

REFLECTIONS ON COVID-19 POLITICS IN UGANDA

8

Could Covid-19 be General Museveni's Waterloo?

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Like most politicians of the authoritarian breed, President Yoweri Museveni has seized the opportunity that the raging pandemic has created.

He has converted the government response into a campaign platform.

Despite the (surprisingly sound) advice of the Speaker and Chief Justice, the President did not declare, as required by the Constitution, a state of emergency before issuing the directives that are currently in force.

But since he has never been known for adhering to constitutional procedure, that is no surprise.

By decreeing that any relief distribution efforts by the Opposition will attract arrest and a charge of “attempted murder”—a pronouncement that has gotten youthful legislator Francis Zaake, the Mityana municipality Member of Parliament, locked up—the Ssaabalwaanyi, as Mr. Museveni loves to sometimes call himself, to mean ‘chief fighter’ has ensured that the spotlight remains firmly cast on him as the messiah.

His wit and humour have become an overnight sensation as more people look forward to his addresses that have been long on content but short on concrete and coherent interventions.

Like the much sought-after sanitizers, his regular addresses have polished his battered image and allowed him to worm his way back into the hearts of many Ugandans... but for how long?

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Like the much sought after sanitisers, his regular appearances have polished his image and allowed him to warm his way back into the hearts of many hitherto bitter Ugandans. Very low in ratings from the start of his current fifth term, the crisis has given him a much-needed boost.

The problem is that the world has changed in about four major ways that could prove irreversible:

To begin with, traditional donor economies have been so adversely affected by the pandemic that the language of economists has changed from “recession” to “depression.” This means that Overseas Development Assistance (which was already shrinking, anyway) will experience farther contractions as Europe and America recover not just from the economic, but psychological toll.

Secondly and thanks in large part to USA president Donald Trump who ran his campaign on the slogan, “Make America Great Again,” the United States, a major donor to Uganda, has, some analysts argue, abdicated her place in global leadership. Germany, France, the House of Saud, and Russia have displayed an appetite for dominating world affairs but the country to watch is China.

International supply chains have been disrupted to the point that manufacturing, transport and labour must be rethought. As Kenyan economist and writer David Ndihi has indicated, the pandemic has caused a (negative) technology shock—transformational occurrences of a permanent kind that can be equated to innovations like the internal combustion engine, aviation, or the microchip—which require new thinking in just about every sphere of life.

The final issue which may not necessarily be a shift but is worth watching is that history is replete with the rise of extremists and demagogues in times of crisis. Like Donald Trump and the resurgent fascism across Europe, Adolf Hitler (German leader from 1933-1945) and Benito Mussolini (Italy’s prime minister from 1922 to 1943), rose to power by exploiting the fears and vulnerabilities of voters. This trend is likely to increase as countries look inward to save themselves first before lending a hand to others. This means that there are less people to beg from.

Are these shifts on the radar screen of Uganda’s rulers?

While the leaders of Ghana, South Africa and to some degree next-door Kenya have declared loan moratoriums, tax cuts, liquidity support for SMEs and ensured that basic utilities (like water and electricity) remain in supply, Uganda’s executive and legislature have, over the past two months, gorged themselves at the trough, in excess of a trillion shillings, under the pretext of supplementary budgets.

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Even the procurement of food for distribution by the Office of Prime Minister, a no stranger to scandal, got bungled up by impropriety. Accusations of collusion between hoteliers and health ministry officials have tainted the quarantine process that saw dozens of returning Ugandans and foreigners held under questionable circumstances.

Even though Uganda has not officially recorded a fatality, the imposition of a lockdown has paralysed life at all levels. The worst hit are those who subsist on daily earnings which, more often than not, are too meagre for any savings to be put away.

Where does this leave Uganda and for how long will dubious food distribution and rhetoric keep a hungry and restive population indoors?

It is no exaggeration to assert that there is enough food for the cameras but far less for the people in greater Kampala alone.

Yet we have seen expectant queues at the homes of worried politicians. Will they continue begging and asking the haves politely as the pangs of hunger bite harder?

Of course there is no way for Uganda's rulers to fatten the cow on market day. Those governments which have been able to respond to this crisis have, over the years made investments in public capital and human resources while Kampala has dabbled in corruption, one scandal after another, not least the latest multi-billion-shilling heist in the name of the virus.

Given these circumstances, and notwithstanding Mr. Museveni's Trump-like optimism, we should brace ourselves for a potentially chaotic period ahead. Against all warnings from public health officials and his daily intelligence briefings, Trump ignored the Coronavirus arguing it will miraculously disappear. His inaction left America's health care system unprepared and the American economy exposed leaving more than 80,000 Americans dead and more than 30 million out of job at the time of this writing. Unlike Trump, Mr. Museveni has, to his credit, confronted the COVID-19 pandemic with unprecedented measures. However, he has also left the economy and Ugandans exposed to absolute uncertainty. It may be understandable that living in the comfort of State House for 35 years, he seems comfortable with a wait and see attitude unlike the many households that have to put food on the dining table every day.

As the food stocks dwindle and the hungry lose hope of receiving relief, survival instinct will kick in. If the law enforcement community which has been keeping people confined is similarly hungry, then food—not presidential directives—will become Priority Number One. With a shrinking economy and no substantive external sources for relief, the contradictions inherent in our fragile Ugandan state and the regime maintenance instincts of the ruling class will produce a perfect storm.



In a worst case scenario, there is an anarchic breakdown of law and order, will the lessons learnt in the jungles of Mozambique in the 1970s, the experiences of the 1981-1986 Luwero bush war and the counterinsurgency tactics of Somalia come to the aid of the Old Man with a Hat?

For a guerrilla, whose bush war exploits and victories against armed rebels have no equal in the annals of our post-independence history, a virus that fights without a defined frontline and does not fear his favorite Kalashnikov, teargas or baton, Museveni faces an unfamiliar opponent. The aging tyrant could soon discover that in this 'Covidian Age,' ruling Uganda's young and restless will need to go beyond the patronizing language of Bazukulu, the threatening language of Ssebalawanyi or the soothing regular fireplace conversations and tweeter messages but may, in fact, need new tricks.

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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