



PRACTICE OF LEADERSHIP

Opposition Leadership in Africa: Analysing the Legacy of Dr. Kizza Besigye in Uganda

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1. INTRODUCTION

Leadership studies often remains a discussion of 'Great Hero' leaders operating at key moments in history; with a continued engrained assumption – in the literature and public consciousness – of those in positions of power being the ones exercising effective leadership or not.¹ This is especially so within the African context where ideas of 'Big Man' leadership lingers. Such conversations are often simplistic and stereotypical;² however, done thoughtfully they are not entirely irrelevant within contexts where social contracts are still forming and the normalisation of democratic transitions of political power far from common place.³ Influential individuals do, indeed, have significant impact within such spaces.⁴

Assessing the effectiveness of leadership in fragile democracies like Uganda is a challenging process, and the role of opposition leaders in African politics

generally remains comparatively under-researched within mainstream political science. In Uganda, the post-1986 political landscape has been dominated, and controlled, by President Museveni: he has maintained his Presidential status by fair means or foul since his Bush War victory in 1986, the advent of democratic elections in 1996, and the return of multi-party politics in 2006. As noted by Sjögren: 'firm executive partisan control of the electoral process, of the instruments of coercive and administrative state power, and indirectly of parliament and the judiciary, have created a structurally cemented uneven playing field' in terms of electoral and democratic processes.⁵ What role can there be for opposition figures under such a system? And if they failed to dislodge Museveni, have they been ineffective?

Other oppositions figures exist in Uganda's politics; however, Dr. Kizza Besigye's leadership has transcended all others in terms of longevity and

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¹ Collinson, David, Owain Smolović Jones, and Keith Grint. "No more heroes': Critical perspectives on leadership romanticism." *Organization Studies* 39, no. 11 (2018): 1625-1647.

² Dulani, Boniface, and John Tengtanga. "Big man rule in Africa: are Africans getting the leadership they want?." *The African Review* 46, no. 2 (2020): 275-291.

³ Angelo, Anaïs. "Presidential powers in postcolonial Africa deserve historical attention." *History in Africa* 49 (2022): 185-206.

⁴ Olonisakin, Funmi. "Re-conceptualising Leadership for effective peacemaking and human security in Africa." (2015), p.131

⁵ Sjögren, Anders. "Extending contestation: opposition party strength and dissenting civil society engagement with autocratic elections." *Contemporary Politics* 30, no. 1 (2024): 21-43, p.32

consistent vision for change over the previous decades, and is the focus of this piece. Dissent has continued to grow even after President Museveni's declared intent to wipe out Uganda's opposition for the next five years after the 2016 presidential election.⁶ Dr. Besigye's latest detention in November 2024, with different outlets reporting him as the most arrested man in Africa,⁷ has also not paralyzed the opposition. Besigye's leadership, and his enabling other relatively strong leaders to emerge in the opposition, has maintained followers' belief in a vision for change across different periods. The opposition has not yet taken power in Uganda; but it remains present, active, growing, and unrelenting. When it does, one day, take the reins of power the debt it owes Dr. Besigye will be immense.

The work below discusses Dr. Besigye's legacy to understand the leadership process that has sustained Uganda's opposition to the National Resistance Movement/Army (NRM/A) political status quo, within a militarized pseudo-democratic political landscape. It considers Besigye's practice of leadership, the degree to which he has garnered followers to his cause or not, and his effectiveness in the context of Uganda's broader historical development despite not fully achieving all his aspired goals.

2. BRIEF BACKGROUND CONTEXT

Assessing the roles, legacies and effectiveness of opposition figures operating in dynamic, challenging, unstructured contexts should be an important aspect of leadership studies, by recognizing how an individual's long-term legacy and effectiveness may be determined beyond their 'success' in gaining power (and even beyond their lifetime). We live in an era where democracy is seemingly in retreat. This was previously thought to be something of an African phenomenon,

with Western actors lamenting the 'democratic backsliding' on the continent after the earlier, naïve assumptions that the post-Cold War era would inevitably spread democracy across the world.⁸ But more recently, partly inspired by the success of China's authoritarian system, but due to a plethora of factors related to discontent with the neo-liberal globalization agenda this has become a more global process. Trump II's regime in the US is the most obvious example of an authoritarian trend across the West and beyond, that includes Orbán in Hungary, Modi in India, Meloni in Italy, and Milei in Argentina, to name only but a few.⁹

Yoweri Museveni has epitomized these global trends through the ages. As the elder statesman of East Africa, in power for 39 years and counting he: was part of the so-called 'new breed' of democratic, liberal, intellectual African leaders heralded by the West in the post-Cold War 1990s; then took a clear authoritarian, pseudo-democratic turn from the mid-2000s onwards (along with the other new breeders such as Rwanda's Kagame and Ethiopia's Meles); and has publicly and privately challenged the Western liberal democratic era and its patronizing approach to Africa, increasingly so as alternative models and partnerships for Africa have appeared.¹⁰ He has been central to the East African trend of 'constitutional coups', whereby incumbents force through seemingly legal amendments to clauses that limit their terms in office, whilst making use of influence over the military and judiciary (Museveni removed constitutional terms limits to allow his run for the 2006 election, and age limits in time for 2021 election. Similar efforts by Nkurunziza in Burundi led a violent political crisis; but were successful in Rwanda where Kagame

⁶ Ugandan leader wins presidential election rejected as fraudulent by opposition, *The Guardian*, February 20, 2011, accessed September 23, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/feb/20/ugandan-leader-wins-presidential-election>; Is Museveni's plan to wipe out opposition finally taking shape? *Daily Monitor*, February 4, 2017, accessed September 23, 2025, <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/magazines/people-power/is-museveni-s-plan-to-wipe-out-opposition-finally-taking-shape--1686640>.

⁷ Sawlani, Samira. Kizza Besigye: the most arrested man in Africa? *Media Diversified*, September 14, 2016, accessed September 23, 2025, <https://mediadiversified.org/2016/09/14/is-kizza-besigye-the-most-arrested-man-in-africa/>.

⁸ Gyimah-Boadi, Emmanuel. "Africa's waning democratic commitment." *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 1 (2015): 101-113;

Akinyetun, Tope Shola. "Democratic backsliding in Africa: Understanding the current challenges." *Social Science Research Council* 20 (2022); Lindberg, Staffan I. "Opposition parties and democratisation in sub-Saharan Africa." *Journal of contemporary African studies* 24, no. 1 (2006): 123-138.

⁹ Cheeseman, Nic et al. "The Rise of Authoritarianism Is Misunderstood – and It Matters." *University of Birmingham*, June 13, 2023.

<https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/news/2023/how-the-global-rise-of-authoritarianism-is-misunderstood-and-why-it-matters>

¹⁰ Walsh, Barney. "Ugandan agency within China-Africa relations." *Bloomsbury Press*, 2022, pp.28-48; Rubongoya, Joshua. *Regime Hegemony in Museveni's Uganda: Pax Musevenica*. Springer, 2007.

can, currently, legally be in power until 2034).¹¹ He has publicly been a pan-African champion of the political federation of the East African Community, but, in reality, his continuation in power has been one reason that federation has not occurred. According to then leader of the opposition in Parliament: 'in his own estimation Uganda is too small for him... he thinks Uganda is too small and he would have wanted to be the leader of East Africa.'¹² This was clear to other leaders, who have always feared Museveni's federal ambitions assumed he would be the anointed inaugural President.

Across most of this period, Dr Besigye has retained his consistent presence as the most vocal and visible opposition figure within Uganda's (and East Africa's) troubled national and regional politics. He stands out as the opposition figure who was part of Museveni's original Bush War victory and has opposed him in more presidential elections than any other figure. As a trained medical doctor, in which he could have been a successful practitioner, he instead joined the National Resistance Army (NRA, later renamed National Resistance Movement or NRM) struggle against Milton Obote's dictatorial rule. In 1999 he abandoned the NRM/A, due to a conviction that Uganda again needed liberation from the government whose rise to power he had directly contributed. This would define his life's work.

Eloïse has highlighted how, in hybrid regimes such as Museveni's Uganda, the opposition play an important role in: denouncing the misdeeds of the regime; mobilizing dissent against ruling parties; and 'succession signaling' whereby the existence of an opposition at least shows that a change of regime is conceivable and possible.¹³ The complex dynamics of needing to participate in a regime's corrupted institutions whilst also protesting against them (such as partaking in rigged elections) make opposition politics extremely difficult to navigate. Lindberg, referring to Dahl, notes that 'without political opposition, there is no choice and when there is no choice the people cannot exercise their right to rule.'¹⁴ But recognizing that in

contexts where elections do not equate to democracy, we must assess opposition figures as taking important steps within 'protracted transitions' that are required for genuinely representative systems to materialize.

Studying Besigye's leadership amid shifting global power and the erosion of Western democratic influence offers insights well beyond Uganda. Academically, it illuminates how moral and oppositional leadership operates within hybrid regimes and how individual agency interacts with systemic constraint; and in policy or activist terms, it shows why decades of opposition leadership can fail to produce regime change despite sustained mobilization, and how international actors - if they are sincere in their democratic ideas - should protect opposition leaders who embody democratic resistance.

3. DR. BESIGYE'S EMERGENCE AND PRACTICE IN OPPOSITION POLITICS

Grint reminds us that it is not possible to analyze leaders in the absence of followers or contexts.¹⁵ Citizens in Uganda tend to be attracted to those that identify with the challenges they face. Without a guarantee for success, and at great personal danger, Besigye leaving government resonated with some of the Ugandans becoming suspect of the increasingly visible authoritarian tendencies of Museveni and the NRM at that time. Dr. Besigye read the context of people yearning for participatory democracy and declared - more prominently than any other politician at the time - that the path Museveni's NRM was treading went against their originally declared principles. This was critical to the emergence of peaceful opposition politics in the post-1986 era. Under the pressure group "Reform Agenda", and later the political party Forum for Democratic Change (FDC), he was the leading contender against President Museveni in the 2001, 2006, 2011, and 2016 presidential elections.¹⁶

From the 2001 presidential elections onwards, Uganda's opposition gained momentum which was a consequence of 'mundane' and everyday political

¹¹ Simbine, Antonia Taiye, and Omosefe Oyekanmi. "Contemporary Trends in African Elections (2013-2023)." *African Journal of Inter/Multidisciplinary Studies* 7, no. 1 (2025): 1-15, pp.2-3

¹² Leader of Opposition in Parliament, interview quoted in Walsh, Barney. "Ugandan agency within China-Africa relations." Bloomsbury Press, 2022, p.33

¹³ Bertrand, Eloïse. "Opposition in a hybrid regime: The functions of opposition parties in Burkina Faso and Uganda." *African Affairs* 120, no. 481 (2021): 591-610.

¹⁴ Lindberg, Staffan I. "Opposition parties and democratisation in sub-Saharan Africa." *Journal of contemporary African studies* 24, no. 1 (2006): 123-138.

¹⁵ Grint, Keith. "Leadership: A very short introduction." *Oxford University Press*, (2012), 7.

¹⁶ Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni wins fifth term, BBC News, February 20, 2016, accessed September 23, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-35620934#>.

practices through which political capital was built and strengthened. With Dr. Besigye as its leader in exile, the "Reform Agenda" built on the irregularities in the 2001 presidential elections that had included violence, voter intimidation, and restriction on opposition activities, and merged with the Parliamentary Advocacy Forum (PAFO). They consolidated into the more formal political FDC entity in 2004 in preparation for the return of multiparty politics. The return of Dr. Besigye from exile in October 2005 gave the opposition more impetus as the FDC positioned itself as a formidable alternative to the NRM/A. Besigye was arrested on charges of treason, terrorism, and rape on his return, which many knew to be politically motivated, which sparked off street protests across the country.¹⁷ Since politics is about perception, his arrest and frequent court appearances in a prison bus created more sympathy and increased his popularity among those that yearned for an end to Museveni's presidency. Dr. Besigye's decision to associate with and build a new identity outside of the NRM administration earned him trust amongst the populace that he needed to sustain his vision of a free, peaceful and democratic Uganda.

The context of Uganda's fledging and troubled democracy sees an ever-mutating political environment, where Uganda's opposition must weave and adapt if it is to survive the wrath of NRM's political activities. Leadership practice in such a situation requires strict focus on the vision, but a change in the mission. This demands efficient and reliable working practices, which include planning work activities, making work assignments, clarifying role expectations, explaining rules and policies, monitoring performance, coordinating activities, and solving work-related problems and disturbances etc.¹⁸ Dr. Besigye's

leadership practice across such areas always kept the NRM government on tension.

The 'walk to work' protests, for example, made FDC an agenda-setter especially in the capital, Kampala, and surrounding suburbs. Organized as a response to fuel prices having risen 50% between January and April 2011, with general inflation at 11%,¹⁹ Besigye's exemplary leadership sustained and spread protests to other major cities throughout April, including Gulu and Masaka. They 'mobilised huge crowds and brought together the opposition and activist sections of civil society' before subsiding in the face of brutal repression by security agencies.²⁰ His contested fourth presidential campaign in 2016 was met with repeated arrests, detentions, and a brutal crackdown by government security forces which again showed his willingness to 'lead from the front,'²¹ suffering overtly and severely in the way he believed fellow Ugandans were doing so.²² Evoking historical injustices and linking contemporary Ugandan struggles to the continuation of those of their forefathers, he stated in 2016:

"We have to recover our people's minds from being masters of the Queen of England. We must now become citizens and take our responsibilities. Leaders are servants. We must change. If you hire Besigye you are hiring a servant."²³

Museveni has used relatively 'low-scale' violence, that has not always resulted in deaths, but which are no less significant: when 'a national hegemon has a repressive capacity that far supersedes that of opposition challengers' it is easy to apply electoral tools of manipulation, such as voter intimidation or bribery (and opposition deaths certainly have occurred during his

¹⁷ Amnesty International. Amnesty International Report 2007 - Uganda. May 23, 2007. <https://www.refworld.org/reference/annualreport/amnesty/2007/en/43015>

¹⁸ Yukl, Gary. "Contingency theories of effective leadership." *The SAGE handbook of leadership* 24, no. 1 (2011): 286-298.

¹⁹ Aljazeera, Uganda walk-to-work protests kick up dust, April 28, 2011, accessed September 23, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2011/4/28/uganda-walk-to-work-protests-kick-up-dust>; Daily Monitor, Walk-to-work: Uganda's year of protest, March 31, 2012, accessed September 23, 2025, <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/magazines/people-power/walk-to-work-uganda-s-year-of-protest-1513072>

²⁰ Sjögren, Anders. "Extending contestation: opposition party strength and dissenting civil society engagement with autocratic elections." *Contemporary Politics* 30, no. 1 (2024): 21-43, p.33

²¹ Eisenkopf, Gerald, and Torben Kölpin. "Leading-by-example: a meta-analysis." *Journal of Business Economics* 94, no. 4 (2024): 543-577; Muzee, Hannah. "'Walk to Work': A New Wave of Nonviolent Activism Against the Militarization of Ugandan Politics." In *Peace as Nonviolence: Topics in African Peace Studies*, pp. 257-265. Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2024.

²² Uganda's Kizza Besigye - veteran opposition leader profiled, BBC News, February 17, 2016, accessed September 23, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-12431180#>; Aljazeera, Uganda: Opposition's Kizza Besigye charged with treason, May 14, 2016, accessed September 23, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/5/14/uganda-oppositions-kizza-besigye-charged-with-treason>.

²³ FDC Official Post, August 27, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/FDCOfficial1/posts/dr-besigye-making-a-speechwinnie-was-in-parliament-before-me-for-the-short-time-/605827386263001/>

reign).²⁴ In systems where opposition actors participate in institutional processes that they know are corrupted, the mobilization of dissent can involve high-publicity actions 'such as politicians touring and public rallies, but also grassroots initiatives and mere rhetorical discourse not recognizing the incumbent as legitimate.'²⁵ This was exemplified by Besigye's mock swearing in ceremony as the People's President and of a People's Government after the 2016 elections. Besigye's public detentions, beatings and personal tragedies, to the extent of losing his younger brother in 2007 from illness associated with incarceration for the previous weeks on trumped up conspiracy charges, all helped sustain trust among his followers: this was certainly not a leader 'marshaling troops' from a back office. Besigye's credibility (and thus the FDC's) has benefitted from a perception as someone who 'has gone through the trenches', 'has been beaten' and is 'therefore trustworthy'.²⁶

Besigye also believed that building party structures and clear, consistent communication strategies would be necessary steps beyond reliance on charismatic individuals.²⁷ The end game is a followership that is inspired, guided, and motivated towards achieving shared goals. However, this can only be guaranteed by the leader's strong communication skills, strategic thinking, emotional intelligence, and the capacity to foster a positive and inclusive environment. His facilitation of an internal FDC election for its successor president, which took place in November 2012, further indicated his commitment to these democratic core values.²⁸ Besigye's emotional connection with his supporters was evident when he became visibly emotional during a TV discussion about the FDC in 2023, as just one example, highlighting his sincerity and passion for the cause and the people he holds dear.²⁹ During his latest detention, in February 2025, he stated what may become a defining statement, bearing in mind the long historical lens his work should be viewed through:

"We can only influence whether change happens quickly or is delayed, but change is inevitable. Sooner or later, Ugandans will take charge of their destiny and rebuild their country in a way that ensures equal opportunities for everyone."³⁰

Besigye's passion, commitment and transformative vision for Uganda have been clear, consistent, and plain for all to see. So why has the ultimate aim – a peaceful transition of power from Museveni – not been achieved?

4. THE CHALLENGE OF 'UGANDAN FOLLOWERS'

Dr. Besigye's opposition politics has continually inspired hope in the true restoration of democracy and widening civic participation in Uganda. Yet in the Ugandan context, two other groups of followers are important constituents to build mutuality with if you are hoping to gain the reins of power, outside of the general populace. First, are the Ugandan political and military elites, discussed briefly together in this short piece although worthy of detailed examination separately if more space allowed. Second is the international community.

In terms of the first, Museveni has successfully coup proofed his regime since the mid-2000s, with influential military personnel skillfully kept on board through a carrot and stick approach.³¹ Despite bumps in the road, such as vocal animosity to his son's growing importance in the army, and a shrinking inner core of loyalists, no serious internal threat from the NRM or army (renamed the Ugandan People's Defence Force) has ever materialized. Mutengesha and Hendrickson note the Bush War legacies have not deconstructed Museveni from being undisputed chief, ideologue and tactician of the movement,³² all of which show 'the continual

²⁴ Wahman, Michael. "How Strategic Violence Distorts African Elections." *Journal of Democracy* 35, no. 2 (2024): 108-121, p.114

²⁵ Bertrand, Eloïse. "Opposition in a hybrid regime: The functions of opposition parties in Burkina Faso and Uganda." *African Affairs* 120, no. 481 (2021): 591-610, p.206

²⁶ Field work interview quotations from Bertrand, Eloïse. "Opposition in a hybrid regime: The functions of opposition parties in Burkina Faso and Uganda." *African Affairs* 120, no. 481 (2021): 591-610., p.608

²⁷ NTV Uganda, Besigye calls on FDC leaders in Mbarara to strengthen party structures, 23 November 2016.

²⁸ Uganda's Kizza Besigye – veteran opposition leader profiled, BBC News, February 17, 2016, accessed September 23, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-12431180#>.

²⁹ VIDEO: Dr. Kizza Besigye becomes emotional as he talks about the Forum for Democratic Change. #NBSLiveAt9 #NBSUpdates, August 7, 2023, accessed September 23, 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1271144243529329>.

³⁰ NTV Uganda, February 26, 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/NTVUganda/posts/quote-we-can-only-influence-whether-change-happens-quickly-or-is-delayed-but-cha/1095283255975591/>

³¹ Tegulle, Gawayya (2010), 'NRM and the Military: Museveni's Carrot and Stick', *Daily Monitor* (Kampala), 22/05/10; 'The Family Khaki', *Africa Confidential*, 14/05/04

³² Mutengesha, Sabiiti and Hendrickson, Dylan (2008), 'State Responsiveness to Public Security Needs: The Politics of Security Decision', *Making Uganda Country Study and CSDG Papers*, Number 16, p.43

importance of the President's relationship with his military for the domestic scene in Uganda.³³ Meanwhile, the so-called King-Makers, meaning 'the big corrupt people who are surrounding him... they do so many things,'³⁴ have been pressured and cajoled, arrested or rewarded, as and when needed to maintain Museveni as the most influential actor within the political economy. Besigye has never been able to dislodge these actors from their historical positions of influence. His progressive democratic vision of change threatens their privileges; however, the reality of Ugandan history and political culture has meant, arguably, these players must somehow be brought on board and convinced of the need to support you if you hope to gain power.

Secondly, the Western alliance has been the key donor support for the Ugandan government throughout the Museveni era.³⁵ Despite their bombastic human rights narrative, and the pressure put on Museveni for democratic opening or around anti-homosexuality legislation, for example, they have always seen him as a useful key security actor in the deeply troubled Horn and East African sub-region.³⁶ His active military adventurism has, ultimately, kept his soldiers paid, provided looting opportunity for higher ranks, and kept the US and UK happy.³⁷ Besigye has never been able to garner a great international public following, or convinced Western governments to go 'all in' to support his agenda. History will likely judge the hypocrisy within Western circles harshly, depending on whatever post-Museveni landscape emerges, but could a different approach to engaging these influential actors have yielded different outcomes? China, meanwhile, a new significant international partner, of course shows no interest or concern in facilitating any democratic opening (Besigye has called for Chinese project

repayments to be written off as odious debts, such is the corruption he has called out as being present³⁸).

Here, the moral vision espoused by Besigye that so many followers amongst the educated classes buy in to meets the harsh real-politick of the Ugandan context: morals have not been compromised; but has this hindered achieving the ultimate goal? And in terms of citizenry, another critique says that Besigye and FDC retained too much of an urban focus and never gained enough traction with Uganda's mostly rural populace;³⁹ yet how do you compete with a President willing and able to take a sack of money to hand directly to village elders during election rounds in the poorest parts of the country?⁴⁰ With the inherent contradictions between that moral vision and the corrupt hypocrisy of the system, could you ever?

5. EFFECTIVENESS AND LEGACY

Dr. Besigye's leadership proved that to sustain an opposition in Uganda requires strong mobilization skills of people of different professions and abilities, having a team including journalists and other supportive media outlets like the Daily Monitor that consistently reported on his campaigns. The arbitrary arrests and detention of his followers, especially during the walk to work protests noted above, equally necessitated him assembling legal teams like the National Lawyers Guild to give pro-bono services, document police behavior for future litigation and provide guidance on protesters' rights.⁴¹ His leadership recognizes that quick adaptation to new situational challenges is important. He therefore yielded leadership space in situations like legal battles that did not match his skillsets.

³³ Walsh, Barney (2010), Uganda's Involvement in the DRC since 1998: Museveni and Regional Relations, ALC Monograph No1, p.11

³⁴ Daily Monitor newspaper reporter, interview August 2014, quoted in Walsh, Barney. "Ugandan agency within China-Africa relations." (2022) (Bloomsbury Press), p.42

³⁵ Hauser, Ellen. "Ugandan relations with Western donors in the 1990s: what impact on democratisation?." *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 37, no. 4 (1999): 621-641; Findley, Michael G., Adam S. Harris, Helen V. Milner, and Daniel L. Nielson. "Who controls foreign aid? Elite versus public perceptions of donor influence in aid-dependent Uganda." *International Organization* 71, no. 4 (2017): 633-663.

³⁶ Anderson, David M., and Jonathan Fisher. "Authoritarianism and the securitization of development in Uganda." *Aid and authoritarianism in Africa: Development without democracy*. London: Zed Books Ltd (2016): 67-90.

³⁷ Government asked to name DRC looters, Daily Monitor, 2 September 2015; Walsh, Barney. "Ugandan agency within China-Africa relations." (2022) (Bloomsbury Press), p.111

³⁸ Uganda needs 94 years to clear debt, Daily Monitor, April 06, 2018, accessed September 23, 2025, <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/uganda-needs-94-years-to-clear-debt-1749352>.

³⁹ Okuda, Ivan. "Andrew Mwenda Isn't Being Fair to Besigye." *Eagle Online*, December 31, 2016. <https://eagle.co.ug/2016/12/31/andrew-mwenda-isnt-fair-besigye/>

⁴⁰ President Yoweri Museveni's sack of money sparks Uganda row, BBC News, April 22, 2013, accessed September 23, 2025, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-22245873>.

⁴¹ Heacock Rebekah, Uganda: Women's groups, lawyers join walk to work protests, *Global Voices*, May 13, 2011, accessed September 23, 2025, <https://globalvoices.org/2011/05/13/uganda-womens-groups-lawyers-join-walk-to-work-protests/>.

Other 'opposition' leaders have emerged but only fleetingly, often failing to sustain any moral standing or coherent transformative vision of change. Amama Mbabazi, a Bush War veteran and former Museveni ally, broke ranks to run in the 2016 presidential election but performed poorly and later reconciled with Museveni, who appointed him Special Envoy to South Sudan and Ethiopia in 2021.⁴² General Sejusa, another veteran who opposed the alleged succession plan for Museveni's son, lived in exile in London from 2013 before returning to Uganda, where he remained critical but politically marginal.⁴³ Norbert Mao, long viewed as the face of northern opposition politics, also shifted allegiance, joining the NRM and becoming Minister of Justice and Constitutional Affairs in July 2023.⁴⁴

Non-NRM figures have also struggled to match Besigye's sustained support or achieve real political breakthroughs. General Mugisha Muntu's Alliance for National Transformation (ANT), having split from the FDC, failed to win any parliamentary seats in 2021 leaving him with limited influence. Bobi Wine, the first major opposition leader from the post-Bush War generation, emerged under the National Unity Platform (NUP) and briefly gained global attention around the 2021 elections. However, it remains uncertain whether he can endure the persistent repression—arrests, harassment, and violence—from the Ugandan state over time with the same resilience that defined Besigye's long-term opposition leadership.⁴⁵

In the face of the myriad challenges faced within Uganda's opposition politics, Dr. Besigye fostered an environment that created a culture where it is safe to take risks, make mistakes, and adapt strategies as required, which has facilitated the emergence of new political fronts to sustain his vision. This has made it difficult for the NRM to target (and remove) just one opposition party, with more political outfits and parties

such as the NUP and the People's Front for Freedom (PFF) emerging and benefiting from his experience through collaboration. It should be noted, however, that merging these diffuse movements into one strong coherent single opponent may be what is required to unseat Museveni or his chosen successor (in a way that Besigye was never able to, with efforts to form a Democratic Alliance with a single candidate always failing⁴⁶).

6. CONCLUSION

Understanding followership is arguably the key piece of the puzzle in assessing Dr. Besigye's practice of leadership and long-term effectiveness. The limits of any individual leader requires a followership capable of compensating for those limitations.⁴⁷ This is best served through constructive dissent, in which followers are willing to critique their leader if the latter is deemed as acting against the interests of the community. It was tolerance for constructive dissent in Dr. Besigye's FDC that allowed this opposition party to expand to different regions of the country, and facilitate a diversity of views that sustained the FDC party from 2006 onwards.

Despite a trend of sympathizing with military take overs if elected leaders 'abuse power for their own ends,' the most recent 2024 Afrobarometer survey on democracy in Africa showed that, on average across 39 countries: 66% of Africans prefer democracy to any other system of government; 80% reject one-man rule; 78% reject one-party rule; and 66% reject military rule.⁴⁸ The democratic demands of Africans, it seems, remain very much alive and in the majority. Dr. Besigye, his legacy and effectiveness, must, ultimately, be situated within Uganda's historical context. In 2007, Rubongoya wrote that 'the concept of a free and fair election is relatively new and the hangover from the decades of war and

⁴² Museveni appoints Amama as special envoy, Daily Monitor, October 8, 2021, accessed September 23, 2025, accessed September 23, 2025, <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/museveni-appoints-amama-special-envoy-3576846>.

⁴³ Muhoozi forgives Gen Sejusa, set for talks, Pulse Uganda, 3 August 2025, accessed September 23, 2025, <https://www.pulse.ug/articles/news/muhoozi-forgives-gen-sejusa-set-for-talks-2025080310155178685>.

⁴⁴ FULL STATEMENT: Museveni welcomes Norbert Mao to NRM in lengthy letter, Daily Express (Uganda), 23 July 2023, accessed September 23, 2025, <https://dailyexpress.co.ug/2023/07/23/full-statement-museveni-welcomes-nobert-mao-to-nrm-in-lengthy-letter/>.

⁴⁵ Uganda's Bobi Wine recovering from police assault - party, BBC News, 3 September 2024, accessed September 23, 2025, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c1epyzlgn00>.

⁴⁶ Abrahamsen, Rita, and Gerald Bareebe. "Uganda's 2016 elections: Not even faking it anymore." *African Affairs* 115, no. 461 (2016): 751-765, pp.756-757

⁴⁷ Kellerman, Barbara. "How followers are creating change and changing leaders." *Harvard Business School* (2008): 1-16; Riggio, Ronald E., Ira Chaleff, and Jean Lipman-Blumen, eds. *The art of followership: How great followers create great leaders and organizations*. John Wiley & Sons, 2008.

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coups is still felt in contemporary Uganda', with Museveni's NRM ability to maintain security in the majority of the country a key source of their legitimacy.⁴⁹ While it is no longer the case that the *idea* of a free and fair election is new to Ugandans, the imbalance in resource allocation and resorts to militarized responses to opposition actors means their enactment has not yet truly occurred.

This has meant mobilizing the disparate groups of followers within the Ugandan context was never achieved to the degree needed to fulfil that ultimate pursuit – the democratic, peaceful transition of political power in Uganda. Doing so, in the current domestic and global context perhaps required a compromise on the driving principles of Besigye's opposition movement: pandering to a rotten elite; buying votes from rural communities; compromising with the hypocritical Western donors, or corruption associated with Chinese business, and so forth. But if that had been done, and a transition leading to political power been achieved therein, what transformative change would have occurred? Overall, the legacy of Dr. Besigye, and the full telling of his effectiveness as a leader, will be known beyond the post-Museveni and post-NRM Ugandan era. When that genuinely transformative change does occur, which we believe one day will do, Dr. Besigye's historical role in that process will be unquestionable.

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