

Do we need women MPs?

BY JOSHUA KATO

Out of the 375 MPs, 112 are district women representatives. Members of the Uganda Law Society want all the 112 women MPs and 10 army MPs done away with in the next Parliament. If this passes, it would reduce the number of MPs by 122. And if each district is represented by one MP as proposed, then the current Parliament would reduce by more than half.

■ PROGRESSION OF PARLIAMENT

The Parliament of Uganda has been expanding since independence for various reasons: Just before independence, Parliament, led by the Democratic Party (DP), had a total of 78 directly elected MPs. Of these, DP had 43, while the Uganda Peoples Congress (UPC) had 35. There were also 22 ex-officios, making a total of 100 members.

The first independence parliament had 92 MPs. At the time, Uganda's population stood at around 8.5 million.

In the 1967 republican constitution, 10 army MPs were proposed, but before this was implemented, Idi Amin came to power and suspended Parliament to govern by decree.

In 1980, the country was demarcated into 156 constituencies, each with a population representation of about 100,000 people. Uganda had about 12.5 million people.

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Rebecca Kadaga has been one of the beneficiaries of affirmative action

■ ENTER NRM

The National Resistance Movement started with a National Resistance Council (NRC), which was composed of mainly historical leaders of the Luwero war and other opinion leaders to make it "all inclusive". In 1989, when the mandate of the NRC was renewed, numbers increased to 270 members. These included 178 directly elected MPs, 38 NRM historicals, 34 district women representatives and 20 presidential nominees.

By 1992, it had grown to 277 members, with 25% of them nominated. The country's population had grown to about 16.5 million, according to the 1991 population census. If you only consider directly elected MPs, it means each

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directly elected MP represented 110,738 people. However, if you consider the overall number, it means that each MP represented around 59,000 people.

In 1996, directly elected MPs rose to 214 and to 215 in 2001, when the national population stood at 24.5 million. At the time, each directly elected MP represented 113,953 people. But the overall size of Parliament was 295. In addition to the directly elected MPs, there were 56 women MPs, 10 UPDF representatives five youth, four disabled and five workers. So, if you put into consideration the overall number of MPs, it means that each MP represented 83,000 people. In 2006, the number of MPs rose to 332; an

number of women MPs rose by over 150%.

Comparatively, around the same period, the number of directly elected MPs from 1996 to 2011 has only risen by 23! This means that indeed, it is the women who have led to the big increase in the number of MPs.

■ SCRAP AFFIRMATIVE ACTION?

Question: if this affirmative action is scrapped, are women able to take on men? History shows that this is not so easy. There are only 11 women representatives in the House, out of the 238 ordinary constituencies. This was a drop from 16 in the 2006/11 House. The tough women who took on men and won include Syda Bumba (Nakaseke north) Kabakumba Matsiko (Bujenje), Betty Nambooze (Mukono Municipality) and Proscovia Alengot. Electoral Commission records also indicate that not more than 10% of the contestants for the ordinary constituencies in 2011 were women. This means that indeed women do not even contest against men.

"This shows that women are yet to break through the barriers to compete with men," observed the Speaker of Parliament, Rebecca Kadaga. She, however, added that the growing number of women in the House has had a positive effect.

"Women's strong numerical presence in Parliament has had some positive effect in Uganda. Many gender sensitive laws have been passed," explained Kadaga during the 2013 Tenth Women Affairs meeting in Dhaka.

Cissy Kagaba, a civil society activist, disagrees. "We agree that Parliament has to be reduced, but women are not the problem," she says. The argument by gender activists is that even with the affirmative action, women MPs' numbers remain much lower than those of men.