

Ugandan voters toss out Museveni's enforcers

by Linda de Hoyos

Although Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni is being built up as the commanding warlord for the entire East Africa region, in his home base of Uganda, he has been handed a loud rebuff. On April 19, in elections for the top posts of Museveni's own National Resistance Movement (NRM, the single institution permitted to carry out political activities in Uganda), those candidates supported by the heavyweights of Museveni's regime were removed from office by the voters. The most spectacular race was in the capital city itself, where longtime member of the Democratic Party Hajji Nasser Ssebagala took the Kampala mayoralty race with a 60,000-vote majority, leaving his Museveni-financed opponent, Christopher Iga, trailing third.

There should be no mistake, however, in thinking that the voting system in Uganda is democratic. Political parties are prohibited from all activities, even including holding their own conventions. This means that it is nearly impossible for any funding to be channeled to candidates who oppose Museveni. All polling for the local elections—that is, for the heads of local councils and local district councils—took place under the umbrella of Museveni's NRM, which all Ugandans are required to join. In the spring 1998 local elections, known opponents of Museveni were informally dubbed "multi-partyists," in reference to the Democratic Party and the Ugandan Peoples Congress (UPC), or ran as "independents."

In many cases, particularly in northern Uganda, where Museveni's prolonged internal wars have created an enduring climate of violence, there was a campaign of physical harassment and intimidation against those candidates known to oppose Museveni, carried out not by officials of the NRM, but by agents of the government's own Internal Security Organization. Furthermore, 470,000 people in northern Uganda, more than one-third of the population, are incarcerated in "protected villages," where they are under the constant supervision of Museveni's military—hardly the condition for free and fair elections, as pointed out by UPC leader Cecilia Ogwal. Although the UPC, which has its traditional stronghold in the north, was thereby derailed in Gulu and Kitgum, the winner in Gulu was an "independent" who campaigned on a call for peace—in opposition to Museveni's decision for the war to continue.

Despite these constraints inside the country, and although those opposing Museveni received no international backing or support, Museveni's favored candidates—most of them in-

cumbents—were given a sound beating. In almost all districts of the country, with the exceptions of Jinja and Mukono, all the incumbent chairmen of the District Councils lost elections.

The driving out of Museveni's chosen district council chairmen could have a major impact on elections to come. Generally, during the 1996 Presidential elections, these chairmen served as the coordinators for Museveni's Presidential campaign, and were the local enforcers on the scene at voting time. This machinery, which was capable of carrying out large-scale vote fraud in the 1996 elections, has been swept aside.

In several districts, such as Masindi, Kamuli, Kasese, Arua, Lira, Bushenyi, and Kabala, clear-cut victories went to the multi-partyists. In Museveni's own district of Bushenyi, the top brass of the NRM in the national cabinet, including Amana Mushega and Col. Kahinda Otafire, went into battle against the multi-partyist Makaanu Yowasi Rwamanyo—to no avail.

As the *Monitor* newspaper explained, the reason for the ousting was "performance. Increasing poverty in the districts, failure to deliver social services like health and education, collapsing physical infrastructure like roads, dispensaries, and schools, and, like in Kampala, uncollected garbage, potholes on the roads, etc., all played a key role in influencing voter behavior."

These results will propel Museveni to tighten his grip through dictatorship. In the year 2000, he will hold a "national referendum" on whether to simply ban all political parties—a vote on which the parties themselves will not be permitted to campaign. In addition, NRM bosses are saying that they will "screen" NRM candidates more carefully and only run one candidate per post—like "elections" in the former Soviet Union!

Voter riots in Museveni's home district

In this environment, even the NRM is beginning to fracture. In the Ntungamo district of Ankole, Museveni's birthplace, the government was forced by a growing political revolt of the Bairu ethnic majority in the district to send in the military to "keep law and order"—that is, enforce the vote for Museveni's chosen candidate, a Hima Tutsi like Museveni himself. This also failed, with the Bairu candidate, Patrick Buriiku, winning. But no sooner were those results announced, than Museveni deployed more troops to the scene, and by the end of the week, the local election commission reported that Museveni's candidate John Karazaarwe had won by a measly 0.6% of the vote.

The result of this ruse was rioting throughout the district. By April 29, Museveni himself was forced to intervene, calling Karazaarwe and all the candidates to his home. Winners of the lower posts all went to Buriiku's men, who had vowed not to work with Karazaarwe. The fight in the district, Museveni stated, was destroying the entire National Resistance Movement, which has its strongest base in Ankole. Although the violence has ended, the rift in the Movement has not abated.