

# THE BOBI WINE PHENOMENON: The youthful face of Uganda's resistance

Like with many stories, the story of Yoweri Museveni and Kizza Besigye was consummated and nurtured by idealism. Similarly, like many stories built on idealism, inevitably it ended in betrayal, real or imagined.

The story of Ugandan politics over the past two decades has been dominated by two personalities - Yoweri Museveni, the incumbent president, and Kizza Besigye, his main challenger. In many ways, the political vision of both men has been marked by a certain idealism inspired by their participation in the 1981-86 liberation war, whose relevance is increasingly being questioned by many younger Ugandans.

Though they are widely seen as polar opposites, consciously or unconsciously, over the years Museveni and Besigye have needed each other to remain relevant among their respective constituents. Museveni cannot operate without Besigye, and vice versa. The two are thus stuck in a historical time warp of unfulfilled revolutionary utopia.

In dealing with Besigye, his most formidable opponent yet, Museveni is guided by a sense of entitlement, while Besigye is motivated by a sense of betrayal - both individual and collective. He wants change. Museveni believes that he rid Uganda of dictators and tyrants and, therefore, he should rule as he wills, unencumbered.

Besigye, on the other hand, is convinced that Museveni has perverted the ideals of the revolution they fought in together, and like other tyrants, he should be resisted as a matter of principle.

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The difference between the two, one could argue, is that Museveni is "flexible" and Besigye is "obdurate". Museveni sees himself as the grand patriarch of

Uganda's revolution, but with shreds of flexibility that allow him to stay in power. Besigye, on the other hand, sees himself as an egalitarian moral crusader, a position he acquired during his days as the National Resistance Movement's Political Commissar. In his unbending vision, he saw the National Resistance Army (NRA), the precursor to the National Resistance Movement (NRM), as a moral army to end all of Uganda's ills. He was and still remains a doctrinaire ideologue.

Besigye sees NRM as incurably corrupt, unaccountable and a one man-circus.

Museveni, however, sees NRM as the heir to the rich revolutionary tradition of restoring dignity and improving lives of citizens.

Besigye's obduracy, even when it costs him power and friends, is, in essence, the difference between the two men - one a successful President and the other the 'People's President.'

In real terms, Museveni is undoubtedly the winner; he has defeated Besigye in three straight elections, although, some may argue unfairly. But in symbolic terms, every Museveni electoral victory felt hollow and insecure - the more he won, the more he and Uganda lost. In the end, Museveni's victory looks increasingly pyrrhic, while Besigye's electoral and personal losses, innumerable as they are, look like a victory for him and for Uganda.

However, Besigye has reached the limits of his defiance; he needs to give space, support and share his wisdom with the younger leaders because he has done his part in his struggle to make Uganda a better place. Increasingly, both Museveni and Besigye have had to contend with a young Member of Parliament who doesn't draw on the revolutionary ideals of the bush war years, which are fast fading from the conscious memory of the young Ugandans who make up a huge proportion of the population.

### **Enter Bobi Wine...**

The Kyaddondo East MP, Robert Kyagulanyi, popularly known by his artiste name Bobi Wine, was 4-years-old when the NRM came to power in 1986. While Museveni's and Besigye's world views and programmes of action are mostly about history and fear, Bobi Wine's world view is shaped by the future and hope. His background as a ghetto kid, figuratively and metaphorically, appeals to the

majority of youthful Ugandans, who identify with his story of triumph over adversity. Over 60 per cent of Ugandans are under the age of 30. For this group, Idi Amin's and Milton Obote's horror stories, which Besigye and Museveni are wont to use, sound like old lady myths. They see themselves as entrepreneurs, music moguls and successful civic leaders.

Bobi Wine's combination of a remarkable personal story of rising from a Kampala ghetto to become an independent MP, defeating candidates sponsored by both Besigye's Forum for Democratic Change, (FDC) Party and Museveni's NRM, has seen him take the mantle from Besigye and throw down the gauntlet to Museveni.

Consequently, his framing of Ugandan youth's existential angst because of the bleak economic reality, the conscious nature of his social justice message through his music, and the penetration of social media, which has seen the rise of a critical mass of brave front-line activists who have been working in the shadows for change, all have contributed to making Bobi Wine a potent force of nature.

Possibly, the fact that he doesn't come from a military/revolutionary or big political/economic family background must have initially led Museveni and his coterie to assume they could safely ignore him. But increasingly, he is making the state respond in the language it has deployed against many of its opponents: use of excessive force and trumped-up charges, especially treason.

Since his election in July last year, Bobi Wine has demonstrated that he has his fingers on the pulse of the younger urban electorate, especially those who have only known Museveni as the president. He has articulated and energised their latent desire for change in a language they understand, through a medium that is accessible to most of them - music.

His election into parliament has not blunted his appetite for using music as a vehicle to connect with his supporters. During *Togikwatako (Do not Touch It)*, a popular movement against changing the constitution to remove the term limit that allowed president Museveni to contest the presidency, he released the song *Freedom*. The [video of the song](#) features Bobi Wine in a cage-like structure interspersed with images of police violence, making the lyrics as well the video at once poignant and raw, thus connecting with many who have suffered at the hands of the police and other auxiliary security forces.

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*Freedom* is not the only video he released. In 2017, he released another video, *Time Bomb*, whose socially uplifting message in both Luganda and English touches on the day-to-day kitchen table reality of many Ugandans. For instance, why is the price of electricity so high? Why is corruption so prevalent? But in a forward-leaning pivot, Bobi Wine says there is no reason to cry.

*Freedom comes to those who fight*

*But not to those who cry*

*Coz the more you cry*

*Is the more your people continue to die.*

Both songs are a rallying call, not dissimilar to Museveni's when he went into the bush. Museveni is acutely aware of the power of anyone capable of distilling the frustrations or aspirations of the youth, and knows that articulating them in their language poses a mortal danger, even if not immediately.

Remarkably, Bobi Wine's message is paying dividends at the ballot box; since his election, candidates supported by him have won various parliamentary seats; Arua municipality was not the first - he had beaten established parties in Jinja, Rukungiri, and Bugiri.

The state's disproportionate response after the loss of the Arua seat by arresting him and other opposition MP's and supporters is a clear indication that it has been rattled by the reality that the centre of gravity of the opposition has shifted from Besigye to Bobi Wine, and that they cannot afford to ignore him.

Last year, Bobi Wine energetically took up the push against the constitutional change within and outside parliament. During one parliamentary debate, [security agencies invaded the session and beat up MPs](#), fracturing Mukono Municipality MP, Betty Nambooze's spine. While the bill eventually passed after the MPs received a sweet deal extending their term from five to seven years, Bobi Wine

still remains a significant threat to the status quo.

## **Digital activism**

Reflexively, many dismiss online social media activism as a dirty word. In their eyes, online activists are people who are not ready to put their money where their mouths are. These activists are not ready to roll up their sleeves, take tear gas and be arrested by the police.

But behind the dismissive tone, which is accentuated by the generational divide, African governments are fully-aware of the power of social media as a tool for mobilisation and building cross-sector and cross-country solidarity. #ThisFlag in Zimbabwe, and #FeesMustFall in South Africa have demonstrated that social media is a powerful platform.

In Uganda, Stella Nyanzi has become a one-woman army against President Museveni through her Facebook page. She was arrested last year after criticising the First Lady and Education Minister, Janet Museveni, for her ministry's failure to provide sanitary towels to girls in public schools, a promise her husband had made during his campaign in 2015.

Social media platforms reveal a chink in President Museveni's armour; he can't send in his security agencies to stop people using them like he does at public demonstrations. Because they're decentralised, he cannot take out a leader, and they are not susceptible to manipulation using advertising shillings like the mainstream media. The Internet shutdown during the 2016 elections and this year's social media tax were essentially designed to contain social media, but they have so far proved ineffective.

Beyond Uganda, Bobi Wine's arrest has spurred a nascent youth mobilisation. In East Africa, digital mobilisation and organising by young activists have coalesced around the hashtag [#FreeBobiWine](#). Over half of the traffic for the hashtag was driven by Kenyans on Twitter. Activists in Tanzania, Burundi and the DRC were involved as well. This in itself not only demonstrated the transcendent appeal of Bobi Wine, but was also a rebuke to the perceived wisdom that millennials have limited interest and involvement in civic citizenry.

## **The future**

Bobi Wine's rise could also upset the regional 'balance of power' within Uganda. Museveni and Besigye both come from Western Uganda. Bobi Wine is from Central Uganda, a region that has been a thorn in the side of Museveni, and which the president has attempted to subdue using all means necessary, fair and foul.

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However, if he would like to transcend the Museveni-Besigye duopoly, Bobi Wine needs to expand his base beyond urban areas to the rural hinterland. Like every wily politician, Museveni has ignored urban areas, and instead concentrated all his efforts on rural areas. This has been lucrative for him politically. Bobi Wine needs to speak to the youth, not just in Kampala, but in Kitgum as well. He had already started doing so through visits to various parts of the country and in his music videos as well.

The land question and the presidential age limit have sufficiently radicalised a significant constituency in Uganda. And there are a significant number of the young in need of direction. To win them over, Bobi Wine will need to proactively and innovatively capture their issues, provide them with leadership and imagine a possible future with, for and by them.

The musician-cum-politician needs to be aware of the state's machinations, which are already evident. Treason is a favourite charge, as is rape, which Besigye was charged with, and economic sabotage via the Uganda Revenue Authority (URA).

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Bobi Wine is a product of the zeitgeist and is a beneficiary of decades of work by fearless frontline activists, including Besigye. They include the Walk to Work

protests following the contested 2011 elections, which were brutally suppressed by security agencies. They revealed the limits of Museveni's patronage network that has sustained him in power for decades. The disproportionate reaction to Walk to Work and what it stood for shook the state, despite Museveni's claim to winning the election with over 60 per cent of the vote.

Recent events have obviously rattled Museveni's administration. Since Bobi Wine's arrest, the president has been making all manner of statements, but it should not be assumed that the collapse of his administration is a *fait accompli*. To defeat Museveni, Bobi Wine and other progressive forces will need to continue to pursue peaceful mass mobilisation, and to contest every available by-election with similar vigour.

Whether they succeed is another matter, but Bobi Wine's rise undoubtedly marks the beginning of a turn away from the bedtime stories of liberation that Museveni often recites to his grandchildren, to something new, fresh and bold.