

MNALIMU

Why children must be shielded from politics

Guarding young souls

As Ugandans go to the polls tomorrow, children of different ages will be watching events as they unfold countrywide. Like any other election, some of the scenes may be unpleasant and not suitable for the consumption of children, writes **IBRAHIM RUHWEZA**

In many election campaigns across Uganda, children are not always innocent bystanders. They see, hear and imitate what adults do and say, despite their young age. "When they see rival candidates abusing each other, they copy this and eventually project them on their friends – either today or in future," Joel Ogwang, a teacher and counselling psychologist in Entebbe Municipality, says.

He calls on politicians to tone down the harsh language that they use during campaigns because children, including their own are watching and are likely to copy.

"Some politicians use sectarian language, which sows seeds of division right from an early age. The politicians' language has conditioned some children to believe that people from a certain tribe or region stole their birthright and future, which is not the case. They, therefore, grow up hating people from a particular tribe or stereotyping them, just because they had a politicians say it. We need to change this," Ogwang says.

Some politicians take it even a notch higher; they register children who are below the age of 18 to vote.

Dickson Tumuramye, a marriage counsellor, also agrees with Ogwang. He says when parents speak with contempt, fear or hostility about leaders or fellow citizens, children believe the message, that disagreement must be aggressive and that power is something to fight over at all costs.

Tumuramye cautions parents to mind what they say around children, adding that they [parents] play a crucial role in preventing such ideas from being ingrained in the minds of children (see full article on page

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He cautions parents to be mindful of what their children watch on TV and social media.

He urges parents to be careful as they build the civic competence of their children – grooming them to understand that politics comes with responsibilities.

Because of the harsh political language that is vented by politicians through the media, some parents sieve the media content that their children consume. They also ensure that the children do not come near rallies, where politicians utter obscene words.

Joyce Nyakecho, a mother of four and a teacher at Malera Kabarwa Seed Secondary School in Bukedea district, says political

rallies attract people from all walks of life, including drug addicts and criminals, who can easily influence children.

To prevent this, she keeps her children away from rallies and assigns them tasks at home to keep them occupied.

"Children are innocent. They can easily follow whoever impresses them, and when crowds turn violent, they are the first to get injured," she said.

Nyakecho only allows her children to listen to political talk shows on the radio, but restricts them from attending rallies physically.

Ritah Lubulwa, a mother of two and a consultant at Gauff Engineering, says she has discouraged her children from engaging in politics from an early age due to its chaotic nature.

"Local politics has become hostile. If someone does not agree with your ideas, they are hated or even beaten," she said.

Lubulwa believes political leadership is a serious responsibility and that children should be raised with strong values, not exposed



Mothers cheer their candidate at a rally campaigns in Wakiso district as their children look on. Child rights activists say exposing children to politically charged environments is dangerous



A child holding flags at a campaign rally in Mbale city recently

SKILLING

Mukono students get training in AI

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USE ELECTION TIME TO TEACH LEADERSHIP

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to politics that is characterised by hypocrisy or violence.

"Children should grow up properly shaped with politics of good morals. Our politics is harsh and rough," she says, pointing to frequent clashes even in Parliament, which is supposed to be a House of honour.

CHILDREN AT RALLIES

In Uganda's politics, children are used for political mobilisation. On social media, videos of children being made to utter divisive political words under the directorship of adults in the background are common on WhatsApp, TikTok and Facebook. Since the start of presidential campaigns on November 29, children have increasingly appeared at political events, often used to swell crowds and amplify enthusiasm.

This practice has drawn sharp condemnation from bodies such as the Uganda Human Rights Commission (UHRC) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF),

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which warn that involving children in partisan politics is inappropriate and harmful to their well-being.

Crispin Kaheru, a commissioner at the UHRC, says children are frequently seen in campaign processions wearing party-branded T-shirts and colours, an experience that can negatively affect their mental and emotional health.

Speaking at a joint press conference at the UHRC headquarters in Kampala recently, Kaheru expressed concern over the continued use of children at political events.

"We have seen footage of children on cars campaigning for one of the candidates in Rubanda district," he says.

Kaheru noted that at rallies, children are often made to sing praises for specific candidates, despite being vulnerable members of society.

"Campaigns and politics are very risky environments for children, which is why it is important to keep them out," Kaheru emphasises.

Lamex Omara Apitta, who represented UHRC chairperson Mariam Wangadya, echoed the warning.

"Elections are a cornerstone of democracy, but they should never come at the expense of the safety and well-being of Uganda's children," he added.

Apitta says political parties should commit to child-friendly policies that promote children's rights, rather than involving them in political processes they barely understand.

Damon Wamara, the executive director of the



PHOTO BY GEOFFREY OJORE

A child listens attentively as the Chief of Defence Forces, Gen Sam Okiring speaks to the community of Odwarat sub-county in Ngara district. Children usually follow the example set by leaders in a community

Uganda Child Rights and NGO Network, warns that during elections, some campaigns morph into violent incidents and children often end up being caught in the crossfire.

"In some cases, children are injured, leaving them with long-term trauma that affects their physical and emotional development," Wamara says.

He also points out that



Kaheru

some children are ferried to rallies and later abandoned.

"After rallies, some children end up lost and stranded, no one bothers to take them back home," he notes.

Apitta observes that nearly half of Uganda's population is young. If children are not protected from traumatic experiences early in life, he

explains, they may never grow into productive citizens.

Dr Robin Nandy, the head of the UNICEF office in Uganda, says Uganda's young population has immense potential if raised in a safe and calm environment.

To secure their future, he stresses that priority must be given to education and health, enabling children to grow with a clear understanding of their rights and responsibilities.

She also cautioned media houses against

Pauline Nansamba Mutumba, director of complaints, investigations, and legal

services at the UHRC, says some children are coerced into participating in political campaigns without understanding the risks involved.

Jeff Wadulo, a team lead at Jenga Afrika, a human rights non-government organisation, says children should be allowed to grow gradually, to think rationally and understand multiple perspectives before taking a political decision as they grow.

"Using children in politics amounts to brainwashing and exposes them to danger in the future," Wadulo says.

LEARNING FROM ADULTS?

Filbert Baguma, the General secretary of Uganda National Teachers' Union, describes the fierce, monetised prefects' campaigns in schools as a sad state of affairs.

"Schools are supposed to be safe havens for learners to thrive holistically. Having leadership campaigns characterised by bribing voters is a replica of what is happening in national politics, which is very unfortunate," he says.

Baguma puts the blame squarely on schools, saying their actions in allowing such campaigns defeats the purpose of education.

"Commercialised leadership campaigns in school means administrators have become weak. Learners need to be guided on what's right and wrong. Campaigns can be held without using money. The habit is trickling down even to nursery schools. Parents buy their candidates children sweets, sodas, chocolates, among other goodies to bribe voters," Baguma says.

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