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Political Change in Uganda: can citizens go all the way?

LSE IDEAS

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In the wake of ongoing popular protests awakening North Africa and the Middle East since December 2010, the revolutionary surge has reached Sub-Saharan Africa: Gabon, Burkina Faso, and now Uganda. Sub-Saharan countries have been paying close attention to events in the Maghreb and elsewhere. But it must be noted that popular pressure has so far resulted in regime change in only Tunisia and Egypt, and it is becoming clear that existing governments in Morocco, Algeria and Libya are resilient. The case of Uganda therefore depends on whether citizens have the appetite, organisation and persistence to see through the popular quest for political change, and for how long their resolve will last.

In all the African cases, the ensuing discontent has been born out of heads-of-state prolonging their stay in office, dominating the one-party state, or amending the constitution to remove limits to the terms of their presidency. Uganda has ticked all three of these boxes.

In 1986, President Museveni assumed power militarily as leader of the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM), and governed a one-party state for 19 years until he lifted the ban on multi-party politics in 2005. His first ten years of governance was dominated by a coalition of hand-picked operatives, whose support dated back to the struggle against President Obote. The 1995 constitution which paved way for the 1996 elections, limited the presidency to two five-year terms maximum. Accordingly, Museveni should have vacated the presidency in 2006. But his political apparatus rail-roaded the process leading to the constitutional referendum of 2005. This changed the statutes, including Clause 2 of Article 105 which replaced the strictly defined limits with "one or more terms". Consequently, Museveni ran for his third term in 2006, in elections which now allowed for a multi-party state. He subsequently ran for his fourth term in February 2011, winning 68.38% of the vote; the opposition leader Kizza Besigye won 26.01%. Therefore, in a strict legal sense, Museveni is an elected president. But the issue of how to address this self-imposed presidency, for which there are no provisions in Ugandan law, is the fine line which demonstrators have to tread between sedition and organised legitimate protests, even if protestors have powerful grievances such as rising food and petrol prices.

The discontent has multiple sources, and the whole country is embroiled. Unemployment is at the fore of the agitation against rising prices, with the World Bank citing the share of unemployed youth among the total unemployed as high as 83%. The productive population (15-64) is 48.6%; but youth aged 10-24 constitute 34% of the population, and a whopping 49% of the country is under fifteen years of age. The overall poverty ratio is 31.1%, and these trends are worse for the rural regions, creating a form of regionalism in itself. The socio-economic context has become fertile ground for widespread corruption, and generated ample ammunition for trade union activity, with the middle class caught between maintaining their status and articulating social justice. The context has also underlined the ease of social intelligence networks for organising protests through mobile telephones and various other forms of ICT. The variety of dissent reflects the growing fissures within the ruling political fabric; NRM deputy spokesperson Ofwono Opondo openly disagreed with proposals to refuse bail to protestors; and in the current round of musical chairs, the vice president (who had occupied the job for eight years) has been sacked. There are also tense undercurrents among the security services that pose a sharp contrast of an ageing army top brass and a ridiculous recruitment age of thirteen. Above all, the political capital generated by the "saviour" status of the NRM for deposing Milton Obote, has long been consumed.

Against this background, the question arises whether the population is really prepared to pay the whole price for political change. We know that Ugandans can take the law into their own hands when they wish to: on 27 January 2011, David Kato, the advocacy officer for Sexual Minorities Uganda, was bludgeoned to death in his home near Kampala – itself a reflection of popular homophobia in Uganda. But we also know that 68% of voters have just endorsed Museveni when they had the choice to oust him, even if just 59% of the 14 million people eligible actually voted. So do Ugandans really mean business? Is their popular revolt gathering more steam, just like the others in Northern Africa?

Museveni and his senior supporters in the NRM have mobilised the power of the state in his defence. Besigye has been apprehended and beaten four times following this election, resulting in medical treatment in Kenya. His return to Kampala at Museveni's inauguration on 12 May, generated another furore which nearly overshadowed the occasion. By mid-May 2011, the classic walk-to-work (W2W) protests had lasted for the best part of four weeks, and were gathering momentum after each round. Ten protestors have been reportedly killed and hundreds injured since W2W began on 11 April. Besigye himself was placed under preventive arrest at his home in Kasangati on 17 May. The Museveni apparatus appears to have run out of ideas

about how to control the trend of protests, and intends to use the full force of law and repression at the state's disposal. At the time of writing, it does not appear that the government will lose control of the situation

On 14 May 2011, Museveni proposed to NRM members of parliament a constitutional amendment which denies bail to rioters, economic saboteurs, and the likes of Besigye who is widely considered to be pursuing a hidden agenda. The government's agenda, clearly, is to eliminate the protest leaders (Besigye et al) from the equation. A special caucus chaired by the former security minister was charged to finalise the proposals and present among the first items of business for the new session of parliament which began on 19 May with the election of the female Speaker. The proposals aim to refuse bail to protestors until 180 days in jail, with further potential for those who re-offend to lose their right of bail altogether. The Ugandan Law Society issued a joint statement against these proposals on 22 May.

Tacitly, the government aims to try high risk political offenders in the High Court – where the 180 day rule applies – and not a subordinate court. With an overwhelming majority (238 out of 375 seats) in parliament, Museveni has a blank cheque, so we can expect the proposed amendments to go through, and the first line of parliamentary business to include legislation to deal with protests and protestors. We can subsequently expect rampant and high profile arrests to form the legal strategy to crush the popular revolt.

Depending on the lengths to which the opposition is prepared to go to resist government repression, the country has to brace itself for another potential round of civil war in its post-independence history. This is the greatest fear of older Ugandans.

Under the political repression and human rights abuses of the late President Idi Amin from 1971 to 1979, between 100,000 to 500,000 people were killed as a result. Also, according to Human Rights Watch, during the NRM rebellion from 1981 to 1986 against the second presidency of the late Milton Obote, which brought Museveni to power, up to 300,000 people were killed. In the history of Uganda, every dictator has left the scene by violence and widespread bloodshed.

It is not clear what steer might come from the African Union (AU). Uganda is the chief contributor of troops to the AU Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) which has propped up Somalia's Transitional Federal Government in the fight against Al-Shabaab and Hizbul Islam militias. Just before Christmas 2010, Uganda added a further 4,000 troops to beef up the AMISOM force. With the relatively unimpressive support from the other African countries, the AU is likely to hedge, and not upset Museveni by interfering in Uganda's internal affairs. (This is in accordance with AU established practice.) But the complications for the AU go further than the challenge to its founding charter of 'duty to protect'. Uganda's finger has been in every pie of instability in the sub-region in the past fifteen years, for example: the Tutsi exiles who formed the current and ruling Rwandan Patriotic Front were based in Uganda as part of the NRM; similarly the notorious Lord's Resistance Army led by Joseph Kony originated from northern Uganda, and have been causing havoc in surrounding South Sudan, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo and Cameroon.

What form of opposition can persist without Besigye's leadership is debateable. An alternative to immediate political change will be for the opposition to solidify the gains made so far, expand their base, and cultivate more support towards the 2016 elections, but there are no guarantees that the political landscape will be a level playing field; if anything, the opposite looks very certain. Museveni is 67 years old, in good health, and has not mooted succession from his own party, let alone make room for a successful culture of opposition. With his unrelenting resolve to crack down on any opposition, it is difficult to envisage a revolution or immediate political change without bloodshed and extreme political turmoil.

We cannot tell if Besigye is destined to be president, nor if Museveni is destined to be president for life. It will be ideal however, for Museveni to allow political space for competition and opposition, and not to stand in the 2016 elections, if he survives to that point. However, the signs are not promising.

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