NRM dominated councils are sometimes viewed as enemies and anti-government. Hence, good ideas get outrightly rejected, creating endless conflicts. This is very common in the districts where the district chairpersons are members of one party and a major part of the council is from another party. In such circumstances, attempts to censure a district chairperson are common even with the most flimsy of reasons.

## Lack of Framework of Interaction between Political Parties and Local

<sup>6</sup> Rule 21 of the Local Government Standard Rules of procedure dictate that A member desiring to speak shall rise and address the chair and shall do so only after catching the Speaker's eye

<sup>7</sup> Manyak, T. G., & Katono, I. W. (2011). Impact of Multiparty Politics on Local Government in Uganda April 2011, African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review 1(1):8-38; DOI: 10.1353/acp.2011.0010

## Government Structures

The interaction between political parties and the day-to-day operations of local governments and local administrative units largely does not exist. As earlier discussed, there is no known interaction or framework within which political parties for instance input in the planning, budgeting, and service delivery processes at the local government levels. Take the LC 1 as an example, its direct contact with the smallest units of people serves as an important service delivery link to mobilize people to take their children to school or receive immunizations, or to participate in community work. It is also the primary medium for communication because important messages are delivered from higher local governments up to LCI. However, there is no known interaction of political parties with this existing government structure. It is also common at the district council for district councillors to pay no attention to political party priorities in their manifestos but rather focus on what the central government cascades downwards as priorities. Such a missing link has continued to undermine the growth and operationalization of political parties and delivery of services at the local government level.

From the foregoing, it is evident that the implementation of multiparty politics has a long way if Uganda is to realize its benefits. As a country,

Uganda needs to define what we want to achieve from the multiparty system, clearly define the roles of political parties and practically provide an environment to nurture and support political party participation in local governance. These efforts call for policy, legal and operational reforms to be instituted and implemented with the support of the various actors at both national and local level. At the policy level, there is a need to amend the Local Government Act to provide a framework for multiparty politics. At the operational level, the standard rules of procedure should be revised to stipulate how multi-party politics is supposed to be rolled out especially in councils with majority opposition. Lastly, local government leaders should be adequately trained in the operationalization of multi partyism at local government level.

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