The verdict on NRM's 40 years: Gun rule Vs democratic rule

We started the week with celebrations marking 40 years of the NRM in power. That is no mean feat. It means 10 years from now, the NRM will have been in power for half a century.

The party's leaders have been talking proudly of the government's achievements. Ugandans who have benefited from the government will no doubt agree that the NRM has achieved a lot. The same applies to those who have led the government.

But the best way to arrive at the truth is to assess the government's achievements like an impartial judge. This means you are looking at evidence and facts and ignoring emotions.

Let us begin with what tops the list of the things the NRM says it launched an armed rebellion to restore: democracy. Is Uganda a democratic country? Do people have the right to choose their leaders in free and fair elections?

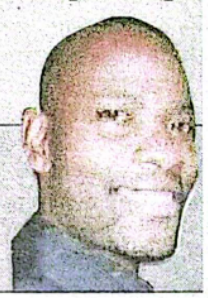
Can supporters of Opposition politicians vote for/campaign freely for their candidates without being intimidated, harassed or persecuted?

In theory, the answer to all these questions is yes. But in practice, we all know — at least those of us who have followed political developments closely for decades — that the answer is a ringing, undeniable no.

The NRM has clearly demonstrated that trying to compete with President Museveni for the highest political position, the presidency, is not only unacceptable but it is also extremely risky, unless you are a lightweight politician with insignificant support.

But if you are hugely popular and you have the potential to unseat the President, the government comes down on you like a tonne of bricks. It makes life hell for you. Ask Dr Kizza Besigye and Robert Kyagulanyi, aka Bobi Wine.

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Musaazi Namiti
Governance

There is no truly democratic country that does to its political opponents what Uganda has done to these two men.

In some of Africa's best-governed countries — such as Botswana, Cape Verde, Mauritius and Seychelles — it is unthinkable that contesting a presidential election can be a real danger to your life. These countries do not have political prisoners. No one is jailed on trumped-up charges because they support a popular Opposition candidate.

When Botswana's former president Sereste Khama Ian Khama wrote about our January 15 election in an opinion article published by South Africa's leading news site, the *Daily Maverick*, he said democracy in his country had lived up to its promise. "Not so for Uganda," he added.

He was stating the obvious, of course. Watch the video of what Mr Kagulanyi's wife, Barbie, said after a raid by the security forces on their home, and you will see why Uganda's claim to democratic rule is laughable.

Where, in a democratic country, does a presidential candidate lose an election and security forces raid his home, smash doors, steal money (Mr Kagulanyi made this allegation), undress his wife, pull her hair, ask for the password to her phone? Where?

The raid was a damning indictment of Uganda's leadership. And that should make our leaders ashamed. They have clearly demonstrated it is gun rule at play, not democratic rule. If you have the people's support and no guns, forget about leading Uganda. It is all in black and white.

If I was a judge ruling on whether Uganda is a democracy, given what I have written, I would say there is overwhelming evidence to suggest it is not and has not been for most of its 60-plus years of independence.

On the economic front, the NRM's accomplishments still leave a lot to be desired. It is all very well to cite figures that suggest the economy has done well for decades. But why has a strong economy failed to tackle seemingly small problems such as unreliable electricity supply? The NRM inherited power outages in 1986. There are still power outages even in Kampala. That means 40 years fixing just one problem and making little no progress.

Musaazi Namiti | *linkedin.com/in/musaazinamiti/*

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