

## Beyond the ballot box: building bridges between citizens and the state in Uganda

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‘Whatever the outcome of Uganda’s February elections, the next electoral cycle as a whole will provide opportunities to address the country’s state-society relations in more substantive ways’

**E**lections represent a critical opportunity for the ordinary citizen to hold a government to account. They also perform a vital function in facilitating and legitimising political change. But elections do not always deliver meaningful change and are at risk of being superficial if certain fundamental conditions are not in place. A greater focus is therefore needed on those channels that connect citizens and the state more substantively, including political parties and progress towards a fiscal contract.

### The Uganda example

Elections are often seen as part of a natural sequence of democratic deepening in which citizen participation is enhanced and relationships of accountability are formed. Even in the early stages of democratic development, the possibility of incumbents’ losing power is thought to provide a powerful sanction, enabling citizens to hold decision-makers to account.

In Uganda, as in many other countries, the reality is that elections – on their own – are a weak accountability mechanism. Countries can enter a ‘political grey zone’ in which elections are held, with some activity from opposition parties and a relatively free media, but with little substantive representation of citizens’ interests (Carothers, 2002).

President Museveni’s National Resistance Movement (NRM) came to power in Uganda in 1986. Initially, it promoted a ‘no-party’ political constitution, but party politics gradually re-emerged and were formally recognised in 2005 (a decision controversially linked to the abolishment of presidential term limits). Not surprisingly, the party system remains underdeveloped and fragile.

The forthcoming Ugandan elections, to be held on 18 February 2011, also reflect wider tensions in the relationship between parliamentarians and citizens, with widespread public mistrust of politicians in general. As happens in other countries, parliamentarians can be oriented primarily towards providing private goods for themselves and their political networks rather than public goods for citizens or constituents at large. Competitive elections

can encourage politicians to take populist stances or to provide narrowly targeted benefits to secure the votes of particular groups (Hyden, 2010). This can prevent emergence of the broader responsiveness (and effective sanctions) that are supposed to accompany democratic electoral processes (Booth, 2010).

Elections in Uganda, as in many other countries, do not by themselves deliver effective accountability or a social contract between citizens and the state. This suggests the need to examine complementary mechanisms that could be strengthened or deepened in a more long-term perspective and in a more continuous way, between as well as during election periods. These include strengthening political parties and making progress towards a fiscal contract.

### Political parties

Political parties can play a central role within well-functioning democracies, aggregating and representing citizens’ interests and formulating policy agendas that respond to their concerns. In practice, however, parties are often weakly connected to citizens, and in many countries they struggle to fulfil their prescribed roles.

In Uganda, for example, the ruling NRM initially established itself as a ‘Movement’ that absorbed members and leaders of other political parties. Following a period of splits and realignments within and outside the formal framework of the Movement, in 2005 a number of old political parties were re-established and a number of new parties were created, such as the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC). However, many of the parties pre-dating 1986 have struggled to become substantively re-institutionalised, their ranks depleted by defections to the NRM and their structures remaining dormant. In general, party identities are strongly associated with their leaders, and programmatic differences are relatively slight.

There are signs of growing organisation at local levels and mobilisation of citizens by some of the newer parties, however. The FDC, for example, has emerged as the largest significant opposition party, despite continued harassment by state agents. The People’s Progressive Party (PPP) grew from a merger of parties that

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were too small to participate effectively in the 2006 elections and it is building strong local structures (Wild and Golooba-Mutebi, 2011). Although the trends are still embryonic, by continuing to build a membership base and a platform between elections there is potential for some of Uganda's new political parties to strengthen links between citizens and the state. But building programmatic parties remains a challenge, and in the short term this still brings risks for political contestation, as shown in predictions of potential election violence in Uganda.

### Towards a fiscal contract

Taxation can also shape how citizens relate to the state – particularly at local levels. The relationship between a government's reliance on tax revenues and the quality of governance is well established. Two of the main factors determining taxation's impact on governance are how much a state relies on tax as against non-tax revenues and how the government taxes citizens (Moore, 2007).

In Uganda, the abolition of the Graduated Tax (a poll tax) appears to have contributed negatively to state-society relations. The Graduated Tax was the only significant form of direct taxation experienced by most people in Uganda, and it was a significant source of local tax revenue. All able-bodied men above the age of 18 and all able-bodied women in gainful employment could be taxed (LGFC, 2001). In 2001, however, opposition politicians began to argue for the abolition of the tax. The ruling party recognised the popularity of the proposal, and the tax was abolished in the run up to multi-party elections of 2006.

The decision left local governments heavily reliant on intra-governmental transfers from central government, which has weakened their responsiveness to local citizens. The few people who now pay tax include market traders and those in formal sector employment (civil servants). These groups commonly seek to protect their own interests rather than those of the wider population. For most Ugandan citizens, low expectations of government interact with weak fiscal links through taxation to leave little space for demand-side accountability.

The trajectories of Western and European state formation are unlikely to be followed closely in

the very different contexts of sub-Saharan Africa. Nevertheless, history suggests it would be unwise to underestimate the importance of taxation in shaping citizen-state relations (Tilly, 1990). Imposing a tax which falls heavily on poor rural people may not be advisable, even as a reasonable first step, in Uganda. The Graduated Tax was viewed by some as supporting the rich rather than as any part of a fiscal contract (Ssewakiryanga, 2005). However, variations across Ugandan districts – with collection rates reflecting local levels of trust – suggest that the development of a fiscal contract at the local level may be possible. Supporting the emergence of a broader fiscal contract in Uganda may require strategies tailored to local variations (Kjær, 2009).

### Post-election Uganda

Whatever the outcome of Uganda's February elections, the next electoral cycle as a whole will provide opportunities to address the country's state-society relations in more substantive ways. Conventional donor approaches to accountability tend to focus rather narrowly on elections – presidential, parliamentary or local – in the belief that these are key drivers of the willingness of the state to respond to citizens. However, the effects of elections depend on fundamental aspects of the context in which they are held, including the factors that shape interactions between citizens and the state between elections and over the longer term.

We believe that two factors in particular deserve greater attention. First, political parties and party systems have the potential to contribute to building bridges between citizens and the state, but are too often overlooked by donors and diplomats outside of the immediate election period. Second, making progress towards a fiscal contract, including new thinking about local taxation, is also crucial. As long as citizens do not feel that they are financing the services that government provides, the pressure on politicians to deliver better outcomes for citizens, rather than win votes by appealing to particular interest groups, will remain weak.

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