



“Civil Society and the Quest for Political and Social Accountability in Uganda”

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Fifty years after independence, genuine democracy continues to elude Uganda. Patronage politics, highly centralized power, military involvement in partisan politics, legal restrictions, and low levels of civic competence all present challenges to democratic consolidation. Yet Reagan-Fascell Democracy Fellow **Frank Rusa Nyakaana**, senior program officer at the Democratic Governance Facility, remains hopeful: “I choose to call Uganda a hybrid regime because I am optimistic that we can still recover the space that we are beginning to lose and pick up some traction.”

“Uganda today is a hybrid political system where aspects of democratic and authoritarian governance exist side by side. In order to strengthen representative institutions, an inclusive and well-coordinated civil society must lead the effort to assert the interests of ordinary citizens through the optimal use of the democratic spaces available. Civil society should focus on those activities that articulate how democracy can and should improve the lives of Ugandans.”

—Frank Rusa Nyakaana
Lawyer, Uganda

Cultivating vigilance within civil society, Nyakaana noted, will facilitate the adoption of democratic practices by government and citizens alike. The Ugandan authorities remain suspicious that governance work by civil society is geared toward regime change, but activists can dispel these suspicions, he argued, by maintaining constructive relations with the government. The Ugandan regime must view civil society not as an adversary, but as a partner in promoting prosperity. By fostering a democratic culture at the grassroots level, Nyakaana added, democratic practices can truly begin to take hold in Uganda.

Discussant Eric Robinson, senior program officer for Africa at the National Endowment for Democracy, commended Nyakaana for his balanced discussion of Uganda’s political evolution and thorough analysis of the opportunities available to civil society groups committed to building a multiparty democracy. Robinson also extended Nyakaana’s call to governments worldwide to allow civil society the space to maneuver. “It is on governments around the world to be brave,” Robinson said. “It takes so much more bravery to reach out to civil society [and] to be open to criticism.”

In response to questions, Nyakaana identified the military’s involvement in partisan politics and controversial management of Ugandan abundant oil resources as challenges to the full adoption of democratic institutions. He said activists must make optimal use of the space still available to strengthen civil society’s capacity to demand governmental accountability and transparency.

The Reagan-Fascell Democracy Fellows Program enables activists, practitioners, scholars, and journalists from around the world to deepen their understanding of democracy and enhance their ability to promote democratic change. The views expressed in this presentation represent the analysis and opinions of the speaker and do not necessarily reflect those of the National Endowment for Democracy or its staff.