

40 years of Museveni: From no party

Forty years after seizing power, President Museveni's political journey tells the story of a leader who once dismissed party politics as sectarian and divisive, only to later champion Uganda's return to multiparty democracy. The 2005 referendum that reopened political space marked a defining turn, but questions remain over whether it reflected conviction or calculation.

BY ISAAC MUFUMBA

On June 8, 2005, President Museveni announced he would campaign for the country to return to a multiparty political dispensation during a referendum scheduled for the following month.

The referendum was held on July 28, 2005, with the question: "Do you agree to open up the political space to allow those who wish to join different organisations/parties to do so to compete for political power?"

A total of 3,643,223 Ugandans, or 92.44 percent of those who participated in the referendum, voted in favour of a return to multiparty politics. Another 297,865 voters, or 7.56 percent, voted in favour of retaining the Movement system.

That majority vote effectively ended 233 months or 19 years and five months of shackling political parties since President Museveni shot his way to power in 1986.

Mr Museveni had never hidden his disdain for political parties. He consistently questioned their ideological orientation, claiming they had been formed along religious and sectarian lines and had promoted the divisions that sowed the seeds of upheavals the country experienced in the 1960s, 1970s, and the first half of the 1980s.

If an interview that the late Paul Kwanza Ssemogerere gave this newspaper in September 2014 is anything to go by, Mr Museveni was initially determined to ban political parties.

"Museveni wanted to ban parties. Talking to us, he was blaming UPC for the chaos. We told him if UPC (Uganda Peoples Congress) is a bad party, people will shun it and join the good ones, but you cannot use that to ban political parties," Ssemogerere said.

It should, however, be remembered that years before Ssemogerere gave the interview, Mr Museveni had indicated during a press conference at State House that he would have banned UPC had it not been for the presence of what he described as "a few good people" in the party.

"The whole of President (George W.) Bush, the leader of world democracy, banned the al-Qaeda party in the USA. He closed their offices and froze their accounts. I may be tempted to do the same with UPC, because they are even more al-Qaeda," he said in a January 15, 2002, interview.

Political parties shackled

Mr Museveni may not have banned political party activity in 1986, but the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) ensured parties were shackled.

The gagging of political parties began with the passing of Legal Notice No. 1 of

1986, which suspended "all forms of political gatherings and any other form of political activities" until further notice. The same instrument that suspended several provisions of the Constitution also required that all gatherings be cleared by the police.

The screws were tightened further during debate on the Constituent Assembly (CA) Statute of 1993, when the National Resistance Council (NRC) imposed a ban on political parties recruiting members, barred them from opening branches and holding delegates' conferences, and forbade campaigning under any political party's banner.

Any candidate who wished to participate in the CA, the NRC said, would contest the March 28, 1994, elections on "individual merit" and could not rely on affiliation to, or membership of, existing political parties for the purposes of the campaign.

On November 2, 1993, during an interview with this newspaper, Mr Museveni not only denied that the Movement was about him as a benevolent dictator or about people from Ankole, but also reaffirmed his position on multiparty politics.

"Why don't you let the parties back and let the people reject them and why don't you send an olive branch to the former leaders?" he was asked.

"The people will get the chance to reject the parties in the referendum or through the CA. But if you say that I should support, politically, a situation where NRM is a party, and there is DP, UPC—then even if NRM wins, it will no longer be a Movement of all the people. It will be a party itself," he said.

He added: "I want all the people of Uganda together. NRM can win elections for sure. If it became a party. But this will mean a failure for my strategy."

The CA did not improve the political parties' situation. On June 20, 1995, 199 delegates voted in favour of the continuation of "no-party rule", while 68 voted against it. Two delegates of the National Resistance Army (NRA), Gen David Tiinyefuza (now David Sejusa) and Lt Col Sserwanga Lwanga, abstained.

Left to Right: President Pastour Bizimungu of Rwanda, Janet Museveni, President Daniel Moi of Kenya, Museveni, President Sylvester Ntibunganya of Burundi, and President Benjamin William Mkapa of Tanzania attend Museveni's swearing in ceremony at Kololo Independence Grounds on May 12, 1996. PHOTO/FILE

The vote culminated in the writing of Article 269 of the 1995 Constitution, which barred political parties from engaging in "any activities that may interfere with the Movement political system". The article barred political parties from operating branches, holding public rallies and sponsoring candidates for political office for as long as the Movement system remained in force.

Backing the CA

A day after the CA took the decision, Mr Museveni wrote to members of the Movement Caucus in the CA, stating that Uganda would not switch to a multiparty political dispensation unless it was "imposed on us by circumstances".

"The only time we should advocate multipartyism should be when our society has undergone sufficient metamorphosis to permit healthy polarisation. According to us, that time is not now," he wrote in the June 21, 1995, letter.

The eight-page letter hastened to add that the Movement would be open to competing with other political organisations if Ugandans voted in a referendum to open the political space.

"Should the people of Uganda, in future, decide to go for multipartyism, we should be able to pursue [the Movement] objectives even under the new [multiparty] circumstances," he wrote.

Mr Museveni further argued that although pursuing the Movement's objectives under a multiparty political dispensation would not be as effective as under the Movement system, doing so would be better than sitting back and doing nothing.

Mr Museveni's letter was in response to concerns that some Movement leaders were confusing members of the Movement Caucus in the CA by issuing contradictory public statements about the future of the Movement system.

The concerns arose after it emerged that two senior Movement leaders, Lt Col Sserwanga Lwanga and Mr Jaber Bidandi Ssali, had earlier written a position paper arguing that a return to multiparty politics should not be tied to a referendum. They proposed lifting restric-

tions on political party activity two years after the first election under the new Constitution. However, those proposals were overtaken by the developments of June 20, 1995.

Mr Museveni did not let up even after the promulgation of the Constitution. In 1996, his presidential campaign was characterised by attacks on multipartyists. The same pattern applied to the campaign ahead of the 2001 elections when he accused Dr Besigye, his biggest opponent, of working with "multipartyists".

About-turn on parties

Why, then, did he suddenly turn around in June 2005 to lead the campaign for a return to multiparty politics?

"We cannot continue to deny people their right to belong where they want to belong. Some people were in the ruling National Resistance Movement, but were not happy with the Movement. We want to end the era of lies that we are oppressing the Opposition," was the official explanation.

Mr Geoffrey Kabyanga, the State minister for Information Communication Technology (ICT) and National Guidance, said it was a strategic move informed by what was going on around the world.

"The decision to return to multiparty politics can be framed as a strategic adaptation by Museveni and the NRM," Mr Kabyanga said.

He added: "By the early 2000s, Uganda was deeply integrated into global political and economic systems that increasingly tied legitimacy and, in some cases, aid to democratic reforms."

Contradictions within

Discussions with actors from across the political divide suggest that external and internal factors, together with the desire to remain in office despite the presidential term limits prescribed in the 1995 Constitution, led Mr Museveni to change his stance on political pluralism.

The external factors played a major role in the contradictions that arose within the Movement.



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democracy to multiparty politics

As Dr Kizza Besigye wrote in the now-famous letter titled "An Insider's view of how the NRM lost the broad base", which nearly got him sent to the General Court Martial for airing his views in the wrong forum, the Movement had changed.

"The Movement created by the CA and completed by Parliament (through the Movement Act 1997) was different from the one of 1986-1995," Dr Besigye wrote.

The Movement from 1986 to approximately 1994 was often described as "all-inclusive" and "broad-based", highlighting "individual merit" and seeming to detach itself from the old political parties and their methods. However, the CA elections of March 1994, the conduct of business within the CA, the presidential and parliamentary elections of 1996 revealed that this was largely a rhetoric.

Prof Sabiti Makara, who teaches political science at Kabale University, said it became increasingly evident

at what the leadership preached and what they practised were very different.

"When put together, 'individual merit', being 'all-inclusive', and being 'broad-based' made the Movement look very bright, but in practice, it was different. During the elections, there were some people labelled Movement candidates, and they were sponsored by the State. When some of those candidates won, some leaders would say, 'We have won', but who have you defeated if this is a broad-based organisation where everybody is equal and participates as an individual?" Prof Makara wondered.

It should be remembered that during the drafting of the 1995 Constitution, the Movement was presented as a political system and an alternative to the multiparty political system. By 2001, however, it had become abundantly clear that the attempt to present it as a viable alternative to multiparty democracy had failed.

Mr Kabyanga concedes that internal contradictions played a significant role in the decision to open up the political space.

"Internally, the pressure was mounting as opposition figures like Kizza Besigye galvanised support and exposed the limitations of the Movement system. Opening up to multi-party competition could, therefore, be seen as a calculated move to renew legitimacy while retaining control of the political terrain," he argued.

Testing internal democracy

During the November 2, 1993 interview mentioned earlier, Mr Museveni portrayed an organisation that practised internal democracy. He gave the impression that challenging him for the leadership would not be frowned upon.

"We stand as leaders, three or five people," he said when asked how anyone could replace him as leader of the Movement.

The interviewer did not think so, saying he believed it would be difficult to dislodge him because the Movement system was associated with, and believed to belong to, him.

"No. Just stand as national leaders, and whoever is voted for becomes the head of a united house. This is very simple, what is the problem?" he responded.

Those comments were put to the test

after Dr Besigye announced on October 28, 2000, that he would challenge him for the presidency.

On 1 November 2000, Mr Museveni issued a statement in which he criticised Dr Besigye for unilaterally declaring himself a candidate.

"Besigye has gone about his intentions in an indisciplined and disruptive way. He has, without consulting any organ of the Movement, launched himself as a Movement candidate although it is well known that he is in close collaboration with multipartyists," Mr Museveni wrote.

There were attempts to perhaps ward off Dr Besigye's challenge to Mr Museveni's leadership and aspirations.

A meeting of the National Executive Committee (NEC) of the Movement held on November 24, 2000, attempted to declare Mr Museveni the "sole candidate" for the post of President, but the fact was that such a decision was in contravention of the provisions of the

1995 Constitution, which stated that any qualified Ugandan could compete for any position under the Movement system. The idea was dropped, but not before NEC adopted a resolution that favoured Mr Museveni.

"Bearing in mind his contribution to the building of the Movement and the country and confident of his potential to make further contributions to the Movement, THE Yoweri K. Museveni is urged to contest the forthcoming presidential elections," read the resolution.

Dr Besigye, therefore, contested the election as an independent candidate, standing for reforms within the Movement.

Mr Museveni's words and the Movement's internal democracy, which had now morphed into a political party, were once again tested before the 2006 elections.

Mr Felix Okot Ogon, the MP for Doko County, picked nomination forms, arguing that it was about time Mr Museveni stepped aside for the sake of democracy. Mr Ogon dropped out of the race under unclear circumstances. Mr Museveni, therefore, did not come under any challenge from within.

In the run-up to the 2011 General Election, Capt Daudi Ruhinda Maguru, a retired former officer of then Presidential Guard Brigade (PGB), now Special Forces Command (SFC), and Dr Nabatanzi Lugudde, a former Presidential Advisor, came up to challenge Mr Museveni. Dr Nabatanzi, however, quit under unclear circumstances, while Capt Maguru claimed that he had been blocked.

Former prime minister John Patrick Amama Mbabazi attempted to challenge Mr Museveni in the run-up to the 2016 elections, but his challenge was unsuccessful. He was forced to contest for the presidency on the ticket of The Democratic Alliance (TDA).

The run-up to January's general election saw the biggest number of people expressing interest in challenging Mr Museveni for the position of flagbearer of the NRM. Three people showed up. They were Mr Briton Kiwanuka, Mr David Ruhinda Maguru and Mr Julius Tumuhimbe, but their candidature was always going to come to naught because the Central Executive Committee (CEC) of the party had ringfenced the positions of National Chairman and presi-



Museveni being sworn in as President of Uganda in 1986. PHOTO/FILE

dential flag bearer as far back as 2019.

Despite the party taking Sh520 million from each candidate aspiring to be a flagbearer, they were never nominated, either because the nomination forms were unavailable or because party officials were not available to receive them.

External factors

Mr Dan Wandera Ogalo, a lawyer who represented Bukoli South constituency in the 6th Parliament and later represented Uganda to the East African Legislative Assembly (Eala) on the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) party ticket, said Mr Museveni did not turn around because he had suddenly come to believe in multiparty democracy.

He said the external factors behind the

sudden turnaround had a great deal to do with donor funding.

"Museveni was never and has never been a democrat. He belonged to the youths of the 1960s who were ardent Marxists. If we are claiming to practise multiparty democracy today, it is because of donor pressure," Mr Ogalo said.

Dr Livingstone Sewanyana (PhD), the Executive Director of the Foundation for Human Rights Initiative (FHRI), weighs in, saying the need for funding for development activities compelled Mr Museveni to rethink his position on multiparty democracy.

"It was not out of our free will. We yielded to pressure from the donors because it was the basis upon which funds to undertake our economic programmes could be realised. It would not have been possible to get the backing of donors without a return to multiparty politics," Dr Sewanyana said.

It should be remembered that in the first half of 2005, five European nations, namely Britain, Ireland, Norway, The Netherlands and Sweden, froze funding to Uganda amid concerns about governance and the pace of developments towards the proposed return to democracy.

Details of the conditions set by the others before the resumption of funding were not readily available, but Britain announced on April 29, 2005, that it was withholding £5 million (\$9.6 million) in budget support to Uganda amid concerns that "insufficient progress had been made towards establishing a fair basis for a multi-party system".

A statement issued by the British High Commission in Kampala pointed out that among the benchmarks for a legitimate transition were "the establishment of the rules for multiparty competition, and the capacity to implement and monitor these sufficiently far ahead

of the 2006 elections".

According to the statement, the two countries had earlier agreed on "the separation of the organs of State from the Movement; unhindered and inclusive debate on political and constitutional reform, including freedom of the press and association; and respect for human rights".

Other stipulations agreed on were "the absence of significant physical intimidation or financial manipulation of the process of change, respect for the rule of law and an independent judiciary".

Britain pegged future aid disbursements to its assessment of Uganda's progress in the transition.

Personal interest

However, there are those who believe Mr Museveni's desire to remain in office beyond the two terms prescribed in Article 105(2) of the Constitution, which provided that "A person shall not be elected under this Constitution to hold office as President for more than two terms as prescribed by this article", was the real motivation for allowing multiparty politics.

Some of Mr Museveni's critics accuse him of opportunistically cashing in on demands for a return to multiparty politics in order to extend his stay in office.

The build-up

However, it appears that plans to open up the political space were set in motion before the donors turned up the heat.

On December 18, 2001, the National Executive Committee of the Movement formed an ad hoc committee, which it charged with examining "the performance of the Movement", especially in light of increasing calls for a return to political pluralism.

The committee produced a report that presented the leadership with three options.

The first was a continuation of the Movement system of governance, but with improvements and continued restrictions on political parties.

The second was the establishment of a one-party system in which the NRM would become the organ of the Movement system. The Movement would remain in government, and restrictions on political parties would be maintained.

The third option was to open up the political space so that those who still believed in the Movement system would organise themselves into a political organisation to compete for power with other parties.

However, for four reasons, the report concluded that the best option would be to open the political space.

The first was that it would provide the Movement "the opportunity to purify itself" and get rid of those who were in it simply because it was broad-based.

The second was that such a move would disarm those opposed to the Movement. "The weapon that they have been using to malign the Movement, accusing it of being undemocratic," would be neutralised, they argued.

The third was that the move would enhance Uganda's relationship with the donor community and "facilitate access to international markets and international aid".

The fourth was that political pluralism had become a global trend, so Uganda could not afford to "detach itself from the rest of the world".

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