

people & power

KYAMBOGO GUILD ELECTIONS.
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POLITICS

start

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First the ghettos, then university halls:

Analysis. Bobi Wine has been regarded by the more sceptical analysts as one with an ability to ride on and reflect the public mood but who lacked concrete support beyond his personal charisma. Recent developments, however, require a reassessment of that view of Bobi Wine and his People Power pressure group, writes **Timothy Kalyegira**.

GUILD POLITICS

During the student guild elections at Kyambogo University in Kampala just over a week ago, the candidate representing People Power, Jonathan Tundulu, won the presidency. Also last week, Julius Kateregga, who also stood on the People Power ticket, won the guild presidency at Makerere University. Two wins at two premier universities in Kampala certainly is a statement of intent.

When Robert Kyagulanyi, better known as Bobi Wine, announced his intention to contest the Kyadondo East by-election in 2017, his musical background and wide name recognition assured him of at least a second or third place finish.

He was not dismissed as a political joke.

When he won by a landslide, many attributed that to his appeal as a musician rather than for what he represented musically.

He was viewed as a non-threatening popular choice, so much so that even the ruling NRM party heatedly congratulated him after his victory.

When he hit the campaign trail on behalf of other Opposition candidates during subsequent by-elections, some began to speak of the "Bobi Factor" in these victories.

Others, though, pointed out that the winning Opposition candidates in Jinja West (Paul Mwiru), Bugiri Municipality (Asuman Basalirwa) and Arua Municipality (Kassiano Wadri) were popular in their own right, reflected the prevalent political mood in the area, and all that Bobi Wine had done was correctly read the mood and align with it.

He was not the decisive factor that had contributed to the by-election win.

When Bobi Wine, Gerald Karuhanga, Francis Zaake and other political activists were arrested and mistreated in Arua during the campaigns of August 2018, they gained much national and international sympathy and support.

Some analysts still interpreted this as a typical sympathy vote rather than a vote on substantive issues.

In other words, Bobi Wine has been regarded by the more sceptical analysts and commentators as one with a good sense of timing, with an abil-



ity to ride on and reflect the public mood but who lacked concrete support beyond his personal charisma; a one-man political movement.

Recent developments, however, require a reassessment of that view of Bobi Wine and his People Power pressure group.

During the student guild elections at Kyambogo University in Kampala just over a week ago, the candidate representing People Power, Jonathan Tundulu, won the presidency.

Also last week, Julius Kateregga, who also stood on the People Power ticket, won the guild presidency at Makerere University.

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Significance

Since the 1960s, Makerere University has traditionally been viewed as the bellwether of Ugandan politics, the institution that reflects current political sentiment and allegiance.

After these two wins at Kampala-based universities with a wide range of students from most of Uganda's ethnic groups and districts, People Power can no longer be dismissed as a spontaneous uprising among the disenfranchised urban school dropouts.

It clearly has tapped into something real. What is that it has tapped into?

For one, the long stay or overstay in power by President Yoweri Museveni is the very least of the grievances.

Museveni has now been in power for longer than any other East African leader and longer than the average age of at least 70 per cent of the Ugandan population.

To an older Ugandan, the NRM's rise to power can seem like just yesterday, but to anyone below 35 this feels like an entire lifetime - which it is.

Secondly, the way in which politics is conducted in Uganda, often in open disregard to the law, with corruption remaining open, rampant and unpunished, wears down the spirit of any citizen.

Thirdly, there are real, structural challenges to the country's youth. They have grown up in a period of tuition fees in institutions of higher learning and where anything of quality is expensive.

After struggling through university or tertiary institution, there are few job openings.

For the few who chance upon jobs, usually in the range of Shs300,000 to Shs800,000 a month, it soon becomes clear that their salaries cannot cover their living expenses, from rent to transport, food and utilities.

The Internet, social media and smartphones that had been welcomed as vital business tools have proved disappointing. The fact of being on WhatsApp, Facebook or Twitter has not translated into any meaningful contacts or job and business opportunities for most young people.

Those who venture out into entrepreneurship are soon faced with the burden of rent and at best a trickle of customers.

Those who venture still further, say to the Middle East for menial jobs, report mistreatment and overwork.

Uganda's youth have a legitimate feeling of bitterness, desperation and helplessness with things as they are.

This is the sentiment that Bobi Wine has tapped into.

Before Bobi Wine and People Power, the Reform Agenda in 2000 and later the FDC party tapped into this growing sense of disenchantment across the country.

In 2006, in its first general election as a party, the FDC quickly won enough seats in Parliament to become the second-largest Opposition party and displace the Democratic Party and the Uganda People's Congress from their historical position.

The common thread that binds the FDC and People Power is this instinctive appeal to the economically disempowered population, fed up with bad governance.

If People Power, which started off as a loose gathering of the "urban lumpen", has now crossed over into university residential halls and lecture rooms, we had better sit up and start taking notice.

The question is: Why, then, was it People Power to win at Kyambogo and Makerere and not the FDC?

Was it that People Power presented better candidates or the FDC had weak candidates?

Or did People Power attract votes from some DP, FDC, UPC and independent students, as Kizza Besigye did in 2006 and 2011?

Rainbow coalition

In 2002, during the general election in Kenya, a rainbow coalition called NARC formed and won the election, bringing the veteran minister Mwai Kibaki to power.

At the time, Kibaki got key support from another veteran Opposition politician Oginga Odinga who, under normal circumstances should have been a rival to Kibaki.

NARC was made possible by the

Strategy. Winner of the Makerere University guild race Julius Kateregga (right) and the runner up Joshua Mukisa (left) both identified themselves with the People Power pressure group. Centre is Kyadondo East MP Robert Kyagulanyi.

COURTESY FILE PHOTOS

2017

BOBI WINE CONTESTED FOR THE KYADONDO EAST BY-ELECTION IN 2017 AND WON BY A LANDSLIDE.