



CENTRE for BASIC RESEARCH

Civic Education and Political Tolerance in Uganda



The Project Coordinator, Dr. Frank Emmanuel Muhereza, while delivering his welcome remarks at the 2nd Monthly Expert Seminar on 20 September 2018.

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Introduction

Centre for Basic Research (CBR) is implementing a three year project titled: 'Strengthening Evidence-based Democratic Governance Agenda Setting and Engagement by Civil Society in Uganda', which among others entails a nation-wide Comprehensive Review of Civic Education in Uganda. The project is supported by Democracy Governance Facility (DGF). The Comprehensive Review of Civic Education study is intended to analyze not only the impact of the various civic education initiatives and interventions by state and non-state actors in different parts of the country over the years, but also to identify areas for strengthening civil society engagement in civic education.

CBR is also conducting Monthly Expert Seminars on critical Civic Education issues to generate public discussions around selected thematic areas ranging from social, political, religious, cultural and economic perspectives on civic education. The Monthly Expert Seminars on Civic Education issues in Uganda are considered as an important avenue for the convergence between theories and the practices of civic education in Uganda in general. The Seminars provide opportunities for civic education practitioners for engaging with emerging issues from on-going researches to understand not only the contribution of the civic education that has been undertaken so far by state and non-state actors, its approaches, delivery mechanisms and impact, but also the intellectual debates on the appropriateness of the civic knowledge generated in which are embodied the country's core values and principles.

The Seminars are intended as an interactive platform for researchers, academics, policy makers and the general public to continue with the debates on the practical necessities of how civic education can become a better vehicle for providing citizens with skills and tools with which to enter the market place of ideas to engage in a deliberative process in which ideals of the democracy we desire as a country are discussed openly and candidly to generate a minimum consensus aimed at enhancing tolerance of divergent political views and promoting peaceful coexistence.

Through these Seminars, different categories of citizens are provided an opportunity to think beyond their current political, occupational, intellectual and cultural dispositions by engaging in critical inquiry of broader issues of democracy, citizenship and national building. They begin to raise questions on the conceptualization of civic education as well as the discourse on the structural constraints in civic education pedagogy, its practical approaches and strategies as a way to understand the various ways our young democracy can become an avenue for strengthening citizenship. In other words, the Seminars are aimed at influencing the democratic governance processes by enhancing on one hand, the responsiveness of government to needs of citizens through dialogue, and on the other, building a critical mass within the citizenry that understands the importance to listening and appreciating each other's opinions and perspectives.

This policy brief presents key policy messages from the 2nd Monthly Expert Seminar on Civic Education organized by Centre for Basic Research which was held on 20 September 2018. The keynote speaker was Mr. Bernard Tabaire from African Centre of Media Excellence whose presentation was titled: 'Condemn Bobi Wine's beating minus roughing up Bebe Cool: Civic education and Political Tolerance in Uganda'. The Guest of Honour was Mr. Jonah J. Bakalikwira, Assistant Commissioner for National Guidance, Ministry of Information Communication Technology and National Guidance. The main discussants were Dr. Sebastian Rwengabo and Prof. Ndebesa Mwambutsya. The Expert Seminar was attended by participants from government, civil society, research organizations, higher institutions of learning, media, and the general public.

Issues Emerging from the Seminar Discussions

There was a general agreement that civic education had not helped to create an environment where political tolerance can be nurtured and thrive. This was partly the reason why, even among a section of the population, the youth, who have the same music taste and are often united by same genre of music, musical engagements in which politics takes centre-stage tend always to degenerate into violence because of a sense of frustration and helplessness resulting from the way elections are managed; the manner in which the three arms of government relate to each other with regards issues of rule of law and respect for fundamental freedoms and liberties.

The seminar noted how civic education had not adequately addressed the growing political intolerance in the country, by on one hand, the government and the political opposition, and on the other hand, by the general citizenry. The country appears to have fostered 'muscular politics' where those who can marshal the power of the state can get what they want for themselves, in a context of many who lack basics, partly due to soaring rates of unemployment. It was noted how electoral competition was only tangentially about considered articulation and exposition of societal issues and solutions, and more about out-manoeuvring one's political opponents. The zero-sum politics of 'winner-take-all', in a context complicated by a scarcity of opportunity for self-advancement of especially the youth, was at the lowest levels, translating into ordinary citizens becoming extremely polarized and intolerant of each other's political views, without any opportunity for exit to sanity.

In response to the increasing violence, the political landscape was becoming extremely militant, highly monetised and regrettably ethnicized – a situation to which the civic education that has been going on in the country has not had any form of response.

A discussant at the seminar wondered: could Uganda be headed to a political stagflation - a situation of political inflation characterized by rising political stakes concurrent with limited opportunities for absorbing, processing and turning these stakes into political deliverables (security, negotiations, peaceful elections and referenda, national dialogues and general political hope)? Or it is a combination of political immaturity and/or democratic reversals? Why has civic education not translated in civility, political tolerance, peaceful political processes and beneficial management of 'political commons'? Have we as a country, anyway, agreed on what kind of civic education we need to have that is good not just for a single political party, but the entire country?

The seminar heard that civic education that was taking place had failed to respond to the most basic civic dispositions of citizens' growing political intolerance in the country; and that: good civic education is good for political tolerance. Bad civic education is bad for political tolerance as it could lead to extreme intolerance. Some of the civic education that has been going on has radicalized the citizenry along polarized political positions. Having no civic education at all is as bad as having bad civic education because it potentially breeds all manner of extremism.

The public vandalism of electricity transmission lines, road signs, streetlights, littering of public spaces and the chaos and carnage on the roads and highways, and the indiscipline of road users are all examples of how Ugandans have lost basic civilities around which virtues of tolerance can be cultivated. As the focus of civic education has been on elections and human rights, the quality of democratic dividends has not improved, going by how poorly citizens regard shared public spaces. It was suggested that civic education needs to focus on not only expanding public spaces and resources but also changing the mind-sets of Ugandans about these public spaces, and how to protect them for the good of all.

What, however, was signified by tolerance politically or otherwise remained a subject of controversy during the seminar, including the extent to which tolerance was considered necessary all the time. It was intimated by a discussant during the seminar that it was not proper to always tolerate political and other forms of injustices simply for the sake of being considered as the most politically correct thing to do. All manner of injustice should not be tolerated much as political tolerance is a good virtue.

Key Policy Messages

The following policy issues were identified as critical for consideration by key stakeholders involved in civic education, who were interested in the subject of political tolerance:

1. There is a need for government to consider the re-introduction of civic education not only at all levels of education, but also to target those who are out of school and have completed school. Formal school should not be considered as the only avenue for delivery of civic education. It should be extended to the home, media, and civic gatherings, among others.
2. The civic education that should be promoted should be one that helps to bond, bridge and link social capital, bonding capital and bridging capital in order to leverage all manner of solidarities around diverse social institutions including school, family, churches and mosques.
3. Innovative mechanisms for delivery of civic education should be considered in light of an increase in population of young people and the current and future advancements in science and technology.
4. The focus of civic education should go beyond elections and human rights to include skilling the citizens about national virtues and values as well as the civic responsibilities to each other, and to the country.
5. There is a need to carefully identify how civic education can be used to nurture and inculcate national values with clear sanctions against arbitrary behavior.
6. Civic education should be re-structured and re-instated at all levels of the educational curricula in the country, as well as introduced in the non-formal education systems.



A section of the public that attended the 2nd Monthly Expert Seminar at CBR on 20 September 2018



Mr. Bernard Tabaire from African Centre of Media Excellence, delivering a keynote address at the 2nd Monthly Expert Seminar at CBR on 20 September 2018