

Uganda: President for Life?

Author: [Fawzia Sheikh](#)

Museveni critics concerned by his apparent third-term aspirations.

Fears are growing in Uganda that this young country now at relative peace - but with a long history of chaos - is once again racing towards dictatorship and misrule.

Non-governmental organisations, women's groups, lawyers and many others have voiced concern about the apparent unwillingness of Yoweri Museveni, voted president in 1996, to abandon power gracefully in time for next year's elections, when he is due to step down.

Museveni insists he remains committed to democracy - the country saw a return in July to multi-party politics, banned in the 1980s - however opponents aren't convinced.

They cite recent crackdowns, including the closure of the independent KFM Radio, as proof that Museveni is cementing his position ahead of the elections, contrary to the country's constitution that allows only two presidential terms.

The government shut down KFM and charged journalist Andrew Mwenda with sedition when he blamed government incompetence for the accident that killed John Garang, the Sudanese vice-president and former guerrilla leader of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement. Garang died in August following a visit to Kampala, when the Ugandan helicopter he was returning in crashed.

Demonstrators carrying placards critical of the president, reading "Uganda is destined for doom if Museveni is allowed to stand again", have also been arrested in Kampala.

Critics say there is a danger that Museveni regards himself as "President for Life", leading opposition deputy Odonga Otto to warn Museveni in parliament, "You are going to open doors for the military option of getting to State House."

Museveni launched his presidency with noble intentions to bring in democracy and a constitutional system of checks and balances. He waged war for five years from the bush against those he deemed corrupt, absolutist leaders like the late Idi Amin and former president Milton Obote.

He assumed political control in 1986 by storming the capital with the National Resistance Army, a band of rebels from western Uganda. "He used to say he had come in to make a difference, to bring in sanity to democracy in the country," said John Mary Odoy, a programme officer with the Democracy Monitoring Group in Kampala.

And to a great extent he did. He earned praise from critics and supporters alike for reshaping Uganda into one of the most stable African states. He encouraged a free press, introduced affirmative action for women, created a new constitution, proactively fought HIV/AIDS and invited back business-savvy Asians expelled during Amin's turbulent reign.

Museveni's seeming reluctance now to give up the top office stems partly from a history of being an intensive hands-on leader, said professor Oloka Onyango, director of the Human Rights and Peace Centre

at Makerere University in Kampala.

"What has been created over time is this structure in which even the people themselves around Museveni believe that nothing is possible without him," said Onyango. "Every minor dispute goes through him as if he doesn't have a cabinet."

Onyango has argued that amending the two- presidential term limit in the constitution should be equated with treason.

Other Museveni critics insist his leadership has not been perfect and agree his reign should not be extended.

One of the worst blemishes on his political record is the continuing war in northern Uganda where the rebel group the Lord's Resistance Army has for two decades murdered, raped and abducted villagers and forced more than 1.6 million to live in squalid camps for displaced people.

Another accusation levelled against him is a penchant to get rid of dissident voices.

"Some who try to...show that they are capable of perhaps taking over when he leaves power....are sort of shut down," said Odoy. "You're made to keep quiet."

Cabinet ministers shown the door have included Miria Matembe, former minister of ethics and integrity, and Eriya Kategaya, a onetime deputy premier and minister of internal affairs.

Now a lawyer in Kampala, Kategaya was sacked in 2003, a few days after publicly opposing the idea of Museveni standing for a third term.

Odoy's Democracy Monitoring Group worries that Museveni's reluctance to step down risks stirring agitation among academics, politicians capable of replacing him and those who believe his presidency has hurt them. Odoy is particularly concerned about the potential for armed resistance against the leader.

At the same time, Onyango dismisses predictions of war if Museveni leaves next year.

"If there is to be chaos, it will be chaos that's generated by Museveni himself," he said. "Otherwise if Museveni were to say, 'Look, my time is up, it's time for me to go', the army would certainly fall in line."

Fawzia Sheikh is a regular IWPR contributor.

Location: Africa

Focus: ICC - International Criminal Court

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/uganda-president-life>