
Interview: Michael Mabikke

The U.S. must support democracy in Uganda

Mr. Mabikke is the general secretary of the Young Democrats, the youth wing of the Democratic Party of Uganda. He was interviewed by Linda de Hoyos in Washington, D.C., on Oct. 22.

EIR: How long have you been the secretary general of the Uganda Young Democrats, and what are its purposes and aims?

Mabikke: I have been in this post for three years; I am one of the founding members of this organization, and have held this post since its inception.

The Uganda Young Democrats are a national network of Young Ugandans who promote the principles of democracy and fundamental human rights. They are opposed to the ruling National Resistance Movement in many fundamental ways. They believe that Uganda should be governed differently. The Uganda Young Democrats believe in the principles of pluralistic democracy, which is opposed to the ruling government, which is a disguised dictatorship.

EIR: The Young Democrats involves people from the age of 20 to about what age?

Mabikke: The Young Democrats are comprised of the age group mainly from about 18 years, to as old as 40. Membership is varied. We boast of a network of 50,000 members all over the country comprised of all walks of life, all categories of Ugandans. We have lawyers amongst us, we have students, we have market vendors, taxi drivers, we have farmers, we have youth from all walks of life.

EIR: Are you associated with any political party?

Mabikke: The Young Democrats are a youth affiliate of the Democratic Party of Uganda; we are very proud to enjoy a parent-son relationship, because the Democratic Party is the mother party. We especially uphold the principles and policies of the Democratic Party of Uganda.

EIR: And the Democratic Party is a national party, is that correct?

Mabikke: Yes, it was founded in 1954, to champion democracy under the banner of truth and justice.

EIR: What policies would the Young Democrats want to see changed inside Uganda, from those policies of the current

government of Yoweri Museveni?

Mabikke: One, we believe that Ugandans deserve better than they have experienced under the ruling National Resistance Movement. Today, there is in place a closed system, a dictatorship really, being perpetrated by greedy and selfish elements in the Movement.

We also believe that the state should conduct social welfare programs — people-centered programs, like investment in people, investment in houses, investment in education, investment in clean water and sanitation, investment in infrastructure. But, unfortunately, you realize that nearly 44% of Uganda's budget is spent on acquisition of military hardware. We believe that there must be a different prioritization, which the leaders of the country apparently do not see. They have all their priorities wrong. There is rampant corruption, of course. A lot of revenues which should have gone to uplift the living standards of the people, instead end up in the pockets of a very few individuals.

We see a lot of belligerence on the part of the government; we are not keeping a peaceful neighborhood. You realize that Uganda is involved in all the conflicts with its neighbors. In Kenya, we have had problems; we have had problems with Sudan, they are ongoing; now we have problems in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where Uganda is accused of aggression. We believe that the state should pursue a more peaceful and more neighborly policy.

We fundamentally believe that the actual aim of any government should be the improvement of the people's social and economic welfare. We should be talking of that agenda and nothing else.

EIR: The founding of Young Democrats: Do you see a difference between the younger generation that is coming up in Uganda and its elders?

Mabikke: Yes, of course, there is a very big difference. One, we were born at a different time; the experiences and approaches are different. You know young people are normally energetic; young people are normally result-oriented, and they would like to see things done a little quicker. There is a difference in approach, and that is why at times, people refer to us as radicals, because we say things the older generation may not say, and we do things a little faster than they do.

EIR: Your efforts to organize this year have met with some resistance from the Yoweri Museveni government. In May, you had a major meeting in Kampala with the Africa Development Foundation, the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung; could you tell us what has happened with your efforts to organize?

Mabikke: First of all, you should keep in the background that, right from its inception, the Young Democrats were met with a very hostile reception from state functionaries. The state has built a political machinery which is quite repressive, and they are all out to gag alternative opinions. This machinery is comprised of Local Council chairmen of the National

Resistance Movement, Resident District Commissioners, the judiciary agents, and ministers. Right from 1995, many Young Democrats have been persecuted, and many have been arbitrarily arrested and are languishing up to this day in prisons all over the country.

The Young Democrats are engaged in a new phase of democratic organizing in the country. This has not gone down well with the status quo; they are all out to stop it. In May, we started a series of workshops around the theme of Democracy and Human Rights. These were civic activities to educate Ugandans on their human rights and democratic principles and civic responsibilities. These workshops were organized for the four regions of the country — north, east, central, and west. But unfortunately, we only held one successful one, and that was in Gulu in the north. All the others, we were halted by government functionaries — these were Resident District Commissioners and police — on the pretext that they had received orders from *above* to disperse the meeting. We have protested these actions, which are a violation of our human right to peaceful assembly.

The Young Democrats are not armed; they believe in non-violence, but it is unfortunate that the *state* is using violent means to quell peaceful assemblies and civic activities.

EIR: They came into the meetings and physically dispersed them?

Mabikke: Yes, they beat people. In the meeting in Tororo, the police came in armed with batons, with AK-47s, with live ammunition, all out to kill. So many participants sustained injuries from police beatings. In Kozi, the police did not come with batons, they came with riot gear like tear gas and live ammunition. Our investigations later showed that they had orders to shoot on sight some of the participants, so they can be used as examples. If you are wondering why Museveni has failed to quell armed rebellion in the north, then see how his state is turning guns on innocent and peaceful civilians assembled to deliberate on the future of their country.

EIR: Is it true that activities of the political parties are banned in Uganda?

Mabikke: Yes, Article 269 of the new Ugandan constitution proscribes political activities. Political parties, according to this Article, are only supposed to exist in name, but not in function. Parties are prohibited from holding party delegate conferences, so they cannot give a mandate to their leaders. It prohibits parties from holding public rallies. Article 269 prohibits parties from sponsoring candidates, which means the parties cannot recruit, and neither can they front candidates. The parties are not allowed to open up branches, which means that the parties are prohibited from recruiting membership and recruiting upcoming leaders. For our part, we think this Article is obnoxious, and we are using all means to ensure that it is revoked.

EIR: There is a national referendum on the existence of political parties upcoming?

Mabikke: Yes, the new Ugandan Constitution provides that three years after the sitting Parliament, Ugandans will hold a referendum to determine which political system they wish to adopt. Of course, the Movement system, which they call no party, but which we think of as an exceptive system, was in the Constitution, and Ugandans therefore are supposed to choose between the Movement and the political parties.

We, in opposition, are completely opposed to the referendum, and we have already made our stand clear that we are not going to participate, we are going to boycott the referendum, on the following grounds: The referendum will be an infringement on human rights, because you cannot cast a ballot on a basic right. On the other hand, the ground is already unlevelled, because the Movement campaign already has its structures intact, and they already have huge resources — which is public money — at their disposal. And, of course, with all this intimidation, the process is being rigged from the start. We believe that the referendum is useless, unnecessary, and a wasteful process.

When Mr. Museveni came in [in 1986], he told us that he was a transition, a temporary arrangement. But, unfortunately, by political developments, like the referendum, like the Presidential elections held three years ago, all indicate that he seeks to make the National Resistance Movement a permanent feature on Uganda's political landscape. We in the opposition have already made a stand not to participate in the forthcoming referendum, and we are calling upon the international community to support this stand and to apply pressure on the National Resistance Movement not to proceed with this process, because it is an infringement on the rights of the individual.

EIR: What has been the result of this crackdown on democratic parties in the country?

Mabikke: One thing is for sure: Those who are fighting for a democratic process are gaining ground every day in Uganda. Going by the previous local council elections, there were a substantial number of leaders who professed to be democrats and who sailed through. The government is now trying to hold the growing strength of the democratic forces in the country, but we think that this is a waste of time. We are determined to continue with the eye-opening role, the more the local population realizes the truth, the more they turn away from the Movement, and join the democratic forces. So, despite these problems, we think there is positive motion, because it is earning us support, because everybody is asking, "Why can't these fellows be given a chance to say something? Why can't we hear an alternative view?" The repression acts to enable the democratic forces to open the eyes of those who could not see, and in a way assisting us to prepare this phase of democracy.

EIR: Is it also the case that insurgencies are on the increase in Uganda—the people who have decided to take up arms against the government?

Mabikke: Of course, we are worried, the number of rebel groups mushrooming in the country is much greater than the number of democratic forces. This is because all avenues to resolve fundamental differences and problems in the country peacefully and amicably have been closed. There is no room for reconciliation. Museveni talks about “*crushing*” the opposition, “*crushing* the rebels,” and we are afraid that there are many more Ugandans right now who are planning to pick up arms as the most practical way of doing away with this repressive regime. But we are encouraging the non-violent democratic struggle.

EIR: If you could, would the Democratic Party and the Young Democrats open up negotiations with these insurgencies?

Mabikke: Yes. You remember in 1996, the Young Democrats were involved in a Presidential campaign, a fight for human rights and democracy, and a campaign for reconciliation. Our candidate, who was Dr. Paul Ssemogerere, preached reconciliation, and he said that if he had been elected President, he would have invited rebel leader Joseph Kony to the table to negotiate a peaceful way out of the rebellion. So far, the government and the UPDF [Ugandan Popular Defense Forces] have tried for 12 years to put down a rebellion [in northern Uganda]. Military means have failed, and for us, it is only peaceful and meaningful dialogue which can sort out these problems. We further believe that to prevent the rebel groups from emerging every day, the only way is to open up, to have a valid alternative and as many political views as possible.

EIR: Shifting to the region for a moment, there were strong voices raised in the Ugandan Parliament against the deployment of Ugandan troops to the Congo. How do you think the Ugandan people view this deployment of troops to war in Congo?

Mabikke: Ugandans are concerned about the deteriorating situation in the region, not only in Congo, but with our neighbor. Our country and our President is accused of aggression, and Ugandans are worried that a lot of money—a lot of money—is being spent in acquiring sophisticated ammunition and military weapons, at the expense of uplifting the standard of living of Ugandans.

About 68% of all Ugandans live in *absolute poverty*. Most people have no medicine; most of the roads have been run down; many students study not in schools, but under trees, and many people cannot afford the fees to send their children to school; many people do without salt, or sugar, and many do without a meal or so a day. Ugandans are concerned that not only is it wrong to antagonize our neighbors, but it is also

costly in social and economic terms to the country.

EIR: What would you want to tell Americans specifically about your country?

Mabikke: Our major concern is the hypocrisy, the hypocrisy of the Western world—especially from the United States and the United Kingdom. These are supposed to be the defenders of human rights and democracy all over the world, but unfortunately, they keep a blind eye to some of the most undemocratic excesses in the world, especially in Africa, at the expense of their national interests. The urge for Americans and British to promote democracy in Africa is superseded by their own interests, and we are completely baffled by the hypocrisy.

Our call right now to countries, is to support the emergence of democratic institutions, because we think that they will not gain by consolidating a one-man dictatorship. Once they support the emergence of democratic institutions, once they support democratic forces all over the world, especially in Africa, we believe that then they will be ensuring a better future, not only for the people of Uganda or Africa, but for the whole world.

EIR: Do you have any specific message for the United States government?

Mabikke: Our call to the U.S. government should be that despite the fact that they enjoy diplomatic relations with the government in Uganda, the United States should signal that it supports the democratic process. Secondly, having seen the problem of Uganda and the danger we are sliding into, they should come in and make a stand on the forthcoming referendum, because it is an infringement on the rights of people. And, because they are the world’s policeman on democracy, it is imperative for the U.S. government to point to out to Museveni very clearly the dangers of going ahead with this referendum.

EIR: What dangers are you referring to exactly?

Mabikke: What we are seeing in Uganda in the coming years is the consolidation of an individual, the consolidation of a dictatorship, the entrenchment of very oppressive one-party machinery. For us, the danger is this: The future cannot be certain with this system, because in the event that Museveni, for instance, died, I think the country would sink into chaos. Museveni is now the only individual in the country. If we could promote democratic institutions, the emergence of alternative power centers, then we can look to a peaceful power transfer. If you consolidate a system like Museveni’s, which is a dictatorship, then at best, all you are looking forward to is a holocaust, is carnage, and total destruction. We are of the view that the time is now for those who say they love peace and democracy to support the emergence of alternative power centers in Uganda, by putting pressure on Museveni to ensure that he opens up to other political players.