LETTER OF THE DAY

Let's build continuity for Uganda

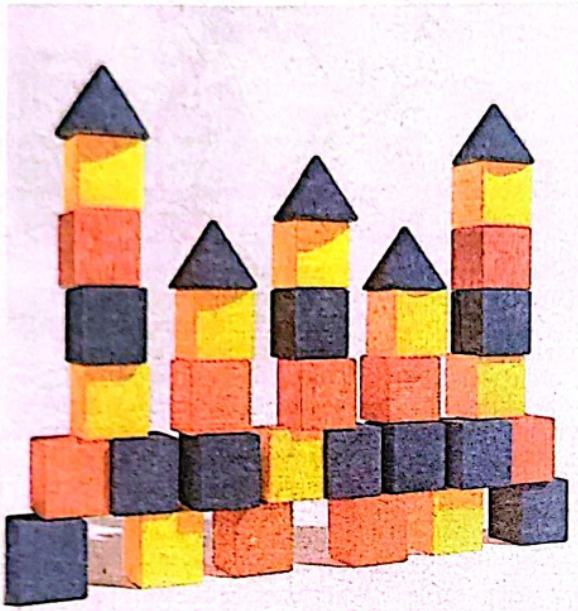
The question of whether President Museveni is "good" or "bad" is exhausted. What Ugandans must now consider is subtler—and more urgent: what has it taken to hold this nation together for nearly four decades, and how do we ensure stability endures beyond a single leader?

When the National Resistance Army (NRA) entered Kampala in January 1986, it was met not with fear, but relief. Citizens offered food to soldiers who looked more hungry than victorious. The capital, exhausted by coups, terror, and chaos, surrendered not to an army, but to the promise of order. Uganda was tired of itself—and ready for a chance to rebuild.

Few national movements have achieved what the NRA did; in January 1986, ordinary Ugandans sacrificed children, livelihoods, and hope to anchor a fragile country to peace.

Standing on Parliament's steps, a 41-year-old guerrilla leader spoke of "fundamental change." No one could have predicted the long, uneven, and often contradictory path that would follow.

Museveni's first and most enduring achievement is clear: he ended the cycle of violent regime change. Armed conflict receded from the centre of political life, and a national army replaced factional militias. That stability, however, imperfect, laid the foundation for everything else. It also allowed the UPDF to evolve. From a guerrilla force with 27 guns, to securing Uganda's borders, to regional deployments in Somalia, South Sudan, and across the Great Lakes, the army has matured into an instrument of both national and regional security. Peace at home enabled influence abroad.



The country's economy grew from under $4 billion to over $66 billion. Roads, electricity, schools, housing, and markets expanded visibly and tangibly. These gains are real. They matter. They deserve acknowledgment—but they also came with choices and compromises.

To judge Museveni without first understanding the country he inherited is to misread his entire political project. Uganda is not a single story. More than 50 ethnic groups, dozens of languages, and a history of colonial distortion make governance a delicate balancing act. The NRM chose cohesion and continuity, sometimes at the expense of rapid institutional reform. Patronage, often criticised, was not merely political expedience—it became a tool to integrate communities, restore cultural institutions, and extend State reach. Yet these same mechanisms blurred lines between public service and political loyalty, creating enduring structural vulnerabilities.

Corruption, too, has been a persistent reality. Rather than eradication, it has been managed, contained, and sometimes tolerated—a reflection of an economy of survival. Traffic officers collect *kitu kidogo*, markets and ministries operate within informal networks, and citizens have adapted. Recognising this does not excuse it; it illuminates the tension between state ambition and lived reality.

Critics often argue that if today's Museveni confronted the 1986 Museveni, they would clash. Critics are right: the older Museveni, hardened by responsibility, compromise, and the weight of national stewardship, would overrule youthful idealism—not from malice, but from experience.

The long tenure of a single leader has defined Uganda's political axis. Opposition mobilisation often pivots on resisting his longevity rather than proposing a coherent alternative vision. Elections become referenda on continuity versus change, not substantive debates about development pathways. Meanwhile, the state struggles to tell its own story. Ministries rarely speak with one voice; the President's voice fills the vacuum.

Succession is the defining challenge of our era. The NRM must prepare for a future in which institutions, not individuals, hold authority. Strengthening mechanisms for succession, accountability, and internal contestation is no longer optional. It is the only way to safeguard the gains of the past forty years. Stability cannot depend on one person—it must be institutional.

Forty years later, has the NRM delivered fundamental change? In many respects, yes. Uganda is more stable, economically connected, and administratively coherent than in 1986. In others, work remains. Institutions must become resilient, accountable, and capable of renewal. Patronage and personal centralisation, once tools of cohesion, now require careful reform to sustain the order they built.

Museveni will not be remembered as a villain or a saint. History will likely see him as the indispensable architect of modern Uganda—both the enabler and the prisoner of the system he created.

For the next generation, especially young Ugandans, the task is clear: build on what works, correct what constrains, and summon the courage to reform without destabilising the foundation. The next chapter of Uganda's journey will succeed not through slogans, nor force, but by engineering a system built for continuity into one engineered for renewal.

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