



Mugisha Muntu illustrated for *TWR* by Farouq Ssebagala.

Muntu

Mugisha Muntu's doomed presidential campaign is an urgent cautionary tale for us all.

Rodney Muhumuza

The most revealing story about Mugisha Muntu was spread by his closest friends after they failed to compromise him one night before or after he was removed from his post as the top commander of Uganda's military. It was Maj. Gen. Muntu's birthday and his wife Julia, to whom he's known to be devoted and unfailingly loyal, was at work outside Uganda, as indeed she has been for much of their marital life. Unbeknownst to Muntu, according to the story I heard years ago, at some point during the party in a nightclub his army friends began disappearing until Muntu remained with the bevy of beautiful women who had been planted there for his enjoyment.

The plotters wanted to find out how faithful Muntu could be, whether he had the strength to escape the charms of every one of the women who surrounded him. Muntu's friends were astonished when he reacted with anger on realizing he had been set up, and it is

said he stormed out of the event with every intention of holding his friends accountable, now that they had failed in their mission.

There are two elements to the story, especially as it offers a window into the fate of Muntu today as a 67-year-old man trying yet again to become president of the republic after polling just a fraction of one percentage point in the last election.

When Muntu rejected those women, some of whom may have been prostitutes, his friends were said to have been more disappointed than impressed by his gesture. To flee from beautiful women was, for them, more disgraceful than accepting a scandalous birthday present from friends who felt the secret rendezvous was appropriate for a man of Muntu's peculiar circumstances.

When Muntu rejected those women, he affirmed his reputation as incorruptible, as a man who was ready to stand by his principles no matter what.

One tries to imagine the scene in a

darkened chamber when Muntu realizes his friends have mysteriously gone and that, at such a late hour, the faces around him are of beautiful women whose names he doesn't know but who are rivalling each other for the right to entertain him. But their crimson fingernails look hellish and it is his lovely wife, asleep in Tunis or some other city, he is thinking of as he excuses himself and departs the club. In that instant, in that moment of extreme temptation, he shows the courage of a thousand soldiers by doing the unexpected. And he manages to escape with his dignity intact, even if the soldiers who arranged the scene laugh when they hear of what has happened.

Muntu is one of a kind in Ugandan politics, a rare breed. That he persists in trying to carve for himself a place in the political milieu is one of the great mysteries of our time. Some may wonder what he hopes to achieve when he is doubted at every turn, when he is

called names by his colleagues, when he stands no chance in a hotly contested race that offers no hope for the likes of him. Barring divine intervention, the 2026 race will be a reprisal of the 2021 contest between President Yoweri Museveni and Bobi Wine, the popular entertainer who is known to his family as Robert Ssentamu Kyagulanyi.

Kyagulanyi will try to maintain the support he earned in his first outing, but it seems the ruling National Resistance Movement party is determined to undo his success in Buganda.

So it is with much curiosity that one hears of Muntu's candidacy as the representative of the Alliance for National Transformation, or ANT, the political group he launched in 2019 after his exit from the Forum for Democratic Change, or FDC. Briefly there were rumors of a pre-election alliance between ANT and Kizza Besigye's People's Front for Freedom, or PFF, another breakaway faction of the FDC, causing Ofwono Opondo, the erstwhile government spokesman, to dismiss the ANT as a non-starter with no future.

Yet, it must said, if the ANT is a non-starter, the same cannot really be said for Muntu, even with his obvious disadvantages and even if he himself stands no chance of winning a presidential election in Uganda today. The question as to why he must stand is an important one, for him and for us, because, by his message and by his track record, he offers hope for those disenchanted by the bad tempered politics that has taken root in the last decade or so.

He is not, as many others are, tainted by the stink of corruption. He never orchestrates polemical attacks against those who assault his dignity, men like his former colleagues in the FDC who for

years mocked him as a foreigner and called him a spy for the NRM without presenting any evidence. More than many others seeking high office, he articulates a vision for Uganda that elevates justice above politics and puts the relative peace of the Museveni years in its proper context. If there is no war, Muntu has said, that's very fine, but the matter concerns all of us if one man is unfairly jailed without trial.

For this reason, it's painful to watch Muntu express his views on TV, because we know that the interviewers and perhaps even the audience will not, or do not want to, take him seriously. They hear his impassioned speech and then consider what they think is at stake in the next election – with Museveni digging in for his seventh term and the revolutionary Kyagulanyi rallying the urban masses – and Muntu seems, at least in the present, to be an extra candidate. They don't believe him when he says the government can be rid of corruption when they can see that corruption has become a way of life. Some are scornful when he says that Uganda will find a way to be a fully democratic society in which every citizen – “by God's grace,” he says repeatedly – can reach their full potential.

Muntu often hearkens back to the promise of 1962, when Uganda became an independent nation. That promise was squandered within five years of independence, and within a decade Idi Amin took power by force and ruled by decree. Museveni, who was among the rebel forces that toppled Amin in 1979, has described his predecessor as a “primitive dictator,” because Amin hanged rebels in public squares and abolished the legislature. By contrast, Uganda under Museveni has a pliant national assembly led by a speaker who

can be summarily summoned to the presidential residence and who, when it suits her, says of Museveni that he is “God the Father.” Muntu has said that Museveni, the longer he stays in power, has appeared more or less like Amin if not exactly like him, in that both leaders have been most interested in retaining political power.

Unlike some other opposition figures, Muntu doesn't urge street protests as a means of regime change. He's sure that violence begets violence and, as much as possible, is to be avoided. In his time as the FDC president, from 2012 to 2017, Muntu came under attack from his colleagues for presenting what they felt was a tame strategy for regime change. When he said he wanted the FDC to focus especially on building institutions that were stronger than any leader by any name, his opponents within the FDC said those were not the words of a firm leader – that he was lampooning Besigye while giving Museveni room to manoeuvre.

In the spirit of the times, not long after the violent Walk-to-Work protests of 2011, to steer away from demonstrations was, for some opposition figures, to retreat from the struggle. But Muntu's point has always been that strong institutions are more important than strong leaders: a strong Museveni who tells the parliamentary speaker what to do, or has undue influence over the justice system, is not what Uganda wants. Muntu's insistence on what he calls ‘a new culture of politics’ caused friction between him and Besigye, a strong and charismatic figure, who has argued in recent years that holding elections is a waste of time in Museveni's Uganda. Besigye has a contextual point, of course, but Muntu has been consistent from the beginning.



Mugisha Muntu illustrated in a cartoon, by Chris Ogon, that was first published in the *Daily Monitor* newspaper.

In 1996, speaking at the funeral of Lt. Col. Sserwanga Lwanga, an army officer distinguished by his intellectualism and dutifulness, army chief Muntu warned that the military he led could never sustain itself without “cadres who have got the capability to notice what is wrong, bring it out in the open and discuss it, come up with a solution and move to the next stage,” which, for him, was building a culture of holding leaders accountable. While Sserwanga’s death saddened him, he said, “we can only take heart if we know that once we die, what we would have created will be taken over and will be sustained.”

So it is not too surprising, then, that the man who garnered less than 70,000 votes in the 2021 vote, an election Besigye sat out for the first time since

2001 as Kyagulanyi’s popularity soared, is running again despite the obvious risk of a loss that might damage his reputation as a viable leader. Muntu is saying, effectively, that elections matter even if he gets a tiny share of the vote. At least in this respect, therefore, Muntu is Muntu. He understands that a terrible loss for him is not his to bear alone. His shame is the country’s shame – because, even though he doesn’t put it this way, he is running *for* the country. To hear Muntu make a patriot’s argument for Uganda if it could and should be saved from the destructive forces that have set back countries like Somalia and Sudan when authoritarian leaders there lost power.

In a press conference before Museveni

was declared the winner of the 2021 election, I heard Muntu talk about the unpredictable transition from Museveni, who turned eighty-one earlier this year. *They have mismanaged the transition* is what I remember him saying of the Museveni regime, words uttered with such conviction that they clarified what’s at stake whenever Museveni offers himself for re-election. In 2025 there is no cue that Museveni intends to hand over power even to someone within the NRM, an ominous sign for a country that has never witnessed a peaceful transfer of power.

Leaders like Muntu, even when they are perceived as weak candidates for the presidency, point us in the right direction. And it can seem as though Muntu in particular has been trying to

warn us urgently of the perils ahead if we don't change course. Forty years of the Museveni regime have left a vast number of Ugandans feeling poor and alienated even as some others prosper and consider all means to retain their privileges. The result is a stalemate the likes of which few Ugandan leaders are equipped to break. But if anyone can perform a miracle, if any national leader can take us back from the precipice, perhaps it is Muntu, who possesses a moral compass granted to few politicians.

Oddly enough, the man renowned for his seriousness has done something playful in recent days, tinting a patch of his hair in a style reminiscent of the side parting of hair that used to be *de rigueur* for learned African men at the dawn of independence. Is Muntu, yet again, recalling the fleeting spirit of a newly independent Uganda, with the abundance of promise that lay ahead? Or is he simply asking younger voters to take another look at him? I prefer to think that it is the former that applies, with Muntu pretty much begging us to make a clean break with the past – with the violence and corruption and injustice of the last sixty years – and return to a kind of *tabula rasa*, the clean slate Milton Obote received when the Union Jack was lowered at Kololo.

The strange thing about Muntu, for those of us who pay attention, is that he tends to speak as one who knows something that hasn't yet been revealed to others, like the paranormal dogs that can sniff looming danger, a storm coming, and try to warn us by wagging their tails. In this sense he is a kind of prophet, an epithet that's perhaps appropriate given his lack of standing among many voters.

In 2023 the eminent cartoonist Chris Ogon executed a piece showing Muntu

dressed as an ancient prophet five years after his decision to sever ties with the FDC, a party he once led. The cartoon was provoked by revelations of further splintering within the FDC, as the people who once had branded Muntu a government spy now went after each other with similar allegations. One faction, led by Besigye and Kampala Mayor Erias Lukwago, accused a rival faction, led by FDC leaders Nandala Mafabi and Patrick Oboi Amuriat, of having been compromised by Museveni and the NRM. The critics accused Amuriat and Mafabi of accepting funding from the president's office. The disagreement was so vicious that it seemed afterwards that some rivals might exchange physical blows.

Mafabi and Amuriat denied the charges, but the allegations were too damning that the two leaders faced calls for their resignation to save the party. They declined to resign, and the FDC was split up again as another faction led by Besigye left to start what is now known as the PFF.

In the disintegration of the FDC, however sad that event was, Muntu was absolved. It was impossible to forget his warning, as he left the FDC, that there were others in the party who were working to destroy it from within. "There is going to be a time," he said, "when people will be shocked to know who the real moles are." Although the allegations against Mafabi and Amuriat of trying to sell the FDC to Museveni have never been fully substantiated, the suspects' accounting of the source of huge sums of cash spent by the FDC over several years never satisfied anyone. The FDC has looked weaker and weaker in the aftermath of that scandal and will almost certainly never have the vitality of the Muntu years, let alone the force of the Besigye years.

And yet, when it comes to Muntu as a

man, one sees a pattern in his life that he's not been quite able to escape. He can baffle others when they misunderstand him and his intentions. People are always pointing fingers at him and asking questions that aren't necessary. If it were not for the fact that he's lived a fairly privileged life and achieved success very early, one would think he has bad luck. Apropos of the disloyalty allegations, Muntu himself has mused that he knew of "no time I was not called a mole."

Muntu, who was born into a respectable family in Ankole, joined Museveni's army of guerrillas in 1981, not long after he had completed his studies at Makerere University. It was a singular act of courage for a young man whose father was then a pillar of Milton Obote's Uganda People's Congress in the western region. It's been said that Obote personally knew the Muntuyeras of Ntungamo and considered the young Muntu a son, so news of the recent graduate's adventure into the bush would have shocked his family as much as the rebel leaders who welcomed him into the Luweero jungle. He wasn't trusted even there, and Muntu recalled once that his commanders "had to put me under surveillance until they realized I was genuine."

Muntu became head of military intelligence after Museveni's National Resistance Army took power in Kampala. Three years later, in 1989, Museveni named Muntu to be overall commander of the armed forces. Museveni was looking for someone fresh and purposeful when he could no longer count on his brother Salim Saleh to do the job, so that Muntu, who was nowhere near the top ranks of the historical bush-war leaders, was catapulted to authority as army commander.

The pictures of Muntu from his time

as army commander are strange to look at: although he is in exemplary order wearing military fatigues, he does not, at all events, look like a militant. This was a time when soldiers had even more of a bad reputation among civilians, and an army commander like Muntu, with his smiling face and gentlemanly comportment, was nothing if not a freak. Even now, looking at Muntu, a soldier first and foremost, one cannot help wondering if he has ever killed a man, shot him or destroyed him by other means, and how unlucky that man would have had to be. It is not the same feeling one has about the typical Ugandan army officer, who in all likelihood has made many others suffer on his way to achieving his high rank, often has a pistol at his hip and is to be found surrounded by mean-looking guards looking ready to pull the trigger.

Museveni would not be in power all these years later if he had not mastered the dark arts of patronage that leave even his most courageous lieutenants unable to challenge him for political power. He turns a blind eye when they become fabulously wealthy or commit serious crimes against civilians, because he knows one day the evidence can be used against them if they choose to become politicians. Not so with Muntu, who confounded Museveni with a clean streak that no army commander before or after him has been quite able to match. Despite holding the army commander's post for a decade, Muntu refused to eat the poisonous seeds that would have bound him forever to the cult of Musevenism. When at last the president and his army commander disagreed fundamentally, apparently over ethical leadership of the army after Muntu was accused of favoring educated officers,

Museveni fired Muntu and offered him a ministerial post. Muntu, not surprisingly, turned the offer down and quietly retired from military service. Later he served as a lawmaker with the regional assembly in the Tanzanian city of Arusha before actively joining opposition politics back home.

Muntu's critics will say that he's incapable of winning an election, even one at village level. But they miss the whole point of Muntu's career: service of "country above self," as he likes to say. Suppressing his own ego, he's able to hold hands with Kyagulanyi and others in prayer, seemingly just another cog in the machine, often malfunctioning, that's trying to prevent Museveni from ruling unto death and turning Uganda into a hereditary monarchy. Yet, in the large scheme of things, Muntu is more important for Uganda than he himself knows: as the much-ignored politician whose impassioned pleas for justice and accountability speak for millions who still believe in the promise of 1962.

One recent morning, going to a funeral in my home area of Rukungiri, I noticed that there were no Muntu campaign posters in Rwashamaire, his hometown. He votes not far from this town in the district of Ntungamo, so the absence of even the remotest enthusiasm for a son of the land struck me as bizarre and unfortunate. But then I remembered that the politician in question was Gregory Mugisha Muntu Oyera, the upright son of a country that doesn't properly acknowledge him and may not even deserve him. He probably doesn't buy the *boda-boda* men booze and fails to rouse villagers with his hopeful talk, his prayerful conviction. Even those people don't understand him. ■

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