

Museveni at 81: Succession and the politics of longevity

BY PHILIP WAFULA
& TABU BUTAGIRA

KAMPALA. At 81, President Museveni's future is in his past. The oath he took on Tuesday started his 41st year in power, only dwarfed in Africa by Equatorial Guinea's Teodoro Nguema Mbasogo and his Cameroonian counterpart Paul Biya.

The elaborate inauguration event in Kampala at which the Chief of Defence Forces (CDF), Gen Muhoozi Kainerugaba, handed the father a shield and sword as part of the instruments of power, and the father returning it to him, and not the Head of Public Service Lucy Nakyobe, who was waiting to receive it, signalled to many, including Mr Job Kijja, a governance researcher, that the First Son is a dauphin.

It is a claim former minister Mike Mukula made to American diplomats at the Kampala Mission, according to diplomatic cables leaked by Wikileaks, and former presidential spokesperson Onapito Ekumoloi, who died in September 2024, expressed similar sentiments in his book, *Tears and Triumph: My Life with Yoweri Museveni and Others*.

It's also what the then Coordinator of Intelligence Agencies David Tinyefuza, who has renamed himself Sejusa, stated in a dossier whose publication prompted the government to shut Monitor Publications Ltd, for about a fortnight in 2013.

Since then, Kainerugaba, who was commander of the Special Forces, has not only risen to a full four-star general but in 2025 took charge of the military as CDF after the powers of that office were expanded in the UPDF Establishment - a document on army doctrine, command and control - operationalised months before the First Son's ascension.

The timing of the launch of a crucial document approved a decade earlier, and prompt assignment of the First Son to test drive its implementation, speaks to Mr Museveni's long-term planning that even his four-time challenger Dr Kizza Besigye acknowledges.

Under provisions of the Establishment, the CDF is the only designated commander to directly report military matters to the Commander-in-Chief, making it at present a father-and-son affair.

That son, aged 52, has spread wings to making running public commentary on political, social and diplomatic matters, thereby inserting Uganda at crosshairs with regional neighbours and world leaders.

Other than a father's occasional public verbal censure, Gen Kainerugaba remains largely unrestrained, proclaiming on social media his presidential ambition and gloating during elections about the killings of Opposition supporters by security forces.

His semi-political outfit, the Patriotic League of Uganda (PLU), counts 305 of the 529 members of the 12th Parliament as its own, a significant bloc to influence Uganda's lawmaking, if the numbers are accurate.

Among the officers and rank-and-file of the army, Gen Kainerugaba's crackdown on corruption and arrests of senior commanders has opened financial flows to improve housing, enhance soldiers' salaries and expand medical insurance for themselves and their families.

A new national referral hospital for



Gen Muhoozi Kainerugaba, Chief of Defence Forces

the army has risen in the skies of Mbuya Hill, a Kampala suburb, with building of barracks taking roots in the countryside. For doing what his father delayed to do, Gen Kainerugaba is earning his own credits, adding to trappings of a First Son, and escaping scrutiny.

"Things are looking good and there is hope," said a soldier who, before Gen Kainerugaba's elevation, was contemplating exiting the force.

Another said what Gen Kainerugaba brings on the table to effect tangible changes is what his predecessors lacked: clout of a First Son, proximity to the ears of his father, the CiC, impossibility of being compromised or disrespected by peers, juniors or foreign actors and new expansive powers of a CDF.

The rise to top army leadership of a son reflects the Ugandan leader's willingness to say one thing while meaning or doing another, both of which obscure his plans and keep him ahead in the power game.

His push for stay in power

Childhood friends such as Eriya Kategaya discovered the President's about-face when he pushed for scrapping of the two-term limit in 2005, having inked in the 2001 manifesto that, that would be his last tenure.

After clearing that initial hurdle, Mr Museveni by 2017 had clocked 73. Yet, the Constitution barred any Ugandan above 75 years from standing for President, and the next election was years ahead in 2021.

Before long, an amendment was introduced in Parliament and the age barrier was scrapped, with State-directed brutality. The resulting ignominy of the military's siege at Parliament mirrored the dreaded April 1966 introduction of the Pigeonhole Constitution by the government of Milton Obote.

Some claim Mr Museveni learnt tricks of political astuteness from Obote, citing gerrymandering that has gifted the NRM an unassailable parliamentary majority, which has in turn midwived every Executive-demanded legislation, the latest being the Sovereignty Act. Such manoeuvres demonstrate not just Mr Museveni's versatility, which supporters say is pragmatism, but also his chameleon character.

He deploys political means, including

isolating some opponents while accommodating others, to demonstrate that loyalty yields rewards while dissent is punishable, as his former bush-time doctor Besigye is facing.

Mr Museveni's balkanisation of Uganda into smaller districts and cities, now 146 up from 33 in 1986, under the guise of decentralisation, has extended tentacles of Executive reach to grassroots without the corresponding services or resources as State power remains centrally administered. It has also meant that anyone challenging the incumbent must muster a financial war chest to canvass hundreds of constituencies and endear countless power brokers amidst intensely commercialised politics.

State capture

In this context, Kyambogo University senior lecturer Sultan Juma Kakuba says Mr Museveni's longevity in power is not due to a single tactic, but a combination of them, citing capture of key State institutions, militarisation and balancing domestic and foreign interests.

He says: "Museveni has maintained strategic importance internationally, and made Uganda a key security partner in East Africa, which has helped secure foreign aid and diplomatic tolerance despite governance concerns."

Much less is acknowledged by critics of Mr Museveni's strong self-preservation instincts. A health freak, Mr Museveni undertakes regular medical checks, maintains high levels of hygiene, safeguards assiduously against communicable diseases, eats organic local foods and exercises regularly, including gym time.

He reads extensively to recharge his brain and takes shorter power naps, instead of long sleeps, keeping him intermittently awake to hold decision-making meetings many times deep into the night.

Having witnessed firsthand the distraction alcohol caused Obote, blurring his judgments and concentration, Mr Museveni has chosen to forfeit the bottle to stay alert and fight the battles of power and pet subject: socio-economic transformation of Uganda.

The President has trimmed the NRM's original 10-point programme to four goals - democracy, pan-Africanism, patriotism and socio-economic transformation, enabling him to focus on his new ambition: growing Uganda's wealth tenfold by 2040.

Whether it was asking for four years to reset Uganda after capturing power in 1986, or seeking extension in office to make a new Constitution and afterwards test its workings, Mr Museveni now and then has chosen a big-ticket thing to do to justify his continued stay in power.

Uganda to him is an unfinished business that only he, at least when alive, can shape. The planned ten-fold growth in the Gross Domestic Product may be a mission dear to his heart, but one which points to how long he may want to keep around to achieve it.

The political organisation he has set up, the economic policies pursued and critical focus on security capability have Museveni covering all his defences, aiding his presence in power longer than the period served by his predecessors combined, and still counting.