

Ugandan voters deliver warning to Museveni

by Linda de Hoyos

Opponents of military dictator Yoweri Museveni scored a significant victory in local elections held in Uganda in March. Members of the opposition Ugandan People's Congress and the Democratic Party won local offices in key districts in both northern and southern Uganda.

In the capital city of Kampala, in the area of Buganda, once considered a Museveni stronghold, candidates backed politically by the opposition Democratic Party of Paul Ssemogerere took four out of five sub-county district races.

The election victories are a clear signal that the African "new leadership" being put forward by the British Ministry of International Development, along with its supporters in the United States such as Assistant Secretary of State for Africa Susan Rice and Rep. Donald Payne (D-N.J.), is not being readily welcomed by the citizenry of Africa. Despite Western propaganda to the effect that the Uganda of Yoweri Museveni is the "model" for Africa, obviously Uganda's citizens do not think so—as they hand Museveni electoral defeats, despite the fact that the single-party elections do not meet the U.S. Project Democracy standards of "free and fair."

A stark contrast

The complete lack of international attention to the civil opposition movement in Uganda, stands in stark contrast to the focus on Kenya, for instance, where the opposition—often calling for violence—has received nearly universal support in the pages of the Western press.

The gains made by that political opposition in Uganda which has rejected violence as the method by which to overturn Museveni, also points to the gains to be had through a civil process that educates the voter—rather than terrorizing him.

In Uganda, under Museveni's National Resistance Movement (NRM), the opposition parties run candidates under extreme duress—under a cloak of international silence, without funds or means to raise them. Although the Ugandan Constitution guarantees civil freedoms, all political activity by political parties other than Museveni's military-backed National Resistance Movement is forbidden by civil law. Contestants for elections must run on the basis of "individual merit" only. All local offices are controlled through

the "councils" of the NRM.

In elections this year, opponents of the Museveni regime were forced to enter local elections as members of the NRM, and were designated as "multipartyists." But throughout the country, the NRM apparatus loyal to Museveni used its powers as Resident District Commissioners, District Intelligence Security Officers, Sub-County Intelligence Officers, and other members of the Local Councils to harass and intimidate "multipartyist" candidates and their supporters.

Museveni hopes to lock this system of terror and intimidation into place with a referendum in the year 2000 which calls for the complete abolition of all political parties, and for which the political parties will not be able to campaign in order to defend their very existence!

Ogwal supporters beaten in Lira

In one case in point, Member of Parliament for Lira Municipality Mrs. Cecilia Ogwal of the Ugandan People's Congress was forced to spend the night in jail on March 13 during the mayoralty race in Lira, when 24 of her supporters were summarily arrested, thrown into jail, and then beaten by men from the national Internal Security Organization. The youth were arrested for allegedly creating "chaos" in the city. Mrs. Ogwal said she spent the night in the station to ensure that none of her supporters were taken away and either "disappeared" or murdered. Mrs. Ogwal said that there were gunshots all over Lira town on the night of arrests, fired by men from a car. One Ugandan observer noted that in the north, where Museveni's war against the rebel Lord's Resistance Army has been permitted to drag on for 12 years, there is such general insecurity that violence against political candidates can be perpetrated with impunity.

Ogwal has also filed a suit against Deputy Resident District Commissioner Musa Ecwero for threatening her life in his office on March 13. "It will not be long before I finish with you," said Ecwero to Ogwal, as he was physically restrained by others from physically assaulting Ogwal.

Nevertheless, despite the harassment and intimidation, Ogwal's multi-party mayoral candidate Jaspar Omodo Anyoru won the elections, with a hefty 65% of the vote.

In Kampala, the multipartyists won the majority of seats on most of the Local Council levels. In Mpigi, also in the south, the multipartyists took 20 out of 32 sub-counties in the race for Local Council III (part of the NRM national structure). Multipartyists also did well in Masaka and Bushenyi, the latter being Museveni's home district. In Lira and Gulu, in the north, the multipartyists had a very strong showing. Statistics for rural areas are not yet finalized.

One reason given for the voter rejection of the Museveni regime was Museveni's "militarist approach, which has taken a high toll of the country's resources that would have been used to help people in the social sector, for example, education, health, and road construction," as one Ugandan analyst in Kampala put it.