

Online Article

Museveni's Rhetorical Belief in Democracy and the 2021 Elections in Uganda

In the past few months, Western media and academia have placed unprecedented, and somewhat bewildering, focus on Uganda's 2021 general elections. The exact source of the rather inordinate interest remains a little puzzling. The key issue at stake though is the military dictatorship of Yoweri Museveni, draped in civilian garb for 35 uninterrupted years. As a routine ritual, Museveni purports to seek legitimization every five years through elections, which are scarcely free, fair or credible. This has been the case since at least 2001 when Museveni first faced a serious challenge to his stay at the helm, a challenge from very close quarters – an insider and heretofore member of the status quo, Dr Kizza Besigye, dared step forward to take on Museveni and test his rhetorical belief in democracy.

At a personal, idiosyncratic level Museveni loathes political competition and has indignation for electoral rules that should apply to all actors. Because he holds an exaggerated sense of messianic mission for Uganda and Africa, he feels irritated having to subject himself to the motions of electioneering. As Museveni's rule has become more repressive, characterised by mounting brutality against political opponents and his seemingly rusted response to biting socioeconomic difficulties,

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public opinion and media coverage in the West appears to have shifted dramatically against him.

In the 2021 elections, many among the community of 'pro-democracy' advocates and activists in Africa found reason to overtly and proactively support Museveni's main challenger for the presidency, the popstar and Member of Parliament Robert Kyagulanyi, more popularly known as Bobi Wine. I want to argue here that the obsession with Bobi Wine is problematic as it fails to grasp the complex conditions around Museveni's stay in power and the daunting dilemma of freeing the country from the firm grip of a ruler whose primary source of power is the bullet not the ballot.

Exposing Museveni's democratic pretensions

Since he captured power as leader of the second successful postcolonial African guerrilla rebel group, after Hissen Habre in Chad, Museveni has repeatedly claimed he fought the 1981–1986 war to restore democratic governance and respect for human rights. In the initial years of his rule, at least un-

til the mid-1990s, he superintended modestly progressive reforms that gave voice to the citizenry through local level political participation and robust public accountability. For long spells, armed insurgency in the north of the country constituted a drawn-out human rights disaster, but the rest of Uganda returned to a sound, stable and secure state. Museveni projected himself as a 'security president' who had fundamentally transformed the role of the armed forces from being predatory to protective, from serving as a source of insecurity to guarantors of security of person and property.

In the main, Museveni's democratic credentials appeared credible and compelling to Ugandans and foreigners precisely because he had not been tested yet. Western political and diplomatic actors saw him as representing the 'new breed of African leadership' and as a 'beacon of hope' for the continent.¹ All seemed rosy and reassuring until Museveni faced a real test of his democratic credentials as the country returned to the conduct of general elections in 1996, ten years after he came to power. At this first time of asking, he had a relatively easy ride as he still enjoyed broad goodwill and popular appeal in much of the country, except the war-afflicted northern Uganda. The tougher test lay ahead.

It was during the 2001 elections, and subsequent electoral cycles in 2006, 2011 and 2016, that Kizza Besigye fully exposed Museveni's pretensions and hollow promises of a reformer and progressive incumbent who had earned plaudits from Western capitals. In earnest in 2001, Museveni resorted to state brutality and all manner of underhand machinations to beat back the surprising challenge from his former personal physician and senior cabinet member. From 2001 and on, state organised violence and blatant repression against opposition parties and politicians became the mainstay of Uganda's electoral landscape.²

With inimitable prescience, Besigye had moved to drop the gauntlet and predict that after 15 years in power, Museveni was intent on clinging on perpetually, thus it was time to take him head on before it was too late. His 2001 campaign theme was 'Reform Now.' Many among his colleagues in the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM), at the time vaguely referred to as the 'Movement' within the spirit of so called no-party democracy, demurred, insisting that Besigye was being impatient as not to let Museveni serve his second and last constitutional term. After all, they reasoned, the constitution provided for a two-term limit and Museveni had categorically stated in his 2001 re-election manifesto that he was seeking his second and last term to be able to finish the task of professionalising the army and preparing for a smooth transition to a successor.³

Having served him at a very close personal level, it appears that Besigye had formed an accurate conclusion of Museveni's intentions and predispositions. True to Besigye's prediction, Museveni engineered a dubious constitutional

amendment process in 2005 that included removal of presidential term limits to hand him the latitude to rule for life. The only other remaining constitutional huddle, the 75-year age-limit, also got thrown out of the constitution in 2017 in a manner that included violent scenes on the floor of parliament when the military stormed the House to arrest opponents of the amendment.⁴

Museveni's steady slide

Throughout the 2000s and 2010s, Western media and at least sections of the academia, perhaps in sync with diplomatic and security assessments of their respective governments, going by the general grain of the time, either painted a positive image or at worst maintained a largely lukewarm interest in the deepening tenor of Museveni's authoritarian rule. In fact, the overarching commentary tended to grant short thrift to opposition struggles against Museveni's slide into blunt authoritarianism. With the exception of a few media houses that traditionally report on Africa, and therefore have bureaux in African capitals, not many Western media outlets took any interest in Museveni's vicious assaults on his opponents and the gross erosion of democratic institutions in his singular quest to rule for life.

On their part, Western academics often wrote about Museveni's electoral victories as though they were proven to be credible and indisputable. For example, after the 2011 elections in which Museveni literally raided the national treasury to buy his way to remain in power, which led to the near collapse of Uganda's economy under the weight of inflation, two American-based academics wrote a fanciful but hugely flawed paper, published in the well-respected *Journal of*

Modern African Studies, arguing that money did not matter in the election!⁵ The post-election phenomenon in fact magnified just how money had mattered in securing Museveni's continued stay in power. An election that had passed with little incident produced an explosive post-election atmosphere during which Museveni faced his first toughest challenge on the streets and not in the bushes of rebel insurgency.

Excessive spending in the 2011 elections, a fact that may have embellished and sanitised Museveni's electoral victory but wrecked the economy, triggered runaway inflation and deep economic hardships that fuelled street protests. Wary and jittery of a possible contagion and cascade from North Africa's 'Arab Spring' where Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Hosni Mubarak and Muammar Gaddafi had all been deposed in quick succession and humiliating circumstances, Museveni swiftly summoned the full force of the state's coercive arsenal to beat back the 'Walk-to-Work' protest movement'.

The method and theme of the protest movement was simple yet innovative and portent: it sought to assert the basic and fundamental right to walk to work since people could not afford transportation in the face of high fuel prices and dire financial conditions. Opposition leader Kizza Besigye was the defacto 'chief walker' and the primary target of state repression. In one encounter with the police and military, he was pepper-sprayed to the point of partial blindness as to need immediate medical evacuation to the Kenyan capital, Nairobi.

From the Walk to Work protests in 2011, Uganda's political landscape deteriorated quite rapidly with

Museveni's regime getting ever more repressive, and political engagement becoming patently confrontational and less constructive. As I have argued elsewhere,⁶ Uganda's ongoing political malaise is a consequence of the collapse of the minimum elite consensus forged in the early 1990s and laid down in the 1995 constitution. The collapse of this consensus stemmed in part from Museveni's cavalier moves to chip away at some of the crucial provisions of the constitution, primarily the cap on presidential eligibility. His singular focus on ruling for life gradually spawned a hardened political confrontation, thereby making electoral contests binary fights about defeating him versus defeating him. Every election is a referendum on his continued stay at the helm and not so much a contest over policy and programmes.

In this chequered political environment, particularly starting in the early 2000s through to 2019, the main opposition leader, Dr Besigye, suffered enormous personal pain at the hands of the police, for long commanded by a highly partisan police chief, General Kale Kayihura, plucked from the military to lead the front for Museveni's stay in power using the coercive arsenal of the state. Besigye's trial and tribulations, which spanned a whole two decades, rarely attracted the kind of Western media interest as we have seen over the past year or so. What is more, seldom did we see Western academics assiduously and aggressively speak out 'in solidarity' with those in the trenches against Museveni's brutal rule as they have so forcefully claimed to be doing in the current phase in which Bobi Wine is the singular attraction and primary source of interest.

The West's half-hearted and often approving stance towards Museveni's rule derived from his favourable standing at the Pentagon as an invaluable ally in the war on terror, especially countering the spread of perceived Islamist threats under the tutelage of Sudan's Omar al-Bashir, and of course the situation in Somalia. He was also for long seen as an outstanding student of neoliberalism and the Washington consensus, who undertook thoroughgoing reforms making Uganda's economy arguably the most liberalised and privatised in Africa.

The Wine fetish

Against the background of the West's lukewarm and sometimes approving attitude, in a dramatic turn and in an instant, Bobi Wine became a fetish, valorised and sensationalised in ways that betray an ahistorical understanding of Uganda's political landscape, and somewhat counterproductive if antithetical to the struggle against Museveni's nearly four decades rule. Suddenly, academics who always downplayed the severity of Museveni's blunt authoritarianism now see the regime as nothing short of brutal, deserving unequivocal denunciation and being deposed one way or the other. Within Western academic circles, some who previously argued that Museveni was genuinely popular and had 'won' elections despite allegations of rigging have turned around to denounce this year's election result in very strong terms. Yet, there is not much qualitative difference between Museveni's conduct this time and previous election cycles.

Quite remarkably, a flurry of advocates and promoters of democracy in Africa have been hard at work on the streets of Twitter and Facebook, urging their respective home

governments in Europe and North America to call out Museveni's excesses, to issue tough statements and take a hard stance against him. Unwittingly, some academics and activists participated in spreading mis/disinformation originating from Bobi Wine's fans, in one case retweeting a picture from the 2016 election to show how the vote was being stolen on 14th January 2021!

In a particularly instructive 'show of solidarity,' they challenged their governments and embassies in Kampala to, literally, order Museveni to lift the military/police siege on the house of Mr Wine, who was effectively placed under house arrest on the night of the polls. This proposed nostrum, of their governments issuing some kind of order to Mr Museveni to behave and leave power, apparently draws from the justification that Museveni is a net beneficiary of Western foreign aid who should be reined in by his benefactors in the face of supposedly helpless Ugandans. This, of course, is grossly problematic on many fronts.

Needless to say, Museveni's dependence on Western aid has declined over the years even as the repressive tenor of his rule has held steady or even accelerated. Since the early 1990s when his government overwhelmingly depended on donor funding, Museveni's government bettered internal revenue collections but also diversified external aid dependence to include China and Japan and not just the traditional West. At any rate, why it is morally justified to use aid as the basis for pressuring Museveni today and not 10 years ago is an open question, but at a minimum it shows something not right with the current urgency to 'save' Ugandans from a ruler of long standing.

In the broader scheme of things, the aid argument sits on a decidedly shaky normative and empirical foundation. First, it is faulty to assume that aid by Western powers is a benevolent and selfless gesture, free of strategic and self-serving interests of the benefactors. Aid is not and has never been a purely charitable resource. It is true that there are nations and governments (such as the Scandinavian countries) that disburse aid resources with little or no clear and apparent national interests of their own, but even in this category we know that the aid industry has its own logics and self-reinforcing dynamics which have little to do with the officially stated bases for aid flows or whether aid is actually making that much of a long-term substantive difference. Ironic as it may sound, aid to Africa has grown into a business of sorts and a profession that operates with a powerful feedback loop driven by interests and ambitions that are external to the ostensible aid beneficiaries.

Second, the assumption that the aid leverage wielded by Western powers can be used to influence behaviour and actions of incumbent rulers runs against the unhealthy empirical picture from similar approaches in the recent past. As Jimi Adesina and co-authors⁷ argued in these pages, the experience and lessons of Structural Adjustment conditionalities should disabuse us of faith in externally demanded political reforms because this approach either yields only superficial results or tends to fall flat. It is also a glaring assault on the sovereign existence of a people.

Resisting and defeating an entrenched authoritarian ruler like Museveni is no walk in the forest and is not reducible to the fiat of pressure from Western powers

fuelled by media and democracy promoters. The forces and fuel that can prudently take down Mr Museveni, in a manner that advances the cause of genuine democracy and freedom, must necessarily evolve and emerge from Uganda and among Ugandans. The oversized role of external agitators, quite hypocritical in many ways, in fact might work to hurt than help the struggle for liberation from a decayed, moribund and personalised system of rule now cruising to the fourth floor.

By making January's election about Bobi Wine as a person, and not what is critically at stake for Uganda and Ugandans, the Western media and democracy activists handed Museveni a handy tool to smear and discredit Mr Wine, portraying him as nothing more than an agent of foreign interests, a front for the same old imperial interests that seek to weaken Africa, Mr Museveni repeatedly claimed. Mr Wine himself tended to lend currency to Museveni's charges by openly appealing to Western audiences and uncritically wallowing in the glamour of Western media sensationalism and splendour. On the eve of the January polls, for example, he bemoaned the refusal by the Ugandan government to accredit foreign journalists and election observers. It is difficult to see why he felt a free and fair election in Uganda depended on the presence of foreign media personnel and election observers. An election in a country like Uganda is not necessarily rigged on polling day!

Obviously, Museveni has zero credibility and moral authority to accuse his challengers of working with and benefiting from Western actors, as he in fact has been a leading agent of foreign interests not just in Uganda but on the conti-

nent. The point here though is that external agitation and pressure may sound like a benign and welcome ingredient to take down a brazen dictator; in practice, however, it can lend succour for nationalist mobilisation and jingoism precisely in the service of entrenching the dictatorship as happened in Zimbabwe when Robert Mugabe dug in deeper to hold on for so long.

Which way Uganda

For 'friends' of Africa keen to advance democracy and freedom, who want to 'help' the forces countering a runaway authoritarian ruler like Museveni, the starting point is to take in the lessons of history. Externally instigated regime change is a hard sale as it tends to not happen the way it is expected and often leads to perilous outcomes. After 35 years in power, Museveni has taken Uganda down a dangerous path. Bringing about meaningful change is not as simple as chasing out an autocrat and installing a new messianic figure with a populist appeal. It is also wrong to construe opposition figures as angels embodying democracy and deserving uncritical embrace. To see Museveni as a devilish dictator and his opponents as angelic democrats is a misleading dichotomy. Today's 'pro-democracy' opposition figures can easily turn into tomorrow's authoritarian rulers.

Uganda is a deeply socially complex society. The enormity of the country's socioeconomic problems and crisis of its politics cannot be overemphasised. It may well be an easier job to overthrow Museveni in a popular process, but it is a herculean task forging a new Uganda of peace and prosperity. The issue is not merely one of saving Ugandans from a ruthless dictator, as Western democracy promoters ap-

pear bent on, it is also about understanding how a post-Museveni Uganda can be viably pursued and prudently implemented. Here, the Western journalist, the academic, the democracy advocate and activist, the diplomat and politician need to pause and appreciate that principled partnership with Ugandans might help, but old-type paternalism won't. The agency of Ugandans is what can make a true and durable difference.

For foreign actors who are genuinely concerned and fired up for freedom and liberation of suffering Ugandans, I propose more humility and less hubris. Uganda is at grave political crossroads and the possibility of social disintegration is real. The country's social fabric is fragile. The youth bulge presents a daunting task. Land conflicts easily portend the most important source of social disharmony and violence. The country's democratic experiment requires a total rethink. To start tackling these and other endemic problems, the country urgently needs a candid and concerted national conversation to turn the corner away from Museveni's misrule, to reimagine a new Uganda.

The country wants to free itself from Museveni's mess, but Museveni too needs to be liberated

from his own trap of power. There is a delicate and difficult negotiation to be navigated here. It needs thoughtfulness and perceptiveness, not just fancy slogans and foreign pressure. The prospects for forging a post-Museveni Uganda anytime soon may very well be undercut by actions of overzealous and overbearing foreign actors. There is no magic wand of a popular figure that will easily sweep away Museveni without the efforts of coherent, coordinated and combined change-seeking forces inside the country.

Notes

1. It was President Bill Clinton who used the phrase 'beacon of hope' while his Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, talked about a 'new breed of African leadership.' Both referred to Museveni and his peers Laurent Kabila in Congo, Meles Zenawi in Ethiopia, Isaias Afwerki in Eritrea and Jerry Rawlings in Ghana.
2. Anders Sjögren, 2018, 'Wielding the Stick Again: The Rise and Fall and Rise of State Violence During Presidential Elections in Uganda, In *Violence in African Elections: Between Democracy and Big Man Politics*, edited by Mimmi Söderberg Kovacs and Jesper Bjarnesen, London: Zed Books, pp.47–66.
3. For an account of the discussions in NRM in late 1990s and Besigye's decision to challenge Museveni in 2001, see Daniel Kalinaki, 2014, *Kizza Besigye and Uganda's Unfinished Revolution*, Kampala: Dominant Seven.
4. Elias Biryabarema, 2017, 'Uganda Special Forces Accused of Ejecting MPs from Parliament,' *Reuters*, 29 September 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-uganda-politics/ugandan-special-forces-accused-of-ejecting-mps-from-parliament-idUSKCN1C41RX>
5. Jeffrey Conroy-Krutz and Carolyn Logan, 2012, 'Museveni and the 2011 Ugandan Election: Did the Money Matter? *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, pp. 625–655.
6. See Moses Khisa, 2019, 'Shrinking Democratic Space? Crisis of Consensus and Contentious Politics in Uganda, *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 57(3), pp. 343–362.
7. Jimi O. Adesina, et. al., 'Reflections on Foreign Aid and Regime Change in Ethiopia: A Response to Cheeseman', in *CODESRIA Bulletin Online*, No. 1, January 2021. <https://codesria.org/spip.php?article3122&lang=en>