



Bobi Wine's departure: Same old play cards in the endless liberation drama

In the annals of Uganda's multi-party politics since its restoration in 2005, a predictable drama unfolds after every presidential election. The ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) declares victory for Yoweri Museveni. The leading Opposition candidate cries foul, alleging massive fraud. Protests are called, arrests follow, and eventually the challenger either goes into hiding, faces exile, or departs temporarily to rally international support — all while vowing that "liberation" is just around the corner.

Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu, better known as Bobi Wine, has now joined this well-rehearsed cast. On or around March 14, after nearly two months in hiding following the disputed January 15 election, he announced his temporary departure from Uganda. In a video message, he described evading an intense manhunt, credited ordinary Ugandans for sheltering him, and stated that the regime — including President Museveni and his son, Army Chief Muhoozi Kainerugaba — had made his elimination a priority. His mission abroad: engage the diaspora, international partners, and push for accountability and targeted sanctions. He insists he will return "at the right time."

This is not a new plot twist. It is the same deck of "play cards" that former Opposition leaders, most notably Kizza Besigye of the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC), have used for two decades.

The recurring hand: Since multi-party democracy was reintroduced, the Opposition's standard moves have included: disputing results as "fake" and "fabricated" without always pursuing a credible court challenge (citing distrust in the judiciary); mobilising defiance — whether "Walk to Work" protests under Besigye or youth-driven street actions under Bobi Wine; enduring raids, arrests, treason charges, and alleged threats to life; going underground or into temporary exile to survive and internationalise

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the struggle; and rallying global pressure for sanctions, aid cuts, and condemnation while promising an imminent return and ultimate "liberation."

Besigye perfected this play book. After the 2001 election (even before formal multi-partyism), he fled threats, returned dramatically in 2005 to contest in 2006, faced repeated arrests and treason trials, led major protests after the 2011 polls, and endured house raids and abductions in later years. He too operated from abroad at times, returned to energise supporters, and framed the fight as ending Museveni's "dictatorship." Bobi Wine's 2021 campaign and 2026 aftermath mirror it almost beat for beat.

For supporters, this cycle represents heroic resilience in the face of an uneven playing field — a long-awaited liberation struggle against four decades of one-man rule, militarised elections, internet shutdowns, and State resource dominance. Bobi Wine's ability to evade capture for weeks, protected by everyday citizens, is spun as proof that the people's power endures.

The cost of repetition: Yet after more than 20 years of the same cards, one must ask: where is the breakthrough? Museveni remains firmly in power, extending his rule into a record seventh term. Opposition parties

fracture, supporters grow disillusioned, and the regime refines its tools of control. Each cycle of protest, crackdown, exile, and return has failed to dislodge the incumbent or fundamentally reform the system.

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The government, for its part, dismisses these claims as incitement and points to repeated electoral mandates, stability, and development. It rejects fraud allegations and portrays Opposition leaders as sore losers who retreat when the streets prove costly.

Bobi Wine's latest move is understandable on human terms: self-preservation after credible threats. Operating from abroad may yield diplomatic pressure and diaspora funding.

But history suggests this path alone rarely delivers the "long-awaited liberation" many Ugandans crave. True change in Uganda has historically required more than recycled opposition tactics or external sanctions.

It demands sustained, creative, non-violent domestic pressure, institutional reforms, and — crucially — unity and innovation beyond the familiar script.

Ugandans, especially the youth who propelled Bobi Wine, deserve better than Groundhog Day politics.

The real test for the opposition is not how eloquently it plays the old cards from exile, but whether it can finally shuffle the deck — building resilient structures, broadening coalitions, and offering a vision that persuades enough voters and institutions to break the cycle. Until then, the long-awaited liberation will remain just that: awaited.

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