
Politics and the Demographic Shift: The Role of the Opposition in Uganda

Speaker: Dr Kizza Besigye

Leader, Forum for Democratic Change (FDC), Republic of Uganda

Chair: Ben Shepherd

Consulting Fellow, Africa Programme, Chatham House

9 September 2016

The views expressed in this document are the sole responsibility of the speaker(s) and participants, and do not necessarily reflect the view of Chatham House, its staff, associates or Council. Chatham House is independent and owes no allegiance to any government or to any political body. It does not take institutional positions on policy issues. This document is issued on the understanding that if any extract is used, the author(s)/speaker(s) and Chatham House should be credited, preferably with the date of the publication or details of the event. Where this document refers to or reports statements made by speakers at an event, every effort has been made to provide a fair representation of their views and opinions. The published text of speeches and presentations may differ from delivery. © The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2017.

Introduction

This meeting summary provides an overview of an event held at Chatham House, on 9 September 2016, with Dr Kizza Besigye, leader of Uganda's main opposition party, the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC).

Dr Besigye discussed his perspectives on Uganda's political challenges, and outlined his party's strategies for improving the prospects of Uganda's youth. This is in light of the disputed February 2016 presidential election in which the National Resistance Movement (NRM) and President Yoweri Museveni, the country's president of 30 years, retained control amidst a problematic population bulge (80 per cent of the population is under 30 years old) and continued economic inequality. Examining the history of Ugandan governance and the current socio-political difficulties facing the country, Dr Besigye espoused his vision of an opposition that engages the country's youth, engendering an assertive and organized sense of citizenship. He argued that the catalyst for a new Uganda will be an organized civic demand that creates peaceful shifts in governance norms, leading to more responsive institutions and better management of socio-economic opportunities going forward.

The meeting was held on the record. The following summary is intended to serve as an aide-memoire for those who took part, and to provide a general summary of discussions for those who did not.

For more information – including recordings, transcripts, summaries, and further resources on this and other related topics – visit www.chathamhouse.org/research/africa.

Dr Kizza Besigye

A history of political mismanagement

The challenges facing Uganda, in its economy and social sector, find their roots primarily in a 70-year history of political mismanagement. Any analysis of Ugandan government or citizenship today will be incomplete without considering the tradition from which they have come.

As many will know, Uganda was founded by the imperial British East Africa Company. Its top-down, corporate governance structure began this history. Forcing many nationalities into one entity, it stripped them of their prior citizenship and sought to make them subjects of the Queen. Since this initial subjugation, very little has changed in the way of governance or citizenship. Governance structures remain the masters, and citizens remain servants, rather than vice versa. Nothing better displays this than the fact that since independence in 1962, there have been no peaceful transitions of governmental power. Every regime change has been a forceful one. This includes the current administration, which came to power in 1986 after a five-year civil war that left over half a million casualties in its wake.

This is the environment in which Uganda's political culture has grown. Governments have been advised by it, and in many ways it has also shaped the citizenry as it stands. A salient example of the low investment in Uganda's people by successive governments is the current and problematic population bulge. Due to gender imbalances in Ugandan society, reproductive health and responsibility education is still a problem for young women. Over 40 per cent of women currently desire access to effective contraception, but have none. Concentrated efforts in tandem with Millennium Development Goals have led to increased enrolment in primary education overall, however, the dropout rate among females is disproportionately high. This has resulted in a high rate of teenage pregnancies and a fertility rate of 6–7 children per woman in recent years. Consequently in Uganda, a country of 35 million people, 53 per cent

are under the age of 15 years old, and a further 30 per cent are between 15 and 29 years old. That means 80 percent of the population is younger than 30.

This has had knock on economic consequences. Uganda is still defined as a highly indebted nation. Under the current regime GDP averages 5 per cent. However, real growth is negligible, with a corresponding 3–4 per cent rate of population growth in recent times. Uganda's economy is in a difficult position; it produces the equivalent of just \$27 billion annually, and over 65 per cent of the population live on the equivalent of less than \$2 per day. Meanwhile, a small political and business elite earn more than 50 per cent of all income generated in the country, highlighting the political mismanagement present.

Youth and the struggle for opposition

This is not a Ugandan specific problem. Africa-wide, small cabals control national power, largely for their own gain, by using the traditions and reconstructed institutions of colonial power to manage citizens as subjects. Because their subjects perceive little change historically, national resources continue to serve these cabals at the expense and gross marginalization of the population at large.

For Uganda's growing population this is especially unsustainable. In the past, vicious cycles of military and citizen uprisings have driven little change. Consider the fusion between the NRM and the state in 1986. Initially a reform party, upon overthrowing Idi Amin, the NRM political and militia machines quickly became those of the state itself – forming a no-party democracy, that was, in effect, a one-party state. Indeed, 10 years after the initial regime change, the 1995 constitution established the NRM as the state party, effectively forbidding the others from functioning. NRM leader, Yoweri Museveni, established himself as president, and speaker of parliament, also remaining as head of the movement, while his wife and brother occupied other ministerial positions.

As a result, when opposition is spoken of in Uganda, it is in nominal terms. The struggle for opposition is to find a functional space. It has succeeded to some extent. In 2005, a referendum, and then the constitutional courts, forced the government to allow other parties to function. However, there is still a struggle with the tradition of a one-party state that lasted from 1986–2005. There is also the issue that the NRM remains fused with state institutions. The state versus non-state cleavage still exists such that Uganda cannot be reasonably called a multiparty state.

The FDC's opposition strategy has been the empowerment and edification of citizens such that they can recognize and demand the accountability lacking in their governance. The aforementioned population bulge is actually a huge asset in this sense. Uganda is a contender for youngest country on earth. This means that the majority of the population look forward to the progress of the future, not backward to progress from the past. As such, opposition in the face of state control becomes worthwhile because it is an opportunity to show people where they are, to show them the disparities in their political system and what their responsibilities are in the pursuit of its improvement. Already, such opposition is training increasing numbers of young citizens to see themselves as masters and not subjects. It has also helped establish the organizational political experience necessary to grow a generation of young democratic leaders. Both of these benefits are being seen as grassroots movements increasingly transform small civil action into government acquiescence.

This catalysis and organizational benefit is why the 2016 defiance campaign must continue, in spite of opposition incarceration. It must motivate Ugandans to discover their proper citizenship. In time, it is hoped that this can be the template for all of Africa. In many ways, the successes won are already forcing the government to reach out for national dialogue. The FDC and broader opposition aim to take full

advantage of this dialogue. Through this, the goal is to establish a new constitutional order, to push for reconstructed state institutions that are responsive to the broader population, and crucially, to pursue free and fair elections.

Summary of question and answer session

Questions

Having rejected the February 2016 election result, what challenges are you now planning?

Can you discuss China's role in Uganda and how it differs to the West's?

Should we worry about Yoweri Museveni's exit strategy?

Dr Kizza Besigye

The February 2016 election is not over. The constitution allows for an oppositional challenge. Due to imprisonment, that opportunity has not come. There is evidence of a 52 per cent victory for the opposition parties. As such, demands continue to be made for an independent audit. Constitutionally there cannot be a conclusive result when the runner-up has not been able to have his say in court, all the more so when it has been due to imprisonment. The opposition do not expect Museveni to peacefully concede, and as stated, the FDC will defiantly campaign, not cooperate, and protest until his government is either forced to negotiate, or collapses.

Considering China's role, the primary difference is the conditions of their involvement. Aid and support from the West usually comes with conditions to avoid issues such as corrupt squandering and its associated political instability. Conversely, China is willing to give aid unconditionally. Often, China's government corporations have mutual interests in existing corruption, with many slush funds and inflated public works prices set up to benefit both sides in this way.

Museveni's exit strategy may well be a worry for him as well as us. He is terrified by the prospect of the international criminal court, and consequently, may well hold onto power rather than being held to account. This may even result in him going down with his country. Therefore, opposition should recognize that compromises may have to be made in their negotiations to ensure stability. This may include offering legal guarantees and protections in exchange for peaceful transitions.

Questions

What evidence is there for mobilization in favour of a regime change?

What strategies do the opposition have to ensure actual citizen empowerment, and that this master-servant dynamic does not occur again?

You are a strong presence during elections, but should you and the FDC be doing more to be a constant presence in the Ugandan opposition?

Dr Kizza Besigye

Since the election in February, the opposition has been approached by the government to engage in negotiation. The government is invested in its own survival and not its citizens, but this becomes self-limiting. Self-serving governance, and renting support by creating, and nepotistically assigning, profitable jobs has created disillusion in the broader population. Consider that 80 per cent of Ugandans are reliant on the agricultural sector for their livelihoods, yet almost nothing is invested into the sector. Additionally, consider that the government's recent budgetary spending is over twice what it receives in domestic revenue: 27 trillion to 13 trillion Ugandan Shillings. With international donors reluctant in this trying global financial climate, a borrowing crisis is almost certainly afoot. What will happen when services can no longer be provided, when salaries are not paid? Real youth unemployment is thought to be between 62–84 per cent. This is already a huge chunk of the population. With such dissatisfaction increasing, the government recognizes that to prevent a groundswell, their political survival depends on a consensus-building process, or at least the appearance of one.

Actual citizen empowerment is built on knowledge of one's position and responsibility in a skewed political process. As stated before, an engaging opposition is the most effective way of training the population to recognize and demand the changes that are needed. Only from here can progress and sustainability be pursued. There are never any guarantees that political relapse won't occur, there are no guarantees of actual empowerment. However, if everyone does their part, the beginnings of empowered citizenship can be secured through its practice and assertion. In this way, at least the underlying foundation for actual empowerment can be built. The way begins with the opportunity to learn to identify democracy, to identify good and bad policy, to demand accountability, and to necessitate the competition of political views. Such changes in attitudes, and the organizational knowledge that can be learned in the process, is already half the battle toward an empowered, citizen-driven democratic system.

In terms of constant political presence, it must be considered that, in most democracies, functioning political parties are sustained through member donations. This can't happen for the FDC or other opposition parties. This is because to donate to an opposition party in a country largely run by a state party is seen as subversive and thus professionally or reputationally damaging. Furthermore, the level of political repression is not to be underestimated. When three or more people meet for political conversation in Uganda, they need permission from the Inspector General of the Ugandan Police. Permission is seldom granted, and arrest occurs without it. Elections, on the other hand, provide a window of opportunity in this regard. A recognized space to talk opens up; international attention also provides a certain level of protection. However, be assured that the FDC opposition is consistently present, using creative means when not otherwise permitted.