

Why Museveni swears in on May 12



Mr Yoweri Museveni swears in as the President of Uganda for his first elected term on May 12, 1996, at the Kololo Independence Grounds in Kampala. PHOTO/ FILE

Mr Museveni has a prime eye on history. By this token, he could appreciate the significance of May 12 as either being symbolic of his own beginning or his end.

BY PHILIP MATOGO

In Ugandan history, May 12 is most significant as the traditional date for the presidential swearing-in ceremony, marking the commencement of new terms for President Museveni. This May 12 will be no different. President-elect Museveni will be sworn in for his seventh term at the Kololo Independence Grounds.

One must ask, why does President Museveni insist on May 12 as the date for his swearing-in? Could it be superstition? As to the latter, Ronald Reagan's presidential inauguration dates were set by the US 20th Amendment, which mandates January 20. However, the 40th president of the United States' scheduling was believed to be heavily influenced by his wife Nancy's belief in astrology.

In 1967, Reagan was sworn in as Governor of California at 12:10am. At the time, news reports suggested this unusual hour was chosen based on favourable astrological signs, though Reagan publicly attributed it to avoiding a conflict with a football game.

Following the 1981 assassination attempt, First Lady Nancy Reagan hired astrologer Joan Quigley to guide the president's schedule. Quigley claimed she determined the "exact minute" for press conferences, speeches, and even the departures of Air Force One.

Binaisa falls

With this in mind, did the Bachwezi gods demand President-elect Museveni swear in on May 12? If so, probably only in the sense that they "may" have, pun unintended. However, the truth might be a little more prosaic than that.

On May 12, 1980, Uganda's president, Godfrey Binaisa, was removed from office by the Military Commission of the Uganda National Liberation Front (UNLF) following his attempt to sack Army Chief of Staff, Brig David Oyite-Ojok.

The Military Commission, led by Paulo Muwanga, with Yoweri Museveni as his deputy, seized power and placed Binaisa under house arrest. Binaisa's 11-month presidency ended, leading to a period of military rule until the disputed December 1980 General Election. After which, candidate Museveni went to the bush and the rest, as they say, is history. But is it history?

May 12, at least in National Resistance Movement (NRM) folklore, represents the crossing of the Rubicon for the country. For it not only revealed, rather conclusively, the military's chokehold on our politics. It also presaged the coming of an election and war that chronicles the

NRM/A's origin story.

Museveni as vice

In his April 1990 pamphlet, titled "Notes on Concealment of Genocide in Uganda," former prime minister and two-time president of Uganda, Apollo Obote, wrote thus: "During the rule of the Military Commission, there was no minister of De-

fence. The Commission, as a collegiate, handled all military matters. Thus Paulo Muwanga, David Oyite-Ojok, Zed Maruru and William Omaria curbed, with some difficulties, Museveni's senseless killings. At the beginning of its rule, the Military Commission, with one dissenting voice—Museveni's—pledged and committed itself to holding multi-party general elections within the period the Moshi Conference had appointed. The period appointed was 'within 18 months after the total liberation of Uganda.' Amin's forces were defeated and driven out of Uganda on June 3, 1979."

He further wrote thus: "It is a credit to the members of the Military Commission (minus Museveni) that they kept the pledge. In meetings of the Commission and of the interim Parliament, Museveni was vehemently opposed to elections. His pet point was that Uganda was in a revolution, and an election was not necessary. Museveni even went to Tanzania and Mozambique, where he appealed, in vain, to Presidents [Julius] Nyerere and Samora Machel to stop the elections."

Of course, Obote's view was coloured by his political suasion and not necessarily by political fact. However, there might be other pointers explaining Mr Museveni's penchant for days past that preceded and followed the date of Binaisa's fall.

Psychology matters

In psychology the past influences the future through memory, habits, and ingrained beliefs, often shap-

ing how individuals perceive, react to, and project onto new situations. Formative experiences (especially childhood) create scripts for future behaviours, affecting self-esteem, decision-making, and emotional reactions years later.

Experts say there are three ways the past shapes the future. First, there is episodic memory and simulation. Here, the brain uses memories of past experiences to construct, predict, and simulate future scenarios.

Second, there are cognitive biases and beliefs. Here, past failures or successes create filters (e.g., "I don't matter") that create self-limiting beliefs, dictating future opportunities and emotional health.

Last, there is projection and interpersonal dynamics. Here, unresolved past issues (e.g., childhood trauma) can lead to projecting old fear or distrust onto new, neutral, or trustworthy people.

With respect to projection and interpersonal dynamics, could Mr Museveni's fear of a coup or military takeover have been projected on the date May 12 and thereby making him select it to this very date to see if history will repeat itself and thus expose his real or imagined enemies?

Mr Museveni's involvement in the removal of president Binaisa, one might argue, carries the seeds of its own destruction. By removing Binaisa, Museveni and his co-conspirators proved that a president could be removed from office by force. Hence, this act alone possesses inherent flaws or contradictions that will inevitably lead to the NRM's downfall.

Often attributed to thinkers like Mark Twain, the quote about an organisation carrying the seeds of its own destruction means that the causes of failure are built-in, frequently arising from excessive success or corruption.

A neye for history

In the 2025 book *Slow Poison: Idi Amin, Yoweri Museveni, and the Making of the Ugandan State* by Mahmood Mamdani, Mr Museveni reportedly employs another Mark Twain quote regarding his health in relation to deceased literary giants.

It goes: "Chaucer is dead, so is Milton, so is Shakespeare, and I'm not feeling so well myself." Mr Museveni reportedly replaced Chaucer, Milton and Shakespeare with Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin and Mao Zedong to metaphorically highlight his own health.

This shows that Mr Museveni has a prime eye on history and what it purports. By this token, Mr Museveni could appreciate the significance of May 12 as either being symbolic of his own beginning or his own end.

Dates do indeed matter to Mr Museveni. According to statements from those present, including former Bush War fighter Winnie Byanyima, Kampala effectively fell to the National Resistance Army (NRA) led by Mr Museveni on January 25, 1986.

However, the NRM/A purposefully delayed the official declaration and celebration of the victory until January 26, 1986. This was done to avoid the negative symbolism of sharing the same date (January 25) with the 1971 coup in which Idi Amin took power.

QUICK FACTS ON TUESDAY SWEARING-IN CEREMONY

- It will mark the formal commencement of Mr Museveni's seventh consecutive elective term.
- The new term will run from 2026 to 2031, extending Mr Museveni's rule to 45 years by 2031.
- At least 35 heads of state are expected at the event that will take place at Kololo Independence Grounds in Kampala.
- Steeped in history, the ceremony will typically include the administration of oaths by the Chief Justice, the handover of instruments of power, a 21-gun salute, and a military parade.
- Following the presidential swearing-in on Tuesday, newly elected members of Uganda's 12th Parliament will be sworn in from May 13 to 15.