



PUBLIC DIALOGUE BRIEF: Academia, Religious Leaders and the Working Class in the Political Arena of Uganda

Bishop Stuart University, Mbarara
4 March, 2015 | 1430-1630

“Academia, Religious Leaders and the Working Class in the Political Arena of Uganda” was conducted by the Dean of the Faculty of Law, Assoc. Prof. George W Kasozi and invitations were extended to the broader university community.

The main paper was presented by the Visiting Fellow, Fr Dr Pascal Kabura who led off by decrying seven factors that have conspired to hamstring Uganda’s proletariat, clergy and intelligentsia, namely:

- i) State patronage (co-optation) and neo-patrimonial clientelism;
- ii) A dysfunctional and underfunded education system;
- iii) Militarisation (in explicit and explicit forms) of the society;
- iv) Disincentive mechanisms (blackmail) by the state;
- v) Fear that has been infused into the population and used as a tool of social control;
- vi) Survival instinct;

Dr Kabura then observed that the attempt by some actors in the establishment to delink politics from religion, or the proposition that religious leaders should steer clear from politics is unnecessary as politics and religion cannot be divorced from each other.

If anything, Dr Kabura prompted, there are numerous remarkable contributions by religious institutions and leaders that can be celebrated in Uganda such as:

- i) The participation by religious leaders in peace initiatives towards the end of the twenty year insurgency in Northern Uganda;
- ii) The regular issuance of pastoral letters on matters of national import especially by Catholic bishops;
- iii) Positive role of religious leaders in the liberation struggle against past dictatorships;

Beyond Uganda, he pointed out leaders like the revered Archbishop Desmond Tutu in the epic struggle against the racist apartheid regime in South Africa as well as the collective efforts of Kenyan religious leaders against dictatorship.

He then prompted students to conduct self-introspection by pondering the question concerning what their university will contribute towards Uganda’s political growth trajectory. He mused about the outstanding contributions that universities and other institutions of learning like Makerere, Bishop Tucker and Katigondo; as well as luminaries like Professors Ali Mazrui, Ngugi ‘wa Thiong’o,



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Mahmood Mamdani et al made in their day, adding that universities were respected and feared by the ruling political classes in years past and were the shapers of public opinion and guardians of the nation's conscience. The business class too, contributed to the liberation of Uganda against Idi Amin through contributions in cash and in kind.

He proposed the following remedies towards the resolutions of the situation:

- i) The three groups (academia, religious leaders and the working class) must be encouraged and of necessity, co-opted into the political sphere;
- ii) Every citizen, especially young people, should stop pointing fingers and participate in the political process; consistent with this is the need to build active citizenship;

Dr Kabura observed that if there are any grey areas, they should be points of dialogue rather than premises for stifling participation. How much participation every group should give is a working question whose answer(s) need not be immediate or final.

That said, he brought his elaborate expose to a close by calling for the articulation of a new political ideology by political parties in Opposition. The same holds true for the ruling political organization. He warned that political inactivity/apathy is immoral and is an offence against society. With political apathy comes a reduction in the humane aspect of government.

In his response to the lead presentation, Assoc Prof George W Kasozi related the historical background of participation by the three groups and then led off with three questions:

- i) What is the political arena?
- ii) What is the role of the academia in politics?
- iii) Is the attempt at separation of the Church, State, Academy and Business in tandem with Articles 38(1) and (2)¹ of the 1995 Constitution of the Republic of Uganda?

He referred the audience to David Istoll's book² which he referred to as a remarkable example of the role that the academia can play as a contribution to the political space. In this book, he noted that

¹ 38. Civic rights and activities.

(1) Every Uganda citizen has the right to participate in the affairs of government, individually or through his or her representatives in accordance with law.

(2) Every Ugandan has a right to participate in peaceful activities to influence the policies of government through civic organisations.

² David Istoll, Modern Government in Britain 1970



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Istoll states that “just about everything is political, including a situation where two children in a nursery school both want to play with a particular toy at the same time. This contestation can end in one of two ways:

- It might be resolved through violence when the stronger child takes possession of the toy through force;
- It could also be resolved by the mother arbitrating the conflict because of her superior position;

This demonstrates the fact that all differences are a potential source of conflict that require the participation of all constituent parts of a given polity.

Prof Kasozi took exception to the situation where there is a disparity between straight As and the docility of the University when it comes to actual political participation.

The curtains fell on the Dialogue at the end of the interactive open-floor session.