

Bobi Wine's flight reveals the unfinished nation

After two months in hiding, National Unity Platform (NUP) leader Robert Kyagulanyi, better known as Bobi Wine, fled the country last week. His departure followed a disputed January 15 election in which President Yoweri Museveni was declared the victor by a too-shiny 72 percent of the vote. In a brief social media statement, Kyagulanyi said he would return at the right time.

The election capped a period Amnesty International described as a "brutal campaign of repression", which was also marked by a shutdown of the internet. Immediately after polling, security forces surrounded Kyagulanyi's residence, though he managed to escape. Reports indicate that security elements later forced entry into the home, where his wife, Barbara Itungo, was subjected to humiliation and assault, and the property was allegedly looted.

As is often the case in the labyrinth of Ugandan politics, this is only the opening chapter. Information suggests that progressive elements within the State and security apparatus facilitated Kyagulanyi's escape, turned a blind eye to his hideout, and ultimately cleared his path to exile. There is a grain of hope there. There are still a few good men inside.

Yet this development opens a second, more familiar chapter. Kyagulanyi is the first major electoral challenger to flee Uganda in 24 years, following Dr Kizza Besigye's departure in 2001. His flight reopens the old ledger on what exile reveals about Uganda as a nation. Since the 1966 "Buganda Crisis" under Milton Obote triggered the first modern wave of political flight, we have grappled with the same haunting questions.

When Ugandans run for their lives, who is left behind? How many stay simply because they lack the means to escape, remaining trapped in a cycle of fear. Who stays because they are thriving under the very regime that drives their compatriots away. There is also the matter of anxiety. What do those

This is why every political transition is followed by years of "unification" rituals, as if we were a newly born nation.



Charles Onyango-Obbo
Ear to the Ground



who remain fear the exiles might do upon their eventual return as victors? Conversely, do those who stayed regard those who fled as cowards, or do they envy them for finding a way out?

These questions suggest that the very idea of Uganda remains fluid and unsettled, and that exile widens the contest. Too few ever truly feel at home. This is why every political transition is followed by years of "unification" rituals, as if we were a newly born nation. We descend into the politics of "Never Again", with new leaders vowing that no Ugandan will ever again be chased into exile, driven off their lands and out of their homes, or discriminated against based on ethnicity or creed. We draft constitutions affirming the dignity and sovereignty of the people, intended to constrain leaders from ruling forever and becoming absolute monarchs.

One of the central pillars of this ritual is the National Prayer Breakfast, meant to foster reconciliation across political and religious divides. Yet more often than not, the veneer cracks and the exodus resumes.

Bobi Wine is joining a long list, including writer and satirist Kakwenza Rukirabashaija, outspoken feminist and medical anthropologist Stella Nyanzi, blogger and activist

Fred Lumbuye, David Musiri, who was NUP head of institutions, Hillary Innocent Taylor Seguya, the student activist who famously sued President Museveni for blocking him on Twitter (now X), and activist Shafik Ssentongo, to name a few. In addition, NUP continues to demand the whereabouts of at least 18 to 25 supporters who remain unaccounted for after being abducted by drones, the unmarked vans that have become symbols of fear.

This reality drags us into a toxic debate over who truly owns Uganda and what grants one group the authority to strip another of their citizenship rights. Sixty-four years after independence, these fundamental issues remain unresolved.

The resulting acrimony debases the national psyche. Amidst the bitterness, well-meaning citizens and, occasionally, State propagandists plead with us to love the country and separate it from the ugliness of the State. It is not all negative, they argue. Let us portray the positive side.

They have a point, until the disconnect becomes too jarring to ignore. We see expensive international PR campaigns by firms out of the USA and UK, which the Kampala government has paid millions of dollars for, and earnest social media posts by Ugandan men and women showcasing the scenic majesty of Lake Bunyonyi, the mischievous chimpanzees of Kibale Forest, the snow-capped Rwenzori Mountains, and the mists of Kidepo Valley.

It is a curious irony. Ugandans, some educated at the finest institutions in the world, pointing to geological features formed three million years ago, before we emerged as modern humans, and to Rwenzori rocks dating back two billion years, as proof of contemporary national health. The reality is that it is just another descent into national mediocrity.

In this narrative, the flight of a man like Bobi Wine is treated as a mere exception to the ancient scenery, rather than a symptom of a recurring national tragedy today.

Mr Onyango-Obbo is a journalist, writer, and curator of the Wall of Great Africans. X@cobbo3