

When movements become the system

Last week offered a fascinating political contrast between Uganda and the United Kingdom.

In Uganda, President Museveni was sworn in for yet another term, celebrating the achievements, continuity, and stability of the National Resistance Movement (NRM) after four decades in power. Meanwhile, in Britain, voters delivered heavy blows to both the Labour Party and Conservatives while shifting attention towards Reform UK, a party presenting itself as the new anti-establishment force.

At first glance, these events appear unrelated. Yet together, they reveal one of the great political paradoxes of modern democracy: why do movements founded in the name of ordinary people eventually become systems that ordinary people no longer emotionally recognise as their own?

The story is older than Uganda itself. The Labour Party was founded in 1900 as a political vehicle for miners, factory workers, railway labourers, and trade unions who felt excluded by Britain's aristocratic political establishment. It was a people's movement before it became a governing institution.

The African National Congress emerged in 1912 to resist racial domination and later became the global symbol of anti-apartheid liberation under figures like Nelson Mandela.

The NRM emerged in the 1980s, promising fundamental change after years of instability, State violence, and political collapse in Uganda. Even Uganda's earlier National Consultative Assembly debates reflected this same aspiration: how could political organisation truly serve ordinary citizens rather

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Political



than merely reproduce elite power?

In different contexts, all these movements carried similar emotional promises: dignity, inclusion, justice, and liberation from systems seen as unfair.

But power changes movements. Movements survive by mobilising hope, grievance, and emotional connection. Governments survive by managing institutions, bureaucracy, security, and stability. Over time, liberation movements slowly become custodians of the order they once challenged.

That is the paradox now haunting many democracies. In Britain today, many working-class voters accuse Labour of becoming distant, technocratic, and aligned with metropolitan elites rather than ordinary workers. Ironically, the party created to challenge the establishment is now seen by many as part of the establishment itself.

In Uganda, younger generations born long after the liberation struggle increasingly judge politics through unemployment, liv-

ing costs, corruption scandals, and daily survival rather than historical memory. To many supporters, the NRM represents stability and experience. To critics, it represents permanence and distance from ordinary frustrations.

Perhaps this explains the attraction of Reform UK. Whether one agrees with it or not, Reform UK currently speaks more like a movement than an institution. It projects disruption rather than management. Anger rather than administration. Emotion rather than procedure.

Ironically, this is similar to how Labour itself once sounded over a century ago.

This raises a deeper global question about political organisation itself. Perhaps the crisis is not merely about leaders or parties but systems. Once movements enter State power, they gradually adapt to the logic of survival: bureaucracy, international pressure, elite networks, electoral calculations, and institutional preservation.

Eventually the movement becomes the system. Perhaps this is why citizens across the world increasingly ask the same question: can any political movement remain permanently close to ordinary people once it acquires long-term power?

Or is becoming the establishment the unavoidable destiny of every successful people's movement?

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