

The challenge of transforming Uganda

Outsiders tend to have quite a romantic and positive view of Uganda. They see the country as stable and prosperous. There is of course some truth to this. As always, the devil is in the details.

It is common, especially among citizens of Eastern African countries, to hold a positive sentiment of Uganda, not uncommon, to be the case, in other nationalities across the continent. I deal with this all the time at international meetings in the West or when I travel to countries across the continent – 'Uganda is doing great, right?' is often a rhetorical question commonly thrown at me. To which I say, yes and no. And I explain.

Uganda is Africa's leading refugee-hosting nation. It deserves all the humanitarian plaudits. There are an estimated more than two million refugees living in different parts of the country.

The actual number is likely upwards of three million because the official figures are those registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and Uganda's Office of the Prime Minister.

There is a chance that many refugees go unregistered, as it is quite easy to cross the border into Uganda and straight into a home of real relatives, especially for people from Burundi, DRC, Rwanda, and South Sudan. And these are among the top five sources of refugee flows into Uganda.

Further afield, refugees from Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia have for long found a warm and welcoming home in Uganda. Some go on to lead productive and rewarding lives.

Given the turmoil and instability in most countries in the region, it is logical to view Uganda in a decidedly positive light. After all, it is a country that is not just politically stable and relatively peaceful, it is also willing to shoulder a disproportionate burden of hosting foreigners fleeing instability, insecurity, and sociopolitical persecution.

But then, given our precarious politics and the uncertainty around future transition of presidential power, Uganda is only one trig-

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Majority Report

ger-event away from switching from the hal-
lowed status of a refugee-host to a supplier of
refugees, potentially on a very large scale. Back
to your past status when our own civil wars
and political instability in the 1970s-1990s
forced citizens to flee to neighbouring coun-
tries.

It's hard to make a compelling argument
about what might go wrong with Ugandan
politics in the future when juxtaposed with
current dire conditions in many African coun-
tries, from east to west and central to north.

With coups in the Sahel and parts of West Af-
rica, the instability and crises in much of cen-
tral Africa, not to say anything about the trag-
ic situation in the two Sudans, the never-end-
ing horrific violence in Somalia, and the dis-
astrous turn of events in Ethiopia starting
in 2020, all these cases leave Uganda looking
quite good!

Last Tuesday, I gave a public lecture on poli-
tics in Uganda with a focus on this year's elec-
tions at the University of California, Berkeley.
In the audience was a group of African grad-
uate students under a programme supported
by the Mastercard Foundation.

One student was adamant and pointed-
ly argued that perhaps the long rule of Presi-
dent Museveni, which stands at a staggering
40 years uninterrupted, has the support of
Ugandans and serves the country well!

Does it have the support of Ugandans? We
would know this for sure if there were truly

free, fair, and credible elections in which Mr
Museveni wins squarely, and his opponents
lose fairly, was my answer. As to whether it
serves the country well, yes, Uganda has had
commendable stability and sustained mod-
est economic growth continuously for more
than three decades.

But here is where the details matter, and
where I believe Mr Museveni has failed the
nation and has potentially imperilled his
own legacy. For a country in the grip of pov-
erty and with a miniscule economy relative
to its population, as is Uganda and other poor
African countries, GDP economic growth
must be a marathon not a relay. This is what
set East Asian nations apart – sustaining rap-
id growth, interrupted, for decades.

Uganda has been able to do this, but hype
and hyperbole aside, our growth has not
been that outstanding, especially consider-
ing that the population growth rate too, has
been quite high, thus undoing the otherwise
decent economic performance.

At nearly 50 million people, Uganda's popu-
lation far outstrips the country's land size, re-
sources, and economic output.

Placed in comparative perspective, Ugan-
da's performance under Mr Museveni is pa-
tently disappointing for a man who has such
a firm grasp of the problems of underdevel-
opment and how to make a breakthrough.

Mr Museveni has been in power longer than
the authoritarian rulers and military dicta-
torships that engineered economic transfor-
mation in East Asian nations: Indonesia, Ma-
laysia, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan.

To these, we can add China and Vietnam.
But the biggest problem for Uganda is that
even the modest socioeconomic achieve-
ment of the last 30-40 years can easily be
wiped away by a likely political breakdown
and state implosion, which is not out of the
realm of the possibility given how Mr Musev-
eni has set up his regime of rule.

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