

22 Years of NRM Rule: A Success or Failure? What the People Say

Contributed by Nathan Kiwere
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The report by the national commission of the Africa Peer Review Mechanism said in its conclusion that a "history of autocracy and military rule has been reversed" in the two decades of President Museveni's administration, reported Rodney Muhumuza. "Since 1996, presidential and parliamentary elections have been regularly conducted," says the report. "The notion that the mandate to rule shall be based on the vote and not on the gun has been established." Grace Matsiko couldn't agree more as he added that apart from northern Uganda until a year ago, and Karamoja to date, the rest of Uganda has been one of the safest places in the world, quoting Museveni's former press secretary Onapito Ekomolot.

The foremost achievement attributed to the NRM government, however, is the economic front that has registered enormous success. The Monitor journalist, Elias Biryabarema also agrees that as trumpeted in Mr. Museveni's manifesto, some economic fundamentals have been effectively turned around and sections of the economy are exuberant. Inflation has been tied to single digits. GDP has expanded at a healthy mean rate of 5.5 percent. Domestic revenue has grown manifold. Investment capital is flowing in. This is quite evident on the ground as the country now boasts of a whopping five mobile telecom companies that are providing world-class services to the people at very competitive rates. Urbanization is growing at a very fast rate too with the construction industry as the third fastest growing sector, the bottlenecks thereof notwithstanding. With the introduction of Universal Primary Education (UPE) and the planned introduction of Universal Secondary Education (USE) have lifted the veil of illiteracy many fold; hundreds of kilometers of tarmac crisscross the country thus aiding the booming transport industry; the general standards of living can be said to be improving since 1986 - a far cry from what transpired back in the day.

However, for all the peace and prosperity mentioned above, there are countless blots in the landscape that some critics have been quick to highlight. For instance Grace Matsiko in the same vein alludes to the breaches that underlie the seeming atmosphere of tranquility. He cites the disappointments like Kalangala Action Plan (KAP) and Black Mamba. KAP is a paramilitary group led by presidential political aide Maj. Roland Kakooza Mutale. It has been accused of

harassing government opponents, especially during election time. The Black Mamba is a nickname given to an elite security squad that invaded the High Court premises to re-arrest rebel suspects in November 2005. The Uganda Human Rights Commission cites torture, inhuman and degrading treatment in the prisons, the police and the UPDF.

"In addition, military and security agencies have been involved in detaining suspects being prosecuted by the General Court martial in ungazetted locations such as military barracks and safe houses," the commission has written in one of its reports. Another issue is that President Museveni's government has put emphasis on strengthening the army leaving out the police force and the prison service. A visit to Naguru and Nsambya police barracks reveals the filthiest conditions that are totally hazardous to human life. Sewerage flows freely in front of the quarters; families share uniports while toilets and bathrooms have been turned into sleeping rooms.

Ironically, as Uganda gets more stable, it remains puzzling as to why President Museveni's security tightens by the day. From a presidential protection unit of about 400 soldiers in 1986, it rose to battalion level in 1998 and now it is a brigade with a tank battalion, marine and anti-terrorism units. On average a brigade is about 3,500 soldiers strong.

Back to the economic front, Elias Biryabarema reiterates that for all Mr. Museveni's 22-year hard work, however, Uganda appears to have not moved that much because, lest it be forgotten, the country remains in the least developed category. That sort of status hardly describes a thriving economy. According to a 2006 World Bank report, Measuring Progress in Least Developed Countries: A Statistical Profile, it takes a whopping 36 days to start a business in Ugandan while it takes one or two in developed countries.

At a time when business across the globe is moving at supersonic speed and companies value time to the last minute, less than a quarter of Uganda's road network is paved with company vehicles spending hours groaning through endless potholes. And e-commerce, which has become a central force in the global economy, might take several more decades before it assumes any noticeable shape in Uganda where there are only 4.3 personal computers among 1,000 people and only seven in the same number use the Internet. A 2005/06 National Housing Survey on welfare by the Uganda bureau of Statistics established that an astounding eight million people (31% of the population) continue to wallow in abject poverty. A research fellow with the Makerere-based Economic Policy Research Centre, Mr. Lawrence Bategeka, argued that Uganda's GDP had expanded under the NRM government but that the growth is not rooted in the fundamentals of the economy. "The growth we've seen is not because there has been a big leap in our manufacturing or agricultural production. It is because of the massive aid industry," he said.

President Museveni launched the Universal Primary Education, UPE in 1997, a policy noted as capable of driving up Uganda's literacy rates dramatically. With little funding, massive embezzlement and official neglect, however, education standards in the country soon plunged and the national primary school dropout rate is now at 50 percent, a scandal of sorts. Moreover, the ugliest face of the NRM economy, according to critics, is that of mounting corruption. Uganda loses Shs500 billion a year to corruption and ranks poorly internationally. These statistics of the challenges and success of Uganda under 22 years of NRM rule are simply bits and pieces of the bigger picture. In future we shall bring you more captivating information about Uganda. For God and my country.

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