

Weekly Politics

Tearing the veil: How surveillance States are keen to play 'godly' role



While pseudonymous activists continue to enjoy a good run thanks to the 'balance' test, the law of averages suggests that the balance/scales could yet be tipped. PHOTO/ SHUTTERSTOCK

The law of averages. The string of tangibles that threaten to remove the cloak of pseudonymity include anti-terrorism/national security statutes, data retention mandates, and anti-trafficking laws.

BY ROBERT MADOI

It was during Father's Day of 2016 when Tom Voltaire Okwalinga shared a moment with his Facebook audience that felt very raw. There was an innocence and a truthfulness to the lived experience he recounted. It was an all too familiar sinking feeling that 1970s children were accustomed to. They, after all, had ringside seats to a horror show that was startlingly awful in every conceivable way as Uganda sat at the edge of an incredibly violent moment in history.

"Happy Fathers' [sic] Day to my dad," Okwalinga, widely known by the acronym TVO, wrote in a June 19, 2016, Facebook post. "That

day in 1978 when Idi Amin soldiers assaulted you in front of us, at my tender age of 4, I [sic] saw everything and I think, it was from there that I decided I shall always fight bad governance wherever and whenever it pops up its ugly head."

When Uganda found itself, per TVO, held in a thunderously dark embrace under Yoweri Museveni's presidency, the dissident used the social network Facebook to situate himself in opposition to the State-controlled public sphere. In an August 11, 2012, Facebook post, TVO pledged to be a defender of "the freedoms of the voiceless" and "a supporter of good governance".

His choice of the nickname Voltaire, he would later disclose, was because the French Enlightenment writer's defence of free

speech and religious tolerance was infectious. Ditto his satirical writing style. And so in 2009, riled by the maladministration that happened on an unacceptable scale after Uganda hosted the 2007 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (Chogm), a steady stream of posts gushed out from TVO's new Facebook account. The tone of the posts was notably unapologetic, and they became much blunter in their portrayals of enduring wrongs in the country. The end, when it came, felt like the beginning.

TVO's last Facebook post, radical in purview, is written in a matter-of-fact tone, using short, clipped sentences suited to the wretchedness of his subject.

"Looking forward to," the November 1, 2020, post starts, "[the] Electoral Commission receiving M7 [Yoweri Museveni's] academic papers and displaying them for the press, just like other candidates."

The post shows that sarcasm, such as it was, and to which the dissident was prone, never vanished. The archetype of what the anthropologist James C. Scott called a "hidden transcript", the manner in which such sarcasm homed in on success explains why Uganda's architecture of surveillance attempted—albeit unsuccessfully—to unravel TVO's on-line pseudonymity. The endeavour was un-

dertaken with such enormous, unfathomable depths because State actors could, as they presumably hoped, use draconian legislations like the Computer Misuse Act to address a reprimand to TVO.

TVO's low-profile form of resistance fitted the bill of, or even embodied, an offence committed when one, as the impugned Section 25 of the law put it back then, disturbs "the peace, quiet, or right of privacy of the President through electronic communication". The so-called offensive communication provision would be struck down by the country's Constitutional Court in January 2023. It was, however, in November 2020, a clear and present danger that reared an ugly head.

Stella Nyanzi, another dissident, had learnt this the hard way three years earlier. A Facebook post in which the academic called Museveni "a pair of behinds" was met with a punishment that, in its cruelty, reflected the punishing lengths the State was prepared to go to forcibly silence opposing opinions. Incarceration.

Veneer of pseudonymity

A similar twinge of frustration settled over the comprehension of TVO's Facebook posts,

Continued on Page 8