

Family and Clan as Pressure Systems of Accountability:

Responding to Brutality against Civilians During Uganda's COVID-19 Response

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The central focus of this essay is the brutality orchestrated by state armed security personnel against the civilian population in Uganda that accompanied both the ongoing COVID-19 crisis and its attempted suppression, and recent political campaigns. Seemingly radical grassroots ideas are proposed to prevent further escalation of violence and strained relations between the military or security personnel and the communities. This essay explores two ideas. Firstly, holding community meetings with family members or clan of the brutal military personnel. This is intended to make them persuade their kin to be humane or more responsive to claims made in the public interest. Secondly, communities or districts rejecting transfers or appointments of brutal military personnel from a district which suffered brutality under their command to a new one. Importantly, the article suggests that while above two ideas may be "radical" according to Eurocentric governance theories or models, this labelling is less justified from other vantage points.

The presidential and parliamentary elections in Uganda follow a five-year cycle and the most recent

one was held on 14th January 2021. Uganda has experienced sharp political tensions involving removal of presidential term limit and age limit of 75 in 2005 and 2017 respectively. This year's election period coincided with the COVID-19 outbreak. This election is particularly very important to Ugandans given the fact that 76-year-old President Museveni and his National Resistance Movement (NRM) party had ruled for 35 years amidst the growing concern over the rising inequality. According to the Electoral Commission, President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni won the poll by 58.64% and his closest opposition challenger Robert Kyagulanyi aka Bobi Wine received 34.83% of the vote¹. However, Bobi Wine filed a petition in court against President Museveni's victory claiming that the poll was rigged. "Any election Museveni participates in can never be a peaceful election, can never be a free and fair election", claimed Medard Sseggon, Bobi Wine's

¹ Ajuna, D. (2020) Museveni wins election with 58.6%. Daily Monitor

lawyer.² President Museveni has often been accused of using violence against political rivals and as a major tool to maintain rigid control over Uganda, an allegation he denies.

Human Rights Watch observes that the recent elections were characterized by widespread violence and human rights abuses such as killings by security forces, arrests and beatings of opposition supporters and journalists, disruption of opposition rallies, and a nationwide internet blackout.³

COVID'S ROLE IN ESCALATING ELECTION VIOLENCE

Much as COVID-19 is a public health matter, political decisions continue to play an important role in policies and guidelines aimed at preventing its spread.

widely regarded as historic opposition strongholds.⁵ The security forces and government were accused of selectively enforcing the electoral guidelines on COVID-19 prevention in favour of the ruling NRM party. Opposition politicians claim that the state continues to use COVID-19 prevention as a pretense to gain political capital by violently cracking down on them and their supporters⁶.

Early in the pandemic, the government introduced various preventative measures to slow the spread of the virus, including social distancing, use of sanitizers, travel restrictions, quarantine, curfews, and ultimately a full lockdown. These were often enforced in a draconian manner by armed forces who have a dark history of violence against civilians. The forces are composed of often ill-trained Local Defense Units, police, and the

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Accordingly, the pandemic found its name being invoked in complex political situations, and not just in Uganda. One commentator in the Daily Monitor newspaper, Kaushik Basu argues that around the world, many autocratic regimes used the "pandemic as a pretext to arrest opponents and silence dissent"⁴.

The Electoral Commission issued guidelines to be followed during the political campaigns to "prevent further spread of the virus." Political rallies were to be limited to a maximum of 200 people and prohibitions limited processions to and from the campaign venues. The electoral body also suspended political campaigns in major cities and towns they considered as hotspots for COVID-19, amidst claims that these urban areas were

army. It is upsetting if not surprising that by the time the country registered its 1st COVID-19 death, a dozen people had lost their lives at the hands of the brutal armed forces⁷.

5 The Observer newspaper reports the suspension of campaigns in key urban areas by the Electoral Commission (EC), but a report in Daily Monitor claims that the COVID-19 data contradicts Electoral Commission campaign freeze claims. Orena, A. (2020) EC now suspends campaigns in Kampala, Wakiso over COVID-19. Observer; Atukunda, N. (2020) Covid data contradicts EC campaign freeze claims. Daily Monitor.

6 Security forces target mainly opposition candidates who they regard as threats to president Museveni and in the name of enforcing SOPs, people are indiscriminately killed, some opposition candidates have resorted to wearing bullet proof vests and helmets during campaigns. In other words, SOPs seems to apply to opposition leaders and their supporters but not members of the ruling NRM party. Even the minister of health Dr Ruth Aceng was among the first key public officials to disregard the SOPs. Nyanzi, F. (2020) Police and military should not enforce SOPs selectively. Daily Monitor; Draku, F. (2020) Police teargas Amuriat as NRM holds processions. Daily Monitor.

7 BBC reports that In Uganda, at least 12 people have allegedly

2 AFP (2020). Bobi Wine files election petition challenging Museveni's victory. Daily Monitor

3 Human Rights Watch (2020) Uganda: Elections Marred by Violence.

4 Basu, K. (2020) Covid and common sense. Daily Monitor

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In November 2020, Uganda witnessed some of its worst unrest in recent years. Presidential candidates Bobi Wine and Patrick Oboi Amuriat were violently arrested for allegedly flouting the controversial electoral guidelines. The security forces responded by indiscriminately shooting and killing nearly 60 civilians and injuring over 150 for holding a peaceful demonstration against the arrest of the two leading opposition presidential candidates⁸. Countrywide, the number of deaths caused by armed state security forces is high⁹. It is shocking that the government has fully justified the reckless and indiscriminate shooting of civilians by security agents, and at the time of writing, there is no sign that these perpetrators who murdered civilians on the streets in broad daylight will be brought to justice. The minister of Security, General Elly Tumwine, even defended the killings, saying: "police have a right to shoot you and kill you if you reach a certain level of violence... Can I repeat? Police have a right to shoot you and you die for nothing... Do it at your own risk."¹⁰. President Museveni bragged about how his government is a specialist in violence, saying: "They have entered the area we know very well, of fighting, and they will regret [it]."¹¹.

People in Uganda, and other countries in similar situations, are not just dealing with the pandemic but also facing daily challenges of living and surviving under their authoritarian governments. A significant number of people have more fear for the security forces than contracting COVID-19¹². Civilian-military relations

been killed by security officers enforcing measures to restrict the spread of coronavirus, while the country has only just confirmed its first death from COVID-19. Horrible stories in the Daily monitor revealed how people died in the hands of the security forces. BBC (2020) Uganda - where security forces may be more deadly than coronavirus; Daily Monitor (2020) Covid-19: How Ugandans died at the hands of security agents

8 The video shows state security agents shooting peaceful demonstrators with live ammunitions: <https://twitter.com/observerug/status/1329335187126280193>. See also: URN (2020). Bobi Wine protests: Over 1,000 bullet casings collected in Kampala. Observer

9 Daily Monitor (2020) Covid-19: How Ugandans died at the hands of security agents.

10 Observer (editorial) (2020). No single ambition should cost a life; BBC (2020) Bobi Wine protests: Shoot to kill defended by Uganda minister

11 Kahungu, M. (2020) Museveni warns public on riots.

12 Farida Nabourema (a Togolese human rights advocate) wrote an article in the African Arguments, a Pan-African platform entitled "Dictators love lockdowns" documenting how state security agents in dictatorial governments exercise excessive powers with impunity on citizens by shutting down their freedom of speech and association

are at an all-time low¹³.

COMMUNITY MEETINGS WITH FAMILIES OR CLOSE RELATIVES AND CLAN OF THE BRUTAL MILITARY PERSONNEL

Communities in Uganda cannot continue to watch the current unpleasant situation degenerate further. There is need to generate more sustainable and inclusive practical interventions that can reduce the widening gap between the members of armed forces and the people and harmonize relations beyond the aftermath of the pandemic. The silent majority of Ugandans know that the unfair treatment of fellow citizens is uncalled for and that it should be condemned in the strongest possible terms.

Whereas the community members in a district know all the notoriously brutal military leaders there, initiating a meeting with them directly can seem difficult because of the power dynamics involved. However, through their immediate families or close relatives, the harmonization or dialogue process can kick start. In a peaceful way, community members can approach the relatives of the brutal military personnel and explain the excesses caused or committed under their command.

In a typical African setting, community would members brainstorm with the relatives of the brutal military personnel to find a binding solution or way to improve the bad relations between the community and the military. In this case, such a meeting may be led by the elders in the community or by other traditional leaders. The relatives of the identified brutal officer would at least feel morally obligated to convey the message from the community to their kin. The military officer would in turn realize that his or her approach to the issues at hand is adversely impacting the lives of people and peaceful coexistence in the society where they live and may be motivated through these structures to change. Where the immediate relatives may not easily be reached, the community could involve the clan members of the problematic officers to listen to their plea for peace and empathy. Respected clan leaders can participate in dialogue with elders or local representatives of the aggrieved community. The dialogue signifies the love that community members

through biased laws and guidelines during the lockdown. Nabourema, F. (2020) Dictators love lockdowns. African Arguments

13 Civilian-military relation is at low currently in Uganda. Bagala, A. (2020) How LDUs have lost public confidence. Daily Monitor

have for the brutal military officer. Ultimately, the officer is likely to empathize with the people and in a steady manner peace and good relations will be established between specific military personnel and the community. If this happens in Northern Uganda, members of the Acholi communities might then apply *mato oput*, a traditional justice ceremony that includes forgiveness and reconciliation.

Women could play a pivotal role in such dialogue meetings because they have often been most harshly affected by brutality meted on the community members during pandemic prevention: Their livelihoods are affected; many are roadside or market vendors whose business has been impossible to conduct during periods of lockdown, yet they still have to provide for their families. These women have often been the direct victims of harsh enforcement of curfews[CITE]. Since women would tend to relate more to people than to hardware or military weapons, they would perhaps be significant in such mediation¹⁴. This is because women extraordinarily function as forerunners in rebuilding clan communication, conflict resolution and peace building activities¹⁵.

This grassroots approach would create trust and confidence in the conflict resolution processes, since our communities tend to trust reputable elders and traditional leaders more than formal state governance structures. An anthropological case study conducted by Emma Eifverson indicates that customary conflict resolution systems are often better than the state led approach in addressing causes of conflict¹⁶. Such customary conflict resolution interventions lead to an increase in participation of the local communities in peace building and could indeed work better at grassroot level¹⁷.

REJECTING TRANSFERS AND PROMOTIONS OF THE BRUTAL MILITARY PERSONNEL

The communities in a district may resolve to reject a transfer, appointment, or promotion of a known brutal

military personnel. They can petition the appointing authority to rescind the transfer or appointment of a badly behaved military officer. The community, through their traditional leaders or other locally based representatives, can mount pressure on the local district government or central government authorities to amplify their voice regarding welcoming a brutal officer or seeking to have him or her transferred to another district or community. They can write to central government expressing their refusal to welcome the brutal military personnel in their society. The media can amplify the community's decision to reject the transfer or appointment of a brutal officer.

Certain actors, sectors, or disciplines, like Eurocentric governance theories and models, would find the proposals above radical as the public realm is meant to stay distinct from the private realm. However, from different vantage points, those that would deem the proposal radical are unjustified. In fact, the effectiveness of these proposals can make us question the boundaries of such a distinction altogether.

This proposal has been tested and proven to work. It promotes having law abiding military personnel who are empathetic to the people. On October 17th, 2020, a notorious District Police Commander of Mityana district in central Uganda, Mr Alex Mwine commanded a team of armed security forces who teargassed a gathering of traditional chiefs of Mbogo clan of Buganda Kingdom for allegedly not observing social distancing¹⁸.

The gathering had some prominent religious leaders in attendance as well. The government attempted to transfer the above brutal officer to Hoima district but representatives of the traditional kingdom of Bunyoro and its subjects immediately protested the transfer. "We have rejected the transfer of Mr Mwine to Hoima which is the official seat of Bunyoro Kitara Kingdom. We have received reports about his disciplinary record and we have found it wanting," said Mr Andrew Byakutaga, the Bunyoro Kitara Kingdom Prime Minister. He read the letter before the media and sent a copy to the appointment authority who rescinded the transfer of Alex Mwine. The brutal officer was not wanted in the community because its members feared he would

14 Galtung, J. (1999) Conflict transformation by peaceful means: The Transcend method. UN

15 Lederach, J P. (1997) Sustainable reconciliation in divided societies. Washington, DC: USIP

16 Eifverson, E. (2013) Third parties, the state, and communal conflict resolution: A comparative study of evidence from Kenya. In Thomas Ohlson Memorial Conference, Uppsala, Sweden, pp. 18-20.

17 Mac Ginty, R. (2014) Everyday Peace: Bottom-up and Local Agency in Conflict-affected Societies. Security Dialogue 45, no. 6 (2014): 548-64.

18 Mr Mwine has been surrounded by many controversies. In 2014, the community of Bundibugyo attacked the Police station where he was the District Police Commander and during the lockdown in 2020, he was accused of assaulting Mr Francis Zaake, the Mityana Municipality MP. Nantume, G. (2020) Alex Mwine-Mukono, the officer creating controversy in Mityana. Daily Monitor.

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antagonize their peaceful society.¹⁹ Thus, the local communities or traditional leaders have played a crucial role in checking and monitoring the conduct of security forces.

CONCLUSION

The proposed ideas above are not actually radical if we think about how the community members through various locally based or non-state structures put pressure on leaders at the district level in practise. Particularly, the customary dispute resolution processes that facilitate engagement with relatives and clan members are vital to achieving sustainable and stable peace. The above engagement will create urgency because the brutal military personnel may not merely disregard the plea from the community which they interact with daily, host to their families, relatives, and clan members. Above all it is the same community where the brutal officers would live after retiring from public office. In the interest of peace, the community would not want to witness bloodshed resulting from revenge by the relatives of the deceased murdered by the brutal military personnel during enforcement of COVID-19 preventive measures.

As in the case of Mr Alex Mwine, Ugandan communities are encouraged to reject a transfer, appointment, or promotion of a known brutal military personnel. This approach should be embraced in all parts of the country currently experiencing significant brutality from the security forces during COVID-19 prevention.

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