

# Love him or hate him: Magufuli was a transformational leader

A day after it was announced that former President of Tanzania, John Pombe Magufuli had died, I tweeted about how I believed that, warts and all, he was the best president the country has had since Mwalimu Julius Nyerere. I argued that he knew what leadership was about. In comments which would have struck some people as inflammatory, I added that he and President Paul Kagame of Rwanda were the two 'truly transformational' leaders the East African Community has had.

Reactions came in thick and fast, many from people who clearly agreed with me, or who for some reason or other, 'liked' the comments. Others, notably a few Ugandans, lurched onto the fact that I had chosen to not include President Yoweri Tibuhaburwa Museveni as a transformational leader. One or two, or even three reactions queried why former President of Kenya, Mwai Kibaki, was missing from the list. The explanation was simple, but I did not provide it on Twitter. Let me do so here.

For all I know, Kibaki came as a breath of fresh air after his former boss, Daniel Arap Moi, and went on to impress many Kenyans and followers of developments in Kenya with the way he delivered public goods, particularly physical infrastructure such as roads. A Ugandan friend who has lived in Kenya for many years told me recently:

By all means Mwai Kibaki was a transformational leader. He inherited a state that had central command and control... His style was different from that of Moi. Kenya saw the execution of transformational infrastructure. Kibaki was not controlling every facet of government. He let systems work. Kibaki ran the

country like a corporate CEO.

In addition, Kibaki kickstarted the processes that would deliver the Standard Gauge Railway, and even helped shepherd the country towards the long-desired devolution. When it came sometime after he had left, devolution handed out powers and responsibilities to sub-national administrations and ensured that counties would get the resources they needed to deliver services and development more generally. Among other effects, this seemed to put an end to decades-long marginalisation that some parts of Kenya had hitherto felt. However, Kenya remained as it had been for a long time in many ways. To quote one Kenyan analyst:

I have never thought of him as a transformational leader. I don't even believe he comes close to fitting that description. I don't think there is any compelling vision or configuration of core governance, political or economic values that Kibaki or the Kibaki administration bequeathed Kenya. In many respects his administration deflated confidence that Kenya could do away with its tribalism and corruption problems.

Another Kenyan friend, also a Kenyan observer and student of her country's political and policy landscape, was not convinced about Kibaki's transformational credentials:

I don't think so. He kept with the old Moi ways... cronyism, corruption, nepotism, etc. Little departure from how Moi ran government. In his first term there was significant economic growth. major planning for roads, infrastructure, etc. But the economic gains were wiped out in his second term, after the post-election violence.

So, while Kibaki brought about some real visible changes, a lot remained the same in the realm of state-society relations and in mindset regarding what the government and holders of power and responsibility were supposed to do and what they actually did.

And now to Museveni. I do not dismiss his achievements and say, as some do, that "he has done nothing for the country". Uganda was in a very difficult place at the time Museveni seized power. Things such as human rights, peace, security were non-existent. Even some of the most basic of social services had become unaffordable luxuries for very many Ugandans. Religious and ethnic and regional tensions and animosities were actively orchestrated by politicians to shore up their political fortunes. The economy had collapsed. Consumer goods, even things as mundane as match boxes, sugar, salt, bread, were difficult to find. Even beer and soft drinks were rationed. They could be bought only through political and other connections. Uganda manufactured very little and had very limited capacity for food processing. A very wide range of things, including basic food items such as bread were imported from Kenya.

Politically, the country had been unstable for most of the 24 years it had been independent. Ugandans born since Museveni came to power couldn't possibly relate to this in the same way those who lived under previous governments can. Even then, there is a certain sense of general gratitude among both categories of Ugandans that all this changed for the better. That said, a song sang by a local musician a few years ago captures what a growing number of Ugandans feel these days. The title of the song is "bizzatemu". Loosely translated into English, "bizzatemu" means "we are back to the bad old days". This, of course, is an exaggeration. However, it captures a feeling among many, that in some respects the Museveni government has been sliding into some of the worst aspects of the misrule Ugandans experienced before he came to power. Like Mwai Kibaki, Museveni has built infrastructure, presided over a healthy economy for most of his 36 years in power, attracted foreign investment, and created jobs.

All this has happened amidst an environment, especially over the last 25 years, of low and still deteriorating standards in

public administration and governance overall. The state in Uganda is ineffective, inefficient and its cadres corrupt, across a wide range of service delivery domains. Corruption entails theft, diversion, irregular awarding of government contracts to the well connected, and general mismanagement of public resources. This has been rife for years, entailing hundreds of millions of dollars annually, and seems to keep growing. All this is underlain by, let's face it, nepotism, subtle but palpable ethnic, filial, and regional favouritism, and blinding arrogance of power.

The democratisation project that Museveni and his associates in the National Resistance Movement promised Ugandans has not materialised beyond regular, albeit violent political contests suffused with shameless vote-buying, for cash, and disenfranchisement of large numbers of people in suspected opposition strongholds, and willful general mismanagement. And of late the country has begun to witness arrests, abductions and disappearance of people accused of terrorist activities but who are in fact political opponents of the ruling party, against whom no evidence has been made public. Today Uganda is once again divided on ethnic and regional lines, with divisions deepening, in ways that are painfully familiar to those who are old enough to have been around before Museveni seized power. Power, wealth and privilege are now associated with specific ethnic and regional groups; joining politics is once again about job-seeking and making money, not a calling to serve for the betterment of everybody. While many Ugandans dislike the fact that people in public office enrich themselves using public resources at the expense of the general population, they, nonetheless, expect it and would likely do the same, given an opportunity.

They complain about tribalism, nepotism and ethnic and filial favouritism in the award of jobs and other opportunities, but many will likely engage in the same practices if they ended up in public office. And this is because, as many are wont to

comment, “this is Uganda”, meaning “this is how we are”. The justification for this is simple in the eyes of many: if everybody is doing it, why should I not? And here, in general terms is why I couldn’t possibly include Museveni on my list of transformational leaders. I would echo my Kenyan friend’s verdict on Mwai Kibaki: There is no compelling vision or configuration of core governance, political – I would add ‘social’ – or economic values that the Museveni administration will bequeath Uganda.

In Tanzania on the other hand, in a brief 5-year period, John Magufuli managed to introduce ways of working and governing that transformed both the country’s economy and infrastructure landscape and the way the ordinary Tanzanian understood the role of government and the meaning of public service. Magufuli inherited a country whose governments bore all the hallmarks of dysfunction that characterise governments elsewhere in Africa, including corruption, sloth, inefficiency, and shirking and dereliction of duty. As elsewhere in Africa, some Tanzanians had grown to accept this as the most they could expect from their government.

During one visit to Dar es Salaam about a year before the presidential elections that ushered Magufuli into his first term of office, some of Tanzania’s intellectual and professional elite whom I met at their exclusive watering hole, the Hellenic Club, spared no time to express their desire for a ‘strong leader’ who ‘can make things happen’. They hoped the new leader would, among other things, get rid of the scourge of corruption which had engulfed their country, and which they saw as having worsened under the then outgoing President, Jakaya Kikwete’s leadership. I was visiting from Rwanda. So, my interlocutors said they would like “someone like Kagame”. In Magufuli they got the person they wanted.

Once elected, Magufuli hit the ground running, as it were. He tackled sloth in ministries and state agencies and insisted on the imperative to “*kuchapa kazi*” (to work). He combatted theft

and diversion of public resources to private uses. He curtailed waste, often seen in public money going into funding unnecessary official foreign trips and junkets for government officials, and questionable and avoidable ceremonies and jamborees. The 'freed' resources then went into building and revamping infrastructure and providing services needed especially by ordinary Tanzanians. Even where provision fell short, as it must in resource-constrained contexts, it was not lost on ordinary Tanzanians that this was a government that prioritised the poor and marginalised (*serikali ya wanyonge*). A lot has been said about his intolerance for opposition and crackdown on media. The violence by the security forces that characterised the recent election campaigns was particularly shocking to many across the region and the world. However, in Tanzania this is nothing new. Life for opposition groups wasn't that much better under his predecessors, especially Kikwete. Media already felt under siege before he became President. This is not to make excuses for him. Only to say that, even factoring all that into his legacy, Magufuli's tenure in office was transformational both in the way he re-oriented the government and led it, and in his success at changing mindsets about the role of government and leadership. Today Tanzanians do not expect leaders to pursue or promote personal interests, but to serve the people in pursuit of the common good. Such expectations, not sloganeering about democracy, drive people to demand for accountability and, by extension, governments that respect rights and freedoms.

What of Paul Kagame? He and the Rwandese Patriotic Front inherited a country torn asunder by institutionalised discrimination and marginalisation of a significant section of its population, and a related political history that saw it descend into perhaps the 20<sup>th</sup> century's speediest genocide. At the time he took over the reins of the RPF as Chairman and subsequently became President in 2000, the young post-genocide government as well as the ruling party itself were struggling with internal challenges and crises, some of them owing to a

gradual deterioration in discipline and control. Indeed, the need to reverse this trend was perhaps the most compelling reason for Kagame's rise to the top of both the party and the government.

Since then, Kagame has stamped his authority on both, not least through his no-nonsense approach to matters of accountability both for public resources and for tasks that those in positions of power and responsibility are assigned. In Rwanda, officials know that the public resources with which they are entrusted are not to be diverted to personal use. Those who abuse public resources do not expect to get away with it. Nor do members of the general public expect it, having learnt over the years that mismanagement or theft of public resources guarantees severe sanctions for the thief or abuser.

Today, unlike pre-genocide, Rwandans do not expect entitlement to any advantages or special claims on the state, on the basis of one's social attributes or origins or connections. Rwandans do not expect to pay bribes or give any form of gratification to public servants in return for services to which they are entitled free of charge. Instead, they expect to be attended to in the shortest time possible and to be treated with decorum and respect. Over the years they have learnt that when this does not happen, they are entitled to complain. Complaints are usually addressed.

The Kagame administration has also presided over a period of rapid expansion in physical infrastructure across a wide range of domains, and in the availability of social services, courtesy of innovations such as universal health insurance, investment in and actual provision of technical and vocational education and the provision of free housing for the poor. The poor who previously did not own the land they lived and farmed on now have ownership. Girl children who previously did not inherit land from their parents now do. Gender equality can now be seen beyond slogans, such as in the day-to-day

seriousness with which the government tackles gender-based violence and other forms of discrimination against women. All these changes speak to something very important in considering the transformational credentials of any leadership: mindset, behavioural, and attitudinal change. As with the “Magufuli effect” in Tanzania, the “Kagame effect” can be seen in the high degree to which citizens’ expectations of their leaders and government have changed in such a way that citizens are now able to make demands and expect a response.

As with Magufuli, Kagame has been and remains the subject of trenchant criticism on account of his government’s restrictions on media, political space and political discourse, and other aspects of non-respect for human rights. Warranted or not, and a great deal of debate can be had about the specifics of the accusations, both men have bequeathed their countries compelling visions and configurations of core governance, political, social and economic values, to paraphrase my Kenyan friend’s take on Mwai Kibaki.