



CENTRE FOR ELECTORAL JUSTICE & RESEARCH

COVID-19 AND THE LIKELY DISRUPTION OF THE 2021 GENERAL ELECTION.

The World Health Organization has declared the global spread of the notorious Coronavirus or Covid-19 as a global pandemic.

The virus which was first identified in Wuhan, Hubei province, China has also spread to other parts of the world like a wild bush fire, with Europe being declared the new epicenter of Covid-19. This global pandemic has seen unprecedented global disruption of how people live their lives and interact with each other. Social distancing has been adopted as a precautionary measure, thus several events or activities have been cancelled or suspended indefinitely. Major cities across Europe are in a lockdown, public spaces have been abandoned especially in Italy, Spain & France.

Self-isolating or quarantining has been adopted at an individual level by those who have come in close contact with persons who have tested positive of coronavirus or were he or she has tested positive with the virus.

Uganda has no confirmed positive case of Covid-19 as of yet, but its neighboring East African countries of Kenya and Rwanda have not been lucky having respectively registered confirmed cases of Covid-19. With confirmed cases in its neighborhood it's no longer business as usual for Ugandan Authorities. In response Kenya's Cabinet Secretary for Health announced a string of measures, which include but is not limited to banning public rallies, that have become so common, as the political season takes shape in Kenya, especially with the Building Bridges Initiative (BBI) regional public rallies across the country.

Uganda is geared for yet another general election, which is upon us in just months, as the global pandemic (Covid-19) spreads. Its perhaps against this backdrop that a concerned citizen, a one Mgugu Abbey has dragged the country's electoral commission and the Attorney General to the High Court of Uganda.

A copy of the unverified notice of motion, that is circulating on social media, the applicant Mgugu Abbey prays for orders & declarations, that;

- a) That a state of health emergency is declared in Uganda due to the threat of coronavirus.
- b) Suspension and cancellation of the 2021 General Elections, until 2nd respondent (Government of Uganda) gains control over threatening disaster or danger of coronavirus, inter alia.

It's important to note there is no Covid-19 cases registered in Uganda, at least at the time of writing this article, therefore there is no state of health emergency or crisis in the country that justifies a declaration of national emergency.

However, experience from Covid-19 affected countries has shown an unprecedented disruption of social life. If Uganda registers covid-19 cases, the ongoing electoral processes will be affected. In the run-up to the general elections, political parties will conduct their internal (primary) elections, to elect or select flagbearers at all levels of political leadership.

Thus of keen interest to many observers and political commentators will be the NRM, the ruling party which prides itself as a mass party, and the biggest political party. Its currently registering new members and updating its register countrywide in preparation for the party primary elections. If you may recall the NRM party, amended its regulations on voting by a secret ballot to lining up behind a candidate.

This mode of exercising one's right to vote by people lining up against each other in close contact, creates possible exposure to the novel coronavirus, especially were some of the infected persons are among those lining up to vote their preferred candidate

Covid-19 which is an infectious condition which can spread, directly or indirectly from one person (infected) to another person (uninfected) is caused by the novel coronavirus. Coronavirus spreads through the eye, nose and mouth, via droplets produced on coughing or sneezing, close contact with the infected person and contact with contaminated surfaces and objects or items of personal use.

Although voting in the general elections is by secret ballot, there is a high possibility of a healthy voter coming in contact with a contaminated surface or object, such as the ballot paper, the pen used in ticking the ballot, the voting booth in our case the "plastic basin", the ballot box etc., were the said items have been contaminated by an infected person among the voters or electoral officials.

The virus while on a surface or objects has a life span ranging between 8-10 hours, this means that many people who come to vote will get exposed to the virus for the entire duration of the voting process, unless the contaminated surfaces and items are disinfected.

Public campaigns or rallies, which attract large crowds are another redzone that can facilitate the easy spread of the virus.

It's likely that we will have some confirmed cases, though it may not descend into a national crisis or emergency.

The electoral commission must enhance its capacity to be able to deliver not only a free, fair and genuine election but also a coronavirus free or safe polling environment for citizens to exercise their electoral rights.

Thus a credible contingency plan should be in offing and ready to be actualized, where need arises and give assurances to the public so as to avoid voter apathy due to health concerns.

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