Article

Political Contestations, Human Rights Violations and the Human Victims in Uganda: A Call for Social Work Actions through Indigenous Pathways

by

Venesio Bwambale Bhangyi
Assistant Lecturer
Department of Social Work and Social Administration, Kyambogo University
Uganda
E-mail: bhangyiven@yahoo.co.uk

Mette Rømer
Associate Professor
Department of Sociology and Social Work, Aalborg University
Denmark
E-mail: romer@socsci.aau.dk

_____

Abstract

In Uganda, the social work profession was introduced by the British colonial government, and therefore activated as a tool of colonial state control. Consequently, the profession adopted Western philosophies with a disregard for indigenous social support philosophies. It used a non-political stance to counter political dissent, resistance and activism against the colonial administration. In the decades that have followed, the profession's invisibility in politics and activism has undermined its critical contribution to challenging injustice in social policy and society. In this article, we challenge this apolitical epistemology of social work in Uganda rooted in the profession's colonial past, the country's violent political history and contemporary neoliberal economic choices. We use a case analysis of the political contestations, human rights violations and human victims in the 2021 presidential elections in Uganda. We conducted a thematic analysis of data sourced from both print and electronic media, election observer reports and human rights reports. From this analysis, we argue that Uganda's political contestations produce widespread state- and non-state-driven human rights violations. We articulate that the resultant countless human victims can no longer be ignored, and should compel social work as a profession that seeks to promote social justice into action. From a decolonial standpoint, we stress that social work's continued inaction cannot safeguard the profession's social justice mission amidst Uganda's political contestations. Since the outcomes of these political contestations profoundly impact social justice, human rights and the well-being of the majority of the communities, we argue that the social work profession in Uganda must galvanise the commitment to engage in the politics of the day vigorously and publicly. We conclude by making calls for social work actions that utilise indigenous pathways in building a credible political leadership that safeguards the rights and wellness of society.

Keywords: critical social work, decolonial social work**,** indigenous social work, human rights, social justice, political social work, Uganda

Introduction

The deafening silence of the majority of Ugandan social workers on matters of politics' human rights violations amidst the mounting victims of human rights abuses is worrying. And one may ask, why should Ugandan social work be concerned about political and election violence? After all, we social workers are not active politicians. However, as we will argue in many parts of this paper, violence associated with elective politics shape social work in many significant ways, thereby making political practice an essential element of professional practice. In addition, when we think deeply and reflectively, we social workers are also citizens affected by this election violence and politics. The public that we serve is profoundly impacted by these forms of violence. We are also professionals expected to respond to the pains and injustices meted out to victims of this violence. Political contests also shape social services and the social policy contexts in which we operate. Moreover, the pain, suffering, violence and human rights violations are a concern for the social work profession since they challenge the human rights and social justice focus of the profession (International Federation of Social Work & International Association of Schools of Social Work, 2018; Sewpaul, 2016). The collective trauma and memory of pain is a long-term social issue with social consequences. Standing by is no longer an option. Experiences from social workers else-where in countries such as Zimbabwe, where political contestations are violent, have challenged the profession to intervene in the socio-political crises engulfing their nations, rather than remaining armchair critics (Muchanyerei, 2017). Besides, all these political crises are symptoms of a deep-rooted national political malaise that require serious attention (Amecah, 2021).

We understand that social work is clearly a profession that promotes human rights and social justice (International Federation of Social Work & International Association of Schools of Social Work, 2014; 2018). Yet, amidst flaring political contestations in the country, the profession struggles to uphold its human rights mandate. In this Ugandan experience, it is mostly human rights lawyers and opposition politicians who actively struggle to defend human rights. Social work's absence in politics and the defence of human rights is not surprising. The social work profession was introduced in the country by the colonial government (Twikirize, 2014). As such, it was activated

as a tool of colonial state control (Kasozi, 1994; Makubuya, 2018; Twikirize, 2014; Spitzer, 2019). It used a non-political stance to counter resistance and activism against colonial administration. Thus, from its humble beginnings, Ugandan social work was focused on remedial practice and community development. This meant that the profession was devoid of foundational knowledge, education and training to ignite political action, activism, lobbyism and political advocacy, since the sessional paper No.2 1957/58 that supported the introduction of formal social work training was focused on probation welfare and community development (Ministry of Planning and Community development 1965 as cited in Twikirize, 2014, p. 137). Consequently, the profession adopted submissive elements of Western philosophies of social work practice. The disregard and subjugation of local indigenous knowledge and practice systems (Makubuya, 2018) meant that both peaceful and resistive local approaches did not make their way into professional social work. In addition to this historical context, we point out later in the next section that this apolitical character of Ugandan social work has been extended by a history of violent politics, the neoliberal economic policy choices employed in the frameworks of new public management and the lack of- or a limited emphasis on critical theory. These factors have created intersecting forces that have challenged politicising the social work profession in contemporary Uganda.

In the decades that have followed since Uganda's independence, the profession's invisibility in politics and activism has undermined its critical contribution to countering social injustice in social policy and society. In this article, we challenge this apolitical epistemology of social work practice and education in Uganda rooted in the profession's colonial past and contemporary contexts. We seek to galvanise social workers to shift from the peripheral to the forefront as torchbearers of peace in condemning oppression, political abuse, social injustice and human rights violations. This is necessary because the importance of political practice in social work has been extensively debated (Becevic & Herz, 2023; Bee, 2024; Lane et al., 2018; Martinez, 2021; McClendon et al., 2020; Pawar, 2014; Pritzker& Burwell, 2016; Sewpaul, 2016). Scholars have urged that engagement in professional political practice would enable social work to: contribute to solving social problems in practical political terms, support the promotion of social justice and human rights ideals of social work, help to account for the differences in social-political contexts during

practice, effectively bring meaningful social change, account for the impact of political choices made by those in political leadership, improve the effectiveness of social policy and prepare future social workers (students) for political practice (Becevic & Herz, 2023; Martinez, 2021; McClendon et al., 2020; Pritzker& Burwell, 2016; Sewpaul, 2016).

Our intention therefore is to awaken Ugandan social workers from their professional political slumber to actively participate in the country's political discourses. This professional political *awake-ness* is specifically necessary to make strategic corrections that are urgently needed in Uganda's politics of development to attain the desired social economic change in the country (Kalinaki, 2020; Khisa, 2015; Mitchell, 2023; Walkins & Vokes, 2023). To achieve this professional awakening, this paper argues three questions: Why is social work invisible in Ugandan political and human rights discourses? What evidence of human rights violations and human victims does the 2021 presidential contestations present to challenge social work's apolitical posture? And how can indigenous knowledge provide an effective pathway for social work to vigorously defend human rights in the context of such volatile political contestations?

In this paper, we collectively advance the argument that social work in Uganda cannot continue being apolitical in the context of explosive political contestations. We therefore begin the paper with an illumination of the apolitical nature of Ugandan social work in historical and contemporary contexts. This is followed by the description of the methodology that guides the construction of this paper, which is rooted in case analysis. We then discuss the nature of political contestations using the 2021 presidential elections in Uganda. This leads to our presentation of the human rights violations and human victims' stories that emerged from this perilous contestation. These highlight the magnitude of social injustice that Ugandan social work must address. We then propose *a three-path model* of an indigenous framework to guide social work engagement in political practice in this context. This leads us to draw implications for social work practice rooted in public political actions in Uganda's social work. We conclude that Ugandan social work should embrace a political practice stance that safeguards the human rights of citizens (*we use this term to refer to all people with a legal right to reside/live/stay in Uganda)*, which contributes to

peaceful political contestations, and contributes to building a political leadership that respects human rights for public wellness.

Social Work Invisibility in Politics, Activism and Human Rights in Uganda

The profession of social work promotes social change and development (IFSW & IASSW, 2014). The attainment of the desired social change is inherently a political process, as it requires a solid form of social organisation and social authority. In this case, political bargains, negotiations and compromises that facilitate, but not obstruct social-economic transformation, therefore become necessary (Khisa, 2015). These would require professional involvement for social work to promote the desired social change and development. However as previously noted, social work is majorly absent in the national political discourses of Uganda, a problem which is also common in many other social work contexts (Becevic & Herz, 2023; Pawar, 2014). For Uganda's case, this professional political disengagement can be attributed to five forces: the colonial history of social work in the country, political precariousness in post-independence Uganda, limited political theory in Ugandan social work education, decades of neoliberal choices and the remedial-developmental orientation of Uganda's social work.

Professional social work in Uganda was introduced by the British colonial government as part of its administrative and development efforts. At this time, social work majorly focused on social rehabilitation in urban areas, social administration and community development (Twikirize, 2014). The colonial government was strategically and largely concerned with asserting domination and social control over the territory of Uganda (Kazozi, 1994; Makubuya, 2018). In this context, only knowledge and practice that promoted social assistance and support was introduced in the country's social work. In addition, only imported theory and knowledge constituted social work education and practice (Spitzer, 2019). As such, local knowledge of social care, helping and support was excluded from professional social work (Spitzer, 2019; Twikirize, 2014; Twikirize et al., 2013). Thus, indigenous political strategies of political engagement, such as civil disobedience and resistance that some Ugandan communities would employ to place demand, agitate for reforms and claim resources

or benefits (Kasozi, 1994, pp. 17-29), were also excluded from social work practice. Additionally, social workers were employed in agencies of British colonial state control such as prisons, rehabilitation centres, youth centres and administrative centres to serve colonial interests (Twikirize, 2014; Twikirize et al., 2013). We therefore conclude that consequently, early social work practice under British colonial control was devoid of political strategies, such as activism, grassroots coalition building, lobbyism and holding leadership to account.

Social work in the post-independence Uganda operated in times of political crisis, violence, oppression, war and political intimidation. Examples of such political violence include the 1966 Buganda crisis in the Obote I premiership, the 1971 to 1979 dictatorship by President Idi Amin and the 1981 to 1986 National Resistance Army (NRA) bush war. Other examples include the major rebel insurgencies from 1986 to 2005, such as the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) of Joseph Kony, the Allied Democratic Forces/Front (ADF) and the Holy Spirit Movement (HSM) of Alice Lakwena. In the past two decades leading to 2024, Uganda has been strongly involved in the fight against terrorism and rebel activities, both internally and within the East African region. The cumulative consequences of these wars and insecurity have been 50 years of non-top political oppression, suppression, intimidation, violence, militarism and securitised national politics. Some scholars, such as Wilkins and Vokes (2023), have observed that this militarised political governance has begun to spread to social development programmes, such as the Operation Wealth Creation Programme, where the state security agencies maintain a strong presence. In the recent past, attacks by the president of the Republic of Uganda and some members of his cabinet on social work, calling the profession useless and responsible for the country's high unemployment burden, are telling (Ntanda, 2020). Thus, social work has operated in the context of fear, timidity and state control. Any critical social work voices are seen as an existential threat to the government, and dealt with using considerable force. The closure of the Democratic Governance Facility (DGF) in 2022 is evidence of this state paranoia. This human rights programme was closed for allegedly promoting threats against the current government (NTV News, 2022; Sadek, 2023; Vandeputte, 2023). For reference, this programme was an umbrella programme financed by the European Union through support to civil society organisations in the country to promote democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

Interestingly, all civil society organisations in Uganda must be registered, and are keenly supervised by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which is mostly mandated to register, regulate, co-ordinate, inspect, monitor and oversee the operations of these organisation across the country through the National Bureau for NGOs (Republic of Uganda, 2016).

A further force for the limited participation of social work in political discourses are the limitations in training on critical and political theory. From the experience of the first author as a Ugandan social work educator, social work training and education is only beginning to integrate critical theory into its curriculum. This can partly be explained by the fact that most social work training in the country has been focused on diploma and bachelor's education, with graduate social work education at the master's and doctoral levels a more recent introduction (Department of Social Work and Social Administration, 2023; 2024; National Council for Higher Education, 2019). While social work theory is taught across all the schools of social work in the country, the selection of the theory options does not adequately question the structural and political conditions that perpetuate violence, injustice, human rights violations or social underdevelopment. For example, in their study on social work practice in Uganda, Twikirize et al. (2013) found a very limited engagement in policy advocacy, with the majority of social work graduates engaged in direct practice at the family and community development level. A later study by Bukuluki et al. (2019) found that social work graduates had a low interest and a low motivation to work or pursue careers with oppressed, vulnerable or disadvantaged people.

Knowledge on theories of power, oppression, injustice, advocacy, social movements, grassroots activism, radical social work thought, dissenting practice, critical reflection, environmental actions, and critical social policy that would spur their interest in political practice, is either missing or not well-emphasised in their social work education. While some social work courses on social development, social policy, social sector governance, civil society organisation or human rights are part of social work curricula in many universities in Uganda (National Council for Higher Education [NCHE], 2019), limited political practice engagement appears to suggest that they do put enough emphasis on critical approaches. As such, we argue that most social workers are short on the critical theoretical tools, knowledge and thinking to engage

in political practice. This limited critical approach in social work practice and training may be due to a short history of graduate social work education in the country. As noted earlier, graduate social work education in the country, where rigorous theoretical interrogations are likely to occur compared to undergraduate education, is more recent (Department of Social Work and Social Administration, 2023; 2024).

It may also be due to decades of ne-colonialism, neoliberalism and capitalist policies and choices of the post-independence Uganda. Many of these choices have made social work irreconcilable with its missions of social change, social justice and human rights. It has created insecure and perilous social conditions, in addition to the privatisation of public goods by advocating for minimum government involvement in people's welfare in many countries (Becevic & Herz, 2023). This trend has not spared Uganda, and has created scenarios in which: social workers in public service positions work with limited to no funding; the government constantly attacks social work as the cause of some social issues such as unemployment (Ntanda, 2020), with those working in civil society organisations being keenly monitored to prevent any agitations that may destabilise the economy (NTV News, 2022; Vandeputte, 2023).

The above four forces culminate into a fifth force that perpetuates the apolitical nature of Ugandan social work, i.e., the remedial/developmental orientation of social work education and practice in Uganda. As of 2013, 78% of Ugandan social work practice was in community development, health and education, while 85% of the social workers were employed in non-profit organisations and government (Twikirize et al., 2013). However, while these are large professional numbers, they are more focused on social assistance and social support without openly challenging the policy and political processes that create the problems of ill-health, underdevelopment, poverty and disadvantage. It is these same conditions that directly or indirectly impact educational and other social services essential for human welfare. Martinez (2021) has warned that if we do not engage in social work practice with a political perspective, we cannot address such problems with roots deep in the political social order. This leaves us with on-the-surface practice, one which is isolated and does not expose the political realities of social suffering and of the social work profession. This is compounded by the limited macro/national practice social work intervention. Thus, macro practice in political areas, such as accountability, policy, human rights, gender

or violence prevention, is marginal. Collectively, these five forces account for the continuous invisibility of social work in the political and policy discourses that shape the human rights landscape in the country.

In view of the above, social work in Uganda requires an urgent infusion of political practice. This politically charged social work practice would actively demand social change: mobilising, empowering and encouraging registration of voters to cause change; working as staffs in political campaigns; running for electoral political offices; working as political appointees; using leadership positions to demand policy reform; and introducing politics and power dimensions in social work practice methods (Becevic & Herz, 2023; Pritzer & Lane, 2017). Becevic and Herz (2023) further suggest that political social work should be built on identifying adversaries, developing a politicised plan for action, mobilising the supportive passions of many, and developing coalitions of social and political struggles. We think that the *three-path model* that we have proposed, and the implications for social work that we have drawn later in this article, contributes to building this form of political practice in social work in Uganda.

Methodological Approaches

In this paper, we use a case analysis of the political contestations, human rights violations and human victims in the 2021 presidential election in Uganda. We study the 2021 election because it has been noted as the most violent election in recent times in Uganda's election history (Kiyonga, 2022; Nantume, 2021; Wilkins & Vokes, 2023). While this case focuses on the 2021 presidential election, we also analysed the related political events immediately leading to- and immediately after the January 14th, 2021 election in the country. To help build the case, we reviewed documents, reports, articles and mainstream media reports on the 2021 election violence. These were obtained through online searches using search phrases, such as '2021 elections in Uganda', 'Ugandan elections', 'election-related human rights abuses in Uganda', '2021 Ugandan elections', '2021 election violence', 'human rights violations in 2021 Ugandan elections' and 'social work involvement in Ugandan politics. At this stage, sources were included for referencing the 2021 presidential election.

We then read through the materials and watched media briefs to summarise the main discussions, and gain impressions of the reports. These materials were then analysed using a thematic analysis to obtain the major nuances and variations of political contestations, rights violations and abuses. These themes were then subsequently compared with selected literature referencing social work engagement in political actions, particularly in the African and other contexts. The resulting analyses and comparisons constitute the major themes and arguments presented in this paper. The usage of the secondary sources linked to the 2021 presidential election in Uganda, as data sources and the comparison across these stories provided an understanding of the election processes and rights violations that the Ugandan communities faced during the elections. Additionally, the comparison across social work involvement in politics in Africa and beyond broadens the paper's contribution to the understanding of social work political engagement.

The potential limitation of depending on secondary sources is that the paper misses out on the breadth that direct voices, narratives and accounts of community members, victims and social work practitioners would provide on this topic. However, we know through our interaction with these materials that many of them presented a detailed account of the context. Many other sources reviewed captured real-time videos, accounts and interviews extracts in real-time moments from community members. Still, we cannot claim to capture the deep descriptions that an in-depth interview-based study would have captured. Nevertheless, we present a coherent account based on our sources of data.

Political Contestations in Uganda: Historical to 2021

The scale of political contestations facing Ugandan social work is huge. The seeds of power struggles in the precolonial contestations among indigenous kingdoms and tribes were flared by the *divide-and-rule* strategy of the British colonial administration from 1894 to 1962 (Makubuya, 2018). At independence in 1962, the first government led by Milton Obote encountered a huge nation-building challenge due to the fractured relations among the various Indigenous tribes. For example, the 1966 Buganda crisis was a clash between the central nationalistic government and the Buganda tribal kingdom in central Uganda (Kasozi, 1994; Musisi et al., 2018). The Idi

Amin government of 1971 to 1979 was notoriously brutal and militaristically violent towards political opponents (Kasozi, 1994; Mooneyhan, 2014). Human rights and social agitations were crushed, pushing social work further into the periphery. Since the country has witnessed episodes of political violence at every turn of contest for political power, the takeover by the National Resistance Army/Movement (NRA or NRM) in 1986 was premised on fundamental change characterised by peace stability, and social-economic development (NRM, 2020). However, this promise has turned into a mirage as years of NRM rule go by.

The seeds of violence in the 2021 presidential contestations had long been sowed by the NRM government. In power since 1986 (the NRM is the party of the current Ugandan government whose mandate runs at least until 2026), the NRM started as a military government, and then formed into a single party state under the movement system between 1986 and 2005. From 2006, multiparty presidential elections have been held with the process becoming more violent, and results disputed each time in 2006, 2011, 2016 and 2021 (Wilkins & Vokes, 2023). From the start, the 2021 presidential election felt different. The incumbent was a seasoned, battled hardened, mercurial politician and military man in President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni. The main challenger was a youthful, energetic, vibrant, and popular musician turned politician in Robert Ssentamu Kyagulanyi, also known as Bobi Wine. Interestingly, the challenger was an unknown political novice who became the darling of the young generation, the majority of whom were born when Museveni was already president. This young generation of Ugandans sensed that it was their chance to lead the country. Interestingly, the challenger's popularity, and the threat this caused to the established ruling NRM candidate, motivated the latter to unleash a serious level of political violence and human rights violations of untold proportions to maintain the status quo. The spark to this violence was the arrest of the main opposition challenger Bobi Wine under the pretext of flouting the COVID-19 prevention regulations during his presidential campaigns (Bagala, 2020; Nantume, 2021).

Human Rights Violations and Human Victims

Social work in East Africa is known to have only a limited influence on social-political policy (Spitzer, 2019). Hence, it is no surprise that Ugandan social work had little, or

no influence, in the context of the 2021 presidential election violence. The beginning points to better understand these violations is to learn how securitised the election processes were. These elections were conducted during the COVID-19 conditions, where most prevention measures were already securitised. Security persons manned most public spaces, highways, and even social gatherings. It was a stringent requirement that any public gathering must seek police authorisation. The elections themselves were highly securitised. The Public Order Management Act of 2013 already requires political and other outdoor gatherings to seek police authorisation, a measure which critics argue is used as a security/political tool by the NRM government to subjugate political contests (Monitor, 2021c). For example, at the heart of the election violence, witnesses accounts indicated that many of the alleged 'abuses', 'murders' and 'violations' were committed by 'people wearing' security uniforms and insignias belonging to the police, the army and the local defence units (Nantume, 2021). Many such 'security' personnel were variably seen perpetuating human rights violations, such as arrests, shootings, beatings and intimidations (Bagala, 2020). This militarised or securitised political contestation is no surprise, since the Ugandan government is known to be a military and securitised state (Wilkins & Vokes, 2023).

A second point of understanding is by analysing the acts that constitute the alleged human rights violations during the 2021 election. There were reports of 'killings' and 'murders' of civilians and supporters of political opponents (Monitor, 2021a). For example, up to 54 people were killed during riots resulting from the arrest of one of the presidential candidates in November 2020 (Bagala, 2020; Nantume, 2021). Many who died from bullet-related injuries were described as 'incidents' of 'stray bullets' by security forces and the ruling party (Nantume, 2021; Wandera, 2021). Nevertheless, the fact remains that there were dead people connected or unconnected to political causes killed by bullets and guns. There were also arrests of political opponents and their supporters. These arrests did not spare several opposition presidential candidates. There were reported incidents of intimidating voters, supporters and candidates (Wilkins & Vokes, 2023). There was the physical injuring of many citizens during campaigns, e.g., through confrontations with security forces and scuffles between inter/intra party or candidate supporters (Wandera, 2021). Arrests and the imprisonment of civilians, mainly opposition supporters, were a common occurrence

(Monitor, 2021c). Many were arrested over reasons such as threatening security persons, threatening/beating party supporters, defacing campaign posters, 'rioting' or simply being in the wrong place (Monitor, 2021a; Wandera, 2021).

And the third point of understanding is by looking at the human victims that resulted from presidential election violence (Musisi & Wandera, 2021; Monitor, 2021). The victims of this violence and violations were human beings: men, children, women, older persons and communities. Nantume (2021) reported that of those killed were two children and two older persons in their 70s. Six students were also gunned down (Nantume, 2021; Wandera, 2021). However, we need to note the contradicting accounts between private reports and government reports on these figures. For example, an investigation by the government's security forces into these riots reported that 42 people died due to 'stray bullets' and only 11 of those shot dead were 'rioters' (Batangira & Kamutungi, 2021). What was generally reported is that majority of those killed were 45 years or younger, indicating the magnitude of dreams and lives cut short. Family, friends, relatives and local leaders suffered the pain of mourning loved ones, nursing tortured ones, visiting those in prison, and/or living without their loved ones. The pain of missing persons is unbearable, the relatives not knowing if their loved ones are already dead or still alive. Two years after the incidents, there were claims that scores of opposition supporters were still missing, which was disputed by the government (Kayonga, 2023). There have been accusations of human rights violations by the NRM-led government in the three and a half decades it has been in power (Kayonga, 2023; Kiyonga, 2022). These claims, however, cannot be substantiated due to a weak internal capacity to demand accountability. The public opinion in the country is that even the powerful West is not keen to demand accountability and the prosecution of the perpetrators within the NRM (Kayonga, 2023).

Political Social Work Actions: *A Three-Path Model*

Evidence suggests that decolonising social work in Africa requires one to be genuine, to return to one's cultural roots, and to sometimes demonstrate a stubborn resistance to dominant ideologies to social work practice (Ibrahima & Mattaini, 2019). The dominant social work ideology is that which is apolitical, one focused on social care,

social support and social assistance. Despite these interventions' focus on empowerment, they do not challenge the social and structural roots of social problems, including social injustice and human rights violations. We argue that developing a dissenting practice, one which challenges, asks tough questions or critiques the current social order, holds the tools to enable Ugandan social work to ultimately and effectively engage in political social work. Such a practice should be radical, bold and strongly political to demand and claim the social work ideals of human rights and social justice (Becevic & Herz, 2023). This practice should also guarantee an engagement that is vigorous, visible and public. It should be one that is characterised by a stubborn defence of human rights despite a perilous profession context due to political contestations. This should be intentioned to make social work contextually relevant and aligned to current political realities of the Ugandan public. It should seek to promote in Uganda a culture of harmony, co-existence, reconciliation, one for the other, forgiveness and non-violence. We discuss this engagement as a *three-path model* of indigenous pathways to social work's political practice in Uganda.

In the *first path*, we argue for the use of elders and elders' influence. In traditional Ugandan communities, elders are respected, cherished, widely consulted, with their advice commonly used to handle complex social issues in their localities (Sanya, 2013; Wamara & Carvalho, 2021, Wanyenya, 2024). The elders would be used as a structure for dialogue, discussion and mediation to deal with political confrontations, violence, human rights abuses and general political discontent. Elders' forums at national, regional, district and community levels are essential. Elders are respected because of their track records of a special contribution to community, in addition to their vast depth of wisdom/experiences to draw from (Sanya, 2013). There is already preparatory work through the formation of *The Elders Forum of Uganda* (TEFU) (Amecah, 2021; Sanya, 2013). Proponents contend that TEFU should be constituted at national and regional levels by elders from various religious, civilian and regional communities (Amecah, 2021; Sanya, 2013). The first-ever televised presidential candidates' debate in Uganda in the period leading to the 2016 elections is a testament to the influence of elders in national political discourses. This debate was organised and delivered under the auspices of TEFU. Sadly, however, TEFU was unable to organise during the 2021 elections due to intense political mistrust,

resource limitations and the entry of new political players who had not been previously engaged (Amecah, 2021). Social work could engage with such existing efforts, or build new forms of community level elders' forums. Working jointly with other political/civic organisations engaged in national political discourses is also essential.

In the *second path*, we suggest social work engagement with community power. This would harness the profession's presence in communities, as well as the power within communities as a force for change to address political issues and human rights abuses. Social work should deploy the collective community power known as social authority to influence political discourses (Botonon, 2015). Social authority reflects strategies that support villages or communities or citizens or groups to act collectively to influence key political decisions, monitor the quality of politics, and demand better politics. Social work could ensure that this authority is mobilised and responsive as a form of power that demands political accountability. An example of this is the Ugandan *barazas* used in recent years to demand accountability and responsibility in social service delivery (Institute for Social and Economic Rights [ISER], 2018; Monitor, 2012b). These political *barazas* would involve village meetings between communities and political actors (both ruling and opposition). Communities and politicians would then exchange ideas in a non-campaign context. The community would then demand explanations, alternative actions, present their political aspirations and hold politicians to account for their actions, promises and violations of rights. Social work could ensure that there is a mechanism for constant feedback and follow-up. It would also encourage citizen attendance, meaningful citizen participation and serious political accountability (ISER, 2018). The public would be facilitated to release its bitterness, disappointments, hopes and dreams through asking hard political questions (Monitor, 2021b). The challenge for social work would be how to build momentum, consistency and the institutionalisation of this *barazas* action in the political policy cycle, processes and party structures.

And in the *third path*, we propose actions through a national political dialogue rooted in the indigenous spirit of togetherness, reconciliation, truth-telling and healing. The national dialogue is necessary to deal with a deeply rooted political malaise, which demands that Ugandans sit down and reason together (Amecah, 2021). This would

borrow from the traditional Ugandan saying that *for people to live together peacefully they must have to learn to argue together peacefully.* This could build on the earlier proposals of the 2018 national dialogue by the interreligious council of Uganda (IRCU) and The Elders Forum of Uganda (TEFU) that did not happen. In part, the dialogue could not happen due to disagreements and extreme polarisation between the main political actors regarding the overall focus of the reforms that were to be discussed. Perhaps what was required was the building of bridges of common issues to anchor the dialogue, and then chisel slowly on the divergences to find more settlements. Social work could engage in mobilising actors, communities and eminent persons to dialogue. It could also work to ensure that the process is citizen-led in discussing social, economic, political, cultural and constitutional issues that flare in political contests. Social work could also facilitate the participation of all voices, including dominant and minority opinions at the heart of this dialogue. The ultimate purpose is to return political opponents to a discussion table to exchange ideas in a civil way. This should evoke the widespread spirit of reconciliation inherent in Ugandan communities. The idea is to cascade dialogue down to regions, districts and villages in the communities to create healing and pathways to healthy political competition. The challenge for social work would be bringing dominant opinions and actors to the table, and to create sufficient momentum for dialogue. But, working in, and with existing efforts for national or regional dialogue is a good starting point.

Implications for Social Work

Social work is inherently political through its processes of promoting social change and problem solving. For example, in its code of ethics, the National Association of Social Workers of Uganda [NASWU] (2012, p. 4) recognises that understanding power is critical to serving individuals and communities. This challenges any form of thinking that Ugandan social work professionals should remain apolitical. It also has implications for social work practice, research, policy, education and leadership. As a profession that is anchored on the principles of human rights, social justice and collective responsibility (International Federation of Social Work & International Association of Schools of Social Work, 2014; McClendon et al., 2020), Ugandan social work is urged to liberate the communities from the human rights violations inherent in the country's contested politics, and to empower these communities to

challenge these political injustices. In this paper, we propose that social work can play a valuable part in the country's politics, and in addressing the politically motivated human rights abuses through various ways.

Social work in political and civic education

In the first instance, we ask social work to get involved in the political and civic education of the communities. This is because the lack of civic education has been consistently blamed for the chaos in Ugandan elections. However, the lack of commitment by human rights-oriented professions, to mount an opposition to political contestation-linked human rights violations beyond human rights lawyers and journalistic storytelling, has resulted into a haze of professional resistance. Initially, social work could raise awareness about civic rights at the collective and individual levels. Social work could also be engaged in educating voters about election processes, responsibilities, rights, obligations, laws and safety. Such civic education could also be extended to empowering the voters on a variety of issues, such as demanding accountability for actions that violate citizen rights during political contests. The '*voting is social work movement*' in the USA is a clear example (Severance, 2024). This programme extends voter education to students, communities, social work faculty and disfranchised communities, including vulnerable populations. Using a non-partisan approach, it activates programme participants and targeted communities to re-engage with the election process. In addition, personal and collective safety, well-being and safeguarding during political contests could also be part of this civic education. This role could be integrated with social work actions conducted under the mindset change and community mobilisation programmes postulated in the National Development Plan III (Republic of Uganda, 2020).

Coalitions to demand political accountability

Social work should also be engaged in demanding political accountability. This would require holding to account those who commit or facilitate the commission of human rights violations and abuses during political contests. Social work professionals could use their documentation skills and their capacity to reach grassroots communities to systematically collect evidence essential to demand this accountability. Those who act with impunity in communities would have to contend with the evidence collected

by social workers as part of this accountability drive. Social work networks, partnerships and presence in local areas and engagement in local politics would be essential elements of this accountability approach (Pawar, 2014). Voters in communities, villages and local areas should be active in these efforts, for they see, hear and know what happens at the local level. Their involvement would therefore build a movement of action towards the politics of change, harmony and respect for one another.

Documentation of human rights violations and human victims

Social work should be engaged in the systematic and meticulous documentation of cases of human rights violations and human victims' cases resulting from political contestations. This documentation could involve the preservation of collections of images, whether written, oral or any artistic forms of these cases. Witness, victim and perpetrator (where possible) accounts would offer powerful tools to understand, theorise, learn and offer accountability about politically motivated human rights violations and human victims. Such data would then be used by scholars, policymakers, practitioners, educators, communities and justice systems to build actions toward change for respectful political contests. It would preserve collective memory as a starting point towards healing, reconciliation, forgiveness and a match to a harmonious future. It would also help curtail corruption that has interfered with seeking justice over political violence in the past (Walkins & Vokes, 2023; Wamara, 2017).

Building credible service-based political agendas

Social workers could also work directly with political candidates to build credible service-based agendas in their manifestos. This will require social innovations in which political positions are contested on a clear promise of service delivery. Social work would actively seek out and work with political contestants to build itemised service interventions in their campaign agenda. As such, social work would also be engaged in demanding post-election service delivery by those who won the political contests. Bee (2024) has offered a strong call to UK social workers with a similar view, articulating that while political manifestos may be lengthy, it is essential for social workers to understand and compare across candidates' promises in terms of

fiscal plans, welfare policies and plan costing. For the Ugandan case, the beginning point is for social workers to enter elective politics. Another choice involves lobbying and supporting political candidates to clearly articulate their policy proposals. A further suggestion involves lobbying those currently working in higher levels of public services in both central and local governments to help or support political candidates in their reach in articulating their policy proposals. There is precedent for social workers' involvement in elective politics and political offices as legislators, lobbyists, advocates and student interns in the USA (Rome & Hoechstetter, 2010). While these examples are from different contexts, they offer lessons for Uganda. These will require Ugandan social workers to build skills in political lobbying, issue setting, tracking political promises and building coalitions to demand action on political promises. This would enable social work to be engaged in wider national political reflections that inquire into, reflect upon, question and even challenge the possibly empty and securitised development promises dominant in today's contested politics in Uganda (Wilkins & Vokes, 2023, pp. 270).

Introduction of critical theory in social work education

We call upon Ugandan social work educators to introduce and or expand the study of critical social work theory in social work education. Critical theories such as theories of power, oppression, critical disability, injustice, critical human rights, advocacy, social movements, grassroot activism, radical practice, dissenting practice, critical reflection, critical childhood studies, decolonisation, critical indigenous studies, critical refugee studies and critical social policy should be enhanced in social work education in Uganda. This can be achieved by scaling-up the integration of these theories in existing courses, creating an independent course on critical social work theory, or deepening existing theoretical courses by expanding readings on critical social work thought (a course is also variably referred to as course unit, a paper or module in the Ugandan context). It also demands Ugandan social work scholars to produce, identify, and/or use critical papers debating contested local social issues. The ability to use critical journalistic and public opinion papers/articles/briefs produced in Uganda to engage social work students in critical debates is a good starting point. Overall, this critical theory will begin to shape the knowledge, thinking, and practice of both learners and educators toward political social work practice.

Training students and social workers for professional political participation

Lastly, we propose structured efforts to train and prepare social workers for professional political office. First, this will require training current and future students in political practice as part of their social work education. Second, it will require a continuous professional education training for social workers interested in political practice. Our proposal is inspired by the understanding that preparation for political practice spurs interest in politics among social workers, and that changing the backgrounds of those in political office reshapes social policy for the better (Lane et al., 2018; McClendon et al., 2020). The example of Nelson Mandela, whose politics focused on forgiveness, reconciliation, peace, democracy and harmony despite deep divisions, injustices and calls for retribution by many in a post-apartheid South Africa, supports the view that a different background office holder has a strong promise for positive change (Sewpaul, 2026). Lane et al. (2018) provides three areas of such training that support political social work as a starting point for Ugandan social work: teaching students the theory and processes of electoral activities, experience sharing with students by social workers in political offices or practice and supporting students to develop their plans for political office. Students could be encouraged to explore plans and possibilities for professional political practice at any or all the levels of government in Uganda. Such a practice could include elected offices, appointed political offices, work in leadership positions, work as political advocates, internships in political offices or work as strategists in electoral campaigns.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued that social work in Uganda has not been sufficiently engaged in political practice, and in tackling social injustice or human rights violations that result from Uganda's political contestations. This political disengagement has its roots in the introduction of the profession as a tool of British colonial social control and the continuation of repressive approaches in Uganda's post-independence political contestations. While political contestation-related human rights violations are not new in the country, we have sounded the warning that the heights reached during the 2021 presidential election are a call to social work action. Readers of this paper

are therefore strongly urged to undertake actions that enable social work to engage in political action, activism and advocacy to safeguard human rights, and deliver social justice to human victims of such political contestations. This call requires alternative practice approaches whose actions could benefit from the indigenous pathways to social work engagement in political practice. Elders' wisdom, the politics of harmonious co-existence, truth speaking and reconciliation are indigenous ideals that could guide social work actions. We have proposed that working with communities, political contestants, election policymakers and other human rights defenders could strengthen the promotion of social work practice that is political, and human rights focused in this politically contested context.

In this way, social work will be actively, vigorously, impactfully and publically engaged in the politics that shape the human rights and social justice landscape in the country. We also think that this could make social work to be equally engaged for better outcomes in policy, legislation and other actions that inform political contestations. We find this approach as both decolonising and indigenising social work in Uganda and beyond. This is because it taps grass-root resources, sanctions, power and other potentials that can champion the respect of human rights. This respect would be extended to include the rights of political commentators, critics, opponents and competitors. Consequently, Ugandan social workers should embrace a political practice stance that safeguards the human rights of citizens during political cycles. Additionally, this stance will contribute towards building a credible political leadership that safeguards the rights and wellness of society. To build such a leadership, we also ask social workers to engage in elective politics, take on political offices and train in political practice.

References

Amaceh, H. (2021, January 29). *In defence of the elders forum of Uganda – Part II.* Monitor. https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/oped/columnists/bernard-tabaire/in-defence-of-the-elders-forum-of-uganda-part-ii-1731466.

Bacevic, Z. & Herz, M. (2023). Towards an agonistic social work: A framework for political action and radical practice. *European Journal of Social Work,* 26(6), 1164–1177. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2023.2190052

Bagala, A. (2020, November 24). *Death toll from riots rises to 50.* Monitor. https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/special-reports/death-toll-from-riots-rises-to-50--3208320.

Bee, M. (2024, June 19th). *Should a social worker bother to read a political manifesto?* Social Work News. https://www.mysocialworknews.com/article/should-a-social-worker-bother-to-read-a-political-manifesto.

Botonon, I. (2015). *Social accountability: An introduction to civic engagement for improved service delivery.* International Rescue Committee. https://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/document/565/ircsocialaccountability discussionpaper.pdf.

Bukuluki, P., Höjer, S. & Jansson, B. (2017). Motives and career choices among Ugandan social work students. *European Journal of Social Work*, 22(4), 712–724. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2017.1399252

Butagira, T. & Kamurungi, E. (2021, May 17). *Govt* [government] *probe report on November riots leaks.* Monitor. https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/govt-probe-report-on-november-riots-leaks-3403830

Department of Social Work and Social Administration (2023). *Proposed Doctor of Philosophy in social work by coursework and research* [GDSW program document]. Kyambogo University.

Department of Social Work and Social Administration (2024, January 10). *Master of Social Work, Kyambogo University.* https://socialscience.kyu.ac.ug/academic-programmes-swsa/masters-of-social-work-gmasw/.

Institute for Social and Economic Rights (2018). *An assessment of the role and effectiveness of Barazas in decision-making processes.* Institute for Social and

Economic Rights. https://iser-uganda.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Baraza_Policy_Brief.pdf.

International Federation of Social Work & International Association of Schools of Social Work (2018). *Global social work statement of ethical principles* https://www.ifsw.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Global-Social-Work-Statement-of-Ethical-Principles-IASSW-27-April-2018-1.pdf.

International Federation of Social Work (IFSW) & International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) (2014). *Global definition of the social work profession.* https://www.ifsw.org/what-is-social-work/global-definition-of-social-work/.

Kalinaki, K. D. (2022, October 20). *Forgotten voters and the empty promise of our politics-part II.* Monitor. https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/oped/columnists/daniel-kalinaki/forgotten-voters-and-the-empty-promise-of-our-politics-part-ii-3991388.

Kasozi, K. B. A. (1994). *The social origins of violence in Uganda, 1964 to 1985.* McGill-Queens University press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780773564879

Kayonga, C. (2023, October 30). *Dead or alive? The curious case of NUP's missing supporters.* Monitor. https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/magazines/people-power/dead-or-alive-curious-case-of-nup-s-missing-supporters-4417072.

Khisa, M. (2015). Political uncertainty and its impact on social service delivery in Uganda. *Africa Development*, *40*(4), 159-188

Kiyonga, D. (2022, December 04). *2020 protests and the changing face of Uganda-West relations.* Monitor. https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/magazines/people-power/2020-protests-and-the-changing-face-of-uganda-west-relations-4042576.

Lane, R. S., Ostrander, J. & Smith, R. T. (2018). 'Politics is social work with power': Training social workers for elected office. *Social Work Education*, 37(1), 1-16. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2017.1366975

Makubuya, N. A. (2018). *Protection, patronage, or plunder? British mechanisations and (B)uganda's struggle for independence*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Martinez, S. (2021). Power, politics, and social work: The need to reinvent social work around the world. In: Boulet, J. & Hawkins, L. (Eds.), *Practical and political approaches to recontextualizing social work* (pp. 229-240). IGI Global Scientific Publishing. https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-6784-5.ch012

McClendon, J., Lane, R. S., Ostrander, J. & Smith, R. T. (2020). Training social workers for political engagement: Exploring regional differences in the United States. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 40(2), 147-168. https://doi.org/10.1080/08841233.2020.1724240

Mitchell, I. M. (2023). Indigenous land rights and contentious politics in Africa: The case of Uganda. *Ethnopolitics,* 22(3), 353-373. https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2022.2035513

Monitor (2021a, November 20). *November riots: How victims were killed.* Monitor. https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/special-reports/november-riots-how-victims-were-killed-3625394.

Monitor (2021b, January 05). *What happens at a Baraza?* Monitor. https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/lifestyle/reviews-profiles/what-happens-at-a-baraza--1554032.

Monitor (2021c, February 02). *Public order management act: Bad law or poor enforcement?* Monitor. https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/special-reports/public-order-management-act-bad-law-or-poor-enforcement--1617972

Mooneyhan, S. W. (2014, January 9). *Uganda genocide: A nightmare finally comes to an end.* World Vision. https://www.worldvision.org/disaster-relief-news-stories/uganda-genocide-nightmare-finally-end.

Muchanyerei, B. (2017). Apathy or fear? The role of social workers in Zimbabwe's political discourse. *African Journal of Social Work,* 7(2), 60-64

Musisi, F. & Wandera, D. (2021, November 22). *No accountability one year after deadly riots left scores dead.* Monitor. https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/special-reports/no-accountability-one-year-after-deadly-riots-left-scores-dead-3627552.

Musisi, F. C., Herst, O. R. & Mahajubu, A. (2018). Unlocking the mysteries of the origins of the 1966 Ugandan constitutional crisis. *Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 6(3), 14-25.

Nantume, G. (2021, January 04). *Many protest victims were below 30 years, says survey.* Monitor. https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/special-reports/many-protest-victims-were-below-30-years-says-survey-3246742.

National Association of Social Workers of Uganda [NASWU] (2012). *Code of ethics for National Association of Social Workers of Uganda.*

https://www.ifsw.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/CODE-OF-ETHICS-FOR-NASWU.pdf.

National Council for Higher Education [NCHE] (2019). *Minimum standards and competency framework for social work education and training in Uganda* https://www.ifsw.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/29_06_2019_Final-Minimum-Standards-and-Competency-Framework-1-2-1-1.pdf.

National Resistance Movement (2021). *"2021-2026 National Resistance Movement (NRM) manifesto: Securing your future"*. NRM secretariate https://www.mediacentre.go.ug/sites/default/files/media/NRM%20Manifesto%202021-2026.pdf.

Ntanda, M. B. (2020, January 31). *Social workers are not useless, irrelevant*. New Vision. https://www.newvision.co.ug/news/1514280/social-workers-irrelevant.

NTV News (2022, October 2). *Panorama: DGF (Democratic Governance Facility) ends support in Uganda*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=02cfpL_b9Ys.

Pawar, M. (2014). Social Work Practice with Local Communities in Developing Countries: Imperatives for Political Engagement. *SAGE Open*, *4*(2). https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244014538640

Pritzker, S. & Burwell, C. (2016). Promoting election-related policy practice among social work students. *Journal of Social Work Education*, *52*(4), 434-447. https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2016.1198294

Pritzker, S. & Lane, R. S. (2017). Political social work: History, forms, and opportunities for innovation. *Social Work*, *62*(1), 80–82. https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/sww072

Republic of Uganda (2016). *The Non-governmental Organization Act, 2016.* https://mia.go.ug/sites/default/files/resources/The-Non-Governmental-Organisations-Act-2016.pdf.

Republic of Uganda (2020). *The national development plan (NDPIII) 2020/21-2024/25.* National Planning Authority (NPA). http://www.npa.go.ug/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/NDPIII-Finale_Compressed.pdf.

Rome, S. H. & Hoechstetter, S. (2010). Social work and civic engagement: The political participation of professional social workers. *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*, 37(3), 107-129. https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.3541

Sadek, J. (2023, May 30). *Democratic Governance Facility closure event* [Speech]. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2023/DGF%20Board %20Chair%20Remarks%20Closure%20Event%2030.05.2023.pdf.

Sanya, W. (2013, November 23). *Elders' forum launched to spearhead peace*. New Vision. https://www.newvision.co.ug/news/1334541/elders-forum-launched-spearhead-peace.

Severance, J. (2024, October 16). *Voting is social work: Empowering social workers to empower voters.* UConn Today. https://today.uconn.edu/2024/10/voting-is-social-work-empowering-social-workers-to-empower-voters/#.

Sewpaul, V. (2016). Politics with soul: Social work and the legacy of Nelson Mandela. *International Social Work, 59*(6), 697-708. https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872815594226

Spitzer, H. (2019). Social work in East Africa: A mzungu perspective. *International Social Work, 62*(2), 567–580. https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872817742696

Twikirize, M. J. (2014). Social work education and practice in Uganda: A historical perspective. In: Spitzer, H., Twikirize, J. M. & Wairire G. G. (Eds.), *Professional social work in East Africa: Towards social development, poverty reduction, and gender equity* (pp. 136-148). Fountain Publishers.

Twikirize, M. J., Asingwire, N., Omona, J., Lubanga, R. & Kafuko, A. (2013). *The role of social work in poverty reduction and the realisation of Millennium Development Goals in Uganda*. Fountain Publishers.

Vandeputte, N. (2023). The suspension of the Democratic Governance Facility in Uganda: The illusion of "politically smart aid." *Development in Practice, 34*(3), 336–350. https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2023.2238915

Wamara, C. K. & Carvalho, M. I. (2021). Discrimination and injustice against older people in Uganda: Implications for social work practice. *International Social Work, 64*(6), 1022-1034. https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872819858740

Wamara, C. K. (2017). Corruption in Uganda: Does this have anything to do with social work? *Journal of Human Rights and Social Work, 2*, 52–61. https://doi.org/10.1007/s41134-017-0031-6

Wandera, D. (2021, November 23). *November riots report: Stray bullets killed 39 victims*. Monitor. https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/special-reports/november-riots-report-stray-bullets-killed-39-victims-3628160.

Wanyenya, P. (2024, September 26). *Gov't* [Government] *plans law to restore respect for elders*. Parliament Watch. https://parliamentwatch.ug/news-amp-updates/govt-plans-law-to-restore-respect-for-elders/

Wilkins, S. & Vokes, R. (2023). Transition, transformation, and the politics of the future in Uganda. *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, *17*(1-2), 262-279. https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2023.2236848