

opinion



Daniel K. Kalinaki In My View

Here is how Museveni or Besigye can lose if they win, win if they lose

It is tough being a political pundit. After a bruising and bitter election in 2006, the conventional wisdom was that 2011 would be candidate Museveni's toughest fight for re-election, now that Kizza Besigye had the time and space to organise the FDC into a viable alternative.

Yet not only did Mr Museveni increase his percentage share of the vote, the election was relatively peaceful to the point of being dull. Yet it had two Black Swans that few pundits had publicly predicted: the walk to work demonstrations that came after the elections and which arguably gave birth to the Opposition's 'defiance' campaign in this election season; and the decision by a majority of voters to vote with their feet and refuse to turn up, for whatever reason, leaving the winner with a minority presidency.

In the post-mortem attempt to make sense of what 2011 and its subsequent events meant, a consensus emerged around the idea that Besigye was a spent force and that the 2016 contest would be between the incumbent and former prime minister Amama Mbabazi.

So what are we to make of Dr Besigye's resurgence, Mr Museveni being forced to work

overtime for his dinner, and 2016 going from a dead rubber to a live wire?

The easiest answer is one that we have known for many years now; that Uganda is now polarised into the M7-Yekka camp on the one hand, and the Anyone But Museveni (ABM) camp on the other. This is best seen in the aggressive rhetoric from both sides, the near messianic hero worship of their respective candidates, and the absence of moderate views.

This means that supporters are willing to do anything for their candidates, including giving gifts, washing streets but are not willing to cede any ground to rival supporters, or pull from the margins to the centre.

In a winner-takes-all system, these polarised positions mean that the winner and the losers all have to know how and what to lose and win, respectively.

For candidate Museveni, for instance, scrapping past the post with only a small margin will allow him retain the presidency but he would then have to spend a lot of political and financial capital to gain the wider legitimacy necessary to govern, oversee a transition on his own terms, or seek the constitutional amendments necessary should he

So there are many races in one. Assume 12 million of the 15.7 million voters vote, a win would be a win for Besigye, even if losing Parliament means he would struggle to govern. Similarly, a win would be a win for Museveni, but if he got, say 6.5 million votes to Besigye's 5.2 million, he would, taking all the advantages of incumbency into consideration, have 'lost'.

wish to run again in 2021.

To some extent, also, Mr Museveni is running against the NRM; a comfortable parliamentary majority will ease the new government's legislative agenda but if his own percentage is significantly lower than the party, or if it cedes too much ground to independent candidates, then the emergence of a significant reform-minded section in the party could turn managing the caucus a full-time job and the transition a major headache.

Similarly, for Dr Besigye, a bittersweet outcome would be for him to win the presidency with a minority in Parliament. This would create two power centres in the country and either slow down the legislative reforms he

has promised to undertake if elected, or force him to resort to the very patronage he accuses Mr Museveni of using to stay in power and get his way.

So Dr Besigye needs to pull the party behind him and hope that the Opposition and independent candidates win enough seats to, at the very least, deny the NRM the two-thirds majority.

If Dr Besigye loses the presidential race, he needs to win a lot more votes – in other words lose strongly – in order to keep his own political career and, more importantly, the momentum for reform alive.

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As we shall argue next week, a win-win scenario for Uganda would be a return to the spirit of Moshi – but that's something for we'd have to find the missing middle pieces of our political jigsaw puzzle.

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