In Uganda, Another Museveni Crackdown

Helen Epstein

As an election approaches, opposition to the strongman's long, brutal rule is gathering—but it has to reckon with his security state and its international enablers.

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When the popular Ugandan singer and opposition politician Bobi Wine was arrested last week, his nation erupted. A huge crowd had gathered in Luuka, just east of the capital Kampala, to hear him speak, when security forces suddenly began firing not only tear gas canisters but also live bullets into the crowd and beating away Wine's bodyguards with batons and pepper spray.

Wine was driven off in a police van and detained for two days without access to his family, doctors, or lawyers. The charge? Holding a rally of more than two hundred people, in violation of Covid-19 social-distancing regulations—something that ruling party politicians, including Uganda's strongman leader Yoweri Museveni, in power since 1986, have been doing with impunity.

Badru Katumba/AFP via Getty Images)

Opposition leader Bobi Wine saluting as he walked into a court building following his arrest at an election rally, Inganga, Uganda, November 19, 2020

Uganda's next election is scheduled for January 14, 2021, and no one expects it to be free or fair. But Wine and his party, the National Unity Platform, had hoped that by rallying support across the country, they could bring about their own "Velvet Revolution," ultimately forcing Museveni to confront his unpopularity and concede, as have aging leaders in Burkina Faso, Gambia, and Sudan in recent years.

That hope seems distant now. As news of Wine's arrest spread, demonstrators organized protests in major towns across the country. Some set fires in the streets; others attempted to tear down Museveni's huge campaign posters that loom over traffic circles countrywide. Security forces again responded by hurling tear gas canisters at people in the streets and even inside buildings, and by shooting wildly at demonstrators and ordinary pedestrians alike, killing at least forty-nine people and severely injuring scores of others.

WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter filled up with gruesome images. In one, a teenage boy cries for help as he examines the fragments of his legs, shattered by gunfire. In another, security forces are seen patrolling below a second-floor office window. One raises his rifle and fires at the woman filming them—you hear a bullet whiz by her ear; shaken, she shows us the bullet holes in the window and the wall behind her.

Museveni is one of the Pentagon's closest African security partners. Since 2007, Uganda has been the largest troop contributor to the US-supported African Union Mission in Somalia, and Ugandans have also been serving under US command in Iraq, almost since that war began. During the 1990s, Museveni also helped funnel weapons from the US to rebels in neighboring Sudan.

In exchange for putting his forces at America's disposal, Museveni receives hundreds of millions of US taxpayer dollars annually in foreign assistance. Some of this money goes to reputable humanitarian groups and nongovernmental organizations that do

good work, and this funding is generally well-audited. But hundreds of millions more flow into the World Bank, which sends the money directly to the Ugandan Treasury, where it is easily diverted to the pockets of Museveni's henchmen and to spending on his brutal security forces.

Getty Images

An injured man being led away after he was shot in the face with a rubber bullet during unrest following Bobi Wine's arrest, Kampala, Uganda, November 18, 2020

As recently as May, the World Bank announced a $300 million assistance package in the form of budget support to Uganda, ostensibly for Covid-19 relief. One month earlier, Museveni's government had allocated the very same amount to a "classified expenditure" budget for the security forces and the Office of the President. In Uganda, classified expenditures are not subject to detailed oversight by parliament or by aid donors, but there's reason to fear that this money is being used to finance the latest round of human rights abuses and the militarization of next year's election.

This could have been a coincidence; it's not certain that the regime arranged the new classified expenditure in anticipation of the arrival of the World Bank's assistance package. But World Bank grants and loans are usually negotiated weeks or months before they're publicly announced, and the regime would thus have known it was on the way. At the very least, the World Bank appears to have rewarded behavior that contravenes its standards of what it calls "good governance." Since Uganda's last general election, in 2016, spending on such classified expenditures has increased nearly fivefold.

The $300 million classified military expenditure was contained in a supplementary budget request prepared by Uganda's Finance Ministry and submitted to Parliament for approval. The ministry claimed that the additional funds were necessary for addressing the Covid-19 crisis, but then allocated nearly forty times more money to security spending than to the health sector. Meanwhile, thirty-nine of Uganda's 134 districts have no hospital at all, and there are only fifty-five intensive care units and 411 working ambulances in the entire country of some 43 million people. On November 11, Uganda's accountant general announced the suspension of funds for all activities other than salaries, loan repayments, security, the Electoral Commission and State House (Museveni's residence). This means that, despite the World Bank's largesse, there will be no money for medicine, laboratories, fuel for ambulances, or other expenses necessary for a Covid-19 response.

Although the supplementary budget, along with the $300 million classified military expenditure, was approved by Parliament, this does not signal popular approval. The Museveni regime routinely bribes or tortures members of Parliament who try to obstruct its aims. In 2017, Museveni's Special Forces raided Parliament to halt a filibuster campaign against a bill designed to enable Museveni to rule for life. One member of Parliament, Betty Nambooze, was escorted to a room without security cameras, where operatives held her against a wall while one of them shoved a knee in her back. She emerged with two broken vertebrae.

In 2018, a year after he'd been elected to Parliament, Bobi Wine was himself arrested, along with four other MPs and dozens of their supporters. All were falsely accused of stoning one of Museveni's vehicles during a by-election campaign rally. When Wine and his associates appeared in court, after a week without access to their families, lawyers, or doctors, some, including Wine himself, were on crutches.

Although the Covid-19 pandemic has been mild in Uganda, with fewer than two hundred confirmed deaths, the economic effects have been devastating for Uganda's poor. Growth in the economy is expected to slow by half, and anecdotal accounts of hunger, destitution, and suicide are widespread. Yet, when opposition MP Francis Zaake attempted to distribute relief food to his hungry constituents last spring, he was arrested and tortured for three days. Twenty-nine years old and previously healthy, he now walks with a cane.

In June, the US government donated $15 million to the NGO GiveDirectly to send cash transfers to needy Ugandans, but the government shut the program down, claiming, without evidence, that the group was working with the opposition. The reason for GiveDirectly's suspension appears to reflect the regime's desire to control all relief funds and thus ensure that opposition voices, especially among the poor, are either silenced or turned into clients.

Museveni's abuses are not new; they are part of a pattern dating back thirty-four years, and Uganda's donors know this. In early 1987, about a year after Museveni seized power, he met with US Ambassador Robert Houdek at the embassy in Kampala to discuss a possible visit to Washington. According to a WikiLeaks cable authored by Houdek, among other subjects, the men discussed the "three-piece tie," a signature torture method of Museveni's security forces, in which the victim's upper arms are tied tightly behind the back so that

the breastbone protrudes outward, producing searing pain. Houdek noted that it sometimes left its victims paralyzed or caused gangrene, necessitating amputation.

As Houdek related in the cable, Museveni wanted to know why that was America's concern. The ambassador explained that the three-piece tie was a form of torture and a violation of human rights. Museveni protested that if you just use verbal interrogation, you won't get anywhere. Ambassador Houdek sympathized but hinted that World Bank loans and a visit to the White House were contingent upon an improved human rights record.

Hajarah Nalwadda/AFP via Getty Images)

Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni speaking before a trek commemorating his guerrilla forces' campaign that brought him to power some thirty-five years earlier, Galamba, Uganda, January 4, 2020

Houdek was also concerned that a group of Ugandan politicians had recently been arrested on treason charges, and said he hoped they'd receive a fair trial. Museveni assured him that if the evidence was insufficient, they'd be freed. A month later, some of the politicians were acquitted, including the immensely popular Andrew Kayiira—who had served briefly in Museveni's cabinet. But in a speech before the Uganda Law Society, Museveni indicated that he still thought Kayiira was guilty. Three weeks after that, men in army uniforms stormed a garden party at the house where Kayiira was staying. Kayiira leaped from the table and fled indoors, followed by the intruders, who gunned him down in a bathroom.

President Reagan met Museveni in the Oval Office the following October, and then again in 1988 and 1989—an unusual privilege for a young former rebel leader who professed to be a Marxist at the time. Museveni even visited Reagan's California ranch, and hired Reagan's son-in-law as a US-based publicist. Video footage of Reagan's first meeting with Museveni is available online. With Andrew Jackson's portrait looming on the wall behind them, Reagan warmly welcomes the Ugandan dictator and his delegation.

"We only have a few minutes here," Reagan says, as press cameras click and flash. "But it's a pleasure for me to be able to speak with you about your concern, ah—and the progress you're making with regard to human rights."

That meeting established the template for the remarkably benign reputation Museveni has enjoyed in high-level diplomatic circles ever since. In 1998, Bill Clinton's secretary of state Madeleine Albright praised Museveni as a "beacon in the Central African region," even though his troops had killed thousands of people in northern and eastern Uganda, and even though he'd backed brutal insurgencies that sparked mayhem in Rwanda and Congo. In 1999, World Bank economist Paul Collier praised Museveni's Uganda as "the main example of successful African post-conflict recovery." George W. Bush welcomed Museveni to the White House multiple times and praised his efforts on AIDS, even as evidence was emerging that Museveni's forces had gang-raped both women and men in northern Uganda. As president, Barack Obama criticized Museveni's anti-homosexuality law but failed to condemn the torture of dissidents and Museveni's support for violent rebel groups in neighboring Congo.

In a rare departure from this script, a consultant named Joel Barkan drafted an explosive report for the World Bank in 2004 accusing Uganda's foreign aid donors of supporting a brutal autocracy. It described endemic corruption involving Museveni's family, the stacking of army and civil service posts with members of the president's ethnic group, and the sabotage of peace negotiations with rebel leader Joseph Kony. The report also noted that Museveni had diverted 23 percent of all discretionary ministry budgets—including for health, education, and transport—to a classified military fund "used for managing dissent and election expenditures."

The World Bank sat on Barkan's report for nearly two years, during which time its sister organization, the International Monetary Fund, granted Uganda over $100 million in debt relief. A watered-down version of the report was eventually released, but it omitted mention of ~~the~~ Museveni's family's involvement in corruption, the diversion of civilian ministry funds to the military, and the undermining of peace negotiations with Kony's rebels.

In numerous meetings and phone calls with Western diplomats and donor agency officials over the years, I've become familiar with this tendency to downplay Museveni's crimes. More than one of my interlocutors suggested to me that at least he was better than Idi Amin, the notorious dictator who ruled Uganda in the 1970s. But this isn't true. Amin had countless army officers, cabinet ministers, and even an Anglican archbishop murdered, but he never unleashed the kind of brutality against ordinary people that Museveni has.

Museveni has claimed that Bobi Wine is being used by "homosexuals and others who don't like the stability and independence of Uganda," and has warned Wine's supporters that they are "playing with fire." In spite of this obvious menace, Wine has resumed campaigning—though security forces continue to invade his rallies and shoot his supporters. Just this week, they shattered a woman's foot and shot two men, one in the leg and the other in the ribs. The latter may not survive. Uganda's donors have lamented the violence, but generally mute any criticism of the regime. The day after Wine's arrest, as the death toll mounted, the US embassy treated the repression as a "both sides" problem, tweeting "We urge all parties to renounce violence."

Of course, the diplomats see what's going on. But they must operate within a cruel system of foreign aid and subaltern military relationships in which rich countries hire poor armies to do their dirty work. Call it "cold war realpolitik" or the "global war on terror," it amounts to a modern form of colonialism, even if Washington now terms it "partnership." The donors' cynicism boils down to the same kind of racism that prevailed in colonial times, born of vastly unequal power relations. In order to stuff a dictator's pockets so his forces will fight their wars, it is necessary to regard the lives of African people as expendable.

Helen Epstein

Helen Epstein is Visiting Professor of Human Rights and Global Public Health at Bard. She is the author of *Another Fine Mess: America, Uganda, and the War on Terror* and *The Invisible Cure: Why We Are Losing the Fight Against AIDS in Africa*. (March 2020)