



People Power: Museveni's New Headache That Just Won't Go Away

By Isaac Imaka



After 33 years in power, President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni finds himself in the unflattering position of engaging in running street battles with a man 38 years his junior.

Used to sparring with fellow bush war veteran Dr Kizza Besigye, a man he has accused of everything from being a rapist to having HIV/Aids, Mr Museveni finds himself in a situation where he has to accuse Mr Robert Ssentamu Kyagulanyi, a.k.a Bobi Wine, a man younger than his last-born daughter, of stoning his car.

For that, Bobi Wine is facing treason charges together with 32 others.

How did it get to this?

Just after the 2016 general elections and the clampdown and mistreatment of opposition leaders that followed, Bobi Wine released the song "[Situka](#)", which challenges Ugandans to do something about corruption and injustice in their country. It opens with the lines: *"When the going gets tough, the tough must get going, especially when our leaders become misleaders and mentors become tormentors. When freedom of expression becomes a target of suppression, opposition becomes our position."*

Later that month, he visited opposition leader Dr Kizza Besigye at his home where the latter was being kept under “preventive arrest”. He went with his guitar and strummed a few notes of his new song for him. He would then appear alongside him at a rally all suited up, his dreadlocks reduced to a low fade box cut. He had joined politics! Social media lit up.

A couple of months later, there was a vacant seat in Kyadondo East Constituency. He won but the social media fuss that came with it was brushed aside as city noise. Many thought he was just another celebrity trying to have a piece of the national pie.

The House had already attracted the country’s leading gospel artist Judith Babirye. Kato Lubwama, a leading comedian, had also ditched stage garb and got suited up.

These two celebrities had, however, buckled on the political stage. Two years in, Judith Babirye was yet to make her maiden speech on the floor—she was busy organising a “charity” gospel music concert for the political A-class at \$100 a pop. He had made his intentions clear on national TV: “*Buli omu afungane wafungana*” (Let the kite perch and let the eagle perch too). He was not going to antagonise anyone.

People looked at Bobi Wine’s dreadlocked hair, his ghetto ruggedness, his sagging jeans and his ghetto swagger and judged him: “He is just excited. He is not politician enough. He should drop the ghetto look. Will he even manage to sustain a debate in the house?” many wondered.

“Come on, the excitement won’t last a month,” a former legislator, now a Permanent Secretary in one of the top ministries, said as we read the tea leaves on Bobi Wine’s coming to Parliament.

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“The social media noise is from his city fans but Parliament is not a music stage. Reality will hit him and he will retire to his studios to only pick paychecks from Parliament.”

The President too was not that bothered. The National Resistance Movement (NRM) had lost a by-election but so what? It was in a city constituency and the winner was a celebrity.

“We shall do better in other coming by-elections. In any case, they are mostly in NRM strongholds,” Justine Lumumba, the party Secretary General told the press.

However, they forgot to interrogate one thing about this musician-cum-politican: his music.

Born outside Kampala but raised in the squalid slum of Kamwokya, Bobi, as he is fondly called by his crew, knocked his hustle doing all manner of odd jobs, from car washing all the way to starting a ghetto music production house, the Fire Base Crew, composed mainly of his ghetto boys-to-men, from where he spoke truth to power to the struggling youth through music.

He would later attend Makerere University where he got a diploma in Music Dance and Drama - not a minor achievement for a ghetto kid. He bestowed unto himself the title of Ghetto President and the slum dwellers approved.

Bobi bore witness to government inabilities and iniquities toward the wretched of the earth and hit

by hit, especially in the two years leading to his joining politics, the Ghetto President articulately and fearlessly stood on the side of the disadvantaged. He rallied young people to believe in themselves and change what they believed was wrong around them.

In *Tugambireku Jennifer* (Please talk to Jennifer), he tells the story of the plight of hawkers in the city and says they have sent him to plead with the Kampala Capital City Authority boss, Jennifer Musisi, to reduce the bitterness and brutality with which the city council was getting hawkers off the street.

His campaign song, *Bikwase Kyagulanyi* (Entrust your affairs to Kyagulanyi) was a rags-to-riches testimony targeting the ghetto youth who he referred to as the super youth. He uses himself as an example of a poor ghetto kid who made it to the top without forgetting his roots.

“We work hard not to leave the ghetto but to make the ghetto a better place to live in,” he sings, before asking the youth to go forth and spread the message of hard work and success. “And if anyone does not believe you, use me as the example.”

Bringing the ghetto to Parliament

After being sworn in as MP, Bobi stood on the steps of Parliament and told journalists: “I have brought the ghetto to Parliament”.

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With his unshaded spirit of a hustler and the bounce of a college kid, he was to represent not only Kyadondo East, but the youth who make up more than 75 per cent of Uganda’s population—aggressive about what they want and restless about the future; aware and disapproving of the societal issues like unemployment, the broken health system; and detached from NRM’s post-bush war rhetoric of peace and security that had made the Museveni generation too scared of change for fear that the country would slip back to turmoil.

Uganda’s Parliament is largely youthful, but the majority of the legislators are pro-government and largely silent, toeing the usually unpopular party line.

The opposition in Parliament had become predictably toothless. Divided and outnumbered, they always buckled under NRM’s numerical strength when faced with a controversial subject on the floor. The Majority of the youth had therefore given up on Parliament and taken their political frustrations to social media.

The age limit stage

Having come in at the height of the Presidential Age Limit amendment debate, Bobi Wine brought in the raw energy of the youth. He mobilised fellow anti-amendment legislators and they rolled up their sleeves and literally fought physically in Parliament against the Bill. Just like in ghetto street fights, where fist fights are lost by the outnumbered, Bobi Wine and his group of MPs were out-fought by the security men who bundled them straight to police cells.

They were applauded on social media. At least they went down fighting, many said.

Students of Makerere University immediately invited him to be on a panel to discuss the Mandela legacy. President Museveni was the keynote speaker. To high-pitched clapping and foot stamping from the students gathered in the university's main hall, Bobi Wine, looking straight in the President's eye, drew the line that showed that his was a generational cause.

"In their times, the youthful Museveni and all the other revolutionaries did not fold their hands when things were bad. They looked injustice straight in the eye and registered some achievements. I wonder what our President Museveni would be thinking if he were young today," he said adding a quote from Mandela that "it is up to a generation to be great".

"I want the young people of this generation to know that every generation has had its challenges. For the Mandelas it was apartheid. For the Musevenis and his comrades it was bad politics and instability. For us it is about unemployment and exclusion and it's what we have to fight.

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"Mandela spent 27 years in jail but didn't have a sense of entitlement. He accepted that it was not about himself. He gave chance to the young to take charge of their country as the elderly gave guidance," Bobi reminded the audience.

After the lecture, the President took to Facebook and accused Bobi Wine of hijacking his audience in Makerere and described him as a liar spreading blackmail after benefiting from the government's music service development.

The Kyagulanyi People Power effect

As the anti-age limit wave picked up, so did Bobi Wine. He went to Firebase Music Studio and recorded *Freedom*.

In the song, he breaks down the justification for his stand against the removal of the age limit clause from the constitution. He questioned President Museveni's pledge in 1986 to bring about fundamental change and said that he now preaches "no change".

When the opposition set out on a nation-wide campaign against the amendment, the song was picked as their anthem, with the slogan "People Power".

Bobi Wine's celebrity status, his definitive message against President Museveni's government through music, his identification with the youth, and his street twang made him a darling. He became a crowd puller and even though he is in Parliament as an independent, every opposition politician wanted him at their rally. He obliged until more by-elections came about; he then decided to only support independent candidates.

Bobi Wine has never said he is going to contest against President Museveni but in three consecutive parliamentary by-elections, every candidate Bobi supported won. FDC, the erstwhile strong challenger to NRM, came a distant third. The trick, independent candidates knew, was to bring Bobi Wine to their rallies.

The President and the NRM machinery responded by attacking Bobi Wine's ghetto upbringing. "He is violent. His group is rigging votes. They are using violence to scare NRM voters from voting," the explanation from NRM went.

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In Arua, Bobi charged the largely young crowd, telling them he had gone there to liberate the district from NRM and Museveni the same way he had done it in Jinja, Bugiri and Rukungiri districts.

"We find ourselves in a situation where they have been postponing a problem hoping it can solve itself. Until a time has come when we must come and we do what we must do.

"The war we have is between the oppressor and the oppressed. A small group of people led by Museveni as the majority of Ugandans being oppressed. I come because we must win this war here in Arua. If we lose, NRM will continue misrepresenting you," he said.

After the rally, he was picked up, badly beaten and thrown into a military cell. His candidate and 31 others were also locked up and missed the voting. Yet he still won the election.

In jail, Bobi was isolated from the 31 other detainees and moved to a military facility. However, his supporters took to social media with the hashtag #FreeBobiWine that spread the Bobi Wine effect far and wide.

Ugandans in Japan, the United States, and the United Kingdom joined the fray and asked Museveni to free Bobi Wine.

Kenyans joined in and marched to the Uganda High Commission. An opposition party in Tanzania wrote to the Uganda government and demanded that he be freed. The Kenyan Young Parliamentarians Association threatened to fly to Kampala and lead a demonstration.

The more the government refused to release a picture of Bobi Wine in detention, the more his lawyers fed the world with updates of how badly he was beaten and how he required urgent medical attention or else he would die.

Young people in major towns across the country took to the streets and lit old car tyres, chanting people power slogans and demanding the release of Bobi Wine. International law and human rights lawyers from America offered pro bono services.

In just a year after joining Parliament, and after attending four parliamentary by-election rallies, Bobi had already caught national and international attention.

But is he a threat to Museveni?

"He seems to inspire very young people that he can actually make them get what they want and he seems to give them an inspiration that it's possible to come out of the ghetto and become something," Makerere University Don Sabiiti Makara told NBS TV after the Mandela lecture at Makerere. "He is a factor now and he has become a factor in a very short time and you know the

establishment doesn't want anyone else to become a factor, especially amongst the youth who are the biggest number of voters."

NRM Chief Whip, Ruth Nankabirwa, has acknowledged the power of Bobi Wine's celebrity status and how he has used it to achieve his goals.

Stuck with an increasingly aggressive 36-year-old (a year younger than Museveni was when he went to the bush), President Museveni has taken to social media to personally justify the military's use of excessive force in Arua where Bobi Wine's driver was killed. Since the Arua chaos, he has put out four missives addressing the near cult-like social media reaction to Bobi Wine's brutal arrest. In all four posts, he takes the priestly seat of a grandfather addressing his grandchildren and insists that Bobi Wine is an undisciplined grandson

"The problem in Arua was caused by Bobi Wine's group together with Kassiano Wadri, who attacked me, a useless action because I am protected and I can defend myself," he said in one group.

Many responded to his thread by telling him that his time was up and that they wanted him out.

It is hard to tell whether Bobi Wine will muster the courage to contest against President Museveni, but according to Dr Makara, it is clear that the President is yet to find the best way to respond to young Ugandans. "He had mastered how to deal with Besigye, now he doesn't know how to deal with the Young Turks."

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