

A 300% rise in divorce reveals the revolution Museveni lost

On January 26, the National Resistance Movement (NRM) and President Museveni marked 40 years in power. Following victory in the disputed January 15 vote, the countdown to May has begun, when Museveni will be sworn in to begin a march towards 45 years in office.

When you hold the steering wheel for nearly half a century, you fall into the age trap. The common refrain is that Uganda is a classic study in the African story: a continent of teenagers ruled by octogenarians. Across Africa, the median age is 19, while the average age of the 10 oldest heads of State is roughly 81. In Uganda, this demographic gulf is huge. President Museveni, at 81, governs a nation with a median age of 17.1. His Cabinet is a generational fortress, with my friend, Deputy Prime Minister Moses Ali, at 86, and Finance minister Matia Kasija at 81.

Yet to suggest they are out of touch simply because of age is a lazy observation. The shift is structural, not just chronological. The Uganda of 1986, which the NRM inherited, was a collection of traditional, predictable households. Today, that domestic unit has been reshaped. In 1986, single-parent families, the product of war and displacement, accounted for about 10 percent of households. Today, that figure is nearly 30 percent.

The Ugandan home is no longer the patriarchal monolith it once was. In 1986, female home ownership was almost zero, hobbled by culture and male-biased law. Today, women are a formidable class of proprietors, owning nearly 20 percent of registered urban property. Their participation in the non-agricultural workforce has jumped from a few clerical roles to 48 percent.

Most telling is the 300 percent increase in divorce petitions over the last 40 years. Women are increasingly exercising the autonomy to dissolve non-performing social

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contracts, a defiance that mirrors a growing impatience with stagnant political ones.

The spiritual map has also shifted. In 1986, Uganda was dominated by hierarchical institutions: the Catholic and Anglican churches and traditional Islam. There were fewer than 500 Pentecostal miracle centres. Today, including those meeting under mango trees and in papyrus shades, there are more than 50,000. Pentecostals have surged to 25 percent of the population, flocking to independent leaders like Joseph Serwadda. This is not just a change in prayer; it is a move from centralised religious authority to a fragmented, entrepreneurial spiritual market.

The physical geography has expanded beyond recognition. At least 15 towns, several of which are now cities, including Mbarara, Masaka, Gulu, Lira and Arua, had populations several times Kampala's at independence in 1962. Thousands of peri-urban neighbourhoods have sprouted along highways, creating a sprawling semi-urban belt that exists in a grey zone between the village and the city.

Education and culture have kept pace with this growth. In 1986, there were only Makerere and the fledgling Bugema. Today, there are 57 universities. In the arts, 1986 featured a handful of musicians; today, more than

10,000 artists like Azawi and Joshua Baraka bypass traditional gatekeepers to publish directly to Spotify and YouTube.

The economic umbilical cord has also loosened. In 1986, 90 per cent of Ugandans were tied to the hoe. Today, that figure has dropped to 64 per cent. Remittances have surged from almost nothing to more than \$1.4 billion annually, rivalling traditional exports. This is an increasingly "detritationalised" nation.

The old leadership offers a patron-state, a hierarchical system in which the leader provides security in exchange for loyalty. But the modern Ugandan requires a platform state. This decentralised infrastructure provides the technology and legal tools for citizens to create their own value, like an operating system rather than a ruler.

The Ugandan of 2026 possesses the capacity to decouple from failing systems and move towards better opportunities. An 81-year-old leadership, rooted in the command-and-control logic of the bush, cannot fully respond to this shift. They provide the wisdom of a static past to a population building a networked future.

In practical terms, they succeed on old metrics: keeping the borders intact and maintaining a monopoly on violence. However, they struggle where the new Uganda lives: in the peri-urban slums where Parish Development Model (PDM) money evaporates into patronage. They falter when they shut down the internet, the entry point for a youth whose marketplace is global.

The exit is no longer a flight into exile, it is the \$1.4 billion sent by a gward in Qatar to build a house in Wakiso, bypassing state structures. The entry is a 19-year-old in Masaka selling digital art globally online, while the government still thinks of him as a peasant to be mobilised for a rally.

Museveni is winning the battles of 1986, but he is losing today's because he is building a hut for a family that has already moved into an apartment block.

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