Ugandan elections: Museveni holds onto power

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President Yoweri Museveni won the presidential elections in Uganda by a substantial majority. He gained 69.3 percent of the vote, whilst his main opponent Dr Kizza Besigye won 27.8 percent. Turnout was 70.3 percent, and the other four contenders won 3 percent between them.

Museveni, based on the National Resistance Movement (NRM), has been in power since 1986. Other political parties are not allowed to operate openly, on the grounds that the NRM is all-inclusive, under what is known as the "no-party" system. This election was the first time Museveni faced a major challenge. Besigye was a leading member of the NRM in the 1980s, being Museveni's personal doctor for a period. With support from disaffected members, he is calling for a reform of the NRM. Besigye's main platform was for a return of political pluralism, accusing both the government and the NRM of corruption and cronyism.

There have been a number of reports of vote rigging and intimidation of the electorate. Besigye says he is taking up a legal challenge against the government, alleging that his political representatives and supporters were attacked, and that voter registration lists were inflated in favour of Museveni.

Independent election observers of the Ugandan Election Monitoring Group, a non-governmental organisation, stated that most of the voting proceeded lawfully, but that between 5 and 15 percent of the vote may have been won fraudulently—mainly by Museveni. They attributed this to intimidation and irregularities in the registration.

Apart from the issue of allowing other political parties to function, Besigye and the other candidates had no substantial policy differences with the Museveni regime. They appear to reflect sections of the Ugandan elite who have lost out in the present system of political patronage. There was certainly no opposition to the domination of the country's economy by the International Monetary Fund. Besigye appears to have won more support than Museveni's opponents in the 1996 elections due to growing disaffection with the government, given the continuing levels of poverty in much of the country.

Despite Uganda receiving more Western support and aid than many other African countries, there is little to show for it in terms of an improvement in social conditions for the majority of Ugandan citizens. The country ranks 158 out of 172 on the UN's Human Development Index. Per capita income averages $310 per year; life expectancy is just 42 years; 66 percent of the population have no access to safe water and 38 percent of children under the age of 5 are malnourished.

In the recent period there has been growing criticism of Museveni in Europe and the US, and Besigye is no doubt hoping to gain support from Western donors. For most of his fifteen-year rule, Museveni was lauded as the African leader who had turned from being a guerrilla fighter into a supporter of free market policies and the scrupulous application of IMF structural adjustment programmes. The intimidation of political opponents and the lack of multi-party politics were overlooked, and Museveni was even praised by former US President Clinton as one of the "new African leaders" during his 1998 visit. By contrast, a *Financial Times* editorial on the Ugandan elections proposed that Western governments should now demand a "more open and inclusive pattern of government" as a clear indication of future policy.

Behind the criticism appears to be the concern that Museveni, despite following the IMF privatisation programme, is still allowing too much government

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spending-or “dangers of a widening fiscal deficit” as the IMF puts it. Ignoring the instability and violent conflicts that often result, demands for “transparent” government have become the standard approach of the World Bank and IMF, in order to reduce the level of political patronage.

It is also convenient for Western pundits to blame Museveni for the economic slowdown in the country. The BBC quotes an African investment expert who states that Uganda is still an attractive place for investors, although the level of investment there is not comparable with oil-producing countries. However, inquiries have now “faded” and it is “very difficult for African countries to maintain that level of interest”. The IMF and Western donors would continue with relatively large amounts of aid, this expert argues, because of the necessity of maintaining the illusion in the free market: “Uganda is the only example that donors can hold up as a success story.”

Whilst growth rates throughout the 1990s averaged over 6 percent, last year GDP growth fell to 5.1 percent. The main reason is that 50 percent of Uganda's export revenues come from coffee, the price of which has slumped.

An equally important reason for growing Western disaffection with Museveni is his position within regional African politics. Uganda was the base of support for the Sudan People's Liberation Army rebels fighting the Sudanese government, and which received covert military aid from the US for that purpose. Museveni was also the main backer of the Rwandan Patriotic Front, which took power in 1994, driving out the genocidal Hutu regime. Uganda and Rwanda then jointly launched the rebel movement that brought Laurent Kabila to power in the Congo, again with US backing.

Uganda, however, is no longer regarded as a centre for US influence in Africa. Sudan is now receiving Western interest seeking to profit from the exploitation of its huge oil reserves. In the Congo, after two and a half years of war resulting from the conflict with Uganda and Rwanda, Kabila's son is now at the centre of a Western-backed peace initiative. Uganda has been told to pull out its forces. Rwanda and Uganda have become bitter enemies, after disputes broke out over their political and economic interests in the Congo last year. Museveni even denounced Rwanda during the election as a “hostile country”.

Museveni did retain a level of popular support in the election. However, this primarily reflects the fear that any alternative would lead back to bloody regimes comparable to that of Idi Amin in the 1970s and Milton Obote in the early 1980s, when up to one million Ugandans were killed. Playing on such fears, Museveni is careful to stress that any alternative to his “no-party” system could give rise to sectarian and tribalist conflicts.

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