

Introduction

Uganda has been of immense interest to what Mahmood Mamdani uncharitably refers to as ‘stargazing academics in distant ivory towers’² who produce a plethora of commentaries and scholarly work on the country’s politics, culture, economy, etc. At the peak of political decay and societal dysfunction – especially in the 1970s and 1980s – the country suffered stupendous deficiency of long-term intellectual commitment on the part of its citizens, leaving the task of knowledge production to foreign nationals in the ivory towers of the Western (especially the American) academe. To fill this void, a few initiatives came to the fore in the mid/late 1980s, including the founding of Fountain Publishers to support and promote local scholarly publishing, and the Centre for Basic Research (CBR). Both Fountain Publishers and CBR are based in the Ugandan capital, Kampala.

Even after years of partial successful reconstruction of the Ugandan state, the paucity of comprehensive research and the dearth of path-breaking scholarly output has been conspicuous. Ugandan researchers instead pursue supposedly ‘more relevant’ topics: HIV/AIDS, Public Health, Primary Education, Sexuality, Social Service Delivery, Decentralization, Micro-finance, etc. This is driven by the rush for short-term financially rewarding research consultancies underpinned by external donor funding. In this light, Joshua Rubongoya’s recent study of regime survival and legitimation in Museveni’s Uganda is a welcome intervention, especially considering that the study of State Power and Politics has become less ‘fashionable’ and hardly appealing in the scheme of forces undergirding knowledge production on, and about, Africa. The supposed shift from being exotic to becoming banal has meant that a great deal of research funding does not prioritize the study of state power and politics in Africa.³

In this essay, I explore the book’s central argument and its location within the corpus of scholarship on African politics. While a great deal of Africanist scholarship tackles state failure and the attendant ramifications, Rubongoya moves in the opposite direction with his focus on state reconstruction and legitimation in the wake of near state collapse, decay and lawlessness. His key research question is thus: When a violent, authoritarian state makes constitutional power transition impossible, and when extra-constitutional means are used to get rid of it, how should the new regime go about authenticating its right to govern (p. 3)? Rubongoya answers this question with analytical sophistication, erudition and scholarly finesse. This review examines the author’s answers to the above question. In the penultimate part of this essay, I attend to some factual errors and analytical inaccuracies that detract from the book’s argument. More serious is the flaw in the author’s approach – the dearth of new empirical data beyond the refrains characteristic of conventional political history of postcolonial Uganda – a shortcoming to which I will then turn.

Hegemonic Regime Survival and Legitimation in Uganda: A Review Essay¹

Moses Khisa

Regime Hegemony in Museveni’s Uganda: Pax Musevenica

by Joshua B. Rubongoya,

New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007, 283 pp.,

ISBN 9781403976055

The Subject Matter

In his *Regime Hegemony in Museveni’s Uganda: Pax Musevenica*, political scientist Joshua B. Rubongoya, based at Roanoke College in Salem-Virginia, embarks on a herculean task of making sense of, and coming to terms with, the legitimacy crisis in African politics, with a focus on his homeland of Uganda. His subject matter is pertinent, and the author’s purview is prolific. Rubongoya undertakes a careful, skillful reading of the complex and checkered politics of post-independent Uganda weaving together a narrative that is at once insightful and illuminating but also persuasively pale! I return to the latter aspect in the last part of this essay.

The book is divided into three parts and has seven chapters. Although the thrust of the book is to understand *Pax Musevenica* – a neologism recast from a local Luganda vernacular phrase, *emirembe gya Museveni*, or ‘the times of Museveni’ – Rubongoya maps out a genealogy of Uganda’s democratic legitimacy crisis and foregrounds the antecedents to the current regime-hegemony in Uganda. While the first part grapples with laying down and elaborating the conceptual tools anchoring the study – that is, state, democracy and legitimacy – the second part makes a detour of colonial and immediate postcolonial legitimacy crises with glaring continuities that provided the cannon fodder for Museveni’s guerrilla armed struggle and capture of power in 1986. This second part of the book falls into a common procedural pitfall: the tendency to measure Museveni’s rule against the failures of the past regimes, an issue I shall revert to in a moment. The third part of the book – the biggest (with five chapters) – closely appraises the emergence and entrenchment of *Pax Musevenica*.

The Making of Pax Musevenica

The first four chapters of the third part deal with five-year periods, one after the other, of Museveni’s rule from 1986 to 2006. In the first five years, dubbed ‘The Honeymoon of *Pax Musevenica*’, the NRM (or the Movement) embarked on popularizing and spreading the Resistance Council (RC) system, undertook economic liberalization to resuscitate a shattered economy – all aimed at fostering democratic legitimacy. The all-important task of reconstructing the state in these five years took place along a relatively liberal and democratic trajectory (p. 24). The new structure of

democratic representative government seemed like a novel and noble break with the statist regime type of yesteryears and was anchored on this RC system. The RC, and later LC (Local Council) system, a form of democracy from below, provided the programmatic framework for Movement politics and became the foster mother of *Pax Musevenica*.

The introduction of a multi-layered localized structure of popular representation, the RC/LC system, was the founding strategy that sought to attract democratic legitimacy for the new regime. This approach of popular representation was carried onto the legislative realm and the high point became the conclusion and promulgation of the 1995 constitution:

These legitimation and consolidation strategies were radically different from those employed by Museveni’s predecessors. While Obote will forever be remembered for the ‘pigeonhole’ constitution and Amin for suspending constitutional rule altogether, the NRM will be known for initiating a constitutional procedure that seemed to have captured popular support (p. 78).

The key argument here is that the institutional and structural innovations put in place during the guerilla war (the RC system being the foremost) became the foundation for authenticating NRM authority following the capture of state power in 1986 (p. 66).

The second five years – 1991 to 1996 – saw concrete steps in consolidating democratic ideals (p. 93) but with a tightening of the lid on party politics rationalized by supposed viability of the oxymoronic no-party democracy. Thus, Rubongoya concludes that the 1991-1996 period, most notably the 1996 elections, marked the pinnacle of NRM rule and of *Pax Musevenica* (p.126).

... [O]f the elections that have been held since 1986, the 1996 polls were the least contentious and the results least contested. Notwithstanding the absence of opposition parties, they were symbolic of a possible new political dispensation in which social trust might again provide the underpinning of a democratic transition (p. 127).

Although political parties were legally banned at the time of the 1996 polls, they in fact formed an umbrella organization dubbed the Inter-Party Forces Cooperation (IPFC) under which a joint opposition candidate, Paul Ssemogerere, faced the incumbent President Yoweri Museveni.

Rubongoya argues that the period (from 1986 to 1996) of democratic

reconstruction and power consolidation was the foundation upon which the current project of regime hegemony has been established and strengthened (p. 178). The early period also put in place institutions and the structure for informal networks of NRM support. Thus, ‘the patronage that runs through these networks has become the lifeblood of Museveni and the NRM.’

From Fundamental Change to Convergence

Beyond 1996, ominous signs emerged and serious cracks appeared in the governance realm of the polity. While a vibrant legislature – the parliament – elected in a mood of incandescent popular representation, asserted its legislative and oversight authority, a nucleus of presidentialism was building up to castrate parliament and to subordinate it to a burgeoning imperial presidency. Rubongoya identifies an important shift in the scheme of politics after 1996 from political broad-base as a pillar of no-party politics, to the embrace of ethnic/regional balancing as the new *modus operandi* for ensuring an inclusive government. The Cabinet ballooned as the president sought to appease ethnic/regional constituencies by dishing out Cabinet positions. Along with the expansion of the Cabinet came the creation of district administrations, proliferation of security and intelligence agencies, all serving a clientelist purpose.

The shift to ethnic/regional politics was preceded by the inclusion in the 1995 constitution of a ban on multiparty politics and the entrenchment of the NRM/Movement as a system of government. Thus, 1996 marks the turning point in the build-up to today’s neo-patrimonial rule in Uganda. The political consensus that characterized the first ten years took a backseat as the NRM was purged of dissenting voices. In place of national political outlook, the NRM supported ethnic and regional clientelism along with increasing centralization of power. Recourse to manipulative politics, including constitutional engineering, the violence that engulfed 2001 and 2006 national elections, the usurpation of the independence of Parliament, and the attack on the sanctity of the Judiciary epitomized by the infamous military siege of the High Court on November 16, 2005 by a group of hooded military commandos dubbed ‘The Black Mambas’, all presage the gathering storm of a democratic legitimacy crisis. These events, and others, prompt Rubongoya to conclude that instead of a fundamental change in the country’s politics promised in 1986, a convergence with Obote’s much maligned rule was occurring. It was in this mood of mounting concerns about democratic reversal that the World Bank, a key financier of *Pax Musevenica*, lamented: ‘we regret that we cannot be more positive about the present political situation in Uganda, especially given the country’s *admirable record* through the late 1990s...’⁴

But What Happened to Mr. Museveni?

The last chapter (seven) offers reflections on the future of Ugandan politics and state and the implications of this Ugandan case-study for Africa. In the final analysis, Rubongoya employs the logic of dialectics to sum up his study (pp. 185-193). The NRM thesis under the rubric of the *Ten Points Program* enabled Museveni to leverage democratic legitimacy by registering four important achievements: relative peace and order, empowerment of local authorities, emergence of civil society groups, and a growing economy. The grand finale to establishing democratic legitimacy was the promulgation of the 1995 Constitution which, despite glaring weaknesses including the ban on political parties, marked a significant milestone on the path toward the reconstruction, institutionalization, and legitimation of the Ugandan state (p. 197).

In the legitimation dialectic, Rubongoya argues, the antithesis remained rooted in the limitations placed on party politics and in the absence of a more open/liberal environment in which competitive politics was nurtured. The ultimate test was whether or not the dialectic between the no-party advocates and the multipartyists would yield a democratic synthesis. That synthesis was sidestepped. Instead, there emerged, especially after the manipulative constitutional amendment that enabled Museveni to maintain a grip on power, a convergence with previous regimes that had formed the *raison d'être* for the *Ten Points Program*. What happened, Rubongoya asks (p.192), to the 'peasant/warrior', war hero, champion of popular democracy, anti-sectarian crusader, and democratic populist – Museveni? A partially facetious answer but one which nevertheless aptly and instructively answers the question: 'simply put, he stayed too long!'

Rather than consolidate the ground for democratic legitimacy, flashes of which appeared in the first ten years, neo-patrimonial legitimacy anchored on presidentialism, clientelism and prebendalism took center stage. Along with neo-patrimonial rule has blossomed the over-centralization of state power. Rubongoya does not deal with the simultaneous fragmentation of a highly centralized center of power. The latter brand of *Pax Musevenica* involved the creation of numerous government ministries, myriad security and intelligence organizations, loosely constituted political mobilization bodies, a litany of departments and offices, all operating from or associated with the office of the president and state house. It is a paradoxical schema that simultaneously creates multiple agencies and fragments a highly centralized center of state power.

The Book's Downside

For a book that promises a timely intervention in understanding Uganda's contemporary politics, this reviewer is compelled to attend to factual errors and inaccuracies too numerous to be

ignored. The following list may strike the reader as pedantic but it is such small errors that become historical facts for posterity once they find their way into a book which provides an argument that is compelling as an authoritative record of contemporary Ugandan politics.

Some lapses include:

- ◆ 'Indeed, it was in response to the contested nature of the 1980 elections that Obote's Minister of Defense Yoweri Museveni abandoned the government to launch a rebel opposition that would lead to the ouster of Obote in 1986' (p. 53). In fact, Museveni was never a Minister in Obote's government. He was Defense Minister and vice-chairman of the interim Military Commission government prior to and during the 1980 elections that brought Obote to power for the second time.
- ◆ '...transportation systems had deteriorated so much that it took hours from the airport in Entebbe to the capital, Kampala – a distance of only 26 km!' (p. 86). The author no doubt means that the distance from Entebbe to Kampala is 26 miles, which would be well over 40 kilometers.
- ◆ 'Later in 1997, the...NRM-dominated NRC enacted the Movement Act, a law that, in effect, compelled all citizens to become members of the NRM.' There was no NRC in 1997. The National Resistance Council (NRC), the interim legislature, ended before the promulgation of the 1995 Constitution. The legislature from 1996 – 2001 was the Sixth Parliament and not the NRC. A related error is in endnote 39 on page 249, where the author says 'In June 2005 FDC members of Parliament...'; yet that is the year of the formation of the FDC party whose first ever MPs joined Parliament in 2006. There was no FDC in parliament before 2006.
- ◆ 'Notwithstanding the Kabaka's endorsement of the regional tier system of government...' (p. 118). This was never the final position. Although the then Buganda Premier Mulwanyamuli Ssemogerere had in principle agreed to the regional tier, this was later rebuffed by the Buganda Parliament (Lukiiko) and the Kabaka, insisting instead on being granted full-fledged federal status.
- ◆ 'The ADF were infamous for activities such as the mass killing of students at Kicwamba Teacher Training College.' (p. 133). The college in question here is a technical college and not a teacher training college.
- ◆ 'Kazibwe's ouster from the cabinet in 2003 had more to do with her failure to support President Museveni's third term objectives...When she finally quit government, she was availed a generous financial package from the public coffers for her postdoctoral studies in the United States' (p. 137). In fact, former Vice-President Specioza Kazibwe never at any one time opposed the third term for Museveni. She was axed from her VP position so as to give way for somebody seen to bring more political capital to the regime. The author backtracks on this point later on page 170 and declares ignorance of why Kazibwe was fired from her position as VP.
- ◆ There was no MP in Kampala in 2001 called Nsubuga Sebuliba as the author states on page 151. He may have been referring to the then Makindye East MP Nsubuga Nsamu.

- ◆ On page 154, the author cites poverty statistics for the years 1993-1996; yet the period under discussion in that chapter is 1996-2001.
- ◆ On page 171, Minister Kahinda Otafire is listed among those censured by Parliament on charges of corruption and abuse of office; yet the maverick soldier-cum-politician always chides those who accuse him of corruption for never succeeding in pinning him down with incriminating evidence. In fact, he has never been censured by Parliament.
- ◆ 'The role of the military became even more ominous when a special force (dubbed the black mambas), with intent of intimidating the judges, surrounded the Supreme Court...' This incident was at the High Court and not the Supreme Court.

The book's more serious flaw is the almost total lack of primary source material, whether gleaned from field-based interviews or archival sources. Instead of relying almost entirely on prior studies of Uganda in the preceding three decades by economists, historians, political scientists and sociologists, among others, a nuanced balance between empirical source material and conceptualization would have yielded a better book. And since the author handles the latter with remarkable brilliance, he would have tackled the former aspect of scholarly expectation quite convincingly. Part two of *Regime Hegemony in Museveni's Uganda* comes close to reproducing, without problematizing, the conventional wisdom of Uganda's post-independence politico-economic history. Rubongoya would have done his readers an invaluable service by revisiting some of the axiomatic formulations commonly held about Uganda's political history, had he adopted a more critical approach. Consider the conclusion that Obote rose to power by chance (p. 35) and by default for the second time and not by

any qualities of statesmanship or charismatic characteristics. It is a stretch of the imagination that a man 'without any qualities' would ascend to power twice.

To be sure, some of the leading political players in Uganda's post-independence politics were still living by the time this book went to print. Seeking out a few and interviewing them would have immensely enriched the narrative. With relations between the central government and Buganda monarchical government once again souring, with new questions being raised about who actually committed atrocities in the Luwero triangle, and with past ills returning to dog Ugandan politics; an attempt at revisionism would have afforded the reader an alternative to the conventional narrative. A related problem is the author's historicist approach that seems to suggest that one event or set of events within a certain time-frame prepared in linear fashion the ground for the next course of events. To do this, if I may borrow Mahmood Mamdani's words, is reducing the past to a one-dimensional reality and reconstruction of the past as if the only thing that happened was laying the foundations of a present crisis.⁵ Because of a somewhat linear-like approach and the tendency to juxtapose *Pax Musevenica* with previous regimes, Rubongoya ends up in an analytical cul-de-sac with the resultant conclusion that we have recently witnessed, under *Pax Musevenica*, a convergence and not fundamental change. My hunch is that Uganda has entered a completely new form of politics not previously witnessed. Though the current regime may practise politics differently than it advertises, it is not the case that today's patronage network, for example, compares with anything from the past.

Notes

- ¹ The author would like to thank Professor William Reno, his academic adviser at Northwestern University, who read and made comments on an earlier draft of the essay.
- ² See Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), Chapter One.
- ³ Jean Francois Bayart and Achille Mbembe have been the front runners in emphasizing the banality of state power in Africa. See: Jean-Francois Bayart, *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly* (New York: Longman, 1993); Achille Mbembe's *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).
- ⁴ Joel D. Barkan, *et al*, "The Political Economy of Uganda: The Art of Managing A Donor-Financed Neo-Patrimonial State," A background paper commissioned by the World Bank in fulfillment of Purchase Order 7614742, Final draft (Kampala, 2004).
- ⁵ Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*, p. 287.

