

IMPLICATIONS OF BY-ELECTIONS ATTACKS IN KAWEMPE NORTH

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the Kawempe North Constituency by-elections, where law-enforcement officers' excessive use of force against citizens resulted in extensive mayhem and violence, revealing a glaring disconnect between public order management and the protection of democratic rights. It explores the far-reaching consequences of such incidents, including physical harm and emotional trauma to citizens, bystanders, responders, and security personnel. It argues that beyond de-escalation techniques, human rights assistance to victims, and accountability for the excesses, stakeholders must invest effort and resources in addressing the emotional and mental health burdens that these incidents occasion, as a critical step towards building a healthy nation.

INTRODUCTION

The attacks on journalists and bystanders during the Kawempe North by-elections campaign in Uganda brought to the forefront the complex and far-reaching consequences of violence during public assemblies. Beyond the immediate physical harm, such incidents inflict profound emotional and psychological trauma on victims, bystanders, and responders. Moreover, the security operatives involved in these incidents, often overlooked, may also bear significant emotional and mental health burdens, underscoring the multifaceted nature of trauma in these situations.

This article examines the implications of the Kawempe North by-elections attacks, considering the physical, emotional, and mental health impacts on all parties involved – victims, bystanders, responders, and even the security operatives who perpetrate the violence. By exploring these diverse perspectives, this article highlights the need for comprehensive support systems and reforms to mitigate the adverse effects of such incidents and ensure the well-being of all individuals involved.

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On the 13th of March 2025 some of the reporters sustained severe injuries and required medical attention while covering the Kawempe North by-elections Campaign. Bystanders and journalists covering the elections were beaten and their cameras, laptops and phones confiscated and destroyed by the security agents.

In the past, while defending brutal attacks, security officials have said some of the journalists have been beaten because they don't wear branded apparel which easily makes them stand out from the crowd and which now it was not the case. With the current attacks it seemed like it was orchestrated to intimidate campaigners and community members attending the assembly.

During public assemblies such stunts can significantly impact bystanders and the campaigners both physically and emotionally. Bystanders get caught in the crossfire where they are trampled in the stampede and they're affected by teargas, paper sprays and other chemicals that are being used to disperse the crowds. These violence and brutalities causes' emotional distress. These affects the participation and attendance of the community and it place their safety at risk. Some of the risk and effects on Bystanders, Police and Community Members are as follows:

1. The physical harm caused by the attacks - leads to injuries and killing.
2. Psychological trauma – bystanders, police and campaigners experience PTSD, Anxiety and depression as a result of being a primary witness.
3. Campaigners –the experience a decreased working morale, burnout, fear and lost hope on the democracy.
4. There's impact on the economy and state property – damage to state buildings and property during protest and loss of business few days after attack and these affect future impact in other areas because people need to protect their business so they will shut down during campaigns going forward.
5. Continuous community mistrust between police and the community makes it difficult to manage public safety.

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These kinds of attacks causes anger and frustration because the Kawempe community couldn't protect themselves and its perpetuating more violence and fear in the area. These attacks brings mistrust and divisions in the community and people feel helpless. Going forward the community members would not allow other assemblies to be held in their area because they get attacked and arrested for participating. They will be hyper vigilant during assemblies and most will also avoid attending these campaigns. These incidents limits the community their chances of choosing freely which party they want to be a part of because of fear of attacks during campaigns. As JAP (Justice Access Point) an organization that supports victims and stand against the violation of Human Rights we have come to learn through our work that these attacks continue to divide the society in general instill fear and brings condemnation to people who wants to participate in the fairness of electing a new leader.

The Kawampe incident on its own needs to be a shifting campaign strategies for many parties to also focus on addressing police brutality and the use of force and live ammunitions during public assemblies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As Civil Society these incidents needs to be addressed, and such incidents needs to create creates a shift in reforms going forward not only for the campaigners but with the support of Human Rights Defenders organizations.

As a means of assisting going forward as civil society we need to:

Foster collective healing approach in the communities that was brutally attacked for the restoration of trust amongst communities.

Security personnel needs to be trained in de-escalation technique to reduce the likelihood of violence during protest.

A clear communication path way between police, campaigners and community members can also help in preventing misunderstanding and also administer smooth engagement.

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This ushers people in understanding the shared traumas they carry and understanding that it was formed by external forces. These will be a sign of support and making them understand that they're not alone and as a collective through engagements we can rebuild our own trust and unity. This will help in implementing new strategies going forward and consider integrating culture and religion in shaping the interventions so that we have proper engagements going forth with the affected community.

CONCLUSION

The attacks starkly illustrate the devastating consequences of violence during public assemblies, inflicting profound physical, emotional, and psychological harm on victims, bystanders, responders, and even security operatives. This article underscores the imperative of adopting a holistic approach that not only prioritizes de-escalation techniques and accountability but also addresses the long-term mental health and emotional well-being of all parties involved. By doing so, stakeholders can foster a safer, more just, and resilient society where citizens can freely exercise their rights without fear of violence, and where healing and recovery are supported for those affected.

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