



# REFLECTIONS ON COVID-19 POLITICS IN UGANDA

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Africa's armies and security systems in the **COVID-19 ERA**: A case of Uganda's response to the Coronavirus.

*Angelo Izama\**

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African armies and security systems are back in the spotlight. With COVID-19 pandemic, their ability to support large scale civilian control through extended curfews and lockdowns, reinforce health workers at the front lines whilst adopting a nationalist and not parochial posture is an early simulation of other potential political crises of the future.

And just as well.

One of the side effects of the world catching the Wuhan flu and getting seriously hurt is that China, the only socialist economic and military superpower, will now be grabbed by the balls by other superpowers and squeezed hard. Then the bully club of nuclear armed nations – who have learnt very little about the destruction of world wars, will descend on the rest.

When the shakedowns are done, many regimes whose leaders have been offering lip service to the work of African independence will be left with the consequences of their dithering on building viable and cohesive societies – or the bigger idea of a strong fraternity of nations on the continent, or even the investment in their armies beyond creating regime protection militias.

The Chinese are not weak but the choice between pragmatic Chinese partners or former imperial powers will not be made freely. When the bankers and soldiers from either side get to work, the ensuing melee will cause regime transitions either toward more controlled systems or lesser controlled ones or put simply, towards more western style democracies or Putin-style autocracies. Regardless, there will be less autonomy for these

\*Angelo Izama is a Ugandan journalist, writer, analyst and frequent contributor on current affairs for local and international publications and broadcasters. He is currently Team Leader of Kwawote.

African nations no matter the label they adopt to survive. Therefore, the quality and posture of their existing military establishment will make a great difference between the highway to “democracy” or the highway to a militocracy.

In April, the [Wall Street Journal](#) published a piece about one of China’s big weapons – debt. The story named two projects in Uganda central to our country’s long-term economic growth (the Karuma Hydropower dam and Entebbe airport upgrade), highlighting that both have “kill” clauses that allow China to takeover in case of non-payment. Ironically, until recently the control of debt had been a favorite soft power tool of Western governments. So, when the narrative of “Africa needs trade not aid” is replaced by “Africa faces neither East nor West but forward” the foundations that are shaken by the COVID-19 pandemic on global power relations will strike at the underlying condition of most African countries; weak national cohesion.

### **Armed patriots as history students**

African military and security systems that are simulating their role in a national crisis via the Coronavirus pandemic will be tested further. For many years of having no viable indigenous social goals combined with the corruption, waste and drift of being mere middlemen to global capitalism will find them complete pushovers and unprepared to chart a course of their own or defend their principals. There are some who have been fashioned by more recent internal conflicts and the new political identities born out of those crises– like Rwanda of 1994 and Uganda since the 1970s. For these, surviving a New World Order shakedown may boil down to pragmatic choices as well as the prospect of solid internal controls.

The response of the Uganda People’s Defense Forces (UPDF) to COVID-19 as a live simulation of a national crisis are available for analysts to interpret now. We shall do so through a very Ugandan story shortly. However, a few notes on the structure, history and posture of the UPDF are worth taking to that analysis.

### **The national army for one appears top heavy.**

Until recently, the human capital of the UPDF has been drawn from its inception in the bush war and regional conflicts from the 90s. However, it has a high growth of younger

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cadre and professional officer corps that are the result of a program of professionalization. While the same program was underfunded and continues to be so, it has changed the make-up of the army. None the less the army still has low specialization, a large infantry with its principal divisions led by second generation officers. Internally the army is focused on law enforcement as well as regime protection, depends heavily on state funding, negligible official military economy though it is present in most areas of state managed economy. Externally – the UPDF has a long history of pan-African projects such as its long-term engagement in Somalia and around the region. These projects have been the graduating school of its skilled fighters, shape its official ideology and make it potentially one of the most capable expeditionary forces in the region. There are other problematic aspects of the force with regard to its ethnic make-up, shifting ideological foundations ( it is command centered not mission centered and run on doctrine primarily for example) and the personal ties its founders have to it present themselves as both pros and cons – ensuring continuity but also risking discontinuity as explained later.

In the last five years – partly as a result of the reduction in regional activity ( in Sudan and Somalia) the UPDF is increasingly looking inward ( save for recent tensions with Rwanda) and has fluid relations with global powers – either East or West. In short it may be a better prepared force for the turbulence of global power shifts. A closer look at the COVID-19 simulation from the embedded nature of the UPDF bears some clues.

### **The Case of Bad Beans for the “Vulnerable Poor”**

When officials from the Office of the Prime Minister or as others quip, the office of permanent mismanagement (OPM), were arrested recently – the official reason given was the officially sounding charge of corruption and abuse of office.

As the story goes, acting with malicious intent , a cluster of officials, obvious bad apples in the otherwise ripe barrel of the civil service, refused to buy cheaper beans and other items for the so-called “vulnerable poor” in the country’s COVID-19 response plan. Instead

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they allegedly padded the rules to benefit a regime-backed businessman by the name of Aponye Nyegamahe.

The affected officials, including the Permanent Secretary, are facing various charges. It would have been impossible in today's Uganda that an emergency procurement, worth millions of dollars, would go without scandal. The OPM scandal has all the usual suspects for this very Ugandan scandal to happen. A large discretionary procurement using public funds, a mixture of regime-backed businessmen competing for it, and a crisis to keep the public engaged. The OPM is a "scene of crime" of similar charges in the past. Pension funds worth millions of dollars were raided less than a decade ago and recently donors cut aid to a refugee program because of "creative accounting" by government officials.

The latest scandal however allows for a small analysis about the role of Uganda's military in public affairs – especially in the face of a major political crisis – something of an inevitability in my view. To do this requires working with some re-definitions, however.

The first is to take corruption beyond its legal definition as fraudulent and dishonest conduct. A more accurate definition of corruption as a political activity is not the leaking of public funds. Such a definition would be redundant in a political society that is organized around the appropriation of public funds to pay for political support. Corruption in Uganda as elsewhere is about inequality before public institutions whereby certain individuals, groups of individuals or even classes are either above the reach of the law or can influence how it relates to them. Such a character in the OPM scandal included Mr. Aponye, whose businesses unofficially operate like a state parastatal. They also include his opponents in the OPM deal – which are the subject of this article; the Ugandan military.

The second definition, looking ahead, is about what kind of political society may emerge from a seismic shock to this system. Uganda is defined variously as an emerging democracy or a fledgling autocracy. With regard to the latter, to some people, the measure applied to Uganda has to be the extent to which one can throw the phrase – some countries have armies but some armies rarer still, have countries. The military, aside from its official duties in national defense, are the reason that Uganda's politics has revised definitions that combine the nature of military influence (command, autocracy) to the effective populism of electoral politics of the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM).

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Recent definitions of what Ugandan politics suggest is that it is an electoral authoritarianism – a sufficient hybrid that does not tell us much about what happens when in a major political crisis it is forced to go one way or the other – on a path of authoritarian determinism or one of democratic aspiration-ism. Personally, I prefer to use the definition of electoral fascism – to include the aspects of personal rule that involve the central character in this story – President Yoweri Museveni. As a strategic actor – Gen Museveni is referred to as the center of gravity of Ugandan politics. It is from his personal office that Lt Col. Edith Nakalema - the head of an outfit called State House Anti-Corruption Unit - exercised the authority to arrest the OPM officials. Museveni's oversize influence on the government has spawned a large and expensive "state within a state" with multiple offices that often take over the authority and functions of official government agencies. Lt. Col. Nakalema, for example, commandeers other state institutions – such as the police, courts etc., to implement a presidential directive.

The center of gravity occupied by Gen. Museveni is borne by historical events. Without getting deeper into this, his position in the government reflects the hybridity we referred to earlier. The Office of the President he occupies stands, because of political events, between the army as a predatory institution from the past and the civilian population and keeps the two (army and civilian) from clashing. In one direction, the clash can lead to loss of power and credibility by the army where future civilian governments may reduce their influence and defund their activities and in another, civilian authority would further erode and be replaced by a command political economy run by generals. As long as Gen. Museveni holds the center – he acts as an arbiter for this tension – renewing good faith in the army through his administration of the military while restoring faith in civilian affairs by subjecting himself to an election every five years and running the official government through an embedded patronage system.

In a major political crisis, such as where this center of gravity is absent, the question becomes whether or not the emerging exercise of authority will retain the "state within the state" such as a presidential succession or return that authority to the ordinary institutions of the state. The actions of Lt. Col. Nakalema show how this clash between the military and civilian occurs, why it does and its possible consequences when put in the

Through COVID-19, for example, one can see at close range the capacity of the regime to mobilize public participation in a crisis, as well as the limits of the use of force in civilian control – such as the deployment of curfews, flexible arrest orders, military violence and correspondingly the civilian response to martial conditions

context of the COVID-19 event. The pandemic has the benefit of creating a live simulation of a crisis – one of truly national dimensions. Through COVID-19, for example, one can see at close range the capacity of the regime to mobilize public participation in a crisis, as well as the limits of the use of force in civilian control – such as the deployment of curfews, flexible arrest orders, military violence and correspondingly the civilian response to martial conditions. So far all of this has been possible with the center of gravity holding – and with the authority of YK Museveni intact or in some cases enhanced. What has also been evident is the emergence of Museveni not as an authoritarian of old – but as a broker of compromise between aggressive government units and individuals as dramatically broadcast in his regular COVID-19 briefings.

This center of gravity is in fact fragile and a cause of worry. The backstory to the OPM scandal was that the original procurement of beans and posho was problematic. The quality was indeed questionable. Things took a turn when “better samples” of food products were dispatched from the office of Operation Wealth Creation (OWC) run by the president’s brother and senior military adviser, Gen. Salim Saleh. OWC itself is a government programme run outside the official government architecture. It is unclear what happened next but an agreement to share out the procurement between Aponye enterprises and OWC failed – and subsequently led to the corruption “investigation” that resulted in the detention of the OPM officials. The head of the COVID-19 National Task Force, Prime Minister Ruhakana Rugunda remains in charge of the process but it has been greatly revised since it was launched.

As a simulation of a crisis, COVID-19 shows certain predictive elements of the source of the next political crisis. It shows that a future crisis will most likely come from corruption – as defined earlier. Over time, Mr. Museveni has demonstrated that he either does not have the political will or the capacity to confront the cancer of corruption. Unable to marshal the apparatus of the state to deal with corruption, he seems to be resorting to the Bible and spirituality for guidance as he well explained in his May 2020 Labor Day address. As the cancer of corruption is likely to persist, the next crisis is likely to be triggered by elite interests clashing within the business and political aristocracy which sits above official government systems. Secondly, the COVID-19 pandemic crisis shows us that if such a crisis happens without the leadership of Gen. Museveni or someone of similar stature – the resulting chaos will test the military in its use of authority (credibly) and the civilian actors too in similar ways.

**So far, the following observations are useful in thinking about the events to come.**

Firstly, that the military today is embedded in the economy. OWC and multiple other ventures have created an army that must act through the real economy, one that has interests in how that economy is run, and whose leaders are similarly beneficiaries and

protectors of economic activities. COVID-19 has been a good simulator of an economic crisis but it is not severe enough yet to show how an embedded military may respond in dire economic crisis.

Secondly, that the military is cohesive but cohering around the authority of Gen. Museveni as its founder. There are, however, large administrative gaps. In a national crisis, without him, it is unclear how for example, authority over the police, auxiliary militia groups like Local Defense Unit (LDU) and veterans can be centrally run especially if the political interests expressed by such a crisis are not uniting of the public ( such as COVID19) but rather disuniting – like a governance question such as political succession.

Thirdly, that use of violence has ramifications for civil-military relations. Earlier on in the enforcement of the partial curfew and lockdown, violence especially by LDUs - a UPDF affiliated militia group - was met with public condemnation. The security forces responded by adopting a light touch with enforcement and in some cases re-interpretation of their orders. The abuse of stickers (movement authorization permits) and exemptions on movement suggest that in a political crisis the space for a Chinese whisper between those giving orders and those implementing them will be more fluid.

COVID-19 may have run a live simulation about a national crisis but beyond the pandemic it has revealed that weak administrative capacity, elite corruption and limitations on the use of violence may point in the direction of less direct military control in the future. If the center of gravity fails to hold, an emerging consensus may focus more on economic concessions and deal making. Corruption indeed as an organizing principle of the establishment elite may avert the violent reconstruction of the state.

#### About the Uganda Transition Scenarios Thought Leadership Group – UTSTLG

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For more information, please contact: Great Lakes Institute for Strategic Studies, P.O Box 398, Kampala. Tel. +256 414 660439