

NUP party president Robert Kyagulanyi, alias Bobi Wine. PHOTO/FILE

Opposition's fight or flight response

Implication. Analysts say Bobi Wine's exit from the country and his idea to temporarily step aside from leading NUP marks a very significant moment for Opposition politics.

BY ISAAC MUFUMBA & PHILIP WAFULA

With Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu, alias Bobi Wine, exiled and Dr Kizza Besigye incarcerated, the Opposition in Uganda finds itself facing an existential question: What next? Dr Besigye and Bobi Wine have, between themselves, six presidential campaigns in which they failed to unseat Yoweri Museveni amid vote rigging claims.

Bobi Wine, who took on the mantle of Opposition leader in the 2021 and 2026 polls, on March 14 appointed Dr Lina Zedriga as acting party president of the National Unity Platform (NUP) after he temporarily left the country "to handle important party duties".

Dr Zedriga assumes the NUP presidency at a critical juncture, and with her leadership being thrust under im-

mense pressure, which was highlighted by a recent incident in which she was locked out of the party headquarters in Makerere-Kavule, a Kampala suburb.

This administrative warfare, reminiscent of previous office closures in Gulu, remains a primary obstacle as she attempts to stabilise the party's physical and organisational infrastructure.

A seasoned lawyer and activist with deep roots in northern Uganda, Dr Zedriga brings strategic maturity born out of direct State persecution having recently been released from detention on charges of inciting violence in Ororo, Nwoya, Amuru and Gulu City in December 2025. The Gulu Chief Magistrate's Court on February 24 granted Dr Zedriga a Shs1m cash bail after spending 40 days in prison. The case remains under investigation, with further court proceedings scheduled for next week on Tuesday.

While the spotlight will illuminate every action of Dr Zedriga, the general

feeling in the top echelons of her party is that Bobi Wine's departure to the USA is a strategic retreat of sorts.

"The man said that he is coming back soon. He also mentioned that he is gone for a couple of engagements with other leaders within the international community space and that he will come back. That is not exile," Mr Joel Ssenyonyi, the Leader of the Opposition in Parliament (LoP), who is also the spokesperson of NUP, told *Weekly Politics*.

Despite being unequivocal about real threats to his life, Bobi Wine has told all and sundry that "running for president is not a crime". Except when it is. The NUP principal's troubles bear a striking resemblance to what Dr Besigye grappled with in 2001. The veteran politician is currently battling treason charges.

After coming second in the 2001 presidential poll, Dr Besigye moved to challenge Mr Museveni's victory in the Supreme Court on grounds of fraud. Whereas the Court agreed that there had been irregularities, three out of the five judges ruled that those irregularities had not significantly impacted the outcome. So, against his better wishes and judgement, Dr Besigye fled into exile in South Africa on August 17, 2001.

History repeats itself

Prior to that, the Opposition doyen had twice been forced off planes at En-

tebbe airport. First was on March 17, 2001 when he was hounded off a South African Airways plane, before being forced off a Kenya Airways flight on May 25, 2001.

Dr Besigye's movements inside the country had also been curtailed. On June 30, 2001, he was blocked at Lukaya, on the Kampala-Masaka-Mbarara highway, as he was making his way to a thanksgiving ceremony at the home of his in-laws in Ruti, Mbarara.

On the same day, Mr Museveni, who addressed a press conference at his private ranch in Kisozi, linked him to bombs that had earlier gone off in Jinja, Kasese and Kampala. He also challenged him to denounce Colonels Samson Mande and Anthony Kyakabale, who had earlier declared war on the NRM government.

It was at the time alleged that the two renegade Colonels had formed a rebel organisation, People's Redemption Army (PRA), which allegedly operated bases in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Dr Besigye and his supporters have always argued that the existence of the PRA was a fabrication.

Nearly 25 years later, just like had been the case in June 2001, a day after the Electoral Commission (EC) declared him the winner of the January 15 polls, Mr Museveni labelled the Opposition "terrorists", adding that they had been hell-bent on using violence to overturn

the election results.

In 2001, Dr Besigye fled because he felt persecuted and feared for his life. Bobi Wine's situation is not dissimilar. Dr Lulume Bayiga, the Buikwe South Member of Parliament (MP), who is also one of the vice presidents of the Opposition People's Front for Freedom (PFF) to which Dr Besigye ascribes, says what is going on is in line with Mr Museveni's long-held desire to employ all means available to kill off the political Opposition.

"He had promised that there would be no Opposition by 2021. He then promised himself that it would not be there by 2026, and he has worked in that direction. He has ostracised, incarcerated, bought and conscripted Opposition leaders. Even those who have no political parties, but are critical, have not been spared," Dr Bayiga says.

Dr Bayiga says cars and envelopes dangled at cultural and religious leaders have made them mute, while critical thinking and intellectual discourses in institutions of higher learning have been killed.

"You go to Makerere University, and you see the surveillance that takes place in academia. There is no academic freedom. Those of us who studied in the 1990s had the freedom to debate critical issues affecting the country. We

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