UGANDA: MUSEVENI’S TRIUMPH AND WEAKNESS

Angelo Izama

Angelo Izama has been a Knight Fellow at Stanford University and a Reagan-Fascell Democracy Fellow at the National Endowment for Democracy. A journalist with the Kampala Daily Monitor for more than ten years, he writes frequently on governance in Uganda as well as regional security in Central Africa.

On 18 February 2011, Ugandans went to the polls to choose first a president and the 350 directly elected members of their country’s unicameral 375-seat Parliament. As expected, 25-year incumbent Yoweri Museveni of the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) effectively used a flood of state resources to float himself into yet another term as president. He improved on his 2006 showing of 59 percent (his lowest ever) by winning 68 percent of the vote. His associate-turned-opponent Kizza Besigye of the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) was once again unsuccessful, managing to pick up only slightly more than a quarter of the vote, down from the 37 percent that he had won in 2006. The NRM did similarly well in the parliamentary races, winning a commanding majority of 250 seats.

The back story to the elections features a dramatic rise in political contention inside the NRM at the parliamentary and local levels, and also suggests that Museveni—worried by the “Arab Uprising” as well as recent events in Côte d’Ivoire and closer at hand in Kenya—had been trying to feel his way toward a somewhat more tolerant and competition-friendly form of authoritarianism.

The sequel to the elections, however, suggests how many miles Uganda still has to travel on the road toward democracy. In April, peaceful “walk to work” protests broke out over surging fuel prices. Having tapped state resources so freely to guarantee election wins for Museveni and the NRM, the government had been caught flat-footed, without enough money on hand to augment national gasoline reserves or take other steps to ameliorate the public’s distress—a distress that citizens
all over Uganda could clearly trace to Museveni’s misgovernance. It was a field day for Besigye and the opposition, and a massive embarrassment for the regime, which responded brutally. As of this writing in mid-May 2011, ten people have been killed. On April 28, Besigye was arrested so violently that he had to be evacuated to a hospital in Nairobi, Kenya. At least a dozen of his supporters and aides are languishing in prison. Meanwhile, riots and urban protests continue with no end in sight, as the wide gap between core political institutions and the key institutions of governance remains. The cities of this rapidly urbanizing society are restive places where criminal violence is alarmingly common in ordinary times, with political violence ready to flare as well should a precipitating event (such as a fuel-price spike) be added to the already-volatile mix.

To the casual observer, Uganda in 2011 might seem an unlikely candidate to become a strife-torn basket case. Since Museveni came to power in 1986 as the commander of a victorious insurgency, the country has compiled an impressive economic record. World Bank figures show that growth averaged 6.7 percent a year (more than twice the regional average) from Museveni’s first year as president in 1986 all the way through 2008. And discoveries made just a few years ago and now being exploited indicate that Ugandans live atop impressively large oil supplies (which are of no help with the current fuel crisis, alas—Uganda lacks a refinery and must import all its gasoline).

Along with economic growth, Uganda under Museveni was once known for promising political strides. The 1995 Constitution guarantees individual rights, separation of powers, and other mainstays of effective democracy. Yet there was a glaring exception: Museveni insisted on “no-party” (effectively one-party) rule, claiming that only a system where candidates ran solely on individual merit could preclude the return of dangerous political divisions rooted in ethnic differences.

Citing the individual-merit principle, Museveni’s own former physician Kizza Besigye tried to run for president in 2001. Museveni defeated him 69 to 28 percent in a campaign replete with open violence and intimidation, and Besigye fled into exile after the vote. Anxious to deflect attention away from his move to eliminate the constitutional limit on presidential terms, Museveni restored multipartism before the 2006 election. Braving another round of heavy-handed regime tactics, Besigye returned to oppose Museveni once again, and won 37 percent while holding Museveni to 59 percent.

The president’s 2011 reversal of his slide in vote share despite expectations of a closer result requires explanation, especially given that the 2011 contest was more peaceful than those of 2006 and 2001. Even though the election again failed to feature a level playing field, the manner in which Museveni won demonstrates both the shrewdness and the insecurity of a regime determined to stay in power at any cost.
Early in the run-up to the 2011 election, it seemed that Museveni would face a steep challenge. The 2006 election had been dramatic and tightly contested. The common wisdom was that the trend of declining support for the incumbent, battered by public dismay over corruption and poor governance, would continue in 2011, leading to a runoff or even an opposition victory.

With ample time to prepare, Besigye planned a grassroots-mobilization strategy that he claimed would result in an even stronger opposition showing in 2011. He remained undaunted even after the breakup of the loose coalition that his own FDC had formed with the Democratic Party and the Uganda People’s Congress in order to make a common appeal for a level electoral playing field.

Some of Besigye’s confidence came from the corruption scandal that engulfed Museveni in late 2009. Widely publicized parliamentary hearings tied the president and his close associates to misappropriations of public funds in connection with Uganda’s role as host of the 2007 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. In one instance, Museveni was shown to have approved the release of a never-to-be-seen-again US$1.3 million for a hotel that never opened. His critics in Parliament were led by one-time NRM legislators who had lost their primaries in 2005 but secured seats by running as independents in the 2006 general election. Museveni’s attempts to restrain them were futile, and some in senior NRM ranks began to fear the prospect of fatal splits in districts long considered strongholds by the party’s old guard.

Museveni also ran into trouble trying to exert more central-government authority over the southern kingdom of Buganda, the country’s largest traditional authority and an important cultural institution to the nearly 17 percent of Ugandans who are ethnic Baganda. In September 2009, rioting in Kampala left more than sixty dead—some killed by soldiers and police—after Museveni barred Buganda’s hereditary leader from visiting a disputed town outside Kampala. In March 2010, tensions again rose when a fire destroyed the Kasubi Tombs, a Buganda historical site in Kampala. Amid suspicions that the government had started the blaze, Museveni showed up unannounced to inspect the damage. Jeers and rocks were hurled at his bodyguards, who then (true to form) overreacted by killing several people. The Baganda had once been part of Museveni’s base. If he had lost them, observers wondered, how could he win in 2011?

**Turning the Tide**

With momentum apparently building against him, how did Museveni manage to win his highest vote share since 1996? And why did the NRM’s parliamentary majority increase from 205 to 263 seats? A combination of clever political strategizing and misused state resources is
the answer, which in turn offers us clues about the future of Museveni’s regime and the approaches that incumbents in other electoral autocracies may seek to emulate.

Museveni opened the 2011 campaign by pragmatically distancing himself from all lower-level contests, including parliamentary as well as local races. Breaking with custom, he abstained from publicly endorsing any candidates in the fraud- and violence-marred NRM primaries. A number of powerful NRM incumbents, including a quarter of sitting ministers, lost and ended up running as pro-Museveni independents. The president dealt with public frustration over corruption by trying to deflect blame for poor government performance onto local officials. Never did he acknowledge that most local leaders (not a few of whom are from the NRM) have little control over the funds for health and education that made up the bulk of what was being siphoned away by corrupt practices.

Museveni’s criticism of local leaders did not stop him from offering many of them money and promises of future favors in return for their help in mobilizing voters. He is well-known for handing brown envelopes full of cash to local leaders and supporters, or for funneling hefty
“travel reimbursements” to local officials summoned to presidential audiences in Kampala.

Another major tactic was to stress Museveni’s achievement in bringing stability to Uganda after decades of strife. “Stability” and “prosperity” were emblazoned all over NRM campaign materials. The subtext was Museveni’s close relationship with the army and the suggestion that only he could keep it from returning to its ignominious practice of terrorizing civilians. Ignoring rules that bar serving officers from political engagement, the army’s top general and other senior commanders made high-profile statements about the elections. In sum, the picture painted was meant to portray Museveni as the de facto father of the army, and to hint that the military would refuse to accept anyone else as president. The guarantor-of-security appeal received reinforcement on 11 July 2010, when Somali terrorists from the al-Shabab insurgent group carried out suicide-bomb attacks in Kampala, killing 74. If they packed Museveni off into retirement, Ugandans wondered, what threats might they have to face without the strongman’s firm hand on the helm?

Clever campaign strategies notwithstanding, Museveni won mostly because he threw overwhelming state resources into his campaign. A few days after the 2011 election, Daniel Kalinaki, current managing editor of the Daily Monitor, observed that the key lesson Museveni seemed to have learned and applied from past campaigns was that “bribes, unlike bullets, leave no tell-tale marks.” Across the country, the NRM purchased millions of dollars’ worth of available commercial advertising space and blanketed public places with posters.

Government buildings, airports, public parks, and traffic roundabouts were all covered exclusively with NRM materials, many of them mentioning Museveni by name. A chartered airplane and helicopter flew over Kampala blaring Museveni’s campaign songs and scattering leaflets. Civil society watchdogs such as DemGroup, an alliance of local NGOs supported by international donors, used text-messaging to gather numerous reports of cash handouts by Museveni campaign operatives.

The Museveni campaign’s looting of the national budget made the 2011 balloting the most expensive single event in Uganda’s postindependence history. Within weeks of the January 2011 passage of a supplemental budget of US$260 million (the original budget of $3.2 billion was already nearly 20 percent of GDP), Finance Minister Syda Bbumba declared that the government was nearly out of money just seven months into the fiscal year. It emerged that $1.3 billion, or more than a third of the entire budget, had been spent in January alone. The government denied that money had been channeled into the election campaign, but no accounting for the spending was made.

As if raiding the official budget was not enough, the executive branch also made campaign-season withdrawals totaling $740 million in off-budget government funds from the Bank of Uganda. Almost a month
later, Museveni personally asked ruling-party MPs to sign off on the expenditures, which under the law Parliament was supposed to approve in advance. The president reportedly told them (and has since said public-ly) that the money—roughly equaling combined annual spending on health and infrastructure—had gone to pay for fighter jets and other unspecified pieces of military hardware, a classi-fied category of purchases convenient-ly exempt from line-item scrutiny by Parliament.7 Museveni’s government has a history of making dubious arms buys with overtones of corruption, the most notorious being a 1998 deal in-volving four Ukrainian-made helicopters that never became fit to fly.8

Not surprisingly given Museveni’s military background and ties, a heavy security presence was part of election day and the days beyond. Citing terror threats, heavily armed military units deployed in Kampala and other cities, remaining for more than a week after the voting ended. Although the al-Shabab bombings show that the terrorism danger is real, it is likely that the government was also thinking of events in North Africa when it decided to put troops on the street. Museveni and other NRM leaders promised to deal harshly with any attempts at mass protests like those that had just succeeded in top-pling the longtime authoritarian rulers of Tunisia and Egypt. The heavy military presence may be a major reason for 2011’s low voter turnout, which was down nine points from the 2006 figure of 69 percent.

As further insurance against mass protests, Museveni and his gov-ernment took steps to prevent civil society and the opposition from gathering credible evidence of cheating. Thinking of Kenya’s descent into strife after its 2007 presidential balloting, and also of events in Zimbabwe and Côte d’Ivoire, Museveni was aware of the international pressure and isolation that he might face if the election’s integrity were to become a subject of loud public complaint. Significantly, Kizza Be-sigye declared in advance that he would not go to court as he had after his losses in 2001 and 2006. On both those occasions, the courts had held that the elections had failed to meet the standards of a free and fair poll, though Besigye was unable to convince the judges to overturn the results or order a fresh balloting. It was not unreasonable for the gov-ernment to expect that some form of civic agitation (or worse) was the opposition’s intention.

The day before the 2011 election, the government ordered telecommunications companies to block text messages containing any words on a list that included “Cairo,” “Mubarak,” and “people power.”
officers surrounded the opposition coalition’s unofficial tally center the
day after the election, and the text-messaging system that the opposition
was using to collect results from individual polling stations went offline.
Besiigye would eventually claim, based on the tallying that Inter-Party
Cooperation (an opposition umbrella group) was able to complete be-
fore its center shut down, that he received at least 47 percent of the vote.
At the time of this writing in May 2011, the opposition is pursuing a
lawsuit against the companies that it contracted to set up the electronic
reporting and tallying system.10

Beginnings of a Softer Approach

Although troop deployments and blocked messages recall the heavy-
handed tactics that the NRM had favored in elections past, the “big
picture” of the 2011 balloting revealed a regime tentatively trying to
moderate its usual emphasis on naked intimidation with populist appeals
and softer forms of manipulation such as bribery. Changes in political
incentives both internally and internationally help explain this decision:
Museveni realized that an electoral victory relatively free of blatant
fraud and violence would pay significant dividends.

On the other side, the steady presence of opposition candidates was
new and significant. In 2006, Besigye’s sudden return from South Af-
rican exile, followed by his constant arrests and court appearances, cre-
ated much drama and many headlines that not only galvanized his sup-
porters but also invited more international attention and opportunities
for criticism from Uganda’s major development partners. The U.S. Con-
gress, for instance, acted on the lessons of 2006 by requiring Secretary
of State Hillary Clinton to provide updates on the state of competition
in Uganda leading up to the 2011 vote. The presence in the presidential
race of former UN official Olara Otunnu also restrained the regime. He
and others publicly warned that Museveni could face invalidation of the
election and an international tribunal should violence occur.

An additional factor urging moderation was Uganda’s newfound sta-
tus as an oil producer. Although remaining in power was crucial to the
incumbents’ desire to stay in control of the large reserves discovered in
2006 and 2007 in and near Lake Albert in the Great Rift Valley, a fraud-
ulent or otherwise troubled-seeming election would frighten investors.
Museveni kept a petrochemical deal worth $2.9 billion on ice pending
the vote. He campaigned in the impoverished yet oil-endowed west of
the country by accusing Besigye of wanting the presidency as a vehicle
for stealing the new wealth that will flow from what may be more than
1.5 billion barrels’ worth of exploitable reserves.

In the run-up to the 2011 vote, Museveni allowed Besigye and other
opposition candidates to campaign more freely, and incidents of repres-
sion were much scarcer. Under these more placid circumstances, the
public seemed less taken with Besigye, though he and other opposition candidates still managed to draw sizeable crowds throughout the campaign despite the refusal of state-run radio stations to broadcast news of their itineraries.

Museveni’s more tolerant approach to the opposition allowed its lack of organization to come to the fore. This reinforced the president’s arguments that his foes had no agenda other than unseating him, and were unprepared to lead. Museveni delighted in showcasing high-profile opposition defectors, many of whom were believed to have made deals with the NRM beforehand.

Among the most startling aspects of the 2011 results was the rise of NRM support in northern Uganda. Long an opposition bastion, the North shifted toward the NRM with a force that heavily outweighed the slight increase in opposition support seen in the traditional NRM strongholds of the West. The NRM’s spending spree was likely a factor, but so were the peace and economic growth that returned to northern Uganda after the expulsion of the cult-like insurgent group known as the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA).

For nearly twenty years, the LRA had terrorized northern Uganda. At first, the LRA battled the government, but eventually it turned mainly to preying on the civilians for whom it claimed to be fighting. The government relocated nearly two-million people—officially for their own protection, but also in order to deprive the LRA of recruits and abductees—to often hideously neglected camps for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). In 2005, the Ugandan military succeeded in forcing the LRA out of Uganda. Although the group remains operational in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Central African Republic, and parts of southern Sudan, its capacity to harm civilian populations within Uganda has ceased. With the signing of a North-South peace accord in Sudan the same year, the neighborhood became more stable. Ugandan agricultural exports began flowing north across the border, and IDPs began leaving the misery of the camps in search of a better life.

Gulu, the town at the center of the LRA conflict, is now one of the fastest growing cities in Uganda. With the conflict’s end and the exit of the relief organizations and other NGOs that had become mainstays of the northern economy, energies turned toward small-scale (most agricultural) trade while significant numbers of young people sought work in nearby towns or Kampala. In 2009, Sudan was leading all other neighbors as a buyer of Ugandan goods ($184 million that year), with a number of other nearby countries not far behind. Northern Uganda was the key to much of this trade, which in turn helped to fuel the war-torn region’s recovery.

During the LRA conflict, northern Uganda had been the political opposition’s most active stronghold. Although Besigye was a southerner and a former ally of Museveni (another southerner), the opposition stan-
dard-bearer benefited in both 2001 and 2006 from a large northern protest vote. The North had long nursed grievances against the South and West, and believed that Museveni was deliberately ignoring the region and allowing the LRA crisis to fester. By being the man most likely to unseat Museveni, Besigye became the North’s favorite son.

While Besigye and the opposition took northern support for granted, the NRM went on a charm offensive, not only highlighting new economic growth, but channeling government projects and funds to the region. Lira, another town once crippled by the LRA conflict, received new roads and a new hospital that rivals the best public hospital in Kampala.

Thus the FDC now finds itself with just a few northern seats in Parliament while the NRM holds the lion’s share—a result that would have been unthinkable just a few years ago. Such are the wages of neglect and overconfidence, though to be fair to the FDC and the other opposition parties, there was no way for them to match the regime’s tapping of state resources. Even if the opposition had recognized and moved to counteract the threat, the NRM surge might have come anyway.

**The Tumultuous Internal Situation**

In addition to the changes on the presidential level, one of the big stories of 2011 was the large turnover of parliamentary seats within the victorious NRM. The NRM primaries, as mentioned, were high-turnout, fiercely competitive contests. Losing incumbents in many cases refused to take the primary results as dispositive, and insisted on running in the general election as independents. The high turnover that was the upshot testifies both to the benefits associated with holding office as a member of the ruling party and to the tactics that Museveni uses to manage threats as well as allies.

One of the fiercest rivalries over the last two election cycles has developed in Sembabule District, a semi-arid patch of countryside in south-central Uganda that is home to more cows than people. It is a ruling-party bastion and a microcosm of the shifting trends within the NRM. The area’s “big man” is MP Sam Kutesa. He is Uganda’s foreign minister, the president’s brother-in-law, and reputedly the country’s richest person. His main rival for power locally is Theodore Ssekikubo, a younger, reformist MP who represents one of the district’s two counties (Kutesa represents the other) and who in the last Parliament came to symbolize the so-called NRM rebels, a coalition of independents and NRM mavericks that forms an “opposition” outside the official opposition parties.

During the last Parliament, much of the heat that the NRM majority found itself absorbing over issues such as corruption, election reform, and the faulty provision of public services came from these rebels. Mu-
seveni’s dominance may have been beyond challenge, but that of the NRM was not. In fact, its internal organization has become thin. And despite the return of multiparty competition, the NRM’s institutions have remained weak since Museveni began using cabinet positions and other state offices (not party posts) as key instruments for projecting his influence and maintaining support.

Between 1986 and 1996, the NRM was highly organized and functionally intact. As Museveni’s personal ambitions became a contested issue within the party, however, splits grew. Before becoming a public opponent of the president in 2001, Besigye was the leader of a group of NRM dissidents who called for reform from within. In 2005, Museveni fired three major cabinet members—one of them an old and close associate—who had become known for privately opposing the president’s unchecked power, his manipulation of Parliament to lift term limits, and his rumored ultimate goal, the grooming of his son Muhoozi Kainerugaba for the presidency.

The cabinet dismissals were a sign that Museveni was losing legitimacy within the NRM. Perhaps not coincidentally, his reliance on the official structures of the state was growing fast. The Office of the President and State House (the official presidential residence) became the primary engines of government. Funding for them outstripped spending on agriculture and competed with monies expended on defense, education, and health. During the ban on multipartyism, the distinction between the NRM and the state seemed to matter little. Once multipartyism returned, however, the NRM reemerged as the regime’s key vehicle for claiming and projecting democratic legitimacy.

Efforts to put the party in order began in 2005 and gathered more intensity after Museveni’s 2006 reelection (his narrowest). Yet the years of unbridled personal ambition and exiting colleagues had taken their toll. Museveni’s scheme to end term limits destroyed any pretense that the political enterprise was about anything but him. In 2005, the initial NRM primaries produced the first “NRM independents”—primary losers who refused to accept what they regarded as manipulated results, and so carried on to run in the general elections. These included newcomers such as Ssekikubo, whose battle against Sam Kutesa in Sembabule epitomized the new reality of competition within the NRM.

In late 2010 and early 2011, the general-election contest in Sembabule became one of the most contentious in the country—and only NRM candidates were running. Museveni’s efforts to rein in the rival camps failed miserably as Kutesa and Ssekikubo each unsuccessfully backed the other’s opponent amid a climate of bitterness and even violence. The new Parliament now has 38 NRM “independents,” a number that makes them the equal of the single largest opposition-party delegation, the FDC’s. As harsh critics still nominally within the NRM but unafraid
to oppose the administration publicly, they have been and will continue to be a headache for Museveni.

It may surprise many to learn that more Ugandans voted in the NRM’s most recent primaries and other intraparty elections than took part in the 2011 general elections, and by a wide margin. The NRM reports that 6.1 million people cast ballots in its primaries and internal races. The participation figure for the presidential race in which Museveni defeated Besigye, by contrast, was only 5.25 million.

These intra-NRM contests have been growing more competitive as well. From 2005 to 2010, the number of candidates more than doubled to 1,580. Some observers think that the NRM’s often-intense primary campaigns gave the ruling party an edge in voter mobilization, as did such curtain-raiser events as two large party conferences held in Kampala. Other commentators blame the primaries for record-low general-election turnout, however. By the time January 2011 rolled around, voters felt that they had already voted or had their expectations met at the local level, where it mattered. According to Simon Osborn of the Democracy Monitoring Group, somewhere between 3.7 and 4.1 million adults took part in NRM primaries. The comparable figure for opposition primaries was around a million.

In both 2006 and 2011, where opposition candidates won they tended to do so by high margins owing to unique advantages in specific constituencies. The 2011 races, however, revealed a trend toward much narrower (if still wide) winning margins, especially for FDC candidates. The average margin of victory for a successful FDC parliamentary candidate in 2006 was 30.4 percent; five years later, it had halved to 15.2 percent. This appears to be an amplified version of a larger trend, since the average margin for winning candidates from all parties fell from 27 percent to 22.5 percent across the two election cycles.

The tide of rising competition was seen in the candidate-crowded NRM primaries as well, where a quarter of Museveni’s cabinet ministers lost their seats. (Not all won them back in the general election, either.) In 2006, each directly elected NRM seat had been contested by an average of 3.7 candidates. In 2011, that figure was 5.1, while the average for the FDC was an even higher 5.7 candidates.

In late 2010 and early 2011, Museveni responded to the possibility of an electoral defeat with recklessly state-financed populism as well as the shrewd exploitation of opportunities presented by recent changes in Ugandan society such as the end of the insurgency in the North and the discovery of oil in the West. The tactics used may well resonate with other competitive authoritarian regimes when and if they feel themselves pressed.

As we have seen, a side-effect of Museveni’s complex maneuverings has been the intensification of electoral competition—including competition within his ruling party. This development may hold as-yet-unseen
opportunities for tipping the balance of emphasis within the Ugandan version of “competitive authoritarianism” away from the noun in that phrase and toward the adjective that precedes it. Uganda is not yet a case of transition to democracy. Yet rising contention within the ruling party may pave the way for liberalizing measures, particularly if the current elite comes to feel a high cost from applications of outright repression such as the police violence of April 2011.

Museveni faces no term limits, and appears in good health at age 68. There is an age limit of 75 at time of election on candidates for the presidency, but that can be overturned just as term limits were, or the current term might be extended, as one NRM legislator has already suggested. His continued tenure does not come cheap, however. The Parliament that he expanded requires constant feeding, and the cost of moving the democratic goal posts has been rising. In 2005, lifting term limits cost 5 million Ugandan shillings. Five years later, inducing MPs to support the president took 20 million, and that is not even counting informal expenditures. Members of Parliament are now finding themselves forced to spend much more on their own reelections, meaning that the bill for the regime’s efforts to keep itself in office has gone sharply up.

Should Museveni decide to introduce a succession plan, it is bound to start with internal cabinet arrangements. This would mean an increase of tensions within the NRM inner circle. A casting aside of the old guard would most likely signal that the goal is to make Muhoozi Kainerugaba heir to his father’s office. Kainerugaba is currently the commander of the Special Forces Group, the elite force that forms the backbone of the Ugandan military and controls most of its heavy weapons (including aircraft and artillery) as well as its intelligence capabilities. He holds the rank of colonel and has quietly become the regime’s top securocrat, with responsibility for his father’s safety as well as key installations such as the oil facilities. He recently wrote a treatise on his father’s career as a military commander in the 1981–86 Bush War, which some regime-watchers take as a sign that he is preparing to assume a higher public profile. His mother, First Lady Janet Kataha Museveni, a two-term MP with her own following and significant influence in government and business, is also sometimes mentioned as a possible successor to the presidency.

The Long Shadow of Tahrir Square

The 2011 polls happened as popular uprisings were toppling the Ben Ali and Mubarak regimes in Tunisia and Egypt (in the latter case just months after an election), and as a civil war was raging in Libya. In Côte d’Ivoire, an incumbent was refusing to give way after an election that the opposition and the international community insisted he had lost,
with fighting the result. The situation seemed akin to those that had at other times engulfed Kenya and Zimbabwe and checked their democratic momentum. In Africa, incumbents who fail to win outright are still tempted to create stalemates that end in fragile power-sharing arrangements propped up by external actors who fear that change via crisis will prove too costly.

This is the international community’s favorite response to transitional pressures in sub-Saharan Africa. The idea appears to be that the state, staring crisis and collapse in the face, must be saved. The long-range intent may be to rescue the state for the sake of democracy (it is hard to democratize chaos), but the short-term effect is that the logic of stability rules and trumps all other considerations.

This is not to scant the value of stability. Should people-power coups like those that are shaking the Middle East and North Africa spread to the rest of Africa, we may well find ourselves forced to ponder the cost of the civil wars, human-rights abuses, and economic catastrophes that are the all-too-likely bad cousins of change-by-crisis. What are the limits of the winner-takes-all model of democracy, especially in countries riven by grave preexisting political cleavages? Will “governments of national unity” have a normative home in the history of democratization, especially democratization through crisis? Africa is today a place where elections may be the single most frequent precipitator of instability, but where national and international legitimacy cannot be had without them, even when a regime is authoritarian at its core.

Museveni approached the 2011 elections mindful of recent trends and directed his regime’s activities accordingly. Relative restraint was dictated by the need to avoid international-pariah status, and extreme populism (complete with wild, unaccountable spending) became the preferred tool in place of repression. A weak opposition playing by an old rulebook was an unwitting help.

Like many longtime incumbents, the president embraces democracy only when it works for him. This sadly is the overarching reality of his regime. He is in effect a closet autocrat. As we have seen from other African cases, where democracy is the principal agent of
Angelo Izama

Legitimization it imposes major systemic stresses on incumbents and the countries they lead. In January 2011, Museveni broke the bank in hell-for-leather pursuit of reelection, and won. By April, the consequences of his fiscally reckless tactics were coming back to haunt him in the form of major protests over conditions that his cash-strapped government was powerless to address, but it would be unwise to think that no future African authoritarians will replicate his gamble.

As his security forces lash out viciously against unarmed marchers, Museveni now seems strangely uncomfortable with his latest electoral victory, and is behaving as if he stole the vote. For him and others like him, elections are simply a vehicle to affirm their power and not part of a coherent repertoire of democratic institutions that shape not only how power is gained, but how it is wielded, especially against challenges to the leader’s authority. The repeated assaults and arrests to which the regime has subjected Kizza Besigye reveal this in stark terms: Museveni despises his former ally for the support that he has garnered by focusing on issues of misgovernance, wants to make an example of him, and wants to show him who is boss. Surprised at the tactical level by larger and louder protests than it had expected, the regime has responded in its default manner, with a disproportionate use of force. The president and his men can plan formal events like state-resourced election campaigns, but when caught unawares they show brittleness and overreact. Perhaps they are feeling real panic about the events in North Africa and the Middle East.

Museveni has publicly mentioned both Libya and Côte d’Ivoire. His government is treating the fuel protests as treason and fears that they are attempts to overthrow the regime. The government has not only used police brutality against protestors and opposition leaders, but has also tried to block social media and news coverage, and has placed heavy troop deployments in towns where the protests are coordinated. In short, the regime is using the old and time-tested tools of street-level repression with which its cadres remain most familiar, experiments with softer methods notwithstanding.

Yet the protestors seem to be setting the agenda, and it is doubtful that things will ever really be the same again. This is the legacy, above all, of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolts. To the question of what elections themselves should mean in terms of accountability, they have added a whole new type of pressure that truncheons, water cannons, and even real bullets cannot seem to stop. If Hosni Mubarak was not safe, can Yoweri Museveni be? The answer is no.

NOTES


4. Interview with author, Kampala, 22 February 2011.


isterial Meeting in Vilnius, Lithuania, culminating a week of meetings and forums held by civil society representatives from around the world.

Heads of state, foreign ministers, high-level diplomats, and civil society activists attended the Ministerial Meeting, at which the Community of Democracies adopted the Vilnius Declaration.

The declaration emphasizes the Community’s commitment to strengthen its activities and endorses the Democracy Partnership Challenge, a new initiative to help other countries make the transition to democracy. For more information and to read the Vilnius Declaration, please see: www.ccd21.org/activities/vilnius_ministerial.html.

Corrections

In “The Freedom House Survey for 2010: Democracy Under Duress,” which appeared in the April 2011 issue of the Journal, the table on pp. 22–23 misclassified several countries. The Maldives, the Philippines, Tanzania, Timor-Leste, and Tonga should have been marked as electoral democracies, and Sri Lanka should not have been. In addition, Yemen should have been listed as Not Free. The editors regret these errors.

The article “Uganda: Museveni’s Triumph and Weakness” by Angelo Izama in the July 2011 Journal issue should have listed Michael Wilkerson as a coauthor. The editors regret the omission.

NED’s International Forum

On June 7, the Forum, together with the Korea Institute for National Unification, organized a conference on “Democracy Assistance for North Korea.” Panelists focused on possible scenarios of regime transition, the transition experiences of other countries, and recommendations for the international community. Participants included Francis Fukuyama of Stanford University; Stephan Haggard of the University of California–San Diego; Ho Yeol Yoo of Korea University; and Jae Jean Suh, president of the Korea Institute for National Unification.

On July 27, the Forum organized a roundtable discussion on the situation in Libya. The meeting brought together analysts and practitioners specializing in Libyan affairs and leading experts on the challenges of post-conflict societies, democratic transitions, and electoral and constitutional design in order to identify some possible paths toward the emergence of a democratic Libya.

The Forum hosted a luncheon meeting on June 23 featuring Reagan-Fascell Democracy Fellow Anne-Stella Fomumbod, founder and chief executive officer of Interfaith Vision Foundation, a Cameroonian NGO that promotes human rights and democracy. She gave a presentation entitled “From the Grassroots to the Nation: Promoting Women’s Rights and Political Participation in Cameroon.” Michelle Bekkering, director of the Women’s Democracy Network at the International Republican Institute, commented.