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The Observer (Kampala)

Uganda: Ignore Museveni On Term Limits, MPs Told

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BY EDWARD SSEKIKA, 27 APRIL 2012

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Civil society organisations under the umbrella of Citizens' Action for the Restoration of Presidential Term Limits have reacted with scorn at the NRM top organ's attempt to gag party Members of Parliament from publicly discussing the restoration of presidential term limits.

The Central Executive Committee (CEC), NRM's top-most organ, resolved on Sunday to stop party lawmakers from public debate of the proposal to restore term limits. The party warned that MPs discussing the matter risk disciplinary action. President Museveni, the NRM chairman, later told the party's National Executive Committee (NEC) that the term limits debate is an unnecessary distraction. But the civil society organisations (CSOs) say the move serves narrow interests. At a joint press conference at Makerere University's St Francis community hall on Wednesday, the members argued that restoration of presidential term limits is a bi-partisan issue. "It is unfortunate that the NRM party organs are making an attempt to trivialise an issue of national importance [into] a partisan conversation," the CSOs said in a statement read by Livingstone Ssewanyana, executive director of Foundation for Human Rights Initiative.

Other CSOs present were: Centre for Constitutional Governance (CCG), Citizen Coalition for Electoral Democracy in Uganda (CCEDU), ActionAid and Uganda Governance Monitoring Platform (UGMP). Ssewanyana, who is also chairperson of CCEDU, stressed that term limits are crucial in guaranteeing peaceful transfer of power, political stability and socio-economic development. It is unfortunate, he added, for NRM to try to patronise and hold its MPs hostage.

The CSOs urged MPs, regardless of their party leaning, to recognise their primary allegiance towards the citizens of Uganda whom they represent and the taxpayers who pay their salaries. Term limits were dropped from the constitution in 2005, following a controversial amendment of Article 105. The amendment was aimed at extending President's rule beyond 2006.

Now, a group of MPs led by Gerald Karuhanga (Youth, Western) is behind a bill that seeks to restore the term limits. Dr Zac Niringiye, assistant Bishop of Kampala diocese, says restoration of term limits should not be blocked in the interest of just one person - President Museveni.

"We have both the responsibility and right to champion the future of this country and shun narrow interests," Dr Niringiye said at the Makerere press conference, adding, "Term limits should be restored this year. I urge the MPs to table the bill as soon as possible".

Dr Niringiye urged Ugandans not to build a system around one person - moreover one that does not accommodate change. He was backed by Irene Ovonji Odida, chairperson of ActionAid International, who said that Uganda is not a project for one person or one political party.

Whip already

Protests notwithstanding, the NRM party appears determined to crack the whip. Aware that if not 'handled well', the proposed bill could kick President Museveni out of State House in 2016, NRM has revitalised its national disciplinary committee, which has been dysfunctional for some time.

The committee, headed by NRM's national vice chairperson Moses Kigongo has not been fully constituted for a while, with three committee members missing. Now, with several independent-minded legislators taking positions that are in conflict with their party's view, President Museveni has filled the vacant positions with Beatrice Wabudeya (former minister for the Presidency), Mike Sebalu (member of the East African Legislative Assembly) and Lilian Abalo. Museveni told NRM's NEC meeting on Tuesday that he would come down hard on undisciplined members unless they changed their ways.

"New controversies are emerging all the time because of cheap popularity seekers and this bias of only talking about the negative. It's not accidental but deliberate," Museveni said.

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