

The failed state argument

SUNDAY, 11 NOVEMBER 2012 17:54 BY CORY KUKLICK



For everyday Ugandans, there is no clear winner in this annual debate

A debate has recently picked up again in Kampala over whether Uganda should be considered a “failed state”. Makerere University professor Frederick Jjuko began the discussion last month at the National Dialogue on Freedom of Expression and Information, arguing that Uganda meets the criteria of a “failed state”, or a state that does not meet its basic responsibilities as a government (See, “Is Uganda @50 a failed State?” *The Independent* Oct.5) Moses Byaruhanga, a political advisor to President Yoweri Museveni, challenged Jjuko’s assertion.

“A failed state is a state that has failed to govern some parts of her territorial borders,” Byaruhanga recently told *The Independent*. “So, when you look at Uganda, we have managed to control all our borders... That alone means we are not a failed state.”

This debate revives itself in Uganda’s political arena every year following the publication of the *Failed States Index*, which ranks sovereign states on a scale that assesses social, political and economic security. This year Uganda was ranked at the 20th position, falling behind its mark from last year. While the discussion generally takes place in governmental halls, the question is, does the “failed state” argument matter to everyday residents of Kampala?

A flawed Index?

The *Failed State Index* is an annual report put out by Fund for Peace and *Foreign Policy* magazine. There are 13 factors that are used when ranking states for the index, although there is no clear definition for what constitutes a “failed state”. In 2012, almost every African country was represented on the list.

The *Index* has come under criticism for applying universal standards to specific and diverse countries.

“Every country is different and adjusting,” says Andrew Sempebwa, a musician from Nsambya. “They should consider many factors; we have only been independent for 50 years. Progress is gradual.”

Many of the countries included in the “Alert”, or highly unstable side of the list, including Uganda, Kenya and the Democratic Republic of Congo have only just broken away from colonialism in the middle of the last century. Other countries, like Syria and Egypt, are in the midst of social upheaval or civil war.

“What has America contributed to these countries before judging them?” Gabriel Nahabwe of Nsambya asks in reference to Fund for Peace’s American location. “If judgments come from an American perspective they are not equal.”

For other residents, however, the *Index* provides a good way to measure Uganda with the standards of other countries.

“It’s a good intention, you need to know how you are making progress against the rest of the world,” says Charles Ssenono, a boda boda rider from Ave Maria.

The spirit of Uganda

Like Byaruhanga, many residents of Kampala point to the recent successes of Uganda and the progress it has made in the last 20 years as a measure of the country’s stability. Uganda has done well in fighting HIV/AIDS, and the completion of the Bujagali Hydroelectric Power Station has meant increased access to electricity for many residents.

“When you see what the government is providing, like roads and social services, you can see we are developing,” says Gracien Bigirabagabo, a groundskeeper from Ndejje. “It is not a surprise if people think we are failed because they do not have an equal understanding of the country.”

Other residents of Kampala point to expulsion of the Lord’s Resistance Army from the country and an increased sense of security following a history of oppressive rule. The scars of Idi Amin’s regime, and the 300,000 deaths that came from it, are still fresh for many Ugandans.

“Some of us were born in the ‘70s, and we can see things progress,” says Sempebwa. “The first thing you have to ask is, ‘Are you secure?’ I don’t think there is any nation in the world who thinks they are perfect. The state is trying to do what it can.”

Many residents believe that the argument over “failed state” status is important due to a sense of pride in their country. Despite high unemployment, including over 80% of Ugandan youth without jobs, some people believe that positive change must come from the population itself, not from the government.

“I have the spirit of Uganda,” says Annet Nabulya, a principal from Ndejje. “If Uganda is not successful, then it is part of my fault. People who say we are failing should not blame Museveni but themselves. Even if I didn’t have a job I am still a Ugandan, I still have pride.”

Success for whom?

The burden of success that Nabulya places on the residents of Uganda is not shared by all. Despite claims from the government that the economy is moving forward, unemployment and the high price of goods have left many residents frustrated with their living conditions. Corruption in the country is also rampant, with *Transparency International* rating Uganda as “Very Corrupt”.

“There is a little bit of progress, but it is failed,” says Herbert Muqanga, who has been unemployed for over a year since being forced away from his job as a shoe salesman in Kampala. “It doesn’t matter if the government says we are successful, because for me I am struggling to get something to eat. I don’t care what the government says; I care what my family thinks. They know I am suffering.”

A country’s success can also be gauged on two levels, according to some residents. While politicians and their families prosper in their roles within the government, progress at the local level has been slow, if not negligible.

“The government doesn’t address the ordinary people and what we need,” said Nahabwe. “Maybe a few people are successful, but looking at the bigger picture, the challenges are not met.”

Agree to Disagree

Jacob Mugulusi, a schoolteacher from Ndejje, takes the middle of the road. He notes increased social mobility and the freedom to travel without hassle, but also bemoans hospitals that lack drugs and the eviction

of many street workers in Kampala.

“Somebody has their own reasons for saying if we are succeeding or failing, and maybe they can prove it,” he says. “If we compare from past years we can see Uganda has succeeded in one way and failed in another.”

Everyday residents of the country, like politicians and professors of the country, seem to agree on one thing: The ‘failed state’ argument is important, but there is no clear winner of the debate.

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