

Ugandan President Museveni arrests opposition rival Bobbi Wine

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19 January 2021

After declaring victory and a sixth, five-year term in office with a much-reduced majority, President Yoweri Museveni put his main opposition rival, the 38-year-old musician Bobbi Wine of the newly formed National Unity Platform party (NUP), under house arrest.

When protests erupted after the announcement of the election results widely seen as rigged, amid rising social and economic hardship in the wake of the pandemic, the security forces dispersed the crowds, killing at least two people, and cordoned off the party's offices in the capital Kampala.

Speaking to the media surrounded by soldiers and police, Wine said he was "worried about my life and the life of my wife."

Mathias Mpuuga of Wine's NUP announced the party would challenge the election results, saying, "We have evidence of ballot stuffing and other forms of election malpractice and after putting it together we are going to take all measures that the law permits to challenge this fraud."

Museveni's victory follows a bitterly contested election campaign, marked by a lethal crackdown on the opposition that included nine other challengers as well as Wine, and an internet blackout. His election was only possible because parliament lifted the 75-year age limit for the presidency, enabling him to stand again.

Barely half of the registered 18 million voters cast their vote, reflecting the dangerously tense political atmosphere. The security forces killed at least 55 people during protests in Kampala and other cities in November after Wine was arrested and detained for a second time during the campaign. Hundreds of opposition supporters, human rights activists and journalists were detained and some were kidnapped.

Following his election to the National Assembly in 2017, Wine became the most significant challenger to the longtime president, who seized power in 1986 after overthrowing the dictatorial regime of President Milton Obote. Wine, who grew up in Kamwokya, one of Kampala's most deprived neighbourhoods, appealed to Uganda's youth who face chronic unemployment and dreadful social conditions on an anti-corruption, pro-human rights, reformist platform that is

incapable of resolving their entirely legitimate demands. His widespread support, particularly from the youth and poorer layers, has shaken Museveni's corrupt regime and his imperialist backers.

Several other opposition politicians faced arrest, beatings and torture at the hands of the police in a blatant attempt at intimidation by Museveni's ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) Party. Wine said he had lost count of how many times he was arrested and prevented from campaigning. He told the *Financial Times* he had been shot at four times, forcing him to campaign in a bullet-proof vest. One of his bodyguards was run over by the military police. Earlier this month, Wine filed a case at the International Criminal Court, accusing Museveni and nine top security officials of attempted murder and human rights violations in the run-up to the vote.

Sarah Bireete, director of the Center for Constitutional Governance in Kampala, said, "This has been the most violent election in Uganda's history because Museveni's grip on power has been greatly challenged—especially by the young voters."

While Museveni emerged the winner with 59 percent of the votes, his vice-president, a dozen of his cabinet ministers and a further 21 NRM members lost their seats. Wine won 34 percent of the votes, mainly in Kampala and other urban centres. He accused Museveni of "fabricating" the results, a claim supported by observers from the United Nations, US and European Union who were prevented from monitoring the election. The Africa Elections Watch coalition reported late openings in most polling stations, illegally opened ballot boxes and the arrests of 26 election monitors from civil society groups. Both the US and Britain, the former colonial power, have called for investigations into allegations of fraud and other irregularities.

Museveni, once lauded as one of a new generation of African "renaissance leaders," spent his years in office giving away Uganda's assets to international financiers and carrying out a punishing series of privatisations. This wholesale robbery and looting of resources on behalf of

international capital and its local agents has had a catastrophic effect on the working class and poor farmers.

This last year has seen the number living in poverty rise from by a further 3 million to 11.4 million. Social protection programs are totally inadequate, reaching just 3 percent of the population. Some of the hardest hit have been Uganda's 1.4 million refugees—Africa's largest refugee population—from war-torn neighbours the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and South Sudan, following the 67 percent loss in funding for the UN's World Food Programme for East and Central Africa.

In 2017, the country ranked 162 out of 189 on the UN's Human Development Index. Three-quarters of the population lives on less than \$3.10 per day. Life expectancy is just 62 years, only two years more than war-torn DRC; 51 percent of Ugandans lack access to safe water; 82 percent do not have access to improved sanitation facilities; and acute malnutrition among children between six months of age and five years is four percent, but 10 percent in the West Nile sub-region of Uganda.

According to the World Bank, 700,000 young people reach working age every year in Uganda, but there are only 75,000 new jobs, leaving more than 70 percent of Ugandans employed in subsistence agriculture. With half the 46 million population less than 15 years old, an average of one million young people a year are expected to reach working age between 2030-2040.

Uganda's economy has contracted sharply in the wake of the pandemic, a locust invasion and flooding, with GDP for 2020 projected to be between 0.4 and 1.7 percent compared to 5.6 percent in 2019, as export, tourism, remittances and foreign direct investment plummeted.

Museveni's regime depends on extensive backing from the US, which provides over \$970 million a year in development and security assistance, including military training for the army. Last June, the World Bank released \$300 million in relief funds to combat COVID-19 that vanished into the military budget.

Such "aid" is for services rendered. Uganda, a key regional ally of US imperialism, has deployed its Uganda People's Defence Force in support of Washington's puppet governments in South Sudan and Somalia, participated in MONUSCO, the UN-led military operation in the resource-rich DRC and provided military training for Equatorial Guinea's armed forces.

According to a 2012 report by USARAF, Uganda's Entebbe airport provides a space for Washington's AFRICOM forces' vast spying operation conducted with turboprop planes. It has been reported that there are "black sites" in Kampala operated on behalf of the US for the interrogation and torture of suspected terrorists. According

to the *New York Times*, Ugandan recruits also served as private security guards and worked closely with American troops in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In a move indicating that Washington is assessing the possibility of shifting its support away from Museveni, US ambassador Natalie E Brown sought to visit Wine, only to be stopped by security forces. Government spokesman Ofwono Opondo told Washington to keep out of Uganda's domestic affairs, saying, "What she has been trying to do blatantly is to meddle in Uganda's internal politics, particularly elections, to subvert our elections and the will of the people. She shouldn't do anything outside the diplomatic norms."

Uganda is only one of several recent elections in Africa that demonstrate the explosive anger building up among the working class. It follows allegations of election rigging in last year's "landslide" re-election of neighbouring Tanzanian President John Magufuli, notorious for his crackdown on the opposition and authoritarianism.

In Ghana, President Nana Akufo-Addo won re-election in December with a contested 51.59 percent of the vote that led to angry protests in which at least five people were killed.

In the mineral-rich but desperately poor Central African Republic, President Faustin-Archange Touadéra won five more years in power after an election characterised by violence, with fighting continuing in towns across the country as opposition parties demanded a re-run of the election.

The January 6, 2021 fascist coup attempted by US President Donald Trump to forestall the transfer of power to President-elect Joe Biden demonstrated that such measures are not restricted to African governments. The working class in the former colonial countries must turn to its class brothers and sisters around the world, including in the metropolitan countries, whose regimes are no more committed to equality and democracy, in an international struggle for social equality and justice through the socialist reorganisation of society.



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