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# Uganda: What Has Sustained Museveni for Over Quarter a Century?

BY CHARLES MWANGUHYA MPAGI, 29 JANUARY 2012

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Kampala — On Thursday, President Yoweri Museveni and the top National Resistance Movement (NRM) brass headed to the mountainous eastern district of Kapchorwa to mark 26 years since he took power.

While many of his critics now dismiss the commemoration of what government calls Liberation Day as nothing more than a partisan affair, it remains instructively significant for a man who at taking over power claimed he was "not a career politician" but a soldier who wanted to only lead a transition of only three years and hand power back to civilian rule but has now stayed on for more than quarter a century.

How and why did Museveni the man change is a critical question for historians to answer but how a country that in the first 25 years of independence had changed presidents eight times managed to tolerate Mr Museveni for now a period longer than half the country's entire post-independence existence raises an intriguing preposition.

Retired Maj. John Kazora, once a staunch ally of Mr Museveni and admirer of the Movement for which he abandoned prospects to hunt for a job after graduating from Makerere University to join Museveni in the bush war in early 1980s, recalls a meeting of the triumphant fighters at the Lubiri Barracks in Kampala in the early days after the city fell.

"We were having a meeting at Lubiri and Museveni asked how long we should stay in power, many suggestions were made, with some saying four years, it is Museveni who stood up and was vehemently opposed to the suggestion saying, four years to do what? We should stay for only two years until Amanywa Mushega laboured to tell him, Mr President what can you have done in two years to set a proper foundation to realise the Movement ideals."

Both Kazoora and Mushega have since abandoned the Movement to found the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) seen as a home of many who have seen what they say is a fundamental derailment of the fundamental change the President promised Ugandans 26 years ago.

While taking his first Presidential oath on January 29, 1986, President Museveni told an expectant and excited local and international audience that he would lead a transitional system and organise elections within three years after which he would hand power back to civilian authority. But, by 1989 the narrative had changed. Work on a new constitution for the country had started and Mr Museveni, who was also chairman of the National Resistance Council or what is now known as the 5th Parliament, said the system needed more time to set the country on the right course.

Of the Council, only Wasswa Ziritwawula distrusted the move and offered to resign, the rest of the team stayed put and endorsed the extension for five years to the completion and inauguration of the Constitution on October 8, 1995 that set ground for the first general elections the following year.

A fundamental provision in Article 105 (2) entrenched a two-term limit of five years each but that Museveni who by then had already been in charge for 10 years offered himself for the election in 1996 saying he needed to test the Constitution and set it on a firm root meant he was breaching his earlier pledge to serve only as a transition leader for the 3rd time.

By 2001, many insiders in the Movement had started growing uncomfortable with Mr Museveni's commitment to quit power anytime soon. In 1999, his former personal doctor and fellow combatant, Dr Kizza Besigye, had held consultations with close colleagues arguing that Museveni needed to be challenged and asked to step aside. Besigye wrote a controversial paper in which he outlined how the Movement had derailed.

But the paper was never discussed, instead, Besigye was accused of speaking in the wrong forum after the paper got published in newspapers and he was lined up for disciplinary action before the army court martial.

Facing imminent arrest, Besigye rushed holding hushed consultative meetings with a last critical one held among top NRM historical fighters and political players at the Ministry of Public Service boardroom where Mushega was in charge. Participant remain cagey on the details of the meeting but what is clear is that the question of an election without Museveni as a candidate in light of Besigye's paper a year earlier was central.

Besigye argued that Museveni was not about to hand over power, his colleagues insisted he could still be convinced to leave. Some of those in the meeting are people Besigye had consulted with as possible Movement candidates under the individual merit system.

Besigye wanted Museveni challenged by his colleagues not to even consider offering himself, others said he needed convincing and selected a team to do exactly that. It turned out Besigye was right, Museveni would stand again but those who still had faith in him sensing danger demanded that he states clearly that would be his last term.

In his re-election manifesto Museveni stated six times including at the back of the manifesto book, "I am, therefore offering myself to serve the people of Uganda for the last presidential term in order to: consolidate the work of building a professional army, consolidate our gains in the economy, in infrastructure reconstruction and modernisation, consolidate our gains in democratisation, putting in place mechanisms for an orderly succession and making a contribution to creating a vibrant regional market and penetrating the global market under the World Trade Organisation."

But 10 years and two elections later, fulfillment of sub-point three on why Museveni offered himself for that "last Presidential term," remains elusive. No plans have been put in place and at the celebrations of 26 years on Thursday Museveni said "transformation" would be achieved in the "next 10 years."

Political historians and observers of Uganda's politics over the years point to a number of factors that might have kept Museveni in power this long and counting. Atop the list is what they have grouped together as social factors mainly the fact that organised transition has eluded the country since independence has been a dream.

Often violent and sudden changes in the years between 1962 to 1986 created war fatigue among the society which Museveni took advantage of to prolong and sustain his own stay in power.

The five-year bush struggle of 1981-86 that brought him to power was brutal but he had also been active in the anti-Amin struggle between 1972 and 1979 two episodes that brought immense suffering.

**Tired of war**

"People were fatigued by war, they wanted a chance to move on and since Museveni was able to offer a sense of stability in his first years in power, he managed to enable people to fear a return to war," an academic at Makerere University said.

But another major factor was that for a section of the people especially in Luwero that gave sanctuary and life to the rebellion, a failure to deliver on the promises that led people to support the NRA war meant a deep sense of distrust for anyone else who suggested armed conflict as a means to remove Museveni.

Museveni's personality has also come out strongly in investigations for this story as a factor that has kept him in power this long. Described as a pragmatist, Museveni has created himself out as a kind of hybrid between a democrat and militarist dictator--a feat that eluded his predecessors.

This positioning saw him make concessions early on unleashing various fundamental freedoms that when he donned his military--dictator fatigues became difficult to roll back though they have enabled him prolong his stay.

His admirers and critics alike point to what some have described as a "good Constitution he did not want to allow function." An entrenched Article 105 (2) on term limits was removed even before it was tested because he would have been its victim and a number of pages with critical provisions have either been ripped out of what was hailed as a good Constitution or been watered in subsequent legislation especially in Parliament.

**Exciting the supporters of monarchs**

For example, while he was keen to restore cultural institutions they soon became a tool to further his political ambitions through causing confusion among the communities he granted restoration. Many, previously non-existent institutions have been created as is the case of Rwenzururu in Tooro and Bunyala in Buganda while those traditionally acknowledged like Ankole remain unrestored. In this way he has been able to appease both monarchists and republicans equally happy or confused and fighting amongst themselves and not him.

Propagators of this theory of having his cake and eating it say the practice has enabled him create a population that will not give up the little they have achieved but too afraid to risk it by questioning his stay in power. But as he stays longer, the desire to roll back more of what he has already given may put him in more and more conflict with a people who will not let go of the freedoms they have tested without a fight.

That more than 78 per cent of the population today who was 10 years or younger at the time Mr Museveni shot to power has become a kind of a powder keg to whom constant reference to the bad and horrifying history both for security and services is becoming fast unsalable.

This group is seen as more potent in that 20-year old Ugandans from, for example Fort Portal, who found works on the Kampala--Fort Portal Road underway when they were toddlers but have driven on a smooth road their adult life won't listen to tall tales of how bad it was 30 years ago, they assess the performance of the government on the cracks and pot holes that emerge on the road today not the muddy murram they never saw.

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