



**PUBLIC DIALOGUE BRIEF: Universities as Agents of Social Change:
The Role of the Youth in Political Transition**

Uganda Martyrs University, Nkozi
11 February, 2015 | 1400-1645

This Public Dialogue was convened under the auspices of the East African School of Governance and Diplomatic Studies at Uganda Martyrs University and was organized by Fr Dr Maximiano Ngabirano.

The Dialogue featured a lead presentation by Ms Mary Mutesi a lawyer working at the government-owned Uganda Media Centre which was followed by responses from the Vice Chair of the Public Accounts Committee of the Parliament of Uganda, Hon Paul Mwiru and the host Professor, Maximiano Ngabirano.

Conceptually, *transition* was defined as a cross-cutting and transient phenomenon that begins from the economic-, to the social- and finally manifests in the political arena. It was further submitted by Ms Mutesi that youth in and of itself is a traditional period which must be taken into consideration in thinking about this matter.

She further sought to categorise transition along three planes: generational, political and social. She argued that all the foregoing three must be anchored on a shared/common ideological shift.

Mutesi concluded her presentation by underscoring the importance of the youth as instruments of change and listed the various ways in which they can intervene to spearhead this shift:

- i) Exposure through the available electronic platforms and resources like literature and other publications;
- ii) Mentorship, career guidance and related policies like affirmative action so as to build the capacity of the youth to lead;
- iii) Develop and pursue a shared agenda;

For his part, Hon Mwiru strongly contested the suggestion by Ms Mutesi that a transition in Uganda is unfounded because there is no anarchy (at least in the overt sense) that is obtaining. He noted that the crisis in the health sector (as evidenced by the high maternal and infant mortality rates) as well as the dismal completion rates at primary level for instance examples in themselves of a situation that is reprehensible enough to warrant transition.

He then listed three reasons why he felt that the current crop of youth cannot be the engine that propels the much sought-after transition:

- i) Uganda's young people are not politically conscious; they are at best aloof and at worst despondent about the political direction of their society; this is compounded by the fact



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- that politics has been commercialized and vulgarized to a level that precludes decent contestation for elective office(s), relegating the youth to unproductive activities like sports-betting;
- ii) Mwiru decried “an antiquated and dysfunctional educational system that cannot produce the quality of citizens required to be politically active”; he referred to the vast majority of the human resource churned out of institutions as “illiterate graduates” who, beyond ‘cramming’ for examinations cannot apply themselves to real-life situations and provide answers/solutions;
 - iii) His second last reason was the desperate economic condition that reduces citizens to daily survival and detached from the broader political questions of the day;

As a solution, he mooted three remedies:

- i) The need for universities to fight for the preservation of academic freedom and thought;
- ii) Improve the recruitment criteria both for staff and students at the intake/admission level;
- iii) Ensure that the leaderships of universities (particularly the senates and/or university councils) are independent and free from undue influence and interruption.

The Dialogue was brought to a close after an interactive open-floor session between the predominantly student audience and the panelists. The interactions gravitated around inquiries from the audience about what solutions to undertake; intolerance to dissent by the ruling establishment and the emasculation of student organizations like Uganda National Students Association. The Dialogue ended at 1700.