

When Mr Museveni took power in 1986, his views appeared to suggest a leftist inclination. His views and actions led several people to label Mr Museveni a Marxist. In today's article, analysts discuss whether or not the label was misplaced or correct and also when Mr Museveni could have taken on capitalism.

BY ISAAC MUFUMBA

On January 29, 1986, a lean man clad in green military fatigues, his sleeves folded and a green cap on his head, stood on the steps at the entrance to Parliament and took the oath of office as President of Uganda.

The oath marked the transition of Mr Yoweri Museveni from a guerrilla leader to President of the Republic of Uganda.

His National Resistance Army (NRA) had driven out soldiers of the Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA) and allies from power, ending a five-year armed struggle that began on February 6, 1981, with an attack on the Kabamba Military Barracks.

Throughout his campaign for the 1980 General Election, Mr Museveni had declared he would go to the bush to wage a war should the polls be rigged.

Milton Obote's Uganda Peoples Congress (UPC) party was declared the winner of the election with 75 seats in Parliament, followed by Dr Paul Kawunga Ssemogerere's Democratic Party (DP), which won 50.

Mr Museveni's Uganda Patriotic Movement (UPM) won one seat, while another new formation, the Conservative Party (CP) of Joash Mayanja Nkangi, failed to win any.

Mr Museveni also contested in the three-candidate race for the Mbarara North constituency, which was won by Mr Sam Kuteesa with 15,657 votes, followed by Mr Guchwa Mingyi of UPC with 12,747. Mr Museveni came third with 12,682.

1980 election an excuse?

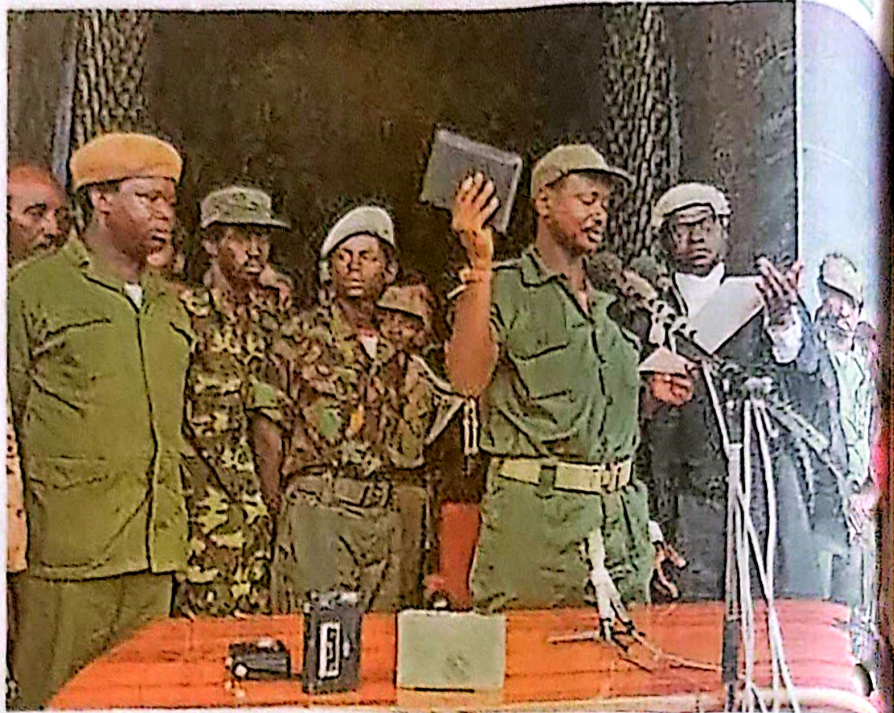
After losing the election, Mr Museveni filed a petition in the High Court, listing 10 grounds for the annulment of the Mbarara North election result. He argued that some registered voters were missing from the voter register and that the registers were not displayed for inspection as required by law.

Some people have since argued that the election petition was a decoy intended to buy time for Mr Museveni to prepare for the launch of the armed struggle.

Others believe that claims of a stolen election were simply excuses he used and that he would, in any case, have found a reason to wage war.

Those who argue so often point to a paper, Fanon's theory on violence: Its verification in liberated Mozambique, which Museveni wrote during his student days at the University of Dar es Salaam.

In that paper, Mr Museveni agreed with Frantz Fanon's view of violence as the highest form of political struggle.



Left to right: Gen Kahinda Otafiire, Maj Robert Kabura, Maj Koozi Tumusiime, Gen Yoweri Museveni, an unidentified judicial officer, Maj Gen Jim Muhwezi and Sir Peter Allen (then Chief Justice) during the 1986 swearing-in ceremony at Parliament. Mr Museveni took oath three days after his National Resistance Army captured power following a five-year armed struggle. PHOTO/COURTESY

40-year reign: From preaching Marxism to practising Capitalism

gle, adding that armed struggle helps to conscientise the masses.

"Without a revolution, a revolutionary social convulsion, one cannot get the necessary discipline to mobilise the population. One cannot create a new order unless one shakes the old one..." he wrote.

He also argued that armed struggle was the best way of dismantling neo-colonialism.

"It is necessary to create social convulsions so that the social institutions, the custodians of the status quo, which in a colonial situation means slavery, are not only brought into question but are actually shaken and made malleable, a precondition for successful recasting. To say that one can introduce fundamental changes without a violent shake-up is to say that one can turn ore into iron without melting it. Not only must you melt ore first, but the fire must be of very high temperature to enable you to melt it," Mr Museveni argued.

Communist/Marxist

Mr Museveni's views appeared to suggest a leftist inclination.

"All the processes of criticism and counter-criticism and a correct ideology of Marxism-Leninism must be taken into account in order to arrive at authentic decolonisation. You might have a broad-based united front when you are confronting colonialism. But even within that united front the Marxist-Leninists, the only authentic nation-

Embracing capitalism.

Museveni, the student activist who visited liberated areas of Mozambique... was a Marxist... I don't know whether he was still a

Marxist when he came from the bush, but once he took power, he realised that there are many interests that come into play when you are governing a country. He now meets neo-colonialism in its original form." - Ronald Leonard Egesa, a political and economic analyst

alists in the last analysis, must either assume the leadership or have a group of their own that can act any time to seize state power after the colonial power is defeated," he wrote.

That led several people to label Mr Museveni a Marxist, but Mr Augustine Ruzindana, a former member of the Front for National Salvation (FRONASA), said the label was misplaced.

"The communist label was never correct. The liberation movements were not Marxist-like, for example, the Communist Party of China or the Communist Party of Vietnam. They adopted armed struggle and borrowed some Marxist, leftist, socialist ideas, but they never really became communists," Mr Ruzindana stated.

He explained that parties such as the People's Movement for the Liberation

of Angola (MPLA), the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO), and South Africa's African National Congress (ANC), were allied with communist organisations but were never communist themselves.

"The liberation movements were not communist. They were called communists by the West, but in ideology they were not. They were not communist in the traditional sense," he added.

Practices and messages

Those who labelled Mr Museveni a Marxist can perhaps be forgiven. His early speeches after becoming President smacked of leftism.

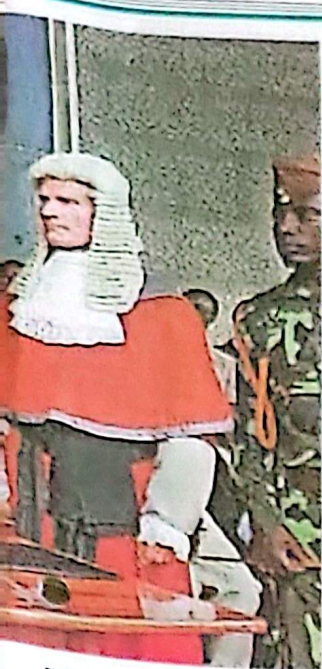
He preached frugality and modesty that bordered on the penny-pinching often associated with staunch Marxists.

He was often seen taking tea or porridge from a locally manufactured plastic mug. He advocated buying furniture for State House and government offices from local dealers in places such as Bwaise in Kampala City.

He described the spectacle of Africa's can leaders flying private luxury jets to the United Nations General Assembly while 90 per cent of their people walked barefoot as "pathetic".

His ministers rode in Toyota Land Cruisers, while senior military officers used Spanish-made Santana Land Rovers.

Mr Museveni also introduced barter trade as a way of paying for imports. Uganda, for example, exported soyabean to Yugoslavia and received road works in return.



It sent maize to Tanzania and got transformers. It exported beans to Cuba and, in turn, received medicines and military assistance.

Drastic change?

It is difficult to pinpoint the exact moment Mr Museveni changed, but by the end of the 1990s, he had fully embraced capitalism.

The economy had been liberalised at the behest of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. Many public enterprises, including strategic ones such as Uganda Commercial Bank (UCB) and Uganda Electricity Board (UEB), had either been privatised or divested, as the economy became private-sector-driven, where local giants such as Mukwano Industries, the Madhuni Group, and the Mehta Group, as well as multinationals like British American Tobacco (BAT), called the shots.

The decision to embrace liberalisation and structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) is widely seen as a precursor to the economic growth recorded during Museveni's first three decades in power, a period in which Gross Domestic Product (GDP) rose from \$3.92 billion (Shs14.67 trillion) in 1986 to \$6.04 billion (Shs22.61 trillion) in 1996, \$9.94 billion (Shs37.21 trillion) in 2006, and \$24.07 billion (Shs90.09 trillion) in 2016.

It should also be noted that leftist governments in countries such as Angola and Mozambique held on to power at the height of the Cold War largely because of military interventions by Cuba and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the predecessor of the Russian Federation today.

However, Mr Museveni and the NRM came to power shortly after Mikhail Gorbachev had become the leader of the USSR.

Gorbachev was elected General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union on March 11, 1985, at the age of 54. He introduced sweeping reforms, including Perestroika (restructuring) and Glasnost (openness), aimed at reinvigorating the Soviet economy, slowing the arms race, easing the Cold War tensions, and withdrawing Soviet troops from foreign deployments. Could that,



President Museveni takes the oath on May 12, 2016 for the sixth time since taking power in 1986 (fifth after a General Election). Next Tuesday, he will swear in for another five-year term, making him Uganda's longest serving President since Independence in 1962. PHOTO/FILE

too, have been a factor in Mr Museveni's transformation from a preacher of Marxism to a practitioner of capitalism?

Back to earth

Mr Ronald Leonard Egesa, a political and economic analyst, argued that Mr Museveni abandoned his utopian ideals once the reality of being President set in. "Museveni, the student activist who visited liberated areas of Mozambique and wrote a dissertation on Fanon's views, was a Marxist and naive theorist. I don't know whether he was still a Marxist when he came from the bush, but once he took power, he realised that there are many interests that come into play when you are governing a country. He now meets neo-colonialism in its original form," Mr Egesa said.

Mr Ruzindana, however, disagreed with Mr Egesa's view. Pointing to the NRM's 10-Point Programme, a document crafted during the guerrilla war not only to justify the NRM/A's decision to take up arms but also to provide an interim blueprint for governing the country, he said the change occurred before Mr Museveni took power.

"The 10-point programme emphasised building an independent, integrated and self-sustaining national economy. It talked of a mixed economy. It does not talk about the establishment of a socialist system. It actually espoused more of the non-aligned ideol-

ogy than one aligned with the communists, so the change occurred during the struggle," he argued.

Mr Ruzindana has a point. In May 1987, just 15 months after the NRM took power, it carried out a currency reform and exchange programme as part of a major restructuring of the economy. The process, undertaken at the behest of the IMF, included devaluation of the Shilling and a rise in interest rates.

Currency notes from the Milton Obote II era were replaced in a process that also saw the value of the shilling cut by 30 percent and two zeros knocked off the currency.

One new shilling was issued for every 100 old shillings: 1,000 shillings became 10 shillings, 5,000 shillings became 50 shillings, and so on. The highest denomination was Shs100. The exercise also introduced Shs1, Shs2, and Shs5 coins, as well as 50-cent coins.

That, however, raises questions. How does one then explain the State-controlled importation of essential commodities such as sugar, soap, and salt, and their distribution through Local Council structures? And what about the attempts to introduce barter trade?

Mr Egesa insisted this was not driven by Marxist leanings.

"It was not because he was still a Marxist that he went into barter trade. I think it was out of desperation because the country was cash-strapped, but also to try and arm-twist the West because

you are indirectly showing them that you can do without the dollar, which they will not allow to happen. So, it was some kind of blackmail to get them to provide the much-needed funding," he argued.

Mr Egesa said Mr Museveni accepted whatever the West threw at him, including the SAPs, in the interest of consolidating power.

Personal changes

The changes have not been confined to policy and ideology. It has extended to Mr Museveni's persona. Frugality has, in the eyes of critics, given way to a life of opulence.

Expenditure by the State House and the Office of the President has been rising for years. Budget allocations to the two institutions between the financial years 2010/2011 and 2018/2019, for example, show that they received Shs2.134 trillion, only a few million shillings short of half the Shs4.378 trillion allocated to the education sector over the same period.

Some of the expenditure has gone towards entertainment, fleets of vehicles, and presidential jets.

Luxury jets

A total of Shs148 billion was spent on the acquisition of presidential jets between 2000 and 2009.

The first, a Gulfstream IV, was purchased in 2000 at a cost of Shs60 billion.

It replaced the Grumman Gulfstream acquired by President Idi Amin in 1973.

The second, a Gulfstream V, was delivered early in 2009 at Shs88 billion, amid protests from some Members of Parliament. The President's chief pilot at the time, Maj Gen Ali Kiiza, defended the purchase, saying the Gulfstream IV had become too old and too expensive to maintain, requiring Shs639 million a year in servicing.

When the jet was purchased, Uganda was said to be the only country in Africa with a GDP per capita of less than \$1,000 (Shs3,743,130) whose leader was flying such an expensive aircraft.

Fleet of cars

The official cars of the President have also changed over time in make, cost, and fleet size.

The black Mercedes-Benz he drove into Parliament when first sworn in was first replaced by white Mercedes-Benz cross-country vehicles, which in turn gave way to an armoured Mercedes-Benz limousine and a fleet of Land Cruisers.

The Toyota Laurels once used by ministers have since been replaced by fuel guzzlers with engine capacities of more than 6,600cc. The Santanas, too, are long gone, replaced by an assortment of vehicles for the military.

The cost to taxpayers has long been a matter of concern. The State House Policy Statement for the Financial Year 2017/2018, for example, indicates that the institution spent Shs21.7 billion on 192 additional vehicles between 2010 and 2015.

In January 2025, for example, a team led by the State House Comptroller, Ms Jane Barekye, while appearing before Parliament's Committee on Presidential Affairs, asked for a budget provision of Shs399 billion for the financial year (FY) 2025/2026.

Among the listed priorities was the purchase of cars. Ms Immaculate Namara, an assistant commissioner in the Office of the President, complained that what had been appropriated was far below what was required.

"State House requires an additional Shs6 billion to replace the ageing vehicles and ensure the fleet is roadworthy. Only Shs4 billion has been allocated for transport equipment, leaving a significant funding gap. This shortfall affects the President and Vice President's ability to carry out mobilisation activities, particularly during the upcoming election season," Ms Namara said.

High maintenance costs

By July 2019, the cost of maintaining the presidency had run into trillions of shillings. Taxpayers' money was being spent on, among other things, the wage bill for presidential advisers and assistants; donations; the facilitation and remuneration of resident district commissioners (RDCs), their deputies and assistants; entertainment; and the maintenance of State House and other homes and farms associated with the presidency.

That includes periodic renovations. In the run-up to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHO GM) in 2007, for example, Shs96.4 billion was spent on refurbishing and re-furnishing State House Entebbe.

Another Shs7 billion was provided to renovate the same facility in FY2016/2017.

None of the furniture or cutlery came from Bwaise or any of the local shops that sell such wares. It would appear that State House's procurement department does not share Mr Museveni's earlier insistence that furniture should be bought from local carpenters.

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

Mr Yoweri Kaguta Museveni became President of the Republic of Uganda on January 29, 1986 after leading a successful five-year liberation struggle. He went to the bush with 26 other young men and organised the National Resistance Movement and National Resistance Army (NRM/NRA) to oppose the tyranny that previous regimes had unleashed upon the population.

The NRM/NRA captured power

on January 26, 1986. After victory, Mr Museveni formed a broad-based government that helped unite the country's political groups. Prior to the struggle of 1981-1986, Mr Museveni was one of the leaders in the anti-Amin resistance of 1971-1979 that led to the fall of the Amin regime.

After Idi Amin's coup in 1971, Mr Museveni was instrumental in forming the Front for National Salvation (FRONASA). FRONASA made up the core of one of the Ugandan fighting groups which, together

with the Tanzanian People's Defence Forces, ousted Amin's regime in April 1979.

In 1996, he became Uganda's first directly elected president. He also won the presidential elections held in 2001, 2006, 2011, 2016, 2021 and 2026.

Mr Museveni was born in a peasant pastoralist family in Ankole, western Uganda in 1944. He is married to Ms Janet Kataha. They have four children and many grand children.