



Afrobarometer Briefing Paper No. 111

**CITIZEN PERCEPTIONS OF DEMOCRACY IN
UGANDA: THE GROWING GAP BETWEEN
EXPECTATIONS AND REALITIES**

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Introduction

In the latest Afrobarometer Survey, Round 5, conducted between December 2011 and February 2012, 74 percent of Ugandans indicated that the country was headed in the wrong direction. The data suggests that much of the discontent with the country's direction stems from resentment over high commodity prices, dissatisfaction over management of the economy, and unease over the growing gap between rich and poor. This bulletin focuses on the extent to which public concerns pertaining to democracy and human rights may contribute to Ugandans' feelings that their country is headed in the wrong direction. While Ugandans express a strong preference for democratic institutions and practices and a majority of respondents express high levels of satisfaction with the current state of democracy and human rights in Uganda, the survey also demonstrates that a considerable gap has emerged between citizens' expectations of democracy and the realities on the ground in Uganda. This pattern is also present, though less pronounced, with regard to respect for human rights. This growing gap between the expectations of citizens and the realities in Uganda raises both concerns but possibly hope about where the country is headed.

Afrobarometer Surveys

The Afrobarometer is a comparative series of public attitude surveys, covering up to 35 African countries in Round 5 (2011-2013). It measures public attitudes on democracy and its alternatives, evaluations of the quality of governance and economic performance. In addition, the survey assesses the views of the electorate on critical political issues in the surveyed countries. The Afrobarometer's main goal is to produce scientifically reliable data on public opinion in Africa while strengthening institutional capacities for survey research, and disseminating research findings to inform policy and practice. The Afrobarometer also provides comparisons over time, as four rounds of surveys have been held from 1999 to 2008 and Round 5 is currently underway.

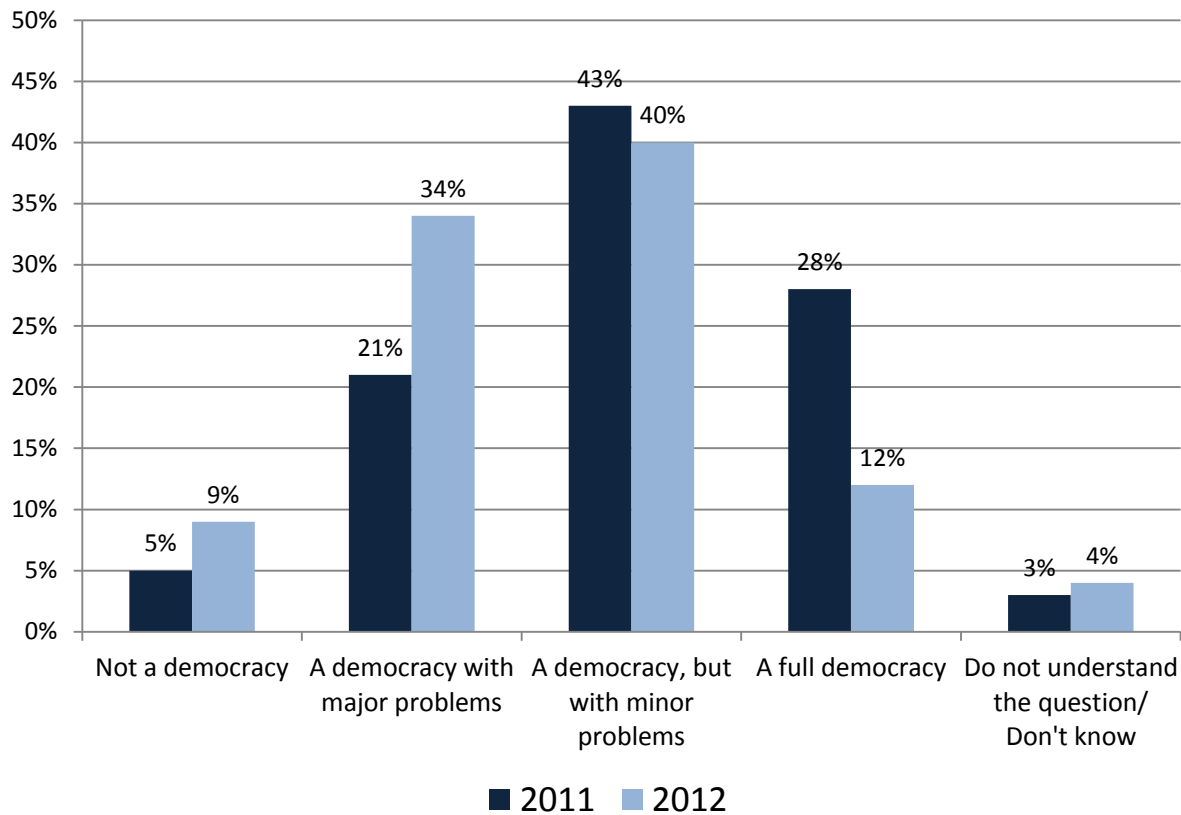
During Round 5, Afrobarometer surveys will be conducted in up to 35 African countries using a common survey instrument and methodology. The instrument asks a standard set of questions that permits systematic comparison in public attitudes across countries and over time. The methodology is based on a national probability sample of 2400 adult Ugandans selected to represent all adult citizens of voting age, allowing for inferences with a sampling margin of error of +/- 2% at a 95% confidence level. The sample was drawn randomly based on Probability Proportionate to Population Size (PPPS), thus taking account of population distributions and gender as well as rural-urban divides. The sampling process ensured that every adult Ugandan citizen had an equal and known chance of being selected in the sample. Fieldwork in Uganda was conducted by Wilsken Agencies, Ltd., between December 2, 2011 and February 27, 2012. Previous Afrobarometer surveys have been conducted in Uganda in 2000, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2010 and 2011 (two special pre-election surveys).

How do Ugandans Rate Democracy in Their Country?

While a majority of Ugandans (52 percent) still believe that their country is a full democracy or a democracy with minor problems, public evaluations of the extent of democracy in Uganda have experienced a considerable decline since 2011. In 2012, only 52 percent of Ugandans believed that their

country is either a full democracy or a democracy with minor problems, compared to 71 percent of respondents in the pre-election environment of 2011 (Figure 1).

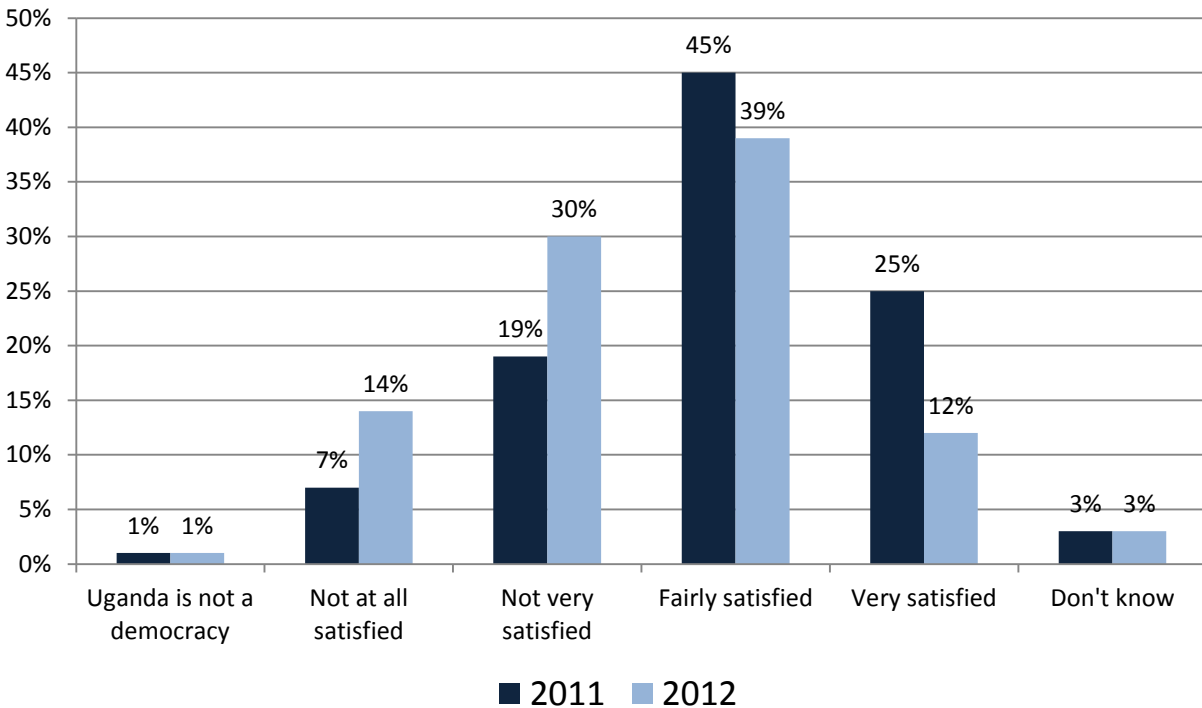
Figure 1: Extent of Democracy in Uganda



Question: In your opinion, how much of a democracy is Uganda today?

In addition, Ugandans reported far less satisfaction with the way democracy works in their country in 2012 compared to 2011. When asked “how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Uganda,” 51 percent of Ugandans reported that they are fairly and very satisfied in 2012, compared to 70 percent in 2011. However, it is notable that the 2011 pre-election levels of satisfaction were unusually high, and the 2012 figures represent something of a return to the historical norm (Figure 3).

Figure 2: Satisfaction with Democracy



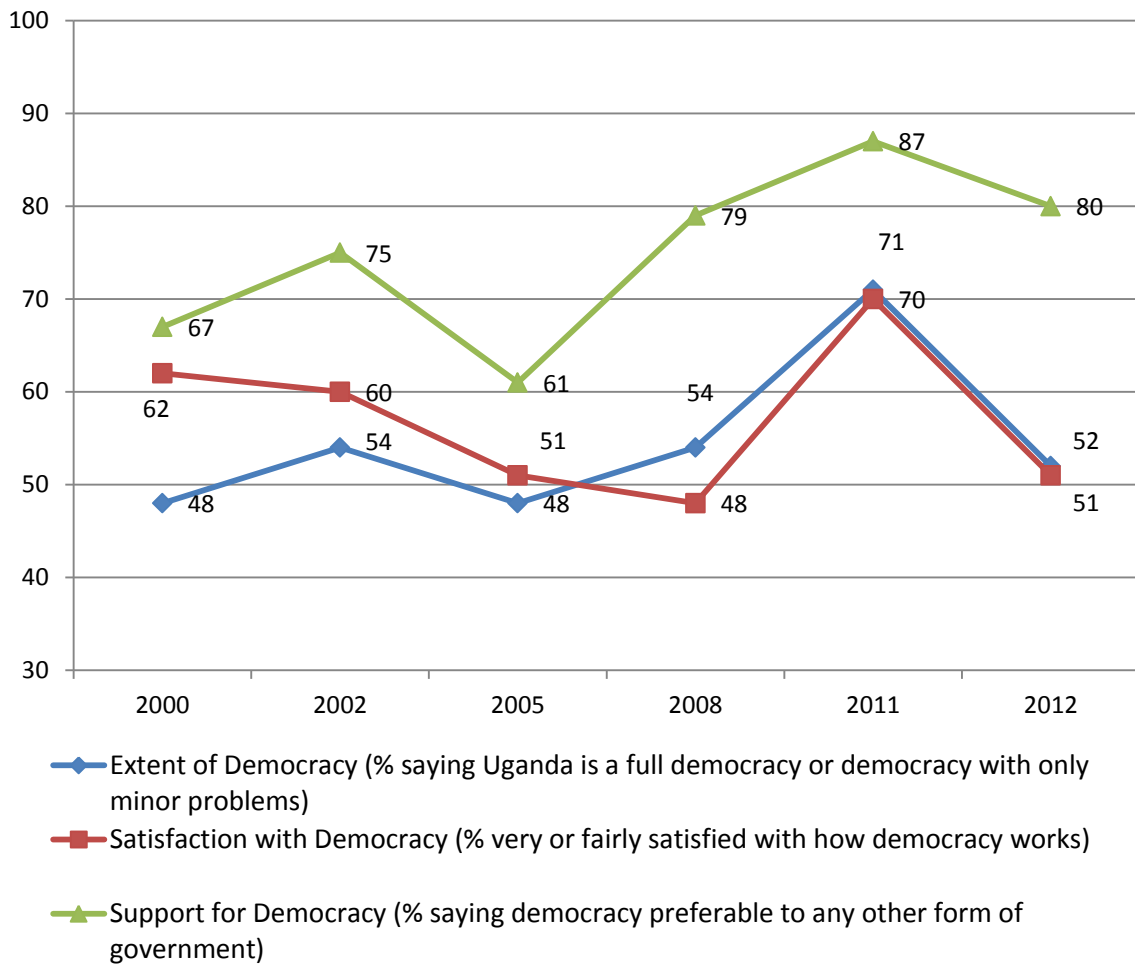
Question: Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Uganda?

Extent of Democracy vs. Preference for Democracy

Analyzing patterns over the last ten years, we see that citizens’ ratings of the extent of democracy have increased modestly (from 48 percent in 2000 to 52 percent in 2012) while satisfaction with democracy has dropped considerably since 2000. At the same time, popular support for democracy as preferable to any other form of government remains fairly constant at around 80 percent. While Ugandans’ preference for democracy has increased substantially in the past decade, their ratings of the extent of democracy have increased much more slowly, revealing a widening gap between the preference for democracy and the actual enjoyment of it.¹ And satisfaction with democracy has actually declined significantly. It appears that while popular expectations for democracy have grown, reality is not keeping pace.

¹ See Robert Mattes, Francis Kibirige and Robert Sentamu “*Understanding Citizens’ Attitudes to Democracy in Uganda*,” Afrobarometer Working Paper no. 124, 2010.

Figure 3: Public Ratings of Democracy, 2000-2012



The noticeable spike in the extent of democracy, satisfaction with democracy, and support for democracy in January 2011 may be partially attributable to the survey being conducted during the height of 2011 presidential and parliamentary election campaigns. But the significant decline recorded between January 2011 and January/February 2012 may also be due to growing dissatisfaction with the economy, disenchantment after the elections, or other political factors discussed in more detail below.

Electoral Processes and Institutions

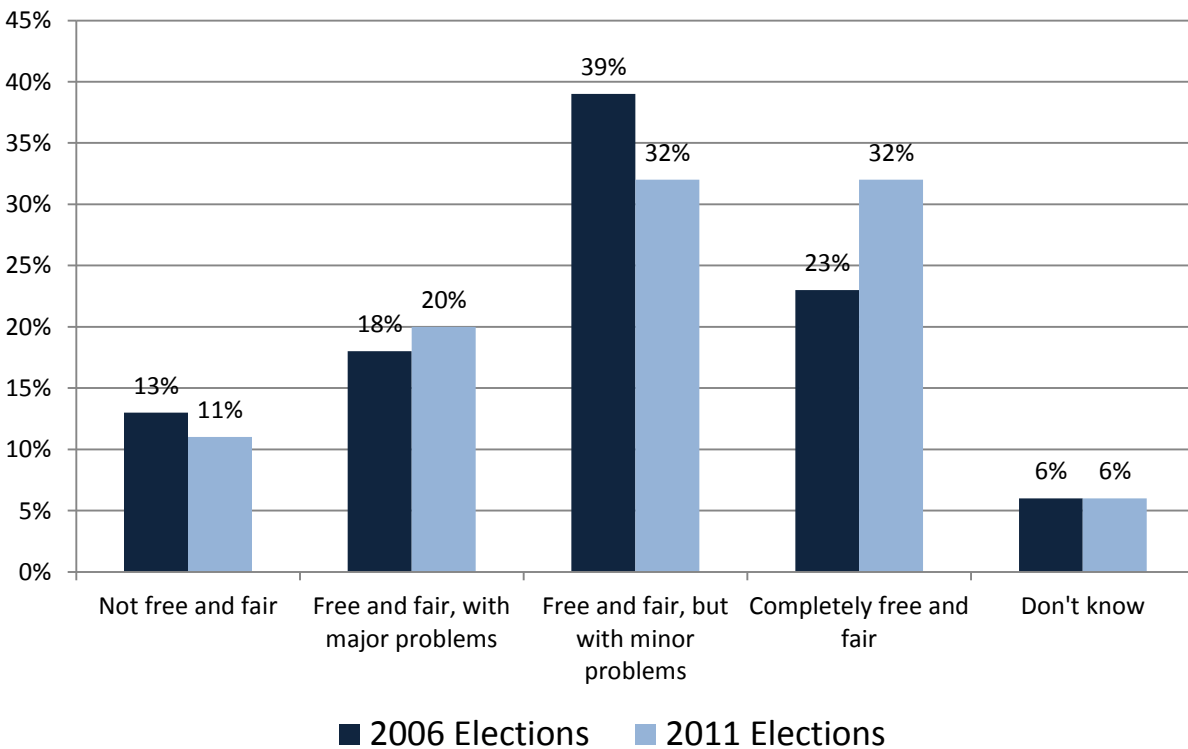
To better understand Ugandans' changing perceptions of democracy, it is worth exploring some of the key processes at the heart of democracy, and to see how public attitudes about these processes have changed over time. We begin with a look at elections. Ugandan elections have been the source of considerable controversy, especially since the entrant of opposition challenger and former NRM stalwart Kizza Besigye in the 2001 elections. Although President Yoweri Museveni has won every contest, the opposition leadership has cried foul repeatedly. Observer reports on past elections have been mixed, with many expressing concerns over the lack of a level playing field. Nevertheless, most observers have recognized the actual election-day processes to be relatively free and fair. The Afrobarometer survey enables us to examine how ordinary Ugandans view key electoral procedures and institutions.

To begin, it is clear that Ugandans strongly support elections—89 percent agree that elections are the best way to select leaders, up from 82 percent in 2008, demonstrating a high level of commitment to the necessity of elections. This commitment has been fairly consistent over time, with 83 percent also naming

elections as the best way to select leaders as far back as 2002. It may be argued, however, that these responses reflect only a theoretical commitment to elections.

When it comes to reality, nearly two thirds of Ugandans express confidence that the country’s electoral processes have been fundamentally free and fair, although sometimes with minor problems. Comparing ratings of the elections in 2011 and 2006 reveals some improvements, with 32 percent rating the 2011 election as “completely free and fair”, compared to 24 percent for the 2006 election; nearly two thirds (64 percent and 62 percent, respectively) rate both elections as generally free and fair (having at most “minor problems”). The appearance of high confidence in electoral processes breaks down, however, when partisanship is factored into the analysis with most of those identifying themselves as opposition supporters regarding the elections as not free and fair or free and fair but with major problems.

Figure 4: Ratings of Election Quality

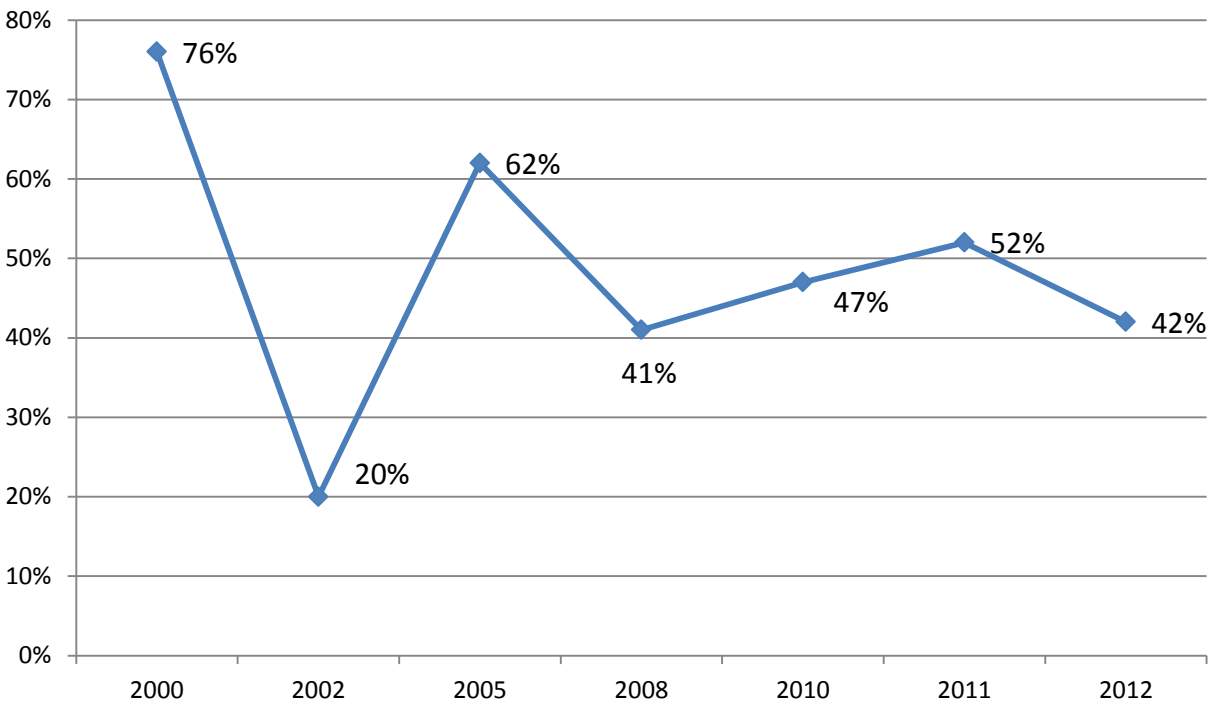


Question: On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national elections?

(Note: Data about the 2006 elections comes from the R4.5 survey in 2010, and the data about the 2011 elections comes from the R5 survey in 2012.)

Given these concerns about the electoral process, to what extent does the population consider the institutions responsible for the elections to be legitimate and trustworthy? Overall, trust in the Electoral Commission (EC) has fluctuated considerably over time (Figure 5). Confidence in the EC is weak even after factoring in partisanship.

Figure 5: Trust in the Electoral Commission, 2000-2012



Question: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? The electoral commission. (% responding "somewhat" and "a lot")

Thus, while Ugandans remain committed to the electoral process as a method of selecting leaders, and generally express positive responses about the freeness and fairness of recent elections, public trust in those who manage the country's elections remains low.

Political Parties

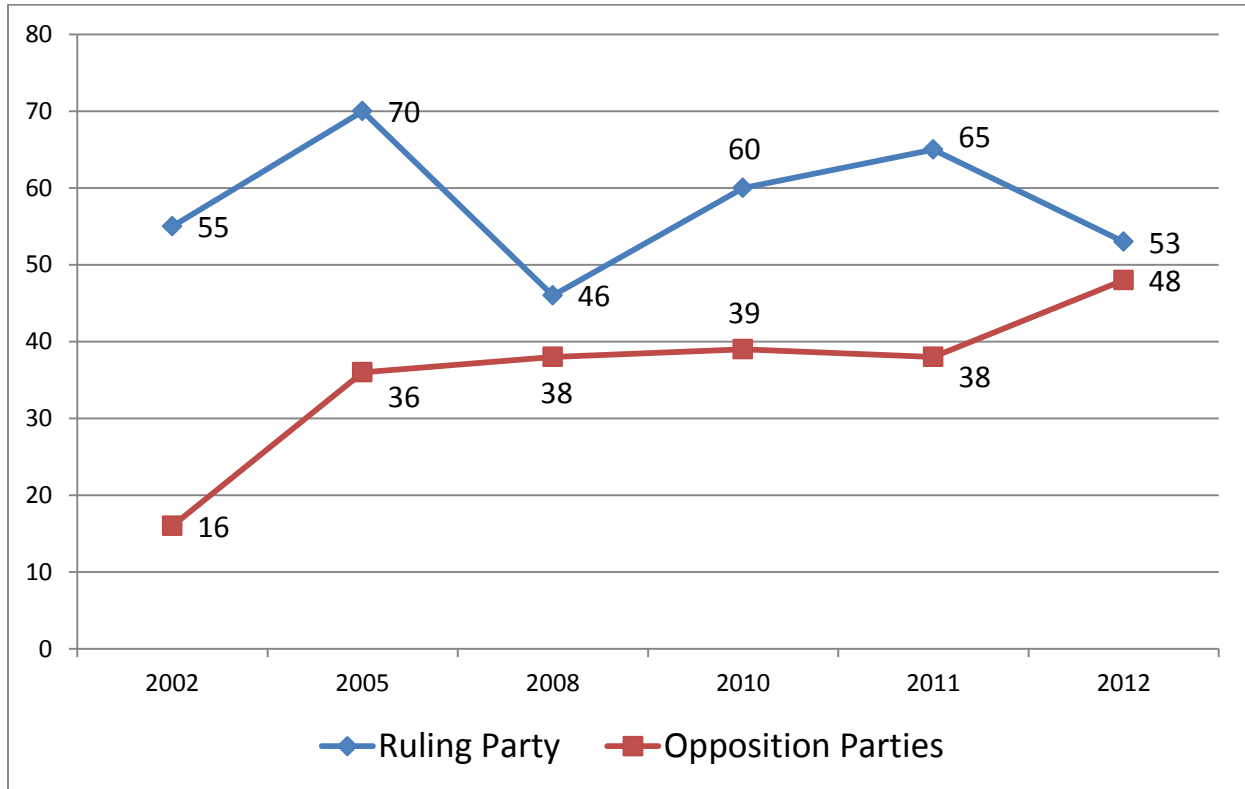
Although Uganda was officially a "no-party democracy" from 1986 until the 2005 referendum, party affiliations in Uganda trace back to the 1960s and have been viewed as a key determinant of how Ugandans respond on a range of political questions. In 2012, Uganda appears to have made considerable progress in institutionalizing its multi-party system: 86 percent of Ugandans now feel free to join a political organization of their choice, 84 percent disapprove of a political system in which only one party can stand for or hold political office, and 69 percent think that many parties are needed to give people a real choice in who governs them.

Despite growing support for multiparty politics, however, Ugandans still express considerable anxiety over the potential outcomes of multiparty competition: 64 percent think party competition often or always leads to violent conflict, and 61 percent think opposition parties or supporters are silenced by government. This may be one reason why Ugandans are divided on the question of the proper role of political parties. A slight majority prefers opposition parties that "cooperate" with the government (51 percent) compared to those who think the opposition should "examine and criticize" the government (46 percent). Many citizens still tend to link political parties with divisiveness and violence, probably a result of both Uganda's tumultuous political history, as well as government campaigns under the Movement System to link parties with violence and sectarianism. Even so, fully 72 percent of respondents say they close to a political party.

Trust in the ruling party has remained relatively constant over time (55 percent in 2002, and 53 percent in 2012). But the opposition has gained considerable ground: trust in opposition parties has risen from a

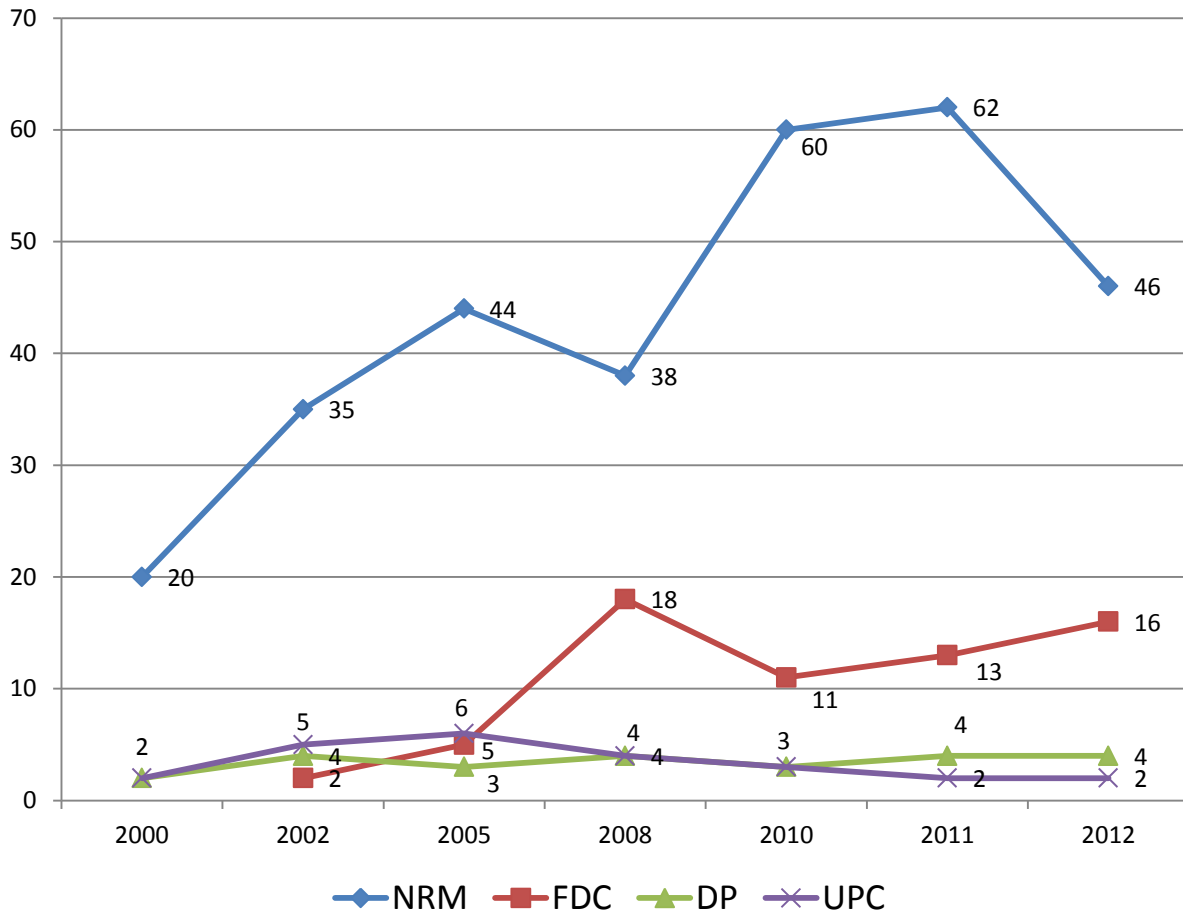
mere 16 percent in 2002 to 48 percent in 2012. Trust in the opposition has risen to within five percentage points of the ruling party, suggesting that both the opposition and the ruling party are becoming accepted players in the political landscape. However, a huge gap remains between levels of support for the ruling party and the opposition, demonstrated both by the outcome of the 2011 presidential and parliamentary election, and by more recent findings for party affiliation (Figure 7).

Figure 6: Trust in Political Parties, 2002-2012



Question: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% responding "somewhat" and "a lot")

Figure 7: Political Party Affiliation, 2000-2012



Question: Do you feel close to particular political party? If yes, which party is that?

This substantial gap between the level of support for the ruling party and the opposition parties suggests that the multiparty system may not yet be consolidated. While opposition parties may now be an accepted feature of the political game, their inability to narrow the gap with NRM suggests that they are still not capable of serving as an effective check on the NRM’s power.

Separation of Powers and Checks and Balances

Another important component of a consolidated democratic political system is the existence of checks and balances. In 2012, Ugandans indicated a strong preference for the principles of separation of powers and checks and balances:

- 89 percent disapprove of the army coming in to govern the country
- 93 percent disapprove of the president dissolving Parliament and eliminating elections to govern the country himself
- 79 percent believe that the President should report regularly to Parliament on how government is spending money
- 85 percent believe that Members of Parliament should make laws rather than the President

- 73 percent think that the President must always obey the laws and the courts, even if he thinks they are wrong
- 86 percent believe that there should be a two-term limit on the presidency

Based on these responses, Ugandans indicate a strong preference for adherence to democratic principles in the areas of checks and balances and separation of powers. The weakest levels of support are for accountability of the President to Parliament and the courts, but even these are at levels above 70 percent. Despite these preferences, however, Ugandans are considerably less satisfied with the reality of how such principles operate in practice in Uganda. Forty-four percent indicate that the president ignores courts and laws often or always. Likewise, 45 percent think that the President ignores Parliament often or always. These responses indicate that Ugandans espouse the principles of separation of powers and checks and balances, but recognize regular violation of these principles in Uganda.

Public Attitudes: Freedom of Speech, Freedom of the Press, and Freedom of Assembly

Ugandans express similarly strong preferences for basic freedoms including speech, the press, and assembly:

- 85 percent believe that the media should constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption
- 80 percent agree that the media should have the right to publish any views and ideas without government control
- 73 percent believe that they should be able to join any organization whether or not the government approves of it
- 76 percent disagree with the proposal to remove the right to bail for people involved in public protests or demonstrations

Although there is not an equivalent question to measure the right to free speech, the public clearly indicates strong support for freedom of the press (above 80 percent) and slightly less strong support for freedom of assembly (still above 70 percent). This indicates consistent support for the principles of human rights and freedoms.

Respondents record less of a gap between their expectations and realities with respect to basic freedoms, including speech, the press, and assembly. More specifically:

- 83 percent feel free to say what they think
- 86 percent feel free to join a political organization of their choice
- 89 percent feel free to vote for a candidate of their choice
- 83 percent feel that the media is effective in reporting government mistakes and corruption; only 34 percent indicated that the media regularly abuses its freedom

These responses suggest a high level of enjoyment of basic rights and freedoms at the individual-level. The key exception was already noted: 61 percent believe that opposition parties and their supporters are frequently silenced by the government, and 64 percent worry that party competition often leads to violent conflict, suggesting that despite freedom of assembly those affiliated with a particular party can end up as victims of political violence. These inconsistencies are disturbing in that they challenge otherwise positive perceptions of the enjoyment of human rights and freedoms in Uganda.

Conclusion: Is Democracy in Decline in Uganda?

While public demand for democracy and commitment to democratic principles of democracy has steadily grown over the last 10 years in Uganda, realities on the ground have not yet met the expectations of citizens. A significant—and often growing—gap exists between citizens' expectations of democracy and

the delivery of democracy in practice. A slim majority of Ugandans still view their country as a democracy, yet many respondents are concerned with the state of democracy and electoral processes, the multiparty system, and weak checks and balances. Despite overall ratings that are marginally positive, the gap between Ugandans' support for democratic institutions and practices and their rating of the actual extent of democracy and their satisfaction with it has increased in recent years. Ugandans are far less satisfied with the way democracy works in 2012 (51 percent) than they were in 2000 (62 percent). While 80 percent of respondents say democracy is preferable to any other form of government in 2012, only 52 percent think Uganda is a fully democratic. This 28 point gap has widened considerably since 2000. The gap between support for democracy and satisfaction with democracy has also grown, from 5 percent in 2000 to 29 percent in 2012, a 24 percentage point increase. On the other hand, Ugandans increasingly believe that "the government is like our employee; we are the bosses and should tell government what to do" rather than agreeing that "the government is like a parent" that should "decide what is good for us". A solid majority of 58 percent chose the first statement over the second in 2012, up from just 31 percent in 2005. This reaffirms the perception that citizens are demanding more responsiveness and accountability from their government, and that they expect it to uphold the principles of democracy and human rights. If the gap between expectations and realities is not reduced, however, citizens may become increasingly frustrated, although whether such frustration would produce still greater demands, or instead lead to disillusionment and disengagement, remains to be seen.

References

Mattes, Robert, Kibirige, Francis, and Sentamu, Robert, 2010. *Understanding Citizens' Attitudes to Democracy in Uganda*, Afrobarometer Working Paper no. 124, October 2010

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