

dom authorities. In Rwanda, a clearly biased Rwenzururu Kingdom could not ignore Bruno Bwamable. That's how larg-

cautioned that Bwambale (and his media de-

When is foreign meddling unwelcome?

The late Shaka Ssali (bless his soul) had a standard parting question, especially for big-name guests on his *Straight Talk Africa* show on the *Voice of America*: What is the single most regrettable mistake you ever made?

He put this question to President Museveni when he appeared on the show in 2001. Unsurprisingly to anyone who knows Mr Museveni's sense of infallibility, he said none! After a brief pause, he grudgingly said (I am paraphrasing here): "perhaps it is listening too much to foreigners who gave us bad advice."

The President was being quite sincere, but only half-heartedly. The full truth was that Uganda's economy up to that point, and for many years that followed, was largely driven by the policy blueprints of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (WB).

Prof Ezra Suruma published a whole book on this, writing authoritatively about the directives handed to Ugandan economic policymakers who went to Washington DC begging for financial support. It was believed at the time he was sacked from the position of Minister of Finance that his forced departure stemmed from his opposition to the directives of powerful foreign actors.

The IMF and WB, along with the USA Treasury, had an oversized influence on Uganda's Treasury, the Central Bank, the Finance ministry and the national budgeting process. Ultimately, this made Kampala easily the stand-out student of the neoliberal free market agenda, which was aggressively promoted by those two Western financial institutions.

There was a quid pro quo dynamic at play in Uganda's relationship with the West. In exchange for implementing economic reforms and pursuing macroeconomic policies that the IMF and WB wanted, Uganda emerged as the beneficiary of Western aid largesse.

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, more than half of Uganda's recurrent budget (paying

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Moses Khisa
Majority Report



for mundane things like civil service salaries and operational costs for running the government) was funded by foreign aid. Better still, our development budget (infrastructure, anti-poverty programmes, etc.) was wholly funded from foreign aid, grants and loans.

Foreign financial institutions and Western governments did not merely influence Uganda's socioeconomic policies from afar in Washington DC or Brussels by placing conditions on their aid; there was a direct technocratic presence at the source in the key government agencies mentioned above.

This was the more intriguing because our current rulers came to power forcefully denouncing Western imperialism. They accused the West of complicity in Idi Amin's takeover in 1971. The political and military elites they kicked out of power in 1986, and those from all previous regimes, were all pointedly labelled as 'comprador' - meaning agents of foreign interests.

They attacked the governmental apparatus they inherited as neo-colonial, unsuited for meeting the aspirations of a free and independent Uganda. The Uganda Police Force, civil service, the education system and the wider public sector were all deemed colonially oriented and denounced as anti-people.

But rhetoric is one thing; reality and practice can be quite different. The 1986 rhetorical posturing, flashes of which we hear occasionally, was not quite matched with what the new rulers implemented after they took the reins of power. Reforming the civil service in the 1990s, including mass retrenchment, was done at the behest of Western technocrats, buttressed by the WB and with a blueprint that was Uganda's only in name. Police training and amassing hardware security capabilities happened with direct patronage from the USA. Universal Primary Education, and later Universal Secondary Education, was authored and funded by the WB.

The reality is that the number one agent of foreign meddling and the absence of policy sovereignty is precisely the very government now chasing shadows of foreigners.

There has been a deterioration of relations in recent years, but for more than two decades, America's most important African ally was President Museveni and his government. That is how the Ugandan army was the first to deploy in Somalia, ostensibly on an African Union peacekeeping mission, but realistically to fight America's war on terror.

As I wrote last week, the current narrative billed as 'Protection of Sovereignty' betrays the hallmarks of a paranoid rulership facing a crisis of legitimacy. But it fits perfectly well in a now well-trodden path of using the law to repress citizens.

The impetus for the clamour for protecting our 'sovereignty' came from the quite impressive mobilisation of financing from foreign sources, primarily Ugandan diasporas, by the National Unity Platform. Thus, the utterly bizarre move to define as foreigners Ugandans who live and work outside the country who remit hard-earned currency back home and now must be policed! It's bonkers.

moses.khisa@gmail.com