

REFLECTIONS ON COVID-19 POLITICS IN UGANDA

7

The Nation's Religious Leaders are AWOL: COVID-19 Pandemic and Museveni's Weaponization of Religion

May 2020

*Zac Niringiye**

A publication of the Uganda Transitional Scenarios Thought Leadership Group

When the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020, Uganda had not reported any registered case of infection by the coronavirus. Although at the time efforts to prevent its spread in Uganda were in high gear, it was President Museveni's address on March 18, 2020, that launched an aggressive and comprehensive strategy for combating its rapid spread in Uganda, with a raft of directives that were tantamount to a partial lockdown of the country. On March 30, 2020, the President announced more measures, effectively ordering a nationwide lockdown that amounted to a de facto state of emergency.

By all accounts, it would be erroneous to underestimate the magnitude of destruction the COVID-19 pandemic could cause to the country if not urgently and comprehensively tackled. High mortality rates, disruption of the health care systems around the world, the economic and social dislocation from the United States, to Spain, United Kingdom, Italy to South Africa are living testimonies of the devastating nature of the coronavirus contagion.

Notwithstanding the WHO recommended guidelines for preparedness, readiness and actions for fighting the pandemic, what and how the Museveni regime is determining measures being put in place and mechanisms of ensuring compliance that are specific to Uganda, is shaped by the regime's interests and capabilities (or lack thereof). At the heart of this response is the weaponization of Uganda's clergy leaders making them the cornerstone of the regime's sedation strategy since at least the year 2000.

Bishop. Dr. D. Zac Niringiye is a Senior Fellow in budding think tank - The Institute of Religion, Faith and Culture in Public Life (INTERFACE). He is a leading theologian and pastor in Africa and civic-political activist in Uganda. He served as the Assistant Bishop of Kampala Diocese until retirement in 2012. He is an avowed champion for good governance and social justice.

Among the rafts of directives for the partial lockdown announced on March 18, 2020, was the suspension of religious gatherings: prayers in churches, in mosques, open air prayers and services. In the same address, he announced:

On Saturday 21st March, the 41st Anniversary of the defeat of Idi Amin's forces at Rugando by the TPDF Force of 80 KJ and Task Force BN and Fronasa Forces, I have invited the top leaders of the Faiths for National Prayers at Entebbe State House. The few of us will pray for the whole country together. All of you pray in your homes, God will hear us.

Indeed, on March 21, 2020, select religious leaders convened at State House Entebbe and the National Prayers were conducted and aired on all private and public radios and television stations. It should not be lost on us that prior to the March 18, 2020 address, on the previous day, the President met with religious leaders under the auspices of the [Inter-Religious Council of Uganda](#) (IRCU) to brief them on the impending suspension of religious gatherings.

It is possible to misconstrue the two events – the briefing before March 18, 2020, and the National Prayers at State House on March 21, 2020 – as tactical manoeuvres intended to ensure buy-in from the religious leaders and forestall any resistance towards the drastic measure of suspending religious gatherings– something unprecedented in Uganda's recent history. As a clue to making sense of why hitherto Museveni's public interface with the religious leaders ended with these two events, we should put them in the context of the track record of the regime's dealings with the religious and faith communities. It should also interest us that the work of distributing relief items to distressed communities has hitherto been reserved for security personnel (and to a limited degree, the Uganda Red Cross Society). One would have expected to see churches and mosques engaged in this kind of work – something that is part of their DNA – right from the beginning.

My argument in this short paper is that the two events were intended for more than just buy-in of the religious leaders; they are consistent and indeed part of the modus operandi of weaponizing religion as an instrument for regime legitimacy. It is consistent with Museveni's Machiavellian 'carrot and stick' as well as 'divide and rule' strategies and tactics for legitimacy and renting support of large sections of the population, from the period of the National Resistance Army (NRA) bush war to topple the Obote II government in the early 1980s.

In his book, [Sowing the Mustard Seed](#), which chronicles the bush struggle to capture state power, Museveni argued that among the primary causes of Uganda's political crisis in the 1960s was sectarianism. His point then was that societies like Uganda still at the pre-industrial stage, "tend to have vertical polarisations based mainly on tribe and ethnicity" and that "even when polarisation in underdeveloped societies is horizontal, they are sectarian by religion, as has been the case in Uganda." Based on this analysis, two of the

top five priorities that underpinned Museveni's political programme and his National Resistance Movement (NRM) and its military wing the National Resistance Army (NRA), were "Restoration of security of person and property" and the "Consolidation of national unity and elimination of all forms of [sectarianism](#)". However, although Museveni promised that his leadership's "thinking was radically different from previous regimes which had been sectarian and [neo-colonial](#)", the evidence is to the contrary.

Firstly, to counterbalance the relationship between the Obote II government and the Protestant-Anglican Church as its anchor religion for its political base, Museveni took advantage of the disgruntlement of the Catholic Church and courted its leadership in supporting the bush war. Unsurprisingly, on capturing state power, the Catholic Church "hailed the successful revolution of the NRM," which they described as, "a most welcome [breath of fresh air](#) for us in Uganda and an example to the rest of the world.". The Catholic Church on its part hoped that the support for the regime would tilt the balance of political favours away from the Church of Uganda. Subsequently, the regime depended on religious fissures to bolster its popularity and the support of the Catholic Church, which boasted of being the majority religion, continued unabated at least until early in the first decade of the third millennium.

Secondly, although Museveni rightly castigated previous regimes for structuring the body politic along religious, regional and ethnic lines, his regime has consistently used religious and ethnic-regional lenses in building a patronage system. Key positions in government are ring-fenced for particular religious institutions, in particular for Catholics and Muslims; the Protestant bishops (Church of Uganda) are given goods, especially cows and cars; Pentecostals and 'born-again' church leaders receive sponsorship of one kind or the other. Conspicuously, there are no institutional processes to determine systems and criteria of access to these public goods; Museveni is the institution, the system and the criteria. As one Muslim cleric rightly observed, "political leaders [read Museveni] have used their influence to confuse religious leaders for political ends."

Thus, although Museveni has consistently accused religious and cultural leaders that make politically critical statements of his regime as meddlers and advised them to "[stay out of politics](#) and stick to minding Ugandans' cultural and spiritual wellbeing", he is the first to use them for his political ends as and when it suits him. There are many religious leaders that Museveni has appointed to political positions in his government over the years.

Thirdly, over the last ten years, the IRCU has grown to become a strategic ally for Museveni's rent-seeking efforts for regime legitimacy. It began with the publishing of the Anti-Homosexuality Bill in 2009 – a proposed law intended to criminalise the promotion of and engagement in homosexuality – but was cemented with the passing of the bill into law four years later, in 2013. It then became an act of Parliament in February 2014 when the [President assented to it](#).

Over the four years, Museveni and his cronies had succeeded in persuading the IRCU leadership that the President ought to be supported as a champion against the onslaught of Western imperialist imposition of foreign culture. It culminated in a “National [Thanksgiving](#) Service Celebrating the Passing of the Anti-Homosexuality Bill” on March 30, 2014 – an event which the President “facilitated” IRCU to organise.

Although the Anti-Homosexuality Act was annulled by the Constitutional Court four months later, Museveni had succeeded in co-opting the religious leadership, as part of his tools for regime legitimacy. It was not coincidental that these religious leaders were among the [first people to congratulate Museveni](#) upon ‘winning’ the 2016 Presidential election – an election that nearly all election observer groups, local and foreign, adjudged to have been neither free nor fair.

Recent studies of the Museveni-NRM regime have shown that over the last twenty years, the motivation behind any critical governance interventions has been the pursuit of one goal: regime longevity and survival. It would be foolhardy to hope that when faced with a crisis of the COVID-19 magnitude, the regime has reason for contrary social imagination.

Indeed, to make a better sense of the measures, directives and logistical mechanisms Mr. Museveni is employing in ensuring that the population fully complies, and how he is governing the country during this period, one has to put them in the context of his insatiable appetite for power. After all, the COVID-19 pandemic is not just a threat to the fundamentals of the country and state as we have known it; it has the potential of wrecking the anchors of the regime. One of those anchors is its stranglehold on the peasant and rural population. Museveni’s engagement with the religious fraternity is an important pillar, given the religion demographics, whereby about 98% of the population claim affiliation to some form of faith tradition.

Religious leaders and their constituencies have been crucial targets for Museveni’s patronage manoeuvres for regime legitimacy among the rural peasantry and will remain so given the fact that he has been largely successful in co-opting the top-most leadership of the Nation’s main religious bodies. It is therefore not surprising that even in light of the distress caused by the current lockdown, the failure by the regime to effectively distribute relief food, the violence meted on Mityana Municipality member of parliament [Francis Zaake](#) and a fraudulent supplementary budget in which Mr. Museveni allocated himself billions of shillings in classified spending and a controversial [10 billion](#) shillings to Members of Parliament, the Nation’s clergy leaders remain in mute mode. In the face of uncertainty, they are absent without official leave.

About the Uganda Transition Scenarios Thought Leadership Group – UTSTLG

We are a network of independent multi-disciplinary professionals committed to critical inquiry on contemporary and emerging governance and public policy issues in Uganda. UTSTLG is driven by a desire to be intellectually thought provoking and asking questions behind the answers. UTSTLG is hosted by the Great Lakes Institute for Strategic Studies (www.glissafrika.org). The views expressed in UTSTLG publications and think pieces do not represent the views of GLISS or the collective thinking of individual members but are the views of the authors.

For more information, please contact: Great Lakes Institute for Strategic Studies, P.O Box 398, Kampala. Tel. +256 414 660439