Special EDITION

# How Strategic Choices Keep President Museveni in Power

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By Jules Swinkels


## 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).


@HISS2017 @Horninstitute
info@horninstitute.org www.horninstitute.org
+254 720 323 896 +254 735 323 896
50, Riverside Drive
P.O. Box 25632 - 00100
Nairobi – Kenya
HORN INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Over the course of his tenure, Museveni had to deal with several challenges to his rule. First, in the aftermath of the bush war, Museveni inherited a politically fractured landscape with numerous political groups vying for control. Second, after the 2001 and 2006 elections, Museveni's strong political opponent, Dr. Kizza Besigye, a former Museveni comrade and personal doctor during the insurgency, petitioned the Supreme Court. In both rulings, the court stated that vote rigging, ballot stuffing, and intimidation had taken place. However, in both cases, the judges decided that electoral irregularities did not affect the outcome of the elections for it to be dismissed (Tangri & Mwenda, 2010; Reid, 2017). Third, the Ugandan Constitution allowed for just two presidential terms of five years, effectively banning Museveni to run in 2006. Fourth, after being in power for 31 years, Museveni's age did not allow him to run for a fifth term. The Ugandan Constitution, Article 102(b), barred those above 75 years and below 35 years from running for president. President Museveni turns 75 years in September 2019, effectively making him ineligible to run for presidency in 2021. Fourth, resistance from within his own party to both the lifting of constitutional age and tenure limits (as discussed below), as well as his tight control and influence over their parliamentary caucus. Gyezaho (2007) found that MPs regularly felt 'gagged and suffocated'. Fifth, Uganda has a lively political opposition that has continuously put pressure on Museveni and the NRM.

This article analyses how President Museveni has strategically dealt with these challenges to his rule. Drawing on the concepts of statecraft and neo-statecraft, it concludes that Museveni could cling to power by adopting a neopatrimonial and clientele network of supporters in the National Resistance Movement and within the executive, legislative, and military branch, enabling him to strategically intervene in those challenges posing a serious threat to his power.

## Theoretical Framework

Statecraft "is the art of winning elections and achieving some necessary degree of governing competence in office... It is concerned primarily to resolve the electoral and governing problems facing a party at any particular time" (Bulpitt, 1986, p. 21). Statecraft theory, originally developed by Jim Bulpitt (1986), understands politics and policymaking by focusing on governing challenges and strategic choices by the government's leadership. The approach is, thus, concerned with how political elites confront and respond to governing challenges. Bulpitt (1986; 1996) argues that the primary concern for political elites and government is to achieve successful statecraft, meaning to gain and maintain power. He posits that there are certain political mechanisms designed to protect this objective: party management, a winning electoral strategy, political argument hegemony, and governing competence (1986; 1996). James (2012) argues that there should be a fifth support mechanism to statecraft theory: bending the rules of the game. Institutions are formal, legal-political rules that can be enforced by third parties rather than informal 'anthropological' ones (James, 2012).

James (2016) distils from Bulpitt's ideas a theory of neo-statecraft, which he argues, is especially useful in 'winner-takes-all' presidential systems with strong executives (p. 100). A crucial element in neo-statecraft theory is the concept of 'intervention': if a political centre believes that its strategic interests are affected by a policy issue in which it previously has not been a stakeholder, it will seek to intervene (James, 2016). In top-down centralized political systems with strong executives, such strategic intervention can be adopted to overcome challenges and cling on to power. Intervention takes place along economic, political, or social lines.

Strategic intervention, Greenaway, Salter, and Hart (2007, p. 717) argue, can be done by powerful actors or policy entrepreneurs with their own agenda who can shape and determine policy outputs through 'implementation networks'. The logic behind those networks is closely related to the concepts of neopatrimonialism and clientelism. The concept of neopatrimonialism was first termed by Eisenstadt in 1973. Others, like Médard (1982) and Roth (1987) developed the term further. However, the debate on the topic, albeit under different terms, started with Roth (1968), who distinguished between traditional patrimonialism and personal rulership, the latter of which he explicitly dubbed neopatrimonialism in 1987. Personal rulership "operates on the basis of loyalties that do not require any belief in the ruler's unique personal qualifications, but are inextricably linked to material incentives and rewards" (Roth, 1969, p. 196). There exists conceptual tension in the relationship between patrimonial domination and legal-rational domination. Patrimonial domination, where *all* official relations are privatised, does not portray African realities (Erdmann & Engel, 2006, emphasis in original). The notion that there is no distinction between the public and private realm is untrue in the African context. Neopatrimonialism, then, is the penetration of patrimonialism, or informal relations, into the legal-rational system of bureaucracy, thereby twisting its logic, functions, and effects. In other words, "informal politics invade formal institutions" (Erdmann & Engel, 2006, p. 18).

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Erdmann and Engel (2006) argue that clientelism is often equated or incorporated into neopatrimonialism as a component of the latter. Clientelism entails a relationship between a more powerful patron and less powerful client. Scott (1972) defines clientelism as an "instrumental friendship in which an individual of higher socioeconomic status (patron) uses his own influence and resources to provide protection or benefits, or both, for a person of lower status (client) who, for his part, reciprocates by offering general support and assistance, including personal services, to the patron" (p. 92).

## Analysis

Over the years, Museveni has had to overcome several challenges to remain in power, as outlined in the introduction. Below are the economic, political and social strategic choices that Museveni has taken to deal with these challenges. There is significant overlap between the various choices, but for the sake of argument, each has been placed in its own category.

### Economic

*High-level corruption:* Tangri and Mwenda (2008) show that high-level corruption in the Ugandan government has underpinned clientele support for the government and mobilised political support to help the government stay in power. The Business Anti-Corruption portal (2017) reported that there is a high risk of corruption in Uganda's judicial sector, in part due to political interference. Interestingly, Uganda's anti-corruption framework is among the most solid legal frameworks in Africa, while the enforcement of these laws is deplorable (Global Integrity, 2010). Transparency International ranks Uganda 149th out of 180 countries, with a Corruption Perception Index score of 2.6, meaning highly endemic and deep rooted.

*Economic reforms:* After Museveni came to power, Uganda transformed from 'laughing stock' to a serious economic player in the region (Reid, 2017), attributing to Museveni's status as guardian of prosperity. Since 1986, Uganda has consistently been one of the fastest growing economies in Africa, leading to a substantial reduction in poverty. Most of the reforms that transformed the economy, originated inside the Ugandan government during the 1990s, rather than being imposed through donor conditionality (Kuteesa et al., 2009). The World Bank reports that between 1990 and early 2000s, Uganda's growth rate was around 7 per cent per year, surpassing the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) target 1a and thus halving poverty by 2015 (the World Bank, 2018). Naturally, these reforms and growth rate have helped Museveni stay in power due to garnered popularity.

### Political

*No-party politics and the tactical return of multi-party politics:* Upon taking office, Museveni enforced 'no-party democracy'. With exception of the Uganda People's Congress (UPC, Obote's former party) and the Former Uganda National Army (FUNA), then led by a former Idi Amin, all political parties were 'represented' in the NRM. Reid (2017) argues that, instead of representing inclusivity though, this strategy was "designed to carefully control the fragile political environment, rather than a route to genuine democratic transition" (p. 82). No other parties were allowed to participate in the political arena until 2003, when the government made a u-turn on the issue. Makara, Rakner, and Svåsand (2009) argue that the reintroduction of multi-party politics was stimulated by internal conflicts between factions within the NRM and much less by international (donor) pressure, as further discussed below. "The decision to open up for multiparty competition was intimately linked to Museveni's ambitions to remain in office and control the transition process. By linking the return to multiparty politics to the removal of term limits, the power of the executive was consolidated" (Makara et al., 2009, p. 186). In short, to simultaneously appease criticism from within his own party and remove term limits, Museveni allowed opposition politics to return to the political arena, realising that a united NRM could overpower the opposition while a fractured NRM posed a big threat to his rule (Kalinaki, 2014).

*Electoral fraud:* Electoral fraud by the NRM is widely reported. In 2001 and 2006, the Supreme Court ruled that significant vote rigging and ballot stuffing had taken place, but decided (with a 3-2 majority in 2001, and 4-3 majority in 2006) that the results should stand. Izama and Wilkinson (2011) argue that while in the run-up to the 2011 elections, Museveni was facing a steep challenge due to a 2009 corruption scandal and clashes with the Buganda kingdom. However, through a combination of clever political strategies and misuse of state resources, Museveni garnered the highest approval rate during his tenure: 69 per cent. To gain insight into this political game, it is worth taking a closer

look at the 2011 campaign. Museveni publically distanced himself from all lower-level contests, and abstained from supporting parliamentary and local races, opening the campaign. He dealt with frustration over corruption charges by deflecting blame to lower-level officials. At the same time, he offered these local leaders money and promises of future favors in return for their help in mobilizing voters (Izima & Wilkerson, 2011). Finally, the NRM stressed Museveni's achievements in bringing stability to Uganda after decades of strife. "The subtext was Museveni's close relationship with the army and the suggestion that only he could keep it from returning to its ignominious practice of terrorizing civilians" (Izima & Wilkerson, 2011, p. 68). To support this, high-level military officials made official statements, publically supporting Museveni and suggesting that they would not accept anyone else as president.

Finally, the NRM seeks electoral support of youth and small-scale farmers through hand-outs under the Youth Livelihood Programme. Critics allege the program has been tainted by local government nepotism, political favouritism and embezzlement (International Crisis Group [ICG], 2017).

*Personal control over army and security services:* The small Bahima sub-group of the Banyankole, Museveni's ethnic group, have dominated the top positions within the army. Closest to him is the Presidential Guard Brigade (PGB), which has the best training, weaponry, and salary. His eldest son Lt. Cl. Muhoozi Kainerugaba is the commander of the PGB. Museveni's close and personal control of the military and security services over the years shows that the Uganda People Defence Force (UPDF) is being run as a *de facto* personal army (see above for example). Tangri and Mwenda (2010, p. 35) state that in 2006, top political leaders were alleged to have phoned and threatened judges with a military takeover to maintain Museveni in power if the election results were annulled.

*Party management*: Museveni has demonstrated to NRM leaders that loyalty brings large benefits while resistance will be punished. "If you shy away from me, I will also shy away from you" (quoted in Nganda, 2009). He is known to sack ministers opposed to him. In response to senior NRM leaders Jim Muhwezi, Mike Mukula, and Henry Tumukunde's 'rebellion' (criticising the president for weak leadership and corruption), Museveni directed that they face trial on corruption-related charges. Museveni has control over significant "public resources, which he allocates in favour of loyal legislators and government ministers in the form of roads, health and education facilities, and personal benefits" (Tangri & Mwenda, 2010, p. 38). This is how he ensures that rifts within the NRM do not escalate into a full-blown rebellion.

*Lifting of constitutional term and age limits:* In 2005, Museveni lifted constitutional term limits, paving way for a possible two more terms in office if re-elected. Lifting the term limits created serious fallout with senior NRM members, and several broke relations with him. He adopted a tactic (as seen above, side-lining those opposed to him and rewarding those loyal to him. Tangri (2005) reported that through the use of political manipulation, bribery and patronage, he pushed the constitutional amendment through parliament. Additionally, for the 2021 elections, Museveni will have been too old to participate, as the Constitution Article 102(b) prohibits individuals older than 75 or younger than 35 to run for the presidency. However, in 2017, he brought a bill to parliament to remove the presidential age limit. At the end of 2017, the bill got accepted, with 317 politicians voting in favour and 97 against, effectively paving the way for a presidency for life.

*Decentralization:* Green (2010) shows that "President Museveni's government has created new districts as a means to compensate for other patronage resources lost through reforms and that new districts have helped him to continue to win elections" (p. 83). The NRM embarked on a radical decentralization mission after 1986, widely heralded as a significant step towards further democratization. However, Green (2008, p. 428) shows that countries like Uganda have seen an explosion in the number of local political bodies, "as a means to build up patrimonial support among local elites." Bates (1981) argued that these reforms have led to a sharp reduction in the availability of the central government rents which had previously provided politicians across Africa with patronage resources.

## Social

*Lack of international pressure:* Through diplomacy and tactful foreign policy, Museveni has over the years made himself a 'trustworthy' ally for the international community. Uganda is a heavily aid-dependent country, and since the mid-1990s, Uganda has enjoyed an influx of foreign aid amounting to 80 per cent of its development expenditures (Branch, 2011). However, relations between donors and the government soured over the 2001 and 2006 elections, and the 2005 lifting of constitutional term limits, as both the United States and the United Kingdom pushed Museveni against meddling in the elections and lifting of term limits. However, after 2006, relations have improved significantly. The US and the UK see Museveni as a crucial ally in the fight against terrorism and Islamic extremism in the region, notably

Somalia. Additionally, the World Bank has commended Uganda for its successful economic reforms. Museveni has tactfully positioned himself as 'far from the worst' leader in Africa's political scene, leading international donors to turn a blind eye to some of his misdoings.

*Domestic opposition – disorganized and suppressed:* Dr. Kizza Besigye, Uganda's main opposition figure, posed a serious challenge to Museveni's rule over the last twenty years. He challenged Museveni in the 2001, 2006, 2011, and 2016 elections, each time accusing Museveni and the NRM of widespread electoral fraud. In the run-up to the 2006 elections, Besigye and 22 other were accused of treason. When the trial kicked off on March 15, 2006, Justice Kagaba ordered for the release of 14 suspects. The military refused the order, returning the suspects to jail.

Few Ugandans believe that political change will happen via the ballot box, national dialogue, or a popular uprising because the opposition suffers from funding shortages, infighting and regime co-option (ICG, 2017). Attempts to form a coalition of opposition parties in the run-up to the 2016 elections have faltered. The main parliamentary opposition, the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC), has been weakened by lack of grassroots structures, financial resources, divisions over strategy and police repression. With regards to these grassroots structures, Besigye noted "the weak grassroots structure of the party, yet that's where elections take place" but "we didn't have an elaborate vote protection mechanism within our own structures" (Quoted in Independent, 2008). With regards to funding, Tangri and Mwenda (2010) show that the NRM's 2006 elections budget was around USD 26 million, while the FDC spent only USD 850,000.

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With regards to police repression, the government adopted Public Order Management Act (POMA) 2013, which bans political gatherings of three or more people without prior permission from the police. This has stymied genuine opposition to the NRM. The Ugandan police is known to violently crackdown on opposition protests and demonstrations. Opposition and civil society organisations have accused the police of arbitrarily arresting and detaining opposition activists. The latest example of this trend is the arrest and alleged beating of famed opposition figure Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu, also known as Bobi Wine. Wine has attracted significant support, especially among the youth, who are disillusioned with Museveni and his 'historicals'. In February 2019, Wine stated that he is running for president in 2021, possibly posing a new and significant challenge to Museveni's power.

## Conclusion

Museveni has made adequate strategic choices to overcome challenges to his presidency. He is still firmly in power, and the way is open for another term in office if he wins the 2021 elections. By first imposing no-party politics and then reintroducing multi-party politics at a convenient time, Museveni could control the fractured political landscape in the early days of his tenure and simultaneously remove the constitutional term limits. Through widespread electoral fraud, ballot stuffing, and vote rigging, Museveni could win four consecutive elections. Through clientele and neopatrimonial networks, Museveni ensured that rifts within the National Resistance Movement would not spiral out of his control. Through decentralization and increasing local political bodies, Museveni has been able to increase patrimonial support among local elites. By suppressing and arresting opposition figures and limiting media freedom, Museveni effectively silenced political opposition. All these strategic choices are underpinned by both the unwavering personal relationship between Museveni and the army and security services, who serve as a *de facto* personal army, as well as high-level corruption, which underpinned clientele support for the government and mobilised political support to help the government stay in power. Additionally, Museveni's tactful international relations and diplomacy choices have resulted in a lack of international pressure from international donors.

## Recommendations

To ensure a peaceful, democratic and liberal Uganda, international donors should:

- Lobby for the re-instigation of constitutional term limits of two terms (ten years in total). Additionally, negotiate with Museveni not to run for office in 2021 but instead allow for open, free and peaceful elections.
- Mediate between Museveni and the opposition with regards to peaceful and free elections in 2021. Work together to ensure that the possibility of electoral fraud is kept to an absolute minimum
- Disapprove corruption and dissuade political and military elites to engage in corrupt practices that influence democratic accountability.
- Assist Uganda in adequately implementing Uganda's existing strong legal framework with regards to corruption.
- Assist in strengthening the independency of the judiciary so that it can adequately deal with cases of corruption, clientelism, repression or conflicts of interest.
- Pressure Museveni and the NRM to allow peaceful political opposition and protests, prevent human right violations in police and security operations, and lift the 2013 Public Order Management Act.
- Pressure Museveni to sever the strong ties of military executives with the political body and ensure the proper division of power (judicial, military, political).
- Assist Uganda on the long-term with potential troubles arising from the eventual succession of Museveni. International donors should pressure Museveni not to line-up his family to take over as this will create significant tensions in Uganda.

To conduct meaningful opposition to Museveni and the NRM, the opposition should:

- Organize at the grassroots levels to put elaborate vote protection mechanisms in place, limiting the possibility of electoral fraud.
- Look for meaningful funding opportunities, for example in the diaspora or with the international community.
- Play into rifts within the NRM to increase discontent from within. Push for true political contest by amplifying the sounds of disagreement with Museveni throughout the political spectrum. In other words, the opposition needs to prevent an 'us versus them' dynamic, but rather invite politicians from all sides to take part in open political contest. This can be done by highlighting Museveni's oppressive tactics with regards to opposition from within his own party.
- Teach youth and small-scale farmers not to accept hand-outs under the Youth Livelihood Programme, which allegedly seeks to influence them to vote for the NRM.

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## About the Writer

**Jules Swinkels**

Swinkels is a Visiting Research Fellow at the HORN Institute and a researcher in international relations, conflict, and war studies. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Political History and International Relations, with a minor in Islamic Studies from Utrecht University (NL), and a Master's degree in Military Strategic Studies from the Royal Dutch Defence Academy.

He co-founded 'De Focus', a Dutch non-profit foundation aimed at strengthening the relationship between society and scholars by transforming academic articles into challenging short stories.

He can be reached at Swinkelsjules@gmail.com