Want firm grip on power? Don’t feed citizens too much

By Michael Maditi (email the author)
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You might not think that eating beans promotes democracy, but it does. The reliability of your food supply and the kinds of food you eat have a big influence on your political power. That’s why revolutionaries, on capturing power, promise an iron rice bowl or a chicken in every pot.

Hungry people are dangerous because they are prone to violence in order to get enough for their families to eat, and this can escalate into anti-government protests if hunger is widespread. Starving people are a burden that no government wants to pay for, so it recruits food aid to relieve it. And feeding people is a great way to buy their loyalty. Just don’t feed them too much if you want to keep a tight grip on power.

When people don’t have to worry about where to get their next meal, they can turn their thoughts to other pursuits. They develop visions for the future and look for the means to satisfy them. That’s why people with full stomachs are often better at keeping their leaders in check than hungry ones.

In Uganda today there are probably 15 or 20 million people who either don’t get enough to eat or who get the wrong things to eat. Karamoja teeters on the brink of famine year in and year out partly because the pastoral lifestyle of most of its people renders food crop production ineffective.

In the North and elsewhere it is popular and lucrative to grow a strain of rice which is especially suited to upland or drier climates, and this has kept millions of people out of danger of starvation and brought
badly needed cash to grower households. But nutrition security hasn’t changed because the protein-rich crops like beans or lentils which should supplement the rice are sold instead of eaten.

The Gulu District Chairman Norbert Mao recently raised his profile by winning the leadership of the Democratic Party, but until he can back this with more votes and money which flow from North to South, he will be dependent on the wealth and power of southerners, and this will restrain him.

Food isn’t the only thing you need to fuel democracy, but it’s one of the first things. If you don’t get a steady, balanced diet of carbohydrates, protein, vitamins and minerals, your body suffers. The French general Napoleon Bonaparte quipped that an army fights on its stomach. The same is true in politics. Other things being equal, hungry people are weak and well-fed people are strong.

For the millions here who eat well or often, politics might seem like a game to determine who gets to control State House. The government is careful to present action or policies in all areas of development related to starving or malnourished people. Opposition leaders have little to say about food, and people accustomed to leaving such things to politicians are probably more concerned with filling their bellies than with what goes in them. In too many parts of the country there is only just enough food to keep people grateful for the present political arrangement, but not enough to ask themselves if there is a better way.

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