



Uganda and the Bobi Wine Proposition

By Eriasa Sserunjogi



When Yoweri Museveni was declared winner of the January 14 election in Uganda, the situation in Kampala and other towns and townships across the country remained calm. There were no spontaneous celebrations. His party's secretariat would hours later organise a victory procession from the spot where the declaration was made to Kololo Airstrip, the venue where Museveni will take the oath of office for the sixth time on May 12. One could clearly see that the procession, which took place under tight security, was largely made up of paid participants.

The absence of spontaneous celebrations after Museveni is declared winner is not news; it has been like this before. Museveni being declared winner and his opponents disputing the results has been a ritual that has been repeated every five years since 1996. When Museveni defeated Paul Kawanga Ssemogerere in 1996 amidst accusations of rigging, Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu, aka Bobi Wine, was 14 years old, too young to vote.

Much earlier - in 1980 - Museveni took part in his first presidential election as a candidate more than a year before Kyagulanyi was born. Museveni failed to win even in his own constituency on that occasion and the victory went to Milton Obote, the man who commanded the guns at the time. Museveni turned things in his favour when he started a war after that election and took control of the guns and the country's leadership in 1986. He hasn't looked back since.

Of course some Ugandans vote for Museveni, but perhaps they consider it too risky to openly

celebrate. It is risky because many of their compatriots who vote against Museveni are angry at the establishment and do not understand how a Ugandan in full possession of their mental faculties can vote for Museveni in the year 2021. Many Ugandans have been attacked for showing support for Museveni, and when demonstrations take place, one would be well advised not to be caught wearing yellow, the colour of Museveni's National Resistance Movement (NRM).

Those Ugandans who don't vote for Museveni believe that elections are habitually rigged in Museveni's favour. And there is another group of Ugandans who have grown too despondent to participate in any election in which Museveni is a candidate. A regular commentator has over the past few months repeatedly wondered why Ugandans are keen to participate in polls whose outcome is known in advance.

The country is deeply divided and very few believe that the government is committed to democracy. An opinion poll that was conducted by Afrobarometer, whose results were released two days to the election, showed that whereas 78 per cent of Ugandans want their leaders to be chosen through periodic free and fair elections, only 36 per cent of the citizens are satisfied with how democracy works in Uganda. (Afrobarometer describes itself as an Africa-wide survey research project that measures citizen attitudes on democracy and governance, the economy, civil society, and other topics.)

That is the setting in which Kyagulanyi took on Museveni. The popstar-cum-politician whipped up emotions and motivated many - especially the youth - and ran a campaign against Museveni in particularly difficult circumstances. He had 64 days to campaign in 146 districts in what was his first ever countrywide tour as a politician. He had attempted to tour the country before the campaigns - and the law allows a presidential aspirant to conduct such a tour one year to the election - but the authorities blocked him. His music concerts were banned over three years ago when he made it clear that he harboured presidential ambitions.

Then the COVID-19 pandemic seemed to drop like manna from heaven for Museveni, and it was quickly seized upon to ensure that Kyagulanyi's campaign activities in dozens of districts were blocked, while those in the districts he visited were over-policed and strictly controlled. To say that Kyagulanyi campaigned in the actual sense of the word would be to stretch matters.

The same thing happened to the other candidates in the race. Museveni did not personally address rallies and limited himself to fairly small meetings with leaders of his party in different areas in observance of the rules that the electoral body had put in place to prevent the spread of COVID-19. But he has interacted with the same voters for decades and as in all previous campaigns, he again had the entire state machinery doing his bidding in every village, paid for by the taxpayer.

Like Kizza Besigye, who before him had challenged Museveni at the polls four times, Kyagulanyi ran his campaign through defiance and made it clear at the outset that he would not abide by the rules set by the electoral body ostensibly to control the spread of COVID-19; he would only abide by the electoral laws as set out in the constitution and the relevant statutes. Although Kyagulanyi acknowledged that COVID-19 is real and had sent out messages asking Ugandans to protect themselves, he also pointed out that by the time the campaigns started, Ugandans were interacting freely and such restrictions were almost nonexistent in markets and other areas, and argued that it was not logical that the government should think that people could only contract COVID-19 at political events.

In any event, he added, the government had not showed a commitment to the fight against COVID-19 and, as an example, pointed out that whereas money had been appropriated to supply all Ugandans with masks six months before the campaigns started, millions of Ugandans still hadn't

received them.

Kyagulanyi would be vindicated when after the election – and having been declared winner – Museveni drove from his country home hundreds of kilometers from the capital, making several stopovers along the way and addressing crowds of people who were not observing the preventive measures that had been strictly enforced during the campaigns. The veil was off and the lie was laid bare the moment Museveni obtained the result he was after.

Kyagulanyi disregarded the regulation to have a maximum of 200 people per meeting and called mass rallies. The authorities held their breath for a moment, hoping that the popstar would fail to draw crowds in areas away from his native Buganda region and his efforts would collapse on themselves. When the campaigns kicked off on 9 November 2020, Kyagulanyi started with a bang in an area far away from his native land. The crowds kept growing bigger and the narrative that he was only popular in his native Buganda region collapsed as quickly as it had been constructed by regime propagandists. As the days wore on Kyagulanyi continued to pick up steam as he went through the districts and his tour of Buganda region drew closer. The regime ran out of patience.

Kyagulanyi had scheduled rallies in the east on 17 November 2020, to be followed by his first rally in Buganda the following day. He visited Masaka – the epicenter of anti-Museveni activities – on his first day in Buganda. The authorities couldn't allow that so on the morning of 17 November, Kyagulanyi was arrested as he arrived at the venue of his scheduled rally. It took something like a garrison of the army and the police to arrest him, and after a mini scuffle the presidential candidate was whisked away like a hardcore criminal. The abduction was relayed live on social media and some of it was on television. Kyagulanyi's supporters violently protested in Kampala, Masaka and other towns and after two days of rioting the security agencies had shot and killed at least 52 Ugandans. According to official records, two others were run over by vehicles that were caught up in the melee.

The effects of the events of 18 and 19 November are still in evidence all over Uganda. While Kyagulanyi has been under house arrest since election day and he disputes the results of the election – Museveni was declared winner with 58.64% with Kyagulanyi garnering 34.83% – his supporters have not raised their heads to protest. There are armed soldiers walking in single file every few hundred meters in Kampala and other urban centres, and Ugandans only have to look back at the events of two months ago to know that these armed men could kill them with little provocation.

[President Museveni](#) left no doubt at all whatsoever that this could when he spoke about the November protests and killings: “According to the police report, for instance, the five persons who died in Nansana were part of the rioting group. They had, apparently, “overpowered” the police. I will get the details of “over powering” the police. What actually happened? It is criminal to attack security forces by throwing stones or attempting to disarm them. Police will legitimately fire directly at the attackers if they fail to respond to the firing in the air. Many of the up-country police groups are not equipped with anti-riot equipment (shields, batons, water cannons, rubber bullets etc.) and should not be. We should not have a country of rioters. It is the duty of everybody to keep the peace.”

It is therefore back to square one. The emergence of Kyagulanyi as his principal challenger excited many and ignited hitherto apolitical constituencies to rise up against Museveni. These groups include artistes with whom Kyagulanyi has interacted for decades and young Ugandans who were excited by the prospect of having a youthful president. But the optimism that was whipped up by Kyagulanyi's superstar status has since dimmed. He is locked up in his own home and not even the American ambassador succeeded in meeting him when she tried last week. His lawyers and party

officials have been pleading to meet with him so that, they say, they may prepare a petition against Museveni's re-election.

After the 2016 election, Besigye was where Kyagulanyi now finds himself. He was locked up in his home from the day after the voting until the eve of Museveni's inauguration - a period of three months - when he escaped and unexpectedly showed up in the busiest area of Kampala. Besigye was then arrested and flown in a military chopper to the remotest part of the country where he was charged with treason because he had declared himself winner of the election. The treason case has not been tried for five years and the state is clearly not interested in following through.

The objective - which was achieved - was to keep Besigye out of circulation and prevent him from organising a mass uprising, which Museveni's government seems to believe is the only thing that can remove it from power. After the 2011 election, which Besigye again disputed, the opposition leader inspired what were dubbed walk-to-work protests, bringing Kampala to a standstill for months. Museveni is keen to ensure Kyagulanyi does not inspire such protests and his government has literally banned demonstrations; whoever tries to protest is met with brute force. On the other hand, those Ugandans who would perhaps like to protest against what they call a rigged election wouldn't dare - the events of November are still very fresh in their minds.

Museveni has thrown at Kyagulanyi every weapon that he thinks might work. In an interview with an international television channel during the campaigns, he accused Kyagulanyi of being backed by foreigners and homosexuals and has repeated these claims many times over. Museveni made the same claims against Besigye, never mind that his stranglehold over Uganda for the last 35 years has been made possible in large measure by foreign funding.

A new accusation that has cropped up against Kyagulanyi is that he is promoting tribalism and sectarianism. Kyagulanyi is an ethnic Muganda and his tribesmen have for the first time since 1996 rejected Museveni and voted for Kyagulanyi. Museveni, however, has on each occasion since 1996 been overwhelmingly voted for by the Banyankole - his kinsmen - and most of western Uganda, but this does not come up in the tribalism talk that he and his spokespeople have now ignited. The import of what is happening is simple: Kyagulanyi, just like Museveni's every opponent before him, will be fought by all means possible.

When all other methods fail, Museveni resorts to the use of force. In a video clip that went viral, Museveni vowed to obliterate Kyagulanyi's group. A few days later, security forces arrested dozens of Kyagulanyi's followers, accusing them of all sorts of crimes. Some of them are locked up by the military, accused of illegal possession of military equipment. The pressure exerted on Kyagulanyi was so intense that about a week to polling day he sent his children out of the country. He cut an isolated figure going into the election, only enjoying the company of his wife at home, with whom he now remains under house arrest. You can call it a home or a barracks, whichever you choose.

In the end, all the theories about whether Kyagulanyi would be a different proposition to Museveni collapse. It was always going to come to this; the history, age, religion, tribe or whatever other characteristic of whoever challenges Museveni doesn't matter. When everything else fails Museveni resorts to the use of force. With his military strength still visibly intact, he will perhaps keep his foot on the gas peddle for as long as he can. Or maybe he will surprise us and engineer a negotiated exit.

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