



AFRICA POLICY BRIEF

Its own worst enemy? The Ugandan government is taking desperate measures to control rising dissent

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Uganda has the world's second youngest population. The Museveni regime is increasingly struggling to build legitimacy among this group, which wants public services and employment rather than distant stories about how the regime brought an end to war when it came to power in 1986. This brief aims to explain the ways in which the Museveni regime has dealt with these changing circumstances. Concretely, it argues that the regime's attempts to improve public services largely fail because of existing patronage dynamics. This has made the regime even more dependent on the use of patronage and violence.

INTRODUCTION

Uganda is a very different country today than it was when President Museveni came to power in 1986, not only in terms of development but also in terms of population. Uganda has the world's second youngest population, seventy-eight

percent of whom are under 30 years old.ⁱ The regime therefore has to rely on different sources of legitimacy than when it came to power. Previously, the Museveni regime's achievement of bringing an end to war was its primary source of legitimacy and,ⁱⁱ while this is still important for certain categories of the electorate – in particular older generations – it is no longer relevant for younger generations. They have never known war and demand instead employment and improved public services – 62ⁱⁱⁱ to 83 percent^{iv} of young people are unemployed. As a result, protests in urban areas – such as the 2011 'Walk to work' protests – have drawn large, young crowds. Symbolic of these dynamics has been the meteoric rise of Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu, also known as Bobi Wine, a popstar-turned-legislator. In a short time, he has managed to rally masses of youth and unite them in their discontent against the regime.

This brief aims to explain the ways in which the Museveni regime has dealt with these changing circumstances and increasing challenges. Concretely, it argues that the regime has become its own worst enemy as

its attempts to improve public services largely fail due to pre-existing patronage dynamics. This, in turn, further entrenches these patronage dynamics and the regime's reliance on violence – ultimately failing to increase the regime's legitimacy.

THE CARROT: FAILING EFFORTS TO IMPROVE SERVICE DELIVERY

The first way in which the regime has been trying to increase its legitimacy is through various measures aimed at improving public service delivery. For example, in 2017 the Museveni regime announced that it would downsize the bloated, expensive government machinery by scrapping dozens of agencies that had usurped much of the ministries' powers and resources. Nevertheless, to date little action has been taken, presumably for fear of undermining the patronage network on which the president relies. The same year, the regime also tabled a new constitutional land amendment to facilitate government acquisition of land and thus reduce excessive delays in infrastructure projects caused by disputed compensation claims. However, it critically underestimated the deep mistrust many Ugandans harbour towards the government in land matters. As a result, the proposed amendment is seen as another avenue for regime elites to grab land.

Other efforts to boost the economy have ended up as mere patronage schemes in the context of the 2016 elections. Examples include Operation Wealth Creation, which aimed to increase agricultural production through free agricultural input distribution

(such as seedlings), and the Youth Livelihood Programme, which disbursed loans to entrepreneurial youth groups. Only a fraction of these loans, widely treated as 'money to eat' ahead of the 2016 vote, has been recovered.^v

In this situation, the regime continues to strongly rely on corruption, and has in the past decade become increasingly explicit about it. The regime has stopped making any effort to portray its hand-outs as legitimate government programmes such as Operation Wealth Creation or the Youth Livelihood Programme. Instead, Museveni's 'sacks of cash' have become an increasingly standard way of tying constituencies into the regime. For example, after registering heavy losses in Kampala in the 2016 elections, President Museveni launched a new cash-distributing exercise in the city, donating up to 300 million UGX (USD 90,000) at a time to selected youth savings cooperatives.^{vi} In September 2016 Museveni donated more than 1.6 billion UGX (USD 450,000) to Kampala youth groups in three weeks.^{vii} These are just some examples of the increasingly open ways in which cash is handed out, as well as the ways in which Ugandan politics have become monetised: constituencies expect their political representatives to 'deliver' in financial terms – particularly upon a visit from the president.

In sum, the Ugandan government is failing to offer much-needed opportunities to achieve Uganda's ambitious – and by all accounts unrealistic – 'Vision 2040' plan, through which it envisages the country

becoming a middle-income economy by 2040. Moreover, the government has also failed to deliver on security, its self-proclaimed core pillar of legitimacy since coming to power. Or, as Museveni has often put it, allowing Ugandans 'to sleep peacefully'.^{viii} Recent years have seen a surge in crime, from thefts to serial killings. These are partially a side-effect of rising poverty levels and rapid urbanisation. More importantly, they are a symptom of a problematic security sector characterised by severe infighting, pervasive corruption and a widespread lack of public trust.

The new air of insecurity has been most starkly reflected in two series of murders. Between June and September 2017, at least 19 women were gruesomely killed in Entebbe and two other Kampala suburbs in the Wakiso district, spreading fear among urban dwellers in central Uganda. Furthermore, a series of high-profile assassination-style killings carried out by assailants on motorbikes that started with the murder of several Muslim clerics in late 2012 has in recent years claimed victims across a broader section of the elite: a senior state prosecutor, two high-ranking police officers and a prominent ruling-party member of parliament.^{ix} The murders, which remain unsolved, illustrate a sense of lawlessness gripping the country.

THE STICK: AD-HOC POLICY MEASURES

With services stripped of money and support for Museveni waning, the past two years have seen a series of ad-hoc policy

measures aimed at increasing revenue streams and controlling dissent.

A good example of this was the introduction of new taxes on social media use and mobile money transactions, which came into force on 1 July 2018. On the one hand, the social media tax aimed to control increased political (opposition) activity online: social media (and the internet in general) has come to play an important role in the mobilisation of opposition political activity, such as in street protests. On the other hand, it was a way to increase government revenue. The introduction of this daily tax of €0.05 for social media use led to protest by the young urban elite. However, still more politically explosive were the new taxes levied on mobile money transactions. Ugandans from every walk of life were in uproar over a combined three percent tax on deposits, transfers and withdrawals made via mobile phones on which elderly people in the villages rely as much as young entrepreneurs in towns. In a matter of days, the president backtracked, first claiming part of the taxes were levied 'in error' before rescinding some of the new charges without any legislative procedure.

The public debacle over the new taxes is symptomatic of policy-making in a Museveni regime that is increasingly coming under pressure. What these measures – from impromptu fees levied on informal businesses in the city to a new national broadband policy – have in common is that they rarely seem well-thought through. Moreover, they are met with public resistance and are often rescinded or

amended as quickly as they are put into effect.

MORE STICK: COERCION

Dissent is also suppressed with direct measures. This is nothing new: long-standing opposition candidate Kizza Besigye was falsely accused of rape during the 2006 elections. Later on, he was kept under *de facto* house arrest (for example, following the 2016 elections) and has on multiple occasions been arrested, often violently. In recent years, the government has stepped up its reaction to any opposition. As the urge to express dissent is growing for many – especially the young – so is the human cost of actually doing so. The extreme violence meted out against opposition politicians, supporters and accidental bystanders surrounding the Arua by-election in August sent a strong message: opposition to the regime comes at a hefty price. After popular-singer-turned-politician Bobi Wine's driver was fatally shot on the eve of the vote, 33 people, including legislators, were brutally arrested and later charged with treason. Several, nursing visible injuries when they were paraded in court, claim they were tortured in detention. During small-scale, disparate protests in Kampala and other towns in the days that followed, at least four were shot dead by security forces.^x

Lastly, it is worth mentioning that the Museveni regime has always been good at knowing on which spaces to crack down, in making a distinction between actors visible to the outside world and actors with little

profile outside the country. An example of this is the way it has dealt with media outlets during elections. As the EU delegation's report on the 2011 elections noted, while those in Kampala have been mostly free to operate, 'the media based outside Kampala, where legal protection and international scrutiny are lacking, are the most vulnerable'.^{xi} Similar tactics are used when it comes to opposition politics: during the recent crackdown on Bobi Wine and his People Power movement, strong international pressure secured the release of Bobi Wine and has (for some time) granted him relative freedom of movement. Meanwhile, the crackdown continued on lesser-known figures. For example, a young woman who had recorded a video in which she threatened to 'hit President Museveni with her genitals' if he failed to release Bobi Wine from prison was illegally detained for two months before being sentenced. Days before her sentence was given, a little-known People Power mobiliser and Democratic Party member was violently arrested by a group of heavily armed plain-clothed men in broad daylight in the centre of Kampala.

OUTLOOK

The picture this paints of Uganda today is one of an ageing regime seeking to tighten its grip in the face of rising opposition and empty coffers. In doing so, it risks losing its hold on the 'Museveni babies' – the more than 80 percent of the population born after the incumbent president came to power in 1986. Even young urban elites who have largely chosen to remain apolitical, many of them children to ruling party members or

otherwise part and parcel of the expansive National Resistance Movement (NRM) party state, feel further alienated. The regime's public policies harm rather than harness the few opportunities a stagnant if not recessive economy has to offer. The increased use of the stick only exaggerates this tendency. The regime's continued reliance on violence appears to be counterproductive and is explained in an increasingly clumsy language: in a rare admission of the extreme nature of the recent brutality, government mouthpiece and cabinet minister Frank Tumwebaze speculated that the worst aspects of an arrest must have been carried out by anti-regime elements in the security forces.

In sum, in trying to handle the rising challenges to its regime, the government has become its own worst enemy both in its use of sticks and carrots. Efforts at improving public service delivery get stuck in patronage dynamics, creating a catch-22 dynamic in

which patronage dynamics become further entrenched. Given the NRM's failure to sufficiently improve public services, patronage has become the principle way of creating the regime's legitimacy. The regime's increased use of violence further feeds into this, undermining the regime's legitimacy, creating a spiral and a feedback loop in which the regime is still more reliant on both patronage and violence.

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ii Reuss, Anna and Kristof Titeca (2017) 'When revolutionaries grow old: the Museveni babies and the slow death of the liberation', *Third World Quarterly*, 38(10): 2347-2366.

iii Action Aid, 'Lost opportunity? Gaps in youth policy and programming in Uganda', 2012, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/04/21/uganda-5-years-no-justice-walk-work-killings>



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- viii 'Museveni address: Top 11 security issues', *Daily Monitor*, June 20, 2018, <https://www.monitor.co.ug/News/National/Museveni-address-top-11-security-issues/688334-4622288-format-xhtml-149bcm0/index.html>
- ix 'Police holding 66 suspects for brutal killings – Museveni', Uganda Radio Network, September 15, 2018, <https://ugandaradionetwork.com/story/brutal-killings-museveni-says-66-suspects-arrested-others-still-at-large>
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- xi European Union (2011) 'Uganda. Final report, General Elections 18 February 2011'. p. 27.