

sunday feature

Museveni in last minute effort to secure NRM 'black spots'

Another round. Soroti is one of the four districts that FDCs Kizza Besigye defeated President Museveni in the 2011 polls. At Mr Museveni's rally in Soroti Municipality, his meeting was interrupted by a brief downpour. Just four days later, Dr Besigye held a rally in the same area that surely did not miss the attention of the NRM, writes **Solomon Arinaitwe**.

When President Museveni rushes back to a cluster of regional municipalities for a second round of hastily arranged rallies, he will be confronted by the same troubles that derailed his first round of rallies and forced him into a return.

As the campaigns hit the tail end, Mr Museveni has decided to rush back to selected municipalities in east and northern Uganda, where he campaigned in most of November and December, in a last attempt to regain the initiative he calculates to have lost to Kizza Besigye and Amama Mbabazi.

Mr Museveni will start today – just four days to the polls – traverse the northern Uganda municipalities of Arua, Gulu and Lira. He will then go to the east with a set of rallies in Soroti, Mbale, Tororo and Jinja.

And Museveni's fears were vindicated by polls that have indicated that he has lost ground, with one poll conducted by this newspaper putting his rating at 59 per cent while another by Research World International (RWI) indicated that his support had plummeted to a marginal 51 per cent, and the most recent by research firm Ipsos putting him at 53 per cent.

Closing gap

With Besigye closing the gap at 32 per cent in the RWI survey, the polls sent shock waves within the NRM camp, and though Mr Museveni's handlers will put on a brave face and attempt to pour scorn on the findings of the polls, privately, they were concerned about the poll ratings and designed a Plan B of revisiting some municipalities.

Mr Museveni says having been in these areas at the beginning of the campaigns, he will be going back to reawaken his supporters.

And if the crowds are anything to go by, Dr Besigye's campaign seemed to gather more steam in Bugisu with the rally he convened in Mbale by far more attended than Mr Museveni's rally there, an indication that the FDC flag bearer may be regaining the critical district he lost by more than 30,000 votes in 2011.

But when Mr Museveni makes his second return to Mbale, the fulcrum of Bugisu, he will again be faced with the dissenting voices over the failed resettlement programme for landslide victims in the Bududa areas, the Mt Elgon land wrangles and the impasse over the payments of more than Shs9 billion to farmers who were supplying coffee to Bugisu Cooperative Union (BCU) before its activities were suspended.

These frustrations have been fodder for Opposition presidential candidates.

Mbale NRM party chairman, Mahmud Masaba, who was part of organising committee of Mr Museveni's first round of campaigns in the Bugisu sub-region and is part of the brains behind the latest rallies, acknowledges that the need to neutralise the budding structures of Dr Besigye and Mr Mbabazi informed Mr Museveni's return.

"Mbale is among the places where Mbabazi and Besigye are con-

Areas Museveni will revisit

THE TOWNS

- Arua
- Gulu
- Lira
- Soroti
- Mbale
- Tororo
- Jinja



centrating. There is a lot of confusion there. It is among what I can call the black spots. That is why he is coming back for consultation meetings. That is the strategy," Mr Masaba says.

When he heads back to Soroti for the second round, it will not be lost on Museveni that when he started his campaigns in eastern Uganda in November with rallies in Katakwi, he was immediately confronted by the hangover from the NRM primaries that has produced Independents fighting for political turf with the official party flag bearers.

At a rally in Usuk County, the battle between Independents and NRM flag bearers was manifest by the presence of Viola Akurut, the NRM flag bearer for the Katakwi Woman MP contest, and Education minister Jessica Alupo, who was defeated in the primaries.

Peter Ogwang Vs Alupo and Jeje Odong vs Musa Eweru are the other battles from within that the NRM is struggling to contain in Teso sub-region. Capt Mike Mukula, the NRM vice chairperson for eastern Uganda, says such "contradictions will affect individuals and not the President".

Alive to the troubles Mr Museveni

encountered with his first rallies, Mukula says the President may make "fresh commitments" when he returns to Teso.

With rallies in Katakwi, where Museveni launched his eastern tour, receiving a lukewarm reception, those in the know suspected that the internal bickering might hurt the party's fortunes at the presidential race.

As he traversed most of eastern Uganda, Museveni had no answers for the divisive issue of compensation but just called for patience.

Mukula hangover

In Soroti, a hangover over the flip-flopping ways of Capt Mukula has left many there with a bitter taste. When Mukula rowed back on his promise to challenge for the presidency and even opted out of the parliamentary race, he was left with egg on his face.

And Soroti is one of the four districts that Dr Besigye defeated Mr Museveni in the 2011 polls. Dr Besigye polled 41,872 votes to Museveni's 23,711. At his rally in Soroti Municipality, his meeting was interrupted by a brief downpour. Just four days later, Dr Besigye held a rally in the same

area that surely did not miss the attention of the NRM.

Mr Mukula admits that though the Go Forward candidate had initiated some cells in Teso, they have since fallen apart as Mbabazi failed to live up to the "expectations" of his supporters.

"The star that Amama had initially gained has waned. His candle is dimming. There were expectations that he had a lot of money but the young people have not seen it. His campaigns have been mismanaged at the headquarters," Mr Mukula says.

In Tororo, the pulse of Bukedi sub-region where Mr Museveni is making another last minute attempt to win over the hearts and minds, a dispute over the creation of a new district is yet to be resolved. A dispute between the Iteso and the Japhadola over the creation of new a district has stalled progress.

During his first campaigns there, Mr Museveni blamed the dispute for the failure to create a district and instead chose to attack the Tororo County MP Geoffrey Ekanya, warning the people of Tororo against electing Opposition MPs.



NRM presidential candidate Yoweri Museveni. COURTESY PHOTO