

Erik van der Zanden – Political Innovation in Ugandan Slums - draft paper for the Africa Knows! Conference; panel 32

Political Innovation in Ugandan Slums is of National Importance

In overpopulated cities, youth are unable to find work and remain stuck in a situation of scarcity, called waithood. As their desperation for escaping the waithood grows, opposition parties utilize the very frustration of these groups to pressure the government. Instead of working on solutions, governing powers often respond by using force to silence those opposition movements. Since colonial times, fast urbanization is perceived as a threat to peace in Africa, leading to a negative cycle of violence. However, there might be an alternative. A Boserupian approach proposes that scarcity as a result of population growth forces people to innovate. Through innovation, youth may be able to escape their waithood. This decolonizing approach could lead to asking different questions about population growth. Such moments of either violent instability or peaceful innovation lead to breaking points in history. What often follows is a set of institutions or repeating patterns of behaviour. These patterns determine historical trajectories to either more instability, or progress. In order to predict what political impact urbanization has on people who live in suburbs, one needs an inside-out perspective from these youth in waithood. This paper is about peaceful political innovations of Ugandan youth in waithood in the slums of Kampala.

Key words: Kampala, slums, youth, waithood, political innovation

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Introduction

It is a warm cloudless night. We are riding in a small convoy of two cars on an abandoned road towards a covertly organized night funeral. Yesterday an innocent People Power supporter was killed by the police, and the organization of a legal funeral was prevented by state police. I am on the back seat, and Robert Kyagulanyi, better known as Bobi Wine, leader of the People Power movement, is driving himself. We are discussing the political situation of Uganda, and in particular how Uganda's youth remains stuck in a hopeless situation. *"We are desperate for change Erik. For years the opposition has contested the dictatorship without results. We in the ghetto have been left out. Young Ugandan lost hope. That is why we must innovate and use new methods like music and concerts. They must realize that we and them are not any different, we are both the outcasts. They must realize that power belongs to us the people"*.

This situation of young Ugandans losing hope is not unique to Kampala. A combination of fast urbanization and population growth resulted into the growth of slums across Africa. Urban youth living in slums endure a stressful situation. Basic necessities such as clean water, food, toilets, waste disposal, education, and accommodation are scarce and even missing. Unable to find work and normally entering the stage of adulthood, these youth remain stuck in a situation called *waithood*, as they are unable to progress from youth to adults (Honwana 2012).

Throughout Africa, the numbers of unemployed and desperate youth in waithood attracted the interest of opposition parties, who utilized the frustration and anger of these groups to demand for change (Branch & Mampilly 2015). Three regional protest waves occurred, from 1950 to 1965, 1980 to 1990, and 2010 to 2020. Yet many youth remained stuck in waithood, and anger often led to political unstable situations such as civil war, coup d'états, revolutions, and genocide (Cooper 2002, Abbink & Van Kessel 2005). The fast growth of populations and cities in Africa leading to overpopulated slums is therefore often portrayed as a dangerous trend. This correlates with *Malthusian thinking*.

Thomas Malthus argued that population growth is exponential in comparison to the static increase of necessary resources. The result is scarcity, and scarcity leads to more instability. Somehow the population had to rebalance its resources; through war, famine, or disaster (Malthus 1789, Turner & Shajaat 1996). Focus on political instability has been the norm within

the academic and political debate since colonial times. Population growth such as urbanization is perceived as a threat to stability (Sommers 2010).

However, this negative statement was challenged by Esther Boserup who proposed an alternative perspective on population growth. She argues that population growth and its resulting scarcity forces people to innovate (Boserup 1965, Turner & Shajaat 1996); an approach called *Boserupian thinking*.

For this paper a Boserupian approach is taken as point of departure, as it leads to different questions. Because when these youth in waithood respond to their situation of scarcity not with political instability, but political innovation, these slums could become breweries of national social-political transformation. That leads to the guiding question of this paper: *How can political innovation of urban youth in waithood influence Uganda's national trajectory?*

Political Innovations in Africa

Honwana (2012) found that while youth in waithood suffer hardships, they also invent creative ways to change their society. In societies where they are left out by both those in power and opposition, youth invent new forms of citizenship and initiate campaigns or even revolutions towards social change. Even though from the outside one may observe a situation of underdevelopment, underneath the radar there could be enormous activity and creativity among youth initiatives. By delving into these communities as researches one should search for the inside-out perspectives, with these African youth as protagonists, to become able to predict likely developments. Single acts of desperation such as the one of Tunisian fruit vendor Mohamed Bouazizi in 2011 could set a whole continent aflame. African youth all over the continent have become more interconnected than ever before (De Bruijn & Both 2017), and young Ugandans are eagerly searching for solutions for their desperation beyond their own borders (Mutimbwa 2019).

Y'en a Marre in Senegal

One case is particularly interesting when following the current political developments in Uganda, and that is the story of youth civil society, hip-hop, and street protest in Senegal during the Y'en a Marre (We are Fed Up) movement. The rap group Kuer Gui, established in 1998, toured for years through Africa and Europe focusing on social injustice and corruption. In January 2011 the

movement Y'en a Marre was formed by Senegalese rappers, where Kuer Gui played a crucial role. The movement was a reaction to desperation among youth in lack of employment and future perspectives. It quickly took a more national role in main criticism to the regime of Abdoulaye Wade. In their first public event rappers voiced the grievances of youth through music, and merchandise was given out promoting the mission: Y'en a Marre. In preparation of the 2012 elections they invented a slogan: Ma Carte d'Electeur, Mon Arme (my voting card, my weapon), heavily using social media, music and meetings to address young people about the importance of their vote. When president Wade tried to amend the constitution, massive protests followed, turning into the 23 June Movement. Young People all over Senegal stood up to protect their rights and the institutions of their republic (Honwana 2012).

People Power in Uganda

In 2016 a musician called Bobi Wine stood up against the frustration of youth in Uganda. As a musician he focused his songs on social issues such as poverty and division and maintained his ghetto heritage. After the national elections of 2016 his song 'Situka' urges the youth to demand justice and act (Mutimbwa 2019). In 2017 he is elected to MP Kyaddondo East and becomes a lawmaker besides being a musician. He becomes the face of defiance in a movement called People Power, first against the amendment to the constitution making life presidency possible for Museveni, later the social media tax and other social injustices. The slogan of the movement: 'people power our power, our power people power' is a direct translation of democracy marketed for the Ugandan urban poor.

Like the Y'en a Marra movement Bobi Wine uses hip-hop music to connect to youth in waitness. Another striking similarity is the focus on the getting national ID's for otherwise isolated youth to politically activate these youth, in urging the youth to make use of their majority in the next 2021 elections, to get their national identity cards.

But political innovation does not remain restricted to the musicians. Both at the higher and lower spectrum of youth in Uganda several initiatives can be found where youth invent new non-violent methods in changing their situation. Besides informal interviews with opposition leaders such as Bobi Wine, youth such as students, musicians, and activists were interviewed.

Methodology

During fieldwork for the Master Thesis in Uganda between January and March 2019, 18 youth from 4 different organizations were interviewed. Each of these organizations presented a different sector of the urban youth in and around the slums of Kampala. Earlier contact with youth organizations combined with an internship at Forum for Democratic Change (FDC), the largest opposition party of Uganda, provided the opportunity to use snowball, or referral, sampling. This meant that first contact started with key informers, who then introduced other members of their organization. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews.

The first youth initiative was the Jobless Brotherhood, a humanitarian movement founded in 2014 by Norman Tumushimise and Robert Mayanja with their yellow pig demonstration at the parliament. This group of activists was the first non-political activist organization focused on youth in Uganda.

The second youth initiative was Action for Liberty and Economic Empowerment (ALED), a non-political community-based organization promoting a free and prosperous society with aspects of entrepreneurship and individual liberty that was founded by student leader John Mugabi in 2016. Its members are generally young professionals, university graduates that found (informal) jobs aim to transform their communities. They are part of a global libertarian society, with many NGOs under the network of 'Action for Liberty' organization. Because of this global network, they are well connected to Western libertarian intellectuals and activists.

The third group of interviewees Students for Economic Empowerment, a student association at Kyambogo University, founded in 2017. They were inspired by seminars and personal contact with ALED, in particular through ALED's founder who was a Guild President of Kyambogo University and often visits his old university. Prevented by university authorities to use the word liberty in their name, they focus on enlightening minds of fellow students on how to gain ideas about entrepreneurship and individual liberty. They also perceive themselves as libertarians and use the same network as ALED.

The fourth group of interviewees was Zion train, an activist band of musicians living in the ghetto, founded by a musician called Tony in 2015. Located in a ghetto in Kampala, Kisenge II, they live in absolute poverty. Most of the residents survive through criminal activities,

prostitution, street vending, or as boda boda drivers. These musicians want to bring a positive voice in this area, where the inhabitants are constantly confronted with news of death, disease and marginalization.

Political Innovations Youth Organizations Uganda

The methods that they invented could be divided into three modes in relation to the state: Confrontation, Critical, and Isolated.

1. Confrontational. The Jobless Brotherhood and political parties FDC and People Power propose non-violent methods to defiantly confront the state, often facing repressive measures. They use peaceful demonstrations, which are used to overcome fear and to apply political power as dissatisfaction is showed.

2. Critical. The libertarian initiatives of Action for Liberty and Economic Development (ALED) and Students for Economic Empowerment (SEE) use their non-violent methods critically against the state. They interact both with and within the state, not confronting but critiquing it, focusing on transforming society first. They are sensitizing the mind, to awaken the fellow youth about their and their nation's potential.

3. Isolated. Ghetto band Zion Train used its non-violent methods isolated from the state, as the focus of their methods ignored and were ignored by the state. They focus on transforming their direct community of fellow inhabitants and thus limited their scope to local issues. They are using talents development, empowering fellow youth to develop their talents and gain skills. These talents and skills are the key ingredient in gaining freedom and escaping the dependency of waithood

Besides the three different modes in relation to the state, the different politically innovative methods could be divided into four groups: Sensitizing the minds, peaceful demonstrations, talent development, and national elections.

1. Sensitizing the minds

The most effective methods of sensitizing the minds of fellow youth are social media, music, ambassadors, community activities, and conferences.

“As with a small gadget like this one, through Facebook, leave alone spreading, I can also get inspiration from what is happening around me. You see, if you have been here for some time you observed that the media here does not report about (the revolution in) Sudan. But Facebook does, you understand. Internet does. So, to me, it is internet and social media, and the regime, which is consistently damaging itself, and then the population of the young people who are now a little bit sensitized” (Van der Zanden 2019).

Another interesting method quoted by all youth organizations, repeated by members and leaders of FDC and People Power, was music. It could inspire youth everywhere, even in the poorest areas, up to those in university. M. elaborates: *“Music has a very big potential as it has no boundaries, that is its strength. So, music is very powerful. Now we have a music revolution in Uganda. Music can reach to any place, any age and any gender”*. F. shares his vision *“Music can change someone. Music is the soul of any human being”* (Van der Zanden 2019).

2. Peaceful Demonstrations

Peaceful Demonstrations are methods that directly and defiantly confronts the state to address injustices. The interviewed youth divided these demonstrations into the categories of a. creative activism, b. political walking, and c. Strikes and sit downs.

Creative activism is a form of activism which relies heavily on the use of symbols to convey a political message. In Uganda it has been the Jobless Brotherhood who first used and further developed this kind of activism. Augustine explains: *“Creative activism is where you use symbols, even when you don’t speak, those symbols can explain whatever you are meaning. So that is when we ended up getting the yellow piglets. Tag them up with a message. Because you don’t have enough time to talk, police never allow you to have enough time to speak to media. It impacted greatly, because it was the first time there was a message even without someone speaking, but it gave a very loud noise, I can say it was silent, but it gave a loud noise to the listeners”* (Van der Zanden 2019).

3. Talent Development

An important aspect was transforming the marginalized and dependent youth into vibrant and skilled citizens. Especially the organizations of ALED, SEE and Zion Train were enthusiastic about developing the talents of the youth. The focus was on gaining entrepreneurship skills,

developing talents such as making music and providing positions within organizations to learn responsibilities and gain experience. Odong elaborated on the potential of developing the inherent talents of the youth: *“I help them to work on their talents. There are talents in the ghetto, that is why I am working so much with the students of the entertainment association. So that people study, not train to get a document, but train to empower their talent, especially those from the ghetto”* (Van der Zanden 2019).

4. Elections

In the 2016 national elections of Uganda youth started to mobilize again in big numbers, as hopes went up that if they went to vote massively, they could overthrow the regime (Taylor 2016). Especially the FDC initiated Power 10 or P10 created agency for the youth, who were called upon to be vigilant in protecting their votes and monitor possible state rigging or corruption (Bagala 2016). Social media played a similar role as in Egypt, by providing live updates on votes, police intimidation and state rigging through Twitter and Facebook. The day of the elections social media was shut down and even though the activists used VPN, most of the population remained dependent on radio and TV where the NRM was declared the victor. FDC headquarters who maintained their own tally based on the P10 results was invaded and all computers taken. Fortunately, they had saved data on the cloud (Mutimbwa 2019). Yet the army was deployed on the streets, Kampala was under siege. The day after the elections the streets were silent, the population mourned the democracy as they realized the military regime had stolen the victory and now ruled by the gun. The opportunity that elections provide is well described by Kimani Njogu on the cover of his book (2013): *Elections provide an enormous opportunity for national transformation. They can be a moment of national renewal. Mobile phones are providing game changing instruments, as Africa has an opportunity to significantly change the lives of ordinary citizens. But this transformation required that youth are fully ‘present’ in the political, economic, social and cultural sectors. They must stay focused on the things that are important for their nations”*.

The Narrow Corridor

In their analysis on why certain states remain politically stable with peace and prosperity as a result, Acemoglu and Robinson (2019) argue that this progress all depends on the constant contest between power of the state and power of society. The state, which they call the Leviathan based on the book of Thomas Hobbes (1651), can be present in three ways. In a situation where power of the society is strong enough to prevent the centralization of power, the Leviathan is absent. In a situation where ambitious individuals manage to centralize power and form a state, a Despotic Leviathan develops. In the case countries find a balance between power of both state and society, both in constant contest for power, the Leviathan becomes Shackled. The state is controlled by society, who ensure that the state acts in their best interests.

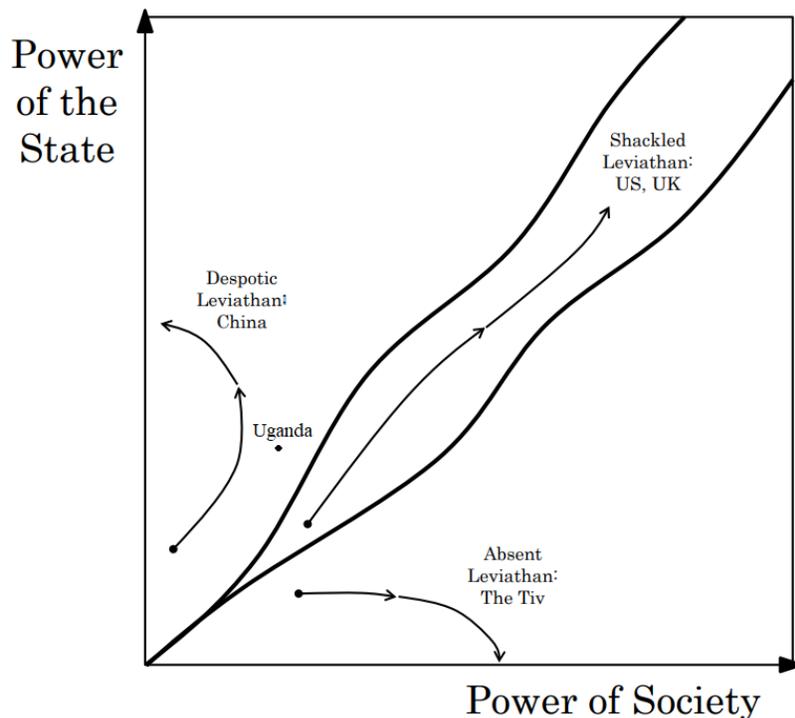


Figure 1: The Narrow Corridor (Acemoglu & Robinson 2019)

This is of interest for the social-political situation of Uganda, where president Yoweri Museveni and the National Resistance Movement (NRM) has successfully built a despotic leviathan, where the state is more powerful than its society. Yet it is the narrow corridor where Uganda will experience most economic growth and freedom. By increasing the power of society, empowering it to shackle the Ugandan state, Uganda can enter the narrow corridor. From this perspective,

political innovation of society, in this case of youth in slums is of crucial importance, as the more these innovations empower society, the more likely it becomes that Uganda enters the narrow corridor.

These moments of political instability or political innovation, often called breaking points in history, lead to different sets of *institutions*. Institutions are repeating patterns of behavior within societies (Acemoglu & Robinson 2012). Examples of the impact of institutions are decolonization movements in Africa, which may be classified into two groups: violent rural movements and peaceful urban movements. Violent rural movements led to autocratic institutions, while peaceful urban movements led to democratic institutions (Wantchekon & Garcia-Ponce 2013).

Conclusion

This draft has elements of the paper that aims to merge urban youth in waithood (slums), political innovation, and national transformation in the form of entering the ‘ narrow corridor’ into a single structured paper. In particular, the flow from the political innovation towards the national scope and theory of narrow corridor needs to be established. Through the last section of the paper, the question resurfaces: *How can political innovation of urban youth in waithood influence Uganda’s national trajectory?*

However, it is far from finished, and needs better structuring and a clear introduction, middle part, and conclusion. This needs to be solved in the final version of this paper.

Feedback on this initial draft is more than welcome.

Kind regards,

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