

## Chapter 15 Swimming against the Tide: Militancy and Diplomacy as Survival Mechanisms for Opposition Parties in Uganda's Militarised Politics

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### 1. Introduction

2005 saw the much-vaunted re-opening of multiparty political space in Uganda after 20 years of closure. This chapter argues that since 2005, this “open” space has in fact shrunk with every passing year. Despite the formal fact of the support for a multiparty system in Uganda in the 1995 Constitution, attempts to stifle oppositional political parties continue. To this end, the National Resistance Movement (NRM) government has deployed various means: coercive force; a restrictive legal framework; patronage; state capture; a highly securitised and militarised social fabric; and a dominant-party system.

Despite manifest evidence of hostility to multiparty democracy, many have been deceived by the existence of what on the surface appears to be a fairly comprehensive and seemingly facilitative legal framework for multiparty democracy. This framework formally guarantees the protection of civil liberties, including the freedoms of assembly, association, and political participation. However, oppositional political parties are coming to realise that they need to reflect on how best to survive in what is a hostile political space. Given the fact of NRM dominance (enforced as it is by open military support and a general militarisation of society), questions of how to promote the necessary adaptation, coping, collaboration, and resilience of opposition political parties are becoming ever more pressing.

This chapter examines the effectiveness of the survival mechanisms that political parties adopt in response to militarised politics. Can these strategies enable parties to survive, grow, and maintain oversight and accountability against the ruling government, or if they inadvertently weaken the parties and make them easier targets for government repression? Do these survival mechanisms provoke retaliation from the state, or are they regarded with indifference?

The chapter takes a new perspective (adapted from the thinking of the opposition parties themselves) to rejuvenate the discourse on the evolution of multiparty politics in Uganda. It examines how (with some parties at least) their resilience and adaptation of “non-conventional” methods of coping with state-led militarised politics come to border on “criminal militancy”. It also examines another model of survival adopted by parties under siege, one that ordinary citizens refer to as “sell-out diplomacy”. The upshot is that each opposition party retreats and re-emerges with unpredictable and innovative strategies for coping with state restrictions that redefine what is “acceptable” and “rightful”.

The chapter examines the factors that inform and motivate these strategies, the links between them, and how effective (if at all) they have been in helping opposition political parties to survive the effects of the militarisation of the state. It argues that the modes of survival and resistance adopted by opposition parties in their struggle to survive have both short- and long-term ramifications, both positive and negative, for multiparty politics in Uganda, and particularly so for the quest for constitutionalism. It also notes how these survival mechanisms themselves attract the attention of the state, resulting in reactions which have diverse implications for the political landscape of the country.

The chapter examines the evolution of multiparty resilience in Uganda by examining the experience of two opposition parties: the National Unity Platform (NUP), formerly the People Power Movement (PPM) and the youngest opposition political party in Uganda as of October 2024; and the oldest opposition party, the Democratic Party (DP). It looks at a new trend in Ugandan opposition politics, that of forming “working co-operation agreements” with the ruling NRM government (which means effectively being subsumed in the NRM government in contrast to widely known coalition government politics). The chapter uses the case of the DP, which concluded such an agreement in 2022, to show how this works in practice and what it is likely to mean for Uganda’s multiparty dispensation.

In contrast to previous discussions, this chapter examines how certain parties (such as the NUP) are employing militant yet legal forms of opposition and how this has led to the rise of militancy and counter-militancy in Ugandan politics.<sup>1</sup> It argues that the more militant models of political

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1 Y Kiranda and M Kamp (eds.), *Reality Check: The State of Multiparty Democracy in Uganda*, Kampala, Uganda, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (2010), [https://www.kas.de/c/document\\_library/get\\_file?uuid=3deffb14-7b9c-9a87-cad8-33ddc54e26d5&groupId](https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=3deffb14-7b9c-9a87-cad8-33ddc54e26d5&groupId)

opposition are under-explored within the scholarship on multiparty politics in Uganda. Ultimately, the chapter asserts that the approaches these opposition parties take, whether diplomatic or militant, will significantly influence the future of multiparty democracy and the consolidation of constitutionalism in Uganda. It concludes that the chosen method of coping can either empower or undermine a party's viability.

This chapter is divided into four sections. Section 1 (namely, this brief introduction) lays the groundwork for the central argument and outlines the evolution of Uganda's multiparty system up until October 2024. Section 2 provides an overview of the current state of multiparty politics in militarised Uganda, detailing how this militarisation has subtly transformed the state over the past 20 years (2004–2024). Additionally, this section provides an overview of the inner state of health of political parties, and particularly of the opposition political parties. Section 3 delves into case studies of two parties, the NUP and the DP, highlighting the strategies they employ to navigate the challenges of militarised politics in contemporary Uganda. The chapter concludes in section 4 with a summary of the main findings and a number of recommendations aimed at promoting the de-militarisation of politics.

## 2. The state of multiparty politics in militarised Uganda

### 2.1 The evolution of multipartyism in post-independence Uganda (1962–1995)

Uganda's journey to independence was significantly shaped by a variety of political parties that emerged during the pre-independence period, and especially in the 1950s. Each party reflected different interests, produced different ideologies, and targeted different constituencies, contributing to the complex political landscape of the time. The three main parties formed in this period were the Uganda National Congress (UPC) (1952); the DP (1954); and the Progress Party (established in 1955).<sup>2</sup> In addition, the United Congress Party began in 1957; the Uganda People's Union in 1958; the

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=252038 (accessed 18 November 2024); JO Onyango and J Ahikire (eds.), *Controlling Consent: Uganda's 2016 Elections*, Trenton, New Jersey, Africa World Press (2017).

2 Tumushabe G, Rwakakamba M, and Makhone B, "Hard Choices or No Choice at All: Questions for Uganda's Political Parties", 1 (2015) *The Situation Room Uganda Debates Papers*, pp 7–8.

Uganda National Movement (1959); and the UNC in 1960.<sup>3</sup> Finally, the Kabaka Yekka (KY) (loosely interpreted as “King Alone”) was established in 1962 (with its roots in the Buganda Kingdom, it arguably aligned with the interests and identities of the Baganda ethnic group located in central Uganda).<sup>4</sup>

Of these, the two parties most influential in shaping Uganda’s multiparty democracy were the DP (often seen as a voice for the Catholic community and a strong advocate for democratic principles), and the UPC, which aimed to creating a broader nationalist agenda. The rivalry and interaction between the two not only provided the electorate with political choices but also contributed to shaping Uganda’s ideas about multiparty governance, coming to a sudden halt with what was effectively a total ban on political parties in 1971.<sup>5</sup>

Prior to this, the two parties were major players in the 1962 general elections, with the DP’s popular support reflected in the majority it gained in Parliament. However, the UPC sought to enhance its influence by forming a controversial alliance with the KY. This was described by many observers as “artificial”: it represented a strategic political manoeuvre rather than a genuine unification of ideologies brought about through grassroots support.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, this alliance enabled the UPC to establish Uganda’s first post-independence government, with Milton Obote as Prime Minister and Sir Edward Muteesa II as the ceremonial President (and also the “king” of Buganda).<sup>7</sup> Obote’s administration faced the daunting task of addressing the country’s ethnic and political divisions while seeking to create a cohesive national identity and a framework for multiparty governance that could successfully respond to the aspirations of the people.

The quest for multiparty politics was severely undermined by various measures taken by the governments of the time, including banning political parties or crippling them with restrictions on recruitment and mobilisa-

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3 *Ibid.*, p 8.

4 *Ibid.*

5 L Wild and F Golooba-Mutebi, “Review of International Assistance to Political Party and Party System Development, Case Study Report: Uganda”, London, Overseas Development Institute (August 2010), p 2.

6 *Ibid.*

7 F Musisi, RO Herbst, and A Mahajubu, “Unlocking the Mysteries of the Origins of the 1966 Ugandan Constitutional Crisis Global”, 6 (2018) *Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, pp 14–25, 19.

tion.<sup>8</sup> On 20 December 1969, President Obote, in an effort to counter the momentum that the opposition was gaining, and as a response to an assassination attempt, declared a state of emergency and banned opposition political parties.<sup>9</sup> This action was a significant setback to the young nation, as Obote had in effect created a path to a one-party authoritarian state. Ironically enough, Uganda had won independence in the first place partly as a result of the organised demands made by nationalist-based parties and social movements formed during the colonial era between 1920 and 1956 – parties and movements whose political descendants were now banned.<sup>10</sup>

The attack on opposition political parties continued apace during General Idi Amin’s “reign of terror” (1971–1979). In this period, the rule of military officers and martial law prevailed, with no signs of democracy or any form of citizen involvement in governance.<sup>11</sup> Amin was overthrown on 11 April 1979 by armed dissidents from the Uganda National Liberation Front acting together with the Tanzanian Defence Forces. A civil war ensued, with no prospect of multipartyism.<sup>12</sup> The 1980 attempt of holding multiparty elections – which enjoyed the limited participation of the two older political parties, the UPC and DP, along with a sprinkling of smaller parties – ended in a shambles, with widespread vote-rigging and intimidation.<sup>13</sup>

Despite its promises of political reform after gaining power in 1986, the National Resistance Army/Movement (NRA/M) maintained the ban on political-party activities. Legal Notice 1 of 1986 effectively banned parties by prohibiting them from holding conferences; opening branches; sponsoring candidates; recruiting members; or displaying party colours. At the same

8 GM Carbone, “Political Parties In A ‘No-Party Democracy’: Hegemony and Opposition Under ‘Movement Democracy’ in Uganda”, 9 (2003) *Party Politics*, pp 485–501, 486.

9 *Ibid.*

10 C Summers, and A Sikainga, “Ugandan Politics World War II (1939–1949)”, in JA Byfield, CA Brown, and T Parsons (eds.), *Africa and World War II*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press (2015), pp 480–498.

11 S Makara, “The Challenge of Building Strong Political Parties for Democratic Governance in Uganda: Does Multiparty Politics Have a Future?”, 41 (2009) *East African Review*, p 10.

12 G Roberts, “The Uganda-Tanzania War, the Fall of Idi Amin, and the Failure of African Diplomacy, 1978–1979”, 8 (2014) *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, pp 692–709, 700.

13 Makara, *supra* n. 11, p 10.

time, the NRA/M actively recruited citizens into its movement.<sup>14</sup> Beginning with Obote in 1969, intensified by Amin from 1971 to 1979, and maintained by the NRA/M after 1986, the ban on political parties significantly altered Uganda's political landscape. It restricted political pluralism, hindered organised political participation, and ushered in an era of repression that would have lasting repercussions for the country's political environment.

Various justifications have been provided by post-independence Ugandan leaders for the bans on political parties. One explanation predominates: this is that political parties contribute to ethnic and religious division within the country, given that the politicisation of ethnicity has played a significant role in party-formation.<sup>15</sup> Makara has summed up how leaders from Obote onwards made their case, noting that "for the sake of national unity, the fight against poverty, disease and ignorance, it was necessary to establish a one-party system instead of the factional and tribal groupings that characterized political parties".<sup>16</sup> Against this background, Makara maintains that there was tangible progress in the country in the immediate post-independence era (1962–1966) when Uganda was functional under multiparty dispensation. The real issue is not parties but their vulgarisation through ethnicisation.<sup>17</sup> All in all, the first 30 years of Uganda's independence were characterised by a deep disdain for political parties. Only in 1995, with the advent of a new constitution, did this change.

## 2.2 Elusive multipartyism in the post-1995 dispensation

The 1995 Constitution aimed to usher in a new era focused on human rights, the rule of law, and enhanced efforts at democratisation. Notably robust, the 1995 Constitution includes a dedicated chapter on rights and establishes a framework for a multiparty governance system. It has eight key provisions that support the development of such a system. This section examines these foundational provisions and their implications for multiparty politics.

14 JA Okuku J, "Beyond 'Third Term' Politics: Constitutional Reform and Democratic Governance in Uganda", 11 (2005) *East African Journal of Peace and Human Rights*, pp 182–219.

15 J Okuku, "Ethnicity, State Power and the Democratization Process in Uganda", Discussion Paper No. 17, The Nordic Africa Institute (2002), pp 7–8.

16 Makara, *supra*, n. 11, p 10.

17 *Ibid.*

The first such provisions are found in the Constitution's National Objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy. These serve as the guiding framework for all state organs, citizens, organisations, and individuals in applying or interpreting the Constitution and laws, as well as in making and implementing policy decisions.<sup>18</sup> According to the framework, the Ugandan state shall be based on "democratic principles which empower and encourage the active participation of all citizens at all levels in their own governance".<sup>19</sup> It further provides that "all political and civic associations aspiring to manage and direct public affairs shall conform to democratic principles in their internal organizations and practice".<sup>20</sup> The principle also calls for the independence of civic organisations in "pursuit of their declared objectives".<sup>21</sup>

The second provision, Article 38 of the Constitution, highlights the importance of participatory democracy, which empowers citizens to engage actively in the political process. It guarantees every Ugandan citizen the right to "participate in the affairs of government, individually or through his or her representatives in accordance with law".<sup>22</sup> This dual approach allows citizens to voice their opinions and concerns directly, while also enabling them to elect or appoint representatives who can advocate for their interests in government. The second arm of the provision guarantees every Ugandan "a right to participate in peaceful activities to influence the policies of government through civic organizations".<sup>23</sup> By acknowledging the role of civic organisations, this article fosters participatory democracy and establishes a basis for the formation of political organisations and parties.

Thirdly, Article 29 of the Constitution strengthens multiparty politics by guaranteeing every individual the right to peacefully assemble, demonstrate, and petition, as well as the freedom of association. This includes the right to form and join groups such as trade unions, political parties, and other civic organisations.<sup>24</sup> It also guarantees individuals the "freedom of thought, conscience, and belief", something which implicitly allows them to create and join political parties that are aligned with their values and

18 National objective I(i), of the Constitution of Uganda, 1995, as amended.

19 *Ibid*, National objective II(i).

20 *Ibid*, National objective II(v).

21 *Ibid*, National objective II(vi).

22 *Ibid*, Article 38(1).

23 *Ibid*, Article 38(2).

24 *Ibid*, Article 29(1)(d) and (e).

aspirations. Together, these provisions form a crucial foundation for the establishment and growth of political parties.<sup>25</sup>

The fourth is Article 72 of the Constitution. This is essential to the definition of the multiparty-political landscape because it guarantees the right to form political organisations, including political parties (a right augmented by the Constitution (Amendment) Act, 2015). However, this right is not unconditional. The Constitution stipulates that such organisations must operate within specific guidelines (such as the requirement for registration) before they can begin to function. Additionally, it mandates Parliament to establish laws to regulate their financing and operations.<sup>26</sup> By requiring adherence to constitutional principles, registration, and regulatory oversight of financing, the article aims to promote a healthy environment in which diverse views coexist and democracy and the rights of citizens are safeguarded.

The fifth provision is Article 69. This is perhaps the most fundamental, as it expressly establishes the constitutionalisation of political parties. It sets forth a foundational principle for democratic governance in Uganda, entitling the populace to select and evolve their political systems according to their preferences. It underscores the significance of democratic processes, the importance of political pluralism, and the need for governance structures that reflect the will and interests of the people. The article explicitly states that the people of Uganda have the right to choose a political system that aligns with their “preferences through free and fair elections or referenda”.<sup>27</sup> It further recognises multiple types of political systems through which Ugandans can exercise preference (indicating a commitment to political diversity). The systems mentioned are: (1) the so-called movement system, a broad-based political structure developed and promoted during the tenure of the NRA/M based on inclusivity and non-partisanship; (2) the multiparty political system, which allows multiple political parties to compete for power and promote democratic pluralism; and (3) any other democratic and representative political system, which leaves room for new

25 *Ibid*, Article 29(1)(d) and (e).

26 *Ibid*, Article 72(2) and (3). Article 72’s headnote was amended in 2015, via the Constitution (Amendment) Act 12 of 2015. Section 2 of Act 12 of 2015 states: “Article 72 of the Constitution is amended by substituting for the headnote the following – ‘Right to form political parties or political organisations’”. In the previous provision, this right had been restricted solely to the “right to form political organisations”.

27 Article 69(1) of the Constitution of Uganda, 1995, as amended.



political systems to emerge in the future in reflection of changes in society, governance needs, or popular preferences.<sup>28</sup>

The sixth provision is Article 70. This provides for the movement political system, which is described as broad-based, inclusive and nonpartisan and conforming to a diversity of principles.<sup>29</sup> These include participatory democracy; accountability and transparency; and accessibility to all positions of leadership by all citizens. The most significant of these principles concerns individual merit as a basis for election to political offices rather than affiliation to political parties.<sup>30</sup>

The seventh provision is Article 71. This establishes the framework for a multiparty political system in Uganda and outlines several critical principles that political parties must adhere to (in their formation, membership, organisation, and operations) in order to ensure a democratic and inclusive political environment.<sup>31</sup> Among things, the political party must have a national character;<sup>32</sup> show inclusivity in membership; demonstrate a democratic internal organisation (conforming to democratic principles as stipulated in the Constitution); ensure gender equality and representation; hold regular elections for national organs of the party: and demonstrate financial accountability. By establishing a framework for a multiparty political system that emphasises the above principles, Article 71 was intended not only to shape the political landscape and political parties generally, but also to enhance social cohesion and foster a more robust and participatory multiparty democracy. Of course, the realisation of these principles is contingent on effective implementation and a commitment to them by all stakeholders, including the government, political parties, civil society, and citizens themselves.

Equally important is Article 75. This, in the attempt to mark a fundamental departure from Uganda's turbulent past, prohibits Parliament from

28 *Ibid*, Article 69(2)(a)–(c).

29 *Ibid*, Article 70(1).

30 *Ibid*, Article 70(1)(d).

31 *Ibid*, Article 71. This article was amended in 2005 under section 15(b) of the Constitution (Amendment) Act 11 of 2005 by way of insertion. This particular provision allowed for the insertion of a new clause (2) stating as follows: "Parliament shall by law prescribe a code of conduct for political organisations and political parties and provide for the establishment of a national consultative forum for political parties and organisations with such functions as Parliament may prescribe." Section 15(a) of the Constitution (Amendment) Act affected only the numbering of clauses and had no substantive effect on the content of the provisions.

32 Article 71(a) –(f) of the Constitution of Uganda, 1995, as amended.

enacting a law to establish a one-party state. Here we find the endorsement of the multiparty-political system writ large.

### 2.3 Claw-back clauses in the Constitution

Although the Constitution includes measures aimed at constitutionalising political parties, their effectiveness is diminished by a number of restrictive clauses. Indeed, the very ban on political gatherings, association, and assembly that had characterised Uganda's turbulent past was carried forward in the 1995 Constitution. This prepared the ground for a one party-state by presenting "the movement" as the only viable alternative system of political governance for Ugandans. Consequently, while the Constitution ostensibly recognised multiparty politics, practical implementation remained constrained, eviscerating the promise of a diverse and functional political environment.

This retrogressive provision was embedded jointly in articles 271 and 270 of the Constitution. Article 271 recognised the political parties or organisations that were in existence immediately before the coming into force of the 1995 Constitution, extending their lease of life and allowing them to "continue to exist and operate [but only] in conformity with the provisions of the Constitution until Parliament was to enact laws relating to registration of political parties and organizations".<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Article 270 put a hold on the full functioning of political parties "until Parliament makes laws regulating the activities of political organizations in accordance with Article 73 of the Constitution". It provided for the continuance of political activities except in regard to the following:

- (a) opening and operating branch offices; (b) holding delegates' conferences; (c) holding public rallies; (d) sponsoring or offering a platform to or in any way campaigning for or against a candidate for any public elections; [and] (e) carrying on any activities that may interfere with the movement political system for the time being in force.<sup>34</sup>

The irony is that the activities restricted by these provisions were fundamental to the existence, functionality, identity, operation, survival, efficacy, and viability of political parties. They were crucial to the ability of political

33 *Ibid*, Article 271.

34 *Ibid*, Article 270 (a)–(e).

parties to establish the local presence essential to grassroots mobilisation and to develop their internal democratic processes and governance. In short, the prohibitions hollowed out the substance of what it is to be a political party. Parties hence remained side-lined and constrained under a de facto one-party system dominated by the NRA/M. This consolidation of power allowed the NRA/M to utilise its resources, state apparatus, and influence to make itself the only significant player in the political arena.

#### 2.4 Enabling unfettered multipartyism: The 2000 and 2005 referendums

Political parties were legally recognised under the 1995 Constitution. However, while this legal framework was ostensibly there to support political pluralism, in reality it created an environment in which parties were unable to translate their legal status into any meaningful practice. They operated under a framework of legally enforced restrictions that stifled their development and rendered them largely insignificant in the country's political arena.

As a result, Uganda remained under the influence of an NRM political framework, one predicated on the concept of "individual merit" as the entry-card for anyone intending to engage in elective politics. The emphasis on individual merit remained a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it allowed for a broad range of candidates to participate in politics based on their qualifications and abilities; on the other, it reinforced the idea that political affiliation is secondary to personal credibility and accomplishments. Consequently, political parties could not gain any traction as collective entities representing diverse interests, ideologies, and constituencies.

But the winds of change were gathering momentum and clamouring for a full, unfettered return to a multiparty political system. The first window of opportunity came in June 2000 when a historical referendum asked voters: "Which political system do you wish to adopt, Movement or Multiparty?"<sup>35</sup> The results proved disappointing to advocates of the multiparty system. The referendum saw 91 per cent of voters in favour of continuing with the movement system. However, the low turnout (of about 47 per cent) and the lack of adequate campaigning opportunities for the pro-multiparty side raised questions about the legitimacy of the outcome.

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35 M Bratton and G Lambright, "Uganda's Referendum 2000: The Silent Boycott", 100 (2001) *African Affairs*, pp 429–452, 435.

The environment during the referendum was marked by restrictions on opposition groups, leading to allegations of unfair practices.<sup>36</sup> Nonetheless, the movement system (the de facto one-party state of the NRA/M) was given another lease of life.

The turning-point for Uganda's political system came with the constitutional referendum of July 2005. Here, the people voted to lift the existing restrictions on the political space and re-introduce multipartyism.<sup>37</sup> The subsequent transition to an effective multiparty political system was codified by the passing of the Political Parties and Organizations Act (2005), which laid down the framework for the operation of political parties in Uganda. This legislation contains several key elements: a framework for the registration of political parties and political organization;<sup>38</sup> rules for the internal conduct of political parties, focusing on financial audits, mergers and alliances with other political parties, and membership (among other things);<sup>39</sup> a code of conduct for political parties;<sup>40</sup> and provision for a national consultative forum for political parties and political organisations.<sup>41</sup>

With the opening up of the new political space, political parties appeared to flourish. By the end of December 2023, 26 political parties were certified by the Uganda Electoral Commission.<sup>42</sup> However, these numbers alone may paint a falsely rosy picture. Only eight of the newly registered parties are fully operational and with the substantial presence across the nation necessary to challenge the current NRM government. These include the DP; UPC; National Unity Platform; Conservative Party; and four other smaller parties (the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC); NUP; Social Democratic Party (SDP); Justice Forum (JEEMA); and Alliance for National Transformation (ANT)). Of these eight, only the NRM, UPC, NUP,

36 O Therkildsen, "Uganda's Referendum 2000: The Silent Boycott: A Comment", 101 (2002) *African Affairs*, pp 231–241.

37 A Meldrum, "Ugandans Vote for Multi-party State", *The Guardian*, 30 July 2005, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/jul/30/andrewmeldrum> (accessed 19 November 2024); M Khisa, "How Museveni Has Twisted Uganda's Constitution to Cling to Power", *The Conversation*, 20 June 2019, <https://theconversation.com/how-museveni-has-twisted-ugandas-constitution-to-cling-to-power-118933> (accessed 13 November 2024).

38 Political Parties and Organizations Act (2005), sections 3–8.

39 *Ibid*, sections 9–18.

40 *Ibid*, section 19.

41 *Ibid*, section 20.

42 Electoral Commission, "Political Parties", <https://www.ec.or.ug/political-parties> (accessed 24 February 2024).

DP and FDC may be regarded as fully active in elections, and even then, active in a highly restrictive environment.

## 2.5 Uganda at 62: Between militarisation and democratisation

On 9 October 2024, Uganda celebrated 62 years of independence. A notable pattern has emerged from this history: usually, the presidency has been held by individuals with military backgrounds or by leaders with strong military support. The militarisation of political power has been a key factor in how presidential authority is obtained, maintained, and consolidated in Uganda. This intertwining of military influence with political leadership indicates that political power not only belongs to politics and politicians but is also deeply embedded in the military's role in society. This dominance of the military poses serious challenges to multiparty democracy and civilian governance (evident in allegations as to the partisanship of the Uganda Peoples' Defence Forces). This section explores how militarisation manifests itself in Uganda and the effects it has on political-party development and the overall political landscape.

In this discussion, we adopt Enloe's definition of militarisation as a "a step-by-step process by which a person or a thing gradually comes to be controlled by the military or comes to depend for its well-being on militaristic ideas".<sup>43</sup> Enloe adds that "the more militarization transforms an individual or a society, the more that individual or society comes to imagine military needs and militaristic presumptions to be not only valuable but also normal".<sup>44</sup> Similarly, Adelman notes that militarism "blurs the boundaries between what can be defined as military and what can be viewed as part of civilian life".<sup>45</sup> Consequently, "militarism demands that an entire society become permeated with and built according to military values and priorities."<sup>46</sup>

What Enloe and Adelman describe is a lived reality in contemporary Uganda. It comes through at different levels of society, in varying degrees of severity, and as the common denominator of the different regimes that

43 C Enloe, *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarising Women's Lives*, Oakland, California, California University Press (2000), p 3.

44 *Ibid.*

45 M Adelman, "The Military, Militarism, and the Militarisation of Domestic Violence", 9 (2003) *Violence Against Women*, pp 1118–1152.

46 *Ibid.*

have ruled the country. There is consensus among scholars and political commentators that the militarisation of the Uganda state has been and remains important in Ugandan political life.

Militarisation became particularly pronounced in 2001 with the appointment of a serving senior military officer, Major-General Katumba Wamala, as the inspector general of the civilian-oriented Uganda police force.<sup>47</sup> This decision not only signalled a significant militarisation of the police but also facilitated the infiltration of military influence into other aspects of Ugandan society. Since then, the presence and impact of the military has expanded. It has become increasingly intertwined with many dimensions of the nation's social framework, and has taken over spaces and spheres hitherto reserved for civilians. It is important to highlight key manifestations of this militarisation, as they illustrate the challenging operational landscape that opposition political parties face.

Militarism has permeated Uganda's economy and public service delivery through the agency of the Uganda Peoples' Defence Forces (UPDF). In 1994, the Uganda Air Cargo Corporation was established as a government-owned entity to provide efficient and coordinated air transport services.<sup>48</sup> By the end of 2023, five of its eleven board of directors' positions were occupied by senior military personnel, while the general manager was a lieutenant-general.<sup>49</sup> This reflects the extent of military involvement at the highest levels of the organisation.<sup>50</sup>

In addition, the significant military presence in Uganda's fisheries sector became apparent in 2017 when the fisheries protection unit was established in the UPDF by a presidential directive. This unit was tasked with combatting harmful fishing practices that were believed to be causing fish-stock

47 "Profile: Gen. Edward Katumba Wamala", *The Independent*, 7 February 2017, <https://www.independent.co.ug/gen-edward-katumba-wamala/> (accessed 24 October 2024).

48 Section 4 of the Uganda Air Cargo Corporation Act, 15 December 1994, <https://ulii.org/g/akn/ug/act/statute/1994/18/eng@2000-12-31> (accessed 17 November 2024).

49 K Kazibwe, "Uganda Air Cargo Boss Fired as Museveni Continues Purge," *Nile Post*, 15 June 2020, <https://nilepost.co.ug/2020/06/15/uganda-air-cargo-boss-fired-as-museveni-continues-purge/> (accessed 23 October 2024).

50 D Lumu and C Kiwawulo, "Museveni Appoints Lt. Gen. Lakara as Uganda Air Cargo Boss", *The New Vision*, 15 June 2020, <https://www.newvision.co.ug/news/1520888/museveni-appoints-lt-gen-lakara-uganda-air-cargo-boss> (accessed 23 October 2024).

depletion in the country's lakes.<sup>51</sup> However, its operations were marred by human rights abuses, including extra-judicial killings, the torture of fishermen, and the destruction of fishing equipment, all conducted under the guise of enforcing better fishing practices.<sup>52</sup>

Militarisation has also been visible in the construction sector. In 1 July 2021, the President issued an executive directive to both the ministers of health and of education (at the time, the Minister of Education was the President's wife, Janet Museveni). They were to cede all current and future government construction projects of hospitals, health centres,<sup>53</sup> and schools to the UPDF Engineering Brigade.<sup>54</sup> The directive commenced in the financial year of 2021/2022. The President argued the need for this on the grounds that the UPDF was not corrupt and was also more efficient than red-tape civilian public servants.<sup>55</sup>

The increasing militarisation of public security and law enforcement in Uganda represents a critical shift away from traditional governance of internal affairs by civilian authorities. This is particularly the case with the Uganda Police Force.<sup>56</sup> Here, senior military officers (from the rank of colonel and above) have been placed in high-ranking positions that determine policy directions.<sup>57</sup> These include the position of the deputy

51 J Nalwooga, "UPDF Soldier Shoots Fisherman Dead on Lake Kyoga", *The Daily Monitor*, 2 May 2024, <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/updf-soldier-shoots-fisherman-dead-on-lake-kyoga-4610230> (accessed 23 October 2024).

52 "UPDF Fisheries Protection Unit to be Deployed on Lake Albert", *The Independent*, 18 June 2020, <https://www.independent.co.ug/updf-fisheries-protection-unit-to-be-deployed-on-lake-albert/> (accessed 18 October 2024).

53 K Kazibwe, "Museveni Directs all Gov't School, Hospital Construction Projects to be Handled by UPDF", *Nile Post*, 9 July 2021, <https://nilepost.co.ug/2021/10/06/updf-takes-over-construction-of-all-hospitals/> (accessed 19 October 2024).

54 K Kazibwe, "UPDF Takes over Construction of all Hospitals", *Nile Post*, 6 October 2021, <https://nilepost.co.ug/2021/10/06/updf-takes-over-construction-of-all-hospitals/> (accessed 15 October 2024).

55 A Bagala, "Museveni Orders Army to Build Schools, Health Centres", *The Daily Monitor*, 9 July 2021, <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/museveni-orders-army-to-build-schools-health-centres-3466800> (accessed 15 October 2024).

56 R Tapscott, *Arbitrary State: Social Control and Modern Authoritarianism in Museveni's Uganda*, Oxford, Oxford University Press (2021), pp 79–80; A Mubiru, "The Rise and Fall of Gen. Kayihura", *The New Vision*, 14 June 2018, [https://www.newvision.co.ug/new\\_vision/news/1479729/rise](https://www.newvision.co.ug/new_vision/news/1479729/rise) (accessed 15 October 2024).

57 "Army Command, Power in Uganda Police Widens", *Africa Press*, 11 February 2022, <https://www.africa-press.net/uganda/all-news/army-command-power-in-uganda-police-widens> (accessed 19 October 2024).

inspector general, as well as posts in the directorates of human resources<sup>58</sup> and criminal investigations,<sup>59</sup> among others. Militarisation is also evident at the top of the Ministry of Internal Affairs which is entirely led by high-ranking military officials, including the minister and the permanent secretary.<sup>60</sup>

All in all, there are substantial questions around “the independence of the police and the application of military law in a domestic setting”.<sup>61</sup> Thus, it is not surprising that the militarised police institution in Uganda is described “as the main state agency at the center of securing the NRM regime”.<sup>62</sup>

The implications of militarisation are profound, and particularly so for the multiparty-political landscape in Uganda. Opposition political parties face significant challenges, as their legitimate mobilisation efforts and other party activities are not only monitored but actively suppressed by a militarised police force. The militarised approach to internal security fosters a climate of fear and repression that poses significant risks to the prospects of realising the foundational ideals of multiparty democracy and human rights in Uganda.<sup>63</sup>

Militarisation has also swallowed the National Identification and Registration Authority (NIRA). This is the national agency mandated to “create, manage, maintain and operationalize the National Identification Register

58 I Mubiru, “Museveni Appoints Four UPDF Officers as Police Directors”, *Watchdog Uganda*, 3 July 2019, <https://www.watchdoguganda.com/news/20190703/71522/museveni-appoints-four-updf-officers-as-police-directors.html> (accessed 19 October 2024).

59 *Ibid.*

60 S Namwase and J Nkuubi, *Guns, Bread and Butter: Militarisation of Economic Sectors and Public Institutions in Uganda: A Socio-Legal Analysis*, Kampala, Human Rights and Peace Centre, Makerere University (2024), pp 167–173.

61 CE Bailey, “Meeting the Needs of the State: Intelligence, Security and Police Legal Frameworks in East Africa”, in Ryan Shaffer (ed.), *African Intelligence Services: Early Postcolonial and Contemporary Challenges*, Maryland, Rowman and Littlefield (2021), pp 257–280, 266.

62 J Kagoro, *Inside an African Police Force: The Ugandan Police Examined*, Geneva, Springer (2022), pp 26. See also “What You Should Know about New Deputy IGP Maj Gen Paul Lokech”, *The Independent*, 16 December 2020, <https://www.independent.co.ug/what-you-should-know-about-new-deputy-igp-maj-gen-paul-lokech/> (accessed 17 October 2024); C Etukuri, “Parliament Clears Lokech’s Appointment as Deputy IGP”, *The New Vision*, 19 December 2020, <https://www.newvision.co.ug/news/1535695/parliament-clears-lokech-appointment-deputy-igp> (accessed 19 October 2024).

63 Namwase and Nkuubi, *supra* n. 60, p 173.



by registering all citizens of Uganda”.<sup>64</sup> From the board of directors of the NIRA through to its mid-level portfolios, senior military officers maintain a controlling hand in what was initially a civilian-administered institution.<sup>65</sup> The involvement of senior military officials in the civilian agency responsible for citizen registration threatens the democratically crucial process of creating and maintaining an accurate electoral roll. There are many allegations regarding military officers’ interference. In 2014, opposition political parties protested the issuance of new identity cards just before the 2016 general elections, fearing that military influence might allow for partisan control of voter registration and disenfranchise voters supporting opposition parties to the advantage of the ruling party.<sup>66</sup>

Uganda is alone in Africa (and perhaps the world) in allocating 10 seats in Parliament to the military. UPDF MPS are there to act as “listening posts” and provide guidance for the country.<sup>67</sup> This is allowed for by Article 78 of the Constitution, which prescribes that the composition of Parliament includes “representatives of the army” as well as other special interest groups.<sup>68</sup> In a healthy democracy, elected representatives are supposed to reflect the interests of their constituents rather than serve as proxies for military interests.<sup>69</sup> This dual role blurs the lines between civilian governance and military authority. The measure contributes to weakening the foundations of the multiparty system. Additionally, the military’s representation in Parliament contributes to the concentration of power within the NRA/M ruling party, thereby undermining the potential for competitive politics.

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64 See National Identification and Registration Authority, <https://www.nira.go.ug/home> (accessed 30 December 2024).

65 M Karugaba, “NIRA in ID Cards Printing Crisis”, *The New Vision*, 14 October 2021, <https://www.newvision.co.ug/category/news/nira-in-id-cards-printing-crisis-117255> (accessed 18 October 2024).

66 “Government Rejects Opposition Demands to Stop ID Registration”, *The Daily Monitor*, 24 April 2014, <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/government-rejects-opposition-demands-to-stop-id-registration-1570676> (accessed 25 October 2024).

67 Namwase and Nkuubi, *supra* n. 60, p. 179.

68 “UPDF MPS Defend Role in Parliament”, *The Independent*, 20 May 2021, <https://www.independent.co.ug/updf-mps-defend-role-in-parliament/> (accessed 25 October 2024).

69 Namwase and Nkuubi, *supra* n. 60, p. 180.

### 3. Ways of coping with militarised politics: Options for the opposition

#### 3.1 “Sell-out diplomacy”: The case of the Democratic Party

On 21 July 2022, the NRM signed what was publicised as a “working cooperation agreement” with the DP. This agreement was signed by the leaders of the two parties, President Museveni (NRM) and Norbert Mao (DP).<sup>70</sup> Central to this was the pledge “to share political power and also to foster constitutionalism and the respect of human rights”, both of which are somewhat plausible undertakings.<sup>71</sup> Not unexpectedly, however, and of critical importance to this chapter, the two signatories made several interesting remarks after the signing.

Museveni’s comments worked to undermine any sense that the agreement had been signed between equals. He noted that it should have happened earlier and boasted, with condescension, “You know the history. I keep telling you that DP without Museveni is not a serious group because I was a very active member of DP.”<sup>72</sup> Museveni was also reported as saying that although the DP was “supporting opposition, they have been friendly and not destructive”.<sup>73</sup> For his part, Mao said the DP-NRM agreement was “a living document” and would “continue growing”; it had been signed in “good faith”, and marked the resolution of a number of differences that the DP apparently had had with the NRM.<sup>74</sup>

One day after the signing of the cooperation agreement, Museveni appointed Mao as Minister of Justice and Constitutional Affairs as a part of the agreement. In addition, the DP was also allowed to appoint someone to a junior minister portfolio,<sup>75</sup> to select four of its members for other appointments to “government departments, statutory bodies and government agencies”;<sup>76</sup> in turn, the NRM would support the election of the

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70 “Mao Signs Cooperation Agreement with Museveni”, *The Independent*, 21 July 2022, <https://www.independent.co.ug/mao-signs-cooperation-agreement-with-museveni/> (accessed 18 September 2024).

71 URN, “Details of Museveni, Mao 42-clause Agreement”, *The Observer*, 22 July 2022, <https://observer.ug/news/headlines/74458-details-of-museveni-mao-42-clause-agreement> (accessed 18 September 2024).

72 *Ibid.*

73 *Ibid.*

74 *Ibid.*

75 *Ibid.*

76 *Ibid.*

secretary-general of the DP to the East African Legislative Assembly.<sup>77</sup> The agreement also provided that the ministerial positions above were to be held by the appointed ministers for “the full term of the 11<sup>th</sup> Parliament or for the duration of this agreement, whichever comes first”.<sup>78</sup> Further spoils of victory extended to Parliament. In this regard, the agreement stipulated that

the National Resistance Movement will support the nomination of a Democratic Party member of parliament to be the chair of a standing committee, as well as a democratic party member of parliament in the role of deputy chair of an additional committee.<sup>79</sup>

It is important to note that the cooperative agreement also bound those DP members who were given cabinet positions to accept the notion of collective responsibility. To this effect, the agreement stipulated that the “Democratic Party ministers agree to be bound by the cabinet rules in the exercise of ministerial responsibilities, and in particular, agree to be bound by the provisions on conduct, public duty, and personal interests of ministers”.<sup>80</sup> In other words, the DP president-general could neither express nor maintain any views which diverged from those of the NRM. The possibility of the DP’s opposition to any government programmes was now effectively ruled out in advance.

To compound this silencing, DP cabinet ministers were bound by the confidentiality rules that govern the executive.<sup>81</sup> The agreement stipulated that where “cabinet papers or other briefings are provided to the Democratic Party, or where the Democratic Party is involved in consultation on legislation, policy or budgetary matters, all such material and discussions shall be confidential unless otherwise agreed”.<sup>82</sup>

Perhaps as a means of evaluating the success of this cooperation, meetings between Museveni and Mao were to be held every three months. At this writing (March 2025), it was too early to assess the functionality of this agreement and what would happen if any of its fundamental terms are breached. However, some of the consequences of the agreement were already becoming apparent, as we shall see below.

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<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

### 3.2 The impact of “sell-out diplomacy” on multiparty politics

This alliance has important implications for the DP’s internal dynamics, its relationship with the public, and the fostering of multiparty politics in the country. Many members of the public viewed the agreement as primarily a means for ensuring individual political survival and self-promotion, rather than as an effort to serve the needs of ordinary citizens. The commentator Michael Mutyaba suggested that such cooperation, which extends to joining the government, is a strategy that “relies on identifying frustrated opposition leaders whose careers face some sort of crisis and who are eager to rekindle their political fortunes”; though seemingly far-fetched, the argument is plausible and not easy to dismiss.<sup>83</sup>

Indeed, an examination of various political entities that chose to ally themselves with the NRM reveals two common concerns: the fear of political irrelevance, and anxiety over decline of financial support for their parties (sentiments also to be found in the current DP leader Mao).<sup>84</sup> Mutyaba argues that “Mao – frustrated by a waning career, internal factionalism, and displacement by more popular opposition rivals – was a prime candidate for co-optation”.<sup>85</sup> When the agreement was reached, the DP had only nine members in a 529-seat parliament, a modest representation compared to that of the NRM, with its 343 members.

Whereas public communications on the new partnership emphasised the attempt at “ensuring collaboration on matters of constitutional importance”, ordinary people were not convinced and expressed both nostalgia for the old arrangements and pessimism for the new.<sup>86</sup> The agreement did mark a new strategy by Museveni and the NRM for dealing with the opposition, one which moved away the old tactics of coercion and intimidation. Mutyaba refers to it simply as an example of “Museveni’s long-established pattern of co-opting opposition figures into government”.<sup>87</sup> However, this went beyond the co-opting of individuals; it effectively involved handing over control of an oppositional political party and its leaders to the NRM.

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83 M Mutyaba, “Is Co-opting the Opposition Shrewd Politics or a Desperate Ploy?”, *African Arguments*, 10 August 2022, <https://africanarguments.org/2022/08/uganda-museveni-mao-is-co-opting-the-opposition-shrewd-politics-or-a-desperate-ploy/> (accessed 19 October 2024).

84 *Ibid.*

85 *Ibid.*

86 *Ibid.*

87 *Ibid.*

As a result, the agreement lacked legitimacy in the eyes of the public, prompting scepticism about the NRM-DP alliance. The agreement never had a strong social foundation and promised only a precarious future due to prevalent distrust of the DP. Indeed, following the agreement, a large number of DP members moved to other parties, and particularly to the NUP, while a court case was filed against the president-general and secretary-general of the DP seeking to annul the agreement on the grounds that there had been no effective consultation with, nor consent from, actual party members. At the time of writing, the case has still to be decided.<sup>88</sup>

A second consequence of the agreement centres on the sense of betrayal felt by DP members after it was signed. Many viewed it as a betrayal of the core values of truth and justice which the party had championed for more than 60 years in Ugandan politics. Given the widespread perception of the lack of precisely these values in the NRM government, there was little belief that the DP could continue to uphold them in this new and compromised arrangement. Thanks to its apparent abandonment of its own core values, the DP lost a great deal of popular support.

Perhaps even more disturbing was that the DP had abandoned the most important roles that opposition parties can play in a country like Uganda. They are that a party not only acts a platform that enables citizens to “participate in the governance process (political participation), but also structure[s] the political landscape to enable competition between varying interests and policy objectives (political competition)”.<sup>89</sup> For now, it is impossible to claim that the DP works as a party in competition with the NRM, seeking to elicit accountability and ensure oversight and so propel democratisation forward; instead it has consigned itself to the abyss. It is now referred to as conquered territory, condescendingly spoken of as a mere footnote to the broader narrative in which the NRM represents itself as the land’s great mother and liberator.

For the co-opted DP members, there is also the further danger of being discarded once their purpose has been served. The NRM government,

88 “Court Issues Timelines in Mao-NRM Deal Case”, *The Independent*, 27 February 2024, <https://www.independent.co.ug/court-issues-timelines-in-mao-nrm-deal-case/> (accessed 28 February 2024). See also Michael Phillip Lulume Bayigga, John Paul Lukwago Mpalanyi, Fortunate Rode Nantongo, Richard Sebamala and Fred Kayondo v Gerald Siranda, Mao and the Attorney General, *Constitutional Petition*, 2023.

89 J Maiyo, “Political Parties and Intra-Party Democracy in Uganda: Challenges and Opportunities for Democratic Consolidation”, *SSRN*, 13 May 2020, p 14, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3600470> (accessed 24 October 2024).

particularly under President Museveni, has a history of drawing opponents into the cabinet with promises of ministerial roles or similar positions. Initially, these individuals may indeed receive public praise from the President for their cooperation and patriotism. However, after about two years (typically coinciding with cabinet reshuffles), they are often dropped without warning. They are then left completely stranded, having lost all credibility and public support for having been seen to compromise their principles for the sake of personal gain. Many who are recruited in this manner find that their political careers end when they lose their positions, as they no longer have favour with the electorate.

At the time of writing, there were concerns that this fate might be in store for the DP and those of its members in government positions. This is what Mutyaba calls the “all-too-common risk of being dumped by Museveni once the defector has served their purpose”.<sup>90</sup> Collectively, these sentiments from everyday citizens portray opposition figures and parties as merely serving the interests of the NRM government. This perception is echoed by Mutyaba:

While defectors may enjoy various financial benefits, they are also typically tasked with doing the NRM’s dirty work. Mao, for instance, will likely become the face of further proposed constitutional amendments that would entrench Museveni’s rule or ease his son Muhoozi Kainerugaba’s ascendance to power. The NRM likely hopes the new justice minister will act as a shock-absorber, diverting public criticism from the regime and preventing anti-Museveni sentiments from crystallizing. To the public and many in the opposition, however, Mao’s departure is both evidence that he was a secret NRM agent all along and a reason to stop infighting and develop greater clarity of vision.<sup>91</sup>

In a country as deeply polarised as Uganda, such cooperation is often represented as prompted by the need for national reconciliation. While there may be some theoretical validity to this claim, the reality suggests an entirely different agenda, one focused on suppressing opposition parties and undermining the multiparty system in Uganda. Furthermore, this approach has negatively impacted future collaboration among political parties, as the DP has become deeply isolated from other opposition groups. Indeed, Lewis Rubongoya, the secretary-general of the NUP, has branded the DP

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90 Mutyaba, *supra* n. 83.

91 *Ibid.*

leader, Mao, a “self-seeker”, noting that “the pretence is over. [It] explains the attacks on NUP. Hope this clears the air for those who always ask about ‘opposition unity’ in Uganda.”<sup>92</sup>

All in all, this development has deepened discontent among Uganda’s opposition parties and resulted in historically low levels of trust among the key opposition players. Accusations of being “moles” for the NRM and claims that certain members have been “bought” by the ruling party have intensified. The DP’s coping strategies have fostered further mistrust within the opposition and among the public, and resulted in a significant loss of legitimacy. The agreement emerged amid the promising discussions within the opposition to unite and field a single presidential candidate against the NRM in the 2026 elections; that goal now appears highly uncertain. Diplomacy as a coping mechanism thus seems shaky compared to the militancy model, something we shall now examine in relation to the experience of the NUP.

### 3.3 The rise of militancy in Uganda’s opposition politics

The People Power Movement (PPM) emerged under the leadership of the music icon Kyagulanyi Ssentamu, known popularly by his stage name, Bobi Wine. Its message was simple: after nearly four decades of the NRM, it was time for it to give up power as it was no longer in touch with the contemporary aspirations of the youthful population. Ssentamu accused the government of multiple sins: authoritarianism, poverty, corruption, and nepotism and sectarianism in the distribution of government services and employment opportunities; he decried the dwindling trust in elections as conduits for the peaceful transfer of power and the representation of the will of the people. Ssentamu presented the PPM as the formation needed

[to] spearhead the first-ever inclusive, non-violent transition of political power in Uganda ... from the 35-year long dictatorial regime to a people’s choice government through free and fair elections ... compelled by Arti-

92 J Kamoga, “Uganda’s Oldest Opposition Party Agrees to a New Deal Ruling NRM”, *The East African* (Nairobi), 23 July 2022, <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/news/east-africa/uganda-oldest-opposition-party-agrees-new-deal-ruling-nrm-3889630> (accessed 18 September 2024).

cle 1 of the Constitution of Uganda 1995, which grants all power to the people of Uganda.<sup>93</sup>

In order to reach its goals, the PPM social movement had to acquire the formal legal standing necessary to access the relevant rights and privileges of a registered party, including of course, the right to participate in the national elections. Hence the birth of the NUP.

The establishment of the NUP in July 2020 was a significant development in Ugandan politics, and particularly for opposition politics given the government's attempts restrict the growth of opposition parties. Prior to the formation of the NUP, the PPM had raised concerns about the potential obstruction it faced from the Uganda Electoral Commission in any attempt to register as a formal political party. The NUP was created to provide a legitimate platform for the PPM to contest the 2021 general elections.

The NUP was marketed as a new political entity, one which brought forward fresh ideas and acted as a new platform for the voices of ordinary Ugandans. The reality was a little more complex. Essentially, the NUP was simply a rebranding of the existing National Unity, Reconciliation and Development Party (NURP), first registered as a political party in 2004.<sup>94</sup> This pre-existing status allowed the NUP to circumvent some of the more significant barriers to registration that would have otherwise confronted them.<sup>95</sup> The strategic transformation of NURP into NUP allowed the easy inclusion of prominent figures from the PPM, and especially Bobi Wine as the party president, while maintaining a sense of continuity. The new party sought to translate the energy and enthusiasm of the PPM into a political structure that could effectively challenge the ruling regime.<sup>96</sup>

In the 2021 elections, the political landscape suddenly looked very different. Now, for the first time, a 36-year-old musician standing for a fully established party was in a position to challenge the 74-year-old veteran of

93 National Unity Platform, *People Power Movement Manifesto, 2021–2026: A New Uganda*, p 1, <https://nupuganda.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/NUP-MANIFESTO.pdf> (accessed 18 November 2024).

94 I Katusiime and D Wandera, “Bobi Wine Finds Party Shelter with Eyes on 2021 Presidential Election”, *The East African*, 23 July 2020, <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/news/east-africa/bobi-wine-party-shelter-eyes-2021-presidential-election-1904780> (accessed 26 October 2024).

95 *Ibid.*

96 “How Bobi Wine, NUP deal was negotiated”, *The Daily Monitor*, 23 July 2020, <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/how-bobi-wine-nup-deal-was-negotiated-1908714> (accessed 26 October 2024).



the NRM – Museveni – who had been in power for over 30 years and knew every trick in the book.<sup>97</sup> At long last, the liberation party electoral dividend which had been a constant of President Museveni's long rule looked as though it might not hold against new generation of youthful and energetic politicians. This is a generation that the state prefers to refer to, in derogatory terms, as “militant”, refusing to recognise that any such militancy is a necessary survival mechanism in a situation where state resources are used to undermine – often with force – any political opposition.<sup>98</sup>

From the very beginning, the NUP/PPM showed itself willing to put into action what has been described as “a highly resistant, assertive, aggressive and militant model of politics”.<sup>99</sup> In response to the increasing levels of state militarism, the new party adopted forms of language, conduct, and dress (military-style fatigues) that show that NUP members are ready and willing to challenge the state. Musinguzi has described well the growing militancy within the lowest ranks of the NUP structure, writing of how Kyagulanyi Ssentamu (aka Bobi Wine)

uses foot soldiers for his National Unity Platform (NUP) party, running a group imitating a military structure ... Foot soldiers hold ranks, wear red berets and red overalls complete with pips, and organize themselves into military-like structures. They participate in parades and salute whenever Bobi Wine arrives at events. Additionally, they serve as his security detail during travels to places with large crowds ... The preference for red berets and overalls is inspired by Bobi Wine, and the foot soldiers take pride in dressing like and protecting their leader.<sup>100</sup>

Especially revealing is the fact that the pips on these civilian overalls imitate those of military ranks, as do the structure of authority within the party: its generals and colonels must be obeyed with appropriate deference. The fact that the party president, Bobi Wine, is referred to as the commander-in-chief has not gone unnoticed. One commentator notes the following:

97 AM Tripp, *Museveni's Uganda: Paradoxes of Power in a Hybrid Regime*, Boulder, Colorado, Lynne Rienner Publishers (2010), pp 4–5.

98 H Athumani, “Uganda's People Power Movement Registers a Political Wing Ahead of 2021 General Elections”, *Voice of America News*, 22 July 2020, [https://www.voanews.com/a/africa\\_ugandas-people-power-movement-registers-political-wing-ahead-2021-general-elections/6193238.html](https://www.voanews.com/a/africa_ugandas-people-power-movement-registers-political-wing-ahead-2021-general-elections/6193238.html) (accessed 20 October 2024).

99 *Ibid.*

100 B Musinguzi, “Uganda: Bobi Wine Foot Soldiers, a Symbol of Pride, Defiance,” *The Africa Report*, 8 October 2024, <https://www.theafricareport.com/363788/uganda-bobi-wine-foot-soldiers-a-symbol-of-pride-defiance/> (accessed 25 March 2025).

These NUP uniforms being used at their offices, functions, political meetings and on daily public display as already noticed have no standardization except the swastika armband worn on the left. Like Hitler's youth brigades, NUP activists share the same agenda in the belief and identity by costumes, intimidation, intolerance, violence, bigotry and other fascist tendencies. In so doing, NUP supporters imitate military formations including burly bodyguards for no other useful purpose than to spread intimidation, harassment and fear.<sup>101</sup>

The NUP argues that it is the harsh restrictions and violence visited on opposition parties that have encouraged them to mirror the militant stance and tactics used by the ruling NRM: a government's actions and character often shape and define the nature of its opposition. The more militant approach of the NUP can best be understood as an inevitable response to the NRM's own aggressive tactics. At the same time, this new politically aggressive stance can be attributed to a lack of viable options, particularly when the public is expressing increasing disapproval of the "diplomatic" politicians who have failed to provide any effective challenge the NRM. All of this is reinforced by the current political climate which offers few (if any) opportunities for peaceful and non-violent political engagement.

### 3.4 NUP Militancy and Multiparty politics

Understanding the implications of the emergence of a militant oppositional politics provides valuable insight into the ongoing struggle for democratic participation and the future of multiparty governance in Uganda. This is particularly important with regard to four distinct but related areas: political engagement, public perception, state repression, and societal dynamics.

The NRM government's initial response to the new militancy of the PPM/NUP has been to try and suppress it. Faced with a challenge to its power, the rattled NRM – particularly President Museveni, who is prone to favour strong-arm approaches – has resorted to methods akin to bush war-guerrilla tactics and the extensive militarisation of the political milieu.

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101 O Opondo, "The NUP Politics of Bullying and Insolence Must be Tackled", *Watchdog Uganda*, 19 September 2023, <https://www.watchdoguganda.com/op-ed/20230919/159837/ofwono-opondo-the-nup-politics-of-bullying-and-insolence-must-be-tackled.html> (accessed 17 November 2024).

The government's first instinct has been to confront perceived threats with force rather than dialogue.

In 2019, the Ugandan army designated the red beret, typically worn by military police, as part of its official uniform, and hence forbidden to the non-military. Despite this ruling, Bobi Wine and his supporters persisted in wearing the berets, leading to widespread arrests by security forces. A legal challenge against the ban on red berets was never addressed in court, as a hearing on the matter was never scheduled. During the 2021 presidential election, more than 400 people were arrested for wearing red berets, with total arrests in the aftermath possibly numbering in the thousands.<sup>102</sup> For now (as at October 2024), over 20 NUP party supporters arrested in December 2020 remain in military custody. While the NUP contends that the pretext for their arrest was purely sartorial, the charges facing them include possession of explosives.<sup>103</sup>

The supporters of the NUP have been systematically stripped of all constitutionally guaranteed procedural rights, and notably of the right to bail, which so crucial for any suspect in the criminal justice system. The implications of the denial of rights extend far beyond the individual cases of these supporters. It has adverse effects on all opposition political parties, creating an environment of fear and repression that stifles political dissent in Uganda. By undermining the legal rights of those associated with opposition movements, the government sends a clear message: dissent will not be tolerated, and those who challenge the status quo risk facing severe legal repercussions.

The general conduct, dress code, and militant words of NUP supporters and leaders has also provided the NRM government with useful political ammunition: it has enabled the government to depict the opposition party as violent and unfit to govern. Many NRM party functionaries have been deployed to attack the NUP on every front, but attention is always focused on the party's militant stance.

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102 "NUP Supporters Protest Continued Detention as Army Court Denies Them Bail Again", *The Observer* (Uganda), 16 April 2024, <https://observer.ug/index.php/news/headlines/81066-nup-supporters-protest-continued-detention-as-army-court-denies-them-bail-again> (accessed 25 October 2024).

103 "Military Police Called into Action as Court Martial Denies NUP Supporters Bail", *The Independent* (Uganda), 16 April 2024, <https://www.independent.co.ug/military-police-called-into-action-as-court-martial-denies-nup-supporters-bail/> (accessed 25 October 2024).

Take, for instance, the Government Media Centre. This is the official public relations department, under the Ministry of Information and Communications Technology and National Guidance. It is mandated to “facilitate communication of government policies, programmes and projects to the public through the media”.<sup>104</sup> In practice, the Government Media Centre does not function as a neutral governmental body; it is better understood as an extension of the NRM party’s apparatus.<sup>105</sup> As such, it works to disseminate to the public only the information that is consistent with NRM party narratives and political strategies. The synergy between the NRM and the Government Media Centre plays a pivotal role in framing public discourse. It influences media portrayals of political events and bolsters the ruling party’s position in the face of opposition. By leveraging such state resources for party objectives, the NRM effectively consolidates its control over public communications in Uganda, reinforcing its governance agenda while marginalising dissenting voices.

It is in light of the above that the attacks of Government Media Centre on the NUP are to be read: the Centre is a *de facto* agent of the NRM party. Its director began the attack on the NUP by describing it as a “rogue tribal sectarian outfit whose impudence, bullying, mob mentality and crude arrogance at the national level must be knocked down if Uganda is to maintain stability and social cohesion”.<sup>106</sup> NUP members were also represented as a militant gang that harbours a belief that it “can overrun Uganda with mob mentality and disrupt the hard-won democratization and progress that Uganda is today”.<sup>107</sup>

In 2024, the Inspector-General of Police (appointed directly from the military) announced a ban on the NUP’s nationwide mobilisation tour on the grounds that its members “incite violence, promote sectarianism, make illegitimate calls for the removal of an elected government, and issuance of defamatory statements against the person of President Museveni”.<sup>108</sup> As a result, the “activities of the NUP were immediately suspended ... until such

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104 Uganda Media Centre, <https://www.mediacentre.go.ug/about-us> (accessed 18 November 2024).

105 “Museveni Reappoints Ofwono Opondo as Media Centre Boss”, *The Kampala Post*, August 30 2022, <https://kampalapost.com/content/museveni-reappoints-ofwono-opondo-media-centre-boss> (accessed 18 November 2024).

106 *The Independent*, *supra* n. 103.

107 *Ibid.*

108 “Uganda Police Ban Bobi Wine Rallies over ‘Sectarian’ Comments”, *The East African*, 14 September 2023, <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/news/east-afr>

a time that they are ready to comply with the guidelines and rule of law”.<sup>109</sup> Later, the police head further denounced NUP militancy in the following terms:

We are sending this strong message, that our country, Uganda, will not wait for its villages, towns, urban centers and cities to burn, before taking action to protect its citizens and property. We are going to put an end to the mob mentality, bullying and intimidating tactics of NUP radicals, against innocent civilians and law enforcers. Uganda is one of the safest countries in the region and across the globe and we plan for it to remain that way. This directive stands until such a time when the NUP is compliant and law-abiding.<sup>110</sup>

This framing helps to promote public support for the government even as it actively suppresses political dissent by appealing to all those who fear instability and disorder. The rhetoric works to frame the government as a protector of the peace, with the NUP as the party responsible for conflict and violence.

Such portrayals work to delegitimise NUP political activities by portraying them as threats to national security and stability, partly because of their militantly aggressive political activism. By employing strong language and framing the situation as a battle against violence and lawlessness, the government can justify its actions against the NUP while reinforcing its strong-man image. This not only targets the NUP directly but also sends a message to other opposition groups about the potential repercussions of any challenge to the established order. This all works to stifle democratic engagement and participation in Uganda.

It appears that this characterisation of the NUP is a response to the “credible threat” theory. This is built on the narrative that opposition political parties must have the capability to pose a perceived or real “credible threat” to the incumbent government for them to be taken seriously. In Uganda’s case, this was and remains urgent, considering that the populace believes that only a militant opposition or an opposition leader with a

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ica/uganda-police-ban-bobi-wine-mobilisation-activities-4368488 (accessed 25 October 2024).

109 K Kazibwe, “Police Bans Bobi Wine Mobilisation Tours”, *Nile Post*, 13 September 2023, <https://nilepost.co.ug/news/171404/police-bans-bobi-wine-mobilization-tours> (accessed 25 October 2024).

110 *Ibid.*

military history has the capacity to counter the NRM government. As Benjamin Acosta usefully explains: “In attempts to get their adversaries to ‘take them seriously’, organizations rely on violent tactics for coercive political strategies ... In this sense, the allure of gaining the ‘credible threat’ instigates oppositions to use violence.”<sup>111</sup>

There is something tragic about this militancy of opposition politics. It has undermined the credibility of the party as a potentially all-encompassing transition vehicle from the 40-year rule of the NRM. By adopting a militant posture, the party has probably alienated as many potential supporters as it attracted. Abrahms refers to this as

“the credibility paradox” – when oppositions employ violence, they create a new challenge as the very escalatory acts that add credibility to a [militant organisation’s] threat can subtract credibility from [its pledge to end the threatening act if the target makes institutional changes or grants concessions].<sup>112</sup>

Given the repression that NUP supporters face, it is understandable that the party adopted a more aggressive approach to political activism. This can be understood as a reaction to the systemic suppression of dissent in Uganda and the repeated failure to gain political traction through peaceful means. When traditional channels for activism – such as rallies, campaigns, and public discourse – are heavily monitored and curtailed, political parties such as the NUP are likely to feel compelled to escalate their tactics in order to draw attention to their cause and rally support from their base. The NUP’s argument is that diplomatic politicking with a highly militarised government and a former liberation movement has proven to afford little scope for advancing collective goals and the quest for political transformation.

The perception that a government is unwilling to engage constructively with opposition voices can incentivise militancy. As frustration grows among supporters who feel marginalised, the adoption of more aggressive strategies can appear to be the only viable option for effecting political change. A political culture which is characterised by aggression and retaliation can easily become self-perpetuating. If the NUP’s militants are met

111 B Acosta, “From Bombs to Ballots: When Militant Organisations Transition to Political Parties”, 76 (2014) *Journal of Politics*, pp 666–683.

112 M Abrahms, “The Credibility Paradox: Violence as a Double-Edged Sword in International Politics”, 57 (2013) *International Studies Quarterly*, pp 660–671.

with increased repression, this can start a cycle which may lead to further radicalisation of both the party and its supporters. Ultimately, this would entrench a political climate defined by divisiveness, making it increasingly challenging for Uganda to cultivate a robust and pluralistic multiparty system that works to the benefit of all citizens.

However, the use of militant tactics can be counterproductive. It may alienate moderate supporters and reinforce a government narrative that opposition parties are threats to national stability. This model for coping is inherently geared towards replicating a cancer that needs to be eradicated from Uganda's political culture. This is the cancer of a militant populace that can easily slide into violence should the social triggers of marginalisation and frustration be set off.

#### 4. Conclusion

Ugandan opposition parties face significant pressure from the NRM government's coercive measures. Whereas the existing scholarship has focused on their legal repression, this chapter has interrogated different survival strategies of opposition parties. It has demonstrated that these survival mechanisms against state-led militarisation impacts their evolution and has broader implications for the citizens of Uganda.

The examination of NUP's militancy as one strategy against a repressive government has illustrated how such an approach can escalate violence and frame the opposition as a threat to national peace and stability. Such a framing risks alienating the public, raising doubts about the party's suitability for governance, and undermines the opposition's democratisation aspirations. The NUP case also reveals how militant attitudes among the youth can extend beyond party control, contradicting values of non-violence and breeding further conflict. Ultimately, this strategy exposes the party and its supporters to heightened state repression from a government itself born of militancy and composed of hardened guerrilla war veterans.

The chapter has also illustrated how opposition parties can use diplomacy as another survival mechanism, but this must be balanced with the need to maintain political independence. The example of the DP highlights that this strategy risks losing legitimacy and can be perceived as engaging in "sell-out" diplomacy. Once subsumed by the dominant party, these opposition parties are no longer trusted to represent and fulfil the electorate's aspirations. Cooperation agreements like those of the DP, intended to navigate a hostile and militarised environment, can inadvertently lead to

co-option rather than true coalition, further entrenching dominant party politics and jeopardising the opposition party's existence.

As a result, this chapter recommends that opposition parties should rather cope with a hostile political climate by undertaking joint political and legal initiatives to challenge militarisation and champion discourse on the de-militarisation of the country. Examples of this include but are not limited to public interest litigation to challenge the appointment of military personnel to civilian positions, as such appointments are inimical to building a democratic country based on constitutional order and constitutionalism.

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