

Museveni to make himself permanent dictator in Uganda

by Linda de Hoyos

With a bill presented to the Ugandan Parliament on Dec. 18, Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni took a dramatic step to entrench himself in power in a permanent military dictatorship. The action went unnoticed by the Western press. The bill in question is the Political Organizations Bill which, following the mandate of Article 270 of the 1995 Ugandan Constitution, regulates the registration and activities of political organizations, of which political parties are defined as a subset.

The bill has been condemned by opposition leaders Paul Ssemogerere, chairman of the Democratic Party of Uganda, and Cecilia Ogwal, chairman of the Interim Executive Committee of the Uganda People's Congress, and others. The bill carries forward the ban on the activities of the political parties, which was codified in Article 269 of the Constitution. Thus, although political parties have not been banned in Uganda, their activities have been banned, making a mockery of their so-called existence.

The bill is all the more dangerous because it is preparatory to a national referendum mandated by Articles 73 and 74 of the Constitution, and scheduled for the year 2000, by which the Ugandan population will be ordered to vote on whether they will accept a permanent ban on the very existence of political parties and embrace 100% the "movement system of government" without the threat of any political competition.

The previous U.S. Ambassador, Michael Southwick, was on record as being opposed to the referendum, but nothing has been heard from his successor, Ambassador Nancy Powell, nor from other Western quarters. Inside Uganda, however, the idea of the national referendum has come under severe attack. In a Christmas Day message, Emmanuel Cardinal Wamala declared that the referendum violates Ugandans' basic rights. In the first week of January, the Rt. Rev. Dr. Paul Kalanda, chairman of the Catholic Episcopal Conference, said that the Conference of Bishops "agrees with its spokesman, Cardinal Wamala, that it should not be held because it is against basic human rights. That is our position." Catholic priest Father Paul Semwogerere appealed to the Parliament to change the articles in the constitution which restrict the basic right of freedom of association. "This basic right is God-given and nobody has a right to deprive it from others," he said.

Anglican Archbishop Livingston Nkoyoyo has also stated, "There is no point in holding the referendum before peace and unity are achieved in Uganda." Sheikh A. Mukasa, speaking on behalf of the country's Muslim leadership, came out against the referendum, charging, "The government again wants to . . . deny the people their basic right to associate freely. It might come another time on religion, since they [religions] have also been blamed for dividing people."

Nevertheless, the Ugandan potentate stated that the referendum will proceed. "The referendum will be held. There is nobody who will stop the referendum. Those saying the referendum will not take place are wasting their time," Museveni said. He declared that the right to free political association is "not absolute. Most human rights are not divinely ordained and are subject to modification to fit the political and socio-economic conditions of the societies to which they are applied." Even so, under Article 74 of the Constitution, Museveni cannot hold the referendum on political parties unless there is a resolution passed by a majority of the Parliament for it; a resolution passed by a two-thirds majority of half of the Movement District Councils in the country; or, a petition signed by 10% of the voters from 214 directly elected constituencies.

The referendum is to decide whether political parties will be permitted to exist at all in Uganda. The Political Organizations Bill has been presented to Parliament for passage in order to ensure not only that the referendum is held, but that Museveni's "movement political system" will win that referendum, by destroying the political parties' capacity to campaign in their own defense.

Under a blanket of lies

"In order to understand what this bill does," explained opposition leader Cecilia Ogwal, "it is necessary to understand that Uganda is right now under a military dictatorship, and Museveni is now moving to make this permanent. When he came to power in 1986, by the power of the gun, he banned the activities of political parties as an 'administrative measure.'" Museveni's National Resistance Movement (NRM) was installed as the government, and all Ugandans were declared to be members of the NRM system.

Then in 1994-95, Museveni organized a Constituent Assembly, dominated by his own NRM, to write a constitution. The 1995 Constitution cited by Museveni as his authority for holding the referendum is a contradiction in itself. Although Articles 29(e) and 43(2c) guarantee the right of political association, and Article 72 guarantees the right to form political parties, these rights are essentially abrogated by Articles 69, which defines the government as the "movement political system," and more precisely, by Article 269. There, in subsection (e), the Constitution states that "*political parties should not hold open branches, hold public rallies, or carry out any other activity that may interfere with the movement system.*"

This wording is carried over directly to Article 32 of the Political Organizations Bill, which in subsection 2(a) states that the minister for Presidential and parliamentary elections and referenda “may prescribe such conditions in relation to the opening of branch offices, holding of delegates’ conferences, public rallies, and any other activities of political organizations as may be reasonably necessary to prevent interference with the operation of the movement political system when that system is in existence in Uganda.”

The trick embedded in the Constitution and again in the Political Organizations Bill is that Museveni’s NRM, which is a political entity run at the top by his cronies, is not characterized or treated as a political party. Museveni’s NRM is *the government*, with all the powers of the government—most emphatically military power—at its disposal to stay in power. Hence, Uganda’s religious leaders and democratic leaders are rejecting the fraud of a “referendum.”

Other features of the bill are designed to place the political parties in a legally noxious environment with implicit threats to any organization or opposing political leader. As pointed out in a paper issued by the Democratic Party’s Ssemogerere:

- The bill carries forward Article 269(d) of the Constitution, which prohibits political parties from “sponsoring or offering a platform to or in any way campaigning for or against a candidate for any public office.” Article 24(a) of the bill states that “a) individual merit should be the basis of election to any political office and no political organization and no person on behalf of a political organization shall sponsor or offer platform to or in any way campaign for or against a candidate in any Presidential or parliamentary election or any other election organized by the Commission;

- “b) no person shall use any symbol, slogan, color or name identifying any political organization for the purpose of campaigning for or against any candidate in a Presidential or parliamentary election or any other election organized by the Commission.”

- Article 22 of the bill stipulates that “no two or more political organizations shall hold a meeting in the same place and time.” This is stipulated in order to prevent by legalized force of arms the coming together of any effective opposition coalition against the “movement political system.”

- Although the Constitution gives the right of political association, the minister may summarily prohibit any political organization and ban it, as stated in Article 25(1): “Where a political organization contravenes any of the provisions of this Act, the minister may, by order published in the *Gazette*, after consultation with the [Electoral] Commission, declare the political organization to be a prohibited organization.” It has the nominal right of appeal, but given its banning, no means to do so. Furthermore, the “provisions of this Act” include full disclosure of expenditure, donations, names and addresses of founding members, and other regulating (and terrorizing) measures, by which a party can be prohibited on the basis of an infraction on a technicality.

It is perhaps an irony as to the actual content of the bill and Museveni’s regime that it was presented on Dec. 18 by Minister of State for Defense Steven Kavuma, although he was mistitled on the bill’s front page as “Minister responsible for Justice and Constitutional Affairs.”

Is there a way out?

Perhaps the most dangerous aspect of the bill and the referendum Museveni is insisting upon, opposition leaders agree, is that it closes off all avenues for open and fair debate; it closes off the channels for a peaceful transition to power in Uganda. There is no question that Museveni is becoming increasingly—and understandably—unpopular at home. While he is spending millions deploying the Ugandan Popular Defense Forces outside the country in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Angola, insurgencies inside Uganda have forced the internal displacement of 700,000 people. Cholera epidemics are now reported in camps in northern Uganda, where people are herded without food, clean water, sanitation, or medical services. Epidemics are also breaking out in eastern Uganda, and even the central Rakai region faces famine this year. Further, the “high crimes and misdemeanors” carried out by the Museveni “movement system” in government continues to shock the nation, as scandal after scandal hits the press (see “Paris Club Bankrolls Central African Wars,” *EIR*, Jan. 8, 1999).

If Uganda is not to descend into a holocaust of violence and chaos over the next months or years, then the political parties must be enabled to survive. For this to occur, says Cecilia Ogwal, the first step is that “Museveni must be forced to give up the falsehood that his National Resistance Movement is not a political party. There must be a separation of his party and the state. Museveni is able to use the entire state treasury, state agencies, including the military, to entrench himself in power. The political parties are being forced to compete against the state. The playing field must be leveled.

“Second, the ban on political parties’ activities must be lifted. We must enable the citizenry to operate in accordance with Articles 29 and 43 of the Constitution, which guarantee them their rights.

“Third, the parties should stand shoulder to shoulder. There must be serious dialogue among all the parties, including the National Resistance Movement, on how we should move forward to the 2001 general elections on a true democratic footing. From that dialogue there must evolve a spirit of cooperation, of give-and-take, of reconciliation, of tolerance, which will enable us to arrive at a code of conduct to regulate the interplay between the parties and for full democratization. That means we all play by the rules that we have all agreed upon.”

It is doubtful whether solutions can be taken up, if there is no support from the “donor countries” for Uganda’s democratization. But so far, Museveni’s masters have protected him well.