

Opinion – Can Museveni Keep Uganda from Boiling Over?

Written by Karolina Werner

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KAROLINA WERNER, FEB 2 2021

Ugandans headed to the polls on 14 January 2021 under an unprecedented and complete internet shutdown. Before the blackout, videos of rows of military vehicles and security forces marching down streets were circulated on social media in an ominous indication of things to come. Uganda has never known a peaceful transition of power and there have been many irregularities found in past elections, but this year has been especially violent. The election, or what Nic Cheeseman has called 'a staged event to try to legitimate Museveni's presidency,' has drawn criticism from across the world. It has been marred by increasing violence, arrests, kidnappings, and severe limitations on freedom of expression. As in other authoritarian countries, coronavirus restrictions have been used to justify various excesses, including the use of deadly force, by the government. The government securitized the election and created exceptionalities, including one of the most stringent COVID-19 lockdowns on the continent, for the purpose of justifying their violent actions against its citizens, as it engaged in the seemingly liberal process of electing a new president.

President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni, who ran against ten opposition candidates, was once admired for proclaiming that the problem in Africa is one of leaders who overstay their welcome. Now this quote is being used to underscore the hypocrisy of the claimant. In 2021 he contested for his sixth term in office. He entered the race after changing the constitution twice, once to extend term limits and once to lift age limits, despite popular opposition in parliament and the general population. While accusing the opposition of being misguided and supported by unidentified foreign actors and homosexuals, Museveni has touted his unique experience and wisdom as leader of Uganda. And it is indeed difficult to argue against the fact that there is no one in the country with more experience of being head of state than he has, since he has been president for 35 years.

The main contender, Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu, also known by his stage name Bobi Wine, has risen to international fame not only as a musician but as a formidable opposition leader. Throughout his campaign, which was livestreamed on social media, he has been arrested several times and his campaign staff has been killed, injured, and arrested in large numbers. In November the deadly violence employed by the government became international news as protests and riots began following another arrest of Kyagulanyi. Protestors lit fires and tore down Museveni's campaign posters, first in Kampala, and then in other major town and cities. Security forces and police responded with tear gas, rubber bullets, and live ammunition killing over 50 people.

That Museveni was declared winner has come as no surprise. In an election with the lowest reported turn out ever recorded (despite the highest number of registered voters), the Electoral Commission announced that Museveni came away with 58% of the vote, while Kyagulanyi got 34%. Little information has been released about how these results were tallied. Tensions remain high as Kyagulanyi has repeatedly said that his party would not accept the rigged results, spurring accusations by the government of inciting violence. Kyagulanyi's property surrounded by security forces since before the announcement of results, according to the government, for his protection and to prevent protests. Journalists, along with high-ranking diplomats such as the US ambassador to Uganda, were being denied access to his home. Kyagulanyi reported that food deliveries were also denied. This illegal house arrest remained in place until lawyers were able to file a petition with the court to have Kyabulanyi released. Following a ruling by the court, after 11 days, the security forces were withdrawn, allowing Kyagulanyi to hold a press conference

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and meet with his party representatives.

While on the surface the elections seem to have been some of the most peaceful Uganda has ever seen, arrests, violence, kidnappings, and other irregularities continue to be reported as communications are restored. The internet blackout helped keep violence hidden in some places and those election observers who were allowed into the country have questioned its validity and transparency. The country now appears to be simmering beneath a blanket of ongoing heavy military and police deployment as the government waits for its citizens to grow tired and give up any ideas of protest.

While the internet blackout lasted 5 days, social media continues to be blocked. The eyes of the media and governments across the world are already moving away from Uganda, attention spans are short and easily distracted. Yet as Kyagulanyi and others have noted, Western donors, and the US in particular, have an important role to play here as they have long supported Museveni's regime.

In the meantime, Kyagulanyi has said that he will be contesting the election outcome, through peaceful protests and possibly legal means. It is likely that the legal avenues will be met with the usual dismissal by the courts which have in the past acknowledged irregularities but held up the election results noting that the outcome would have been the same even if the irregularities did not happen. Considering the large number of parliamentary seats NUP won in these elections despite only being 6 months old, and Kyagulanyi's international popularity, he arguably presents a greater danger to the regime than long time former opposition leader Kizza Besigye, who has been arrested countless times. As runner up in the presidential elections, Kyagulanyi is left with no role in the government, yet has a large following. Museveni has to tread carefully, as a revolution may be coming. The question the government must be asking itself is, what is the best method of dealing with Kyagulanyi to keep the country at a steady simmer for as long as possible. Meanwhile, Museveni will do what he does best; legitimise oppression by manipulating the narrative, use carrots to distract, and some very big sticks to keep people in line for as long as he can, as he plans for a successor he can stomach.

About the author:

Karolina Werner is a NEST Postdoctoral Research Associate at the University of Western Ontario and Senior Fellow at the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs, Carleton University. She specializes in governance, inclusion, and peace and conflict, especially in the context of sub-Saharan Africa. She previously held appointments at the University of Ottawa, Centre for International Governance Innovation, United Nations Industrial Development Organization, and the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis. Twitter @karo_wm