

VIII MAGAZINE

Review

Mamdani's teachings about power and decay

Author says ending violence without restoring legitimacy does not bring peace



A Ugandan policeman holds his weapon during a search at one of the Rwenzururu kingdom royal guard huts. Human Rights Watch said that the government needed to investigate the conduct of security forces during the clashes. Picture: Reuters

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Some books help us understand a country. A few rare ones help us understand ourselves. Mahmood Mamdani's *Slow Poison: Idi Amin, Yoweri Museveni and the Making of the Ugandan State* is one of those rare books. Although it focuses on Uganda, it speaks to a much wider African experience: how our states were formed, how power is exercised, and how political decay often happens quietly, long before it explodes into open crisis.

Mamdani is one of Africa's most respected public intellectuals. For decades, he has challenged Africans and non-Africans alike to take colonial history seriously—not as a distant past, but as something that still shapes how our states govern and how citizens are treated. In his work, Africa is not a race or a slogan; it is a political project, unfinished and contested.

Slow Poison brings together an intellectual journey that Mamdani began nearly 50 years ago. From *Politics and Class Formation in Uganda* to *Citizen and Subject* and *Neither Settler nor Native*, he has asked one central question: why did independence and liberation movements fail to fully transform the colonial state? Why did freedom not lead to accountable and inclusive governance? Returning to Uganda allows him to answer this question with both historical depth and personal clarity.

At the heart of the book is a careful comparison between Idi Amin and Yoweri Museveni. Mamdani does not treat them as the same, nor as simple opposites. Instead, he shows how violence under each leader took different political forms, shaped by the kind of state each was trying to build.

The distinction, then, is not about how fast or how visible violence was at any given moment, but about what it even-

tually became. Under Amin, violence ultimately led to the open breakdown of the state, to the rule collapsed under the weight of his own brutality. Under Museveni, violence evolved differently. Over time, it became part of how the state governs—managed through procedures, justified in the language of reform and accepted internationally through donor support. The contrast is therefore structural rather than chronological: between violence that shatters the state and violence that slowly corrodes it from within.

This matters because Museveni's system did not end violence; it reorganised it. Violence moved away from the centre and toward the periphery—first to northern Uganda, then beyond the country's borders. It became less visible to the world, more routine and easier to justify in the name of security and stability. Citizenship at the centre was protected, while communities at the margins lived under militarised rule.

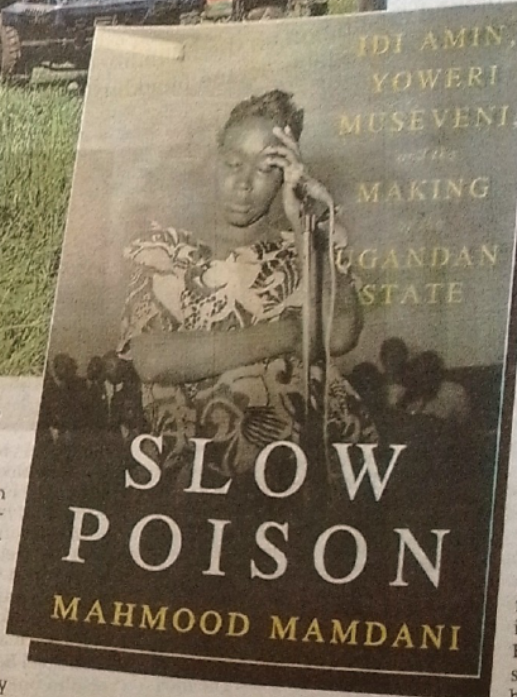
One of the book's strongest arguments concerns the role of the international community. Western governments and donors did not simply look away; they actively supported Uganda as a "model" state. Aid and international approval took the place of popular consent.

Stability was rewarded even as political accountability disappeared. This is not just Uganda's story—it is a pattern seen across Africa.

Readers across the continent will recognise these dynamics. In the Horn of Africa, and elsewhere, liberation movements have hardened into ruling elites. Governments speak the language of reform while shrinking political space. External partners prioritise order over legitimacy. Crisis does not arrive suddenly; it builds slowly, through exhaustion, exclusion and loss of trust.

For those working on peace, mediation and reform, Mamdani's message is clear and uncomfortable. Ending violence without restoring legitimacy does not bring peace—it only delays the next crisis. Real peace requires rebuilding the relationship between state and society, not just managing conflict.

Slow Poison ultimately warns us against complacency. The greatest danger facing African states today is not chaos alone, but quiet decay—when injustice becomes normal and power no longer answers to citizens. Mamdani reminds us that renewal is still possible, but only if Africans confront these realities honestly and rebuild political life from below, grounded in justice, inclusion and responsibility.



Slow Poison: Idi Amin, Yoweri Museveni, and the Making of the Ugandan State by Mahmood Mamdani.

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