

Why politicians trade autonomy for survival

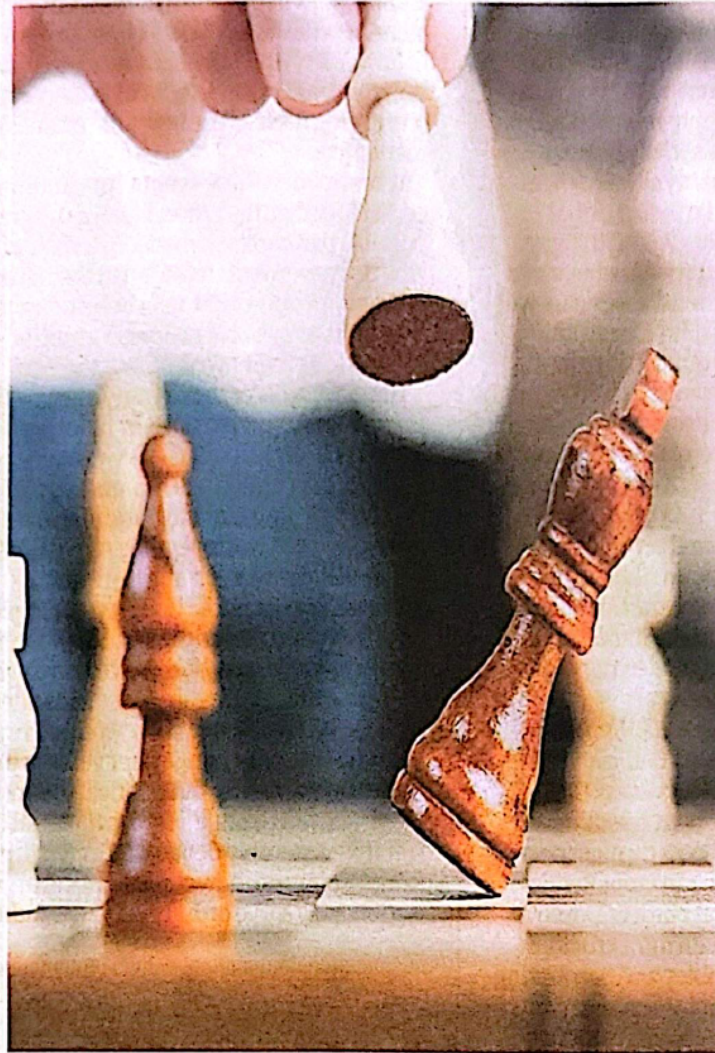
In the current Ugandan political economy, the State has evolved into the primary and often the only viable source of capital, employment, and social upward mobility. This total state capture of the economy has transformed the political landscape into a marketplace where loyalty is the only currency with purchasing power.

To understand why politicians continue to line up to be "used" despite the inevitabilities of the "dumping" cycle, one must look past ideology and examine the harsh economic realities that make the presidency the ultimate gatekeeper of national liquidity.

The foundation of this dynamic is the "permission economy." In Uganda, the private sector remains heavily dependent on State-sanctioned contracts, tax exemptions, and regulatory leniency. Whether it is a large scale infrastructure project or a small-scale supply contract, the path to profit almost invariably runs through a government ministry or an executive directive.

For an aspiring or sitting politician, being in the opposition or even being a "principled" independent often means being locked out of these economic circuits. Businesses associated with dissenting voices frequently face aggressive tax audits or the sudden revocation of licenses, whereas loyalty is rewarded with a "cushion" of State-protected opportunities.

The professionalisation of the political career has made it the most lucrative industry in a country with



high youth unemployment and a shrinking middle class. A seat in Parliament is no longer just a call to service, it is a high stakes investment. Candidates often spend billions of shillings in commercialised elections, frequently borrowing from moneylenders at exorbitant interest rates. Upon taking office, the immediate priority is not legislative oversight but debt recovery.

The State facilitates this by providing massive swearing-in grants, vehicle allowances, and specialised funds. This creates

a trap, a politician who falls out of favour loses the very income stream required to service the debts incurred to get into power. Consequently, they remain in the queue for Executive favour because financial ruin is the only alternative.

This economic dependency directly undermines the rule of law by making the legal system secondary to political utility. When the State is the largest employer controlling a bloated Cabinet, hundreds of presidential advisory roles, and a vast network of Resident Dis-

trict Commissioners, it can offer soft landings for those it has used. A politician who has been dumped from a ministerial position can be recycled into a board membership or a diplomatic posting, provided they remain loyal. This recycling ensures even when an individual is no longer politically useful in the frontline, they remain economically tethered to the presidency, preventing them from joining the Opposition. The structural injustice of this system is most visible in the distribution of development resources.

Gen Museveni often bypasses institutional frameworks, instead using sacks of money or direct presidential pledges to solve local grievances. This practice forces politicians to act as deal-fixers rather than lawmakers. To bring a road, a hospital, or electricity to their constituents, they must demonstrate that they have the President's ear. If they fail to show this proximity, they are labelled ineffective by a frustrated electorate that has been conditioned to believe that development is a gift from the General rather than a right of the taxpayer.

The reason the line for patronage never thins is that the cost of independence is poverty. The legal system, rather than being an impartial arbiter, serves as the enforcement arm of this economic arrangement, offering immunity to the loyal and prosecution to the defiant.

As long as the State remains the sole creditor in a parched economy, the Ugandan politician will continue to accept the role of a disposable tool, knowing that in this system, it is better to be used and fed than to be free and starved.

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