

maten... welcome surprises. M... avoided unnecessary risks in positioning China for long-term strength and stability, acting cautiously in his respons-

strong renning capacity limit the risk of near-term fuel shortages. Its pipeline gas imports and domestic gas production now ease its need for liquefied nat-

China also benefits strategically from America's loss of firepower. The war has depleted US stockpiles of long-range cruise missiles and interceptors, most of

ing, military strategists to study the US military's newest uses of air and naval power. Moreover, on April 3, Xi purged yet another senior figure in his government, a

member of the UN High-level Advisory Body on Artificial Intelligence.

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Before citizens are blamed for failing to free themselves, we must first confront the political order that has taught both rulers and ruled to fear freedom, even if for different reasons, writes **Samuel Andema**.

Whenever Uganda's political troubles intensify, one accusation quickly returns: citizens are too fearful, too passive, too resigned to struggle for their freedom. It is an easy accusation to make because it turns a complex political reality into a simple moral complaint against ordinary people. Yet easy explanations are often the weakest. To blame citizens without asking what produces fear, silence, and dependency is to confuse the outcome of repression with its deeper causes.

Paulo Freire offers a helpful way of thinking about this problem. His central insight is that domination is maintained not only through force, but also through the shaping of thought, expectation, and imagination. Oppressive systems become especially powerful when they make resistance seem dangerous, and accommodation seem sensible. In such conditions, what looks like passivity may be a socially learned way of coping with risk.

This is why the common criticism of Ugandans misses the point. The problem is not that citizens no longer care about freedom. The problem is that many live in an environment where the pursuit of freedom comes with real personal, economic, and social consequences. In such a context, fear should not be read simply as a weakness of character. It is often a reasonable response to the realities of public life.

Many critics misread silence. They assume when people do not openly rebel, they must be satisfied with the system under which they live. But silence does not necessarily mean approval. Very often, it reflects caution in the face of danger. A teacher who avoids political argument, a civil servant who protects a fragile income, a parent who chooses school fees over protest, or a young person who keeps quiet for fear of harassment may all long for change. But longing for change is not the same as being able to pursue it safely. When people learn that speaking too boldly may cost them work, safety, or belonging, restraint becomes

understandable. There is another complication. Oppressed societies can begin to reproduce the habits of oppression in everyday life. People may reject domination in principle while adjusting to it in practice. They may come to admire power because power seems to offer the only reliable protection. They may place their hopes in patrons instead of institutions. They may condemn injustice when it harms them, yet tolerate it when it harms others. In this way, oppression sinks deeper into society than coercion alone could ever make possible.

This helps explain why patronage politics remains so persistent in Uganda. When institutions are weak, inconsistently applied, or overshadowed by executive authority, access to influential individuals can appear more valuable than access to rights. Citizenship then loses some of its force as a political identity. Politics becomes a matter of connections, access, and protection rather than principle and accountability. In such a climate, many people learn that standing on principle without backing can be costly.

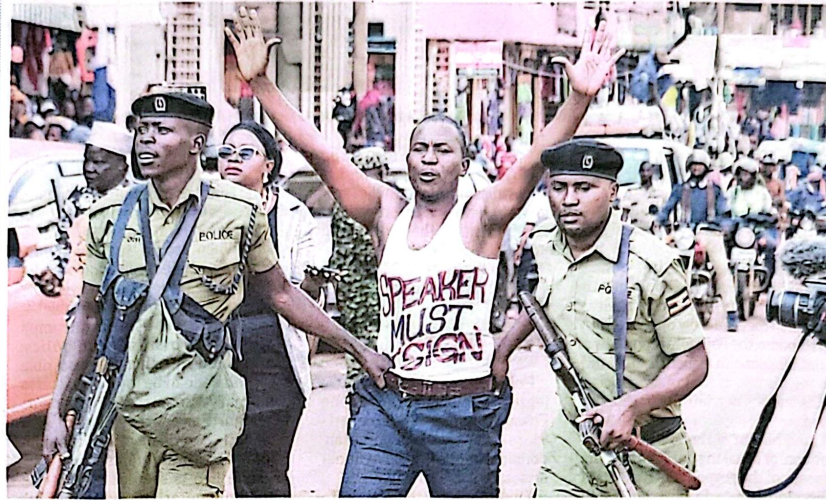
If oppression partly survives by shap-

Issue.
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ing consciousness, then education must be central to democratic renewal. This should not be understood narrowly as schooling for certificates and examinations. It should be understood more broadly as the formation of citizens who can question power, recognise manipulation, think beyond fear, and imagine public life outside patronage. In that sense, schools, universities, places of worship, media spaces, and civic forums all matter. They help create the intellectual and moral climate in which change becomes possible.

This gives the intelligentsia and wider

Uganda's crisis is deeper than blaming citizens



Policemen arrest a man during the March to Parliament anti-graft protests in Kampala on July 23, 2024. The author argues that to blame citizens without asking what produces fear, silence, and dependency is to confuse the outcome of oppression with its deeper causes. PHOTO/FILE

live more comfortably within fear.

The same perspective also helps explain why leaders hold so tightly to power. Domination does not damage only those at the receiving end. It also distorts those who exercise it. Leaders who govern through control can become dependent on that control for security, relevance, and self-preservation. Power stops being a temporary public responsibility and becomes tied to personal survival. The longer authority is personalised, the harder it becomes to see political transition as a normal democratic process rather than as a moment of danger, exposure, and loss.

This line of analysis does not excuse repression. It helps explain why repression can last for so long. To say Ugandans struggle to free themselves is not to deny their agency, nor is it to absolve leaders who sustain oppressive conditions. It is to reject the shallow habit of blaming ordinary people while ignoring the wider political machinery that manufactures fear, dependence, and managed silence.

Uganda's predicament is, therefore, more serious than the tired contrast between timid citizens and selfish rulers. It is a condition of entrapment, though not of equal power or equal responsibility. Citizens live under accumulated fear, economic strain, and weakened trust. Leaders operate within the damaging logic of highly centralised power, where leaving office appears threatening and control becomes difficult to surrender. Both rulers and ruled are shaped by this order, but only one side commands the instruments of coercion. For that reason, the heavier moral burden rests with those who govern.

That is why telling Ugandans simply to be brave is not enough. Courage matters, but it cannot be built on contempt for the people from whom it is demanded. A freer Uganda will require stronger institutions, civic education that develops critical thought, legal safeguards that reduce the cost of dissent, and economic conditions that lessen dependence on political patronage. It will also require an intelligentsia willing to treat education not merely as a path to privilege, but as a means of serving public truth.

Before citizens are blamed for failing to free themselves, we must first confront the political order that has taught both rulers and ruled to fear freedom, even if for different reasons. That is where a more serious analysis of Uganda's crisis must begin.

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