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From Museveni to Muhoozi? Uganda's transition of power

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The past weeks have perhaps been among the most intense and unsettling in Uganda in recent years. Within a remarkably short period of time, Speaker of Parliament Anita Among – until recently one of the country's most powerful political figures – was politically brought down and placed under house arrest. Soon afterwards, former Kampala mayor and opposition lawyer Erias Lukwago was abducted and abused, with Chief of Defence Forces Muhoozi Kainerugaba himself posting images of the abuse on social media. Uganda's largest independent media house, the Nation Media Group, was taken off the air after days of increasingly explicit threats by Muhoozi. Veteran politician Miria Matembe was arrested days after publicly criticizing Muhoozi and the growing wave of abductions. Senior journalist Timothy Kaligyera also was abducted over the past days. Particularly striking throughout these events was that Muhoozi himself publicly announced, ordered or endorsed many of them through his social media accounts.

Taken together, they suggest something more than another episode in the increasing use of force in this '[late Museveni era](#)'. The removal of Among showed Muhoozi's ability to neutralise one of the country's most powerful political figures, as well as to decide on the next speaker of Parliament. The events that followed suggested that he was equally willing to exercise that power more directly, with little regard for formal state institutions. Has Muhoozi effectively taken control?

A looming crisis

In order to answer that question, let's first focus on the context which allowed these events to happen. Earlier this year, [I argued in the Journal of Democracy that Uganda](#) was heading towards a looming political crisis. Over almost four decades in power, President Museveni has gone to great lengths to personalise the state around himself. In the last 10 years, this concentration of power has only deepened, with political decision-making increasingly confined to an ever-narrower circle in which the first family occupies a central place. However, as Museveni, now 82, has grown older, maintaining this highly personalised system has become more difficult. This means that important decisions have become increasingly delegated to trusted insiders, above all Salim Saleh, who today runs what amounts to a shadow cabinet, but also to Muhoozi.

Muhoozi's position changed fundamentally after he became Chief of Defence Forces in 2024. Before then, his authority still encountered resistance, and on occasion he could be forced to retreat, as happened after [his 2022 tweets threatening to invade Nairobi](#). Since becoming CDF, that has no longer been the case. Through a combination of promotions, reshuffles and anti-corruption campaigns within the army—some no doubt genuine, others equally useful politically—he steadily consolidated his hold over the military. Senior officers associated with the old guard were pushed into retirement. During the same period, Muhoozi also became increasingly explicit about his ambition to succeed his father, something he [first openly did in 2023](#).

Muhoozi did not stand in the January elections, but his [presence loomed over them](#). Much attention focused on the positions that members of his political vehicle, the Patriotic League Uganda (PLU), would obtain. The PLU is not a political party, and alternates between presenting itself as a vehicle for renewing the NRM and distancing itself from it – but in both cases presenting itself as an autonomous political organisation centred on Muhoozi. Even before the parliamentary and presidential elections, several outspoken PLU supporters had already secured influential roles in key party bodies, including the Central Executive Committee, leading many to expect that the post-election cabinet would clearly reflect Muhoozi's – and PLU's - growing influence.

The eventual cabinet appointments, however, came as something of an anti-climax. There were fewer Muhoozi or PLU figures than expected, while close Museveni allies and figures associated with Salim Saleh - the other major centre of power within the Ugandan state - retained important positions. It suggested that Muhoozi's takeover would be slower than many had anticipated, and that both Museveni and Saleh still exercised considerable influence over the government.

The fall of Among and power without institutions

That impression has since been overtaken by events. The government itself has become increasingly less relevant, as Muhoozi has shown little hesitation in exercising power directly. The political neutralisation of former Speaker of Parliament Anita Among marked an important turning point.

Among had established herself as one of Uganda's most influential political figures, building an extensive network of influence throughout and beyond the state, one that also rested heavily on corruption (something that was exposed in 2024 during Agora's online campaign on corruption in parliament). During the election campaign, she campaigned vigorously for President Museveni and was widely expected to retain her position. In the weeks before the cabinet appointments, however, Muhoozi and his allies increasingly turned against her, sometimes in cryptic terms and sometimes quite openly. Particular attention centred on reports that she had acquired a Rolls-Royce, prompting Muhoozi to tweet: "I have been Mzee's son for 52 years but [I have never sat in a Rolls-Royce ever](#). I don't think Mzee has sat in one either." In another post, he wrote: "Our job is to serve Ugandans, not ourselves. I cannot support corruption. I risked my life to make this country peaceful. Now that it is, it will not be taken by thieves. Never!" On 12 May, PLU publicly withdrew its earlier support and endorsement for Among. Soon afterwards, her residences were raided and searched, her vehicle fleet was impounded, and she has remained under house arrest.

Within Uganda, this was [widely perceived](#) as being about control and power, rather than about corruption. Tensions between Among and Muhoozi had [existed](#) for some time, with Muhoozi increasingly viewing her as a political rival. Her subsequent public

deference to both Museveni and Muhoozi - including [praising them as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit](#) - only underlined how thoroughly she had been politically subdued; but that didn't help her: she had become too much of a threat.

Soon afterwards, Muhoozi [publicly endorsed former Defence Minister Jacob Oboth-Oboth](#) for the position of Speaker of Parliament – with MPs quickly falling into line. In a recent speech, the [new speaker stated](#) that 'every Ugandan should be a member of PLU'.

The whole episode sent a clear message: Muhoozi has the power to go after whomever he wants, in whichever way he wants. Anyone could be a target. At the same time, it showed clearly: the government or parliament doesn't seem to matter any more. What matters is Muhoozi and PLU.

This trend further intensified

The trend only intensified in the weeks that followed. Over the past years, abductions had become an almost established feature of Uganda's political landscape, but they largely targeted supporters of opposition leader Bobi Wine's National Unity Platform (NUP) and civil society figures, especially during and after the election campaign. However cynical it might sound, it did allow many – local and internationally – to ignore what was happening. In recent weeks, however, both the number and profile of those targeted have changed, extending well beyond the opposition. The fact that these incidents have occurred in rapid succession, outside election periods or large-scale protests, has reinforced the sense that almost anyone could become a target at any time.

There first was the abduction and abuse of former Kampala mayor and opposition lawyer Erias Lukwago. Images of a [blindfolded Lukwago](#), his [head freshly shaven](#), accompanied by triumphant social media posts from Muhoozi, sent shockwaves through the country. The detention of veteran politician and human rights advocate Miria Matembe carried an even more powerful message. Matembe, a long-time political figure who was once a close ally of President Museveni, had publicly criticised the growing wave of abductions and Muhoozi's expanding political role. After security personnel raided her home on 24 June, she was detained four days later. The [images of the 72-year old Matembe](#), limping into court while relatives and supporters wept openly, captured the sense of fear that these arrests have generated. There also was the deportation of Kenyan senior politician Martha Karua, who was acting as a counsel for Kiiza Besigye – a [deportation Muhoozi claimed](#) to have ordered.

Then there was the closure of the Nation Media Group, following days of increasingly explicit threats by Muhoozi. The shutdown took the Daily Monitor, NTV, KFM, Dembe FM and Spark TV off the air. As the country's largest independent media house, its closure deprived Uganda of its most influential independent news platform and marked a major escalation in the shrinking space for free media.

Also here, Muhoozi was explicit that [he ordered the closure](#) of the media house – with consent from his father- , stating he doesn't believe in a free press. In other words, it was Muhoozi who ordered it, rather than the Uganda Communications Commission or any other formal regulatory authority. It took the government two and a half days to come up with [a – vague – statement](#).

A coup?

One question which is on many people's mind is if the country is witnessing a coup. As such, this question isn't really new: the control of the army has been increasing rapidly since Muhoozi took charge; and particularly since the adoption of the new UPDF Bill in June 2025, which gives far-reaching powers to the army. One Ugandan [research report called this](#) "a coup by other means" or "a coup in slow motion". The events of the past weeks have given concrete form to that argument - one commentator captured this emerging political order by describing it as "[a military junta with a PR team](#)".

The removal of Anita Among, and appointment of the new Speaker of parliament, already showed that key political decisions were no longer being taken through the formal institutions of government. The weeks that followed strengthened that impression. Muhoozi directed the closure of the country's largest independent media house, intervened in decisions concerning the [Kampala Capital City Council](#), and openly announced or endorsed arrests and detentions. In many of these cases, legal justification followed only afterwards, if it came at all.

The installation of the new Secretary General of the Patriotic League Uganda (PLU) offered another illustration. It [brought together](#) a remarkable cross-section of Uganda's political establishment, including the Speaker of Parliament, ministers and numerous MPs, underscoring where many political actors now see the country's centre of power. At the same time, the question of whether Uganda is already [living under "President Muhoozi"](#) has moved well beyond social media and now features prominently in political debate.

Silence

Perhaps equally striking as the events themselves has been the silence surrounding them. President Museveni has remained largely absent, while neither the government nor the courts have meaningfully challenged what has been taking place. Political authority appears increasingly concentrated around Muhoozi, while the institutions that would ordinarily provide checks have remained remarkably quiet.

The same silence extends well beyond the state. Uganda's media had already operated for years under growing pressure and increasing self-censorship, making independent reporting ever more difficult. The closure of the Nation Media Group has only reinforced that trend. Foreign journalists have largely left the country. There has also been no reaction to the recent events by any of the major donors – whether it's EU, US or UK. (As

for the US, there only [was a tweet by the US Foreign Affairs Committee](#) Chair on social media.)

[Religious leaders](#) have largely been incorporated into the system through years of patronage, while the political opposition has largely been [neutralized or fragmented](#). Bobi Wine had to flee the country, and many other opposition figures have faced arrest or intimidation.

Fear therefore has become an equally important part of the picture. The concern is no longer limited to political activists or opposition supporters, but increasingly centres on who may be targeted next. Within public and private debates, there's an increasing concern of 'saying something wrong'; and there are increasing concerns of surveillance and tapped phones - reinforced by the circulation of leaked private phone conversations, including those [involving Uganda's EU ambassador and Minister Kahinda Otafiire](#). It marks a profound change from the open and often vibrant political debate that long characterised Uganda. Diplomats have likewise remained cautious, given the increasingly hostile rhetoric directed at several ambassadors over the past years.

Against that backdrop, public criticism has become increasingly rare. Over the past week, the most notable intervention came from longtime NRM stalwart and former government spokesperson Ofwono Opondo, who openly questioned the country's current trajectory. [Careful criticism](#) has also come from Prince Kassim Nakibinge, the titular head of Uganda's Kibuli Muslim community and a prominent Buganda royal.

Social media—particularly X—remains one of the few spaces where political debate continues and civil society voices can still be heard. Yet the arrest of prominent X user Timothy Kaligyera under the Computer Misuse Act, together with the police interrogation of Agora activists, sends a clear warning about the risks of speaking out.

First family

Perhaps the most striking reactions have come from within the First Family itself. In the past week, Museveni's son-in-law Odrek Rwabwogo [released a video](#) saying he was "extremely worried to the core about the direction the country is taking" and calling on Ugandans to unite and speak out. Perhaps most remarkably, [he argued that](#) President Museveni must be protected "from wrong unthinking characters who are undermining the greater good (...) no one group should seek to monopolize him or to pretend to act on his behalf". This latter statement was widely perceived as a clear reference to the influence of Muhoozi and PLU: There has been a longstanding feud between Muhoozi and Odrek – Muhoozi [called him for example in 2024](#) on X 'the biggest thief in Uganda'. The video seemed like an ultimate attempt of Odrek – a long-time competitor of Muhoozi for the Presidency – to gather political support, and potentially temper Muhoozi.

Around the same time, [Natasha Museveni](#) – who's the right-hand of her father, the President - released an emotional video describing Uganda as "going through a difficult

period" and urging people "not to lose hope or become overwhelmed by events". While her remarks have to be understood in the context of the prolonged illness of Janet Museveni, their timing remains striking, in the current shift of power. A letter [attributed to Salim Saleh](#) also surfaced, in which he appeared to offer advice and restraint to Muhoozi in relation to the Lukwago affair.

It also suggests a number of things within the first family: concern, a loss of control over the current events, as well as the difficulty which those around Muhoozi appear to have in influencing him.

It also all points to the further retreat of President Museveni. His increasingly limited public role has become more apparent over recent months, a process that appears to have accelerated with Janet Museveni's illness. She last was seen in [public of March of this year](#), and it recently was acknowledged that [she survived a major health scare](#).

Speculation about the President's health have also intensified, reinforced by comments from Muhoozi ally and regime insider Andrew Mwenda, who recently described Museveni as "[old and exhausted, both intellectually and physically](#)", [with only a limited ability to oversee the affairs of government](#). Whether or not that assessment is accurate, the perception of a President who is increasingly absent has become an important part of the current political dynamics.

Who governs Uganda?

The broader question is whether President Museveni still controls the political system he spent four decades building. Recent events suggest that the personalized decision-making structure has increasingly spiralled out of his hands, with Muhoozi playing a central role in his decision - extending his influence over both the UPDF and the NRM at rapid speed.

The language increasingly used by his supporters reflects that confidence. When NRM stalwart Ofwono Opondo asked whether "the NRM that Ugandans elected on 15 January 2026 is no more", the Executive Secretary of the Patriotic League Uganda [confidently replied](#) that this indeed was the case. While the message was [later deleted](#), it offered a revealing glimpse into how parts of the PLU now view the political landscape: they are the ones in charge.

The same pattern has become visible elsewhere. Following the closure of the Nation Media Group, it was not the responsible ministry or regulatory authority that announced negotiations over its possible reopening, but [Andrew Mwenda](#), one of Muhoozi's closest political allies and a leading figure within the PLU.

How far this process will go remains uncertain. Within broader society and political circles, there's much concern about who, or what institution will be next, and how far

this process will go. The concentration of power, the willingness to use it, and the brazenness of it all, point to concerning and troubling times ahead.

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