

How Museveni built, sustained his power bank

From the military and bureaucracy to churches, markets and local councils, Yoweri Museveni's influence has seeped into nearly every layer of Ugandan public life.

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President Museveni's four-decade rule over Uganda has, domestically and internationally, been garbed in red-carpet rolls and titles of disdain.

In good label, he is a public intellectual, liberal reformist and democrat, the kind former United States President Bill Clinton aptly baptised a "new breed" African leader.

His long stay in power, according to multiple sources close to him, anchors on strategic planning, patience, a gift of discernment, alliance mutations and firm control over a strong army he has built from a ragtag guerrilla outfit.

At home, the Uganda People's Defence Forces (UPDF) crushes armed rebellions, mediates political disputes, subdues regime opponents, midwives elections and undergirds civil works, including emergency response and infrastructure building.

Its rank-and-file alternate between security work, including patrolling neighbours and controlling traffic on the streets. Some of its notable officers are grafted in Parliament and bureaucracy, helping to co-birth laws, some of them draconian; to run big-ticket budgets; and, to make final calls on agriculture and livelihoods, immigration and citizenship, law enforcement, human health and diplomacy.

Role of Army

That is, after securing feted VIPs and foreign investors, the country's skies, land and water. The army decides who mines sand under the lakes and who hatches and catches fish, of what size, using what gears, and administers in real time, often brutally, penalties for breaches.

Such ubiquitous military presence has given Mr Museveni's government a last-mile creeping among the population, keeping in check citizens and netizens worried that they are spied on in physical and digital spaces.

Through grassroots intelligence and local councils, the big brother's watch has nattered mischief against the

and cultural groups to assert State influence over private life, faith and finance.

Religious freedom has brought to Uganda a fast-growing Pentecostal movement, and to Mr Museveni's feet both the newcomers and traditional faiths, with the risk of antagonism no better illuminated than by Church of Uganda Archbishop Samuel Kaziimba, who told his flock he had a life to live – by extension enjoy – than risk martyrdom like his predecessor Janani Luwum and other biblical prophets.

His networks

Over the 40 years of holding power, the Ugandan leader's networks – and by default informers – permeate corporates, public officials, professionals, clerics, market vendors, academics, media practitioners and villagers.

Also pliant are farmers' groups, who get free livestock and seedlings from the army-run Operation Wealth Creation, and the teachers, touts and boda bodas. President Museveni has publicly proclaimed that he works with the latter who in their thousands, maze up as ears and eyes on urban streets and village paths, supplementing the reconnaissance and surveillance work of intelligence agencies, police and security forces.

For such overbearing governmentality, aided by wiretapping and digital monitoring capabilities, academics such as scholar Moses Khisa and Helen Epstein, the author of the book, *Another Fine Mess: America, Uganda and the War on Terror*, separately characterise Mr Museveni's leadership as "authoritarian" and "dictatorial".

These labels may be uncharitable, often unwelcome and dismissed by the 81-year-old's lackeys as ruminations of disgruntled 'foreign agents' and scholars disconnected from reality.

However, they sketch the transition of a man who, in the early years of his government, rode in open-roof vehicles to cheers of roadside admirers, to one who, on his inauguration for a seventh elective term last week, spoke behind bulletproof shields, separating from the very people who the Electoral Commission (EC) announced overwhelmingly voted him back into power.

Such a paradox may explain why the US Department of State simply calls the Kampala administration a "hybrid", a diplomatic way of saying it is neither a democracy nor an outright autocracy despite UPDF's outsized role outside traditional national defence.

Beyond the borders, the Ugandan military has played a proxy liberator in Rwanda and South Sudan, lurching across Congo's thickets to change

and parachuted to Somalia to dislodge the al-Shabaab.

Mr Museveni also positioned himself as an early ally in the US-led war on terror, which, alongside his stranglehold at home and in the Great Lakes, endeared him to the embrace and largesse of the West and foreign investors, earning him a regional security doyen badge.

Despite blots over rising rights abuses that local and international defenders such as Human Rights Watch have documented under his watch, Mr Museveni remains a safe pair of hands for continuity and stability, a signature magnet for foreign direct investment that has poured into Uganda with his oversight.

The democratic credentials for which Clinton lauded him as a new breed African leader have faded and he won the January 15 vote by landslide after the army that his son commands admitted brutalising, arresting and killing supporters of the main opponent Robert Kyagulanyi, alias Bobi Wine, who fled with family into exile for safety.

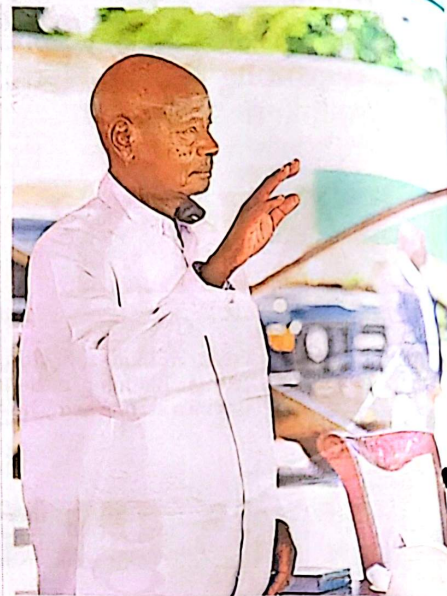
These are the kinds of State excesses that Mr Museveni and compatriots say drove them to execute the five-year guerrilla war in which thousands died to deliver a Uganda of promised human security, the rule of law and prosperity.

Wealth as a tool

To his credit, wealth in Uganda has multiplied, and the most vocal critics of the President are largely better off today than in the past, limiting their push for change to levels far enough not to stagnate or reverse their own fortunes – a curb on the struggle for change.

And Mr Museveni knows it. He permits political parties and critics, within his rules, the latitude to vent anger and challenge him, including at workshops, public rallies and in proliferating media spaces.

Those who shatter the ceiling of tolerable criticism are, however, met with coercion, pretrial imprisonment



President Museveni and wife Janet Museveni during a function at Kololo Ceremonial Grounds on May 25, 2025. PHOTO/PPU

or enforced disappearance, making challenging Mr Museveni risky, according to lawyer and good governance advocate Sarah Bireete.

She was detained ahead of the January 15 presidential poll on accusations of the national voters' roll and is out on bail.

"Money and violence have played a key role in benefiting the incumbent to keep a grip on power," Ms Bireete said, noting that Museveni has deployed a carrot-and-stick approach, co-optation of opponents and violent suppression of dissent.

Nonetheless, dyed-in-the-wool supporters such as ex-lawmaker Emmanuel Dombó, now the ruling party's spokesperson, see no wrong and say Mr Museveni's sway over the nation is a result of his innate flair and practical approach to governance, where means and methods morph to suit evolving realities.

That is a more centrist disposition that allows for explanations or excuses for Executive overreaches while bulletproofing against criticism whenever the Ugandan captain turns

turncoat. Put another way, a realist view frames any Museveni schemes to stick to the seat that his predecessor Godfrey Binaisa said is "sweet, for understanding, not criticism."

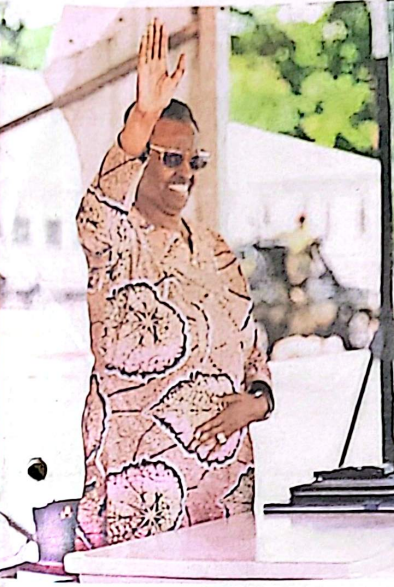
And with that mindset, he has backtracked from his past commitments to Ugandans, shifting goalposts on dangers of a leadership longevity in power and rammed democratic guardrails.

"Since 1986, Mr Museveni has perfected the art of the broken promise," noted Mr Job Kijja, a governance researcher.

For example, in 2005, the constitutional two-term presidential cap, which would have prevented him from seeking re-election the following year, was scrapped in a parliamentary vote preceded by claims of money exchanging hands.

The process was not frictionless and Mr Museveni struck back on his differing comrades by defenestrating them from the Executive, among them figures central in government or bush war that catapulted him to power.

This, in practice, was a classic play of



the mantra that in politics, there are no permanent enemies or friends, only interests, in this case of the incumbent clinging onto the presidential seat contrary to his initial stand.

The problem of Africa, he said at his swearing-in back on January 29, 1986, was leaders who overstayed in power.

After decades in power, Mr Museveni revised his position, saying he meant leaders who stayed in power for long without

His appointees

Many courtiers contend the President is a good-natured human, who means well for Uganda, but is let down by appointees he entrusts with State and government responsibility. That Mr Museveni is charming and humorous in close conversations is given. However, his cheerleaders don't explain why he picks the wrong persons for the rights jobs.

The buck stops with him, former army commander Maj Gen Muntu Mugisha said in the past of his former boss, regarding off-track governance issues afflicting the country, and in essence vacating the altruism claims.

Museveni's opponents

Whereas opponents flog weaknesses of Mr Museveni in making the case why his government must go, the President, on the other hand, targets their strengths to emasculate them, constantly staying ahead in

Fighting a leader who goes nowhere can be frustrating and countless former opponents, among them ministers Norbert Mao and Beatrice Anywar, have ended up in the belly of NRM they long derided as beastly, a corrupt eating club and repressive.

Accommodating such newcomers has helped enrich and reboot the ruling party.

In the gains of the talent pipeline streams acquiescence to a leader whose peers in the initial struggle are either out or dead, suggesting that all in government, except himself, are expendable.

It is unsurprising he called himself the lone visionary steering the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) party, and his party rather than challenge gifted him with an indefinite 'sole candidate' anointment.

That 2014 resolution, invoked every election cycle, has shut the door on internal competition, leaving prospective contenders within NRM to grudgingly cheer Mr Museveni, publicly denounce their ambition or, as former premier Amama Mbabazi did, break ranks and endure the torment and ignominy of bidding for presidency.

Mr Mbabazi is now back to working with Mr Museveni, as compatriots dislodged in the past have done, signalling that the latter's skills to politically isolate, rehabilitate and re-absorb has currency to dwindle external opposition and project his own

1986
WHEN HE TOOK
POWER

KEY PILLARS OF MUSEVENI'S POWER

Military control

The Uganda People's Defence Forces remains central to State stability, elections, internal security and regional operations.

Political patronage

Allies and former critics have been absorbed into government and the ruling party structure.

Grassroots networks

Local councils, boda boda riders,

communities.

Institutional dominance

Critics say key institutions – Parliament, security agencies and local governments – increasingly align with Executive interests.

Regional diplomacy

Uganda's role in regional security has strengthened ties with Western allies and donors.

-The economy and infrastructure

have expanded.
-Uganda has become regionally influential
-Security institutions are stronger

What his critics say:

-Democratic institutions have weakened
-Military influence in civilian affairs has grown
-Elections are increasingly securitised