

# **WE ALL BEAR THE RESPONSIBILITY TO FORGE THE UGANDAN NATION**

## **A Statement by Civil Society on the recent riots in Kampala and neighbouring Districts**

### **Preamble**

Civil Society in Uganda would like to express very deep concern on the worrisome events and riots that rocked Kampala City, its suburbs and some neighbouring districts last week. The riots, sparked off after the Uganda Police Force blocked a planned tour to Bugerere County in Kayunga district by the Katikiro of Buganda on Thursday, September 10<sup>th</sup> 2009 in preparation for a trip to the same area by His Highness the Kabaka of Buganda; to officiate at Youth Day Celebrations, exposed several pitfalls in our country. What was initially seen as a simple act by the Police to block the Katikiro of Buganda led to a cyclic and spontaneous uprising by some sections of citizens in Kampala and some surrounding districts in response to what they considered unfair treatment to the Katikiro and by implication His Highness the Kabaka of Buganda and his subjects.

The turn of events thereafter was regrettable. The riots and excessive use of force by the state security agencies left over 15 Ugandans dead, scores more injured, massive destruction of property, businesses and economic losses especially by innocent people, a breakdown in the rule of law and violations of human and civic rights of Ugandan citizens. The turbulence also led to significant disruptions to the peace and stability in Kampala city and surrounding districts. The events in the last week have also painted a negative picture of Uganda in the international press, a reality that works to undermine the country's economic interests and international standing.

While calm has been restored, it is important that we do not lose sight of the underlying problems our nation faces, for which the events in the last week are only a symptom. The events last week should not be narrowly interpreted as a clash between the Central Government and Buganda Kingdom; rather it should be seen as representing existing tensions that exist in our society today. We believe that having a cultural identity does not necessarily stand in the way of a national identity and as a nation; we should celebrate unity in our diversity.

### **The Underlying Problem**

Civil Society observes that what is present-day Uganda is a conglomeration of diverse peoples. While we are fully aware that the process of creating the nation we now call Uganda was haphazard and imposed, we strongly believe that it is possible, in our times, to forge a Uganda in which diverse peoples live together in peace and harmony. Many countries in the world have successfully walked this path.

Our historical undoing has been that all post-independent leaders and governments have not dealt with historical injustices that many peoples of Uganda feel. Notwithstanding the commendable and landmark process of developing the 1995 Constitution of the Republic of Uganda, there has not been any other meaningful opportunity for Ugandans to thoroughly discuss the political future of this country and a governance system that would lead to the realization of a Uganda that represents the collective aspirations of its diverse inhabitants.

## **The Immediate and Long-term Solution**

Given the events in the last week, it may be tempting and attractive to focus on containing the riots and forcefully restoring calm. However, while this may be logical in the circumstances, it is only a symptomatic and short-term response. In the view of civil society organisations in Uganda, the long-term solution lies in a non-violent and inclusive political process that will accord the opportunity for Ugandans to engage in a sustained national conversation about the political future of this country. We envisage a process similar to the Constitutional Assembly in the early 1990s, this time involving different interest configurations such as political parties, religious, traditional and cultural institutions, ethnic minorities, the academia, non governmental and other civil society organisations.

As we build consensus over this long-term political agenda emanating from the above view, civil society is fully aware of the need for an immediate response to the events in the last week. We therefore make the following calls to actors we believe are central to achieving a durable turn-around from the events of the last week.

### **To the Government of Uganda**

- Recognize that Uganda's existence as a nation is being challenged more every passing day. The government should therefore avoid pursuing or encouraging any actions that would lead to further dismemberment of Uganda along ethnic or tribal lines.
- Government should avoid differentiated approaches when dealing with different traditional and cultural institutions. It should instead provide democratic, transparent and decisive leadership to create the necessary conditions under which a Ugandan nation can be forged from different cultural expressions and identities.
- The Government should recognize that the violent turn of events showed a weakness in the state's response and public information in relation to the events. Furthermore, when it did respond, the police used excessive force, showed a lack of adequate preparedness to deal with civil unrest leading to a perpetuation of violence and loss of innocent lives.
- The government must respect and guarantee space for Ugandans that hold divergent views from its own. When the government or any part of it acts in ways that are disrespectful to the rule of law, violate human and civic rights of some citizens, a wrong signal and precedent is set for the wider population.
- The government should rescind its decision to close certain media outlets, lawfully free arrested journalists and always safeguard freedom of expression for all, regardless of political persuasion. The closure of radio stations actually narrows the state's capabilities to reach out to the public or listen to citizen views.

### **To the Kingdom of Buganda**

- Recognize that many Ugandans, including those from other ethnic groups harbour and experience one form of injustice or another. It is important that the demands and aspirations of the Kingdom of Buganda be located in the wider context of forging a harmonious nation.
- That while there is a sense of frustration from bi-lateral talks to resolve the impasse between the Central Government and the Kingdom of Buganda, individuals resorting to violence is neither an option nor a solution to negotiations.

- The Kingdom of Buganda should use its comparative advantages and platforms to mobilize their constituencies, especially the youth to exercise their agency in responsibly engaging with the state to achieve their demands.
- Finally, as civil society we acknowledge the important role other traditional and cultural institutions can play in mobilizing citizens for the collective good. We urge all traditional and cultural institutions to work together to ensure that our cultural diversity does not alienate us as Ugandans, but rather be used as building blocks for our nation.

### **To the Media**

- Whilst bearing a huge responsibility for shaping public opinion and action, the media should ensure that there is objective reporting of events. Leaders in different media houses should do all in their means to ensure that this important platform is used to harness citizen agency for the nation building.
- The media must act responsibly and be a force for long-term nation building by focusing on the long term solutions. It should mobilize goodwill amongst Ugandans to search for durable solutions to Uganda's social, economic and political challenges.

### **To Various Religious Denominations**

- Use the premise that over 90% of Ugandans are believers in or associate with one form of religious denomination or another, and be more proactive in mobilizing Ugandans as a force of good for the nation.
- The leaders from the various religious and faith denominations should come together and help citizens better appreciate how politics, culture, religion and faith can be harnessed as a force for good.
- The different religious denominations should use their respective platforms to preach the word of peace and non violence as we seek immediate and long-term solutions to Uganda's political challenges.

### **To Political Parties**

- All Political Parties must come out and strengthen their call for a non-violent and inclusive political process to redress the underlying political challenges that Uganda faces. Political Parties should desist from making statements that portray them as being in the opposition for the sake of it, and focus their resources on the long-term nation-building agenda.
- We look forward, especially at such difficult times, to different political parties playing a lead role in suggesting alternatives on how the state could function and deal with such challenges as seen last week.

### **To Civil Society**

- Civil Society Organisations should wake up and get out of their comfort zones to play a more active role in searching for solutions to Uganda's contemporary social, economic and political challenges. Civil Society's silence is a betrayal of the trust and expectations that millions of Ugandans have of it.
- While taking reasonable pre-caution, civil society organisations cannot simply close their doors and offices and stay away in the height of tensions. It should use the meagre resources at its

disposal to facilitate non-violent citizen actions, document human rights violations and support victims achieve justice.

### **To the General Public**

- Above all, citizens should realize that they collectively make the Ugandan state what it is. All Ugandans should realize that the recent events are not simply a Central Government - Buganda conflict, but a national concern. As such, all Ugandans, irrespective of ethnicity or tribe bear a huge responsibility and contribution to make to processes that will enable the country overcome its numerous socioeconomic and political challenges.
- Civil society would particularly like to implore all Ugandans to denounce violence and respect the rights and properties of others, as well as the mandate of the state security agencies to protect and safeguard law and order. Citizens should desist from both targeted and indiscriminate destruction of private or public property.

### **Conclusion**

We would like to end by extending our deepest sympathy and condolences to the families of all Ugandans who lost their loved ones in the violent episodes last week. It is our prayer and hope that no more lives are lost because as a nation, the loss of one life is a loss to the nation.

---

**This final statement is a culmination of several inputs and perspectives by concerned civil society organisations in Uganda, for which we are very grateful**

**For further information, write to [info@ngoforum.or.ug](mailto:info@ngoforum.or.ug) or call +256 414 510272**