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. This 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, emirengye gua 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—Rubongoya points to a past makes a detour of colonial and immediate postcolonial legitimacy crises with glaring continuities that provided the foundation for Museveni’s guerrilla armed struggle against Obote 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 institutionalization of 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 absorbing 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 ‘pig-eatene’, 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 a cornerstone 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 ommoractic 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). [Of the elections that have been held since 1986, the 1996 polls were the least contentious and the results least contested. Notwithstanding the existence 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 finalized in 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 Ssestaro 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 of political accountability along with 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 on-going rules’—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 regionalism 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 system of clientelism 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 purified 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 and the structure of power that 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…’
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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, growth 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 competitive politics was nurtured. The more open/liberal environment in which party politics and in the absence of a form of state power.

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