

Ugandan President Begins Re-election Bid

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High-spirited Museveni procession kicks off campaigning for first democratic elections in over twenty years.

Chanting slogans, blowing whistles and wearing bright yellow shirts and caps, supporters jammed the streets of Kampala on December 15 to cheer President Yoweri Museveni.

Organised by his powerful National Resistance Movement party, which has ruled Uganda for 20 years, the Museveni procession kicked off campaigning for the country's first multi-party elections in more than two decades.

This past week Museveni and five others were certified as legal presidential candidates by the national Electoral Commission from a large tent erected in the Mandela National Stadium.

Museveni said only that he was excited by his nomination for the March elections and promised to advance democracy.

Democracy will be a key issue in the election. After Ugandans voted in July to have constitutionally mandated multi-party elections, Museveni convinced parliament to remove term limits, opening the door to life-long consecutive presidencies.

Among the other candidates is Miria Obote, wife of the late Apollo Milton Obote, who was twice president of Uganda and died in exile this fall. Miria Obote will represent her late husband's party, the Uganda People's Congress.

Obote's nomination makes her the first and only woman to contest the country's presidency, though most observers give her little chance of presenting a serious challenge to Museveni.

Meanwhile, Museveni's most serious opponent, Dr Kizza Besigye, remained in jail as his lawyers argued at the Constitutional Court that the government cannot put Besigye on trial in both civilian and military courts.

Besigye faces one trial for treason and rape in the High Court and separate charges of terrorism and illegal possession of firearms in a court martial.

The lawyers made little progress, however. They accused one of the court's judges of bias because of past conflicts with Besigye when he was the chief of logistics in the Uganda People's Defense Forces and a subordinate to the man who is now a judge, Stephen Kavuma.

Lawyers argued that Kavuma was a key figure in establishing a system by which a civilian can be tried in a military court. The court left the decision to Kavuma to remove himself and adjourned until late next week, leaving Besigye in jail.

The day before, Besigye was allowed to stand for president after being nominated by his party, the Forum for Democratic Change. The certification followed weeks of political wrangling and conflicting legal opinions.

Besigye's jailing was underscored when FDC officials and his well-known wife, Winnie Byanyima, put her husband's campaign poster in an empty chair in front of the commission as his nomination papers were presented.

Other candidates include the former mayor of Kampala, Nasser Ntegge Ssebaggala, who is running as an independent candidate after he failed to secure the nomination of the Democratic Party and broke away with the support of the party's youth wing.

Ssebaggal was arrested in the US on fraud charges in 1998 and served time in jail there. In 2001, he was unable to run for president because he lacked adequate academic qualifications.

Rounding up the list of candidates are the current Kampala Mayor Ssebaana Kizito, who represents the fractured Democratic Party, and independent Abed Bwanika, who is a veterinarian.

Drama and humour were injected into what could have been strictly political affair, when a host of independents including an actor and a comedian were turned away.

Wanjara Wagobe of the Uganda Mandate Party generated some laughter when instead of handing in the required papers, he spoke out for the jailed Besigye.

Then a popular Ugandan actor, Bush Ainebyona, strode into the nomination venue sporting his long grey beard and complained to the commission that his rights had been violated.

Ainebyona said it was wrong for the Electoral Commission to require a poor man like him to raise the 8 million shilling (about 4,000 US dollars) nomination fee and to traverse the country to collect the necessary 4,600 signatures for his petitions.

Further drama came when a blind man, Shafik Mwanje Mwaura, failed to present the required signatures to approve his nomination and was led away by supporters.

Finally, professional comedian Paddy Bitama showed up wearing shades and his trademark plaited hair, then handed the commission a check instead of the required bank draft. When it was rejected, Bitama broke into fake tears and was led away by commission officers.

In an ominous sign of the coming 10-week campaign, however, crowds cheered when a notorious former commander, Major Roland Kakooza Mutale, led a marching band in the Museveni campaign launch.

Now a presidential adviser, Mutale once headed the Kalangala Action Plan, KAP, a well-known paramilitary

squad that was accused of beating and terrorising supporters of Museveni's opponents.

Although Mutale denied the charges, a parliamentary probe on violence in the 2001 presidential election named him and his KAP as being responsible.

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