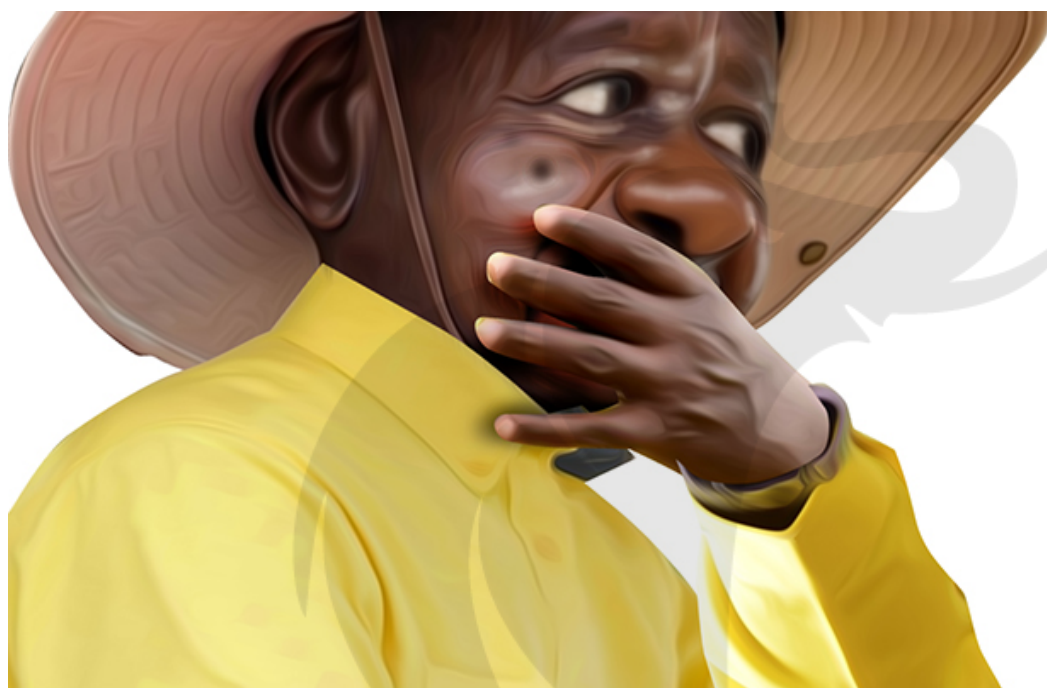




Our Man in Kampala: Museveni and the Americans

By Abdullahi Boru Halakhe



Since taking power in 1986, President Yoweri Museveni has enjoyed total bipartisan support from six American administrations. Along with America's help, Museveni's domestic repression has grown steadily, stymying Uganda's fledgling democracy. Uganda's next general election will take place on 14 January 2021, a week before President Joe Biden's inauguration. The Biden administration must not give Museveni carte blanche but should instead make America's continued support contingent on good governance and accountability.

When he first became president five years after launching a rebellion against President Milton Obote over the disputed December 1980 election, Museveni portrayed himself and his movement, the National Resistance Army/Movement (NRA/M) as the antithesis of all previous groups. After 33 years at the helm, Museveni and the National Resistance Movement are indistinguishable from the people he launched a rebellion to dislodge from power.

The speech and the memo

A speech given and a memo written 13 years apart, laid out the vision and the contradictions within the NRM, and more broadly within Uganda, and cast the authors as protagonists in the struggle for democracy in Uganda. The speech was given by Yoweri Museveni in 1986, shortly after he seized

power. Kizza Besigye issued the memo on 7 November 1999.

The speech, often referred to as the “fundamental change” speech, laid out the future of Uganda under the NRM, while the [memo](#), “An insider’s view on how NRM lost the broad base”, was the most realistic appraisal of the NRA/M 13 years after it took power.

When he delivered his speech on 29 January 1986, Museveni said, “No one should think that what is happening today is a mere change of guard: it is a fundamental change in the politics of our country.” Museveni added,

“The people of Africa—the people of Uganda—are entitled to democratic government. It is not a favour from any government: it is the right of the people of Africa to have a democratic government. The sovereign power in the land must be the population, not the government. The government should not be the master, but the servant of the people.”

Regarding democracy, Museveni said, “It is a birthright to which all the people of Uganda are entitled.”

In November 1999, while still a serving army officer, Col. Kizza Besigye offered an opposing view of the NRA/M when he said, “All in all, when I reflect on the Movement philosophy and governance, I can conclude that the Movement has been manipulated by those seeking to gain or retain political power in the same way that political parties in Uganda were manipulated.” Besigye went further to say that, “[W]hether it’s political parties or Movement, the real problem is dishonest, opportunistic and undemocratic leadership operating in a weak institutional framework and a weak civil society which cannot control them.”

Museveni’s vision of “fundamental change” has produced “no change” and the servant leadership and democracy espoused in his speech are illusory. Besigye’s assessment of the selfish, opportunistic and undemocratic leadership within the NRA/M and in Uganda is all too familiar and the competing realities embodied by Museveni and Besigye have dominated Ugandan politics for over a decade.

A central plank of the NRM was the establishment of a broad-based government and the elimination of all forms of sectarianism. To make good on its promise, the NRM introduced an [anti-sectarian law](#) in 1988. The NRM also instituted a no-party system where elections were contested on personal merit rather than party affiliation. For Museveni and the NRM, political parties were the root cause of Uganda’s crises since independence—as they inherently promote “sectarianism”, unlike the Movement, which “fosters consensus”.

Three elements have sustained Museveni’s vice-like grip on power in Uganda: the use of the security apparatus to suppress the opposition, the passing and selective application of laws—even when the courts strike them down—and America’s generosity despite Uganda’s dubious human rights and governance record.

Electoral violence

Three years after publishing the memo, Besigye ran against Museveni in the 2001 general election. The electoral commission declared Museveni the [winner](#). The run-up to the election saw the [arrest and assault of Besigye’s supporters](#). A Select Parliamentary Committee established to examine electoral violence stated that, “violence experienced in elections includes physical assault and shooting, intimidation, abduction and detention of voters”. In all, according to the commission, 17 people were killed and [408 arrests](#) were made.

A few months after the election, Besigye was detained and questioned by the Criminal Investigations Division (CID), allegedly in connection with the offence of treason. Besigye left the country in September 2001, citing persecution by the state. He returned on 26 October 2005.

Unlike in the 2001 elections, in 2006 the state was keen to derail Besigye's candidacy through legal manoeuvres from the outset to prevent his name from appearing on the ballot. The police filed a case in court accusing him of rape and treason, and arrested him on 12 November, barely a fortnight after he returned to Uganda from exile, and a few months before the election scheduled for March.

When the military realised that the civilian court would grant bail to Besigye and his co-accused, the military prosecutor brought terrorism and weapons offences charges. The court eventually [acquitted](#) him of the rape charge. In dismissing the case, high court [Judge John Bosco Katutsi said](#), "The evidence is inadequate, impotent, scandalous, monstrous against a man who brought himself up to compete for the highest position in this country."

Despite already competing in an election with the odds stacked against him, Besigye lost six weeks to legal fights in the courts where he spent as many days as he did on the campaign trail.

The defiance campaign

After losing two elections, Besigye realised it was almost impossible to beat Museveni at polls which were neither free, nor fair, nor peaceful, or by having the courts overturn the election results and sought to employ other means.

In 2011, Besigye joined other activists in a Walk to Work campaign, a simple yet profound form of protest that highlighted the stark economic realities in Uganda. Even as many Ugandans were struggling to meet their daily needs, the country bought at least eight fighter jets and other military hardware worth [US\\$744 million](#). Museveni's inauguration ceremony cost US\$1.3 million. That the protest came a few weeks after the electoral commission declared Museveni the winner of the election with over 60 per cent of the vote illustrated the hollowness of Museveni's victory.

The election took place against the background of the Arab Spring and its potential for contagion, with Museveni viewing the remarkably benign act of people walking to work instead of driving an existential threat. Museveni and the security agencies could not countenance the Walk to Work or other similar activities turning into a popular movement. The 2013 Public Order Management Act and its convenient interpretation came in handy.

Museveni fell back on the template set during the 2001 election. Security agencies visited unspeakable violence on Besigye and his supporters during the election campaign and Museveni was declared the winner by the electoral commission. Besigye contested the validity of the election in court but, while it recognised that there were irregularities, the court ruled that they were not sufficient to modify the outcome of the election.

Enter Bobi Wine

State violence against Besigye and his supporters has been a constant in the Besigye-Museveni contest but for the first time, Museveni's opponent is not Besigye. He will be competing against the Kyaddondo East Member of Parliament, Robert Kyagulanyi, popularly known by his stage name Bobi Wine. Kyagulanyi was four years old when the NRM came to power in 1986.

And just like with Besigye, Bobi Wine has been at the receiving end of the violence of the state agencies ahead of 2021 election. The police have [disrupted](#) his campaign and [detained](#) him several times and he has on occasion [suspended](#) his campaign in protest at the violence meted out against

him and his supporters. He was recently arrested for [defying the COVID protocol](#) while campaigning. Predictably, the protocol does not seem to apply to President Museveni, who has been campaigning unimpeded.

America's support

Museveni's ascension to power also coincided with the deterioration of the security situation in Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo, and with Muammar Gaddafi's actions to prop up various African regimes. An astute political entrepreneur, Museveni put Uganda at the service of America and in return, successive American administration gave him political support and financial backing.

When President Ronald Reagan warned him to be wary of Gaddafi's activities during their first ever meeting, Museveni told Reagan that he had fought Gaddafi before the Americans [started fighting him](#), to which Reagan replied, "I am preaching to a choir."

Since then, Museveni has made himself indispensable to America's security calculus in the region. During her visit to Kampala in 1998, Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright called Uganda a ["beacon in the central African region."](#)

Uganda is among the largest beneficiaries of the Department of Defense "Train and Equip" programme. The Department of Defense has notified Congress of over US\$280 million in equipment and training for Uganda since the 2011 financial year, over US\$60 million in joint support to Uganda and Burundi for AMISOM and significant funding for the 2011-2017 counter-LRA effort (Lord's Resistance Army insurgency). Additionally, Uganda also receives counterterrorism aid through State Department funds. It received over US\$30 million in support via the [African Peacekeeping Rapid Response Partnership](#) (APRRP).

The state is coming down hard on Bobi Wine because he is tapping into and articulating the latent discontent among the vast majority of Ugandans, those [under 30 who make up over 70 per cent of the country's population](#) and who cannot relate to Museveni's self-aggrandising rendering of the Bush Wars or the Idi Amin scarecrow. America has a choice: to side with most Ugandans who would like to see democracy take root in Uganda or with Museveni under the pretext of maintaining stability.

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