

# Ugandans are off to another bumpy ride

On 14 January 2021, Ugandans went to the polls to elect a president and members of parliament. Presidential Elections in Uganda are always a formality, albeit a deadly one, given the total grip the long-serving president, Yoweri Museveni, who has been in power since 1986, has on the country. The outcome never surprises anyone!

But this election, Mr Museveni's sixth, was surprisingly different in many ways. First, his main challenger. Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu, better known as Bobi Wine, has a life story that is the stuff of the movies. The 38-year-old pop star turned member of parliament was only 3 years old when Mr Museveni seized power in 1986 following a bloody 5-year guerrilla war in which thousands died.

Born in poverty in Kampala's slums, Mr Kyagulanyi pulled himself by the proverbial bootstraps through a successful music career as the country's foremost reggae star and did well for himself. His spate of properties includes a picturesque mansion that sits on a sprawling ranch in the outskirts of Kampala, a beachhead on Lake Victoria and several prime properties in the city, some of which the government has now seized. In 2017 when a parliamentary by-election opened up in one of Kampala's constituencies, he cut off his dreadlocks, ditched the ripped jeans for suits, and contested the seat with the slogan, "From Ghetto to Parliament." Mere three years later, the legislator, who in his music days had christened himself "the ghetto president" announced his intentions to bid for the real presidency.

Ahead of the 14 January election, police and security services had severally clashed with Mr Wine's supporters, massacring nearly sixty of them in just two bloody days in November 2020

after sporadic protests erupted in major cities following the detention of Mr Wine on the campaign trail. Wine was trailed everywhere during the campaign by government informers and secret police and the military. A couple of days before the election, the internet was shut down, and the country remained essentially cut-off from the rest of the world for about a week.

And yet besides all these State shenanigans against him, Mr Wine, whose nascent National Unity Platform (NUP) party was formed only five months before the election, managed to garner a respectable 35% of the votes, some 3.5 million votes, against Mr Museveni's 58%.

Fifty-eight percent may appear to be a landslide victory in another country, but Mr Museveni's Uganda isn't just any country. This is the lowest percentage the president has ever got since he started running for election in 1996. In an election where only about one-half of the 18 million registered voters turned up, Mr Wine's performance was a coup.

Even more impressive was the performance of Mr Wine's parliamentary candidates. They scooped a shocking total of 61 seats in the legislature, essentially becoming the official opposition after much older political parties managed only a handful of seats. His party's candidates, many of whom are young, angry idealists (and yes, a good number of them from 'the ghetto') ousted many of Mr Museveni's lieutenants in parliament, nearly 30 of them were cabinet ministers including the Vice President.

Granted, the bloated parliament has over 500 seats, many of which were gerrymandered by Mr Museveni and his ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) party to maintain a supermajority. It goes without saying that it is also a largely useless, rubber-stamp body, ever ready and willing to do his bidding whenever he, for example, wants to change the constitution to extend his rule.

Regardless, a vocal opposition, however small, occasionally causes him headache. He had to, for example, send his presidential guard to [storm](#) the house when he suspected that opposition MPs were trying to derail his bid to amend the age limit clause in the constitution to allow himself to rule for life.

By law, the opposition also chairs key parliamentary committees such as one on public accountability which, by grilling his ministerial officials in the glare of TV cameras over corruption and scandalous looting of government money, causes his regime great embarrassment.

Mr Wine won overwhelmingly in the central region of Uganda where he hails from, an outcome which led Mr Museveni himself and his supporters to allege that Wine played the tribal card to dislodge the president from the region. The people making this allegation seem to not see the irony of ignoring the fact that Mr Museveni himself overwhelmingly won the Western region where he hails from.

In a rumbling address after he was announced the winner by the country's Electoral Commission, Mr Museveni looked and sounded angry and stung by Mr Wine's performance. It appears that just Wine's guts to challenge him rubbed him the wrong way (Mr Museveni, at 76 is twice Bobi Wine's age. In his speeches, he is fond of referring to Ugandans, 80% of whom are below 35 and therefore weren't even born when he captured state power in 1986, as 'Bazzukulu,' an endearing word that means grandchildren in the Luganda language). He accused Mr Wine of playing tribal politics and being an '[agent of foreign interests](#)', saying that some countries in the region and in the west, which he did not name, had infiltrated Uganda's electoral process.

Analysts will debate for months what these election results mean and what factors determined them. However, what remains clear is that Mr Wine's shrewd campaigning and his foresight

in realizing the increasing discontent against Mr Museveni surprised everyone, including myself – especially in regards to how he managed to commodify these issues to expose fault lines in Mr Museveni's coalition (two years ago [while speaking](#) to the Jeune Afrique Magazine, I had dismissed his chances myself).

For the uninitiated or outsiders, a 35%-58% electoral loss may look like an abject failure for any political candidate. In Uganda, it is not, especially while facing an enigma of a ruler like Mr Museveni. Everyone is now waiting to see what Wine is going to do with his undisputed position as an influential opposition leader during the forthcoming Museveni 'regime'. He has already dismissed the election outcome as rigged and is planning to challenge the result in the supreme court, where the odds are heavily stacked against him (every main contender who lost to Mr Museveni since 1996 has challenged the results in the courts and lost the petitions because, like every other institution, the courts, especially at that crucially high level, are fully controlled by the regime).

It begs the question whether the chided Mr Museveni would be forced into retrospection and probably either plan for a transition after this five-year mandate (he will have ruled for 40 years in 2026) or introduce some reforms to placate the opposition. I personally do not see this happening, having watched Mr Museveni for the last 25 years. He is a stubborn ruler who for some reason still thinks that the country needs him, and like many of his lieutenants as well as himself have said severally, won't hand over the country he so much fought for, to 'lumpens.' Like he alluded to in his 'victory' speech, he thinks a betrayal by members of Bobi Wine's tribe and the catholic church led to Mr Wine's stronger-than-expected challenge. He may thus tighten the grip on the constituents he thinks are against him and, in the process, control civil liberties even more tightly than he currently does. And as

long as Western donors remain happy with his work as an ally on the 'war on terror' and anchor of stability in the Great Lakes region (Uganda's troops are in Somalia, South Sudan and millions of refugees call Uganda home) and keep the aid taps running, he may as well carry on.

Regardless of what both men do, Ugandans are off to another bumpy 5-year (maybe even longer) ride.