WHEN MUSEVENI WON FIRST ELECTION

POLITICS

As *New Vision* celebrates 40 years of existence, we bring you some of the most outstanding stories that *New Vision* has covered over the years.

Joseph Batte brings you the story of how President Yoweri Museveni won his first presidential election.

It was May 9, 1996. The sun was just rising over Kampala when 25-year-old Mama Fatuma woke up at 6:00am in her small house in downtown Kisenyi, Kampala. She tied her *leesu* tight, picked up her voter's card and joined thousands of others walking to the polling station, a stone's throw away from her home.

"Today, my voice counts," she told her neighbour, a teacher named Joseph Kutosi. "After all these years of fighting and suffering, we are choosing our leader with a pen, not a gun."

Mama Fatuma was not alone. Across Uganda – from the green hills of western Uganda to the dusty roads of the east and even in the war-torn northern Uganda – ordinary people like her queued for hours.

Some carried babies on their backs. Others wore their Sunday best. Old men who had fought in past wars leaned on walking sticks. Young women in bright dresses chatted excitedly.

This was Uganda's first direct presidential election after 34 years of independence. After the dark days of Idi Amin and the chaos of the 1980s under Milton Obote, Ugandans were finally voting straight for their president.

The *New Vision* head office in Kampala was buzzing like a beehive. Reporters had slept little.

Why did this day matter so much? Let's go back a little. In 1986, President Yoweri Museveni marched into Kampala with his National Resistance Army fighters. He had fought a long war in the Luwero Triangle (1981-86).

Thousands died, but he promised peace, unity and no more killings. For 10 years, Uganda knew no multi-party elections. Museveni ruled under the "movement system" – no parties, just individual leaders chosen on merit.

Many called it "no-party democracy." Critics said it was one-man rule. But roads started getting repaired. Schools opened again. Shops filled up. People could sleep without fear of soldiers knocking at their doors to rob them at midnight.

Then came the new Constitution in 1995. It said: "Let the people choose the president directly." Museveni, then aged 52, faced two opponents – Paul Kawanga Ssemogerere (now deceased) and Dr Kibirige Mayanja.

Museveni, wearing his signature hat, campaigned like a father of the nation. "No change!" he told crowds. "We have brought peace. We have started building. Why go back?" He pointed to new tarmac roads, better hospitals, and the fight against HIV/AIDS.

His 17-point manifesto was simple: It meant more schools, more farms, more security. In every village, Museveni reminded people of the bad old days.

His main challenger was Ssemogerere, a calm and respected politician. Then, he was the leader of the Democratic Party. At 64, he wore suits and spoke softly but firmly. He wanted real multi-party politics. "Let every voice be heard," he said, adding: "No more one side only." He formed a coalition called the Inter-Party Forces Co-operation and many liked him.

Then came Mayanja from the Justice Forum, who at the time also worked as a director of planning and development at Makerere University. He spoke for the youth, but had little money to reach far-flung villages. His votes would be few.

Election day itself felt like a festival. In Luwero district, where the bush war started, Mzee Kato, a farmer, walked 5km to vote. "I lost two sons in the war. Museveni stopped the bloodshed. Today, I thank him with my vote," he said.

In Gulu, despite rebel threats from the Lord's Resistance Army, brave mothers still lined up. "We want peace here too," one of them told *New Vision* then.

The turnout was huge – almost 73% (6.2 million people) of the 8.5 million registered voters showed up to vote. In some western Uganda districts, however, the turnout was above 90%. People waited patiently.

As counting began that evening, the *New Vision* newsroom filled with tension. Phones rang non-stop. By May 10, 1996, the picture was clear.

Candidate Museveni had won with 4,458,195 votes (74.3%). Ssemogerere got 1,416,140 votes (23.6%). Mayanja managed 123,291 votes (2.1%). About 196,000 ballots were spoilt.

"*Museveni Wins First Direct Presidential Election*," read the *New Vision* headline after the Electoral Commission announced the results.

Kampala erupted into wild celebrations. Cars honked. Young men danced on the streets. Women ululated. Museveni's supporters carried branches and sang liberation songs.

At Kololo Airstrip three days later (May 12, 1996), Museveni was sworn in as the duly elected president for the first time. His wife Janet stood beside him, smiling proudly. Museveni raised his hand and took oath.

In his victory message, Museveni spoke with the confidence of a man who had fought and won twice. "We defeated them by bullet in 1986 and by ballot in 1996," he declared to cheering crowds.

He thanked Ugandans for trusting him to continue the journey of peace and development. "This is not the end. It is the beginning of a new Uganda where every citizen feels part of the Government."

However, not everyone was celebrating. Ssemogerere stood before journalists at his home in Kabusu, Rubaga division, and said: "I cannot accept these results as valid." He listed 54 incidents his team had recorded, including voters being scared away by soldiers, pre-ticked ballot papers, fake voter cards and names missing from registers.

"Whether Museveni won the elections or not, I can tell you, there was rigging," Ssemogerere told the media. International observers watched closely. They said the voting itself was mostly peaceful and orderly.

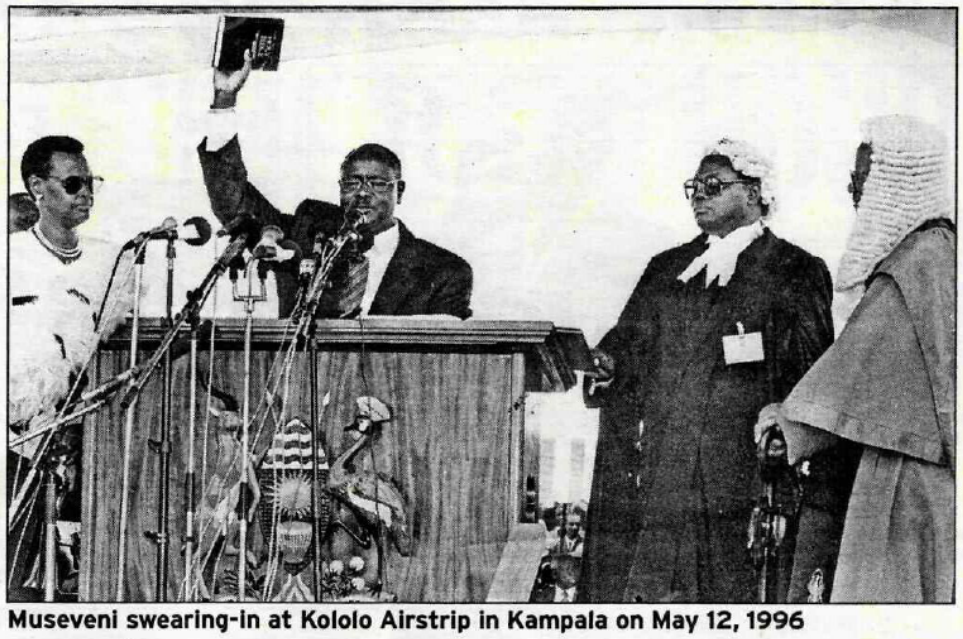
Polling stations opened, people ticked their papers in secret and boxes were sealed. In most places, they concluded it was fair. But they also noted problems: The no-party system gave Museveni an advantage because he controlled state radio, cars and money. Opposition rallies faced harassment. One official later called them "fundamental flaws."

New Vision printed special editions. The front page after voting day showed long queues of smiling faces and a high turnout – proof that Ugandans wanted to decide their future.

Thirty years later, *New Vision* celebrates 40 years of telling Uganda's story, the 1996 election remains one of those captured moments.

Now aged 65, Mama Fatuma still remembers the events of the day as if they happened yesterday: "I voted with my heart because I wanted my grandchildren to grow in peace."

Now retired, Kutosi says: "That day we felt big, like real citizens."



Museveni swearing-in at Kololo Airstrip in Kampala on May 12, 1996

WHY MUSEVENI WON BIG

Why did President Yoweri Museveni win so big? The reasons were simple. First was peace. After years of fear, many Ugandans, especially in the west, central and parts of the east, felt safe for the first time. A mother in Mbarara could send her children to school without worry. A trader in Jinja could move goods without roadblocks every kilometre. They gave credit to Museveni.

Second, real changes on the ground. New schools were built. Farmers got better seeds. The economy grew fast, about 7% every year. Shops had sugar and soap again. People could plan for tomorrow.

Third, the power of memory. Museveni kept reminding everyone of the Luwero skulls, the killings under past leaders. Museveni's campaign team even ran pictures in the media, including *New Vision*, showing bones of people who died during the Luwero war. It was accompanied with a message: "A vote for Ssemogerere is a vote for Obote. Vote Museveni for peace." It scared many into choosing Museveni, who had brought peace.

Fourth, villages loved him. Most Ugandans live in rural areas. Museveni spoke their language – Runyankore, Luganda and simple Swahili. He danced with them at rallies. He promised boreholes and roads. Town people might argue about parties, but elderly women in remote areas related with Museveni as "their son who brought light."

Yet the win was not perfect. In some northern Uganda areas, the turnout was lower. Opposition strongholds like Buganda complained loudly. But there was hope.

BUYENDE DISTRICT SERVICE COMMISSION

Office of the District Service Commission
P. O. Box 87 Kamuli

CORRECTION ON External Advert NO. 1 OF 2026

Correction is hereby made on Buyende District Local Government external advert No. 1, 2026 published in the New Vision of 16th March, 2026 on Page 40 where the No. of positions for the post of Enrolled Midwife was understated and the department of community-based Services wrongly written. The correct information is here below stated;

DEPARTMENT	REF. NO	POST/ TITLE	SALARY SCALE	NO. OF VACANCIES
HEALTH	BDLG/HRM/156/5/2026	Enrolled Midwife	U7Med	03
COMMUNITY BASED SERVICES	BDLG/HRM/156/11/2026	Assistant Community Development Officer	U6	01

Terms and conditions remain as earlier stated.

SECRETARY, DISTRICT SERVICE COMMISSION BUYENDE

TOMORROW: HOW MAYOR NASSER SSEBAGGALA WAS ARRESTED IN AMERICA