



Business as Usual: The Kasese Massacre and Power Politics in Uganda

By Haruna Kanaabi and Maria Burnett



Baluku Bismark was 14 years old when he sat for his school exams in early November 2016 with the goal of becoming a health worker in Kasese, western Uganda. A few weeks later, Baluku was among those killed by the Ugandan army during an attack on the region's cultural institution, known as the Obusinga Bwa Rwenzururu (OBR).

By the end of a two-day assault on 26 and 27 November 2016 the military had killed 155 people using live ammunition and intentional fires; images of raging infernos and piles of bodies circulated on social media. Community members had killed at least 14 policemen. It was eight months after that year's presidential and primary elections.

Baluku is one of many Ugandan citizens whose fate was sealed by state agents in the name of "restoring order". In each instance, those agents "take orders from above" and are shielded from any accountability. Dig deeper and it is about power and votes.

Uganda is scheduled to hold elections on 14 January 2021. Ten opposition candidates, including former musician and member of parliament, Hon. Robert Kyagulanyi, popularly known as Bobi Wine, are challenging President Museveni who has controlled nearly every aspect of government in Uganda since 1986.

As expected, the presidential campaign, which officially began on 9 November 2020, has been marred by partisan law enforcement. Already, but unsurprisingly, state violence is defining the campaigns. Like previous presidential rival Dr Kizza Besigye, prominent opposition candidates Kyagulanyi and Patrick Amuriat have faced harassment, beatings, and various criminal charges. On 18 November police arrested Kyagulanyi during a rally in Eastern Uganda; Amuriat was arrested in Gulu. The arrests sparked spontaneous demonstrations in several towns, with the youth demanding their release. [News reports](#) indicate that security forces shot at least 45 people and hundreds more were injured.

For people in Kasese, these events are occurring as they prepare to vote in the first election since the horrific bloodshed that took place exactly four years ago this week. Unpacking the power politics behind the Kasese massacres is critical to understanding Uganda's elections and the President's stranglehold on power. It also tells a dismal story of total impunity no matter the scale of the killing.

Obusinga Bwa Rwenzururu and cultural institutions in Uganda

The Obusinga Bwa Rwenzururu is the cultural institution, or kingdom, of people that traditionally live in the western Rwenzori Mountains along Uganda's border with Congo. The institution itself is headquartered in Kasese district.

Political recognition of cultural institutions in Uganda is part of the complex path that led to President Museveni's ascension to power in 1986. For example, as a way of soliciting the support of the predominantly Baganda people of the central region, Museveni agreed to restore the region's Buganda Kingdom which had been abolished in 1966 under the first post-colonial government.

But President Museveni, a master of political compromise, understood the delicate balance required. Buganda's cultural leader was permitted to formally exist but he wasn't allowed any actual political power. Over the years, as a form of bargaining for allegiance, Museveni has slowly accepted the restoration of other cultural institutions, such as the Bunyoro-Kitara in the west, and the Busoga and Tooro Kingdoms in the east and southwest, respectively. In a country as ethnically and linguistically diverse as post-colonial Uganda, these cultural institutions and their leaders can command significant loyalty and community support.

Such devotion was on full display in September 2009 when Museveni, seeking to curtail the influence of the Buganda Kingdom, sought to limit the freedom of movement of the kingdom's leadership. Loyalists quickly took to the streets in protest. By the end of two days, security forces had killed at least 45 people to quell the uprising and the Luganda-speaking radios had been taken off the air.

Shortly thereafter, and despite [criticism](#) from those who deemed it unconstitutional, Uganda [passed a law](#) barring cultural leaders from participating in partisan politics or providing a platform for any politician. However, most cultural institutions have often remained influential, if constrained, despite efforts to rein in their influence using this law or attempts to co-opt them into the ruling party.

In 2006, Uganda held the first multiparty elections since Museveni first came to power through a military takeover. Already in power for 20 years, Museveni suffered what some felt was a humiliating political [defeat in Kasese](#), with the opposition presidential candidate Dr Besigye garnering 56 per cent of the total votes to Museveni's 45 per cent.

Some pundits interpreted the result as a rebuke to Museveni for ignoring the grievances of the Rwenzururu cultural institution in its plea for official recognition. In an attempt at political

expediency, Museveni finally acquiesced in October 2009 – a few weeks after the violent suppression of the Buganda kingdom supporters. The *Omusinga*, or King in the Bakonzo language, was coronated and the Rwenzururu cultural institution was restored just in time for the campaign for the February 2011 elections. Museveni won the area vote and secured two seats for his party in parliament. But the recognition wasn't without its critics, and clashes between pro- and anti-Obusinga forces escalated. Intercommunal fighting led to the displacement of both the ethnic Bakonzo and the Bamba, another ethnic group in the region. The government stepped in but was increasingly perceived to be siding with those opposed to the King.

Five years later, the opposition Forum for Democratic Change fared well in the Rwenzori region. All parliamentary and local posts in Kasese went to the opposition. National Resistance Movement (NRM) strongmen, such as Defense Minister Crispus Kiyonga, [lost their parliamentary](#) posts.

The relationship between the President and the King had been rocky for a few years prior to the election but the election results clearly indicated that the ruling party was losing traction in the region. Ruling party mobilisers started working harder to co-opt the king's support base, sowing the seeds of instability.

Kasese in November 2016

Four years later, the full story of the horrific killings that took place in Kasese in November 2016 remains shrouded in secrecy. The government has never published the names of those killed or allowed independent investigations into why its army massacred almost 150 of its own citizens over two days. Spokespeople have only indicated that those who died were "terrorists" who sought to "take over Uganda". Despite arresting and imprisoning over 180 people, the government has never presented any evidence in court and never proceeded to trial. The people arrested in November 2016 languish in prison to this day

Sporadic conflicts between communities, at times involving security forces, flared up after the 2016 elections. In one incident, the Police Flying Squad shot and killed a suspected Omusinga loyalist in a market as he bought food. A government soldier was later killed by machete, allegedly for spying on the King near the palace compound.

Rumours began to spread in Kasese at this time that the government would be handing over a demobilisation fee to the Omusinga's "royal guards" – volunteers who are loyal to the Kingdom and work on its behalf. In a very low-income part of the country, such enticements inflated the ranks of the royal guards as people waited for handouts to support their families.

Eventually, word spread that the payout was imminent. But as people gathered in the palace compound on November 25, the military arrived and Kasese was brought to a standstill. Under the command of General Peter Elwelu, Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF) soldiers, encircled the palace and told the people inside that they could not leave. Tensions escalated and, eventually, soldiers shot and killed eight royal guards at the kingdom's office in town. The rumour that the kingdom was under attack spread into the outlying sub-counties. Community members attacked some police posts and 14 police officers and 32 civilians were killed in the conflicts. The next day, the UPDF made its biggest move, allegedly ordering royal guards to disband or face attack.

At 1 p.m. the UPDF launched an assault on the palace, shooting live ammunition and setting thatched roofing alight. The king was removed by force and transferred to Kampala. Photos of piles of bodies, some with their arms tied behind their backs, circulated on social media. Some of the dead were buried in a mass grave near a military barrack. Some people were never found. At least 15 children last seen inside the palace are missing to this day; 180 people were charged with murder,

terrorism and treason. Those who managed to escape went into hiding and to this day, the palace remains closed.

Two months after the attack General Elwelu told a local newspaper that the “place had lost its legitimacy. It was no longer a palace. It became a legitimate military target because it had become a command post for all that was happening in Rwenzori.”

There is no doubt that the events of November 2016 ended any pretense that the right to freedom of expression existed in the region. Many believe that Museveni would most likely have tolerated the Rwenzururu king had he not shown open support for the opposition. No one could seriously believe the government’s line that the king posed any meaningful security threat to the country or that he would be able to orchestrate any secession. But, clearly, cultural leaders needed to be shown that they could not behave like the Rwenzururu king. What if other kingdoms followed suit?

Since 2016, the Omusinga’s movements have been largely restricted to his house in Kampala. He was [barred from travelling](#) to the Rwenzoris, even after seeking the court’s permission to attend the June 2019 burial of his mother. Security officials say that since the attack on the palace in 2016, the region is now peaceful. The region nurses its wounds and struggles to care for an estimated [300 widows and 600 orphans](#) left behind by the massacre.

Despite some condemnatory statements from foreign embassies and civil society, the government has not been pressured to show any real evidence of why that scale of bloodshed was lawful or proportionate. In a classic case of co-option, President Museveni appointed the king’s brother as a minister in his government.

What happened in November 2016 in Kasese can only be viewed as a stark reminder to all cultural leaders – and frankly to any critic of the regime – that they should stay away from candid engagement in politics or consider supporting Uganda’s political opposition.

Those arrested were left to rot in jail, far from their families. But as the 2021 elections approach, perhaps they are suddenly again useful to the electoral landscape?

Uganda’s upcoming elections

As Bobi Wine ignites imaginations about new approaches to governance in Uganda, the government’s paranoia is at an all-time high and one can only imagine that there is significant work being done to ensure that the Rwenzori votes go to the ruling party. Word is already trickling out that the government is going to [release](#) those who have spent four years in prison without trial. But they will never be exonerated. It is likely that they are under significant pressure to admit some wrongdoing, to grovel and seek forgiveness from Museveni despite no clear evidence of their crimes having been presented. When Museveni releases the detainees just in time for the anniversary (and the voting,) he will demand blind loyalty. Even though his soldiers killed their families.

The patterns of state violence in Uganda are sadly repetitive; the ruling party obstructs burgeoning criticism to Museveni’s long stay in power. Organised dissent – Uganda’s cultural institutions, opposition members, civic groups, or just an outspoken citizen – is met with co-option, pressure and intimidation. A bank account is frozen, a cultural leader is coronated, a brown envelop of cash arrives. But at times, these efforts fail to silence the critics. Defiant voices rise up.

In that flashpoint, the state unleashes overwhelming violence against its own citizens and people like Baluku and many others die under the bullets of the state security agents. No previous military or police training supported by Uganda’s Western “partners in democracy” like the United States or United Kingdom prevents the blatant drive for political expediency.

In each incident - the [Kayunga demonstration in 2009](#), the [Walk to Work protests of 2011](#), the Kasese killings of 2016, the Free Bobi Wine demonstrations in November 2020, and countless other similar events - citizens, often innocent bystanders, or youth demonstrating against state actions are killed or arrested. Each time, the pro-government pundits quickly go on the attack, demonising those killed as terrorists or hooligans and then calling for peace.

Behind the scenes, those in jail will continue to suffer without being brought to trial, and with no credible evidence of their wrongdoing being produced. But no member of the security forces will face any questions to justify the bloodshed. International donors to Uganda's ample security sector will momentarily issue condemnations and then return to the humdrum of diplomatic life in Kampala's leafy suburbs. The graves of the dead, of people like Baluku from Kasese, are quickly forgotten.

If the government's explanation of the reasons behind these horrific episodes is ever to be believed, it will need to hold both sides to account and be willing to allow for criticism, dissent and, most importantly, electoral loss. Military commanders, including generals like Elwelu, who allowed the killings of unarmed civilians, who allowed the bullets to fly, will need to be brought to open court, to answer tough questions from lawyers who don't fear reprisals. As long as men like General Elwelu are promoted for killing civilians, as he was, the unabashed reliance on state violence as a political weapon in Uganda will continue. And horrific images of bloodied bodies - like those of November 2020 and November 2016 - will increase.

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](#).

THE
ELEPHANT