

Troubling times for the Rwenzururu Kingdom in Western Uganda

Eleanor Beevor and Kristof Titeca provide an overview on the standoff between the Rwenzuru Kingdom and the Uganda government.

Over the last few years, the Rwenzori region of Western Uganda has been the site of devastating violence. On [July 5 2014](#), there was a cruel mass attack by armed youths in the border districts of Kasese and Bundibugyo, in which over 150 people are thought to have perished. The armed youths were accused of being part of the traditional Rwenzururu kingdom. Then [in November 2016](#), shockwaves went through Uganda as the national army attacked the palaces of this same kingdom, killing a huge number of civilians, and arresting over one hundred ceremonial guards and even the king himself on charges of treason and terrorism.

Given the scale and nature of these attacks, the lack of attention that the situation has since received is striking. Apart from a number of immediate news reports, the region again has fallen off the media and scholarly map. Yet the situation remains tense, and the government's handling of it has been controversial.

The king, or Omusinga, in question was [Rwenzururu kingdom's](#) Charles Wesley Mumbere Iremangoma. Rwenzururu is the youngest and the most controversial of Uganda's kingdoms. Now that its king is under house arrest, and the ethnic Bakonzo people he represents are in shock at the assault on their monarchy, it could be asked whether the kingdom can be said to still exist at all. Rwenzururu kingdom (which is meant to be a purely ceremonial entity under Uganda's constitution) was born from a secessionist struggle in the 1960s by the current Omusinga's father. And the desire for true independence, spawned by this struggle, among many Bakonzo people has never really gone away.



The Rwenzururu King, Omusinga Mumbere, pictured here with his wife in full ceremonial regalia, is currently under house arrest Image Credit: [Red Pepper Uganda](#)

It is this ethno-nationalist sentiment, combined with the Uganda government's suspicions, which has fueled [recent regional clashes](#). The July 5 attacks in 2014 were the result of inter-kingdom tensions, and many Konzo youth feeling that they were targets of state discrimination. Unfortunately, these attacks entrenched government paranoia around Rwenzururu, rather than stimulating efforts to resolve local grievances.

The final straw for Museveni around Rwenzururu was a suspicion that the kingdom's ceremonial Royal Guards had militant aspirations. The November 2016 attack on the Rwenzururu Palace in Kasese, was, according to the government, because the Royal Guards were establishing a rebel group named Kirumira Mutima, meaning *The Strong-Hearted*. This group was supposedly planning to fight for an independent state, commonly referred to as the Yira State.

The government has since relied on its [time-tested strategy](#) of patronage to try and remedy the situation. It has used cash distribution in an attempt to tie key figures – and so their constituency – to the regime. Earlier this year, [200 million Ugandan Shillings were given to FDC \(opposition\) MP Robert Centenary](#). Centenary had lobbied President Museveni for this sum, without the consent of his party leadership, to assist those affected by the clashes. This led to major tensions among local FDC politicians, and was strongly contested by the party. In the words of a local analyst: "...the opposition felt that this was betrayal: you should not go to the ones who had ordered the killing. (...) once you start associating with the regime, the likelihood of ending up with them is high, given the number of politicians who have been bought off!"

More dangerously, although in line with its historical strategies, Museveni's government has been trying to influence kingdom politics. It has pushed for the appointment of new Rwenzururu leadership, which they hope will be friendlier to Kampala. And they have a perhaps surprising ally in the Queen Mother, Christine Mukirania. She is the mother of the current king, and the wife of Isaiah Mukirania, the original leader of the secessionist movement, and the first Rwenzururu king.

A few months after the November attack on the Palace, the Queen Mother went on local radio claiming that [her son had ruined the mission of her husband](#), and now she must save it. By implication, that meant taking his place as ruler, although reports about her intentions vary. She has on other occasions [denied trying to replace him](#). Still, the Queen Mother is widely thought to be close to President Museveni, and is reportedly receiving significant favours from the government, including a car and land, in exchange for her help.

She is now effectively recognised by the government as her son's replacement. In line with kingdoms' legal restrictions, the Queen is following a more explicitly non-political line. She is primarily [emphasising the religious aspects](#) of the kingdom that she wishes to address – outlawing the traditional rituals her son favoured, and replacing them with more explicitly Christian practices.

The question is whether the people of Rwenzururu will see her as a legitimate successor. For there is still an alternative cabinet of Rwenzururu Ministers that is loyal to the incarcerated King Charles Mumbere. They have issued statements saying that the Queen Mother [cannot claim to represent Rwenzururu Kingdom](#). However, they fear that many people will come to quietly accept the Queen Mother as the monarch, or lose interest in the kingdom altogether.

But many more Bakonzo see the kingdom as their primary national allegiance. And for them, loyalty to Rwenzururu has long gone hand in hand with opposition to the Museveni government. This is particularly so for the significant proportion of people who have not given up on complete independence one day, in the form of this imagined Yira State.

For them, the Queen Mother's attempt to take her son's place is reviled. As are the attempts of other individuals making claims to the throne. [A man called Robert Tibamwenda](#) has also announced that he is the rightful successor. He is reportedly also being given protection by the government, although it is unclear whether he has any supporters at all.

While the situation is currently calm, the government would do well not to push their luck trying to play kingmaker. The main reason that the Queen Mother's attempt to take over has not been met with greater resistance is that most people do not see her as a serious challenger. Still, the government's evident attempts to manipulate the situation after the devastating attack have harmed potentially positive steps towards peace. A peace negotiation team assembled last year was seriously undermined by a [lack of trust](#) between the parties, and persistent rumours of rebel activity and violent government responses have put residents on edge.

As a local journalist, said: “There is no hope to have negotiations between the two parties now, because new rumours and allegations about recruitment and attacks are still coming in about the kingdom. There was a voice recording released on social media today saying that no one should move to town and people should stay home. Most people are still at home in fear.”

If the government continues to try and shape a kingdom descended from rebellion to its own cause, it could easily tip the situation over the edge instead.

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