

Debating the 2016 election

Title: Elections in a Hybrid Regime: Revisiting the 2011 Uganda Polls
Editors: Sabiti Makara, Sandrine Perrot, et al.
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Reviewer: Joseph Kasule

As the country comes close to the next election cycle in 2016, the debate on the nature and outcome of the election will dominate public discourse.

There will be effort to romanticise the opposition and paint it as an imperilled minority that should be sympathised with. There will be accusations against the Government as being biased and covertly manufacturing victory.

There is need to properly balance this debate and learn from either side. Dr Sabiti Makara's (ed. et al) *Elections in a Hybrid Regime: Revisiting the 2011 Election* has opened the debate on the 2016 election starting with a review of the previous elections, with specific reference to 2011.

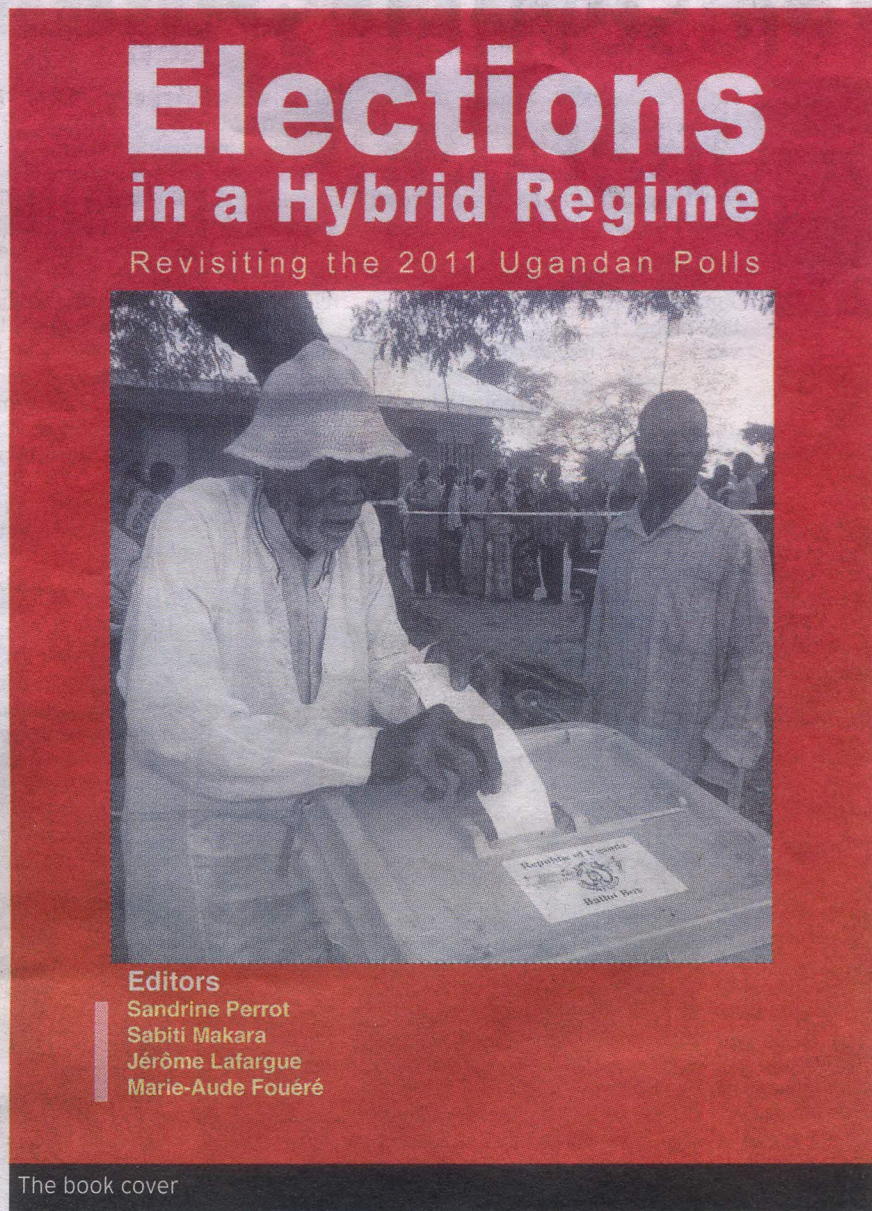
Although the book is raising a great deal of interest among politicians and academics, the breadth and conclusions of the debate does not stand thorough contextual and intellectual scrutiny.

As a collection of several articles from different academics working on Uganda's democratic journey, the book discusses several issues albeit in less sanguine ways. Issues range from the nature of campaigns, the status of multiparty politics in Uganda, the role of the media, the electoral commission, the Government and opposition strongholds and the general security of the country.

As is rightly pointed out, perhaps the country is yet to outgrow the individual merit mindset and so voters would vote for NRM's Museveni in the presidential race but vote for an opposition candidate in the parliamentary and other local elections.

Uganda's democracy is yet to appreciate ideological reasoning for the historical weaknesses are still abundant. Perhaps this is not a weakness of the NRM, but a weakness with roots in our political history, whose democratic journey is still in its infancy.

The book argues that the 2011 election showed that it was difficult to defeat incumbent candidates because of the privileges available at their disposal as presidents – including resources, programmes, the security establishment etc. Acknowledging the fact that 2011 rejuvenated the NRM party with its presidential candidate registering a rise in the trend of NRM presidential victories over the last elections, the book then contradicts itself by arguing that President Museveni did not win the election because he was the most likeable candidate, but because the opposition politicians failed to show a plausible alternative. Although it



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The book cover

is obvious that the opposition is so obsessed with removing President Museveni as opposed to presenting a better developmental programme for the country, it is difficult to tell how the authors arrived at the conclusion that the electorate is hungry for an absent alternative.

One wonders why the authors failed to appreciate the immense political maturity of the NRM politicians and their strong organisational and mobilisation capabilities - showed in reclaiming Teso, Kampala/Buganda, northern Uganda, hitherto opposition strongholds.

As a creative and all embracing party, the National Resistance Movement ably incorporated musicians and comedians into their fold to help in electioneering and campaigning, something that the opposition could not even countenance.

It is shocking that the authors would discuss militarisation of the election without consideration of the regional security issues such as terrorism. Certainly, any terrorist organisation

would love to exploit lapses in security as people are immersed in the frenzy of electioneering. One of major shortfalls of academics has often been reading Uganda through USA, Great Britain, Germany or France and then concluding that Uganda is a hybrid regime – oscillating between authoritarianism and democratic freedoms.

This forgets that Uganda is a young democracy, faced with a different context – especially anarchist opposition politicians, tribal and regional parochialism, where a suave and vigilant government ought to handle the election process rather delicately.

Despite these shortcomings, however, the book raises a great deal of good points. Although subtly mentioned, infighting within political parties derails our general democracy; a failed civic education process and rampant corruption continue to inflict a heavy toll on the national consciousness, constraining our overall achievement as a community.

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