

# Special EDITION

## How Strategic Choices Keep President Museveni in Power

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### Executive Summary

This article argues that over the last three decades, Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni has adequately dealt with challenges to his power, enabling him to be elected into office more than four times. A neopatrimonial and clientele political system has won him four consecutive elections. During this time, the country has lifted constitutional presidential term and age limits, oppressed opposition, and exerted personal control over the army and security services. Combined with a lack of a strong opposition and international pressure, the strategic choices, as outlined in this article, have resulted in an indefinite presidential tenure that is unlikely to end anytime soon.

### Introduction

President Yoweri Museveni has been in power since his National Resistance Movement (NRM) marched into the country's capital Kampala in 1986. Now, 33 years down the line, Museveni is still firmly in office, having crafted a version of Uganda characterised by neopatrimonialism, clientelism, and politics of presidential tenure, as well as far-reaching economic reforms, subsequent growth, and relative peace and stability. Following years-long bush war against the oppressive and violent regime of Milton Obote, Museveni was originally heralded as a liberation fighter. Many African leaders who came to power following armed struggle in the 1970s and 1980s believed they were crucial to national development of their countries. This informed some leaders' decision to stay in power, beyond their constitutional term limits. Interestingly, shortly after becoming president, Museveni declared that 'the problem of Africa in general and Uganda in particular is not the people but the leaders who want to overstay in power' (Tangri & Mwenda, 2010, p. 32). However, during the early years of his tenure, Museveni stated multiple times that he had no intention to become president for life. In 1989, he argued that he did not have "the slightest interest in being president-for-life or even for a long time" (quoted in Tangri & Mwenda, 2010, p. 34). In his 2001 election manifesto, Museveni declared that he would contest for "a last presidential term" (Museveni, 2001, p. 9).

Tangri and Mwenda (2010) advance three reasons why Museveni is determined to hold onto power. First, coming to power against a backdrop of decades of violence and chaos, Museveni believes that he is indispensable for peace and prosperity in Uganda. Without the pacifying influence of a strong leader and a strong party (NRM), Uganda would descend into chaos. Second, executive power has brought many opportunities for accumulation of wealth in the context of scarcity and limited opportunities. Holding on to executive power, thus, has a financial incentive. Third, Museveni, his family, and those around him believe that a new government would sue them for alleged misdeeds. In 2001, when presidential elections were hotly contested, Dr. Kizza Besigye challenged Museveni accusing him and his family of corruption, and threatened judicial action against them. The 2001 election was a crucial moment for Uganda, any intention that Museveni had to give up power peacefully was shattered by the large electoral support for Besigye in 2001 (Tangri & Mwenda, 2010).

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