

National News

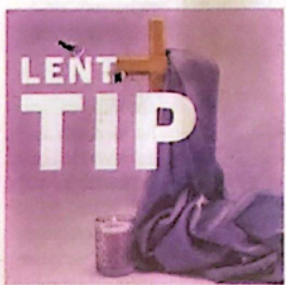
At a personal level, Mr Museveni still retains his charm. But around him, diplomacy is characterised by its absence.

BY PHILIP MATOGO

In 2001, Kololo Independence Grounds in Kampala City was electrified by a high-voltage presidential contest. Crowds had gathered in their thousands, defined by a shared, high-intensity energy, characterised by a mix of euphoria and intense yet controlled enthusiasm.

I lived on Golf Course Road at the time, just below the Independence Grounds. The atmosphere was electric, with a cross-section of crowds united by their passion for their candidate. They could be heard singing, dancing, and cheering in unison.

To ensure his cup runneth over, President Museveni decided to mix things up a little. He leaped onto a boda boda bike, partly to arrive on time for his presidential nomination at Kololo. But mostly to materialise as a man of the people as he navigated through a rushing sea of Ugandans. He immediately stole the headlines and several Ugandans' hearts.



Christians called to reflect on almsgiving

Today let us reflect on almsgiving, one of the three traditional pillars of Lent, together with prayer and fasting (cf. Matthew 6:1-18). What does the Church intend when it recommends almsgiving during Lent?

Almsgiving is not merely giving money to the poor. It is an attitude

How Museveni 40-year rule works like a charm

In April 2004, Mr Museveni struck again. He reportedly used a boda boda to travel roughly 80km to a fundraising event in Kamwenge District (established in 2000) after his helicopter developed mechanical issues.

To be clear, these issues had nothing to do with the "junk helicopter" saga, one of Uganda's most infamous corruption scandals, involving the 1997 purchase of non-airworthy military equipment during the insurgency against the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). All that fell away as Mr Museveni's charm took hold.

Today, such a charm offensive would be unthinkable. Not because Mr Museveni is too old for a boda boda ride, but because he relies more on force than charm. Ms Evelyn Anite, then junior Finance minister, (in)famously stated, "we have the *majje* (army)" in September 2017. So why do they need charm?

Personal charm

At a personal level, Mr Museveni still retains his charm. Around him, however, diplomacy is characterised by its absence. Only possibly his daughter Natasha Museveni Karugire and Maj Gen Kahinda Otafiire make any effort to smile and be polite to *wananchi*. For the rest of the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) party bigwigs, its daggers at dawn. They seem to be out to outdo one another on who can provoke Ugandans the most. It's as if they've drawn a line in the sand and dared ordinary people to cross it just to get their inalienable rights.

The NRM pooh-bahs seem oblivious to the fact that, in politics, a charm offensive is par for the course. As a deliberate, coordinated campaign of personal engagement and public relations designed to win favour, it builds alliances through a "soft" personable approach rather than confrontational tactics.

It is a limited form of "soft power" built on tactical manoeuvre rather than the strategic long game. By its nature, it is temporary, designed to achieve specific short-term goals like passing a Bill or securing a berth in the ship of state. The NRM may not know it but it is more important now than ever before.

Ms Julia Sonnevend, writing for the



President Museveni arrives on a motorcycle for a campaign rally in Mubonde District in 2001. PHOTO/FILE

Princeton University Press, argued this importance rather succinctly: "Political scientists have described the past 30 years as a peak time in political personalisation. We have a declining loyalty towards parties, and rather turn to people we trust. Media platforms also bomb-

ard us with instantaneous visual and textual representations of individual politicians, making us feel like we 'know' these political figures 'in person'. Under these conditions, the personal magnetism of leaders becomes a defining feature of their political power."

She added: "Politics is a form of theatre, where successful performers fuse with the audience, attracting praise and admiration."

Bob Power

Bob Wine (Robert Kyagulanyi) is a highly charismatic Ugandan opposition leader and former pop star known as the "ghetto president". Thanks largely to his evident charm, he commands immense loyalty from youth and the urban poor. His appeal stems from his roots in the ghetto, his music addressing social injustice, and his, at times, defiant yet relatable persona. Thus, he is viewed as an authentic voice for the marginalised, with supporters feeling he truly "understands" their struggles. This is by design, not accident.

In the early 2000s, the rough and ready Bobi could be seen cradling Robert Greene's *The 48 Laws of Power*, which defines charisma not as a magical, innate gift, but as an inner light and intense confidence that can be cultivated and projected through actions, presence, and, most importantly, extreme self-confidence. No matter what you think about him, Bobi has stolen NRM's electoral thunder by treating *wananchi* as he would himself want to be treated.

This is in stark contrast to the NRM kingpins, who view their elective and appointive positions as notches that place them above everyday Ugandans and other concerns.

Mr Museveni, on the other hand, was once every bit as charming as Bobi is today. That's how he has maintained a long-standing, positive working relationship with former British minister for Overseas Development, Baroness Lynda Chalker of Wallasey. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, Baroness Chalker was a key ally for the Ugandan government, often supporting Mr Museveni's economic policies during his "no-party" movement era. It was very much his personal charm that won her over. Indeed, Mr Museveni is a quick study of people; he finds your thumbscrew and once found, it is leverage that he can use to his advantage.

Author Robert Greene notes over-reliance on a single charismatic leader can create vulnerability, leading to a potential collapse if the leader is removed or loses their way. Analysts suspect this is the case with the NRM. Even the party's supporters agree that without Mr Museveni at the helm, Uganda's future is uncertain.

1986
MUSEVENI BECOMES
PRESIDENT