



# SEE NO EVIL: Uganda's 'development partners' look the other way in the face of brutal repression

By Mary Serumaga



A British MP once [referred](#) to Kabaka Mwanga as a “blood-stained ruffian”. (Hansard, Uganda, 20 March 1893). This view was echoed in the *New York Times*. It is interesting to contrast the perception and treatment of Mwanga, who resisted the colonisation of his nation, with the international tolerance of Yoweri Museveni, the President of Uganda, Brigadier Don Nabasa, head of the Special Forces Command (SFC), and Major General David Muhoozi, the Chief of Defence Forces responsible for so much of the terror and bloodshed witnessed in Uganda today.

Tear gas season in Uganda is a good time to observe the behaviour of her “development partners” (DPs), formerly known as donors, particularly the United Kingdom, the European Union, the United States and China. As is often the case, the 2018 tear gas season kicked off with [elections](#). In the past, electoral violence by the State has included [arrests](#) of opposition politicians and their supporters, demonstrations rapidly followed by heavy military presence in the streets and the inevitable flogging and shooting of Ugandan citizens. The elections of 2001, 2006, 2011 and 2016 have all followed a similar pattern as have by-elections in between. It has been a way of life since, under pressure from the DPs, the National Resistance Movement (NRM) allowed the first multiparty elections in 2006.

Elections are part of the window-dressing that [legitimizes](#) foreign support for despotic kleptocrats. As part of a wider legitimization programme, which includes pushing for a Freedom of Information Act and an Inspector General of Government (the Ombudsman), elections provide the appearance of a sovereign State as advanced in the ways of human rights as is to be expected after “years of civil strife” and “ravaged by AIDS”. Elections, therefore, are crucial to the status of the foreign debt. If loans can be found to have been used to oppress Ugandans, they can be legally repudiated under the doctrine of odious debt. The doctrine has been applied successfully in debt repudiation.

*“The State is not liable for ‘odious’ debts incurred and utilised, with the knowledge of the creditors, for ends which are contrary to the nation’s interests, should that State succeed in ridding itself of the government that had incurred them. [...] The creditors have committed a hostile act with regard to the people; they cannot therefore expect a nation freed from a despotic power to take on the ‘odious’ debts, which are personal debts of that power.”* (Nahum Sack)[\[i\]](#).

The UK’s international development agency, DfID, which is Uganda’s largest donor, [invested](#) £8,000,000 over four years (2012-2016) in the Democratic Governance Facility (DGF). Current donors to the DGF are; Austria, Denmark, Ireland, Netherlands, Norway Sweden, and the European Union who invest a combined €85 million for January 2018 - December 2022 aiming, in their words “to address the continuing democratic deficits, and consolidate peace and stability in the country.

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Diplomacy at its best, state terror described as ‘a democratic deficit.’

Deepening Democracy Programme Phase II to achieve the following:

- *“Political responsiveness and accountability* by creating conditions for elected leaders to be more responsive to citizens’ needs and concerns and increasingly more accountable for their performance in office.
- *Democratic culture, space and values* which will focus on developing a pluralistic political system.
- *Integrity of democratic processes* aims to improve the integrity and credibility of key democratic processes and institutions, particularly elections.”

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID says the following on its [website](#):

*“USAID assists the Government of Uganda to build and sustain a democratic, well-governed state [...] USAID aims to strengthen democracy and governance systems and help make them more accountable. USAID’s program also assists in making the voices of marginalized people heard—particularly women and youth—and shapes the role of civil society in governance.”*

British, European and American taxpayers will agree that the Arua atrocities of 2018 mean none of the above were achieved nor can they be under Museveni, the NRM and the SFC.

In other words, if anyone were to ask how has Uganda’s government and military have been able to maintain a regime of terror; how it can afford the instruments of oppression and why any foreign

government would associate with the state brutality witnessed in Uganda in August 2018, DPs would only need to point to regular elections, the Deepening Democracy programme and other such initiatives and the good development assistance is doing.

When looking at overseas development assistance, or grants, only one fact and three figures need to be remembered: each year \$41 billion are extracted from Africa ([Mark Curtis, Tim Jones, \*Honest Accounts 2017 - How the world profits from Africa's wealth\* 6 June 2017](#)). \$162 billion flow into Africa from overseas and each year \$203 billion flow out. Loans (many unsustainable *ab initio*), illicit transfers, tax waivers, illegal and environmentally damaging activity and other economic benefits obtained from corrupt leaders ensure a permanent deficit.

Scandals involving the theft of public funds from Ugandan, British, American and European taxpayers have been dealt with by brief suspensions of aid. When most recently the [American Department of Justice](#) revealed that a Chinese government official had bribed the president and the foreign minister Sam Kutesa (a Museveni brother-in-law) in return for oil concessions, land, tax waivers and other illicit favours, there were no consequences for the pair.

President Museveni, who together with his family was promised joint business ventures with Patrick Ho, and Sam Kutesa remain at large. More than that, after the news broke, the [American ambassador to Uganda](#), Debra Malac, paid a visit to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that ended with the obligatory photo opportunity in which she holds hands with Kutesa.

There is a lot going on. American interests are having to be balanced against the bad optics. It is hard to dismiss as coincidence the Department of Justice's release of the scandalous information in November followed by Museveni's abrupt about-turn on GMOs the following January. He declined to sign into law the [Biosafety Act](#), which had finally been passed after a six-year battle between environmental activists and the Bill Gates-founded Alliance for Science, a promoter of GMOs in administratively weak developing countries.

In sending the Act back to Parliament for reconsideration, Museveni relied on arguments that had been made over the preceding six years by those urging caution and which he had previously ignored. One interpretation of his behaviour is that as long as his signature is still needed on the Biodiversity Act (and so many other deals Ugandans do not yet know about), he and his associates will be handled with kid gloves. Checkmate.

Similarly, in cases of human rights abuses, theft of public resources and plain incompetence, DPs continue to give the government leeway as they negotiate their own interests. This is why it took a whole four days for them to utter a single word about the electoral violence that began on 13<sup>th</sup> August 2018. It would explain why their statement, when it came, did not condemn the murder of Yasin Kawuma, the driver to Robert Kyagulanyi (popularly known as Bobi Wine) and others, the disappearance of the MP himself and the arrest of the other MPs supporting the Arua Municipality MP Kassiano Wadri's campaign.

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It should be recalled that in late 2017, a British trade [delegation](#) led by Lord Popat (a British peer of Ugandan-Asian origin) visited Uganda and left with a contract to construct a controversial airport

for £315 million. There were other deals worth billions. In presenting his report to the House of Lords, Lord Popat made a case for reviving the Commonwealth after Brexit:

*“I will briefly explain why this debate is so important. Britain has run a balance of payments deficit for decades. Quite simply, we do not export enough to pay for our imports. This is neither desirable nor sustainable, yet it receives very little attention or coverage outside of your Lordships’ House. Last year, Britain voted to leave the European Union [...] Last week, I led a delegation of 16 businesses in the oil and gas sector to Uganda. Two of the British companies, Fluor and CB&I, have been shortlisted to build a major oil pipeline to the value of just over \$2 billion. This week, the Ugandan Parliament will approve a loan of £315 million for a British company, Colas Ltd, to build an international airport in Uganda”*

(27 November 2017 the House of Lords [Exports: Africa and the Commonwealth](#) debate Hansard)

## **Uganda’s economic collapse behind jittery junta**

All indications are that Uganda’s [economy](#) is in very poor health. The Auditor General and the Governor of the Central Bank have warned that [debt payments](#) are becoming unsustainable. Interest payments consumed 23% of the budget in 2017. 2018 began with the [closure of secondary schools](#) delivering universal free education. Drug stock-outs in [public hospitals](#) that began six months earlier persisted. Then the flagship achievement of the NRM, Universal Primary Education (UPE), was finally unmasked. President Museveni floated the idea of a new tax on [social media use](#). The World Bank made a rare communication to ordinary people when they said that it was healthy for the population to discuss revenue after focusing on (corrupt) expenditure for so long.

The Over the Top tax (OTT as it is now called) was included in the budget, with President Museveni completely misjudging the mood and calling it a tax on gossip. The [#ThisTaxMustGo](#) movement began. Leading from the front was Robert Kyagulanyi, a member of parliament and a popular musician, actor and activist with a track record in guiding and supporting the youth. He had also been prominent in trying to prevent Museveni remove presidential age limits, the [#Togikwatako](#) campaign. [Mass demonstrations](#) followed during one of which the police attempted to arrest him. His escape on the back of a *boda-boda*, facilitated by his many fans, was [captured on video](#), further boosting his standing among ordinary people.

A further indicator of an economy in distress came on World Youth Day when the president voiced suspicions that universal primary education (UPE) and universal secondary education (USE) were being abused by people “pretending to be poor”. It was his Marie Antoinette moment. He instructed the Youth Council to gather opinions from grassroots leaders about the amounts of money parents would be able to contribute to the cost of educating their children. What he was saying was that the government could no longer fund free education.

Many will remember that teachers, confronted by parents who had been promised free education and school meals, were at a loss as to what to do. Those who charged small fees for porridge were threatened with arrest for “sabotaging my UPE programme”. Parents were instructed to report such teachers to the authorities.

## **The 2018 by-elections**

The difference in August 2018 was the persistence and scope of the defiance against President Museveni’s brutality. The violent arrest and torture of Robert Kyagulanyi and his colleagues and the murder of his driver ensured it transcended national barriers via the Internet. Within four days, a

group of [Ghanaians](#) and a Ugandan had designed and printed banners and held a peaceful demonstration at Accra's Black Star Monument. After it began to trend on Twitter, other countries began to [organise demonstrations](#). Kenya held a number, in Nairobi, Mombasa and Busia. The people of Africa spoke while the African Union remained silent. There is a lesson about pan-Africanism there.

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The [#FreeBobiWine](#) campaign has entered its third week, spreading across the globe. It will not be lost on the government or on its DPs that the demonstrators in the diaspora are Uganda's second largest source of hard currency.

A word about the need for three by-elections so soon after the general election in 2016. They were made necessary by electoral fraud and murder. In the first case, the victory of the NRM candidate in Kyaddondo was cancelled by the courts, which cited irregularities by the Electoral Commission. The same happened in Jinja East when the Court of Appeal nullified the victory of the NRM candidate.

The third by-election became necessary when NRM's Mohammed Abiriga was shot dead on his way home from the State of the Nation Address (SONA) in June. Abiriga, (known by the nickname Yellow Man because of his habit of expressing his support for the NRM by dressing head to toe in the party colour) typified the sometimes farcical blind support given to the ruling party by prominent opposition figures who have been persuaded to "join the Movement" or "return to the Movement".

The SONA itself was a tissue of lies. President Museveni declared that the NRM had restored peace and security following a spate of serial killings in which 19 women were killed and their bodies desecrated; and kidnappings - the three female victims were found dead despite their families paying ransoms as high as \$200,000. Abiriga repeated the claim in a TV interview after the Address. Some hours later, he lay dead inside his blood-drenched yellow Beetle.

After winning the Kyaddondo by-election by 77% of the vote, Kyagulanyi went on to support candidates in the Jinja East, Bugiri and Arua by-elections. The Jinja East by-election was typically Ugandan. According to the independent observer, Citizens Coalition for Electoral Democracy in Uganda (CCEDU), ballot papers [pre-ticked in favour of the ruling party candidate](#) were found stored at one polling station. CCEDU's offices were broken into one night and their computers taken. Five hundred Forum for Democratic Change supporters were jailed before the poll.

Bugiri in July was particularly violent with supporters of the JEEMA candidate, Asuman Basalirwa, being stoned and stabbed and at least two others killed. Basalirwa complained that the police made no attempt to protect his team. During polling, an NRM MP was [confronted by voters](#) at one polling station accusing him of interfering with the process (one news report alleged he was offering money to voters in the queue). He drew a firearm to save himself from the crowd.

The true state of the nation has been revealed by the Arua by-election after which all the winners of the previous ones were arrested and taken to Gulu Central Prison to await trial for treason; FDC's Paul Mwiru (Jinja East) R. Kyagulanyi, K. Wadri (Arua) and Gerald Karuhanga (Ntungamo Municipality). A fifth MP, Francis Zaake is in Lubaga Hospital with spinal injuries after being arrested with the others. (They were finally released on bail this week.)

Ugandans took to the streets in demonstrations that ended in shootings and whippings by the

regular and military police, the army and the Special Forces Command, a criminal unit that began life as the Presidential Guard Brigade nearly two decades ago. In [a report](#) to the World Bank, Joel Barkan, an American political analyst with an interest in Africa, warned that it was turning in to a praetorian guard loyal only to President Museveni.

*“Nevertheless, over the past two years the President has authorized the transformation and enlargement of his personal security unit into the Presidential Guard Brigade, a praetorian guard of an estimated 7,000 men. Its primary purpose is to keep President Museveni and his entourage in power, not national defense.”(Barkan.J. Uganda: An African ‘Success that has Peaked? 2005).*

Over ten young people died and over 300 were arrested in Kampala alone. If the uprisings of 2009 are anything to go by, it will take many of them years and plenty of money in bribes to be processed and finally released. Many others across the country are unknown.

Dr Kizza-Besigye, a longtime opponent of what President Museveni stands for and a veteran of over 50 election-related arrests as a candidate in four presidential elections, demanded the immediate release of the abducted saying, “Trumped-up charges are the rule in how NRM [the ruling National Resistance Movement] addresses and criminalises opponents.”

“I have been charged with treason, rape, terrorism, illegal possession of guns...These people have been detained in the context of state-inspired violence. The idea choreographed in the media that people had guns must be dismissed with contempt.”

The United States and European Union missions took a softly-softly approach, with the Europeans expressing “deep concern” over the arrests, the “suffering of Ugandans” and the tarnished image of Uganda. The Americans were even more mealy-mouthed, calling for humane treatment, due process, fair trials and medical attention. They did not explain why persons falsely accused of crimes would require trials at all.

But it is not surprising. When Kizza Besigye was in prison on treason charges, the British High Commissioner visited him and urged him to plead guilty in order to qualify for a presidential pardon. (It was not clear whether the president had assured the high commissioner that he would grant it.) In the past few days, Museveni has said that he would consider pardoning the Arua 33.

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When Kyagulanyi was produced in court ten days after the 32 other accused, his physical appearance confirmed his wife Barbie and brother’s statements that he had been tortured. The methods included striking him all over with a metal rod. He was also injected multiple times with unknown drugs. He now walks with the aid of crutches.

The charge of illegal possession of firearms was dropped and he now faces the same treason charges as the other accused. They all arise from an incident in which a youth threw a stone at the president’s motorcade, smashing a rear window.

## Continuing repression

Reports of [the arbitrary arrests](#) of Bobi Wine's bodyguard, E. Ssebuufu, and two associates. But there is no sign that the people have given up. As Bobi Wine sings "Freedom comes to those who fight."

Meanwhile, from behind the high walls of their Kampala fortresses, the DPs continue to try and project an image of ethical support for the Museveni and the NRM. There is no such thing.

*#FreeArua33 #FreeUganda #FreeBobiWine #Justice4Yasin*

*The Arua 33 were released on bond on 27 August 2018 and next appear in court on 30<sup>th</sup> August 2018.*

[i] *Les effets des transformations des États sur leurs dettes publiques et autres obligations financières : traité juridique et financier*, [Recueil Sirey, Paris, 1927. Pp157-8.](#)

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