



"One life lost is too many, it exceeds the threshold of peaceful elections"

February 23, 2016

Fellow Ugandans,

In light of the 2016 general election an overwhelming number of Ugandan citizens turned up to cast their votes for leaders of our country. I felt the spirit of a nation while standing in scorching sun-heat for over three hours to cast my vote in my village of Abia, amidst sisters and brothers of all ages. Full of excitement meeting old friends and community from whom we were separated by war for over twenty years, this was an historic election.

I am writing this at a point where the pre-election campaign, polling and declaration of results are behind us. It is written at the backdrop of incidents of political violence, allegations of rigging and voices of grievances over process and outcome. It is an election which has been marred by fatality, and where a lot of people of Uganda have been watching television with mixed emotions of increasing distresses of violence as complains of rigging kept pouring in, while others are celebrating their victory.

International observers, who witnessed the process announced their preliminary mission findings too. They provided statements that indicate we still have institutions to strengthen and processes to improve in this regard. As we speak, the pre-conditions for this election is beyond and behind us. We hold in our hands the opportunity to learn and improve the pre-election and polling before the next time Ugandans cast their votes. It is my sincere prayer that our government is not offended by the truth but learn from it.

The birth of the republic of Uganda was founded on the spirit of liberty, freedom and community. But, the promises of freedom and democracy from independence is yet to mature and materialize, as evidenced in this and previous elections. There is no legitimacy in political mandates obtained through the use of force and intimidation is only another face of disrespect for voters, and it incubates bad seeds in the young generations.

This election should be the turning point for our country; Political sides should acknowledge that negotiations is the way to prevent chaos, to foster social cohesion and to reconcile grievances. All actors – citizens, state authorities and political stakeholders – must adhere to this and commit to dialogue and non-violence. As much as one loss of life in an election exceeds the threshold for what can be called a peaceful election.

In this post-election period, Uganda is at a critical stage where principles are tested. We will today, and in the time ahead of us, stand the test of our peaceful and democratic values. The integrity of our politicians and institutions will be tried, and we need to collaborate to stand this test. Our society has channels through which disputes can be handled. These channels need to be cultivated and used. And, most importantly, they need to demonstrate that they provide a functional, actual and credible mechanism for civil resolution of disputes. The government must give and protect the space to voice emerging questions. In fact, it should be commended, appreciated and encouraged when Ugandans turn to dialogue as the way forward. It is now that we should maintain unity, stand together and listen to each other. It is now that politicians should demonstrate vigilant adherence to legitimate and democratic participation. And where it should be upheld that this is a right of every citizen to take part in.

It is now that the security forces should live up to their finest duty of ensuring the safety of civilians. You all pledged the allegiance to protect the citizens of Uganda, your people; actually your brothers and sisters. In the past days, the images in the news stream have given too much reminiscence of what we experienced in IDP camps, when uniformed personnel fired live ammunition amidst civilians. Considering the charged emotions in our country, and the latent risk of violence being sparked, we call for dialogue. We call for language of non-violence, and just actions and pursue security in good faith. It is now that we as Ugandans need to demonstrate to ourselves, to our neighbouring countries and to the world that violence has been a part of our past, but will not shape our future.

To my fellow youth

We have just completed an election. The third election in Uganda since the multi-party system was re-introduced, and an election in which many youth cast their votes for the first time. We are undergoing this democratic process in the midst of allegations of irregularities and incidents of violent clashes. My feeling is that some of you feel betrayed and marginalized by politics, and that questions about the trustworthiness of our institutions are emerging. I can understand if such is prompting



reaction. It is in situations like this that we need to channel this into peaceful and constructive action. It is on days like today that we must be ready to refuse to be dragged into violence. The political history of our country since independence makes me believe that the most meaningful change will come when we - the young generation and survivors of injustice - agree to mobilize ourselves to become tools for peace. That the change we wish to see will come when our generation restores the broken ethnic identity, brings an end to violence in politics and brings about transformations of our country. The way to do this is through participation in dialogue. By voicing our views, by making ourselves heard.

I offer my wholehearted encouragement to young people that, we can avoid falling into language of enmity. We are part of the generation that will make political intolerance a distant history and should be ready to work and restore faith in politics. It will not come easily, and sometimes we will have to do it with our eyes full of tears; with trembling voices and with hearts broken over hardships that threaten our future. The nation is ours, and we have to firmly hold on to it being peaceful, even if our hands are shaking to strike back. Let us choose non-violence even in our greatest moment of insecurity.

At this moment, and in the time to come, we need young champions to fill up the media platforms amidst voices of citizens, civil society, political stakeholders and authorities. This should be the space, where the questions emerging among voters can be addressed. We need trust to emerge from openness, transparency and trustworthiness. In this moment, there should be an exchange of words rather than stones, ammunition and teargas. And we are calling for space for participation and dialogue.

You may know that we at African Youth Initiative Network (AYINET) have been involved in peacebuilding and reconciliation in Northern Uganda. We are very grateful to be outgrowing the difficulties faced during over 20 years of war between LRA (Lords Resistance Army) and the Government of Uganda; an experience of conflict that reminds us that violence is never a just course of action. We are working to heal deformed bodies, broken hearts, destroyed families, death of brothers and sisters, leave alone tens of thousands of those abducted and still missing due war. Our work has yielded international recognition and in the eyes of many has helped us contribute to Uganda's international reputation as a place of hope and positive change. One of the most encouraging experiences has been the keen interest in the fate of Uganda to me by international leaders such as President Barack Obama, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and many more the world over.

In each of these personal encounters the role of the youth of Uganda and other African has been discussed. And in each one of them I have reassured them that the young people of Uganda and Africa are truly engaged in building a stronger democracy, and hence a stronger country. Brothers and sisters, let's prove to ourselves, to our fellow Ugandans, to our fellow Africans and to the rest of the world that we can do it. That we, the youth of Uganda, have the power and the will to tilt the balance towards an increasingly democratic, peaceful and unified country.

These words are written right after the declaration of disputed national elections result, in a moment where we all need to take responsibility for building on our society's building blocks of peace. A time, where we need to choose dialogue and adhere to non-violence

Together, we can create a big turn in Uganda's history. We can stand together for the peace and justice that we want our future to be shaped by.

Sincerely

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Victor Ochen is a Ugandan born and raised in Lira, (Abia - Internally Displaced Peoples) camp in northern Uganda. He is the founder and director of African Youth Initiative Network (AYINET), he was awarded Archbishop Desmond Tutu's Prestigious African Young leaders fellowship, he received UK International Leadership Program, he became the first Ugandan and youngest African Nobel Peace Prize nominee, and has been named the United Nations Ambassador for Peace and Justice (representing SDG Goal 16), he is the recipient of African regional and Pan-Commonwealth Youth Worker's awards, and also recipient of Mundo Negro Fraternity award by the Daniel Comboni Missionaries of Spain, and still among other recognition, Victor has just been appointed as a Global Advisor to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) on Gender, Forced Displacement and Protection.