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Article

# The Instrumentalization of Women Opposition Leaders for Authoritarian Regime Entrenchment: The Case of Uganda

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**Abstract**
Electoral authoritarian regimes have sought to use a variety of tactics to remain in power even as they have opened themselves up to competition through multiparty elections. These tactics have included an array of measures targeting opposition women. They became significant in Africa after the 1990s as most countries adopted multiparty systems and ruling parties needed to maintain vote share. Ruling parties in African authoritarian countries strengthened their patronage networks by promoting women as leaders. At the same time, women in opposition parties have fared poorly compared to women in ruling parties and male opposition candidates. This has been the case even where one finds the special dispensation of a gender quota in the form of reserved seats. This article looks at how Uganda's ruling party has used various tactics to advance women leaders, responding to pressures from both the women's movement and international actors while seeking to ensure its continued dominance. It reveals an essential feature of authoritarianism in Africa today, namely the instrumental use of women leaders to entrench the ruling party in power.

**Keywords**
authoritarianism; autocracy; parties; quotas; Uganda; women opposition leaders

**Issue**
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## 1. Introduction

Ruling parties in authoritarian countries have often promoted women as leaders through gender quotas that are ostensibly aimed at promoting women in all parties. However, women in opposition parties have generally fared poorly compared to women in ruling parties and male opposition candidates. In Uganda, for example, women in the opposition have had more difficulty than ruling party women in taking advantage of the reserved parliamentary seats, even though they are purportedly accessible to all women regardless of party affiliation. The challenges opposition women face might not seem so surprising, but this discrepancy is quite significant. It reveals an essential feature of authoritarianism in Africa today, namely that the promotion of women is primarily aimed at maintaining the ruling party's vote share and not necessarily a means to advance women in politics.

The story of opposition women is one of authoritarian entrenchment. This article looks at how authoritarian regimes have become increasingly institutionalized by instrumentalizing women's rights to their own benefit and against the opposition, especially after the introduction of multipartyism in the 1990s. This happened as the need to maintain party dominance became more pressing, with the potential loss of vote share that occurred as most African countries introduced multipartyism. It has had particularly harmful effects on opposition women and leaders, more than on opposition male politicians. Thus, the adoption of reserved seats, which is purportedly done to advance the inclusion of women, ultimately legitimizes an authoritarian regime.

The article begins by explaining the argument, research design, and methods. It provides the motivation for the article, building on the existing literature on reserved seats and women's representation in electoral

authoritarian regimes. It provides a background to the Ugandan case, detailing the status of women in the political opposition parties. It then describes the various strategies the ruling party has adopted to maintain vote share, notably after the country shifted to multipartyism in 2005. This included tactics involving reserved seats, independent women candidates, and tactics of repression and cooptation. The article concludes that these various strategies involving women leaders are part of the ruling party's efforts to maintain vote share and ensure longevity in power.

This article looks at the case of Uganda, a multiparty autocratic country, to show how the ruling party maintains its grip on women's leadership. Not only does the ruling party use the instruments of the state to brutally repress the opposition, but it also attempts to coopt and divide the opposition. The imbalance of opposition women in parliament has more to do with the ruling party and its strategies and less to do with the opposition parties themselves.

Overall, women in Uganda today claim 46% of local government positions, 33% of the parliamentary seats, and 43% of the cabinet positions. Women claim the position of vice president, prime minister, deputy prime minister, speaker of the House, and five out of 11 Supreme Court justices. With the 10th parliament (2016–2021), the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) appointed a woman, Hon. Ruth Nankabirwa Sentamu, as the chief party whip. These are by no means the first such appointments. For example, from 2011 to 2021, Rebecca Kadaga held the position of speaker of the House. Another woman, Speciosa Kazibwe, held the post of vice president from 1994 to 2003. And women have long held top cabinet posts.

These patterns represent a steady increase in women's representation in Uganda since the NRM took over in 1986. In 1989, Uganda adopted a reserved system in parliament that set aside seats for women in each district. In the 2021 parliamentary election, 146 women were elected to reserved seats, one for each district. An additional 14 were elected to open seats (out of a total of 353 seats), and 13 were elected to special interest group seats (out of 30). The opposition parties combined have claimed only *one-fifth of the reserved seats for women*, far less than their hold on 29% of the open seats. In contrast, the ruling party controls 64% of the parliamentary seats and 80% of the reserved seats for women, according to the Uganda Electoral Commission (2021). This is not counting women in other appointed, reserved, and independent seats controlled by the ruling party. In this article, I argue that promoting women's rights is part of an instrumental strategy by authoritarian regimes to remain in power and further entrench themselves. Women were not promoted in Ugandan politics simply out of a desire for inclusivity but, also, because this was a mechanism through which the ruling party could maintain their dominant vote share as they opened up to multipartyism. The expansion of the number of districts and reserved seats and the increases in appointed parliamentary seats and independent candidates occurred when the country adopted multipartyism and appears to be part of a broader strategy to ensure NRM dominance.

Uganda fits the modal African party system in which a hegemonic presidential party dominates the political landscape, surrounded by several smaller parties, including the Democratic Party and the Uganda People's Congress (UPC) of the former president, Milton Obote. After President Yoweri Museveni took over in 1986, Uganda was governed by his "no-party" NRM, which was ostensibly a broad-based movement but operated as a de facto single party. It became a multiparty system in 2005 following a referendum. The Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) emerged as the main opposition party in 2004, followed by the National Unity Platform (NUP), which controlled the largest share of opposition seats after the 2021 elections.

The primary motivation for the ruling party's tactics has been the need to remain in power, particularly after the country adopted a multiparty system in 2005. At that time, there was a drop in support for the NRM in parliamentary elections from 100% in 2001 to 67% in 2006 and similar rates in subsequent elections. Museveni also experienced a drop in support from 69% in the 2001 presidential elections to 59% in 2005 and 58% in the 2020 elections. The new challenges from the opposition, even if it is fractured, have meant that maintaining vote share is the paramount goal of the NRM.

The article draws on 45 in-depth interviews in Uganda with women's rights leaders, parliamentarians, ruling and opposition party leaders, journalists, lawyers, academics, members of the judiciary, including a Supreme Court justice and a High Court justice, representatives from the Ministry of Women's Affairs, several former ministers, including the first minister of women in development, members of the Constitutional Commission, and many others. The interviews were part of a more extensive five-country study on women and authoritarianism in Africa.

Since I was interested in the political elite, most interviews were based in Kampala. The interviews were conducted in 2020 and 2022 via Zoom, WhatsApp, and in person in Uganda, regarding the impact of regime type on women's rights. The majority of interviews were carried out over Zoom and Whatsapp in 2020, during the period of confinement due to Covid-19. Interviewees were selected through snowball sampling and were representative of different political parties, sectors of society, ethnicities, and ages. A Ugandan research assistant, a graduate student in gender and women's studies at Makerere University, set up the interviews. Although this was not an ideal modality for conducting interviews, I have done extensive research in Uganda since 1992 and have interviewed hundreds of such individuals over the years. Many interviewees already knew me or knew of my many books and articles on women and politics in

Uganda. The interviews generally lasted between one and one and a half hours.

The interview questions varied depending on the experiences of the individual, but generally, the interviews examined the impacts of the women's movement, politicians, parties, courts, and other actors on the women's rights agenda in Uganda. The interviews probed changes over time. They examined the limits of the NRM agenda and the interactions between the NRM and the opposition. Since the relationship between the NRM and the opposition is a key element in differentiating authoritarian countries like Uganda from democracies in Africa, this was a major focus of the interviews.

## 2. Women's Representation in Electoral Authoritarian Regimes

Women's political leadership has historically been associated with democracies. However, cross-national statistical studies have shown that this is not the case in Africa. In fact, in Africa, autocracies have been as likely to advance women as leaders as democracies, especially regimes with entrenched ruling parties that have remained in power for decades (Tripp, in press). At the same time, autocrats have had no qualms about repressing women in the opposition and preventing their advancement as leaders.

Some of the literature on quotas has focused on the positive aspects of reserved seats for women because they are regarded as a mechanism to advance a women's rights agenda (Qureshi & Ahmad, 2022; Yoon, 2013). Reserved seats are seen as a way of encouraging women to participate in politics (Burain, 2014; Song, 2016), closing the gender gap in political representation, enhancing gender equality, and as evidence for the redress of past imbalances (Nanivadekar, 2006), especially in countries that are culturally less amenable to women's public roles. Quotas, including reserved seats, are sometimes viewed as a positive response to pressures from women's movements and coalitions (Kang & Tripp, 2018; Krook, 2006) and pressures from international bodies like the United Nations to ensure stronger representation of women in political decision-making (Bush & Zetterberg, 2021).

More critical accounts have suggested that such quotas represent "autocratic genderwashing" to hide the less savory aspects of authoritarian rule (Bjarnegård & Zetterberg, 2022). Reserved seats may limit women's meaningful ability to influence policymaking, as in the case of Rwanda (Burnet, 2020), or block women from accessing constituency seats (Darhour & Dahlerup, 2013). What generally is not considered—and what this article explores—is the implications reserved seats have for the strengthening of autocracy, particularly strategies to quelch the opposition. Quotas are often treated as a neutral mechanism in the literature, but much depends on the political environment in which they are introduced. Targeting opposition women is integral to this tactic of adopting reserved seats. Yet the inclusion of marginalized groups through quotas is said to lend legitimacy to a political system and enhance the prospects of incumbents winning elections (Dahlerup & Freidenvall, 2005; Franceschet & Piscopo, 2008; Nanivadekar, 2006). But herein lies a dilemma: Quotas can be used not only to advance inclusion but also to further entrench autocratic ruling parties.

In this account, quotas are not only a response to pressure from women's movements but also a means by which hegemonic ruling parties maintain dominance and longevity in power. This article contributes to the literature on authoritarianism by showing how ruling parties use women to entrench themselves in power while sidelining opposition women. As Bernhard et al. (2020) have shown, incumbent authoritarians open themselves to the risk of losing when they introduce multiparty competition, but with time they generally gain legitimacy and regime strength. The instrumentalization of women's leadership and isolation of opposition women are vital components of this strategy of entrenching themselves. Incumbent leaders in authoritarian countries have multiple legal and illegal means of excluding opponents from the electoral competition (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Schedler, 2002).

As incumbent parties were threatened with the loss of vote share with the introduction of multipartyism in the 1990s in Africa, they sought new strategies to remain in power to further institutionalize their hegemonic position. This coincided with efforts by international and regional organizations like the United Nations and the African Union to pressure governments to increase women's representation. Adopting quotas such as reserved seats became one mechanism that authoritarian executive leaders adopted to further entrench their parties and regimes in power. Other strategies of control regarding women included outright repression, cooptation of opposition women in leadership positions, and attempts to build coalitions with various opposition parties, often through women leaders.

All but two of the countries with reserved seat systems globally are non-democratic. In almost all non-democratic countries with functioning parliaments that have reserved seats, most women can be found in seats controlled by the ruling party and/or parties affiliated with the ruling party. In the remaining countries, the ruling party holds the preponderance of seats, thus maintaining its dominant position, even where the opposition parties combined have more seats (Table 1). Opposition parties have responded by promoting few women parliamentary candidates, making the likelihood of opposition women leaders emerging even more of a rarity. By opposition women leaders, I am referring to women who hold leadership positions in opposition parties that are represented in parliament.

This article asks why have the opposition parties not been as successful in capturing female reserved seats as males or even females in open seats, even though these parties have had women in top leadership positions of

**Table 1.** Women parliamentarians in reserved seats: Ruling party vs. opposition parties, 2022.

| Country | Freedom House ranking | Women in parliament | Women in reserved seats | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | Ruling party women parliamentarians | Opposition women parliamentarians | Independent women parliamentarians |
| Bangladesh | 39 Partly free | 20.90% | 86% (62) | 13% (9) | 1% (1) |
| Burundi | 14 Not free | 38.20% | 76% (35) | 24% (11) | 0% (0) |
| China | 9 Not free | 24.90% | 49% (435 est.) | 51% (307 est.) | 0% (0) |
| Djibouti | 24 Not free | 26.20% | 93% (14) | 7% (1) | 0% (0) |
| Egypt | 18 Not free | 27.70% | 38% (27) | 54% (38) | 8% (6) |
| Eswatini | 17 Not free | 13.5% | Not applicable | Not applicable | Not applicable |
| Guyana | 73 Free | 35.70% | 46% (11) | 54% (13) | 0% (0) |
| Haiti | 37 Partly free | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% (0) |
| Iraq | 29 Not free | 29.80% | 33% (31) | 62% (59) | 5% (5) |
| Jordan | 34 Not free | 11.50% | Not applicable | 0% | 100% (15) |
| Kenya | 48 Partly free | 21.60% | 56% (39) | 41% (29) | 3% (2) |
| Mauritania | 35 Partly free | 20.3% | 60% (12) | 40% (8) | 0% (0) |
| Morocco | 37 Partly free | 24.10% | 47%** (45) | 63% (50) | 0% (0) |
| Nepal | 56 Partly free | 32.70% | 58% (52) | 42% (38) | 0% (0) |
| Niger | 48 Partly free | 25.90% | Not available | Not available | Not available |
| Pakistan | 37 Partly free | 20.20% | 45% (31) | 55% (38) | 0% (0) |
| Rwanda | 21 Not free | 61.30% | 90% (44) | 10% (5) | 0% (0) |
| Samoa | 81 Free | 9.10% | 75% (3) | 25% (1) | 0% (0) |
| Saudi Arabia | 7 Not free | 19.90%* | Not applicable | Not applicable | Not applicable |
| Somalia | 7 Not free | 24.40%* | Not available | Not available | Not available |
| Tanzania | 34 Partly free | 36.90% | 92% (94) | 8% (8) | Not applicable |
| Uganda | 34 Not free | 33.80% | 42% (61) | 26% (38) | 32%* (48) |
| United Arab Emirates | 17 Not free | 50%* | Not applicable | Not applicable | Not applicable |
| Zimbabwe | 28 Not free | 30.60% | 61% (52) | 39% (33) | 0% (0) |

Notes: * appointed; ** ruling coalition; the numbers vary from year to year, making this an estimate; Afghanistan and Eritrea have had reserved seats for women in the past: Afghanistan has not convened its National Assembly since 2021 when the Taliban took over and transferred power to an all-male Leadership Council; Eritrea has not convened its parliament since 2002. Sources: Freedom House (2023), International IDEA et al. (2022), Inter-Parliamentary Union (2019), see also Harvard Dataverse for sources for this dataset.

their parties. The article argues that it has to do with the logic of authoritarian rule and the need by ruling parties to further entrench themselves to remain in power by seeking new forms of legitimacy, such as the adoption of reserved seats. In the case of Uganda, women in the opposition are de-campaigned vigorously by the ruling party and have found that running women for reserved seats is a losing proposition. Although, to some extent, the regime is interested in responding to women's rights activists who demand increased female representation, ultimately, its main goal is to remain in power, and it instrumentalizes women's representation to ensure its dominance.

Most discussions of adopting quotas and promoting women as leaders in Africa have focused on the end of the Cold War, changes in international norms and practices after the 1995 Beijing Conference, and donor strategies (Bush, 2011). However, in Uganda, the reserved seat system started in the late 1980s prior to these international trends, and it was used to strengthen the NRM by reinforcing new patronage structures (Tripp, 2000). Tamale (1999) argues that the affirmative action program of the NRM came out of its desire to show the international community after the takeover in 1986 that it was committed to democracy, had transcended its military claims to power, and garnered greater legitimacy. It was also, in part, a reward for the contributions of women to the five-year guerrilla struggle on the condition that they supported the NRM (Tripp, 2000).

In Africa, women's representation more generally is influenced by the use of quotas (Bauer & Britton, 2006), post-conflict impacts (Tripp, 2015), women's movements

(Kang & Tripp, 2018), the electoral system (Lindberg, 2004), and levels of corruption (Stockemer, 2011). But other region-specific factors influence these dynamics as well.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, women's rights have also been used to expand clientelistic networks and constituencies. Leaders in the Maghreb countries of Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria have used women's rights, in part, to marginalize violent extremists and Salafists to improve their external image and enhance their position as trading partners with Europe and Africa (Tripp, 2019). The appointment of women leaders has been used in some African countries for international status signaling to soften the image of an illiberal regime in the hopes of accessing greater foreign direct investments, loans, and foreign aid and enhancing trade relations (Bush & Zetterberg, 2020). Governments believe that advancing women in parliament is a good way to signal gender equity globally since women's legislative representation is one of the most commonly used measures for indicating a commitment to gender equity (Arendt, 2018).

An important way that regimes remain in power is by broadening their ruling coalitions. One might surmise that since women represent over half of the population, this makes them a key constituency to bring on board politically, especially given their own political aspirations. As newcomers to politics, women often find it most expedient to align themselves with the ruling party, knowing that they are most likely to win with the party's support and are less likely to be de-campaigned. We now turn to discuss how women emerged as leaders in Uganda under NRM and how an initiative aimed at including women, in general, excluded opposition women political aspirants.

## 3. Background

Women did not feature in any significant way in the authoritarian governments in Uganda until President Yoweri Museveni and his NRM took over in 1986. In the 1989 elections for the National Resistance Council (the NRM-led legislature), 18% of the seats were held by women due to the introduction of affirmative action reserved seats for women. This followed patterns established during the guerrilla war that brought Museveni to power, in which seats were set aside for women on the local-level resistance councils, particularly in the Luwero area of central Uganda. Women's rights activists later mobilized to ensure that the reserved seats were embedded in the revised 1995 constitution.

Parties also made commitments to women. According to the NRM (2015), 40% of all political positions should be reserved for women except where it was not practical to do so; however, it had not aggressively tried to meet these goals until after 2005. A major change in tactics occurred when Uganda adopted multipartyism in 2005. After this time, the NRM had to worry more about maintaining its vote share. Unlike the opposition parties, the NRM at this time significantly increased its percentage of female ministers, women in parliament (Table 2), and local government.

Ironically, despite the divisiveness of the NRM leadership, both opposition and NRM women parliamentarians have worked closely together in the Uganda Women's Parliamentary Association, which is the most active parliamentary caucus. Both opposition and NRM women parliamentarians are equally committed to a women's rights agenda (Wang, 2013), as are women in open and reserved seats (Clayton et al., 2017). The Uganda Women's Parliamentary Association has championed key legislation, including laws around inheritance, marriage, divorce, female genital mutilation, trafficking of persons, gender-based violence, public order management, and maternity leave. They have also collaborated on girl child education, sexual violence, maternal health care, and early marriage. These are all issues supported by the NRM but also the opposition parties.

Women in the opposition are slightly more likely to bring up gender-related issues in parliamentary sessions than women in the NRM; however, these findings are not robust in a study of 14 years of parliamentary discourse (Clayton et al., 2017). Women in reserved seats are more active in parliament in making interventions than women in open seats, even though women in reserved seats differ little from women in open seats in the Ugandan

**Table 2.** Women in Uganda's parliament.

| Year | Districts (No.) | Affirmative action seats | Women in open seats | Women appointed | Total women | Total MPs | Women (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1989* | 39 | 39 | 2 | 9 | 50 | 280 | 18 |
| 1996* | 39 | 39 | 8 | 4 | 51 | 276 | 19 |
| 2001* | 56 | 56 | 13 | 6 | 75 | 304 | 24 |
| 2006 | 79 | 79 | 14 | 1 | 100 | 319 | 31 |
| 2011 | 112 | 112 | 11 | 8 | 131 | 375 | 35 |
| 2016 | 112 | 112 | 18 | 9 | 139 | 426 | 33 |
| 2021 | 146 | 146 | 18 | 13 | 167 | 529 | 32 |

Note: * The parliamentary body was called National Resistance Council in 1989, 1996, and 2001. Source: Nakaweesi-Kimbugwe et al. (2019).

parliament in terms of their qualifications (Clayton et al., 2017; O'Brien, 2012). Some have argued that this is because the women in the reserved seats feel accountable to their constituencies, the women's movement, and the NRM. But this would be true of NRM women in open seats as well. This study suggests that pressure from the women's movement explains the behavior of women parliamentarians in different parties and different types of seats.

## 4. Women Leaders in Opposition

The change in NRM's strategy toward women's representation has impacted opposition parties, which also had set targets for women's representation. Opposition parties have promoted women where they can, selecting several notable women leaders at the highest levels over the years. Betty Nambooze served as spokesperson for the Democratic Party (2005–2010) and subsequently as MP. In 2021 she won another term representing Mukono Municipality on the NUP ticket. Miria Obote, the wife of Uganda's founding president Milton Obote, was president of the UPC from 2005 until 2010 and ran for president in 2006. Cecilia Ogwal served as the UPC's acting secretary general between 1985 and 1992. She was active in the Constituent Assembly in 1994 and has been a member of parliament since 1996. Sharon Oyat Arach was appointed as UPC spokesperson in 2020. Of the UPC's top leadership circle of nine individuals, one-third are women, including the party spokesperson (Sharon Oyat Arach), national woman leader (Miria Muhwezi), and assistant woman leader (Racheal Neluba).

Several women have started parties of their own. Beti Olive Kamya-Turwomwe became the first woman in Uganda to form a political party in 2010—the Uganda Federal Alliance—and was a presidential candidate in 2011. Before that, she was a leader of the FDC, although she eventually switched parties to the NRM and, after 2021, became inspector general of government. She represented Lubaga North Constituency for the FDC in parliament from 2006 to 2010.

Women have also played leading roles in the parliamentary opposition. Winfred Kiiza of the FDC was the leader of the opposition in the 10th parliament (2016–2018), having served in parliament since 2006. The opposition leader, Betty Aol Ochan, from 2018 to 2021, was an FDC leader from Gulu District who has been an MP since 2018. Alice Alaso helped form a party that split off from the FDC in 2019, the Alliance for National Transformation, and now is the party's acting national coordinator. She was the FDC's first secretary general for 10 years and women's representative in parliament for Serere District, representing FDC from 2006 to 2021. Dr Lina Zedriga Waru is the vice-chairperson of the NUP in charge of Northern Uganda.

Despite the relatively large number of opposition women holding positions of power in their parties and leadership roles in parliament, the overall number of women from the opposition parties in the National Assembly has been relatively poor, largely due to aggressive NRM decampaigning tactics and the use of reserved seats. The FDC had committed to 40% representation of women at the national level, but they have also advocated for eliminating the quota system because of the advantages it gives the opposition (Muriaas & Wang, 2012). Opposition parties have put forward 28 female candidates compared with the NRM's 29 for open seats in the 2021 elections, yet they won only five seats this way compared to the 11 won by the NRM (Table 3). Opposition women had an 18% chance of gaining open seats compared with a 38% chance for NRM women. Opposition parties put forward 252 female candidates for the reserved seats, compared with the NRM's 145, yet they won only 24 of the seats compared with the NRM's 100. Again, opposition women had a 9.5% chance of gaining reserved seats compared to the 69% chance for NRM women (Table 4). This is not counting the independent seats, most of which are controlled by the NRM. In contrast to women candidates, 627 opposition men vying for open seats won 12% (77) of them, while NRM male candidates had 5.3 times greater chance of winning and claimed 64% of the seats. Although NRM's share of parliamentary reserved seats for women has decreased from 73% in 2006 to 69% today, it has found other ways to maintain vote share through control of women independents and women in appointed seats (Table 2).

Even though there are numerous women in opposition party leadership positions, these parties are risk averse when fielding women candidates for parliamentary elections because they fear they are more likely to lose than men. Opposition parties tend to compete more successfully in urban areas than in rural districts, which limits the areas where they can make inroads. Women in the opposition face more hurdles than men, especially since they generally do not have access to the resources NRM women enjoy. Women in the reserved seats have to represent an entire district rather than a constituency, which is usually three to four times smaller, placing added financial burdens on them. Women politicians generally have fewer resources, yet people expect them to pay for children's school fees or hospital bills and make demands on them that they are less likely to make on male incumbents (Segawa, 2016).

In the past, the FDC held the majority of opposition seats for women, but as of 2021, the majority of opposition seats went to the NUP, with 13 reserved seats and three open seats held by women. But NUP, like the other opposition parties, has similarly experienced difficulties winning reserved parliamentary seats for their female candidates (see Table 4). As a result, the parties have focused on other areas of leadership for women.

Most opposition parties do not allocate funds for their women's leagues, so the difference between their policy and practice is quite stark. They do not see fielding women as a winning strategy in the face of the incumbent's resource advantage. The opposition parties

**Table 3.** Women candidates and winners of open seats by party: 2021 general election.

| Party | Women candidates for open seats | Women winning open seats | Women winning open seats (%) | Total of candidates | Women candidates for all open seats (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| National Resistance Movement | 29 | 11 | 38 | 352 | 8 |
| Forum for Democratic Change | 5 | 0 | 0 | 212 | 2 |
| National Unity Platform | 6 | 3 | 50 | 182 | 3 |
| Alliance for National Transformation | 6 | 0 | 0 | 110 | 6 |
| Democratic Party | 4 | 0 | 0 | 97 | 4 |
| Uganda People's Congress | 3 | 1 | 33 | 31 | 10 |
| Justice Forum | 1 | 0 | 0 | 14 | 7 |
| Ecological Party of Uganda | 0 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 0 |
| People's Progressive Party | 2 | 1 | 50 | 3 | 66 |
| Social Democratic Party | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 100 |
| Independents | 91 | 2 | 2 | 1,040 | 35 |

Source: Electoral Commission (2021).

are also unable to meet their targets for women quotas because they face internal organizational weaknesses and lack finances and human resources. This means they cannot always operate countrywide party branches and offices and cannot recruit and run effective campaigns for women candidates, especially in rural areas where the political landscape is very rough for opposition candidates (Moses Khisa, personal communication, March 18, 2022).

As a result of the defensive posture taken by resource-poor opposition parties in response to the NRM, some women's rights activists place the blame for the lack of women candidates squarely at the feet of the opposition parties. According to one women's rights activist, the FDC has not taken gender and women's rights seriously. As she explained to me in an interview:

> You have to have the leaders within the party structures committed to these provisions within their constitution and within their other policies. They'll have policies on paper, but when it comes to resourcing the strategic plan, implementing, monitoring, and evaluation, they think they can win elections without focusing on building the party, training candidates. (U37, interview, July 28, 2020)

She and other women's rights activists have been critical of parties' lack of commitment to advancing women and for maintaining parties as "a very patriarchal space," as one put it (U14, interview, July 25, 2020; U3, interview, June 23, 2020).

As a result of these realities, women are risk averse when running with opposition parties. Not surprisingly,

**Table 4.** Women candidates and winners of reserved seats by party: 2021 general election.

| Party | Women candidates for reserved seats | Women winning reserved seats | Women winning reserved seats (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| National Resistance Movement | 145 | 100 | 69 |
| Forum for Democratic Change | 83 | 8 | 10 |
| National Unity Platform | 86 | 13 | 15 |
| Alliance for National Transformation | 38 | 0 | 0 |
| Democratic Party | 26 | 1 | 4 |
| Uganda People's Congress | 14 | 2 | 14 |
| Justice Forum | 5 | 0 | 0 |
| Ecological Party of Uganda | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| People's Progressive Party | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Social Democratic Party | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Independents | 361 | 20 | 6 |

Source: Electoral Commission (2021).

women politicians make strategic calculations, knowing they are likely to be vigorously de-campaigned if they run with an opposition party. One woman opposition leader said:

> Many women fear to engage on the opposition side because of the incredibly difficult terrain in which we are engaged in currently. Anyone who comes out to oppose the government is seen as an enemy of progress or an enemy of the country. The president doesn't shy away from labeling people like Kyagulanyi, who is the party leader of NUP, as the enemy of the country because he speaks against ills. He speaks about the inequalities that are now very vividly seen. (U10, interview, July 28, 2020)

The deficit of opposition women in parliament reveals a glaring imbalance between the opposition parties and the NRM, particularly since many of these parties have no difficulty appointing women to key positions within their parties. While it would be easy to attribute the lack of female opposition candidates in parliamentary races to a lack of party commitment to advancing women, as some activists have suggested, a closer look at the NRM tactics of repression and cooptation of women seeking reserved seats mean that opposition women face greater obstacles in getting elected than opposition men.

## 5. Ruling Party Tactics

To maintain vote share, the NRM has not only used the reserved seat system, it has been systematically picking off high-profile leaders of opposition parties, including women, while limiting potential defectors and maintaining a fairly inclusive ruling elite coalition (Khisa, 2016). The ruling party uses various forms of cooptation and patronage, from job offers to money, promises not to de-campaign candidates, and other tactics to lure them from the opposition. However, they also use repression, blocking access to jobs or businesses, credit, unusual tax assessments, dismantling franchise holdings and businesses of businesswomen, and other economic disincentives (Muwanga et al., 2020). These efforts to coopt opposition leaders escalate as elections draw near.

The opposition tends to win in urban areas, but the NRM controls the countryside, where three-quarters of the population lives (Bwana, 2009). The NRM has basically merged its party apparatus with the state and, therefore, can harness state resources to gain electoral advantage. These resources give it greater organizational capacity than the opposition parties, especially its use of the local council system, which is a multi-tiered system of administrative units that reach the village level. To some extent, the NRM can also use the Women's Councils within that local government structure for the same organizational ends, although they are fairly weak. The NRM can field candidates in almost all districts, including women candidates. It also has the necessary resources to bribe people into supporting the NRM and uses funds diverted from government projects for women, youth, and other groups (Khisa, 2016; Muwanga et al., 2020).

### *5.1. Reserved Seats*

The NRM itself is not overly aggressive in terms of training women candidates. Nevertheless, it has adopted several methods to increase female and overall representation that does not require training. The lack of training suggests that promoting women as leaders is not a priority, but advancing them as NRM loyalists into the National Assembly is, in fact, a goal. One tactic to achieve this end has been the adoption of reserved seats. The use of reserved seats to include women in the parliament is relatively low cost since it does not come at the expense of any seats held by incumbent men.

The NRM introduced a reserved seat system in 1989, which was enshrined in the 1995 constitution. The reserved seat system continued with the country's opening to a multiparty system in 2005. Most of these reserved seats are held by the NRM, with each district represented by one woman. The use of reserved seats allows the NRM to control the number of women who will be elected without the uncertainty of party list systems or other systems where the outcome is not predetermined.

The reserved seats also proliferate in rural districts where the NRM can use the local state to coerce women. It is challenging for opposition parties to recruit strong and credible women candidates who can compete against NRM candidates. It is also common for the NRM to use its local machinery, including business supporters, to bribe potential opposition women candidates out of races. Thus, it is common for NRM candidates to win district women's seats unopposed (Moses Khisa, personal communication, March 16, 2022).

Museveni has increased the number of parliamentary seats from 280 in 1989 to 375 in 2011 and 529 in 2021. This meant that the NRM could increase the percentage of women in reserved seats without challenging the position of men in the parliament. Women in parliament increased from 79 seats in 2006 to 146 in the 2021 election. The proportion has not changed since 2006, but the raw number of women has increased. The NRM vote share (Table 5) has stayed pretty much the same since the country went multiparty, with the NRM holding on to the majority of seats. The NRM has also increased the number of appointees from 25 in 2006 to 30 in 2021. If one combines the NRM's elected seats with the NRM women in reserved seats, the appointed seats, and the independents who support the NRM, the overwhelming majority of parliamentarians are NRM supporters. This means that NRM has maintained its hold on politics, even with some fluctuations. After the 2006 election, what the NRM lost in overall seats, it recouped with an increase in women's seats, independent seats, and special interest appointees (Table 6).

**Table 5.** Women parliamentarians by party.

| | 1989 | 1996 | 2001 | 2006 | 2011 | 2016 | 2021 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| National Resistance Movement | 100% | 100% | 100% | 66% | 49% | 49% | 42% |
| National Unity Platform | | | | | | | 14% |
| Forum for Democratic Change | | | | 13% | 14% | 13% | 7% |
| Democratic Party | | | | 4% | 7% | 4% | 3% |
| Uganda People's Congress | | | | 4% | 3% | 2% | 2% |
| Conservative Party | | | | 0% | 0.61% | 0% | 0% |
| Justice Forum | | | | 0% | 0.64% | 0% | 0.25% |
| People's Progressive Party | | | | | | | 0.1% |
| Others | | | | | 0% | 0% | 0% |
| Independents | | | | 13% | 26% | 31% | 32% |
| | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% |
| Total elected constituency | | 214 | 295 | 215 | 238 | 289 | 353 |
| Number of women appointed | | 59 | 12 | 25 | 25 | 25 | 30 |
| Number of women elected | 41 | | | 79 | 112 | 112 | 146 |
| Women's seats | 18% | 19% | 24% | 31% | 35% | 33% | 32% |
| Total seats | 280 | 283 | 295 | 319 | 375 | 426 | 529 |

Source: Electoral Commission (2021).

Additionally, women comprise at least two of 10 representatives of the Uganda People's Defense Forces, at least one of five youth representatives, at least one of five representatives of persons with disabilities, and at least one woman in five workers' representatives and representatives of old people. And finally, there are women who run for the open constituency seats.

**Table 6.** NRM vote share in parliamentary elections.

| Year | NRM vote share (%) |
|---|---|
| 1989 | 100 |
| 1996 | 100 |
| 2001 | 100 |
| 2006 | 66 |
| 2011 | 71 |
| 2016 | 71 |
| 2021 | 64 |

Source: Uganda Electoral Commission (2021).

### *5.2. Use of Independent Women Candidates*

Another tactic of the NRM to increase its vote share has been the use of independent candidates in the second round of elections. There was an increase in independent candidates from 13 in 2006 to 32 in 2021. Almost 200 independent women candidates ran for district seats in 2016, thus constituting nearly half of the 405 who ran for parliament (Wang & Yoon, 2018). Often individuals who do not win primaries as NRM candidates run as independents in the second round. This gives NRM candidates an undue advantage. This has helped the NRM maintain the lion's share of votes, even as the NRM vote share of elected women dropped from 66% in 2006 to 42% in 2021. Meanwhile, the opposition parties are increasingly fragmented.

### *5.3. Repression*

A key tactic in Uganda is to treat opposition leaders violently to make an example of them. Museveni won a sixth five-year term in office in the January 2021 elections that his chief opponent, Bobi Wine, claimed were fraudulent. In the 2021 elections, Bobi Wine and his NUP supporters came under ruthless repression, as had FDC leaders and members in prior elections. Women opposition leaders and members have not been spared, as we have seen in other countries as well (Krook, 2020). As one activist said to me: "Women are a bit cautious. They're thinking, 'Okay, I really want to participate, but not in this environment. I have children' " (U37, interview, July 28, 2020). Thus, the risk involved in participating in politics is great, particularly in opposition politics and especially for newcomers to politics who do not have ample resources.

Ugandan police have attacked women in the opposition who have protested government policies. In 2012, Ingrid Turinawe, then the chairperson of the FDC Women's League and FDC National Political Mobilizer, attended a political rally in Kampala where she was arrested, and a policeman grabbed her breast. She sued the Uganda Police Force and the attorney general for suffering and embarrassment. She was awarded compensation, and the Ugandan government was forced to apologize.

Betty Nambooze, MP for Mukono Municipality since 2010, had been arrested on numerous occasions on politically-motivated charges. Her life was threatened,

and she was allegedly poisoned on one occasion. Although she had been a Democratic Party stalwart, in 2020, she joined the NUP party.

A few years later, a National Executive Committee member and FDC secretary for the environment, Zainab Fatuma, was stripped in 2015 in a protest (Nyamishana, 2015). In response, a coalition of women's organizations issued a press statement protesting the treatment, saying:

> The women's movement, civic associations and women leagues of political parties and citizens who identify with adherence to the constitution by all state institutions strongly condemn the use of degrading and dehumanizing acts by the Uganda Police Force which is mandated to provide law and order. These acts manifest as both a political tool to intimidate women's leadership but also as a grave human rights abuse. (Nyamishana, 2015)

### *5.4. Cooptation*

Cooptation is another common NRM tactic it can carry out because it has access to state resources, which it uses to great effect. While many local leaders have crossed over to the NRM, some have been prominent national leaders. For example, Anita Among had been deputy treasurer of the FDC but joined NRM in 2020. Two years later she claimed the third most important position in the country, as Museveni appointed her speaker of the House in 2022. Beti Kamya-Turomwe had once been a member of FDC and served in parliament from 2006 to 2011. She later formed her own party, Uganda Federal Alliance, and ran for president in the 2011 elections. She then crossed over to the NRM and served first as minister for the Kampala Capital City Authority (2016–2019) and then as minister of lands, housing, and urban development from 2019 to 2021. She is now the inspector general of government.

The NRM appears to be an equal opportunity co-opter, luring high-profile opposition leaders from all parties. The UPC has also lost high-profile women to the NRM. One of its members of parliament, Betty Amongi, began serving as minister of gender, labor, and social development in Museveni's government after 2021. She was appointed minister of Kampala Capital City in 2019 and before that as minister of lands, housing, and urban development in 2016, even though she was in the UPC at the time. She won the parliamentary seat for Oyam South Constituency. She is married to the UPC president Jimmy Akena, a member of parliament for Lira Municipality. Akena is the son of Milton Obote, the former prime minister and president of Uganda.

## 6. Conclusion

The case of Uganda shows how authoritarian regimes and ruling parties instrumentalize and manipulate the politics of inclusion to entrench themselves in power. While much of the literature has treated the adoption of quotas as a response to international and domestic pressures, it has focused primarily on how they are an effort to include women and much less on how they help perpetuate autocratic rule. This article has shown that reserved seats are mainly a phenomenon found in authoritarian countries, and there is a reason for this. The use of reserved seats (in contrast to legislated seats or party quotas) facilitates the use of women for patronage since they can be treated as a group that owes their positions to the ruling party. This instrumentalization of women's rights might not seem surprising, but the discrepancy between the levels of legislative representation of women in the NRM and the opposition parties is significant, especially when one compares the percentage of candidates fielded by the various parties and compares opposition women's rate of success to that of opposition men. Opposition women and women leaders have turned out to be the biggest losers in this process.

While the NRM is the main obstacle to the success of opposition women, divisions and weakness within the opposition pose another constraint. Party women have demanded that opposition parties do more to support female candidates. And while they do better in promoting women within their party leadership, their strength is primarily in urban areas, which limits the districts in which they might expect to win.

The literature on autocracy has looked at how electoral authoritarian regimes entrench themselves even in the face of electoral competition. Still, this literature has not examined the gender dimensions of these tactics, which are crucial in electoral authoritarian regimes that have opened themselves to competition by adopting a multiparty system. By employing a variety of tactics targeting the opposition and, in particular, opposition women, the incumbents have taken a goal that won them international favor—that of increasing women's political representation—and have weaponized it against the political opposition through repression and a politics of division and cooptation.

The NRM-led government not only used reserved seats as a form of patronage. They expanded the number of districts to increase the number of reserved seats for women and they supported NRM candidates who lost in the primaries and had them run as independents in the second round. They increased the number of appointed seats to augment the number of NRM women and other such special groups in parliament. This had particularly adverse effects on women opposition parliamentarians, who found it nearly impossible to run for office without the threat of being de-campaigned and undermined, repressed, and coopted.

The same factors that make it possible for the NRM to advance women and risk opening elections up to challenge simultaneously make the opposition hesitant to advance women candidates. The problem is not simply the opposition's lack of interest in women's

advancement, but the limited possibilities for opposition women when they run for either the reserved or open seats.

The Ugandan case shows how authoritarian regimes use legal and illegal means of tilting elections in their favor. It shows how a seemingly democratic demand of the women's movement and a goal of global feminist mobilization—to increase women's political representation—can be used for authoritarian ends and weaponized against women themselves. This poses a potential challenge to how we understand reserved seats as a source of gender equality and inclusion since the promotion of women in politics primarily serves the political purposes of autocrats rather than the interests of women.

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**Conflict of Interests**

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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