



# Murder as Order

By Kalundi Serumaga



In all too familiar scene, a number of Ugandan civilians were shot dead by men with guns (some in uniform) in the process of the National Resistance Army/Movement (NRA/M) government quelling public unrest in various locations around the country in mid-November. The disturbances, which mainly took the form of wananchi blocking highways with burning barricades, some stone-throwing, and also the emergence into broad daylight of muggers and highway robbers, had erupted because of the arrest and detention of the popular opposition presidential candidate Robert Kyagulanyi (aka Bobi Wine) and continued after a fashion until he was produced in court some six days later.

This is not to say that the reported sixty or so fatalities (and many more injured), largely from gunshots, were actively involved in the rioting. Neither is it to say it should be an acceptable method of stopping mass disturbances.

The best indications of how wilfully random these shootings were are the oldest and the youngest shooting victims, both in Kampala city: Amos Segawa was a 15-year-old schoolboy who was killed while standing next to his mother while she locked up her shop as they prepared to leave town; John Kitobe, a 72-year-old retired former accountant and academic, who happened to be in town on personal business, was shot as he made his way out of an office building towards his car.

The intention was clear: deadly collective punishment in a deliberate act of mass intimidation in the name of "security". This was a continuing fulfilment of a 2016 promise made by the Secretary

General of the NRM party, one Justine Kasule Lumumba, to a restive population back then: “The state will kill your children,” she stated in a public speech to parents about the then post-election demonstrations. We now know that she meant their grandparents as well.

But this is completely normal. And that is the tragedy of Uganda’s politics. It is also the ultimate triumph of the NRA/M as an organisation: to have seduced the country into mistaking the political value of security for valuable politics itself.

Without being forensic, one can trace a direct line from these latest killings back to the 1990 shooting dead of two Makerere University students at a sit-down strike protesting the abolition of student allowances; the military deployments against the repeated 1990s attempts by now-forgotten opposition activist Michael Kagwa to hold demonstrations for a return to multipartyism (eliciting the taunt from President Museveni for them to proceed “if you wish to see dead bodies”); the increasingly regular violence from the 1996 election onwards; the 2009 Buganda uprising shootings; the 2010 shootings of demonstrators protesting the burning of Buganda’s royal tombs; and the 2016 killings of over one hundred Rwenzururu palace guards and others in Kasese, and so on.

There is absolutely nothing new in what has just happened, how it happened and what will (not) happen next.

The core item that the National Resistance Army brought to the political table in the 1980s was security. This has remained its primary identity, and key selling point – the issue that made many choose to ignore or overlook its multitude of sins, flaws, and contradictions, but also what made it so valuable to imperialism, concerned, as it has always been, with ensuring its grip on this bounty at the headwaters of the Nile, which feeds other areas of its bounty.

The backstory to this is very critical in understanding why the regime can send operatives on the streets – on foot and in random vehicles, without uniforms or insignia – to shoot to kill an assortment of civilians, with no consequences, domestically, internationally, legally or morally.

The space called Uganda has historically been unstable. However, it suffered two particular periods of intense social and political turmoil that resulted in armed conflict.

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In the first instance, this was the politics that created the country, where, after some twenty years or so of preaching to children, they had raised an army of militant Christians who proceeded to conquer the region. What we call “Uganda” is actually the end-product of the 1899 victory of the Anglican Christian militia over the rival Muslim and the Catholic militias intent on the same goal: control the Nile at source, and therefore control Egypt. The victors have since then presented this factional advantage as the introduction of “order”, or “peace”, or even “civilization” to the region, delivering it from centuries of slave-dealing, war-mongering heathen African despots. They conveniently forget to mention that it was their religious activism that started the conflict in the first place. The underlying theme to this had been the propagandistic idea of Africa as a chaotic, brutal place in need of a civilizing order.

In the second instance, it is this very same theme that Yoweri Museveni and the National Resistance Army updated, mined extensively, and carried forward as the essential value of their project: their militarist outfit as the competent sub-contractors for the bearing of the White Man’s Burden, bringing an order to a place bedeviled by mad and incompetent despots. Again, what was not

mentioned was how all those previous despots had been installed by the West in the first place.

So, the real “consumer” of this security has been the Western corporations, whose investments in minerals, agribusiness, predatory banking and the rest, are kept safe by these excellent askaris. Any local that benefited did so only as an afterthought.

## **Pax Anglicana**

The everyday greeting in the Gisu area of Eastern Uganda is “*Mirembe?*”, asked as a question. This word literally means “peace”. However, this is not the actual indigenous traditional greeting. It is a form of salutation that emerged from the Anglican military conquest of the East for the emerging British colony as its Christian army marched eastwards between 1898 and 190, under the trusted generalship of the Muganda Anglican Semei Kakungulu. It was a statement of affirmation between the greeters that all resistance was over, and the new dispensation was now imposed. Shall we accept it, and call that peace?

This is the birth of the duality in Ugandan political thinking, where the absence of overt conflict is mistaken for “peace” as an actual condition. It is a thinking birthed by the contradiction of colonialism: on the one hand, its need to extract and make profit off the colonised space means it must arrive through deception, blackmail, and a lot of violence. On the other hand, there needs to be some kind of order, if not regimentation, for exploitative production to then take place. It is that order that is being misnamed as peace, whereas in fact all it is, is the provision of some kind of security to the new owners.

Even after (southern) Ugandans eventually got tired of reminding each other of how much more “secure” their lives had become after period of the overt military rulers between 1966 and 1986, the NRM continued to do it to them, loud and long, in the decades that followed. Certainly, business-oriented Ugandans (which is most of us) were initially relieved that they could go about their lives without having their homes and businesses invaded, or without being mugged and extorted by individual soldiers jealous of their progress. But they were unable to speak out because such private complaints could then be deliberately misunderstood as public political pronouncements against the government.

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There were only two flaws with this argument. First, most of north and northeastern Uganda were anything but secure, let alone peaceful, for the first nearly two decades of the NRM period. Second, it is the NRM regime that has gone on to facilitate the robbing, extortion and mugging of the entire Ugandan society of their historically accumulated wealth by removing all remaining barriers to foreign capitalist looting.

Many could not see it then, in the main. “*Kasita twebaka ku ttulo*” (at least we get to sleep now) emerged as the smug, fatuous and deliberately disengaged response to any attempt to educate them about the new dictatorship being assembled in plain sight. The result is a society of economically and socially insecure, under-skilled, landless underemployed people whose plight has been articulated politically and musically by the very presidential candidate whose arrest sparked these disturbances. They certainly see it now.

So we are back to the stand-off set up in 1897, when the Anglican “order” first asserted itself by imposing a “treaty” on the throne of Buganda, using a two-day gunpoint ultimatum, in which tax revenue, control of weapons and trade routes had to be surrendered to the Imperial British East African Company. This anti-native coup d’état thus check-mated the intentions toward the Nile of other imperial powers: Leopold’s Belgium from its Congo base in the West, Arab expansionism from Sudan in the north, and even the more remote French, German and Italian speculations, embedded in the Catholic mission stations, and budding in military bases on the other side of Ethiopia, dreaming of an opportunity.

### **Whose violence, whose state?**

The only violence the West will accept is violence carried out in its own interest, when it is replacing one regime with another, or when its chosen regime is keeping “order”.

The mass killings in 1966 did not deter Britain from protecting the new government until it also became dispensable. Likewise, after the 1971 coup that brought Colonel Idi Amin to power, the West enjoyed very warm relations with him until he chose the other side in the Cold War.

Britain was deeply involved in seeking to violently destabilise the 1979-1980 post-Amin Marxist-led coalition government, and finally succeeded in toppling it through Paulo Muwanga’s May 1980 coup, which was the stepping stone to returning Milton Obote’s Uganda People’s Congress (UPC) party through the violent rigging of the December 1980 elections.

Britain then went on to heavily backstop the violence that the UPC government meted out to the population in an attempt to steady itself in power. When that government collapsed in June 1985, the West was faced with a choice of two purveyors of political violence: the Okello junta that had overthrown Obote, or the NRA/M, still recovering in western Uganda to where it had relocated following some better organised government offensives against it, just before the coup. Finally, the West settled on the NRA as its latest sweetheart, and after six months of heavy investment, January 1986 happened.

Like the original 1899 Anglican factional victory, it was sold as “Liberation” and “Peace”. In reality, it was the latest imposition of violent “order” by the real owners of the colony.

With the exception of Rwanda, Uganda is significantly smaller than any of the countries that border it. But these intense imperial maneuverings of over a century and half, plus her permanent presence in the commentaries of the Western media since the reign of Kabaka Muteesa I (r.1837-1884), betray an interest that far outweighs her relatively small size: again, the Nile headwaters, and all that flows from that physically, therefore economically, therefore strategically, therefore politically, and therefore militarily. The leadership of the NRM understood this intimately, and chose a side. And it was not the side of the native.

This is why, by contrast, any spontaneous or autonomous activity, especially one with a capacity for its own violence that cannot be imperially co-opted (as the NRA/M was) is brutally suppressed, as the NRM (now as a tool of the West) has done again and again with spontaneous outbursts, and before that in northern Uganda, to Buganda demonstrators, and to subjects of the Rwenzururu kingdom, as well as far beyond Uganda’s borders to “secure order” in the literal Eden, lying between the two Rift Valleys with the Nile at its centre, for the Empire.

In all such cases, the West has, and will, look away, after maybe a bit of anodyne hand-wringing, just as a memsahib would not want to know the gory details of exactly how her houseboy removed a rat from her kitchen, only that he did it effectively. She will even indulge in a bit of grumbling about

how much of a mess he has left her kitchen in, in the process. But the critical thing is that she wanted the rat killed, and now it is dead. Good boy.

So, political agitation is one thing, an actual uprising is quite another. It does not matter what the issue is, the West will not tolerate an actual popular uprising in Africa. The natives must never develop the means to reclaim what was taken from them at gunpoint in 1897.

Certainly, the natives must be prevented from regaining control over the source of the Nile.

This is why we have almost been workshopped to death by donor activism - to learn how to express our political aspirations within the acceptable (which basically means ineffective) methods and language of political careerism. Once we step outside those boundaries, either spontaneously or otherwise, then Kakungulu's death machine is activated, and people are killed like kitchen rats until "order" is restored.

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This is why we can experience a mass killing in the middle of a general election campaign, and the elections will still carry on. It is because these are, in fact, two separate "political" processes being implemented: one to keep the political classes co-opted, and the other to keep the natives excluded.

Nothing valuable, beautiful or just can be built on such an iniquitous foundation.

We need to be clear: what we have had was never "peace", but simply security for the Empire's interests.

And without real peace, even that security will eventually disappear.

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