



From Prestige to Humiliation: Uganda and Ethiopia in the Age of Trump

By A. K. Kaiza



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I had arrived late to Ethiopia, when I first visited it in 2012, barely managing to see the vestiges of the early 20th century nation of lattice work balconies, of Lada taxis, family pizzerias and piazzas; also the Ethiopia of Red Terror squares and state surveillance carried out on such a scale you did not buy a new shirt without the president potentially hearing of it.

That was late 2012, three months after the death of Meles Zenawi. Within a few months, as if making up for lost time, that old Ethiopia had started to disappear.

Toyota Corollas started replacing Ladas. In moved smartphones, graders and skyscrapers. A sleek metro train appeared. Meskel Square, once the regional version of Moscow's Red Square, Beijing's Tiananmen and Pyongyang's Kim Il-Sung Square, was rapidly torn up. The Chinese-built light rail train cut the square to bits, a symbolic adieu to the long-dead Derg years and perhaps a shamefaced admission that Karl Marx and T-72 tanks had been over the top.

The death of Meles was a thus dramatic turning point. For months after, Ethiopians still spoke of him in the present tense - 'as Meles says' - as if like some fictional medieval Japanese Shogun, he

had feigned death to test loyalty; with Meles, you exercised caution.

However, the changes under Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn failed to break the symbolic barrier. The last time I was in Ethiopia, in September 2016, I did not even go into Addis. I was transiting through Bole, a full year since I had last been there. And yet I sensed that things had reverted to vintage Ethiopia: Fear and gloom had returned.

Ethiopians can be a passionate lot, forming sudden and deep friendships, but also quick to take umbrage. Wearing your heart on your sleeve is as Ethiopian as tanking a globule of Tej. I had noticed the friendly, if guarded manner of the Ethiopian waiter and waitress. But on that day in late September, they were rude to customers and supervisors alike. The increasing personal identification with the state of the nation, as the years since colonialism gathered weight and our ethnic character and idiosyncrasies receded in the rear view and we became 'nationals,' meant you could sense the character of a country on people's faces. Before Emperor Haile Selassie was overthrown, the concept of nation would have been alien to the vast majority of Ethiopians, to whom government meant landlord. But the 1974 revolution changed that. And so I sensed a hard and unhappy mood had descended.

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Like a replay of the 1970s and 80s, I looked out of the terminal building and knew that out there, beyond the provisional internationalism of airports, the state was killing someone. As they would say in America, the 1970s had called to reclaim our souls.

Uganda in 2016 Felt a Bit Like Ethiopia Circa 1974

Ethiopians knew what was coming. Barely a week after that transit, a state of emergency had been declared. I was not looking forward to flying back to Entebbe. I did not know if, on my way to Kampala, I would find the highway blocked off and we would have to drive through potato gardens and cattle tracks, as had become the norm following the elections in February 2016. What had once taken about an hour had, in those fraught months, become an ordeal stretching three hours, driving the 42 kilometres from Entebbe to Kampala. The state feared protests and worse and through that evil genius unique to tyrannies, it had banned the people. Before the year was out, state forces were to storm a royal palace, kill over 100 people and deny that famine was looming. Uganda in 2016 felt a bit like Ethiopia circa 1974.

Ethiopia in 2016 once again felt like Ethiopia proper, the revanchist state back in vintage form. It arrived as a thunderbolt. It transformed Hailemariam's face of bonhomie, his smiley icon face, into something more sinister than even Meles's unsmiling picture. It was inevitably denied by the government, but Amnesty International's figure of 800 killed by the state since the Oromia uprising of late 2015, would, if true - and there is compelling reason to believe it is - cast a shadow on the region. Bar Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, there are fewer and fewer places in the world where that many can so systematically be killed.

In closing the highways to human traffic, killing 100 people in Kasese in western Uganda, and in suppressing Oromo protests, both governments, confronted by contestations of legitimacy, used the excuse of war on terror to impose heavy-handed security measures.

These acts of impunity are also, tellingly, the reason both Uganda and Ethiopia have hitherto been

the US's staunchest regional allies in the war on terror. As client states, the two deliver the geopolitical goods. It is harder for states like South Africa or Kenya to kill even eight people or force motorists into village paths without triggering a constitutional crisis. Dictators, American diplomats know only too well, make for great allies.

And therein lies the naked fact of American democracy and power. And the shame of Ugandans and Ethiopians. But no one wins the status of American ally by just sitting around doing nothing.

As Italians make the best pasta, and Japanese make great sushi, so Ethiopians and Ugandans make the best collapsed states in East Africa. Rwandese and Somalis and Sudanese create massive state collapse, but they do so for internal consumption. They collapse only their own states. Ugandans have left their fingerprints on political ruins from Kinshasa to Kigali to Juba; the Ethiopians in Asmara and Mogadishu and who knows where else. Washington notices these differences.

But today, what was until a few weeks ago a matter of pride, the privilege of being America's best and closest friends, has become a matter of panic. From back in the years when the Bill Clinton administration wooed these regimes, belonging to the American camp had brought with it some predictability, and no small amount of kudos. No matter the ideological gap between an Obama and a Bush, you could tell in advance what Washington would do. The bastion of democracy also had checks and balances that cushioned the relationships against a too precipitate Bush or recalcitrant Obama. If Bush cut off family planning aid money, at least he put it into HIV/Aids. He might not believe in the things you believed in, but you could let your five-year old daughter listen to him describe his belief.

Linebacking America has gone from prestigious to humiliating. Now everyone knows you are in it for the money, the fig leaf of being progressive, liberal and forward-looking cannot be convincing when the original item has gone back to 1860 AD. A president or prime minister stands up to declare pride in the relationship with America. Then there comes that pause as they absorb the very loud minds of their audience thinking in unison, 'grab-them-by-the-@f*.'

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It feels like the moment we had always warned about, that an alliance with the US was never a good idea. Except something too dangerous for I-told-you-so gloating came to pass. Three things: The frightening unpredictability of US power; the indignity of taking orders from Donald Trump, let alone being seen to be doing so; what to do about the things we gave up in exchange for US largesse?

Knuckleduster in the House

The defenestration of Gaddafi was a blow Museveni has not recovered from. That happened under Obama's watch. It scrambles the brain to think what Trump may be planning. One thing is for certain: The search for a less expensive, less volatile foreign policy had pushed Washington to seek regional alliances, thence handing lifelines to governments like the one in Kampala, buying them a decade or two extra in power. Trump's knuckleduster approach has little need of such subtleties. He will send in Tomahawks, and when Tillerson arrives, he will not arrive as an alternative to smart bombs. He will come reading the riot act. This must make for sleepless nights in State Houses around the place: America may not need our armies as much as they used to.

Standing at the AU podium, where all the other heads of state and government knew you were Washington's favourite, had added some iron to the voice of our president. Coming to Kampala, for regional presidents, had some urgency to it for, as the representative of American power on earth, what Museveni permitted would surely be permitted in Washington. These days it must feel, every time a fellow president covers their mouth behind the order paper, that they are concealing a gleeful smile.

But joking aside, the alliance with Washington came at a cost. We may in future learn more about the war in Congo and what transpired in dark corners of our State House for that war to happen. But knowing the USA would look the other way emboldened the Ugandan and Rwandan troops that laid waste to that country.

It was easier to pick Ethiopian and Ugandan economies and militaries for manipulation because they were seasick from all the yaw-yawing. Such a thing proved less easy with Tanzania or Kenya, where more or less, the generals and general managers had risen through the ranks since Independence, were running institutions that had over time won legitimacy and had great pride in their professionalism. But these other leaders are sitting there. They can change things.

Political development in Uganda itself has been arrested. What was the motivation for giving in to change when Washington did not care a whit? Might we have beaten a tenderer path to the Sudanese imbroglio had we cared more for riparian amity instead of allowing ourselves to be a base against Bashir? Too many what ifs.

Christians, Muslims: Clanmates Divided by Foreign Religions

Ethiopia and Uganda allowed relationships between Christians and Muslims (clanmates divided by foreign religions) in their own countries to sour over the war on terror. It was an unmitigated tragedy, one that may not have run its full course yet. The judicial process may yet tell us what happened, but the fact that both countries have dozens of Muslim leaders behind bars is testament to decades of wrong turns in policy decisions.

The tragedy is that what brought us to this pass cannot be placed squarely at the feet of our current leaders. Shifts and turns in these countries since the early 1970s were leading to some place like this. The collapse of the monarchy in Ethiopia, and the Independence government in Uganda, led to a series of other collapses. By the time the 1990s arrived, when some stability had been won, the armies in both countries had changed structurally and substantively. Economic directions had shifted at least twice in both countries, banks had gone down, industry collapsed. It was easier to pick Ethiopian and Ugandan economies and militaries for manipulation because they were seasick from all the yaw-yawing. Such a thing proved less easy with Tanzania or Kenya, where more or less, the generals and general managers had risen through the ranks since Independence, were running institutions that had over time won legitimacy and had great pride in their professionalism.

Things will not change for the better. The internal decay is so profound only worse can follow. It is unlikely America will abandon its East African regional policy. They will only make more humiliating demands. And we will say yes.

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