

Uganda: debating a new constitution

In 1986 the National Resistance Movement (NRM) took power in Uganda. It ended years of massacres, rape and brutality experienced by the people of Uganda under the dictatorships of Amin and then Obote II. The NRM has initiated a process of mass discussion of a new constitution for the country. BARBARA KLUGMAN, in Uganda for an international women's conference, reports.

The NRM, headed by Yoweri Museveni, set up a broad-based interim government whose task is to create conditions of peace, national unity and democracy. These conditions are seen as the necessary basis from which the people can formulate a new constitution and a new process of government.

The atmosphere in Uganda is one of tremendous openness and debate. After over a decade of dictatorship and terror, the people are actively engaging in decision-making about their lives - village water schemes, primary health care projects, peasant co-operatives. The new Constitutional Committee moves from area to area giving people opportunities to offer their ideas for the new constitution.

How does this process work? The method of decision-making in Uganda

is based on a system of democracy which is rather unusual and in certain ways different from the models of 'peoples power' that were attempted in South Africa in the mid-1980s.

Democracy in Uganda

In Uganda, all representation starts at village level. Every village, made up of about 20 or so homesteads, has a village council. Every person resident in the village over the age of 18, men and women, is part of the village council, called the Resistance Council, Level One (RC1). The village council discusses all matters of concern to the village. It also discusses national issues. For example proposals for the new constitution are taken from RC1 all the way up to the national level, known as the National Resistance

Council (NRC); issues go from the NRC all the way down to the village RC1.

The village council elects nine people to a village executive committee. One of the nine on the executive is a secretary for women's affairs. Her role is to mobilise women into the village council, and to make sure that the council addresses the women's concerns. The executive of the village council meets with other village council executives from the surrounding area. Together they form a parish council (RC Level 2). The parish council elects an executive of nine people, again with a special women's representative.

This process goes all the way up to level five, the district, which is like a parliamentary constituency. The district executive elects a member of the National Resistance Council. The nine members of the district executive committee have special portfolios including women, youth, information, education, health, rehabilitation, development and defence.

MP works in the fields

This process of representation means that people at the grassroots level have a 'direct line' to the NRC. This was reflected in a discussion I had with Victoria Sebagereka, the delegate to the National Resistance Council for the district of Mukono. She invited conference delegates to her home for lunch. There were some women who gave a performance of song and dance. I asked her where

these dancers came from. She said, "We are in the same community - we work on a plot together, we have a joint bank account. When someone dies, or when there is a special event, we help out at the house. So when I have visitors, like today, they come and help - they cooked the food and they decided to do a performance." I asked her whether she too worked on the fields. "Yes," she said, "I represent them in parliament so I must also work with them."

Another woman MP explained to me that legally women cannot inherit land. So many women are forming co-operatives like that described by Victoria Sebagereka and demanding that their District Councils allocate them land to work on. At the same time they are developing proposals for new inheritance laws that don't discriminate against women.

A 'political cadre' on the sub-county executive committee told me that his role is to politicise the local people: "You can't organise society when it is ignorant of how the government is run. My role is to educate the peasants so that they are also involved in the affairs of government. I'm involved in helping them to contribute to the affairs of the nation."

I asked an ex-guerilla now employed in the Directorate of Women in the NRM Secretariat why women's representation is taken so seriously in Uganda. She said that women are on the land, tilling cash crops. Uganda needs women for production, for the whole economy - "women are the backbone of the country".

A representative of the West Nile Womens Association explained the government's concern with women by saying: "When Museveni was in the bush he saw how women live, how hard they work and how they suffer. So he gives priority to the development of women and the politicisation of women." In fact a new ministry has just been started - the Ministry of Women in Development, headed by Gertrude Byekwaso Lubega, who was also a guerilla during the war.

Democracy starts at the local level

The interesting thing about the system of representation in Uganda is that it starts at a very local level - the village. People who become members of the NRC were originally elected by people who knew them personally - friends and neighbours. Once in the NRC they are still accessible to the people, through the Resistance Committee structures.

The other interesting thing is that representation is based on civic structures, with all local decisions being made by local residents. Although there are many other clubs and organisations such as women's handicraft groups or religious groups, these are not formally part of government. Rather, all *residents* in an area form the government.

Political parties do not play a role in this system - in other words it is not a multi-party democracy. Delegates are elected in terms of how their neighbours know them, rather than in

terms of political affiliation.

So this is a different model both from the system of municipal and parliamentary representation in the South African government's system, and from the model used in some of the discussion within UDF on 'people's power' in South Africa in the mid-1980s.

Questions for the South African debate

There are similar process in our country of street committees, then area committees, and then town councils. But it also incorporates student, worker, youth, teacher, pensioner and women's organisation. This raises the question of democratic representation.

What should be the basis of national political representation? Should it be organised in terms of sectors - people being elected from organisations of women, workers, youth, etc. If so, what constitutes a sector? Are the 'health sector', 'education sector' etc. sectors in the same way as 'youth' or 'women'? ie should they also have direct national representation? Should local-level representation be linked to national representation as in Uganda? Or should parliamentary representatives be separately elected? Finally, should there be special representation for certain groupings, such as women, as there is in Uganda?

Uganda provides one example of political representation, and we can draw from their experience as we consider the many options for building democracy in South Africa. ☆