

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Between the ghetto and the establishment: Bobi Wine, Uganda's NUP and the challenges of movement-to-party transition in an electoral autocracy

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Abstract

What does the institutionalisation of a protest movement into an opposition party in an electoral autocracy mean for its members? This article examines this question by analysing the conversion of People Power, a political pressure group in Uganda, into the National Unity Platform (NUP), focusing on the dilemmas of organisation, strategy and identity. NUP sought to broaden and institutionalise People Power's activities to be seen as a credible party capable of holding state power. Simultaneously, its initial political weight was closely tied to the defiant, extra-parliamentary energy of the grassroots – a resource the party needed to preserve. These tensions were intensified by Uganda's authoritarian context, where state repression and demobilisation intersected with uneven access to resources and patronage, producing frictions between privileged actors and grassroots members. The paper shows how these dilemmas generated frustrations among bottom-up constituencies and highlights the importance of examining intra-party processes from a grassroots perspective.

Keywords: Uganda; opposition; protest movement; Bobi Wine; electoral autocracy

Introduction

Together with the political pressure group People Power, Robert Kyagulanyi, better known as Bobi Wine, took Ugandan politics by storm in 2017. People Power injected new energy into the opposition, mobilising large groups of

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people – particularly urban youth – and fuelling hopes that Bobi Wine could win the 2021 elections. Nearly a decade later, however, the momentum has faded. The National Unity Platform (NUP), the party Bobi Wine built on People Power's foundations, now faces internal rifts among members of parliament (MPs) and growing disillusionment among sections of its grassroots supporters, especially those from the People Power days. While NUP sought to broaden and institutionalise People Power's mobilisation in order to be seen as a serious political contender, its initial political weight was closely tied to the defiant, extra-parliamentary energy of the grassroots – a resource the party needed to protect and preserve.

These tensions are not unique to Uganda. Attempts to merge the logics of social movements and political parties almost inevitably generate friction: movements and parties operate according to different objectives, strategies and identities. The same applies to movements that transform into parties, which end up embodying overlapping ambitions and attracting constituencies with diverging expectations. For grassroots activists, this transition is especially fraught. What once felt like a vehicle for empowerment risks turning into another elite-driven structure, producing alienation among those whose mobilisation was crucial to the party's emergence. Under authoritarian rule, where repression and demobilisation intensify these contradictions, these dilemmas are further compounded by uneven access to resources and patronage, creating frictions between privileged actors and those outside these networks, who often contest the resulting hierarchies.

This paper examines how these dynamics unfold in Uganda's NUP, tracing the frictions and dilemmas of its movement-to-party transition from the perspective of grassroots members. The analysis focuses on the three interrelated areas of organisation, identity and strategy, where the expectations of the bottom and the imperatives of party building collide.

The introduction is followed by a review of existing research on relations between movements and parties. Building on this, we outline a framework for analysing how grassroots perceptions of organisation, strategy and identity shape the trajectory of movements-turned-parties under authoritarian conditions. The empirical sections then put this framework to work. The first of these sections traces the rise of People Power and its profile. The second explores grassroots perceptions of NUP's dilemmas of identity (generation, class and ethnicity), organisation (degree of institutionalisation) and strategy (balancing parliamentary and extra-parliamentary arenas). The third examines how bottom-up members encountered NUP's party building amid repression and patronage. The conclusion then returns to the theoretical framework, situating the findings within the wider literature on opposition politics in electoral autocracies.

The analysis draws on about 50 interviews with NUP members, People Power activists and political analysts conducted in 2024–2025 in Uganda (especially Kampala) and online, complemented by media sources. Our aim is not to provide a statistically representative overview of NUP or People Power. Instead, our research draws on purposive sampling and triangulation to identify the key dynamics within the movement and party. The examples and the vignette

presented in this paper should therefore not be read as isolated or anecdotal; rather, they are illustrative of broader patterns that consistently emerged across our fieldwork and analysis. By selecting cases that highlight these dynamics, we can shed light on the recurring tensions, strategies and dilemmas that characterise NUP and its origins in People Power.

Transitions from movements to parties in electoral autocracies

The observed disconnect between scholarship on political parties and research on social movements (McAdam & Tarrow 2010) has recently been addressed by contributions seeking to bridge it (Arato & Cohen 2021; Hutter *et al.* 2018; Roberts 2023; Tarrow 2021; Tilly & Tarrow 2015). This body of research has examined the significant overlap and interplay between parties and movements, with a focus on opposition actors' desire to bridge or merge the strengths of both types of entity and on the difficulties of doing so; it covers Latin America (Almedia 2010; Anria 2013; Roberts 2023; Trejo 2014), North America (Tarrow 2021) and different parts of Europe (Bunce & Wolchik 2011; della Porta *et al.* 2017; Minkenberg 2019; Pirro & Gattinara 2018), but little research on this topic has been done in Africa.

Most countries in sub-Saharan Africa are either electoral autocracies or shallow democracies with governments that intermittently display autocratising ambitions (Nord *et al.* 2024: 61). Such authoritarian manoeuvring has generated multiple forms of discontent. Over the last two decades, the region has seen a rise in popular protests, and there is now a rich and growing literature on both opposition politics (Arriola *et al.* 2023; Bleck & van de Walle 2018; Cheeseman 2015) and civil society mobilisation and popular protest (Branch & Mampilly 2015; Cheeseman & Dodsworth 2023; Dahlum & Wig, 2019; Eckert 2017; Ellis & van Kessel 2009; Engels & Müller 2019; Harris & Hern 2019; Lewis 2021; Mampilly 2023; Marks 2024; Mateos & Erro 2021; Mueller 2018; Rakner 2021; Sanches 2022; Schmiedl & Lioy 2024) in that region. Nevertheless, there are very few contributions centring on the relations between movements and parties; for one exception that traces the relative strength of opposition parties to their movement origins, see LeBas (2011).

Given the prevalence of protests across sub-Saharan Africa that involve both social movements and political parties, there is a pressing need to examine the particular dynamics generated by their interaction. In this context, state repression, co-optation and uneven access to resources shape not only the strategies of opposition actors but also the experiences of grassroots participants, who are central to mobilisation. This article addresses this gap by analysing how the transition of a movement into a party – specifically, People Power into NUP in Uganda – generates frictions and dilemmas, particularly for bottom-up constituencies, highlighting how authoritarian pressures intersect with intra-party hierarchies and struggles over patronage, organisation and identity.

Towards this end, the remainder of this literature review first looks at the literature highlighting the frictions within protest mobilisations – which, we argue, continue to play a role within political parties – and how grassroots

members perceive this. Second, it uses the framework of Della Porta *et al.* (2017) as a heuristic device to examine the ways in which these tensions manifest themselves. Lastly, we relate this framework to the existing literature on Ugandan opposition parties.

Internal tensions in movements and movement-to-party transitions

Social movement scholars have long shown how internal inequalities shape mobilisation: privileged actors – by class, education or gender – often dominate agendas, while underprivileged participants, despite having the sharpest grievances, are side-lined or exposed to the greatest risks (Snow *et al.* 2004). In African contexts, where resources and protection are unevenly distributed, these divisions become particularly acute. Two cross-cutting tensions stand out. First is the divide between privileged and underprivileged actors, with the former often seeking to protect or extend their advantages. Second is the distinction between those embedded in patronage structures and those excluded from them, where such structures provide both resources and protection for the former while leaving others more vulnerable (Bayart 1993; Bratton & van de Walle 1997). Together, these axes shape who mobilises, on what terms and with what goals. Movements thus become arenas where privilege and marginality are negotiated: elites frequently use them to secure or restore access to resources, while poorer actors engage from far more precarious positions (Branch & Mampilly 2015; Diani 2015; Morris & Staggborg 2004).

These dynamics have been central throughout Africa's protest waves. In earlier waves, elites and organised groups mobilised to renegotiate access to state resources, while later waves – from the late 2000s onwards – were increasingly driven by urban youth and the poor, disconnected from patronage networks. These new actors introduced tensions: some demanded inclusion within political parties, while others rejected parties altogether, viewing them as corrupt or conservative (Branch & Mampilly 2015: 82; Mueller 2018). Such double tensions – between privileged and underprivileged actors, and between those inside or outside patronage networks – continue to shape mobilisation and are sharply felt by grassroots participants.

The transition from movements to parties intensifies these tensions. Movement parties – that is, coalitions of activists applying movement logics in party competition (Kitschelt, 2006) – must navigate organisational, strategic and identity dilemmas (della Porta *et al.* 2017: 23–24). Crucially, these dilemmas are rooted in the inequalities and patronage-based divisions inherited from the movement phase.

Organisational dilemmas emerge as movements with horizontal, networked structures confront the formalisation and hierarchy required in party politics. Privileged actors often have disproportionate influence in institutionalised structures, while underprivileged grassroots members may lose voice and agency, intensifying the frustrations observed in the movement phase. Reliance on charismatic leadership can persist or even increase, further alienating those without access to resources or networks (della Porta *et al.* 2017; Kitschelt 2006).

Strategic dilemmas similarly intersect with pre-existing divisions. Parties must balance parliamentary and extra-parliamentary engagement, yet grassroots actors – especially those previously excluded from patronage networks – may resist certain institutional strategies, perceiving them as a betrayal of the movement's defiant ethos. Meanwhile, privileged actors may prioritise strategies that consolidate access to resources or visibility within formal politics, generating tension with the original grassroots base (Bunce & Wolchik 2011; della Porta *et al.* 2017; Hutter *et al.* 2018).

Identity dilemmas also build on these underlying inequalities. Parties seeking to broaden constituencies risk eroding the cohesion of the original movement and frustrating the grassroots actors whose mobilisation gave the party its initial legitimacy. Such negotiations between plurality and unity and between new supporters and the original base are a continuation of the divisions and tensions established during the protest phase.

For both organisation and identity, 'authenticity' is a cross-cutting issue. A social movement's 'authenticity' – that is, the extent to which 'practices are taken as "real" due to the perceived sincerity and/or moral commitment of the actor(s) in question (...) [or] that their practices are aligned with broader cultural-cognitive expectations and categorizations' (Walker & Stepick 2020: 2) – is crucial for the movement to be valued and effective. In particular, 'grassroots authenticity' is central in a movement's legitimacy (Walker & Stepick 2020). This becomes a particularly contentious issue in the transition to a political party and the loss of enthusiasm ensuing from such a transition. Indeed, as the literature on social movements shows, when its authenticity becomes compromised, a movement may become discredited with particular audiences (Walker & Stepick 2020: 3).

These organisational, strategic and identity dilemmas intensify further under authoritarian conditions. Electoral autocracies create incentives for opposition actors to coordinate across parties and movements while simultaneously heightening repression and demobilisation (Buyse 2018; Gilbert & Mohseni 2018; Nord *et al.* 2024). Unequal access to resources and patronage within parties amplifies frictions between privileged actors and grassroots members, producing frustrations and challenging the capacity of movement-based parties to sustain bottom-up engagement. In this way, the cohesion of the party is further eroded; yet – as the literature on protest movement shows – cohesion is crucial for its effectiveness (Mueller 2024).

In essence, the dilemmas of movement-to-party transitions are deeply intertwined with the double tensions observed in protest movements: the divisions between privileged and underprivileged actors and between those inside or outside patronage networks. These tensions are experienced most acutely by grassroots participants, whose mobilisation is crucial to both the movement's and the party's initial success.

Opposition parties in Uganda

People Power's transformation into NUP is an outstanding example of the dynamics described above. While both these entities, as well as Bobi Wine as an

individual, have been the subjects of a fairly large number of academic studies, no studies focus on how they navigate the transition from movement to party and the difficulties a party faces in this context. Most contributions are empirical and focus on the youth dimension (Bareebe 2024; Macdonald *et al.* 2023), musician activism (Friesinger 2021; Schneidermann 2019) and the role of social media (Muzee & Enaifoghe 2020); one study situates its case in theoretical debates on populism (Melchiorre 2023). The sole analysis that relates the confrontational politics of Bobi Wine and NUP to previous opposition debates over strategic choices that emphasise either institutionalisation or defiance (Wilkins *et al.* 2021) does not address NUP's dilemmas and considerations in depth.

The broader literature on Ugandan opposition parties nonetheless provides useful insights (Beardsworth 2016; Bertrand 2021; Bertrand & Mutyaba 2024; Carbone 2003). Much of this work focuses on party-state relations, examining how parties mobilise against incumbents, erode regime dominance or provoke broader political change. Macro-level analyses often emphasise leading figures or coalition building (Beardsworth 2016; Bertrand 2021). Bertrand and Mutyaba's (2024) work on the institutionalisation of the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) and the Democratic Party (DP) is particularly relevant for our purposes, with two elements of that work being especially useful.

First, institutionalisation is a double-edged process. Building formal organisational structures can enhance durability, increase coherence and help establish a recognisable political 'brand' that fosters voter trust. Yet, in authoritarian contexts, formalisation can constrain flexibility and limit a party's capacity to mobilise more fluid forms of dissent, especially among younger generations or grassroots constituencies with long-standing distrust of formal party politics (Bertrand & Mutyaba 2024: 94). In line with this perspective, Bertrand (2021) shows how Ugandan opposition parties must simultaneously 'participate [in] and defy' the regime, balancing institutional survival with the imperative to mount an effective challenge (Bertrand 2021: 594). Second, institutionalisation is not a purely structural process but rather a contested one. Internal actors can resist or reshape formalisation, highlighting the importance of agency in understanding party behaviour (Bertrand & Mutyaba 2024: 93).

The experience of the DP's Uganda Youth Democrats (UYD) is especially relevant in this context, as it highlights the double tensions described earlier. Founded in 1995 to 'bypass government restrictions and harassment' (Carbone 2003: 493), UYD was autonomous until 2015 when it was integrated into the party structure. First, its autonomous position enabled it to reach the population retained by the DP: 'The radicalism and energy of the youth wing made it [UYD's party involvement] a key element in the broader attempt to revive the party' (Carbone 2003: 493). UYD was very influential in the mobilisation of party support in universities and other higher institutions in a hostile political environment (Bertrand & Mutyaba 2024). Second, UYD's 2005 integration in the DP highlighted the tensions mentioned above, as UYD 'found it difficult to fit into the narrow confines of a political party' (Maiyo 2007: 17), which led to a power struggle with the DP. One of the issues was 'the ideological direction of the party as the youth pulled to the left and the party leaders [held]

on to a centre right position' (Maiyo 2007: 17). UYD was frustrated with its party leaders being among the richest people in the country, given that its youth called to narrow the gap between the rich and poor (Maiyo 2007). Although the most serious issues may have been resolved, the ideological divide remains, with these differences affecting the 'internal cohesion and coherence within the DP' (Maiyo 2007: 13).

Building on these insights, this article shifts the analytical focus to the individual members, particularly grassroots activists who originated in People Power. By examining how the members experienced and negotiated organisational, strategic and identity dilemmas during the movement-to-party transition, we show that internal divisions rooted in the original protest movement – between privileged and underprivileged actors and between those inside or outside patronage networks – remain central in understanding NUP's dynamics. In other words, the legacies of movement-level inequalities continue to shape intra-party frictions and grassroots frustrations, even as the party institutionalises.

The rise of Bobi Wine and People Power

The People Power movement emerged around 2018 in the aftermath of the constitutional amendment to remove the age limit requiring presidential candidates to be under the age of 75 years. As a response to the amendment proposal, the Togikwatako protest movement emerged, where *togikwatako* is translated as 'don't touch it', meaning 'don't touch our constitution'. Bobi Wine, who had won a parliamentary by-election as an independent in 2017, was a key Togikwatako leader. He argued that the protest was 'a national and generational cause' (*World Peace Review* 2020), in which the youth had a duty to change the direction of the country. In doing so, he wanted to return the 'power back to the people' – hence the name 'People Power' (*World Peace Review* 2020).

Two characteristics involving organisation, strategy and identity were key to People Power and the rise of Bobi Wine: renewal and youthfulness. First, through open and horizontal network organisation and by following a strategy of extra-institutional defiance, they were able to rejuvenate the opposition in general by being 'new'; second, they were able to represent and tap into an important electoral constituency with an identity – namely, the youth, for whom they were seen as a particularly authentic representative.

Organisation and strategy: rejuvenating the opposition through a political pressure group

After the 2016 elections, which Besigye had lost for the fourth time running, the overall perception was that 'his party had run out of steam' (INGO official 2023 int.). Besigye had lost faith in the possibility of changing the government through the ballot and had resorted to a range of other mechanisms to provoke change. The most successful of his extra-parliamentary mobilisation efforts were the 2011 walk-to-work protests. His consequent attempts were less successful –

including the 'People's Government', formed in February 2018 with himself as the President – and were aimed at expanding to the grassroots level (*Independent Uganda* 2019). Moreover, the FDC was weakened after several key figures of the party left in September 2018 (*Monitor* 2018).

This was the context in which Bobi Wine emerged. He had won the by-elections in Kyadondo East in June 2017 by a landslide (2017), beating both the government and opposition candidates. The 'newness' factor of Bobi Wine was important here; as an activist summarised, 'Besigye had been standing since 2001; there was fatigue about his constant presence, and Bobi Wine injects fresh blood' (civil society activist 2024b int.).

The key to Bobi Wine and People Power was that it did not follow the classical path of a political party. According to a political analyst, 'The instinct was that Bobi Wine, by being very different, by not having the normal route, by flirting with the more settled opposition, he kept himself aloof from the old opposition politics, by remaining fresh and relevant; and being new is the big game in politics' (political analyst 2023b). His charisma and the symbolic capital of his career as a musician also played an important role in these dynamics (Friesinger 2021).

People Power initially derided political parties and positioned itself as a non-partisan, inclusive vehicle for change. This approach allowed individuals to maintain their previous party affiliations while being part of People Power. The commitment to non-partisanship stemmed from the consensus that the multi-party system reinstated by the National Resistance Movement (NRM) in 2005 was a facade and that true political change required transcending partisan divides to overthrow the NRM and reinstate democratic rule, at which point political parties would become more meaningful. Consequently, People Power was marked by the ethos of a non-partisan revolutionary struggle. People Power explicitly stated that it was not a political party but 'a pressure group that is trying to mobilise youths to join leadership and take charge of the country' (*The Observer* 2019). The group stated that it had no structure and no hierarchy of leadership and that no registration was needed to become a member (*Ibidem*).

Throughout 2018, Bobi came to be seen as the 'kingmaker of the by-elections' (Melchiorre 2023: 221), as he endorsed four candidates that all won their by-elections. In the August 2018 Arua by-elections, Bobi Wine and other People Power MPs were shot at, tortured, arrested and charged in courts of law. Bobi's driver was killed by security forces, but the candidate he endorsed still won (*The Observer* 2019). These events, and particularly the nationwide protests that followed, gave Bobi Wine and People Power national and international recognition, which further propelled the People Power brand into the Ugandan political arena.

People Power and Bobi Wine also played an opposition role in other ways, such as in the protests against the 'social media tax' (*The Guardian* 2018). In sum, People Power and Bobi Wine arrived at an opportune moment in Ugandan politics. Using a horizontal structure and a strategy of extra-parliamentary contention, they brought in both political parties and actors from different spheres of society.

Identity and constituency

The identity of People Power was key, with much of its newness being related to Bobi Wine and his core constituency. As a musician, Bobi proudly coined himself the ‘ghetto president’, in a reference to his origin and home in Kamwokya, a slum Kampala neighbourhood. This ‘authentic’ identity was important for his political career, as it provided significant symbolic power.

Throughout the years, the urban youth had become an important electoral constituency, partly because of demographic changes, as an estimated 80% of the Ugandan population is under 30 (Titeca 2019; Reuss & Titeca 2020). These ‘Museveni babies’ were born under a president whose main claim to legitimacy was that he brought peace and security – a claim with little appeal to the members of this group who wanted jobs and welfare services (Reuss & Titeca 2017; Titeca *et al.* 2018). Among these ‘Museveni babies’, the urban lumpen is a particularly visible and marginalised group. In the recent past, they played an important role as a mobilising force during elections, particularly in Kampala. There was an important difference compared to previous attempts to do so: Bobi Wine was seen as particularly authentic in this context, as he directly symbolised and represented them and had an overall stronger appeal among this group. ‘Kizza Besigye had been relying on, and instrumentalising the urban demographic, in his protests. But Bobi Wine didn’t only rely on them: he was one of them’ (political analyst 2023a int.). In the words of a People Power activist,

When Bobi Wine came: I’m seeing myself, I see how Bobi Wine is us, he’s ours! We have all these politicians, who went to Makerere, who are a doctor, a professor. But we didn’t have any connection with these people. They don’t deliver anything for us. When Bobi Wine came, it opened the eyes for many people: one of us can be a politician?! (People Power activist 2024c int.)

Another sympathiser commented, ‘Before, we were seen as useless; and, because we never went to school, whatever we said, the language we used: it was seen as making trouble. But it’s not; and Bobi: he used our language, exactly the same language. It made us visible’ (People Power sympathiser 2024a int.). One activist described the emergence of People Power and NUP as ‘magical’ and was ‘willing to give his life for Bobi at this point’ (People Power activist 2023a int.). As a civil society activist summarised, ‘Bobi Wine has opened up Ugandan politics to a huge percentage of UG population which didn’t view politics as a thing’ (civil society activist 2024a int.).

Bobi Wine was not the only important figure in the emergence of People Power; the group around him was also instrumental. The ‘Firebase crew’, a group of musicians and producers, played a key role in shaping the narrative of People Power as being there for the common people. As a People Power sympathiser summarised, ‘Bobi Wine, he showed that: you don’t need to be an elite to join politics. When a boda boda rider or a gym instructor sees Eddie Mutwe, or when they see Dan Magic on the street, or chairman Nyanzi [Bobi Wine’s brother], they know: we can also do this’ (People Power sympathiser 2024b int.).

In this way, the emergence of People Power serves as an illustration of the recent protest movements in Africa described earlier. First, People Power started as a grassroots movement with radical demands for a new type of politics and then gained legitimacy through its novelty and by differentiating itself from established elites (Branch & Mampilly 2015; Mueller 2018). Second, People Power had a particular identity and authenticity, tapping into a specific consistency: the poor (or lumpen) urban youth in ‘the ghetto’ – that is, the poorer parts of urban areas, mainly Kampala. From the beginning, the overt social distinctions of People Power and its followers were strongly pronounced in terms of class, place and generation.

In the next section, we describe what happens when both of these markers start to change: not only in terms of a transition to a political party but also in terms of constituency, as the party started to include ‘traditional’ politicians. In doing so, we show how intra-party tensions began to emerge, which have played out along similar lines as those within protest movements: between the privileged/underprivileged and those part of/resisting patronage structures – both of which strongly overlap in this case.

NUP is established but so are its dilemmas

Organisation and strategy: the establishment of NUP as a political party

The transformation of People Power into a political party, NUP, was influenced by a mix of factors. First, given the popularity of Bobi Wine and the success of People Power, there was a genuine belief that they could win the presidential elections. A strategic choice was therefore made to contest for elections rather than aim for mass movement. Second, there were organisational reasons: People Power was very much a horizontal organisation, which remained difficult to control; anyone could claim to be People Power, and there was no clear authority. As a political party, NUP allowed for more controllable political allies, easier access to funding, a formal platform for fielding candidates in parliamentary and grassroots elections, and organised structures for building local support. Third, the authoritarian context played a role: despite its value, People Power as a movement always faced the risk of being banned by the government, which had occurred with earlier pressure groups, including the Activists for Change (A4C) group that led the 2011 protests and its successor, For God and my Country (4GC). In sum, in terms of both organisation and strategy, there seemed to be clear benefits in changing into a party. Doing so, however, had a profound impact on People Power’s identity.

Identity: class and ethnicity

The identity dilemma can be illustrated by NUP’s process of recruiting candidates for parliamentary elections. We examine this process in relation to two elements: the commercialisation of politics, related to class identity; and the geography of politics in Uganda, or ethnic identity.

The commercialisation of Ugandan politics, and particularly of electoral campaigns, has increased over the last two decades. The most detailed study

examined the 2016 elections (WFD 2020) and showed that parliamentary candidates on average spent 136,084 USD (465 million UGX) on electoral campaigns, in a country where the average income is about 50 USD (200,000 UGX) or less per month (Monitor 2022). Attaining political office, particularly a parliamentary seat, thus requires enormous amounts of money.

The nomination process for NUP parliamentary candidates reflected this context. Accusations circulated of bribes being paid: 'it was money thrown at them [NUP officials]: so, the people who would do the vetting were bribed – similar to other parties' (electoral specialist 2023 int.). Others explained the money spent as contributions to Bobi Wine's presidential campaigns. Key constituencies were also characterised by nomination fights, for which the vetting process was unclear. Many interviewees complained that key People Power individuals were pushed out and replaced by established figures, such as MPs who had come from other parties. One key mobiliser, responsible for mobilising and selecting MPs, summarised this as follows: 'From the side of the party, out of desperation, out of panic, we relied on the old guard and seasoned professionals and businessmen. People Power mobilisers were put aside for more conventional figures' (People Power activist 2024b). The stronger financial base of these candidates and their presumed readily available constituencies were perceived to be necessary for electoral success.

Another identity-shaping aspect of the nomination process was the difficulty of attracting candidates for NUP across the country, due to the geography of Ugandan politics and, more specifically, the rural-urban divide and ethno-regional political affiliations. The ruling NRM has made it difficult for the opposition to establish itself in rural areas. As Bareebe (2024: 94) argued, 'in practice, President Museveni has made rural Uganda a no-go area for opposition parties. This has allowed the ruling party to maintain its hegemony in rural Uganda, where 80% of the population lives'.

The 'Buganda' factor was equally important for NUP's electoral politics. This ethnic element has been exacerbated by the Museveni government to portray NUP as Buganda chauvinistic and as having negative intentions towards other regions and groups, with the clear aim of delegitimising the party and pulling voters away from it. That said, it is important to acknowledge the central role of Baganda in People Power and NUP, without falling into the trap of misrepresentation and exaggeration.

The Baganda are the largest ethnic group in the country, residing in the central region, and their inclusion was a cornerstone of Museveni's 'big tent' strategy: he awarded Baganda individuals (known as Muganda) government positions and restored the cultural dimensions of the Buganda kingdom. The relationship between the government and the Baganda gradually deteriorated after the Baganda began to feel excluded from power. This led to separation, mistrust and finally open conflict in 2009 during the 'Buganda riots', in which more than 40 people died (Sjögren 2021).

The rise of Bobi Wine, a Muganda, must be understood within this context. For the first time under Museveni's rule, a leader of a major party and of the entire opposition came from outside the Western region, which was the core constituency and centre of power of the NRM government. This in itself

constituted a major novelty about Bobi Wine and NUP and contributed to Bobi being viewed as a major threat by the government: as the largest ethnic group in Uganda, the Baganda are a major voting and power block. Bobi Wine called himself *Omubanda wa Kabaka* or ‘the Kabaka’s gangster’ in honour of the king of Buganda – a nickname that is still used (JBMuwonge 2023). The rise of Bobi Wine and NUP was not missed by the Baganda political leadership, which had long been looking for ways to increase its influence over politics. Its most important previous attempt under NRM rule was the Suubi group, which was formed in the context of the 2011 elections to promote the interests of the Buganda kingdom (Sjögren 2021). This group joined NUP as a block, with Mathias Mpuuga as the most prominent member. Thus, there was a significant amount of competition for NUP positions in Central Uganda and Buganda.

Overall, its shift to a political party led to a change and sharpening of People Power’s political identity, which created a number of issues. First, the ethnic identity of the group became clearer. Although the People Power movement was a Central Uganda (and particularly a Buganda) phenomenon from the beginning, this had not been an explicit identity. Through the establishment of NUP, however, the Buganda identity became much more pronounced.

Second, the socio-economic profiles of NUP candidate MPs did not differ significantly from those of other MPs, whether opposition or government. NUP candidate MPs were either sitting MPs who had shifted to the NUP or people who had contested before but failed. In this way, NUP brought in a wealth of parliamentary expertise and influence and allowed the party to counter denigrating criticism levelled at the ‘ghetto’ character of NUP. At the same time, however, bringing in elites who had grown through the ‘old’ political system constituted what a civil society activist described as a ‘Faustian pact’ (civil society activist 2024a). In the words of one journalist, ‘You don’t get a whole lot of activists to get the NUP nominations. That didn’t take place. If you look at the age range of people, for sure you got some young people running, but in comparison to other opposition parties, they were not much different’ (Ugandan journalist 2024 int.). A donor official voiced similar concerns: ‘You don’t see an influx of a different type of people to parliament: they don’t look radically different from what other opposition members look like. They’re elites: you’re talking elites running for MP. The idea that you have some radical youth contesting for parliament, they’re not going to make it through the process’ (donor official 2023 int.). As discussed below, the incorporation of political elites all of this had a particular impact on the ways in which key constituencies perceived NUP’s authenticity.

In sum, the establishment of NUP set the stage for several dilemmas in the areas of organisation, strategy and identity. In terms of organisation, the choice to become an institutionalised party carried the risk of creating tensions with People Power’s grassroots constituencies, which were key to the establishment and success of the movement. As a political journalist summarised, ‘the party ended up looking very much like the opposition parties it criticised’ (Ugandan political journalist 2023a int.). Regarding identity, NUP both extended its identity by including MPs and narrowed it by becoming more explicitly Buganda, raising the question of whether the party would be able to maintain

its unity and authenticity. In terms of strategy, the question was whether becoming a political party would increase opportunities or instead reduce them by affecting the movement's legitimacy. One donor official argued that 'the very establishment of NUP could be seen as a contradiction, as the establishment of NUP as a political party was betraying the principles of People Power' (donor official 2023 int.).

Before we discuss the ways in which this transition evolved and was further understood by its members, we turn to how the repressive context in which the transition took place shaped NUP's organisational and strategic dilemmas.

State violence and its ripple effects on the NUP dilemmas

The dynamics discussed in the previous section became further pronounced through the state violence NUP and People Power members were exposed to and the enormous price that particularly lower-level activists had to pay. During the campaigns for the 2021 elections, the security services began to abduct and detain NUP activists. Many were beaten, harassed and/or tortured (Al Jazeera 2021). It has been estimated that over 1000 people have been abducted and detained, and some are still missing. Most abductions took place in the central region. While some appeared targeted towards central NUP activists, many abductions were of random NUP sympathisers (African Arguments 2021, 2022). As NUP's secretary general David Lewis Rubongoya said, 'It has of course had a chilling effect, especially on the base (...) People fear to engage. And I think that's what the regime wants, to instil a lot of fear into the population' (African Arguments 2022). The cost paid by NUP grassroots activists was huge. As one journalist summarised, 'People lost lives, they lost jobs, they lost hopes' (Ugandan political journalist 2023a int.). These circumstances made it difficult for NUP to develop.

The extreme violence meted out by state institutions created a range of difficulties for NUP, mainly caused by the many abductions and imprisonments. A range of interviewees – and particularly NUP members – felt that the party should have done more to release the people who were *de facto* hostages of the government. As one NUP member queried, 'What do you do if someone is arrested, if someone is in trouble? What are the mechanisms of protection? We didn't, and we don't have that in place. You're on your own, basically. There was no emergency response, no rapid response – nothing' (NUP member 2023b int.). Interviews with international human rights officers and diplomats mirrored these sentiments; the interviewees were less than impressed by the strategy of NUP's leadership in response to these cases. Others were less critical, arguing that the scale of the imprisonment and abductions did not allow the party to react sufficiently. There was also a perception of a learning curve among NUP, allowing the party to react better to the renewed but more limited abductions in 2024.

The second effect of extreme state pressure – in the form of both violence and patronage – on NUP's dilemmas of organisation and strategy arose through feelings of suspicion within the party. In particular, grassroots activists feared that their leaders, MPs and officials might be government informers. Rumours

circulated widely; in the interviews, many NUP members and sympathisers accused particular leaders of collaborating with state security forces.

The third effect came by way of the Ugandan diaspora, which played an important role in the rise of Bobi Wine, People Power and NUP. According to several diaspora members, the rise of NUP coincided with the ‘zoom revolution’. The US diaspora is particularly active in NUP, with several NUP chapters; they played a key role in the financing of NUP, which could not rely on public funds (ACFIM 2020). However, tensions also emerged between the diaspora and NUP, mainly around the types of demands advocated by NUP Uganda. The diaspora often pushed for more radical change, feeling that the NUP leadership did not do enough to provoke a regime change¹.

In sum, the broader context of state repression intensified several dilemmas for NUP. Strategically, it generated tensions regarding how to respond to violence and engage with the regime, affecting both Ugandan and diaspora members. Organisationally, the shift to a more hierarchical party structure clashed with the expectations of grassroots activists. For low-level members, these top-down decisions often generated frustration and a sense of disempowerment, particularly regarding how the party should protect and mobilise its supporters under repression. Debates over which constituencies the party should prioritise further amplified these tensions, with rank-and-file members and diaspora activists alike feeling side-lined or unheard in strategic and organisational decision-making.

Intimidated and exhausted? NUP after the 2021 elections: its internal divisions and dilemmas

From its very start, NUP had been attempting to unite two constituencies and harbouring two identities: it had to remain loyal to its People Power base as the voice of the ‘ghetto’, but it also needed to play the role of a parliamentary party. NUP positioned itself ambiguously in order to cover both bases. While a strict focus on extra-parliamentary protests was abandoned, the party continued its reliance on military symbolism such as red berets or clenched fists, in order to at least figuratively communicate that it was fighting a liberation struggle – a key factor for its grassroots authenticity.

With its two constituencies, the party had to speak to two audiences: it had to present itself as radical enough to retain its grassroots constituency and its People Power roots, while also presenting itself as sufficiently mainstream to accommodate the wider electorate. The latter was essential to avoid the party being labelled as ‘radical extremists’ – an online campaign regime voices had been waging for some time (*The Independent Uganda* 2020a).

At the beginning of NUP’s trajectory and throughout the 2021 election campaign, Bobi Wine was able to manage this balancing act. He successfully portrayed himself as both a member of the parliamentary opposition and a fearless leader of extra-parliamentary dissent under challenging circumstances, which was crucial to maintain his grassroots authenticity and legitimacy. For the other MP candidates, maintaining a balancing act was much more difficult.

As mentioned earlier, they came from traditional political backgrounds and had served as MPs for other parties. Thus, only Bobi Wine could credibly symbolise the transcendence of parliamentary and extra-parliamentary opposition politics. Over time, however, his ability to do so eroded. The notion of Bobi as a 'ghetto boy' was gradually devalued. While much of his base is still the urban youth, he is also perceived by many as having become a figure of the establishment, as he travels the world and receives international admiration and support, which negatively affects his grassroots authenticity.

Bobi Wine's trajectory symbolises NUP's divided identity. Over time, tensions emerged within the party, which interviewees described as cracks between those striving for regime change and those wanting to keep the status quo. Most MPs were seen as representing the old guard, a tendency represented by the 2021–2024 opposition leader, Mathias Mpuuga. As one NUP member who came from People Power summarised, 'The old guard, they're ok where they are, as long as they're parliamentarians. It's not about regime change for them. Mpuuga in his youthful days wanted regime change but has now settled for doing what he does: being an MP, and at best advocating for some minor change in the margin' (NUP member 2023a int.). Similarly, a political analyst noted, 'The group of MPs were a very different group than the People Power group: they've grown through the formal system, changed parties when the wind blows different but [are] not radical in their position. They don't have the same connection with activists' (Ugandan political analyst 2023 int.) A political journalist commented, 'most of them [NUP MP's] don't want to rock the boat. They're essentially conservative people; they don't want to challenge the status quo – let alone lead street protests' (Ugandan political journalist 2024 int.). For many former People Power members, the MPs' behaviour demonstrates that change will not be possible through parliament.

This overall tension must be understood in relation to the commercialisation of politics. Newly elected MPs generally arrive in parliament with heavy debts, having taken out major loans to finance their campaigns. A similar logic dictates their possibilities of re-election. Services, medical bills or school fees must be paid to their constituents. Challenging the regime poses a risk in this situation; as one political journalist described it, 'The Mpuugas have been long enough in parliament to realise: I can't bite a stone, or my bread won't be buttered' (Ugandan journalist 2023a int.).

The nature of Ugandan politics – and particularly of parliamentary elections – is inherently compromising. In the words of a journalist, 'opposition MPs are as likely as NRM to get after the money: they're so heavily indebted after the campaigns' (Ugandan journalist 2023b int.). As the last quote suggests, the ruling party will actively use resources to compromise opposition politicians. Indeed, in February and March 2024, revelations by the online activist platform Agora showed that main opposition MPs, including Mathias Mpuuga, had been given major sums of money by the government. Similarly, the revelation of major corruption schemes by the speaker of parliament did not generate any parliamentary action by opposition MPs. To many, this lack of response exposed the MPs' goal, whether opposition or government: survival or self-enrichment. An NUP mobiliser summarised the situation by stating, 'it is

only through politics that we can survive, by getting some crumbs. This means that it is easy for people to become compromised' (NUP mobiliser 2024 int.). Another NUP member commented, 'ideology can always wait; I have a family to feed' (NUP member 2024b int.). To maintain this balance, the status quo is punished.

In these circumstances, NUP MPs are perceived as 'more of the same'. Many Ugandans hold MPs – and politicians in general – in disdain, and NUP has not been able to change their perception. As one NUP member argued, 'NUP and Bobi Wine have become part of the grubbiness of party politics' (NUP member 2024a int.). This has led to major frustration among old People Power activists. As one said, 'We also feel suffocated internally. We thought NUP would be a vehicle for young people, but [there is] so much influx of the old guard. It has become more of the same' (People Power activist 2024a). Another commented, 'We shouldn't have recycled the old elites – we probably were naïve as well' (People Power activist 2024a int.).

The outcome is that many People Power activists have expressed open and explicit disappointment with NUP and Bobi Wine, who are no longer perceived as authentic. In the vignette below, we provide a more detailed example of Alex, a former People Power activist.

Vignette: Alex, the disappointed People Power activist

As an example, we take the above-quoted activist who said he had been willing to 'give his life' for Bobi during the initial days of People Power. When we met Alex (a pseudonym) in Kamwokya, the heartland of NUP, People Power and Bobi Wine, he said 'F*** Bobi' openly and without fear. Alex had been part of a core group in People Power. He was part of the group who made it to Kyambogo stadium to nominate Bobi Wine for the election – a violent and dangerous moment. Alex described how bullets were flying around them² and how, at that point, he'd have done anything for Bobi. People had very high hopes, and Alex described the moment as electric, saying, 'I would have taken a bullet for him'. But Alex's view changed. Like many others, he now feels that People Power's members have paid a very high price for their commitment. People have died and disappeared. As Alex argues, there's a feeling that 'Bobi is now in it for himself. He left us behind'.

Alex's views³ reflect the thoughts of many activists: many People Power activists have become disillusioned. Their hopes were high, and their disappointment runs deep. This result is due to unrealistic expectations and points to the limits of what an opposition party could achieve in the Ugandan context of electoral authoritarianism. Perhaps most importantly, it shows that NUP's strategy targeted a particular event – the 2021 elections – but did not go beyond this. Once the elections had passed, the momentum disappeared, and there is an overall consensus that the movement's energy started to ebb. There was no longer a clear goal and no concrete plan or pathway to follow; even short-term wins became difficult to identify.

It has therefore become difficult to manage the expectations of the supporters. According to one Ugandan analyst, 'You have a large number of angry young men, who are inexperienced in politics and who now feel very frustrated' (Ugandan political analyst 2024a int.). A journalist made a similar statement: 'they are angry young men, impatient for change, and they're not seeing it [the change]' (political journalist 2024 int.). While some continue to express sympathy for Bobi Wine and acknowledge that the current issues are part of the overall struggle, they too express frustration with the MPs. In other words, throughout the institutionalisation process – that is, the further development of NUP – a substantial group within the party, particularly those advocating for extra-parliamentary protest, became increasingly frustrated and disappointed. In this way, the evolution of NUP illustrates that the 'double tensions' within protest movements also play out within movement parties, particularly the tensions between underprivileged actors outside of patronage networks – in this case, the grassroots People Power members – and privileged actors within patronage networks – that is, the more established politicians who joined NUP when it was established. The authoritarian pressure of the Museveni government further acts as an accelerator in these dynamics, including the patronage dynamics (i.e. the handing out of money within parliament) and the brutal repression, which have intensified the tensions between these groups. The underprivileged and urban young People Power members felt that the party did not do enough for them; they felt that NUP had become 'more of the same'.

Conclusions

In this paper, we discussed the transition from People Power, a Ugandan political pressure group, into NUP, a political party in the context of an electoral autocracy. In doing so, the paper deepens the current understanding of movement-to-party transitions under authoritarian conditions and of how such a transition is understood by the rank and file. We argue that party-building efforts aimed at reducing a movement's collective action problems are crucial but also produce frictions: they provoke discontent among a significant underprivileged group of members who feel alienated by the party's institutionalisation and view the party and its leaders as no longer authentic. These frictions manifest across organisation, strategy and identity and, in the case of People Power, were amplified by the repression of the Museveni government. By shifting the research focus to these intra-party dynamics in the transition from movement to party, we offer a new and important perspective in understanding the functioning of NUP and Bobi Wine and the challenges they face.

NUP's early phase relied on high expectations of electoral success and on symbolic resources such as military paraphernalia (e.g. red berets and clenched fists) to sustain both parliamentary and extra-parliamentary forms of opposition. These symbols reinforced the party's identity as a movement rooted in People Power and its struggle against an entrenched regime. Yet, once

the 2021 elections had passed and no clear goal remained, tensions surfaced. While the division over whether to pursue activist and contentious politics or institutionalised and orderly politics is a long-standing one among Ugandan opposition forces, especially the FDC (Wilkins *et al.* 2021), it was particularly pronounced for NUP. This was due to NUP's origins in the extra-parliamentary opposition of People Power and its especially authentic character rooted in the 'ghetto'. Balancing activist and institutionalised politics proved difficult, and the party's institutionalisation weakened its links to grassroots constituencies. MPs and Bobi Wine were increasingly viewed as part of an elite, reinforcing perceptions that NUP had become 'more of the same'. Meanwhile, the party's identity as a youth-oriented, urban, Buganda-based movement helped mobilise certain constituencies but limited its appeal across regions and provoked classist⁴ and regionalised critiques⁵, illustrating how the remnants of a movement's past can be both a resource and a liability.

This study illustrates the dilemmas faced by movement parties, including how the remnants of their movement's past can be both an asset and a challenge, exacerbated by authoritarian conditions. It also showed the importance of examining intra-party dynamics and the ways in which actors within political parties relate to these processes of institutionalisation. All of these issues raise major concerns for the future of NUP and for what that party – or any other opposition entity – can achieve in the current context of authoritarian rule.

The broader lesson from NUP's experience is that movement parties face a dual challenge under authoritarianism: they must pursue external goals, such as electoral gains or extra-parliamentary pressure, while simultaneously managing internal conflicts between actors with divergent stakes, identities and capacities. Symbolic resources and a shared movement identity can help sustain mobilisation, but they cannot fully substitute for coherent strategy, organisational inclusiveness or the management of expectations, as shown by the disappointment of grassroots members. NUP's trajectory emphasises that internal dynamics are as consequential as external pressures in shaping a movement party's capacity to effect change. Understanding these intra-party frictions, particularly in contexts of repression and unequal access to resources, is therefore essential in assessing both the limits and potential of opposition politics in Uganda and comparable authoritarian settings.

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Notes

1 The funds sent by the diaspora were also a source of tension between NUP and the diaspora, but this is outside of the scope of this paper.

2 Bobi Wine was arrested shortly afterwards, in a particularly violent manner. As a press article describes, 'The police also attacked National Unity Platform (NUP) presidential nominee Robert Kyagulanyi aka Bobi Wine soon after he got nominated violently breaking his car glasses and

forcefully removing him from his car and bundling him into a waiting police van' (*Independent Uganda* 2020b).

3 As stated in our methodology section, we present this vignette because our research has shown it to be representative of the dynamics we study.

4 As one academic expressed, 'Is this how far we have sunk as a country that we have to choose between an autocrat and "this"? Is this guy what our country stands for?' A journalist commented, 'You see, most of what you can call the "intellectual class" are very snobby about Bobi: they look down on him. They make him feel uncomfortable. He's so far out of the mainstream politics or civil society that they hold him in disdain'. A NUP member described this as 'The feeling of Bobi Wine being inadequate, of being just a musician, of being a ghetto boy: it never went away; many look down on him'. A businessman noted, 'The perception is, he's just a musician, he's from the firebase crew, from the ghetto, he's a rasta, he's inadequate'.

5 The government successfully portrayed NUP as a Buganda phenomenon that posed a threat for other regions.

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