



REFLECTIONS ON COVID-19 POLITICS IN UGANDA

10

Museveni's Battle Against the Coronavirus

A Covidiot's Reflection on the Future
of Uganda's Electoral Democracy

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Introduction

On April 8, 2020, Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni addressed the country on the COVID19 pandemic, a disease caused by the Coronavirus. This was his 8th address since the country declared heightened surveillance by commencing mandatory passenger screening at Entebbe International Airport on January 20, 2020, and exactly 18 days after the first Coronavirus victim was declared in the country. Flanked by Prime Minister Ruhakana Rugunda, Health Minister Jane Ruth Acheng, State Minister Mary Karoro Okurut and a host of other government officials, President Museveni declared in his trademark style "we are in a war." By this declaration, Mr. Museveni launched a battle against the Coronavirus. Likening it to his five year war in the jungles of Luwero, the Nation's health work force backed by the security forces (the military and an allied militia group called the LDU, the Uganda Police Force) and nation-wide network of Resident District Commissioners (RDC) constituted his infantry battalion.

Looked at through the lens of a public health emergence response, it is evident that Mr. Museveni's battle against the COVID-19 pandemic and its agent – the Coronavius has been largely successful. The strategy employed was able to disrupt the scale of the crisis. Potentially large scale transimission was disrupted, infections remained low, there were no reported deaths and the rate of recovery of hospitalized cases is unprecedented. However, in every battle there was collateral damage. When Mr. Museveni's war against the COVID-19 pandemic is over, the collateral damage will manifest in different forms: lives lost, economies shuttered, livelihoods destroyed and uncertainty about the future.

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In this paper, we argue that the strategies employed in the battle against the COVID-19 pandemic produces a second casualty; Uganda's electoral democracy. These strategies are fundamentally changing the electoral landscape for 2021 by freezing the electoral reform agenda, creating uncertainty over the elections calendar and giving Mr. Museveni considerable electoral advantage. In a pre-recorded television interview aired on May 11, 2020, Mr. Museveni referred to people who think he is milking the pandemic for political dividends as "idiots". Hence the title for this paper. We conclude by suggesting ways in which Uganda can reform its electoral system to avoid similar disruptions in the face of a similar pandemic or crisis of the nature of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Museveni: the warrior president fighting an invisible enemy

President Museveni, the "battlefield" commander of the Uganda's Covid-19 response, is by all accounts a worrier president. He came to power after fighting a five-year bush war 34 years ago in which more than 800,000 Ugandans were killed. Throughout his 34-year rule, he has successfully fought wars of different types and magnitude. From vicious insurgencies in Eastern and Northern Uganda, he confronted the HIV/AIDS with unprecedented leadership and commitment that helped bring the AIDS crisis under control.

In June 2004, he declared war on the judiciary after the Constitutional Court annulled the Referendum and other Provisions Act in what may have gone down in the constitutional history of Uganda as his angriest speech ever. Sometime in 2007, he had declared a war pledging to degazette part of Mabira Forest Reserve to the Metha Group of Companies for [extending their sugarcane plantations](#). This is the only "battle" that he ever lost to Ugandan citizens who were deeply opposed to the destruction of the forest. Later in 2011, in full military fatigue, a walking stick in his right hand and an AK47 strapped diagonally around his chest, Mr. Museveni declared war against landslides that had killed more than 100 people and displaced hundreds of others in the Eastern Uganda district of Bududa. The battle was over but the people of Bududa remain in a "state of war" as the [victims of that landslide remain trapped](#) in a failed resettlement scheme.

On this evening of April 8, 2020, dressed in his trademark white shirt and looking relaxed, Mr. Museveni was declaring war on an invisible and vicious adversary that was moving stealthily across borders infecting millions of people around the world. The coronavirus is [reported](#) to have been first detected in the Chinese city of Wuhuan in Hubei province on November 17, 2019. The Coronavirus travels at the speed of a jetliner largely infecting unsuspecting people along its paths. As of April 30, 2020 (EAT), <https://www.worldometers.info/> estimated that the virus had infected nearly 3,221,029 and killed approximately 228,252 people globally. The United States of America, the world's leading democracy was reported to be having more than 1,064,572 active cases and 61,669 deaths – the highest of any country in the world. Leading European democracies particularly Italy and Spain were still struggling to flatten the curve.

In Africa, the World Health Organization (WHO) data for April 21, 2020, showed the total

number of confirmed cases at 15,555 and 704 deaths. Algeria had the highest reported deaths at 384 followed by South Africa and Cameroon with 48 and 42 deaths respectively. Among the states of the East African Community (EA) Kenya and Tanzania had reported more infections while Burundi and South Sudan had reported the least number of infections or deaths.

Uganda COVID-19 pandemic response

At a broader level, the COVID-19 pandemic response tool kit contain two sets of tools. The first set of tools comprises of scientific efforts including research and development focusing on understanding the epidemiology, causes, clinical manifestation and diagnosis of the disease in order to develop appropriate vaccine or prophylactic treatment. The second set of tools take the form of prevention and control of the spread of the disease. These tools range from case detection, contact tracing, hand hygiene practices, social distancing, wearing masks, movement restrictions, quarantines and restrictions on public gatherings.

These tools may be deployed variously by different governments. A review of the literature suggests that a successful application of these secondly category tools should accomplish the following goals: save lives; reduce COVID-19's burden on a nation's health infrastructure; and help fast track the easing of quarantine and social distancing measures. However, the manner in which different governments chose to implement these measures may produce secondary effects by impacting the economy, livelihoods as well as individual liberties and freedoms.

Generally, the Government of Uganda has deployed a number of these tools as part of its strategy to contain the virus. First, the ministry of health has maintained a consistent record of testing and contact tracing including providing regular updates on infection trends, hospitalizations and recoveries. However, there remain considerable limitations to this testing-contacting tracing effort. For example, government has not made any commitment that it has the capacity for comprehensive testing across the country. The countries testing infrastructure remains limited as all test samples still have to be shipped to the Uganda Virus Research Institute (UVRI). The government has also not demonstrated capacity to ensure effective contact tracing as a number of people report that they were not visited by the contact tracing team even upon reporting themselves. Finally, the Government does not provide specific data on the state of resources available for managing the pandemic. There is no published record on the size of Uganda's health workforce, the number of test kits available or if there is any stockpile of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). In the absence of such scientific and other related facts, a lot of other measures to contain the virus will largely base on fear, guess work or pursuit of political advantage.

The official narrative of Mr. Museveni's successful battle against the coronavirus can easily obscure us from acknowledging the impact of this battle on other dimensions of our public life and society. A lot has been written about the impact of the pandemic on the global and national economies, the public health infrastructure, and on poverty and livelihoods, among other things. This work is dedicated to examining the implications of the war against the Coronavirus on Uganda's electoral system. It is argued that in the short-term, the battle against the Coronavirus has disrupted our elections calendar, gave incumbent President Museveni an electoral advantage, and froze any ongoing attempts at electoral reforms. The paper concludes by looking at the range of structural reforms that may be necessary to ensure that such pandemics or other crises do not hold Uganda hostage in the future.

The war against Covid-19 and the remaking of Museveni

In many ways, the Government of Uganda COVID-19 response brought back a Museveni that was received from the bush and revered as a statesman. However, more than three decades of electioneering characterized by political acrimony, harassment of his political opponents and openly fraudulent maneuvers to change the constitution to overstay in power had battered Museveni's image and democratic credentials here at home and abroad. The pre-coronavirus Museveni had become too partisan referring to politicians who sought to compete against him as enemies and idiots. He regularly attacked them with unmitigated vengeance. He had increasingly taken to delivering partisan addresses and penning opinion articles struggling to strike a balance between public policy and dispensing of patronage that remains the lifeline of his 3 decades' rule. Prior to the threat of attack by the Corona virus, it had become increasingly difficult to draw a distinction between Museveni's three personalities: Museveni the president of Uganda expected to treat and protect every citizen equally; Museveni the chairman of the ruling National Resistance Movement; and Museveni the ordinary citizen of Uganda.

Then the coronavirus threatened to attack us and changed everything. The coronavirus version of Museveni appeared as a unifier. Quite strikingly, in his early fireplace conversations, Mr. Museveni rarely mentioned the year 1986 or NRM which are the standard reference points in most of his addresses and writing. His televised educative fireside chats with less partisan inkling made him look more presidential than an NRM party activist – a posture he has projected since being declared the winner in the hotly contested presidential elections in 2016. By sitting patiently in his live broadcast chats reading donations from big business people and ordinary Ugandans making small but symbolically significant donations, Museveni projected the stature of a statesman. And by offering and delivering a tutorial on working out at home - although he knows that millions of his “bazukulu” born since he came to power may not have what passes for a home where you can do indoor exercises – won public admiration and international media coverage that helped shift his declining public opinion ratings.



COVID-19 and the deployment of Museveni's election assets

It is not an exaggeration to suggest that beyond the public health emergency response that plays out on media platforms is a systematic effort by Mr. Museveni to capture and consolidate the political ground in preparation for the 2021 elections. By the time he declared war on the Coronavirus, he was confronted with a very uncertain and fragile political environment. The emergence of Bobi Wine's People Power Movement attracting largely young people into the political process had sent shockwaves into the Museveni establishment. The violence [unleashed on People Power Movement supporters](#) by the military police was affecting the image of the Force. The Resident District Commissioners (RDCs) who are the official representatives of the President in the districts became the face of the violence as they plucked politicians from radio stations and used the Local Defense Units (LDUs) militia groups to break up rallies and peaceful public protests and gatherings. The use of the [Public Order Management Act](#) (POMA) to suppress political dissent was increasingly becoming untenable.

The battle against the Coronavirus allowed Mr. Museveni to remake everything about himself and the organization of his campaign machinery. It also gave him a unique opportunity to deploy his most strategic election assets: the military and money – in a manner that would be difficult to challenge. In the absence of a fully developed health work force, or the ability to mobilize such a force if it existed, Mr. Museveni turned on the heart of his election campaign infrastructure – the Resident District Commissioners and, the military and its allied militia group – the LDUs – to lead the battle against the virus – enforcing guidelines and quarantine orders, and distributing food to citizens in distress.

In a public health emergency battle such as the COVID-19 potential outbreak, the district medical officers should be the front line commanders. On the contrary, Mr. Museveni put his Resident District Commissioners (RDCs) – a team of quasi-military cum political operatives only answerable to him – in charge of district health operations. Mr. Museveni and all the politicians understand that the war against the Coronavirus is not only a struggle against a public health enemy but also an opportunity to secure an electoral advantage in the months ahead, and for Mr. Museveni even in the years ahead. This reality was played out in the supplementary budget appropriations and its aftermath and the jostling between Mr. Museveni, Speaker Rebecca Kadaga and Ugandan legislators with regard to an irregular [Shs.10 billion “facilitation” to members of parliament](#).

Militarization of governmental operations

President Museveni's battle against the Coronavirus also represents an escalation of his agenda of militarization of governmental operations and the process of de-institutionalization of Government. Over time, the security forces have taken over the running of critical arteries of governmental functions and the economy. Traditionally, sub-sectors like wildlife and forestry where colonialists had vested interests were run through command and control



approaches by paramilitary groups of wildlife and forestry rangers. As the public support for the regime has waned and it has come to increasingly rely on the security forces for survival, there has been a systematic effort to deploy the Uganda Peoples Defense Forces (UPDF) personnel to control all the other segments of Government from the police to [fisheries](#) and [agriculture](#) or the [organization of beauty pageants](#), among others. The battle against the Coronavirus opened up a window for injecting the security forces at the front line of the public health effort. Since the introduction of electoral politics in 1996, the security forces have played both a covert and overt role in influencing the elections in favor of Mr. Museveni. The COVID-19 war effort may make the overt involvement of the security forces and their allied militias more acceptable than would be necessary for a properly functioning democracy.

Makeover of the Uganda Peoples' Defense Forces

The COVID-19 pandemic also presented an opportunity for a makeover by the Uganda Peoples Defense Forces (UPDF). Since the [massacres of civilians](#) and royal guards at Mumbere's palace in Kasese in 2016 and the [unprecedented violence in the Arua by-elections](#), the image of the UPDF was battered as the force faced increased accusations of partisanship and extreme violence against unarmed civilians. By placing the UPDF at the front line of the war against the pandemic, the army has an opportunity to do a makeover and regain some credibility and trust among the citizens. This makeover is enhanced by the deployment of the Local Defense Unit (LDU) force, a militia group aligned to the UPDF. From beating young people and women market vendors on the streets to distributing food rations in the slums of the Nation's capital, the LDUs is a perfect alibi for future violence by the security forces. It is therefore not far-fetched to conclude that the ongoing "sanitization" of LDUs through the food distribution programme prepares them for a more enhanced role in future elections akin to the role played by its predecessor militia – the crime preventers.

Hiding Ugandans away from the virus

In spite of its resounding success on the public health dimension of containing the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, the coronavirus "battle" effort has exposed the faultlines in our national preparedness or lack of it while at the same time effectively engaging a reverse gear on our progress towards electoral democracy.

It is quite instructive that throughout his 13 televised fireplace conversations, Mr. Museveni made no mention of how many ICU beds the country has, how many ventilators, or the stock of our [Personal Protective Equipment](#) (PPE). A president who donates cars to clergy leaders, kings and musicians paying allegiance to him found himself flat footed with no cars to ensure monitoring the spread of the pandemic or implementing an effective contact tracing effort. With most government activities shut down as a result of the lockdown, government proved incapable of commandeering the fleets of vehicles scattered all over our governmental system.

At the peak of the lockdown, a knowledgeable source told me that the department of industry had 3 pickups and 4 drivers with a fuel budget to monitor industrial activity in the country. This could probably be said of many other government ministries, Departments, and agencies (MDAs) that were considered non-essential during the lockdown period. Here we were, the country in total or partial lockdown, and these vehicles could not be made available. Another source that follows regional trends talked of an incident of how Mr. Museveni overruled his technocrats and committed to supplying Uganda's excess sugar to Tanzania at a subsidized price. What is striking is that he had to send one of his ministers and the most powerful permanent secretary in the country aboard a chartered flight to deliver the letter of commitment to Tanzanian President John Pombe Magufuli. It is now common knowledge that after several years of back and force, [Mr. Museveni finally signed Sugar Bill into law](#) behind a blackout delivered by the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown.

The response to the COVID-19 pandemic around the world suggests that once you have the capacity to do massive testing, quarantine, treatment of infected persons and ensure contact tracing, it is possible to relax and finally end lockdown, shelter in place orders or stay-at-home directives. In the absence of these capabilities, the Government took the option of “hiding” people away from the virus. With hindsight, we may ask ourselves, if the government doesn't know its full capabilities: testing capacity, ICU bed capacity, the size of the health workforce or the stockpile of its Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), what other option did the “Coronavirus battle commander” have other than locking the country down and hiding the population away from the attacking invisible enemy?

Indeed, these system deficiencies make it difficult to hazard an understanding of what a successful battle against the COVID-19 pandemic would look like for Uganda looks. Is it containing the spread of the pandemic as is evidenced by the low infections, no death, and high recovery rate? Is it a successful lockdown where citizens remain compliant as long as Mr. Museveni tells the country there is still danger out there? As long as these questions remain unanswered, there remains a sense of uncertainty that go to the heart of the electoral process.

The Coronavirus froze the electoral reforms process

The totality of Mr. Museveni's anti-coronavirus “battle effort” was to, in many different ways, freeze Uganda's electoral democracy. Following the declaration of war on opposition political parties during his swearing-in speech in May 2016, President Museveni has pursued a systematic effort to demobilize all forms of opposition against him. Internally within his ruling group – the National Resistance Movement Party – he neutralized any form of internal electoral contestation by amending the Constitution to remove age limit requirement for president and secure his reserved position as the only candidate for his group. The attempts by his security forces to use the infamous Public Order Management Act (POMA) to stifle opposition activities were increasingly becoming problematic. The Act was annulled by a [unanimous decision of the Constitutional Court](#) on March 26, 2020, two days before Museveni's 4th COVID-19 pandemic address.



COVID-19 handed Museveni a perfect opportunity to pursue his 2016 declaration of war against the political opposition without the street battles that had become the defining phenomenon in his competition with political opposition and other dissenters. The extraordinary measures required to contain the spread of the virus effectively locked Mr. Museveni's potential competitors away from the political arena. He threatened every politician who engaged in distributing food with charges of attempted murder. These threats were enforced ruthlessly against [politicians opposed to Mr. Museveni](#) while his [allies](#) including one of his ministers were reported flouting the orders without any restraint.

Relatedly, before the escalation of the pandemic, Parliament had passed [a series of electoral reform laws](#) covering presidential elections, parliamentary elections, local government elections, and the electoral commission. At the time of writing this paper, a source confirmed that the bills with their covering letter were comfortably seated on the desk of the Clerk to Parliament awaiting transmission to the President for assent. The bills were enacted by parliament during the first week of March 2020. A private member's bill with profound political and constitutional implications for electoral democracy in the country remains before the House. It is therefore instructive to observe that Government has not expeditiously moved forward to complete the legislation process for electoral reforms in the light of the schedule for the general elections slated for early 2021. Mr. Museveni, the "Coronavirus battle commander" is controlling the narrative on all aspects of public life and he is the sole beneficiary of all uncertainty regarding the conduct of the 2021 election.

Coronavirus claims its first victims but they are not human beings

Across the world, the victims of Coronavirus are natural human beings. In Uganda, the victims of the pandemic are key institutions of governance. For example, the institution of the Inspector General of Government (IGG) constitutionally charged with the mandate of fighting corruption has lost ground to an outpost called State House Anti-Corruption Unit. Headed by a one Lft. Col. Edith Nakalema, the [Unit carried out its first arrests](#) earlier on in the anti-coronavirus war.

The highest-profile victim of the war against the coronavirus is Uganda's parliament of 452 members. For his war effort, Mr. Museveni through the minister of finance presented to parliament budget proposals for a supplementary budget of US\$932 billion. The budget included an allocation of Shs.284 billion in [health emergency related spending](#) and over US\$400 billion for the Ministry of Defense for the purchase of classified equipment. The speaker of Parliament rammed the budget through parliament without debate. By the end of the appropriations process, the members of Parliament had siphoned off US\$10 billion entitling each member to at least US\$20 million allegedly for facilitation in their coronavirus sensitization activities. The allocation caused outrage among the public and has dented the credibility of parliament as an institution that feeds for the citizens. Upon application by two MPs, the court placed an injunction on the part of the disbursement or use of the money and subsequently issued orders for the return of the money.

There is a consistent pattern to suggest that the presidency is increasingly using the budget as an instrument for official corruption sanctioned by parliament. In the run-up to the 2011 elections, a payout of Uganda Shillings 20 million was made out to each member of parliament under the pretext of “supervising” government programmes. In 2017, at least US\$29 million was paid to each member of parliament on the pretext of consulting their constituencies on the proposals to [amend the constitution to remove the age limit](#) to enable Mr. Museveni to be eligible to contest for the presidency in 2021. The population is increasingly looking at parliament as a predatory institution that is not concerned with the plight of the citizens. With its image battered, the parliament may have no goodwill left to demand for accountability from the legislature or even discharge its legislative mandate to put into place an enabling legal framework that supports credible, free and fair elections.

Building systems for electoral democracy in times of crisis

To zoom back on the positive side, the current battle against coronavirus teaches us that if we are committed to electoral democracy, we have to think out of the box and be daring enough to do things differently. Strong nations and just societies are founded on the principles of rule of law. In such societies, citizens don’t have to choose between being killed by hunger or a vicious enemy like the Coronavirus. This is why we need to reflect on how future elections may look like in the face of a public health crisis or any other crisis of the magnitude of the coronavirus.

There are at least three major structural reforms that ought to be undertaken to enable a country like Uganda manage elections amidst a potential crisis that mirror the covid19 pandemic in future: decentralize the election management infrastructure to the regions; take advantage of the rhetoric about e-governance to digitize the electoral system; and restructure the electoral commission to make it more independent and focus it on setting minimum standards for elections management at the regional level.

Decentralizing the elections management infrastructure

The response to the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us that in future crises, citizens may be affected by quarantines and stay-at-home orders to limit the spread of a disease or the life threatening impacts of some other disaster. Like in the case of the coronavirus, most of the identified cases have been restricted around the Kampala area. We have therefore learned that there may be a global pandemic that not necessarily have to paralyze an entire country as long as appropriate guidelines and directives are in place. There is no reason why there can’t be an election management body for Karamoja, Kigezi, Bunyoro, Acholi, or any of the other regions. Consequently, a national or regional election can proceed to honor the right of citizens to vote without exposing citizens or election officials to risk.

In the case of COVID-19, there is no rationale why planning for elections would not proceed if there existed a regional infrastructure to plan and execute the plan. A national election



commission would only serve the purpose of providing minimum standards for the conduct of elections and receiving results from the regions for final tally and announcement of the winner in case of the presidential elections. Parliamentary and local council elections would be conducted and results declared by the regional elections governing body. Decentralization of elections management would also create more demand for transparency and accountability on account of the process being closer to citizens and regions competing amongst themselves to deliver a free and fair election. At the same time, such a system would substantially reduce on the cost of elections because of the localized nature of the operations.

Digitization of the electoral system

The disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have reignited the discourse on digitization and how technology is helping societies to cope. From the use of cell phones in monitoring social distancing requirements in [Taiwan](#) to using [contactless drone delivery](#) to transport COVID-19 test samples in Ghana and efforts at virtual learning in Uganda, it is evident that technology will provide a pathway out of disruptive crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. Today, corporations, government departments, and parliament are turning to technology to ensure the continuity of their businesses and work during the lockdown period. We should, therefore, develop an election digital system infrastructure that allows online voter registration, voter verification and electronic voting. The funding provided to political parties under current and future legislation should include targeted investment in member registration and electronic voting in party primaries. The digital voter registration and verification system, as well as the electronic voting system, should be primarily managed by the regional elections management infrastructure while the national electoral commission should receive and back the information.

Restore confidence in the national electoral commission

There is a fundamental distinction between democracies where citizens follow their leaders and act responsibly and authoritarian regimes where compliance to laws and public policy is secured through instilling fear. The experience from the COVID-19 pandemic response shows that countries' success and failure are not limited to either category of countries. China is one example of an authoritarian regime that was able to contain the spread of the coronavirus from the time it was detected in Wuhuan. In Hungary, the regime of [Victor Orbán](#) has used the pandemic to concentrate power in the presidency through emergency legislation. However, there are more successful democratic countries that have pursued aggressive containment strategies by their heads of state offering presidential leadership while placing optimism over fear and hope over uncertainty. There are lessons to be learned from leaders such as Angela Merkel of Germany, Tsai Ing-wen of Taiwan, Sanna Marin of Finland, and Mette Frederiksen of Denmark. President Nana Addo of Ghana and Uhuru Kenyatta of Kenya are some of the examples of African leaders providing presidential leadership against the pandemic while keeping the democratic infrastructure of their countries intact.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic is a multidimensional public policy problem affecting our lives in many different forms: health, economic, social, and political. Judging our response using this multidimensional matrix, it is evident that the Government of Uganda achieved tremendous success in confronting the public health dimension of the problem. The flow of the virus into the country was disrupted early enough and there has been no COVID-19 death reported. However, official narratives of success based on the public health matrix tells only part of the picture. The Government did not develop and implement a shock and awe strategy needed to confront an enemy as vicious as the coronavirus. As such, there has been no clear strategy to mitigate the economic pain of the country or the livelihood crisis that is still unfolding.

As we have shown, Mr. Museveni has seized a strategic opportunity to exert more control on the population, dominate and effectively use the public space to shore up his ratings as a crisis manager and achieved a remaking of the security forces and allied militia groups as part of his campaign infrastructure. With the electoral reforms process effectively frozen and the legislature infected with a US\$10 billion-shilling virus, Uganda's electoral system stands in jeopardy. Yet, beyond this thick cloud is the silver lining where the country needs to look to reform its electoral system and build an elections infrastructure capable of withstanding stress caused by emergencies of the nature triggered by the Coronavirus.

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.

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