



By A. K. Kaiza



The era of President Yoweri Museveni, along with his undeniable influence in the region, has come to an end.

The countdown to the end of his presidency commenced on Wednesday, 27th September 2017, when two days of fights between lawmakers over removing the age limit for presidential candidates was violently broken into by the president's own bodyguards who stormed the debate chambers. There had been a chance that the Ugandan president might retire peacefully; there is very little hope for that now. The body guards he sent to beat up MPs was his suicide note to the world.

Bar North Korea or some arrangement with a kindly Nordic state, we are puzzled when thinking about which government in today's volatile political weather would risk welcoming as exile into its borders, a man who fell to the allure of such supreme imbecility. At the worst, we will be subjected to a Mugabe-style horror show of leader as flesh in progressive decay.

All through that Wednesday, the fever of what might happen in parliament had been building. We had seen snippets of the turmoil on news websites but the impact of the 7 o'clock news - a ritual hour indelibly etched in our collective conscience as the doomsday hour - had not struck yet. Seven o'clock came and the whole of Kampala was quiet, gathered around TV sets. The images of MPs beaten and hauled out of parliament, then tossed like sacks of potatoes into vans by musclemen struck each viewer like a personal blow. You winced, but it just kept on coming.

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You felt in the manner in which the crowds stood hushed before the screens that something had changed. That Wednesday affirmed what we had felt all along – that the government had lost power. Power is the legitimacy of acceptance of their leaders by the people; the use of force is the very antithesis of power. This feeling had been building since the beginning of the year, coming most forcefully in mid-March with the shooting to death of Assistant Inspector General of Police, Felix Kaweesi, a murder that still shocks the nation despite the fact that the past several years had been stocked with gruesome killings. Shortly after that, in April, we had our telephone lines severed.

There had been the Dr. Stella Nyanzi imbroglio (she of the salacious Facebook postings). She used language against the president and First Lady Janet Museveni that reflected the depth of contempt society felt for the power couple. The humiliation dramatised the extent to which the Museveni government was lost and is now flailing. The last of his cooler-minded bush war colleagues had deserted him. He was left surrounded by hyena-like henchmen. Some riposte was brewing. A proud and violent man, we expected Mr. Museveni to lash out blindly. Still, when the expected came, we were chilled to the bone watching it unfold.

It was a horror show, yet it was also a moment of redemption. Museveni's act of self-castration was a double-edged sword; just weeks before that, it had started to look as if Uganda might fracture into pieces after his departure; history might have granted him the chance of posthumously gloating that without him, Uganda fell into pieces. He is not above such a thing. But in yet another moment of immense suspense, Uganda the nation proved harder to kill. It was not the first time that an ethnically divided country was brought together by a mad-man ruler. It happened in 1966 when his predecessor, President Milton Obote, attacked parliament in similar fashion and single-handedly rewrote the constitution. It came again in February 1977 when President Idi Amin murdered Archbishop Janani Luwum.

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Collective horror at what they had allowed one man to get away with galvanised the country on both occasions. Sending his personal bodyguards to beat up MPs may have seemed like a show of force for Mr. Museveni, but only a depraved man living in an echo chamber can read such an attack as heroic. The shockwave will ripple through the country for decades to come, long after it has deposited Mr. Museveni and his coterie of goons onto the dung heap of history. After 31 years of trying very hard, this becomes the signal act of his presidency that will be remembered.

From rebel with a cause to dictator

Perhaps that history will be more measured than a citizen's sentiment in its assessment of a man who rose from herdsboy to most influential ruler in East and Central Africa. History will show that he was a staple of Ugandan public life since the 1970s. He came of age in the revolutionary ferment of the 1960s, a man firmly lodged in leftist idealism. He swung into action instantly, mingling with the continent's liberation fighters in Nyerere's Dar es Salaam; there he was slipping south, AK47 on shoulder, to fight the Portuguese in Mozambique, and proudly announcing in his book, *The Mustard Seed*, that he killed his first white man in the anti-colonial struggle, there he was leading a band of young men to overthrow Idi Amin in 1972; there were midnight raids, car chases with squealing tires and gunshots in the dark – all very Che Guevara, the flaming revolutionary hero and comrade of

Cuba's Fidel Castro.

It was finally the discipline of structure and strategy that put him on the track to power, a slight shift from Marxist firebrand to Maoist strategist. The 1979 overthrow of Idi Amin brought him close to power as Minister of Defence in the interim post-coup government. But, that the military commission was only warming the seat for Mr. Obote's return to power, stung Mr. Museveni to the quick. His four-year guerrilla war against the Obote government was a big gamble, so big and bold that it succeeded.

That he succeeded in his guerrilla warfare does mean that Mr. Museveni had mustered his Mao. If I was being generous, I would say that Yoweri Museveni was an *idea* - albeit one that grew weaker and crumbled, and has now disappeared. But he really did believe in something. The *President* Museveni of the 1980s was an ascetic, a puritan, a humble man (albeit one very proud of his humility). The revolutionary iconoclast of the 1960s was still in him. He taught Ugandans to *denounce*, to think anew. As a Marxist, his *modus operandi* was Maoist in praxis. The masterclass of guerrilla warfare had taught him to believe in the effectiveness of the masses, of *mobilisation*. Guerrilla warfare, given the asymmetry of power that necessitates it, is itself a school in social mobilisation.

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If he did not believe in the people, at least Mr. Museveni learnt not to ignore the fact that acting on the *idea* of people power had swept him into office. This by itself is a far-reaching teleological formulation, a belief that good can ultimately be attained - a humanist thinking of sorts, one that posits mankind as the *summum bonum* of human action - man as an end, a belief that the improvement and welfare of humanity is the end goal of social effort.

The tragedy was that he finally achieved power just as the political force of his idealism was on the wane. The collapse of global socialism - the Soviet Union basically - robbed Mr. Museveni of the kind of support he might have used. When power had at last come his way, he found allies in a philosophy with a teleology of its own. But the neoliberal capitalists that paid for his presidency believed in profit, in money as the end goal to which mankind serves as means. Hence, the cruel irony was that his first big act once settled into power was the implementation of economic reforms by the very enemies of his ideals.

The International Monetary Fund and the World Bank gave much needed financial support to the young government in exchange for forcing through the much-hated Structural Adjustment Policies, which in recent years have been given the less euphemistic tag of "austerity", a policy now tearing apart the post-Cold War Western consensus. What was good for the African gander, turned out to be unacceptable to the British goose. This very split, by which the one-time mother country has shown that what they tell us is unacceptable, has far-reaching historical implications. We East Africans, once bullied by British imperialism, have lost the fear and acceptance of British leadership. But it leaves us naked and uncertain, our leaders groping in darkness.

It is at this point that complexity makes it difficult to make any assessment of Mr. Museveni. Is his heart capable of keeping its treasures - how deep does affection go in him? How hard did he try standing up to the World Bank to defend his ideas? Might he have become a Fidel Castro, an island of ideals against the pernicious excesses of neoliberalism? Could he have tried harder to build a materially poor but more egalitarian, healthy and well-fed nation?

This is the essential tragedy of the man. He started wars that killed millions of people in the region and yet was the first to turn his back on the *raison d'être* of his wars. Perhaps his growing violence, irritability and deafness to advice starting in the mid-1990s were outward signs of raging internal contradictions. But by abandoning his beliefs in exchange for money, we who live outside Mr. Museveni's mind concluded that he was merely power-hungry, unfairly perhaps, but the mountain of evidence to this end is impressive.

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There was another uglier price to pay for abandoning his beliefs: The people that followed him into his bush war, men like his childhood friend, the late Eriya Kategaya, Dr. Kizza Besigye and the former minister Bidandi Ssali, turned away from him. He came to depend on non-ideologues, people hungry for money - of which a lot of free millions were now availed by the IMF, which surely knew it was going to be stolen. Then he turned decidedly tribalist - the furthest distance you can get from Marxism. It may have seemed to him that blood kith and kin would provide bodily safety than the money-hungry henchmen. The result has been the most ethnically uniform government, perhaps in all of Eastern Africa, one in which entire ministries might conduct their business in Mr. Museveni's mother tongue.

The essential mistake Mr. Museveni made was his acceptance of an economic model that was bound to impoverish the majority. And this is where the crisis in Uganda links hands with those in Kenya, Britain and the USA. The von Hayek formulation of economics, which came to be known as "Thatcherite" or "Reaganomics", does burn brightly for the time it takes for national assets sold on the cheap to private interests to raise huge profits. But it concentrates wealth into increasingly fewer hands. In time, as we have learnt, it serves to delegitimise the political class, whose only goal seems to be making the rich wealthier.

The above point brings us to the fraught moments we are in, why it is Uganda and Kenya, rather than Tanzania or Botswana, that are on the edge of collapse, just like the USA and Britain, rather than Germany or Sweden, are in intensive care. It's a pernicious, anti-people economic system and countries that swallowed them wholesale are paying the price. History has recalled the "greed is good" mantra. (No, Gordon Gekko, greed is gluttony.)

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The trajectory via which the small band of the 1980s Ugandan revolutionaries' fervour dissolved into narcissistic greed and bloated rank corruption might have been predicted. There is now a funereal air over Uganda, for we know what has died and must be buried. It was the third moment of unmitigating clarity in post-independence Uganda. Obote started it in 1966, Amin continued it with the murder of Luwum in 1977. Like the previous two events, every Ugandan now knows the script. Just like it did those previous two times, Uganda united against a madman. The sting of insult - for that is what Museveni has done - has sent all eyes smarting in anger.

The epitaph? Yoweri Museveni aimed to make history. He had the potential to achieve that status but he fell short. In his own words, from his book, *Sowing the Mustard Seed*, he "was found wanting". He found power but that power sunk him.

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