Presidential Politics in Uganda: Driving Democracy Underground

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Abstract
In Uganda, the restoration of multi-party electoral politics in 2005 came after 19 years of President Museveni’s rule and chairmanship of the National Resistance Movement (NRM). Museveni won the previous presidential elections in 1996 and 2001, and was, at the time, constitutionally barred from standing for another term in 2006. Not satisfied with this situation, a bill was passed that lifted presidential term limits, leaving Museveni free to ‘win’ the 2006, 2011, and 2016 elections. Changing the rules further, Museveni drove the lifting of age limits for presidential candidates and is set to be re-elected at the age of 76, in 2021. In this paper, I argue that political manipulation of term and age limits and the centralisation of power has done more than make Uganda less democratic. It has reshaped the very nature of politics over the long term, reducing opposition to something that can only operate through casual channels as a form of ‘pop-up’ politics. The net result of this situation is that a credible, open, institutional political organisation capable of building solid coalitions is no longer possible in Uganda. Those who stand to oppose the president do so from the shadows, as a form of oppositional populist politics—knowing what they oppose but having undeveloped political structures and platforms to stand as an alternative. In the long term, this situation has emptied out Uganda’s political space, leaving the disenfranchised unable to assert their voice effectively or openly participate in changing their own country.

Introduction
President Yoweri Museveni marked 33 years of rule in Uganda on 26 January 2019. He came to power in 1986 after his National Resistance Army (NRA) captured Uganda’s capital city, Kampala, following five years of protracted guerrilla warfare. The fall of Kampala marked the end
of decades of anarchy, rapes, murders, kidnappings, and extra-judicial killings perpetrated by former presidents: Idi Amin, Milton Obote, and General Tito Okello Lutwa. It also marked the start of a new era of control by centralisation of power and heavy-handed eradication of open dissent.

Such an outcome is troubling in view of the fact that the promotion of democracy in place of authoritarianism was one of the defining characteristics of Museveni’s campaign. While the post-independence regimes of Idi Amin and Milton Obote restricted the space of political engagement among Ugandans, the new National Resistance Movement (NRM) under Museveni promised wider opportunities for citizen engagement and participation in African politics. Allied to these changes was the reinstating of constitutional rule and insistence on term limits for presidents. At that time, Museveni was highly critical of African presidents who clung to power. His unforgettable inaugural speech in which he said that “the problem of Africa in general and Uganda in particular is not the people but leaders who overstay in power” (Museveni 1997) provided hope for a different kind of future. To a joyful nation, he warned: “No one should think that what is happening today is a mere change of guards; it is a fundamental change in the politics of our country.” He assured Ugandans of his determination to overcome previous challenges of government corruption, lack of democracy, and unconstitutional rule.

At the beginning of his presidency, Museveni carefully articulated the problem of human rights abuses and corruption, where he focussed on former presidents. This resonated strongly with dissatisfied and marginalised Ugandans whose human rights were grossly abused by previous governments. The foundation of his presidency, however, was built on the very thing that later undermined his claims of democracy: a charismatic personality which emphasised exceptional, superhuman qualities and ability to save the country from authoritarian regimes.

This charismatic form of politics soon gave way to something else. In particular, using his charisma to bolster his power, he was able to eschew the continued approval of the people. Before long, he conceived plans to stop the vacillation between the two main political parties—the Democratic Party (DP) and Uganda Peoples’ Congress (UPC)—under the guise of shoring up political stability. The way he went about this, however, was increasingly authoritarian, with a ban on political party activities and the establishment of a ‘movement system of government’ premised on the involvement of all Ugandans in the National Resistance Movement (NRM). The idea behind this move was that all Ugandans would belong to the ‘movement’, even if they opposed it. The net result
of this situation was that the ruling NRM became the only game in town, characterised as a movement, not a party, and therefore exempt from the rules of political party organisation.

The one-party system and the ban on party activities, reflected in electoral law, left the NRM enjoying a virtual monopoly on political organisation and power in Uganda for 10 years from 1986, and it effectively neutralised his opponents by reducing their ability to create an effective political opposition. These changes have fundamentally shaped the political landscape of Uganda, changing the very way in which political action manifests itself. In particular, such changes have reshaped politics over the long term, reducing opposition to something that can only operate through informal channels. This has, in turn, made it inordinately difficult to build credible institutional political opposition in Uganda. What is left in the political space is a form of ‘pop-up’ opposition where claims can be made, without the possibilities of developing effective structures and platforms. This situation has, in turn, hollowed out the ability to move beyond opposition to credible program for change, and has made it very difficult to identify with career politicians.

To understand these dynamics in more depth, I first focus on the changes wrought by Museveni’s NRM and the rise of movement politics, before turning to recent changes such as the lifting of presidential term limits and age caps. Here, I outline the ways in which they have shaped political space in Uganda and the ability to organise. I then turn to recent forms of resistance such as Bobi Wine’s People Power Movement and the way that this fits into the political limitations that have been imposed. I conclude by looking at what is needed to return Uganda to a democratic footing.

The Road to Authoritarian Politics

The wave of popularity that brought Museveni to power after the Bush War allowed him to usher in the ‘movement system of government’. The movement system of government placed the NRM at the centre of Ugandan politics. It also utilised Museveni’s popularity and charisma to justify constant changes to the kinds of policies that he wanted to usher in.

Only two years into government, discussions about a new constitution started. This conversation was part of a wider agreement by the NRM that democracy, constitutionalism, and rule of the law should be restored to the people. The form it took was a Constitutional Review Commission—a legal framework to review the existing constitution, consult with Ugandans, and make proposals for what kind of constitution was needed.
But before the commission could complete its task, Museveni changed his attitude. He demanded that the legislature—then called the National Resistance Council (NRC)—should extend his term of office. His point was that he needed another five years to complete the constitutional making process. Putting his control over that committee to work, his wish was soon granted.

Then, once Museveni was granted another five years in office, he did not lift the ban on multiparty democracy in Uganda. Instead Museveni and his National Resistance Movement continued with restrictions on multiparty politics, thinly justified by the position that Uganda’s past political problems were due to the damage done by sectarian politics (Human Right Watch 1999). While the ‘movement political system’ allowed for election of resistance councils from the village level to the National Resistance Council (Parliament), it did not allow anyone to compete for the position of chairperson of the National Resistance Council, who also doubled as the president of the country. Unlike political parties in other countries that have a revolving door that allows for changes to leadership within the party, this is not the case for the NRM. Museveni has, since the inception of NRM, been the only party leader to hold that office.

The two elections that followed in 1996 and 2001 were also held under the ‘movement political system’, allowing Museveni to edge out his competitors. He hand-picked the seven Electoral Commissioners (EC) and secured the re-appointment of Stephen Besweri Akabway (formerly the Constituent Assembly [CA] Commissioner) as the new chairman of the EC. Suspicions of malfeasance and, allied to this, doubts about the neutrality of Akabway, were advanced by the opposition party leadership because of his partisan role in the CA election. While Museveni used government structures and resources to canvass for votes, the ‘no party system’ or the ‘movement political system’ law prohibited any candidate using political party colours or symbols, or political party, tribal, or religious affiliations or any other sectarian grounds as a basis for his or her candidature or in support of their candidature.

The specific effects of the Ugandan model of a no-party system on the election process have handicapped any presidential candidate competing against the governing NRM structure. Since political party activities were restricted and the movement political system was upheld in addition to incumbency advantage, the subsequent elections were unwinnable. Museveni therefore won with a comfortable majority of 74.2% in 1996 and 69.33% in 2001 (Sabiti 2010).
These developments set the tone for what was to come. Uganda continued to be ruled under the movement system for 19 years. During this period, real, sustained opposition shrunk as Museveni’s grip on power tightened. Yet, from the beginning of 2005, taste for the movement system began to wane among the populace and was no longer seen as legitimate. Also, by 2005, Museveni had already governed for the maximum length allowed by the new Uganda constitution—two five-year terms. His ineligibility and sustained internal and international campaigns to open space for multiparty politics started to ramp up the pressure for change. In a calculated move to deflate the pressure but still hold on to power, Museveni coupled a referendum vote on the re-introduction of multiparty politics with a lifting of presidential term limits.

The Limits of Term Limits

The gamble of moving to multiparty politics while also removing term limits required a particular kind of approach. It required patronage in spades. Although Museveni had the majority number (191 out of 284) in the national assembly, he had to bribe the legislators to vote in his favour (Tripp 2010). This came in the form of a payment to each Member of Parliament of 5 million Uganda shillings ([UGX] approximately USD $3,000) just before the bill was voted on (Tripp 2010). Some 92.5% of voters agreed to open the political space to allow those willing to join other political parties or organisations to do so and to compete for political power (Tripp 2010). On 30 September 2005, the parliament repealed Article 105 (2) of the Constitution allowing Museveni to run for unlimited term for the Office of the President. Museveni was therefore able to amend the constitution without recourse to the populace. These constitutional amendments laid the foundations for Museveni’s continued rule and furthered his grip on power. The legislative body has the power to reform Uganda’s constitution, and it did so, effectively allowing Museveni to legally secure an unopposed autocracy.

Lifting the term limit was met with widespread protests and riots. At this point, Museveni changed gear to more coercive and oppressive measures to keep his regime in power. Museveni was quick to suppress protests using military support, police brutality, and security agencies alongside unofficial private NRM party militias that now keep the Ugandan population relatively subdued. Yet, to contain the increasing riots (for example the 2011–12 ‘Walk to Work’) and contain the great influence of the Buganda and its cultural kingdom, he had to resort to other measures. Museveni’s charismatic authority and populist leadership was reliant on the continued approval of the people, thereby pushing him
to conceive plans to consolidate his grip on power. To appease some sections of the population, the government tabled and passed several controversial bills: the 2007 ‘Land (Amendment) Bill’, the 2009 ‘Kampala Capital City Bill’, the 2009 ‘Cultural Leaders Bill’ and the 2008 ‘Regional Governments Bill’. At the same time, the 2007 ‘Public Order Management Bill’ was passed, allowing the government to take a hard-line approach to silencing protests.

From 2005, the political system has been highly restrictive, with all power residing in the dominant NRM party. After his ability to lift the presidential term limits, Museveni was set to rule for a long period. Putting this to work, he again subjected Ugandans to a shadow referendum to legitimise his hold on power. Using state resources, assets, political structures, and networks built during the 20 years of single party rule, Museveni ran on an NRM party ticket and won two consecutive elections in 2006 and 2010, beating his rival Dr. Kizza Besigye. After he was declared the winner of the 2016 election that was deemed fraudulent and declared so by international observers, people poured on the main city streets demanding a re-vote (Foundation for Human Rights Initiative [FHRI], 2016). The government responded with an iron fist in what was described as a preventive measure. The main opposition leader, Dr. Kizza Besigye, was arrested and police and military vehicles sent into the streets of Kampala. In the melee that ensued, live bullets and tear gas were fired into the rioting mobs, some people were killed; many arrested and imprisoned without trial, thereby denying their access to justice (FHRI 2016).

During this period, Museveni used his incumbency to his advantage. During the 2016 campaign and voting period, police and the army protected NRM party candidates and supporters, meanwhile arresting the opposition party candidates and their supporters. The European Union Election Observation Mission report noted how “state actors were instrumental in creating an intimidating atmosphere … police used excessive force against opposition, media and the general public, justifying it as a ‘preventive measure’” (EU 2016). As the report concludes, the “atmosphere of intimidation and ruling party control of state resources” played in favour of the incumbent (EU 2016). Museveni, who had ruled for 30 years and won five consecutive elections, had access to national resources, structures and public media, which his competitors did not. The NRM party, for example, generated a campaign budget of $7 million in two months, which outstripped the funds raised by his competitors. Ex-Prime Minister Amama Mbabazi and Dr. Kizza Besigye, by contrast, spent $951,000 and $279,000 respectively (Winsor 2016).
Through the partisan regulatory body, Uganda Communications Commission (UCC), Museveni repressed freedom of speech. He arbitrarily applied the law closing and seizing equipment from 13 radio stations, and on polling day, Ugandans found their mobile money services and social media networks blocked by UCC on the grounds that “there was information that people were using these to bribe voters” (EU 2016).

**President for Life**

As if lifting the presidential term limits was not bad enough, one year later, Museveni started another campaign: this time to change the age cap of 75 years for presidential candidates. This time around, however, despite his attempts to have everything his way, Museveni faced unforeseen challenges. When the rumour mill went into overdrive about his government’s intended tabling of a bill to cancel presidential age limits, it sparked a fierce debate in the media, social media, and in social gatherings.

In addition, when the constitutional amendment debate process started in parliament and even before the controversial motion was read, opposition MPs opposed it and tried to defeat its introduction by breaking into endless singing of the national anthem (ABC 2017). Moreover, moments before the controversial motion was read, legislators opposed to it donned red ribbons, stood up, and crowded around the podium, banging on it and on their benches (Reuters 2017). Tempers flared and lawmakers were seen brawling as they exchanged blows with some using microphone stands as crude weapons. In the chaos, at least two female lawmakers were carried out of the chamber after collapsing (Reuters 2017). Twenty-five MPs who were opposed to the constitutional amendment to prolong Museveni’s tenure were forcibly ejected from parliament on the orders of the Speaker for fighting, and six opposition MPs, including Bobi Wine, were suspended from Parliament for three sittings for protesting the bill (BBC 2017).

As the debate progressed, students and opposition activists protested outside the parliament and demonstrations against the amendment spread all over Kampala. Slogans held up throughout this campaign read: “If you dare and touch it, there will be a reckoning” and “Time Up At 75” to confirm that President Yoweri Museveni should serve his last term (Athumani 2017). Similar demonstrations were carried out in other major towns of Uganda. The government reacted by deploying police and military personnel around the parliament and in many parts of Kampala, surrounding suburbs, and other towns. Anti-government constitutional amendment demonstrations were dispersed by police and military using
torn gas and live bullets. Many demonstrators were badly beaten and others arrested (Ahumani 2017). The leading opposition figure, Dr. Kizza Besigye, and DP opposition party leader, Norbert Mao, were arrested and detained incommunicado. Journalists were beaten, detained, and their equipment, including cameras, damaged or confiscated (Reuters 2017). To resolve the issue, Museveni’s patronage went into overdrive immediately prior to voting: the government transferred about USD $10,000 to the accounts of each Member of Parliament, ostensibly to enable them to monitor government programmes (CIPESA 2012).

Debating the age limit bill evoked reactions from the religious clerics weighing against Museveni’s wish for life presidency. Archbishop John Baptist Odama, president of the Catholic Bishops Conference, was unequivocal in stating that: “Those who are planning to change the constitution are ruining the peace of Ugandans when we want a peaceful transition of power” (Martin 2017). In addition, The Rt. Rev. Reuben Kisembo, Bishop of Ruwenzori, argued that “lifting age limits would be synonymous with locking out other potential leaders … Uganda has many qualified people who could be president, and therefore there was no pressing need to change the constitution” (Martin 2017). The political and security situation was so bad before the parliamentary sitting got underway that the military and police were deployed in full force inside the parliament (ABC 2017). In addition, when the debate started, opposition MPs walked out of parliament. Nevertheless, after three days of heated debate, the Parliament, controlled by Museveni’s ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) party, voted 317 in favour and 97 against the constitutional amendment (Observer 2017).

The removal of age limits was the last barricade against Museveni’s life presidency rule in Uganda. While opposition MPs led by prominent lawyers filed a petition in the constitutional court challenging the legality of the Constitutional Amendment Act 2018 that scrapped the presidential age limits, their efforts were nullified by the court. After months of hearing, the Constitutional Court ruled in favour of government, upholding the amendments of Article 102 (b) of the constitution to remove the presidential age cap. Some religious leaders publicly criticised the bill and warned of a bleak future for the country. The Catholic Archbishop Cyprian Kizito Lwanga of the Kampala Archdiocese accused Museveni of “political dishonesty and urged Ugandans to resist the bad politics” prevailing under a president who had ruled the country since 1986 (Ngala 2018). Lwanga encouraged Ugandans to stand against life presidency: “Let us resist bad politics and promote national unity because
we are all interested in this country and also to build a strong future for this country” (Ngala 2018).

**Ghetto Enters Political Mainstream**

With politics looking like a one-man affair, it is difficult to envision how a rival will be able to unseat Museveni from power. The next opportunity to change the face of Ugandan politics may occur in the form of 2021 national general elections, although if current form is anything to go by, the odds are not good. In a bid to secure yet another term, Museveni is already focusing his energy and resources in his campaign. Rather than opening to new ideas, however, he has instituted a clampdown on opposition leaders’ efforts to challenge him. This is happening through a raft of human rights abuses including arrest, torture, and incommunicado detention of anyone who opposes him.

One outspoken representative voice for the disenfranchised is Mr. Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu, otherwise known as Bobi Wine. A prominent Afrobeat popstar known for repertoires of catchy tunes that touch on poverty and social justice issues, Wine is also known as the Ghetto President because he grew up in Kamwokya—one of the Kampala slums (Kigambo 2017). Aiming to run for parliamentary politics in 2017, he cut off his dreadlocks, donned a suit and entered the political campaign fray (BBC 2018). Success followed when he defeated numerous established politicians in a by-election to become the Member of Parliament (MP) for Kyadondo West constituency. He then helped coordinate opposition to the constitutional amendment to scrap presidential age limits. He has since teamed up with other opposition MPs to continue the campaign against Museveni’s anti-democratic impulses, but it has come at a cost.

In a country where 60% of the population is under the age of 30, and most of them underemployed, Bobi Wine has demographics on his side. Aged 38, he has a lot in common with his supporters. He is a magnetic orator with the potential to galvanise the country’s youth to demand their democratic rights. While speaking to the BBC in 2017, he disclosed his urge to be the voice of the younger generation and to stand up for the voiceless (BBC 2017). Campaigning under the slogan “People Power, Our Power”, Wine has worked hard to upset the status quo.

His antics have also earned him the role of kingmaker. Since 2017, Wine backed four opposition candidates who won parliamentary seats in Jinja East, Bugiri, Rukungiri, and Arua by-elections. He was in the forefront of protests against a tax on social media such as a weekly charge for smartphone users and was joined by other activists who saw it as an
exorbitantly high tax for the majority of poor Ugandans. Because of the campaign, the government backtracked on this social media tax (Daily Monitor 2018). While the age cap is passed allowing Museveni to stand in the 2021 for presidency, Bobi Wine’s popularity is seen by Museveni’s camp as a threat to the upcoming 2021 presidential campaign.

Figure 1. Luyimbazi Nalukoola talks with musician and politician Hon. Kyagulanyi Ssentamu popularly known as Bobi Wine (R).

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The presidential strategy to handle Wine is to make his organising ability a challenge, to personally harass and intimidate him, and to force him into a defensive position whenever possible. One example of this was when Wine and Museveni were in Arua municipality in the North-west of Uganda, canvassing votes for their respective campaigns for a parliamentary by-election. This area has traditionally been a stronghold of opposition politics and has strong support for Wine. Over the campaign, Museveni’s candidate lost to Kassiano Wadri, the opposition candidate supported by Wine. Unfortunately, heightened tensions led to the presidential convoy being attacked with stones which, in turn, led to an accusation that Wine and his supporters were involved (The Atlantic 2018). This, in turn, led to Wine’s driver being fatally shot.

The situation provided exactly what Museveni was looking for and led to Wine’s arrest and detention, along with 30 opposition party leaders and supporters. They were subsequently charged with treason (BBC 2018). Bobi Wine was tortured and beaten while in custody and was denied medical treatment. Although he was initially subjected to the threat of court martial, national and international pressure weighed in and the charge of wrongful possession of firearms was dropped (Al Jazeera 2018). This is not the case for other charges, which he is still facing.
Driving Democracy Underground

The need to control rivals such as Bobi Wine and their supporters has resulted in politics being driven underground. One of the strategies and instruments being used to make this happen is colonial: the Stage Plays and Public Entertainment Act that was first introduced in 1949. This is an Act that has not been used since independence but has been resurrected in order to clamp down on artists critical of Museveni’s life presidency project. The Act’s two clauses—requiring songs and scripts for films and stage performances of artists to be examined by the authorities and for artists to request permission from the government before performing outside the country—aims to gag critical voices and censor freedom of speech. The Act targets Wine, whose concerts have recently been blocked because he poses a threat to Museveni’s administration. The laws, according to Wine, are “trying to silence the hundreds of singers, producers, poets, comedians, cartoonists and other entertainers who are raising voices against the oppression, suppression and exploitation of the Ugandan, by a small clique of individuals who rule over us” (Flash 2019).

Violence is also increasing. The Uganda Human Rights Commission (UHRC) reports a surge in violent crime, particularly gruesome killings, torture, kidnappings, assaults, sexual crimes, and domestic violence (UHRC 2017). Most of the murders have not been investigated, and where investigation is undertaken, it is inconclusive with no final report. State violence is not new to Uganda. Previous governments have also murdered prominent individuals, such as Archbishop Janan Luwuum, Ministers Erinayo Oryema and Oboth Ofumbi, Brigadier Pierino Okoya and Andrew Lutakome Kayiira, among others (Lubega 2018). The recent astonishing series of murder victims, however, includes prominent individuals like Hon. Ibrahim Abiriga, a Member of Parliament, two senior police officers (Assistant Inspector General of Police, Andrew Felix Kaweesi and Assistant Superintendent of Police, Muhammed Kirumira), Senior Principal State Attorney, Ms. Joan Kagezi, and a Senior Military Officer, Major Muhammed Kigundu. The other killings have targeted several Muslim sheiks and women between the ages of 18–36 years in the areas of Katabi town council, Kasenyi, Impala, and Nansaana municipality (UHRC 2017).

In Uganda, state sanctioned murder of senior officials who disagree and fall-out with the commander-in-chief appears to have few limits. The list includes senior army and police officers who happened to hold
dissenting views (Kalyegira 2017). In all the recent murders, although suspects are arrested, the government failed to file credible evidence and the courts have dismissed most cases.

Understanding the role of social media in uprisings, Museveni’s government intensified the clampdown on the use of various platforms. In 2018, under the guise of increasing the tax base and tax collection, the UCC started to levy a social media tax “over-the-top”. Every user of Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Skype, Viber, and Instagram is forced to pay a surcharge of UGX 200 a day to access these social media sites. This has had a significant effect because opposition parties and civil society groups that are forced to operate in a repressive context often resort to these platforms to air their grievances and organise protests (Chatora 2012). So, in addition to the “over-the-top” tax, government has increased tax for airtime on cellular, landline and public payphones from 5% to 12%, and tax on mobile money transfers has been increased from 10% to 15% (Nanfuka 2018).

The accumulation of power in the executive has provided Museveni with the ability to censor and persecute those who have criticised or opposed his political agenda. Since 2008, Museveni has adopted additional amendments to the 2004 broadcasting law that further expand the government’s ability to regulate the media and to harass and intimidate critical media outlets. The Uganda Communications Commission uses the 2010 media amendment Act to prohibit TV and radios to broadcast anti-government messages (Human Right Watch 2016) and demonstrates the lack of free media and thus free speech. In Uganda, the absolute control of the media and press lies in the hands of Museveni and his government.

All these challenges have driven democracy underground because Museveni has effectively neutralised the opposition. Like many leaders who have overstayed in power across the continent, he has perfected the art of holding elections to legitimise a grip on power and to appear democratic. While opposition politicians are routinely harassed, they are disorganised and uninspired (Svein and Lise 2016). They mobilise on

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1 Kalyegira cites examples that include Maj Gen James Kazini former army commander, Lt Dennis Bataringaya—officer with Chieftaincy of Military Intelligence (CMI), Captain George Nkwanga the military commander of the Federal Democratic Movement of Uganda, Lt Michael Shalita an officer in the Internal Security Organisation (ISO), Mr. Apollo Byekwaso, former Inspector-General of Police, Elisa Karakire—Regional Police Commander for southern Uganda, and James Habuchirimiro a Senior Superintendent of Police.
anti-regime questions, rather than alternative policies. They lack the capacity to mobilise resources and have no political structures across the county in all constituencies. In the 2006 general election, for example, the opposition focused its efforts on winning the presidency rather than gaining a majority of seats in parliament. Out of the 284 directly contested elected parliamentary seats, the opposition parties contested only around 140, and similarly they fielded candidates in less than two-thirds of over 20 by-elections that have been held since 2006 (Tangri and Mwenda 2010). The opposition parties have little financial resources in comparison to the ruling NRM to fund their political activities, especially during election time. In 2006, for example, the NRM spent about UGX 50 billion ($26 million), compared to around UGX 1.7 billion ($850,000) by the FDC (Tangri and Mwenda 2010). Internal wrangles and large numbers of party defections, exacerbated by the NRM and due to the absence of a strong political coalition, have prevented opposition parties from being able to function properly. The electorate has increasingly become lethargic, with opposition sympathisers tired of trying to defeat Museveni through historical opposition parties and participating in sham elections.

Out of these frustrations, the only politicians who are able to gain any kind of traction are performers such as Bobi Wine, who are trying to use their music entertainment platform to generate political resistance. While they have significant popularity with the youth and poorer demographics in the country, they have very little political experience, no political party affiliation, or a well-defined alternative political agenda. Given this situation, a question remains about whether the kind of political program they have is viable in the short term, if they are called on to create change.

Trying to change this situation is inordinately difficult. Even the ability to organize and meet followers is hampered by constant police harassment. Large meetings are often blocked by police and smaller house-based meetings are raided by security agents. On the occasions where permits are issued, they are very often withdrawn at the last minute due to a ‘technicality’. As a result, the only kind of political platform is through impromptu music and broadcasts which can be subject to disruption at any time. Even if Wine were to be elected, it is not clear that Museveni would leave voluntarily. As a result, Wine will ultimately need either a military support or a popular uprising to unseat the government.

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Existing politicians such as Besigye, whose popularity is not as strong as Wine’s, also face significant difficulties. Although they are more experienced in creating the kinds of platforms and programs for change that Uganda needs, they have previously failed to secure high office due to election malfeasance. Besigye is also subjected to periodic arrest, making the building of coalitions between experienced and inexperienced politicians very difficult. Nonetheless, at the time of writing, there is an effort underway to combine forces in the hope that something can change.

**Conclusion**

Uganda is moving quickly towards failure under Museveni’s administration. Museveni’s popularity grew from a strong resentment against previous regimes, thereby allowing him to sow the seeds for one-party culture. Museveni has been able to assiduously secure his grip on power, so that neither his opponents nor representative institutions have any opportunity to challenge his authority. His consolidation of power through authoritarian means of imprisoning political opponents, increased control over media, and extending his terms, has made it difficult for the opposition to participate in the political process.

In these circumstances, political opposition has been driven underground. Opposition movements such as Wine’s People Power Movement now emanate from colourful personalities that are popular with the electorate, but the level of repression makes it difficult for them to organise.

The civil society organisation, the media, and human rights organisations are continuously raising international awareness of the government crackdown on freedoms. The media are, despite the clampdown, still fighting for pluralistic political discourse. Civil society is committed to the democratic process, pressing for an amendment to democratic electoral laws, independence of the Electoral Commission, balanced media coverage, and scrutiny of candidate campaign funding and expenditures. Even under strong censorship, the social media platforms remain an important medium of opposition mobilisation.

Under the umbrella of ‘United Forces for Change’, the People Power Movement led by Wine and the People’s President led by Besigye have entered an alliance to rally opposition forces together for political change ahead of the 2021 national elections. Using the *No Nedda* (no! no!) slogan, they plan to galvanise support to win the upcoming election. Yet, given that none of the electoral reforms recommended by the international election observer report after the fraudulent 2016 elections have been implemented, the results are still likely to favour Museveni.
References


