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UGANDA'S ARTISTS ON THE POLITICAL FRONT LINES:

The 2021 General Elections in context

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1. Introduction

Uganda went to the polls in January 2021 to elect new political leaders at all levels, for the fourth time under the new multiparty political dispensation. Unlike previous electoral contests, the January 2021 general elections were not business as usual owing to the Covid-19 pandemic which necessitated the enforcement of several measures by the government to combat its spread. This was a predictable pragmatic step from a government that cares for the wellbeing of its people. What was not predicted, however, was the record number of artists, especially from the creative industry, contesting elective political offices. Many registered resounding success in the parliamentary and local council elections, in many cases beyond expectation. Some of them were even surprised that they emerged triumphant. They are now faced with the burden of delivering on their promises to meet voters' expectations

This paper examines a new political climate in Uganda where artists in various disciplines have taken the bold step of vying for elective political offices. We, therefore, analyse the factors at play that engendered a shift in the pattern of voting which worked in favour of these new entrants in the country's political space and its implications for service delivery and political administration.

More specifically, we make inquests and attempt to respond to the following:

- (i) What could have changed in Uganda's political landscape that motivated artists to join politics?
- (ii) What were the factors in the electoral process that worked in favour of participating artists?
- (iii) The possibility that the electorate is getting tired of the elite, who seem to be out of touch with reality;
- (iv) Whether voters are looking for a new cadre of leaders with whom they can share a common intellectual and social ground; and
- (v) The possibility that artists liberated themselves into political activists: they are now not just singing about politics, but also partaking in direct political activities.

2. Understanding the Creative Industry

To get a sense of why and how artists have imprinted themselves on Uganda's political discourse, it is important to review the discipline of art itself first and appreciate it as a reformer of the electoral process.

2.1. Art made manifest: Art denigrated

Art is a discipline in the humanities whose success is grounded in creativity, innovation, and improvisation. Art in a broad sense includes music, the performing arts, fine art, literature, story-telling poetry etc. Art humanizes spaces, providing reference points for self-reflection and contemplation. A good artwork will attract our attention and sustain it, allowing us to give deep thought to even those issues in life that seem trivial. Because it trains us to be reflective, we are able to apply skills of comprehension to complex issues in our social life, enabling us to make informed decisions. To this end, art is vital and indispensable even though it does not exhibit direct or obvious benefits. The imprecise status of art has led some people in positions of power and influence to relegate it to the fringes of human development – a misconception that artists have used to their advantage, especially in the recently concluded elections.

The stereotyping of art as an inferior cousin to other disciplines of scholarship, hence doubting its value as a key contributor to human development, is not a new bias. The colonial government in Uganda treated art (made by Africans) as a dispensable luxury and it seems, thus, that Ugandans could have inherited this attitude from their colonial masters. During her struggle to set up an African Art School at Makerere College in 1940, Trowell was told, according to one local authority (possibly a member of Council), that 'History of Art could fit in the academic realm but not so the actual practice of art.' Her response to those 'philistines' was swift and calculated. She quoted the report of the Commission for Higher Education in the Colonies, 1945, which had stated, inter-alia:

Universities have a double purpose of refining and maintaining all the best in local traditions and cultures and at the same time providing a means whereby those brought up under the influence of these traditions and cultures may enter on a footing into the worldwide community of intellect. (Trowell 1960a, 108)

The School of Fine Art was nonetheless instituted, and degrees awarded and, later in the 1970s, the Department of Music, Dance and Drama was opened. Trowell's experience could be transposed on to any other form of art. Lack of respect for and ignorance about the value of art and culture has even led to some high-profile officials in government suggesting that the Uganda Museum and National Theatre should be pulled down to give way for modern buildings. For them, the achievements of past generations preserved in these places as well as the high quality of artistic statements summarized in the historical buildings are of little consequence. We do not seem to have learnt enough from the essence of pan-Africanism that was heralded by our forefathers, the fighters for independence in the 1950s and 1960s.

In this paper, we put more focus on music because it illustrates more clearly the impact that creative endeavors can have on human consciousness. More than any other art form, music has proven itself to be transformative in both rural and urban communities. This is not unexpected, given that music as an audio medium can easily be packaged to reach all corners of the globe and, moreover, both in the light of day and the dark of night. Music assumes additional power when it is performed on stage, whether in formal or informal settings. Music transcends ethnic or political boundaries. That is, indeed, why it is possible to respond to a piece of music produced in a language that is completely unintelligible. Little wonder, therefore, that enterprising musicians have earned themselves celebrity status and have consequently used it to enhance their political capital.

Popular music dominates Uganda's art and pop industry. Popular music has the benefit of appealing to people's immediate senses. In the absence of a history of classical music in Uganda, popular music is the most prevalent and consumed. When they compose their music, artists commonly draw upon their surroundings, both rural and urban – they are, in any case, an integral part of it. Rural life is characterized by the scarcity of essential services, which explains why many young people are migrating to towns, hoping to find better employment opportunities – better than tilling the land. When they do not find one, they settle for squalid conditions and live on the margins of society. As such, urban life is not necessarily better, given that it is only a small percentage of urban dwellers that can afford the privileges it can offer.

Living in abject poverty, rural and ghetto-bound Ugandans are not oblivious of press reports on the decadence in public offices, which are (mis)managed by the elite class. They are disgruntled, though not resigned. The Ugandan constitution has told them that the only escape from 'imposed' poverty is their vote, which can deliver a new Uganda. In the January 2021 elections, they voted into office a number of performing artists and individuals whom they believed empathize with their life of deprivation. The practice of depriving others of what is due to them is not new; in the recent past, however, it seems to have risen to unprecedented levels. A few self-seeking individuals who could not care less about the welfare of the masses have exploitatively amassed wealth. If the January 2021 vote purged many such individuals from Parliament and LC positions, replacing them with artists and those from humble backgrounds, it is not farfetched to argue that their vote was a protest vote – an expression of disgust at their corrupt leaders.

However, it does not necessarily follow that the new legislators will offer the desired remedy. We all know that democracy is about the majority vote. We argue that in a country where the majority, who also happen to be the peasants and ghetto-bound citizens, are uneducated, they do not understand the role of a Member of Parliament. They will elect leaders whose level of articulating legislative matters is wanting. Even when they have good ideas, they often carry a complex which will prevent them from offering concrete narratives on complex legal matters. Moreover, as novices and a minority in Parliament (although some come from the ruling party), they will be working against the grain. The political discontent of their voters can only be expressed through (un)peaceful demonstrations which have, as experience has shown, been decisively quelled with teargas and sometimes live ammunition.

With the elections behind us, it is difficult to speculate on what will become of the artists-turned-politicians. If they remain steadfast in the pursuit of the political goals that made them successful, their chances of delivering on their promises still cannot be guaranteed. We do not rule out the possibility of pressure from the ruling party to get them to adjust their political imperatives. In other words, it is not farfetched to predict a shift in allegiance from the philosophy of their respective parties to that of the party in power. In a country where political loyalty is rewarded with improved service delivery, this could ironically be of advantage to those who elected 'our novices'. On the other hand, as old age catches up with the incumbent, his nationalism and interest to serve all Ugandans regardless of the way they voted could become his priority. He might want to be remembered as the grandpa of the nation who left behind a legacy of reconciliation and forgiveness.

We do not doubt that the elite have been a disappointment to the electorate. We note that the 11th Parliament will have an unprecedented number of legislators who are ill-prepared for clerical work, thus making critical decisions for the educated. This unfortunate state of affairs has its origin in our history.

2.2. The political history

Uganda's political history can be described as rocky and turbulent. Since independence in 1962, the country has not had a peaceful transfer of power from one government to another. Apollo Milton Obote, the first elected president, was deposed by Amin in a military coup in 1971. Amin, himself a soldier, was deposed by a combined force of Ugandan exiles and the national army of Tanzania. Museveni captured power in 1986 and promised to build an integrated self-sustaining economy. The NRM under Museveni started out very well and, indeed, in the 1996 elections, he scored over 75% of the vote. This figure has progressively reduced to 58%, as exhibited in the 2021 elections. Yet, these dwindling percentages are recorded in a country where the population that falls under the poverty line has reduced from 56% in 1992 to around 25% in recent years, where the economy is reported to be strong and growing at an estimated 6.3% per annum, growth that is largely driven by the expansion of the service and industrial sectors. If such impressive figures are not enough to persuade voters, then there must be other reasons which are not related to the economy – most likely political. In such situations, art becomes handy in articulating political impasses.

2.3. Science vs the arts – Political dimensions

Gen. Museveni believed (and still believes) that science more than anything else is the engine for development and that a lot of what has been achieved economically derives from the power of science. To demonstrate his belief, teachers of science have been rewarded with higher pay. While Museveni's argument cannot be disputed, the interdependence of science and the arts is indisputable too. For example, at the core of art education is creativity, innovation, and self-realization. In whatever profession we are pursuing, we need all these traits. They are key to motivating and guiding a scientist to work towards the desired results. A scientist who is not imaginative will not deliver fresh perspectives. Undermining the arts therefore results in producing scientists rigid mindsets and closed minds.

The result of privileging scientists was that artists felt neglected and marginalised. The marginalization of the arts, which started in education institutions, as Margaret Trowell experienced it, was concretized in the Museveni era. Consequently, the resentful artists found comfort among the ordinary Ugandans with whom they shared a sense of neglect. The two are now bedfellows, in part because (a) music as a medium of artistic gratification is itself 'infectious'; (b) the content in the music resonates with the hopes and fears of the local population; and (c) music has a therapeutic effect. Musicians, many of whom were born in the years leading to Museveni's ascent to power (1986) or soon after, sing about, among other things, a 'negotiated and compromised democracy' in Uganda. They sing about graft, corruption and cracking down on political dissent. Their music strikes a chord with local consciousness, and this has endeared them to the ordinary Ugandans, who flock in large numbers to the artists' shows. Ironically, it is the environment of political heavy-handedness that they condemn in their music that has turned them into celebrities and earned them wealth – wealth at the expense of poor masses,

suggesting that musicians are in the long run exploitative just like their adversaries, the elite politicians.

On the surface, these two ‘exploitations’ could look the same; however, they differ from a moral perspective. In attending a music show or a comedy night, the audience pay for a service, and they go home with renewed vigour and, moreover, contribute to national development in their different capacities. They pay taxes which are ploughed back into science and other sectors of life. When, however, revenue is stolen by the political elite, as is very often the case, the elite are guilty of financial impropriety and stealing from the poor.

2.4. The Kyagulanyi aka ‘Bobi Wine’ factor

One of the fiercest critics of Museveni today is Robert Kyagulanyi, popularly known as Bobi Wine, who contested in the recent presidential elections, becoming the first runner-up with a score of 35%. This, by any stretch of the imagination, was an impressive performance, given that his party, the National Unity Platform (NUP) had been registered just six months prior. Kyagulanyi represented three constituencies. First, he had in the recent past become a political musician in the opposition, critical of those who break their promises. Second, he is a young man in his late thirties. An estimated 48% of voters were in the age bracket of 18 – 30 years and these are people who are mostly affected by the scarcity of jobs. Third, Kyagulanyi hails from the ghettos. His story of self-emancipation and self-discovery is a story millions of young people today in Uganda can identify with. As such, Kyagulanyi, who constructed himself into a king of some sort, has been able to clone himself in other musicians and the hard-pressed. Kyagulanyi’s profile has been an inspiration for many young people beyond the artists’ fraternity.

Although the 10th Parliament has had other artists, such as Judith Babirye (Buikwe North) and Kato Lubwama (Lubaga South) who, in any case, preceded Kyagulanyi there, as he (Kyagulanyi) is a product of a by-election in Kyaddondo North, Kyagulanyi has distinguished himself as a charismatic and articulate legislator. He sees himself as an extension of the suffering masses who, as recent elections have revealed, has demonstrated the transformative power of art in politics.

Musicians, previously relegated to the fringes as mere accompaniment to the main political events, could no longer afford to be underrated by Museveni. For his 2021 political campaign, he appointed a campaign team drawn from the musicians’ fraternity under the command of Catherine Kusasira. Kusasira is one of the high-profile musicians in Uganda and an ardent supporter of the incumbent. Although Kusasira’s efforts did not bear fruit, it is noteworthy that by engaging artists, Museveni is beginning to recognize the relevance of art as a resource that he could use for social and political mobilisation.

Kyagulanyi’s success should not be seen in isolation. At the time of his flowering, the world was already exploring the worth of people in the creative industry as political managers. In 2016, Americans elected Mr. Donald Trump as their new president. His extreme views notwithstanding, the four years of his presidency gave America a new facelift and it was on its way to becoming ‘great again’. In Liberia, George Weah was elected president. While in Kazakhstan, a television star became the new president.

3. Conclusion

If art has found its way to the centre, as the recent elections have demonstrated. This is because art is an expression of people's aspirations. Art is the very essence of who we are. Although there are universal aspects that confirm us as human beings, every region has unique features that require the application of unique solutions. For this to happen, we must value our history, much of which is embodied in art. Trapped in the art of the past and present is our identity. Therefore, the capacity of Uganda to propose effective home-made solutions lies in understanding and respecting ourselves – art provides us with the tools to do that. With art gaining currency in politics, we should be able to see an improvement in the quality of our politicians. Equally important is the need to watch out for those artists who are taking advantage of the unsuspecting voter – artists who are taking elective positions just for economic gain. This category misrepresents the capacity of art to reform politics in Uganda.

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