



# Africa's Beautiful Ones Were Born in the '80s, Old Men, Black and White, Have Never Been More Afraid

By Charles Onyango-Obbo



Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni came to power in January 1986, at the head of a victorious National Resistance Army rebel movement that had won a bitter five-year guerrilla war.

30 years later, with nearly an equal number of constitutional amendments to extend his stay in power, including lifting presidential term and age limits, he is a man who looks determined to put in another 32 years, if his body allows it. His spirit is certainly very willing.

He has scattered and broken the spirits of his challengers with beatings, harassment, jail and even exile. Until 2005, his grip on power was largely aided by the fact that Uganda was a single-party state, ruled by what Museveni's government elegantly called the "no-party system".

Everyone was assumed by default to be included in his ruling National Resistance Movement. It thus followed that there were no ideological differences among them. Therefore, candidates could run for office on the only thing they could conceivably have differences on - "individual merit" (do the people consider you a good or bad woman?).

All that was upended in the late 1990s when Museveni's former physician in the bush and later party

ideologue, Kizza Besigye, broke ranks with the NRM in one of the most audacious political moves of the time in Uganda, and challenged him in the 2001 elections. For Museveni to triumph, it took a muscular vote-rigging effort, and the raising of a militia led by a vexatious colonel to suppress the wave of support that greeted Besigye.

However, Besigye had tasted the forbidden political fruit, and there would be no going back. The country's rejection of the "no-party" system, and the opposition to Museveni's 15-year rule couldn't be denied. Four years later, multiparty politics was restored, but there was a caveat to it: the referendum that introduced pluralism was accompanied by a proposal to scrap presidential term limits.

In late 2005, a senior Museveni aide sat across my editorial conference desk at the Monitor media offices in Kampala, where I was editor. With just the two of us, there was no need to play to the gallery, so we could speak reasonably about the election. He said he had studied the election outcome in some detail, and his conclusion was that Museveni was unlikely to be unseated in the long term by a conventional opposition candidate.

The force that would bring him, and other African strongmen, down, he said, was urbanisation. Even at that point when Museveni had a stranglehold on the country, urban areas, especially Kampala, eluded him. Despite the ruling NRM deploying the most lethal weapons in its vote-cheating arsenal, they had failed to wrestle the capital's mayorship and the majority of the parliamentary seats around the capital, from the opposition. The bulk of the opposition gains in recent years have all been largely in urban areas.

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They were cosmopolitan, more expensive to bribe, more knowledgeable, more demanding of higher value public goods (jobs and housing, not maize seeds like the rural voters might), he noted. Most African governments, he said, either don't have the financial and policy resources to assuage these urban demands, and where they do, they face entrenched opposition by vested interests, some regime-linked, for them to be effective.

Today, looking at the rising wave of protests over service delivery, cost of living and jobs across the continent from the Cape to Tunis, and Mombasa to Lagos, he could not have been more prescient.

The conventional wisdom goes that Africa has too many young people who are poorly educated, and economies that don't offer them anything gainful to do so they are angry - especially because the politicians and bureaucrats are stealing the resources that would have gone to creating opportunities. Or they are educated, but still have no opportunities, and so are frustrated and therefore inclined to take down establishments that aren't working for them.

Indeed Africa's population has been on the [rise over the past 50 years, and over 60 percent of its current 1.3 billion population is below the age of 25](#). The continent's youth account for 60 percent of all Africa's unemployed. This has led to sometimes-apocalyptic declarations of the continent's youth bulge being a "ticking time bomb".

If that were the only driver of current unrest in Africa, it would be relatively easy for scrupulous and

effective governments to fix. However, it is not.

Rather than just protesting at poor economic conditions, and a bleak future, Africa's youth are doing much more, and have many in the world frightened. For example, Europeans are afraid of the wave of African migrants, and people of colour in general, driven from their homes by lack of economic opportunities overrunning their cities and taking over their countries, given their declining populations. That fear is rocking the European Union, feeding the rise of anti-immigrant forces.

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To be sure, young Africans are on the move. The majority don't try to negotiate treacherous Mediterranean waters to get to Europe, or trudge through war-ravaged Yemen to get to the Gulf. More than [80 percent of African migration occurs within the continent](#).

But that is not the only movement they are making. They are also moving from the rural to urban areas, with [Africa's urban population projected to reach 60 percent of the total population by 2050](#).

They are moving from the analogue to the digital world. By 2017 there were 419 million Africans connected to the internet via mobile broadband, and that [number is estimated to hit 1.07 billion by the end of 2020](#).

They are moving from consuming culture in the real world, to doing so online, with its artists beginning to ride the viral wave in a big way. Davido's "Fall" in January 2019 became the [longest charting Nigerian single in Billboard history](#), and the first video by an African musician to rack up more than 100 million views on YouTube in December. He was closely followed a few weeks later by Yemi Alade whose hit single "Johnny" pulled her across the line to make her the [first female African artist to reach the 100 million views milestone](#) on YouTube.

They long ago moved from watching local to global football. They are abandoning the old hierarchical Catholic and Protestant churches, and signing up to the range of Pentecostal and other independent churches, a few led by charlatan pastors, hawking instant miracles, and direct tickets to paradise. At base, however, they are looking for real life solutions, not to go to heaven.

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And, yes, in all African countries except a handful, opinion polls tell us as high as 50 percent to 75 percent of them would like to move as far away from Africa or their home countries as they can.

These actions, aspirations, and shifts are challenging the status quo, borders, and power in non-traditional ways, and they are panicking.

Understandably. If you have millions of your young people speaking their minds freely on social media, without passing through conventional channels such as mainstream media, schools, and churches curated by grown ups who are considered trustworthy guardians, the national project can

be imperilled. If you have young people ogling skimpily dressed men and women, or watching pornography, going against longstanding moral codes and the rules about when and how you see the opposite sex naked, it threatens the soul of the republic.

They are listening to all sorts of music, some of it with cuss words, twerking dancers, and simulated sex online.

The establishment is striking back. In Uganda, you have an anti-pornography commission, and a social media access tax that is a sin tax. A similar digital sin tax has been slapped in Zambia, and put on hold after a backlash in Benin. In Tanzania, the joys of blogging will set you back a stiff \$900 in fees. In Egypt, [social media users with more than 5,000 followers are considered publishers, and are subject to state regulation](#).

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Music is being [banned around Africa in record numbers](#), and musicians like Diamond Platinumz in Tanzania are not even allowed to travel and perform their banned music in more liberal jurisdictions. Countries like Uganda are now considering new rules to censor lyrics, plays, and movie scripts.

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In other words, an old elite that wants to keep them in the structures that constitute the current states is blocking young people's movement to alternative political, cultural, aspirational, and virtual worlds. Some of the protests are informed by youth resistance against these attempts by power to control or kill off shifts to their "new world", as it were.

This mass migration across many aspects of life on the continent represents an old phenomenon in some respects. Like elsewhere, every generation has tried not just to remake their environment to conform to their worldview, but also to claim their share of the national goods.

A time always comes when every national cohort seeks a round of redistribution of the nation's wealth. It can take different forms, including a chance to unlock natural resources through policy, direct handouts, or a place at the political table.

For the first 40 years of Africa's post-independence period, it was fairly straightforward. There was independence, and the political and economic freedoms that came with it. Most African countries had relatively small populations, and the prices of the primary commodities they sold in the world market were fairly stable.

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There was an expansion of education, health, jobs new and old as the colonial officials vacated, the generation that fought for independence and their children were, on the whole, well rewarded. The bar was low.

There were European settler farms, businesses, and Asian stores to parcel out among the new African elite, as in Kenya and Zimbabwe, in the flood of “Africanisation” and nationalization actions in their various forms.

Today, these have run their course. There is little left to steal or expropriate for the current generation. Aid has slowed down, and cheap post-financial crisis capital is no longer flowing.

Chinese money doesn’t travel far to the private sector, largely fattening state bureaucrats and regime affiliated business people.

Post Cold War economic liberalisation either recapitalised a few bankrupt state enterprises, or privatised them to the new elite spawned from the second and third liberation wave. The rest were buried in the graveyard of structural adjustment.

Meanwhile Chinese goods, cheaper and wider in range than the stuff that flowed in from Dubai after 1990, have ravaged artisanal industries, once thought to be immune to globalisation, as has happened in Sudan, compounding strongman Omar al-Bashir troubles.

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Besides increasing urbanisation, even in rural areas more and more Africans are moving to live a short distance away from main roads and highways. Just seeing the shiny cars, and the movement on pick-ups and lorries full of goods they cannot afford (mattresses, furniture, beer) radicalises them.

As Zimbabwe has proved, there’s little political capital to be gained from land redistribution. Most people don’t have the capital to work the land profitably. In many cases the soil is tired, trashed by either abuse of fertiliser in the past, or population pressure, and environmental ravages of recent decades that have ravaged its fertility.

On the whole, the cost of expropriation and nationalisation, once popular tools, is too high, because you are no longer grabbing from European settlers or an Asian minority that is afraid to fight back, but your own. You risk a civil war when you do.

The longest period of peace and democracy on the continent has bequeathed us an Africa where the likelihood of dying in a traffic accident is much higher than being killed by a bullet in conflict.

But it also means that it is harder now to get rid of leaders or ruling parties that have entrenched themselves and often rig elections as in Uganda, Togo, Gabon, Cameroon, Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Djibouti, to name a few.

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The five-to-seven year cycle in and out of power that happened in the coup era is now harder to achieve if you find a determined strongman dedicated to hanging on. Media liberalisation has actually helped dictators, because you cannot seize the state broadcaster and declare yourself the

new junta leader. There are dozens, even hundreds of private radio and TV stations, some controlled by regime supporters, who will foil you, as happened in Burundi in 2015 and Gabon earlier in the year.

So we have a war fought on so many fronts. Offering people jobs and money cannot end it, because some of the demands are born of sharp cultural cleavages.

It is complex, because some of it stems from progress: expanded democracy, health, and technology. In turn, the young are threatening the old states in new ways. Previously, the worst was a guerrilla insurgency, and maybe a deadly famine; now it's urbanisation, digital secession by the youth, and a different kind of imperialism we quite don't know how to confront - China's global market communist imperialism. The novelty of it all is exciting and even mildly intoxicating - if you are not a Big Man in an African State House.

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