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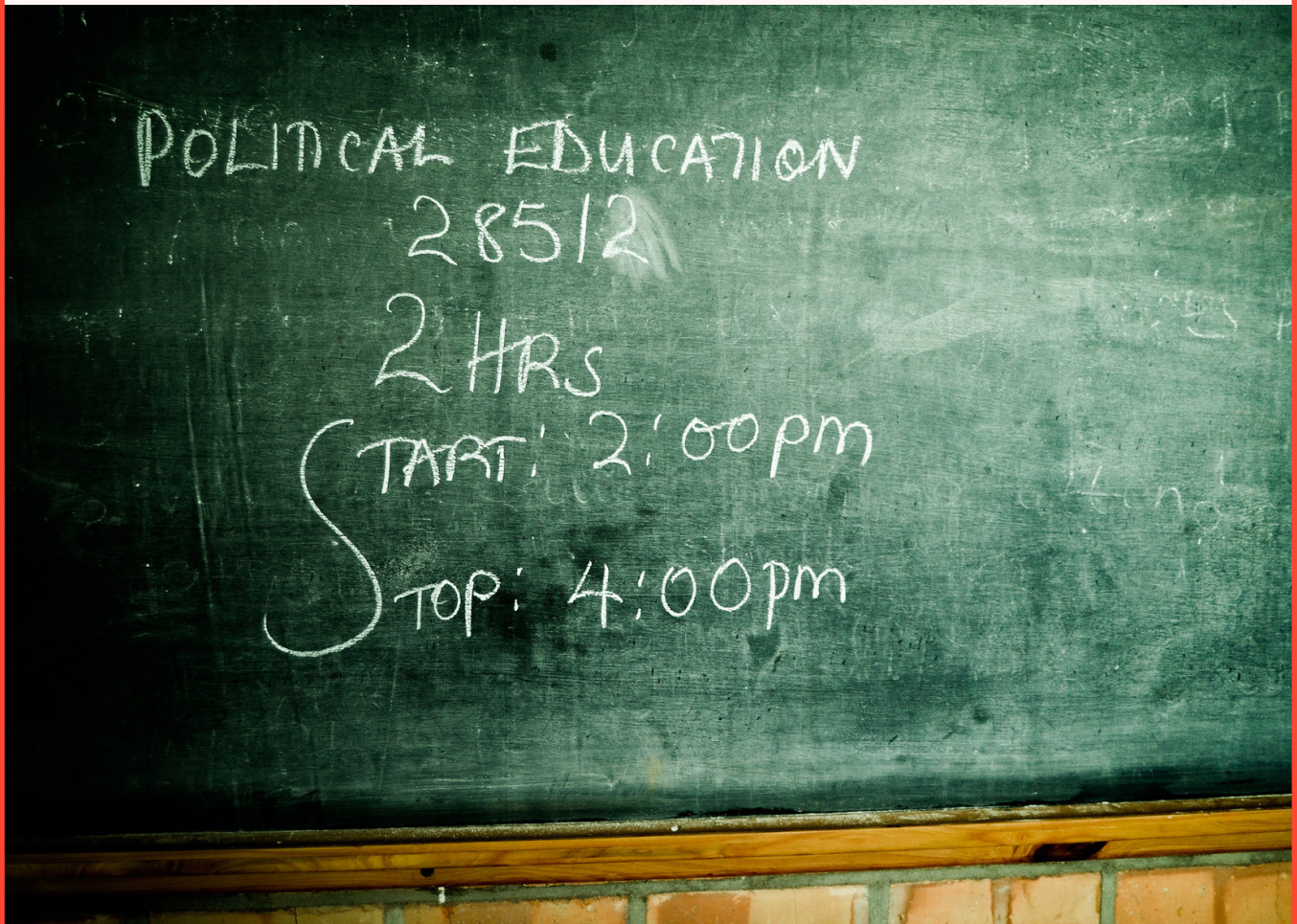


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AUTHORS

Gerald Kagambirwe
Ragnhild L. Muriaas

Avenues for Youth Representation in Uganda

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Authors

Gerald Kagambirwe Karyeija gerald.karyeija@gmail.com

Ragnhild L. Muriaas ragnhild.muriaas@uib.no

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Abstract

Youth representation has emerged as an important political issue worldwide. In sub-Saharan Africa, Uganda can be considered as a pioneer in catering for the presence of youth in political decision-making bodies. Yet, while increased youth representation in democratic contexts is encouraged and applauded, policies aimed at youth inclusion in autocratic regimes can be criticized as serving the purpose of co-optation and control. Through a combination of a historical review of formal political structures and qualitative interviews of youth leaders in Uganda, this working paper aims to take a bottom-up approach to understand the purpose of youth engagement in political structures considered as a tool for government control. The analysis reveals that even if young politicians clearly understand the weakness of the organizations and how they are manipulated by the structures, they also explain how this flawed system of representation provides several opportunities—both for mobilizing against and in favour of the current regime. The rather complex system of youth representation must thus be seen in the light of historical developments. No rulers, even autocratic ones, can know all the consequences of their actions, and decisions can be spontaneous reactions to events and immediate needs, not necessarily well-developed strategies.

Uganda has for decades been a world pioneer in providing formal structures that cater for the special interests and needs of the youth population. There are reserved seats for the youth at all levels of government (including parliament), there is a national youth council, and all the political parties have a youth section. This comprehensive structure for youth representation brings thousands of young citizens into politics from a young age. Still, these channels for youth participation and representation have remained hierarchical and are infused with patronage (Twikirize, Kashaija, Wobusobozi and Gimbo, 2021). And although Uganda has been a pioneer country in including the youth in political decision-making, youth representation in the country has evolved in an autocratic context, which denotes limited access to several rights available in a democratic context (Aalen & Muriaas, 2017; 2018). Furthermore, we may also ask why there is a need to separate the youth interest from the public interest (Mwesigwa & Wahid, 2021; Sumberg et al., 2021). Through exploring the opportunities and challenges in the current network of political youth organizations in Uganda, we seek to build knowledge about the meaning of youth representation in an authoritarian context. A critical question confronts us: How do youth organizations serve the interests of the youth in an autocratic regime?

The current ruling party of Uganda identified youth as a marginalized group that needed specific group-based representation in the system in the early 1990s. The structure of youth representation has, however, developed within the context of an autocratic regime, and it is likely that these formal structures for youth representation could work as tools to control the youth just as much as to emancipate them (Aalen & Muriaas, 2017; 2018). While many youth representatives are likely to have benefitted politically by participation in the structures, there are several factors that prevent youth agency to flow from these organizations. Tensions between youth organizations and the mother parties emerge in all types of regimes if a youth section aspires to be more than a mobilizing vehicle for the mother party (Mycock & Tonge, 2011). For instance, while youth organizations are crucial socializing agents for partisanship and organizational learning processes (Hooghe, Stolle & Stouthuysen, 2004), youth wings often take more radical views and use more aggressive methods than what the mother party—at least publicly—is ready to endorse (Aalen, Orre & Muriaas, 2023). Still, even if there are limits to how influential youth organizations are in national policy-making, we need more knowledge about how political youth engagement evolves in an autocratic context.

In this working paper, we start by providing an historical overview of youth-government interaction in Uganda. After that, we provide an overview of the formal channels for political representation that exist today. In Uganda, 'Youth' is defined as a person between the ages of 18 and 30 years (*The Constitution of the Republic of Uganda, 1995; National Youth Council Act, 2001; FDC Constitution, 2016, UBOS, 2018*).¹ We then present our results from field work in Kampala in 2020 and 2021, where in all 18 qualitative interviews

¹The existing definitions of youth vary across countries and depend on the purpose of using the term. Some international programmes and agencies, like the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), define youth as persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years. This age group accounts for 1.2 billion (16%) of the global population (United Nations, 2018). The African Youth Charter 2008 refers to youth as every person between the ages of 15 and 35 years. In academic studies of youth participation and representation in politics, however, youth is commonly defined as those between 18 and 40 years (Stockemer & Sundström 2018; Belschner, 2022).

were conducted with youth leaders who had served in different capacities in youth organizations. We asked them about their work and their experiences as youth politicians. Our analysis is grounded in the responses from those we interviewed, and we interpret these responses to find trends and patterns about what they saw as the purpose of the institutions and the challenges they faced.

A History of Government-Youth Interaction: Ideology and Institutions

For the last three decades, the NRM ruling party has continued to create an enabling environment for the youth to participate in politics, not only as voters but also as representatives of their social group at all levels. With five slots of the youth in parliament, two in each district and sub-county council and a well-established legal youth council consisting of all political parties, young leaders are present in the most important political institutions of the current NRM regime.

Still, as Israel Kayonde (*The Observer*, February 24, 2010) has specified, the youth-government interactions had already started in the 1960s when the Prime Minister then, Dr. Apollo Milton Obote, introduced student councils in high schools and tertiary institutions under the umbrella known as National Union of Students of Uganda (NUSU). For the rural non-schooling youth, the National Union of Youth Organizations (NUYO) was introduced. This is an indication that even the earliest post-independence regime had some involvement with youths. The Ministry of Culture and Economic Development then was changed to include the word 'Youth' and was renamed as Ministry of Youth, Culture and Sports so that it includes youth department (National Youth Policy, 2001), possibly to be eligible for funding from organizations like United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The youth programmes were all supported by the government and Non-Governmental Organizations like Young Women Christian Association (YWCA) and Scouts and Girl Guides Movement.

Records show that many of the later political leaders in Uganda were products of these unions (National Youth Policy, 2001; Kyaddondo, 2011). By 1980, however, almost all the youth had deserted Obote because of his sectarian leadership style. Many youth programmes also collapsed during President Amin's time (1971 to 1979) and a substantial number of youths joined the armed struggles as '*Kadogos*'²² while some migrated to urban areas for security and business. Manipulation of the youth started at this time, as some politicians were eager to mobilize the youth to have them on their side in the struggle (National Youth Policy, 2001). During the UNLF/NRA bush war (1981 to 1986), resistance committees were established in the power vacuum that emerged after the National Resistance Army (NRA) chased away chiefs who supported the second Obote regime. Their purpose was to collect food for soldiers and build a political network that could 'warn NRA units of the approach of government forces, screen their youth as recruits and form village militias' (Kasfir, 2005, p. 284). The legitimacy of the committees rested on the way they were structured. Unique to the context, all members were elected and designated a specific function, such as defined roles concerning women

²²*Kadogo* is a Swahili word for small but in this context refers to child soldiers.

and youth. While those elected as chairs were frequently Baganda notables due to the geographical location of the war, electing women and youth as officials was a radical move that was accepted.

When the NRA won the war in 1986, the name of the movement changed from the Uganda National Liberation Front (UNLF) to the National Resistance Movement (NRM) and Yoweri Museveni became president. The NRM government introduced department of Youth Affairs headed by a Commissioner under the Ministry of Youth, Culture and Sports in 1986 and all Ugandan citizens of 18-30 years were members of the youth council. In 1993, the National Youth Council Statute was passed by parliament and the election of youth from grassroots up-to national level started. It is important to note, however, that the special attention towards the youth in the government structures was part of a larger institutional and ideological strategy. The NRM developed a multi-levelled and comprehensive movement system built on the origins of resistance councils established during the guerrilla war. The new government expanded the governance structure of the resistance committees into a nationwide multi-levelled governance system based on the vision that people should be fully involved in democratic governance on a day-to-day basis and that politics should cover every aspect of life. Special seats in the elected assemblies were thus not only reserved for the youth, but also members representing other marginalized social groups, such as women and people with disabilities (PWDs). Political parties, on the other hand, were identified as the root cause of the conflicts that turned the country into a civil war, and parties were banned from nominating candidates for elections (Kasfir, 2005). The system developed under the first 20 years of NRM rule became known as the 'no-party' system, based on corporate rather than issue representation (Muriaas & Wang, 2012).

Youth structures were officially established by the NRM government to empower the youth socially, economically and politically. However, the department of youth did not have sufficient funds to implement the youth programmes. As a result, skills and enterprise development programmes like the Youth Enterprise Scheme (YES) were introduced to create jobs for the youth in the country (National Youth Policy, 2001). This programme was also supported by a decentralization policy where local authorities were given the mandate to provide services to the youth. Through decentralization, the youth became directly involved in decision-making. The National Youth Council (NYC) elected representatives for elected offices at all levels of government, both local and national, as well as debating political issues and policies with a relevance for the youth. The National Youth Policy document (2001) contends that prior to the NRM government, the youth were marginalized and only considered as service users. This implies that they were not active participants in the decision-making and development process.

The NRM's overall ideology, according to its constitution, is 'national, broad based, inclusive, and democratic, non-sectarian, multi-ideological, multi-interest and progressive mass organization'.³ The NRM approach on youth engagement, at least in theory, aligns with those who recommend that the youth themselves should be involved in handling the problems this social group is facing, such as unemployment

³ Dr Sali Simba Kayunga, Paper Presented at the 1st Lunch Time Seminar organized by the Department of Political Science and Public Administration in Conjunction with Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 12th March 2015.

(see Woollcombe, 2017). Hence, if there is a youth problem, the government should empower youth to participate in creating policy solutions and implementing their own solutions. This approach to societal problems can be seen as pragmatism or opportunism. Pragmatism in the sense that government does what works or what they think works and opportunism because sometimes initiatives are not a result of systematic planning but spontaneous reactive policy-making. The government constantly repeats that it is catering for the youth through the development of group-specific structures, but this could also serve as a strategy for pacifying the youth and even distribute benefits to the most loyal among them. As studies of insurgent groups that win power have shown in other countries, ruling parties in contexts like Uganda are likely to have characteristics that put them into a position where sub-national elections are not really looked upon as a threat (Aalen & Muriaas, 2017). As such, allowing—and even encouraging—youth activism can serve as a fundament for the sustainability of the regime.

The Current Structure of Youth Representation

This part of the working paper provides an overview of the multiple organizational structures for youth representation in Uganda. Such an overview is important to both understand the character of the political regime in Uganda and the opportunities youth as a group have for political influence.

First, there is the National Youth Council (NYC). The law establishing NYC was enacted by Parliament in 1993 by the NRM Government on the conviction that young people needed a body to promote unity among them and to give them a platform for participation in national development. The council has legal and institutional frameworks. It is also mandated to organize young people to participate in and contribute to the national development project. The council leadership starts from the village up to national level, which implies that the elected youth leaders make binding decisions on behalf of youth in their elected constituency. The council is funded by the government under the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, through the department of Youth and Children Affairs, which is politically supervised by a Minister of State for Youth and Children Affairs.

Second, there are youth quotas at all levels of elected assemblies. The NRM constitutionalized the youth representation in parliament under affirmative action in the 1990s and the quotas are still in place. The quota comprises five (5) MPs elected from the four regions and one female youth MP that represents all female youth in the country. They are elected by the members in the NYC at sub-county and district levels. In other words, there is no universal suffrage in the election of candidates for youth seats, as is the case with the women's seats. For instance, in the western region the estimate headcount of youth is two million while the electoral college is composed of about 800-900 voters (Aalen, Orre & Muriaas 2023). The youth are also represented at the sub-national level, i.e. at the District and Sub County Local Council levels by two youths, male and female. This means that thousands of youths serve as representatives in Uganda, as there are 146 districts and 10 cities that again are divided into smaller units. The representatives of the youth are elected through an electoral college.

Third, there is also a structure in Parliament called the Uganda Parliamentary Forum on Youth Affairs (UPFYA). The Uganda Parliamentary Forum on Youth Affairs is an advocacy platform formed under NRM government in 2008 by a section of youthful members of the 8th Parliament. The genesis for the formation was that youth representatives realized that influencing parliamentary business to address youth interests would be an insurmountable task for only five youth representatives, particularly as youth issues are cross-cutting and the rise of independent politicians in Uganda contributes to a personalization of politics (Karyeija, 2019). UPFYA is therefore committed to promote policies and programmes that place young people at the core of Uganda's governance and development process through legislation, advocacy, networking and outreach. The organization is guided by three objectives: (1) to advocate for youth focused mainstreaming as standard with all relevant government, (2) to strengthen youth legislative capacity, (3) to advocate for increased government financing of youth programmes, and (4) to increase meaningful youth participation in governance processes. The organization's approach of work includes information sharing with youth leaders in NYC structures; sharing perceptions, challenges and opportunities for advocacy and legislative purposes, and research and documentation.⁴

Fourth, there are *youth leagues in all political parties*. In all the larger parties, the youth sections are formally supposed to be represented in the leadership structure at different levels of the organization. Political parties in Uganda operate through structures known as 'grassroots structures'. The structures are used to mobilize the masses to participate in politics in terms of turning out to vote or as contact points for electorate with their political leaders. Parties also count on them as sure votes and they work voluntarily with hopes of getting paid in future when they win elections; these members also contribute money to parties in form of membership subscriptions and help in recruiting members for their parties. They are also very easy to mobilize by their political leaders at different levels, through phone calls, social media like whatsapp groups, or face-to-face. Table 1 shows the expected composition of youth in party structures for the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM), and the opposition parties Forum for Democratic Change (FDC), Democratic Party (DP), Uganda Peoples' Congress (UPC), Justice Forum (JEEMA), People Progressive Party (PPP) and National Youth Council (NYC) which is youth political organization for all political parties.

Table 1: Youth Composition in Selected Political Parties' / Organizations Structures

Structures / Constituency	Elected Positions	Political Parties						
		NRM	FDC	DP	JEEMA	UPC	PPP	NYC
Village	Secretary	01	01	01	01	01	01	--
	Secretary for Female	01	01	01	01	01	01	--
	Youth League	09	09	09	09	09	09	09
	Secretary	01	01	01	01	01	01	--

⁴See www.upfya.ac.ug.

Parish	Secretary for Female	01	01	01	01	01	01	--
	Youth League	09	09	09	09	09	09	09
Sub-County	Secretary	01	01	01	01	01	01	01
	Secretary for Female	01	01	01	01	01	01	01
	Youth League	09	09	09	09	09	09	09
District	Secretary	01	01	01	01	01	01	01
	Secretary for Female	01	01	01	01	01	01	01
	Youth League	09	09	09	09	09	09	09
National Council	Youth Representatives	03	03	03	03	03	03	--
	National Youth League Executives	14	14	14	14	14	14	14
Executive	Secretary Youth Affairs	01	01	01	01	01	01	--
Working Committee / Cabinet	Secretary for Youth	01	01	01	01	01	01	--
National Delegates Conference	*District Youth Secretary	*122	*122	*122	*122	*122	*122	*122
**Parliament	Xx	**04	**01	00	00	00	00	--

Note:

** Number of Districts including City Council as of June 2018 with one Representative each*

*** Number of Youth MPs and Political Affiliations*

This is the formal structure for all political parties, but the positions are not fully filled within all political parties. The NRM is the only political party with 100% representation at all structural levels because of its national coverage as an organization. Other political parties have over 40% structural gaps and this is the reason they are not able to fill all electoral positions and placing political agents in all electoral polling stations country wide. Although the NRM is able to fill all positions in its structure, the leaders have been blamed for failing to provide proper avenues for the youth and market this opportunity to people. Of the 29 registered political parties in Uganda (Electoral Commission Statistics, as of June 1, 2019), the NRM has the largest following of youth, but traditionally the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC), and the National Unity Platform (NUP) are popular among youth as well. The youth are engaged in the other parties at a much lower rate. The NRM is the only party that has longstanding national structures that can mobilize youth across the country, and there have been shifts in what the most popular opposition party is over the years.

This must also be understood against a background of how electoral rules are manipulated and opponents intimidated by the regime (see Bertrand, 2021).

Fifth, we have the Uganda National Students Association (UNSA), which brings together all Ugandan students in post-primary institutions (including those abroad). At the helm of UNSA is the National Students Council (NSC) which is composed of three representatives of universities and other tertiary institutions and three representatives from each district. The NSC elects the National Executive Committee (NEC) to oversee the running of the affairs of UNSA on its behalf. Non-elected, ex-official members of the NSC include District Coordinators, National Secretariat Staff, members of the Board of Trustees and the Alumni representatives. Every school has an elected students' guild council, and five student leaders to the District Students Council represent each school council. This ensures that students' interests in terms of academic pursuit, career, and welfare are aggregated, and formally pursued.

Finally, there is also a new structure that aims to align youth across parties under the National Youth Manifesto (NYM). This is an initiative driven by the civil society through the Youth Coalition on Electoral Democracy (YCED) whose core membership comprises Open Space Centre, Uganda Youth Network, Uganda Parliamentary Forum on Youth Affairs, Show Abilities Uganda, International Foundation for Recovery and Development, and Centre for Policy Analysis. These are youth-led and youth-focused NGOs which funded the youth manifesto together with other 36 like-minded NGOs. The voices of the youth are channeled through this political mobilization vehicle largely for advocacy and engagement.

To sum up, there is no shortage of formal avenues for youth representation in Uganda. The question thus remains to what extent do those who have served in these positions see youth organizations as places where political influence and engagement is possible?

The Meaning of Youth Representation in an Authoritarian Context

While formal institutional structures are important to provide the youth with the opportunity to realize meaningful political representation, the existence of such institutions is not sufficient to make sure that the youth are empowered. In their study of youth participation in the political process, Mugisha, Ojok, Kiranda and Kabasa (2016) find that youth organizations lack the required capacity to organize effectively due to the autocratic character of the regime. They further argue that market liberalism has fuelled patron-client-based politics that has led to corruption. Still, due to its comprehensive structure, the youth are represented at all levels of government and several public boards have requirements of youth representation. We talked to 18 youth leaders and youth officers about the purpose the different youth organizations serve and their experience of participating in these organizations. We have anonymized the interviewers, which includes not disclosing name, affiliation and information about date and place of interview. What are the opportunities and challenges of youth representation?

The Youth Council: Neutral or Ruling Party?

The Youth Council is an important avenue for youth representation as it is the structure that serves as the Electoral College for the youth representatives as well as being a forum where young politicians can meet, discuss, aggregate interests, and develop positions on different questions and policy areas. Even if the structure first developed within the NRM organisation, the Youth Council, with the coming of multiparty elections in the 2000s, was made independent from the ruling party. Candidates aligning with one of the opposition parties could now be elected to the Council. One respondent who had served in an important position in the Youth Council emphasised that the council is supposed to be “non-partisan”. As the respondent described it: “just like the state would operate”.⁵ Yet others indicated that it was not easy to distinguish between the state and the ruling NRM. Respondents across parties complained that both the administration of the youth league and the national leadership treated the structures as if it still was a part of the NRM. As one put it, “The National Youth Council looks more of a partisan thing, it looks more of an NRM thing. (...)...like the parliament also sometimes, but at least the parliament does not go to the extremes the Youth National Council goes”.⁶

Yet, even if the NRM clearly dominate the Youth Council, this does not mean that the government party understands it as a part of its organizational structures. For the party, there are simply too many who are not affiliated with the NRM in the council. This was explained by a young leader who had been a member of the youth council while affiliated to the NRM. According to him, since the Youth Council was indeed a large umbrella for all the youth, the leaders of the youth councils, even if affiliated to the NRM, did not have the same access to the NRM leadership, as for instance the NRM youth league. As explained, the NRM youth league has better access “in a sense that there is already comradeship between people” which “ease communication and identification of opportunities for young people”.⁷ Hence, even if the Youth Council is dominated by affiliates of the NRM and those representing opposition parties argue that they are ignored, the openness of the structures for youth politicians affiliated to other parties still make it something more than a vehicle for the NRM leadership. Because of this, there are reasons to believe that the NRM does not understand it as a natural and trusted ally.

Some respondents highlighted how the youth council was under-resourced and that this made it difficult for the structure to work constructively. As one long-term member affiliated to one of the opposition parties said,

“I have been a member of the National Youth Council for the last five years, but I can tell you, you cannot say there is a structure which is facilitated to do its work. You know, you have objectives and a mandate from your people, but you cannot exercise it because you are not facilitated to basically do the basics. I think there are just structures to blackmail us”.⁸

⁵Interview #7.

⁶ Interview #1.

⁷ Interview #7

⁸ Interview #1.

Hence, many representatives felt marginalized rather than empowered by holding an elected position. Another longtime member of the youth council, but affiliated to the NRM, agreed that the council did not have sufficient resources, but also pointed to how the council was politicized, driven by ambition and sometimes chaos. He admitted that the government did not really listen to the recommendations coming out of the youth council, but it wasn't like the youth council always acted in a way that made it "worthy" to be considered, as he put it. As he said; "I think it is literally a question of whether the council is organized well enough to speak in a way that government would have to listen".⁹ Still others emphasized that "the voice and representation is a big positive. If the young leaders are represented from the village to the national level, it's a good thing", but then paused and emphasized "the negative has been they are incapacitated to do their work".¹⁰ It also seemed like the youth council served as a stepping-stone in many politicians career, as a place to go to after student politics, and before moving on to other positions in the political parties.

Party leagues: Mobilization and Training

The young leaders that we spoke to had different experiences of being a prominent member of the youth branch of their party. All respondents openly admitted that there were tensions between the youth and the mother party. There seemed to be an agreement that one of the key purposes of the youth leagues was to mobilize support for the party. As explained by a leader in one of the opposition parties: "I am basically supposed to rally young people towards the ideology of the party and then empower them to be able to advocate for the things we advocate for as a party and also bring more young people on board."¹¹ One general problem that many young politicians faced was that more established politicians often felt threatened if they spoke too loud or got a following of their own. As one respondent nicely put it:

"Yeah, we have a problem whereby most of those old guys—maybe they did not go through these trainings [that we do]—see us as threats whenever we become active. They normally think that we are fighting them. That is the challenge we are going through. (...) whenever we come up with an opinion, they think we are underestimating them. That is the problem".¹²

For youth politicians, it seemed difficult to find one's place in the party. They should make some noise and be seen, but not too much and not for the sake of themselves. Being at the table and being active in politics still seemed to have an important meaning for many. Some became active in politics through engagement in school politics; others as leaders of demonstrations against injustices; some had even crossed the warnings of their families who tried to discourage them from entering politics. Yet, across parties, all said that what really encouraged them was the need for change. One youth from an opposition party said: "[We] were looking at change of leadership of this country, not just change of people, but having value-based leadership".¹³ Still,

⁹ Interview #7.

¹⁰ Interview #9.

¹¹ Interview #1

¹² Interview #2.

¹³ Interview #1

those affiliated to the NRM were also driven by the opportunity for change; but in their opinion, the best solution was to do it from within the ruling party by providing the necessary information to the government so that it would be better equipped to change the country.

Being involved in formal political structures also gave those involved the opportunity to get training and participate at workshops. Training and workshops would normally find place in Uganda, but it also gave some the opportunity to travel abroad. Youth branch members received training that was often facilitated by international agents and parties in other countries. For instance the young members of the Democratic Party, especially the youth wing, the Uganda Young Democrats, has benefitted a lot from German friends to get training in democracy and governance through internships, fellowships and scholarships for degrees and diplomas. Training was highlighted as one of the main advantages of joining a youth organization. Like one said, “we have a series of workshops and also trainings for the young people”.¹⁴ Some of the young leaders pointed to how their function as youth politicians was mostly that of being present and being allowed to voice the concerns of the group. Still, entering politics at a young age seemed to have its benefits and often marked the first steps of a political career. In some parties, the leadership gave young politicians important positions beyond that of being a youth representative.

“The youth league had a lot of training especially to do with financial literacy and also how to balance politics and financial sustainability so there is a relationship between somebody being a leader, being in politics actively as well as someone not being a beggar. Because many times, if somebody are manipulated both within the party hierarchy and also by the regime, the regime will take advantage of the situation and use that somebody. (...) [Training] has done a lot in changing the young people as far as financial literacy is concerned”.¹⁵

Reserved seats: An avenue for representation or a glass ceiling

As seats are reserved for youth at all levels of elected governments in Uganda, the system is organized in a way that includes young politicians at the table where decision-making is taken. Since reserved seats for different groups were formally adopted in the political institutions of the country, this also had an impact for those arguing for diversity in political organizations. One respondent explained that when they had argued for youth representation in their organization, they had automatically gone for the gender-parity solution. There had to be an equal number of young men and young women represented. Speaking about her work in political organization, one respondent explained:

“Actually, one of our achievements (...) is that we agitated that since we are young people we do not look at gender as one of the hindrances for someone’s participation in politics. We said we must have 2 representatives at each level and we must have a female and a male. So our youth league

¹⁴ Interview #4

¹⁵ Interview #6.

has that composition that whenever there is a male youth representative, there is a female youth representative”.¹⁶

Even if a gender-parity rule is incorporated into several structures in Uganda, some argued that stereotyped gender views on what young politicians could do on a basis of gender were common. As further argued by the same person, “It is just that sometimes because of the way community has brought us up, there is a way they want to label you into a certain corner. So they actually think that if there are demonstrations...blah... blah... blah, it would be the young men at the forefront. It won't be the woman because maybe you can't do that?”.¹⁷

The youth leaders supported the opportunities the reservation of special seats gave, while also pointing to some of the challenges. One young leader explained why the quota mechanisms often served as a ceiling instead of empowering. The example given was that when they got in contact with appointment committees to forward a young candidate, initiatives were met with comments such as “we already have a young person” or that they were looking for someone with “seven or ten years” of experience. One youth leader went on to explain that they “don't want young people to imagine themselves as a special interest group”, and that actually, they “tried to tell the young people that the minute you imagine yourself as that, somewhere, somehow that makes you vulnerable”.¹⁸

One young leader claimed that youth inclusion was tokenism. As she tellingly explained, “it is one thing to (...) give them space at the table and it's a different thing to actually implement what they say”.¹⁹ As she argued, “many political parties give young people positions on the table as just a token, but youth are [not] agitating for space, but as to whether they take them seriously and consider what the young people want”.²⁰ This young leader thus posed the question of how much empowerment there is in just being present, and what is the value of being allowed to debate and voice on concerns if what you say rarely has an impact on policies. One young politician affiliated to the NRM did, however, argue that the ruling party did listen to the youth, and if the party did not listen, it would probably pay for it later. As he explained; “[In the Youth Council we] sometimes agree to disagree. But what comes out is that the interest of the young person must be on the top of the agenda. If you are moving in the group and all are thinking the same, then you can know there is a problem”.²¹ Hence, youth organizations were also a source of information, and not just an organization that should mobilize support, but also being effective in identifying problems and solutions.

There is no doubt that the structure of youth inclusion has made the general political structure more accessible for youth than what it would have been without any attempt at organized youth inclusion. Figures show that of the 557 Members of the 11th parliament of Uganda, 160 are under 40 years of age, and of the

¹⁶ Interview #1.

¹⁷ Interview #1

¹⁸ Interview #1

¹⁹ Interview #5

²⁰ Interview #5 cont

²¹ Interview #9.

140 chairpersons of district councils, 65 are under the age of 40. Young politicians frequently win what are known as the “mainstream seats”—which means those seats that are not reserved for special groups. Several current national leaders were very active in youth politics. For instance, Dr Ruhakana Rugunda, who was a former president of the National Union of Students of Uganda (NUSU) at the end of the 1960s, has had several leadership positions at national level, including being Prime Minister. Former student guild presidents of Uganda’s premier university, Makerere University have become national leaders, such as Rt. Hon. Jacob Oulanyah, who became Speaker of the 11th Parliament of Uganda. In fact, in a recent study conducted in May 2022, by the Uganda Youth Network (UYONET), it was found that the increasing youth participation in politics is largely motivated by the impression that politics is a lucrative profession.

Conclusion

It is possible to argue that the formal inclusion of youth in the political structure in Uganda originated as an attempt to mobilize the youth into the ranks of the ruling NRM. Building youth leagues that would help in the process of recruiting new supporters into the ruling movement is a well-known strategy within popular-based parties. The challenge is, however, that such youths tend to develop a sense of purpose for their own sake. Politically engaged youth can therefore be viewed as a source of threat to the regime by those in power, as members may develop their own ambitions and advance views that may run counter to the regime. Many young people in Uganda perceive youth representation as tokenism meant to either appease them or co-opt them especially in the ruling party, the NRM. As we have shown in our qualitative analysis, youth leaders argue that their representation has not been translated into tangible aspects for improving their wellbeing as youth. Instead it has served more political and symbolic purposes – that the youth are represented to the highest levels. Those who see youth representation as tokenism point to how they can hardly trace the consequences of their actions and opinions in budget allocations and service delivery. The question of tokenism is thus down to how and when can the influence of the youth be traced in policy processes and budget allocations; and if it cannot be traced, what purpose or value does youth involvement have?

Although it might be difficult to point to policy processes where decisions are taken to accommodate the views of a representative youth structure, youth inclusion is likely to have made it easier for young politicians to enter the political stage. Through involvement in youth organizations; they have received training; they have fought verbally against many with opposing views; they have built a following; and they have had the opportunity to practice leadership by serving as elected and appointed leaders at various levels, including as cabinet ministers in government. Young politicians are also able to build a large network, consisting of people from all over the country and for some – also the whole world. The young have also shown they can be a force to reckon with through their support of opposition parties, such as both mobilizing for—but also securing electoral nominations—in parties such as the NUP and FDC. What sets Uganda apart regarding the use of youth structures to mobilize the young in totalitarian countries—such as China and the Soviet Union—is that after the introduction of multiparty elections, training is also accessed by those who are not affiliated to the party of the ruling government. Tokenism in regards youth works in a different way than that often experienced by women as a social category. Young politicians will rather soon—at least in the

Ugandan context—become old politicians, and opportunities and agencies will change within one's own lifespan.

An important lesson with this analysis of avenues for youth representation in Uganda is that the system is a consequence of several different decisions taken in the past. When the NRM came to power in 1986, the motives for developing youth structures were different from those that apply today. Today, the question is whether the government could decide to stop all types of group representation without suffering great consequences. There are reasons why an autocratic government would want to do just that. Some of the features of the system can be seen as rather challenging for the current regime after the decision of open for multiparty elections. After all, one can argue that much as Uganda voted to go multiparty in July 2005, following turnaround support from President Museveni who had long maintained that political parties are divisive, Museveni and his followers tolerated and campaigned for multiparty democracy to contract domestic and international opposition to his long stay in power. Furthermore, more power to the young and a new political generation is the mobilizing ideology of the main oppositional force, the NUP, led by Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu, known by his stage name Bobi Wine.

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Youth representation has emerged as an important political issue worldwide. In sub-Saharan Africa, Uganda can be considered as a pioneer in catering for the presence of youth in political decision-making bodies. Yet, while increased youth representation in democratic contexts are both encouraged and applauded, policies aimed at youth inclusion in autocratic regimes can be criticized as serving the purpose of co-optation and control. Through a combination of a historical review of formal political structures and qualitative interviews of youth leaders in Uganda, this working paper aims to take a bottom-up approach to understand the purpose of youth engagement in political structures consider as a tool for government control. The analysis reveals that even if young politicians clearly understand the weakness of the organizations and how they are manipulated by the structures, they also explain how this flawed system of representation provides several opportunities—both for mobilizing against and in favor of the current regime. The rather complex system of youth representation must thus be seen in light of historical developments. No rulers, even autocratic ones, cannot know all the consequences of their actions and decisions can be spontaneous reactions to events and immediate needs, not necessarily well-developed strategies.

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cmi@cmi.no
www.cmi.no

P.O. Box 6033,
N-5892 Bergen, Norway
Jekteviksbakken 31, Bergen