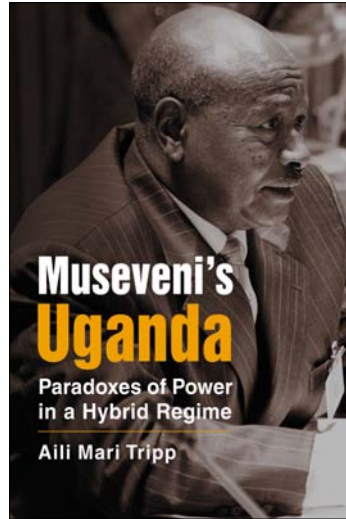


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# Museveni's Uganda: Paradoxes of Power in a Hybrid Regime

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ISBNs: 978-1-58826-731-3 hc  
978-1-58826-707-8 pb



LYNNE RIENNER PUBLISHERS

1800 30th Street, Ste. 314

Boulder, CO 80301

USA

telephone 303.444.6684

fax 303.444.0824

This excerpt was downloaded from the  
Lynne Rienner Publishers website  
[www.rienner.com](http://www.rienner.com)

# Contents

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<i>List of Illustrations</i>	vii
Introduction	1
1 Museveni's Uganda in Comparative Context	9
2 The Rise and Demise of a Broad-Based Government	39
3 A Troubled Household: Dissension Within the National Resistance Movement	59
4 The Quid Pro Quo of Political Liberalization	75
5 Participation, Patronage, and Power in Local Politics	111
6 The Carrot and the Stick	127
7 Peace and Insecurity	149
8 Legitimizing Repression and Corruption	181
Epilogue	193
<i>List of Acronyms</i>	197
<i>Basic Political and Social Data, 2010</i>	199
<i>Bibliography</i>	201
<i>Index</i>	213
<i>About the Book</i>	223

# Introduction

*It's me who hunted and after killing the animal, they want me to go. Where should I go?*

—President Yoweri Museveni, 2008<sup>1</sup>

Hybrid regimes are fraught with contradictions. Their leaders adopt the trappings of democracy, yet they pervert democracy—sometimes through patronage and largess, other times through violence and repression—for the sole purpose of remaining in power. This creates a catch-22. Because leaders have sought power through violence and patronage, they cannot leave power; the personal consequences would be too great. Because there is no easy exit, they must continue using violence and patronage to remain in power. Hybrid regimes embody two divergent impulses: they promote civil rights and political liberties, and yet they unpredictably curtail those same rights and liberties. They limit rights and liberties often enough that they cannot be regarded as democratic—but not consistently enough to be regarded as fully authoritarian. Uganda is such a hybrid regime, as have been most African countries after 1990. These countries are situated at a crossroads between democratization and authoritarianism, rarely if ever reverting to full-blown authoritarianism of the kind we saw during Idi Amin's rule in Uganda—but rarely transitioning fully to democracy either.

When Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Army (NRA) marched into Kampala, residents were surprised to discover that there was no looting, as there had been with previous armies. The NRA, governed by a strict code of conduct, was strikingly disciplined. A former director of the Makerere Institute for Social Research, the late Dan Mudoola, referred to the NRA as almost "puritanical and ascetic" (Mudoola 1991, 237). After two decades of turmoil under the Amin and Obote governments, Museveni's takeover in January 1986 was seen by many Ugandans as a much-needed respite from chaos. Museveni brought much of the country under his control, pacifying and drawing in various fighting factions under the rubric of a national army. The first cabinet embraced most major political factions and parties. The government was led

by the National Resistance Movement (NRM) and its seemingly unique no-party Movement system. The NRM established a five-tiered hierarchical resistance council system of local government that had originated during the guerrilla war.

Uganda's president Yoweri Museveni was for a long time widely acclaimed by foreign correspondents, donors, diplomats, and some academics as a new style of African leader to be emulated for introducing key institutional reforms. He had inherited a legacy of institutional failure and collapse from previous administrations and had the opportunity to radically reform and recreate governance structures (Brett 1994a). He was commended for his almost single-minded pursuit of economic growth, fiscal discipline, and the free market. He restructured the civil service and improved civil service wages. He retrenched large sections of the armed forces, privatized parastatal companies, and returned confiscated properties to Asians who had been ousted by Idi Amin in 1972. Museveni also undertook currency reform and raised producer prices on export crops. Gradually the economy got back on its feet and growth rates took off as inflation dropped.

The country's real GDP growth rate in 2007–2008 stood at 8.7 percent, and according to the Treasury of Uganda, had grown at a rate of 6.5 percent since President Museveni took over, resulting in a seven-fold increase in the size of Uganda's economy. Poverty declined from 56 percent to 31 percent of the population from the early 1990s to 2005—even as Uganda's population doubled.<sup>2</sup>

Museveni was praised for tackling the HIV/AIDS epidemic and bringing the rates of infection down significantly. His ambitious decentralization policy and emphasis on grassroots participation have been widely regarded as models for other countries, and surveys like Afrobarometer showed that the local government system was regarded highly by the population. In the early years of Museveni's rule, Uganda's human rights record seemed pristine compared with that of previous regimes. He was seen as having brought peace and stability to a country that had been fraught by conflict for years. Even his efforts at the creation of a seemingly unique no-party state did not meet with much criticism initially, except from opposition parties.

Uganda was one of the first countries in Africa to significantly increase the presence of women within the legislature and government. Uganda adopted legislative quotas for women as early as 1989, thus increasing the number of women in parliament from claiming one seat in 1980 to 18 percent of the seats in 1989 and 31 percent of the seats by 2009. Museveni also brought women into key cabinet positions and had a woman vice president, the first in Africa, for ten years. The 1995 constitution had an extraordinary number of clauses addressing women's rights. Thus, at the outset, the NRM won the approval of large numbers of women who were convinced that this was a government that was committed to improving the status of women.

From many Ugandans' perspective, such glowing descriptions of the country's politics and economy were overly optimistic. As Ugandan analyst John Ssenkumba notes,

To many Ugandans, the widespread conception, mainly held by outsiders, that their country is an oasis of stability, economic progress, and democracy is a frustrating mirage. For those without privileged protection from the unilateral exercise of governmental authority, however benign or enlightened this authority may appear to be, this image of Uganda as an arena of boundless political openings and relentless economic progress is grossly deceptive. (Ssenkumba 1998, 172)

These seemingly contradictory understandings of what had transpired in Uganda since Museveni took over reflect some of the paradoxes of hybrid regimes. They are neither the autocracies of the past, nor are they fully democratic. They range from semidemocratic to semiauthoritarian along the spectrum of hybridity, creating a duality of key elements of both democratic and authoritarian regimes that is explored in Chapter 1. In the case of Uganda, which falls on the semiauthoritarian end of the spectrum, many democratic institutions have been introduced, often to be subverted for nondemocratic ends simply to keep Museveni's government and party in power.

Political scientist William Muhumuza sums up the contradictions well:

Museveni's government created an impression that it was on a steady path to strengthen democratic institutions. . . . Nonetheless, these institutions have ended up being used for propaganda purposes, they have not been enabled to perform their duties independently. Therefore, Museveni's motive to retain power in a pseudo democratic dispensation has significant implications for Uganda's political future. . . . Personalization of power leads to authoritarianism and corruption that may reverse Uganda's current gains. (Muhumuza 2009, 25, 40)

Howard and Roessler (2006) identify a key tension within hybrid regimes, arguing that they are inherently unstable because they provide opponents with a significant opportunity to challenge incumbents during elections. There are many other paradoxes in such systems. Museveni's exercise of power in Uganda has been replete with contradictions that are suggestive of some of the more general constraints on semiauthoritarian regimes:

- What had initially been a broad-based antisectionarian government encompassing a wide spectrum of political interests and ethnic backgrounds became narrower and more exclusive in composition (see Chapter 2).
- Dissension within the NRM was both a product of the lack of leadership turnover and internal democracy, but, at the same time, it propelled the move toward multipartyism (see Chapter 3).

- Since 1986, when Museveni took over, the more the country seemed to open up political space, the more control the executive exerted. Ugandan politics under Museveni had initially been defined by an idiosyncratic no-party system (a de facto one-party system) until the introduction of multipartyism in 2005. The opening of political space at times became a pretext for control of civil and political society, and the more precarious the exercise of these rights became for those challenging the status quo. Advocacy was treated as antigovernmentalism and grounds for suspicion at best and repression at worst. The unpredictability of civil rights and other paradoxes of democratization are explored in Chapter 4.
- Decentralization and the creation of mechanisms for popular participation through a local council system were converted into a patronage-based political machine to maintain the ruling party in power. Center-local relations became concerned primarily with creating vertical lines of patronage and obligation and minimizing those horizontal societal linkages that became obstacles to staying in power (see Chapter 5).
- A key dilemma of power lies at the nexus of security and patronage. This is more characteristic of semiauthoritarian and authoritarian states than of electoral democracies or democracies that experience regular changes in leadership. Leaders pursue patronage in order to stay in power, not simply to enrich themselves or support their kin. They use patronage as a carrot to co-opt supporters and even, at times, their political opponents. They also rely on security forces as a stick to intimidate their opponents into submission. Rather than being sources of security, these forces became a source of insecurity for many, especially those in the political opposition. As governments feel more insecure, they rely increasingly on various extralegal armies and militias. Because rulers have used these tactics, they must stay in power. Leaving office will surely mean exile, repression, imprisonment, or death. It might even mean a trip to the Hague to be tried in the International Criminal Court. And so one often finds an impossible catch-22 situation in many semiauthoritarian (as well as authoritarian) states (see Chapter 6).
- Although much of Uganda experienced peace, the NRM government saw more internal conflict in almost all its border areas and in the northern and northeastern third of the country. It even engaged in incursions into the Democratic Republic of Congo in an apparent effort to expand its regional influence and to exploit resources. The conflict in the north of Uganda became one of the longest standing conflicts in postindependence Africa. These conflicts, which often took horrific dimensions, were frequently tied to long-standing grievances on the part of rebel groups but also to the army's need for new sources of patronage (see Chapter 7).

- The final chapter shows how economic growth, which has the potential in the long run to provide the basis for democratization, in the short run provides legitimacy to a system that relies on corruption, patronage, and violence to sustain itself. The chapter also explores some of the ways in which donors provide resources that unintentionally support nondemocratic practices and undermine the creation of productive and mutually beneficial synergies between state and citizens (see Chapter 8).

These, then, are some of the paradoxes of the Museveni government that this book explores. They emerge as persistent features of the semiauthoritarian regime type. The dilemmas are not primarily the result of the moral failings of an individual or even of a group of leaders; rather they are the product of the systemic and institutionalized features of semiauthoritarian rule in the context of a low-income country. In other words, there is no guarantee that another set of rulers in Uganda would behave all that differently under similar circumstances. When one looks at other countries facing similar constraints, comparable outcomes are evident, suggesting that the problems Uganda confronts are institutional and structural. Many of these dilemmas can be found in authoritarian regimes as well, but the difference lies in the extent to which semiauthoritarian regimes must also contend with the existence of democratic institutions and, at the very minimum, keep up the appearance that they too are indeed democratic. The undemocratic core of the regime makes this an almost impossible task, because there is a constant tension with the forces—in civil society, in political parties, in the media, within the elite, and in the legislature and the judiciary—that are trying to create a democratic reality out of those same institutions.

In authoritarian states, these challenges are much less pronounced. Sudan, for example, appoints its legislature, so it does not have to deal with the messy problems of how to ensure a desired electoral outcome yet give the appearance of a free and fair election. In authoritarian Eritrea, the government controls all broadcasting outlets and there have been no independent newspapers since they were banned in 2001. In Uganda, in contrast, the existence of a critical media poses a constant challenge to the regime, which promises freedom of speech in its constitution. Yet the government must engage in intermittent harassment and intimidation of the media in an attempt to control its content and influence. Under the authoritarian regimes of Milton Obote I (1962–1971), Idi Amin (1971–1979), and Milton Obote II (1980–1985), one could not envision the situation in Uganda today, where the Supreme Court constantly pushes back against executive encroachments and carves out its independence through key rulings.

By the same token, one cannot imagine within a democracy the kind of flagrant challenges of the kind experienced by the judiciary in 2005, when an

extralegal armed militia, the Black Mamba, was sent to the High Court to rearrest opposition leaders at their bail hearing. These dual realities of partial democracy and partial authoritarianism exist in constant tension in a semi-authoritarian context.

The paradoxes of the Museveni regime are thus typical of the dilemmas confronting poor hybrid regimes, which are neither fully democratic nor fully authoritarian. This is not to say that their leaders should not be held accountable or that individual leadership qualities and values do not matter. Nor can one conclude in a deterministic manner that countries cannot depart from the predicted mold. Rather, it is simply necessary to recognize that the problems of governance in a country like Uganda generally transcend the behavior of individuals in power.

Thus, while this book focuses on Uganda's experience since 1986, it has broader implications for the study of those semiauthoritarian regime types that characterize the African landscape today, found in over half of all African countries. Its main contribution is to show the dual character of these regimes by studying one country in depth and to argue that they need to be examined in their own right, rather than as failed attempts at democratization or as mere authoritarian regimes in democratic guise.

The book is based on seven research trips to Uganda of several months each and one more extended stay. I first visited and became familiar with Uganda in 1968; my most recent trip was in September 2009. Although my initial work there involved the study of the women's movement and women and politics, it provided many insights that are reflected in the pages that follow.<sup>3</sup>

In developing the book, I conducted fieldwork in Kampala, Gulu, Jinja, Mpigi, Luwero, Mbale, and Kabale. This involved interviews and discussions with hundreds of leaders and members of national and local organizations, entrepreneurs, politicians, party leaders, policymakers, opinion leaders, academics, journalists, representatives of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), businesspeople, representatives of development agencies, bilateral and multilateral donors, religious leaders, and many others in Uganda. I observed some of the proceedings of the Constituent Assembly in 1995 that culminated in the approval of a new constitution. I drew heavily on a systematic review of newspaper articles from *The Monitor*, *The New Vision*, *The Weekly Observer*, *The Independent*, *The East African*, and several other smaller papers. I also used online sources and unpublished reports by the Ugandan government, the US State Department, and various international and domestic NGOs as well as extensive secondary literature. I have made every effort to draw substantially on Ugandan sources and perspectives.

I owe a sincere debt of gratitude to all the Ugandans I have interviewed and learned from over the years. I am deeply appreciative to those who read and commented on the manuscript, including anonymous reviewers. Since I



take my findings about the nature of the state in Uganda seriously, I will leave them nameless as a precaution, but my gratitude is no less heartfelt.

## Notes

1. Cited in Onyango-Obbo 2008b.

2. *The Independent*, <http://www.independent.co.ug/index.php/column/comment/70-comment/811-where-the-economist-went-wrong>. Accessed July 6, 2009.

3. This research resulted in *Women & Politics in Uganda* (Madison, Oxford, and Kampala: University of Wisconsin Press, James Currey and Fountain Publishers, 2000); *The Women's Movement in Uganda: History, Challenges and Prospects*, coedited with Joy Kwesiga (Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 2002); and *African Women's Movements: Transforming Political Landscapes* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), coauthored with Isabel Casimiro, Joy Kwesiga, and Alice Mungwa. I also published numerous articles and book chapters on related topics and on Ugandan politics more generally.