



Sustainable peace conditional upon genuine democracy

Muniini K. Mulera Letter to a Kampala Friend

Dear Tingasiga,
Peace has broken out in Uganda. I mean, talk about peace by the rulers who suggest that all is well in the land.

On October 9, 2014, President Yoweri K. Museveni declared Uganda peaceful "for the first time in 114 years." A few days ago, he pushed the clock centuries back to find a time when there was "a bit of peace."

"We have brought peace to the country for the first time in 500 years," the President reportedly told soldiers of the UPDF. "Before the 500 years, there was a bit of peace because of the Bachwezi Dynasty."

Just over a week ago, Kale Kayihura, the Inspector General of Police, was appointed a peace ambassador after signing a pledge to keep peace.

"I am committed to ensuring that this country enjoys total peace," Gen Kayihura declared. "I will actively foster a culture of peaceful co-existence and to take a stand against any form of violence today, and all the days to come."

Once again Museveni and Kayihura, always eager to be part of a good effort they don't believe in, are manipulating the public mind.

Even as Kayihura was signing the peace pledge, several military style Uganda Police vehicles were at Mombasa, awaiting transport to Kampala, to be used against political opponents of the President.

However, let us assume that Museveni and Kayihura are sincere in their belief that there

is peace in the land. It begs the question: What is peace?

Is peace the absence of war or other armed insurrection? Is it the presence of a heavily armed multi-thousand Special Forces Command to keep the ruler safe? Is it the possession of a militarised police force whose first option in almost every situation is the use of deadly force?

Is it peace when a subjugated population is cowed into subservience? Is it peace when you insist that Ugandans either belong to your party or they will be denied basic services and opportunities that are theirs by right?

The peace that Museveni and Kayihura are gloating about is turned on its face by the President's own remarks four months ago when he threatened to "completely crash without a trace" anyone found inciting violence in the run-up to the 2016 elections.

Why, if there was peace in the land, would the possibility of election-related violence arise in the first place? Could the threats of violence be a symptom of a serious political and governance illness?

Some forget that there was peace and steady progress in Cote D'Ivoire throughout Felix Houphouët Boigny's 33-year reign. His legacy was a ripped up country that descended into the hell of bloody wars and economic collapse.

There was apparent peace and prosperity for some in Liberia under William Tubman's

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27-year rule that ended with his death in 1971. His handpicked successor, William Tolbert, had a good stretch of reforms until 1980 when he reverted to draconian ways, banning the opposition and ordering the arrest of his chief opponent.

An extremely bloody military coup d'état on April 12, 1980 ended his reign and his life. Liberia descended into a long tunnel of hell, from which it is still trying to recover.

Peace can be an illusion when the ruler's eyes and ears are closed to the naked truth. Indeed, that may have been the cause of the rather early demise of the Bachwezi Dynasty that Museveni admires and, perhaps, wishes to emulate. Subjugation of others did not secure them lasting peace. It is not about to do so.

Peace, to me, means a healthy society. So I modify the WHO's definition of health and define peace as a state of complete physical, mental, social, economic and political wellbeing, and not just the absence of war.

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There is no peace when the majority must make do with condemnable health care facilities, even as selected citizens fly to the best medical centres in the world, paid for by long-suffering citizens.

There is no peace when doctors, nurses, teachers and other essential service providers are denied their already meagre salaries. There is no peace when there are huge economic disparities occasioned by sectarian considerations in apportioning access to opportunities.

There is no peace when genuine democracy is sabotaged at every turn, when engaging in legal political activities is punished with tear gas, bullets, arrests and impoverishment.

Of course, from their perspective, Museveni and Kayihura may genuinely believe that there is peace in Uganda. However, if they had the courage to ask Ugandans for an honest opinion on the matter, they would be shocked to discover that their idea of peace is a one-way street, a mirage that is destined to vanish unless all the people, regardless of political choice, enjoy true justice. Peace and freedom are inseparable twins. Searching for genuine freedom must remain our most urgent engagement.

Dr Mulera is based in Toronto, Canada.
muniinikmulera@aol.com