



Removing a Dictator

By Nanna Schneidermann



In the campaign for Uganda's presidential election, 2021 has started where it left of in 2020. The 38-year-old musician-turned-politician, His Excellence Ghetto President Bobi Wine aka Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu, as well as his team and supporters, are being harassed, arrested, violently deterred and blocked from campaigning by Ugandan authorities bent on ensuring that President Yoweri Museveni, in power since 1986, stays there.

Bobi Wine and his People Power Movement are not unlike other youth-driven protest [movements across Africa that are making their voices heard](#) by organizing through digital media. But while the international community celebrates the emancipatory potential of these new young voices, the complexities of their political engagements as well as the consequences of the abuses that participants face seem to fade from view. In Uganda, specifically, the emergence of cultural figures in politics is rooted in how the role of popular musicians changed in the elections of 2011, which coincided with the height of Bobi Wine's musical career.

Bobi Wine rose to fame in the mid-2000's Kampala, as an Afro-pop star inspired by global icons like Michael Jackson and Bob Marley. Bobi took on the title Ghetto President and his Firebase crew jokingly became the "ghetto government" of [Kamwokya](#), the neighborhood where he was from. Though Bobi released socially conscious songs advocating for "[the ghetto people](#)," the crew considered formal politics in Uganda as dangerous and would warn ignorant friends, like me, not to "get mixed up in politics."

The more than 100 artists and music industry professionals that I interviewed throughout the 2000s were, with a few exceptions, not into politics. They had grown up in the 1980s war-time Uganda, and saw the emerging, largely informal, music industry as a chance to cast off the burdensome ties of kin and ethnicity that seemed to rule politics. They rather saw themselves as entrepreneurs and brand names in a global market for music; as individual stars lighting up the skies above Kampala. Wine and his fellow superstars like Chameleone and Bebe Cool instead politicked in [diss-songs](#) and [beefs](#) about being the biggest name, the most famous artist, in the country. Not many would have imagined that beef would one day challenge President Museveni. But as anthropologist Kelly Askew duly warned, in Eastern Africa [“economic and political practice need not be conceptualized as distinct from aesthetic principles.”](#) New forms of “bigness” and power emerged around the young musicians with digital means of production and the aesthetics of entrepreneurship.

On July 7, 2010, the extremist group Al Shabab, which had been operating in East Africa, attacked several night-time venues in Kampala. Insecurity and cumbersome new security measures meant empty concert halls and night clubs, and this was bad business for artists. Around the same time the election campaigns for the 2011 elections were taking off, and musicians now found work performing at rallies and allowing politicians to use their hits as campaign songs. “After all, I am a business man, and there’s too much money in politics,” said one of my friends who was on the campaign trail for the ruling NRM of Museveni. But this did not mean that singers were now the clients of the “big” men and women of politics. Rather, they framed their relationship with politicians as a market transaction, as just another sponsored show. The Firebase Crew too performed at rallies for candidates of opposed parties in 2010, and one crew member commented: “If I go for his [the politician’s] show, then he has to pay me. Then voting is something else.” In this way, they enforced their status as street-wise, self-made men and women, hustling the old, political elite without being caught in their patrimonial networks of political allegiance.

While career politicians in Uganda usually emphasise belonging and legitimacy with voters in election campaigns through [direct exchange](#) and by engineering relations of mutual dependence to gain influence, pop artists make their livelihoods and fame through mediated connections to fans and consumers. The relational form of their “bigness” can neither be characterised as relations of political activism, nor as patronage, nor as pure market relations. Rather, young musicians here operate as kind of cultural brokers within the tensions of all three forces at once.

A second way that artists brokered between music, market, and politics in the 2011 elections was as candidates for political office. As the industry grew, artists and celebrities in Uganda were beginning to show the same material properties as the more traditional elites. They built mansions and drove cars more extravagant than any politician; they owned businesses, as well as the means for the production of their “bigness”—studios, night clubs, and concert grounds. One of these candidates was [Eddy Yawe](#), musician, producer, studio owner—and Bobi Wine’s older brother. As a candidate for Member of Parliament, he remarked that musicians had so far been considered as *bayaye* (hoodlums, hustlers) only to be used by the elite as entertainers in formal politics, but this was about to change:

In the eloquent imagery of what the political scientist Jean-Francois Bayart referred to as the [“the politics of the belly,”](#) Eddy explained how artists could broker their fame beyond the kitchen, where power is cooked, for a seat at the dining table and a bite of the national cake. He was neither singing praises, nor protesting an increasingly authoritarian regime, but rather sought to extend his sphere of influence as an artist by entering into politics. Though Eddy Yawe had a big turnout at rallies, he did not win the election, according to some, [because of electoral fraud.](#)

While musicians brokered their fame in the field of politics, some politicians also sought to extend

their power through the field of music. If there had been any doubt about the political elite taking the music of the new generation seriously as an effective means to mobilise voters, it was put to rest when President Museveni launched his own campaign rap song, "[Do You Want Another Rap?](#)"

In early 2017, a parliamentary seat opened up in Kyadondo East. Wine shaved off his dreadlocks and ran as an independent candidate, with a campaign based largely on music and social media. His stance was clear: he was not a politician, but had come to politics as a musician to represent the young generation, the Ugandans whose interests were being ignored by the government. He won. When the political platform, [People Power - Our Power](#), formed by Bobi in the struggle against the removal of the presidential age-limit which allowed Museveni to rule for life, it was not a political party but a movement. He released the People Power anthem "[Freedom](#)" and continued to host shows at his concert grounds One Love Beach. When his [driver was shot and Wine himself arrested](#) and tortured in August 2018, protests broke out across Uganda and fellow artists came out to support People Power in [songs](#) and social media. In the following months the Ghetto President started hinting at a run towards presidency in both [interviews](#) and quite direct [diss-songs against Museveni](#).

People Power launched the party the National Unity Platform as their political wing in July 2020 and Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu as their leader and presidential candidate. Using social media and beef tactics from the music industry to gain traction in politics, Bobi Wine successfully insisted on his integrity as an artist. But this also drew the music industry into politics in ways that made music the battleground for the future of the country.

As the 2021 elections approach, the Ugandan government has used a progressively more violent repertoire of strategies to repress Wine's run for president and stifle the music industry. On one hand they confirm Wine as a legitimate candidate and the political power of music, but they also point to the limits of the cultural brokerage and "bigness" of artists in the face of state repression and violence.

One strategy is the use of legislative power to [block political](#) opponents. Since 2018 the police have systematically denied security clearances to venues and shows that include [Bobi Wine, the Firebase Crew](#) as well as other singers associated with People Power. While Bobi Wine flew abroad to perform, less known singers now effectively became clients of People Power as their livelihoods as artist-entrepreneurs had been undermined.

In early 2019 the parliament sought to update the "[Stage Plays and Public Entertainment Act Cap 49](#)"—hitherto a legislative, colonial leftover from 1943. The act requires all music, stage and film producers to be licensed by Uganda Communications Commission (UCC), limits touring and number of performances by singers, and requires them to submit their lyrics, music, and visual material for approval at a government censorship board. The enforcement of such a law would, naturally, devastate the cultural industries in Uganda. Further, as the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the world in 2020, the authorities have [weaponized the emergency for repressing political opposition and militarizing public space](#).

A second strategy was co-optation. In the second half of 2019, music stars and celebrities who had been People Power supporters and critical of NRM's politics were invited to visit personally with Museveni and were gifted large sums of money to change sides. For some, the switch [seemed voluntary](#), while the musicians I interviewed in December 2019 described being both cajoled, intimidated, and threatened into [publicly accepting money "gifts"](#) and entering into a patron-client relationship with the president. At the same time Museveni attempted to [appropriate the imagery of the Ghetto Government](#), when he hired former Firebase Crew member Buchaman as his special "ghetto" advisor, launched new initiatives in Kampala's slums as well as a paramilitary group of

crime-fighters, the “ghetto army.”

Thirdly, the violence that the Ghetto President’s campaign has been subjected to demonstrates that beefing with the president of Uganda is no joke. Bobi Wine was arrested minutes after submitting his presidential nomination forms, and this led to riots across the country, with more than [50 civilians losing their lives](#), and many more injured, in November 2020. Members of Bobi Wine’s campaign team have been shot with [rubber](#) and [live bullets](#), knocked by cars, killed, ambushed, and arrested. On December 30, 2020, the entire campaign team of more than 90 people were arrested and their cars impounded. Firebase Prime Minister and signer Nubian Li, Producer Dan Magic and bodyguard Eddy Mutwe and 46 other civilians were [court marshaled on January 8th](#) based on dubious evidence collected four days after their arrest.

These violations have been documented by [Facebook Live and YouTube channels](#) run by young men with cameras, at times just mobile phones. The daily streams allow both Ugandan and international audiences to participate in the campaigns, but is also a strategy to Bobi Wine and his team safe from harm.

The NRM government has a [history of controlling Ugandan media](#) and shutting down the internet during [elections and protests](#). But in December, the Uganda Communication Commission reached all the way to Silicon Valley and [requested Google and Facebook to shut down eight of the social media channels](#) for inciting violence. Meanwhile, both Ugandan and foreign journalists have been injured and their credentials revoked. “We don’t have guns to fight, but use the camera as our weapon,” Bobi Wine said as a reaction to this [in a press conference on December 15, 2020](#).

While his entire campaign and security teams are incarcerated and his campaign suspended by the country’s Electoral Commission, Bobi Wine has filed a complaint with the International Criminal Courts against Museveni and Minister of Security Elly Tumwiine ([also an artist](#)), among other officials, for crimes against humanity. During a video call with international press about the ICC case, he was [assaulted by police officers](#). After returning to the video call a visibly affected Bobi Wine, with running eyes from the tear gas, commented: [“I am a presidential candidate. But as you can see, if I can be harassed like this, you can imagine what is happening to Ugandans who don’t have a voice.”](#)

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