Uganda would still be the same if Bobi were left alone

Imagine this: On January 15, Ugandans are casting their ballots and are patiently waiting for the results to be announced. The Internet is switched off, security forces are all over Kampala streets, and nobody in the city is allowed to gather in groups. The Electoral Commission is announcing provisional results at the National Tally Centre as they come in.

Meanwhile, National Unity Platform (NUP) leader and presidential candidate Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu, aka Bobi Wine, is in his house with his family. The house is not surrounded by security forces, but they have been deployed and are patrolling the neighbourhood, ready to deal with any eventuality.

Days later, the election results have been announced. President Museveni has won the election. The Internet is still switched off. Kampala is looking like a ghost city, and security forces are still patrolling the streets.

Mr Kyagulanyi has rejected the election results. But most Ugandans do not even know that he has. He does not have the capacity to fight security forces on the streets. He cannot come out of the house and take to the streets to be joined by his supporters and cause an insurrection.

Life continues. Banks, markets, offices and shops are open. Hospitals are treating patients. Boda bodas, taxis and buses are ferrying passengers. The Internet is back on, but it is not working effectively. Most people are still struggling to have unfettered access.

In a country that claims to be a democracy, all this would be unacceptable, of course. But if this is what the authorities had done, we would not even be talking about Mr Kyagulanyi being in exile.

Mr Kyagulanyi left the country without the security forces' knowledge. That is failure Number One.



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Brutally Frank

If security forces were not deployed to Mr Kyagulanyi's home; if his wife, Barbie, was not tortured, Uganda would still be as it is today. Same leaders. Same dysfunctional public hospitals. Same unreliable water and power supply. Same roads with potholes. Same lovely weather. Same beautiful, nyash-y women.

I suppose security forces meet and review the outcomes of their operations to see what worked and what did not. But it is hard to see how this operation can be called a success.

Mr Kyagulanyi left the country without the security forces' knowledge. That is spectacular failure Number One. He released videos from an undisclosed location, sometimes wearing a scarf around his neck. January and February are winter months, and that was a strong clue that he was already out of the country — but security forces continued their search across the country. This means they did not have the vaguest idea where he was hiding. This is failure Number Two.

The planning and execution did not make sense, considering that Mr Kyagulanyi and those working with him do not pose any national security threat.

Security forces abduct a person they say has a case to answer, and the abductors say: "Why don't you want to work with Museveni?" This is what Lina Zedriga, the deputy of Mr Kyagulanyi, said after she was released on bail following weeks of detention over (questionable) charges of inciting violence.

Their method of work raises more questions than it answers. If you have evidence and/or intelligence that 68-year-old Zedriga is inciting violence, how does blindfolding her protect Ugandans from that violence? How does sitting on her arms protect Ugandans?

Every abducted Ugandan who is freed goes on to tell a story that does nothing but tarnish the country's image. This means the more people you abduct, the more you tarnish Uganda's image — and the harder you make it for the image-makers to do their PR work.

Ms Zedriga's harrowing account is now on the Internet, as are stories of Mr Kyagulanyi's wife and Dr Sarah Bireete of the Centre for Constitutional Governance. Security forces may continue doing what they are doing — it is how they earn a living — but the question remains: How does it change Uganda for the better?

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