



# REAPING FROM THE MUSTARD TREE: The grave mistakes that will lead to Museveni's downfall

By A. K. Kaiza



A spine of low points in the land upon which Kampala sits runs from the Makerere hill north of the city centre, flowing past the foot of Old Kampala from where it enjoins Nakivubo Channel, and thenceforth, takes a long turn southeast, flanking the city in its race to deposit its drainage into Lake Victoria. A century ago, this malarial spine divided the Buganda kingdom headquarters from the fast-rising and [apartheid-style](#) white-and-Asian-only Protectorate zone, which is now the capital of Uganda.

Back then, Kampala still referred to the one hill, now called Old Kampala. But in 1902, the colonial government had violently annexed the biggest and longest hill in the area, Nakasero, and at the close of the First World War, it had firmly established its presence there. The handful of original streets, still named now as then, such as Kyagwe, Allen, Johnson, William, MacKay and Bombo Road, were already operational. The colonial arrangement had nominally left Buganda in charge of the bulk of the area. But by the 1920s all the lands in what is now a metropole city was already gaining the name Kampala.

Thousands of Africans were forcibly removed from Nakasero, and later Makerere, Kololo, and very

much later, Naguru and Mbuya hills, to create room for Europeans and Asians. It was from this spine, whose central lumber would quickly become [Kisenyi](#), that the first urban uprisings would occur, and also the last one. When anti-colonial feelings ran high, like when the era of [mass taxation](#) started in the World War I years, and when drafts to the First and Second World Wars drained African incomes and lives, troubles started from this spine.

These things don't change. A hotbed of illicit brewing (yes, that prohibition era was bigger than America's), thievery, prostitution, and worse, Kisenyi was outside the opulence of the Protectorate zone, outside of the control and native culture of Buganda; it was outside of the law, of morality even. Kisenyi was outside of care and love. The house servants labouring in the Protectorate zone lived in this slum.

It was here, Kampala's seminal ghetto, that the former Ugandan president, Apollo Milton Obote, briefly stayed, and it was in Kisenyi that the late James Mulwana, who would become an industrialist after colonialism, started his business as well as his newspaper, and where the music genre, Kadongo Kamu (one man band) was born.

And so when in July 2018 - a century after the [British poll tax](#) imposed unjust levies on every adult black male just for existing - the Yoweri Museveni government introduced a raft of taxes targeted at electronic economics (which is the new "land" for the new peasantry of electronic money), my mind ran to Kisenyi. Museveni was making enemies with that class of people all wise rulers try and befriend - the poor.

The poll tax (graduated tax or GT) and the hut tax had invented poverty in the colony, for poverty is a social relationship, not material dearth. The tax was designed to simultaneously collapse the African economy and force Africans to work for European and Asian capital to propel the growth of the monetary economy. The taxes broke families, introduced overcrowding, and with overcrowding, the communicable diseases which are still killing us. Neither Obote nor Idi Amin went after the poor. They protected them, no doubt one secret reason Museveni received clandestine support for his war from dark sources to fight them.

And so when in July 2018 - a century after the British poll tax imposed unjust levies on every adult black male just for existing - the Yoweri Museveni government introduced a raft of taxes targeted at electronic economics (which is the new "land" for the new peasantry of electronic money), my mind ran to Kisenyi. Museveni was making enemies with that class of people all wise rulers try and befriend - the poor.

Poverty, which is exclusion from communally-generated surplus rather than a product of laziness, is created by the law. Taxes relocate surpluses from the majority to the minority by taking away their matooke and their aspirins, both in short supply now. The essential act of decolonisation, seen without the political and social rigmarole, would essentially be the elimination of regressive taxes and the re-capitalisation of black African enterprises. Since the colonial system could not empower Africans and still be colonialism, the elimination of the colonialist was necessary for the survival of black people. And yet, one hundred years later, a small coterie in Uganda today is standing in the place of the colonial elite, the wealthy and the untaxed, whilst the majority are forced into poverty and the little they have is taken away. The moral odium of the Museveni koffle stinks a hundred times worse.

It may have been the most ideological thing Museveni did since starting his war, but the taxes, if we had cared enough to see, had been a long time coming. Museveni has been steadily reversing the

gains of independence for reasons only he and his backers know and which have been kept from us, the citizens of Uganda. This reversal has been achieved by the steady build-up of [foreign takeover of key enterprises](#), which then stop paying taxes.

Just like the British mass taxation created lasting poverty in Eastern Africa (and elsewhere via other policies), this new regiment of taxes has the impact, in one fell swoop, to eventually eliminate all the economic gains achieved since decolonisation. But it will do more than that. It has begun to legislate poverties which will doubtless take a century to overturn.

There is a very discomfoting parallel between the Museveni government and the early colonial government in this country. Museveni has run a script so close to that of the preeminent colonial collaborator, [Sir Apolo Kagwa](#), the Prime Minister of Buganda from 1890 to 1926, that it makes you more than uncomfortable. There is the fact that both men came to power through the gun (Kagwa in the late 1880s, Museveni the late 1980s) with the firm support of Great Britain; both men were praised as progressives by outside forces; both implemented land grabs on an industrial scale; both oversaw genocidal civil wars for decades; both turned their ethnic group into wealthy rulers over the rest of the country. And to further stagger the mind, both men witnessed land commission inquiries into land thefts they both instigated.

But the downfall of Kagwa had become inevitable by 1920, the situation he created having thrown Buganda into such calamity that deep into the 1930s, the British had to encourage immigration from Rwanda, Burundi, Belgian Congo and the West Nile to fill up the labour shortage from three decades of population decline - from the colonial war, famine, disease and forced labour. It was the 1890s, and not the 1960s, which crippled Buganda, but the kingdom never admits this.

There is a very discomfoting parallel between the Museveni government and the early colonial government in this country. Museveni has run a script so close to that of the preeminent colonial collaborator, Sir Apolo Kagwa, the Prime Minister of Buganda from 1890 to 1926, that it makes you more than uncomfortable.

In 1918, it was poll tax and hut tax. In 2018, it is [social media tax](#) and [mobile money tax](#). Both target the same people, the poor. At 1 per cent, the mobile money tax may look small to government officials who profit by graft, but in the real world, this tax is crippling the majority of Ugandans. Here is an illustration to explain why the country is burning:

For one week after July 1st, the young man (who I will call Nyanzi) who loads my mobile money account, did not send me the airtime I had already paid for. When I finally ran into him, he told me "things are hard nowadays. I have no float". "Float" is the capital in a money agent's account to enable him to transact.

That afternoon, around the 7th of July, I was on my way back from the market, wincing from the fact that a kilo of beef was selling at USh12,000, up from Ush10,000 the week before, a 20 per cent increase. The matatu from Kampala to Entebbe was now costing USh3,500, up from USh3,000. In the real world, 1 per cent meant job loss for Nyanzi. It meant an entire quarter kilo of beef docked from the scale, and in mileage terms, it meant you stopped 5 kilometers short of reaching Kampala.

I deliberately simplify the matter since other factors were at play, also to do with taxes, like the one on fuel. But there were tens of thousands Nyanzis in the country, and millions of Kaizas unable to balance budgets. How did the 1 per cent tax play out?

Take a theoretical USh1 million (US\$267) needed to transport matooke from Bushenyi to Kampala.

The truck owner sends money for fuel via mobile kiosk to his driver. The truck owner likely received the capital through his phone and transferred it to the farmer's phone, and the farmer transferred it to a farmers' SACCO, repaying the loan he had received to buy seedlings. The money - that US\$1 million - would in one day have changed hands four times:

At the beginning of the day, when the purchaser received it on his phone, he lost US\$10,000 to the tax man (that 1 per cent); the second transfer, to the farmer, the remaining US\$990,000 lost a further US\$9,900; US\$ 980,100 is docked down to US\$970,299 at the end of the day, which means that US\$29,701 has been lost in taxes. This is again simplifying it. There were the old mobile money transfer costs which the telephone company, the kiosk operator, and even the government, charged, meaning that since sums between US\$0.5 million to US\$1 million attract a US\$12,500 withdrawal fee, the total withdrawal fee, minus the taxes, fetched up to US\$ 50,000.

The charges don't stop there. There is also the US\$8,000 sending fee each would have paid (assuming they are all registered mobile money users). So, in total, US\$88,000 has been lost in moving US\$1 million, that's a total of 8.8 per cent, not 1 per cent. The sheer costs are likely equal to the total profits for that unit of matooke costing US\$1 million. The final cost will be transferred to the consumer. But is the "final consumer" not a fictional persona?

The initial transfer began with Nyanzi, from whose kiosk the US\$1 million was sent in the morning. But Nyanzi also buys lunch worth US\$3,500 from Mama Sam each day, and Mama Sam bought a bunch of matooke transported with the money he sent. Mamma Sam paid an extra US\$5,000 for matooke that day. She increases Nyanzi's lunch cost to US\$4,500 a plate on the day Nyanzi made 40 per cent less money because customers like myself preferred to carry money on our person, for when we want it. So even the original US\$3,500 a plate would have been unaffordable.

Nyanzi cannot afford lunch now. He eats mainly matooke. He is not at liberty, like the farmer, the transporter and Mamma Sam, to ask customers to pay more. His margins are pre-set by the telephone company. Like his great-grandfather in 1918, who faced with the twin poll and hut tax, Nyanzi will leave his village and move to town to forage. In town, he will end up in a slum. There, he will eat one meal a day, for the final burden of costs faced by the chain of buyers and sellers is the poor man's stomach. Nyanzi's stomach is just like his great grandfather's stomach in 1918. Nyanzi never finished school because his great-grandfather was unable to educate his grandfather. Thrown off their lands by Kagwa, his grandfather lived in poverty through the 1940s and '50s, and sent only one son, Nyanzi's father, to school in the 1960s but could not pay fees beyond O' Level in the 1980s. In the 1990s, his ethnicity prevented him from advancing, as did his grandfather's race in the 1930s. His son, Nyanzi, dropped out of O' Level in the 1980s.

These are the intricacies of taxation that governments generally keep common people from understanding, harping instead about law and order and hard work. The revolutionary moment comes when people on the streets or in the slums instinctively understand taxes, and connect them to their missing lunch.

It was via Kampala's slums that Robert "Bobi Wine" Kyagulanyi rose up to become the most important challenger Museveni has ever faced. He is also that singular historical figure - the great simplifier.

These are the intricacies of taxation that governments generally keep common people from understanding, harping instead about law and order and hard work. The revolutionary moment comes when people on the streets or in slums instinctively understand taxes, and connect them to their missing lunch.

\*\*\*

From the highest point on the curve, looping Butiikiro Road in Kampala, which sits on the old Buganda government territory, just edging Kisenyi, you still see the scars left by the politics of Sir Apollo Kagwa, from the rusty, dusty spine from Kisenyi to Kivulu slum below Makerere hill. On Monday, August 20th, this route was marked by rising black smoke. Smoke was also rising in other parts of Kampala and the country. A national protest movement had started. Unlike the 1950s, the movement had also become international, with people in South Africa, the United States and Kenya protesting against Museveni, a first for a Ugandan leader.

The connection between the most important tax since the colonial governorship of Coryndon in the early 1920s, and the [violence in Arua](#), cannot be ignored. The [killing of Yasin Kawuma](#), Kyagulanyi's driver, in Arua, is like the shooting to death of five people in January 1945 by the British in similar protests around the country. What August 2018 has done is bring complex issues down to levels that are clear to everyone now: The political and economic elite will not take responsibility. They steal and pay themselves huge sums whilst the multinational "investor" corporations dodge taxes. The gates have been shut on forgiveness and redemption. The expansion of financial inclusion, which mobile money made possible, has been cut short, and with it, the lives of millions have been ruined.

There is something of the *ancien régime* in Uganda now; an arrogant monarch, an out of touch elite, poverty, disease, hunger, ruinous foreign wars. As if this was not enough, the government had to go ahead and impose a punitive tax.

The gruesome details of how Kyagulanyi was [tortured](#) made you close your eyes in horror (genital-pull and metal bar to the head). At the age of only 36, Kyagulanyi, aka Bobi Wine, who from since he was in his early 20s has been singing about the nastiness of Ugandan life, has become the biggest threat to Museveni's political career in ways that Col. Kizza Besigye was not.

With Besigye, there was some kind of parity with Museveni. They had one time been comrades, had fought the same war and had been close to the same woman. You could read [nuance](#) into the struggle. Having followed Museveni for 18 years before the rupture, you could question Besigye's judgment.

The gruesome details of how Kyagulanyi was tortured made you close your eyes in horror (genital-pull and metal bar to the head). At the age of only 36, Kyagulanyi, aka Bobi Wine, who since he was in his early 20s has been singing about the nastiness of Ugandan life, has become the biggest threat to Museveni's political career in ways that Col. Kizza Besigye was not.

Kyagulanyi was not even born when Museveni started his bush war. Unlike Museveni and Besigye, he rose from the underclass, and made his own money the hard way. A great-grandchild of Apollo Kagwa's victims, Kyagulanyi is a critic, not just of Museveni, but of the entire history of the making of Uganda. His fight is so deeply rooted, so fundamental, that despite his own claims to decolonisation, Museveni is only a detail in the war Kyagulanyi is fighting. Bobi Wine's war is history, a battle in which Museveni now plays a bit part. The realisation that Kyagulanyi dwarfs him scares Museveni who, while auditioning for the part of Napoleon, has ended up playing Pol Pot.

People - Ugandans and non-Ugandans - even if they don't know the intricacies of the history of poverty-creation in Uganda, instinctively understand this. The sub-plots tell important stories nonetheless.

I recollect writing in the July 2011 issue of the *Nairobi Law Monthly*, and in *The East African* during the Arab Spring, that the Walk2Work demonstrations in Uganda would leave Museveni untouched. I did not anticipate then that this was a mere precursor to bigger things in the near future. Museveni's government was back then internally intact. He had not yet made tactical errors (anti-gay bill, lifting presidential age limits) which would cement in local and international minds what a few of those with insight into his regime had been saying for decades. Opposition to his rule had been top-down, the Kampala elite leading a few towns in opposition.

The "tipping point" was yet to come. And it arrived in September 2017 when Museveni's bodyguards [invaded parliament and beat up MPs](#), who included my mother's elderly uncle, as well as Bobi Wine.

I need not repeat it, but another parallel with Apollo Kagwa is that it was around 1917 that real trouble started for Kagwa, the majority year when the child king, Daudi Chwa, in whose name Kagwa had pillaged and impoverished Buganda, and exported genocidal wars to Bunyoro and beyond, became a man. Kagwa was no longer regent and even the British could no longer ignore his greed for wealth and power. A century later, in September 2017, in another sterling parallel, Museveni engineered the [removal of the age limit](#) embedded in the 1995 constitution that he himself signed into force. To try and cement his wealth and power, Kagwa had attempted to create an upper chamber for the Buganda parliament, which he intended to stuff with his newly landed gentry cronies. This would balance the power between him and the now adult king. Opposition sprung up in places none had expected. This was during a year in which a spate of murders had exposed the degree to which his government was unable to govern.

The "tipping point" was yet to come. And it arrived in September 2017 when Museveni's bodyguards invaded parliament and beat up MPs, who included my mother's elderly uncle, as well as Bobi Wine.

But in 2017 the question was: If Museveni could not [stop the killing](#) of an Assistant Inspector General of Police and 22 young women, what did he want to govern for life for?

Museveni was in such a mess that he did not even need to commit new crimes for moods to sour against him. Lifting the age limit recycled and presented in bad light even the good he had done in 30 years. But he just had to go ahead and impose crippling taxes on the poor. That, at a time when multinational corporations and "foreign investors" had been enjoying tax holidays for decades.

The new, some say, "unlawful" (but law is what parliament says it is, so they are lawful), taxes are what Museveni should have studiously avoided. As long as opposition to his rule was led by elites like Col. Besigye, who came with the shadow of prior association with Museveni, he was in a safe place.

But Museveni is a proud man. He was at one time a savvy man too. Now he is tired. He has made Col. Besigye irrelevant. The people Besigye had attempted to lead are now leading themselves. The elite never trusted Museveni. Now the poor revile him.

---

*Published by the good folks at [The Elephant](#).*

*The Elephant is a platform for engaging citizens to reflect, re-member and re-envision their society by interrogating the past, the present, to fashion a future.*

Follow us on [Twitter](#).

