2018

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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/lajur/vol4/iss1/7

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The ‘Big Men’ of Africa: Origins, Tactics, and Implications of Rule by Mugabe and Museveni

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Abstract: This paper explores the phenomenon of ‘Big Man’ rule in post-colonial Africa, through the lens of two prominent African ‘Big Men’: Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, and Yoweri Museveni of Uganda. This paper contributes to the debate regarding the democratic nature of elected ‘Big Men’ and their ability to serve their citizens. This paper argues that ‘Big Man’ rule in Uganda and Zimbabwe cannot be considered democratic due to the tactics of control used by these leaders, nor can it be considered benevolent, because of the implications these tactics have on the effectiveness of government. This paper starts by examining the colonial roots of ‘Big Man’ rule to establish a context before delving into the tactics and implications of these tactics. This argument challenges the notion that the relative peace and stability brought on by these leaders is inducing democracy and responsible government.

Key Words: Big Man; Mugabe; Museveni; Zimbabwe; Uganda.

Introduction

The African continent is dotted with examples of the ‘Big Man.’ ‘Big Man’ rule “can be defined as a form of autocratic rule that is highly personalized and restrained little by modern institutions” (Anthony 2006, 160). This paper will explore the origins, tactics, and implications of ‘Big Man’ rule by examining two prominent ‘Big Men,’ Zimbabwe’s Robert Mugabe and Uganda’s Yoweri Museveni. This essay argues that despite the periods of relative stability brought on by Mugabe and Museveni, it is incorrect to categorize either as a benevolent and democratic leader because of their extreme focus on perpetuating power rather than serving their citizens. This is an argument that is not supported to by many academic institutions and world leaders as Mugabe and Museveni have both received honorary degrees from universities across the world, and Mugabe was even appointed to the role of Goodwill Ambassador by the World Health Organization. While some of these accolades have been revoked and the reputations of these leaders remain murky, this paper intends to make clear the nature of these leaders’ political rule and the negative consequences of their rule (Horton 2017, 1938; Rogers 2007, 12). While Mugabe was removed from power in November of 2017, Museveni remains as the political leader of Uganda. The tenures of Mugabe and Museveni as leaders are not dissimilar to those of the leaders in countries such as Cameroon, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gabon, Nigeria, Sudan, and Togo (Diamond 2008, 144). The research conducted in this paper on ‘Big Man’ rule in Uganda and Zimbabwe should encourage other scholars to research this subject in different regions of Africa. First the colonial roots of this phenomenon will be discussed, followed by an analysis of the tactics used to subvert democracy, such as patronage networks, media influence, and subversion of electoral processes. The analysis will conclude by investigating the consequences that leadership
style has upon the ability of the government to serve its citizens. This paper will
demonstrate that ‘Big Man’ rule in Uganda and Zimbabwe, born out of colonialism, has
adverse effects on the ability of governments to serve their citizens because of the
undemocratic, extraordinary focus on consolidating and perpetuating power.

In what context have ‘Big Men’ come to rule in Africa?

The roots of ‘Big Man’ rule in Africa can be traced back to the colonial period. While
there are examples of strong warlords and territorial leaders in pre-colonial Africa, the
unwavering personal authority of the ‘Big Man’ was not present in pre-colonial times. In
Zimbabwe “chiefly authority over land and people was never complete” (Mseba 2015, 75).
Mseba argues that this is because authority which rivaled that of the chief also existed in
the forms of spirit mediums and those who provided wives to the chiefdoms’ founders
(Mseba 2015, 76). This constant rivalry for authority, even in times of domination by a
chief, is indicative that the absolute power of the ‘Big Man’ did not exist in pre-colonial
Zimbabwe.

Similarly, in the pre-colonial kingdom of Buganda, which existed roughly in the
boundaries of modern Uganda, Hanson argues that power was not concentrated in the
hands of the kings, but rather dispersed among various state figures. She observes that
“Diverse authority figures provided significant and effective checks on the king’s power,
[even when] the king’s power grew, he was still surrounded, literally and figuratively, by
others who curbed his authority” (Hanson 2009, 181). Hanson demonstrates that even in
the powerful kingdom of Buganda, the monarch did not wield the absolute power of a
modern ‘Big Man’.

Colonial rulers often imposed indirect rule by giving a selected leader of a
community (who was loyal to the colonizer) authority over an area (Baldwin 2014, 255),
but undermined the pre-colonial systems of checks and balances on said leader (Warner
2001, 81). Pre-colonial governance structures in Africa were completely re-organized by
the colonizers in order to undermine any local power and maximize the influence of the
colonizer. While local power structures may have remained relatively unchanged, the way
in which those structures operated had changed; leaders no longer derived power from
their people and were therefore no longer required to be accountable to them. In
particular, the French referred to local leaders as their “instruments” implying that African
leaders were set up to be tools of the colonizers and used to exercise colonial dominance
(Warner 2001, 81). In the case of Uganda, the British imposed their concept of individual
land ownership onto native practices, turning peasants and chiefs into tenants and
landlords (Warner 2001, 81). The British conception of private property paved the way for
new tactics of control and governance, undermining the traditional governance structures.

This new colonial rule often created arbitrary boundaries, resulting in colonial
states with no regard for the organization of individuals within those spaces. The creation
of a physical state did very little in the way of creating a national identity for the people
within the state, nor did it create the infrastructure to support a central government. Herbst
argues that “[c]olonizers were not interested in duplicating the power infrastructure which
bound city to hinterland …[r]ather, the cities were mainly designed to service the needs
of the colonizers” (Herbst 2000, 16). Colonizers were interested in the extraction of
resources, which is why many set up administrative capitals on the coasts of states.
These cities were designed to be ports for the colonizers to move goods, not to be the seats of power for African leaders. As Warner points out, “[t]he colonial state apparatus had, if at all, built only weak administrative and infrastructure links to much of the state’s territory” (Warner 2001, 83). The colonizers did little in the way of creating infrastructure for a central government, leaving future leaders to rely only on their own personalities and networks to centralize power.

The extractive, non-unifying design of the colonial state had long-lasting effects on the identity of the people residing within the boundaries. People within any given state are divided between “many distinctive ethnic entities by differences of language, religion, race, region of residence, and so forth” (Jackson 1982, 7). Furthermore, these divisions were often exacerbated by the colonizers attempting to destabilize any united resistance to their domination. These divisions are still felt today, where central governments are, by necessity, built on the backs of multi-ethnic coalitions (Adejumobi 2000, 63). In Southern Rhodesia (present-day Zimbabwe), where white individuals created permanent settlements, the 1950s and 1960s gave birth to nationalist movements (Herbst 2000, 17). The white population gave many black Africans an entity to rally against; however due to the dispersed and diverse nature of the many groups in Zimbabwe, the movements were unable to gain traction amongst the rural populations and ultimately resulted in increased divisions between rural and urban groups (Herbst 2000, 18). It is in this climate that the ‘Big Man’ emerged as the model for political rule in Africa.

The exit of colonial powers led to the emergence of the ‘Big Man’ as a ruler of the African nation-state. Upon Zimbabwean independence, the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) waged war against the primarily white minority government, which led to brokered peace by the UK, and a general election (Law 2014, 220). Robert Mugabe, leader of the ZANU (now the political party ZANU-PF) won an overwhelming majority of the vote. Mugabe was initially seen as a symbol of black Zimbabwe, and, like many of the ‘Big Men’, he possessed a “distinctive character” (Booth 2006, viii). Years later, during the 1986 coup in Uganda, another distinctive character seized power: Yoweri Museveni. Coming in on the heels of the atrocities perpetrated by the Idi Amin and Milton Obote rules, Museveni was seen by many as a potential solution to the violence and instability.

Both Mugabe and Museveni managed to elevate themselves to become the only national political figure in their respective countries (Law 2014, 220; Tripp 2004, 4). The lack of popular political figures who were relevant to multiple ethnic groups allowed these colorful leaders to solidify and concentrate power without much backlash. This was observed as a continental phenomenon in the 1980s as Jackson stated, “Wherever African governments have exercised substantial control, strong personal rulers have been firmly in the saddle” (Jackson 1982, 7). Both Mugabe and Museveni had firmly entrenched themselves as the only viable leaders in the eyes of their people almost immediately upon securing their seats of power.

How do ‘Big Men’ consolidate power and ensure continuing rule?

‘Big Men’ have the tendency to come to power in a coup, however their rule is typically perpetuated in a pseudo-democratic system (Adejumobi 2000, 63). These leaders “personally directed the administration and political institutions, arbitrarily passed laws to suit their own purposes, banned independent political organizations, maintained
power through various forms of patronage, and used the military as a personal army.” (Tripp 2004, 4). There are many reasons why leaders like Mugabe and Museveni wish to remain in power; after terrible atrocities of leaders past, they may believe that a change in government would trigger instability. Another view is that they may fear prosecution from their successors. Regardless of the reasons, the ‘Big Men’ of Africa have conceived strategies for remaining in power. These strategies have rendered many African states without an effectively functioning democracy.

As mentioned, there are numerous tactics used by these leaders but perhaps the most prominent are the extensive patronage networks cultivated by each ‘Big Man’. As previously demonstrated, due to colonialism African states are made up of numerous fractured ethnic groups that can have very little in common. ‘Big Men’ draw upon “informal networks of patron-client relations that draw their symbolic and emotional glue from ethnic bonds” (Diamond 2008, 138). Uniting and mobilizing their own ethnic groups is a primary concern of a ‘Big Man’. The next priority of the leader is to add different ethnic groups to his patronage network. This is not an indiscriminate menagerie of random groups, but rather a well-considered, deliberate selection. Baldwin posits that “Political leaders consciously choose how much power to allow traditional leaders based on electoral calculations […] political leaders cede power to traditional chiefs as a means of mobilizing electoral support from non-coethic groups” (Baldwin 2014, 253). Uganda and Zimbabwe are no exceptions to this phenomenon, as both Museveni and Mugabe have brokered coalitions spanning numerous groups “to maintain control” (Baldwin 2014, 266).

Another significant tactic used by leaders to maintain power is shaping the public narrative, primarily through the use of media. This tactic has been used extensively by Mugabe’s party, ZANU-PF. By leveraging connections in both domestic and international media, as well as word of mouth and grassroots efforts, ZANU-PF has attempted to re-frame history and paint ZANU-PF in a positive light. This narrative “reduces Zimbabwe’s complex and controversial history to a simple narrative favouring ZANU-PF” (Laurie 2012, 174). This is not simply a nostalgic claim, but one that is amended and updated to remain current and topical with the electorate (Laurie 2012, 174). As observed by Tangri, “Many believed Mugabe to be ‘father of the nation’ and believed he was irreplaceable” (Tangri 2010, 22). In Uganda “the media have been subjected to many constraints imposed by state elites” (Tangri 2010, 33). Influence over the media and narrative is a common tactic employed by the ‘Big Men’ to remain popular with the electorate. This popularity among the electorate is used as justification for extended terms, and ensures that the government can claim to have a legitimate mandate.

An extremely powerful tactic leveraged by African ‘Big Men,’ is the subversion of political process. This broad tactic can come in many forms, be it through the use of violence and intimidation or peaceful constitutional amendments; Mugabe and Museveni are no strangers to undemocratic practices. In fact, Law argues that “violence has been central to Mugabe’s strategy for political survival” (Law 2014, 220). Law points to the 2000 Zimbabwean elections as evidence of this intimidation strategy’s success. Mugabe has also been investigated for the murders of over 20,000 people in the 1980s (Rogers 2007, 12). Mugabe is not limited to violence as a means to subvert democracy – in fact he has made at least eighteen separate constitutional amendments (Van Cranenburgh 2008, 953). This may come as a surprise to some due to the perceived informality of Mugabe’s
rule, however the constitution is constantly used as a weapon against political opponents, so undergoing the formal amendment process serves an important purpose for Mugabe (Van Cranenburgh 2008, 953). Similar to Mugabe, Museveni has also altered his country’s constitution in order to push back his term limit and remain in power for longer (Tripp 2004, 8-9). Both Uganda and Zimbabwe are essentially ruled by a single party, with an executive branch that far oversteps its balance of power, to the point where Freedom House does not consider either country to be a democracy (Van Cranenburgh 2008, 963). In many states controlled by a ‘Big Man’ it is difficult to find an impartial court system or electoral governance body, and nearly impossible for an election to occur without any irregularities. For example:

In the 1996 and 2001 presidential elections, Museveni drew heavily on state resources to fund his campaign. The president appoints the electoral commission - a power that has contributed to the unleveling of the electoral playing field. Many incidents of preelection harassment of the opposition occurred in the 2001 election, which was unusually violent and, the opposition alleged, was marred by extensive rigging (Tripp 2004, 12).

It is clear that fair and unbiased elections cannot occur under the rule of a ‘Big Man’ because the leader has formal and/or informal control over the individuals who are responsible for running the impartial elections. Through subversion of elections, influence over dominant narratives, and complex networks of patronage, ‘Big Men’ like Mugabe and Museveni fortify their power. This extreme focus on power consolidation is undemocratic, as the power is not vested in the people. A true democracy has power dispersed amongst the masses, but that cannot occur under ‘Big Man’ rule.

**What are the consequences of ‘Big Man’ Rule?**

‘Big Men’ in Africa have played a significant role in the weakness of the states which they govern. Their leadership style has crippled the bureaucracy, encouraged inappropriate resource allocation, and fostered corruption. The individuals who feel the harsh consequences of this are the citizens, while the ‘Big Men’ get extraordinarily wealthy. Some have argued that “Museveni has overseen a prolonged period of economic and political stability and donors argue he deserves their support, even when his record on democracy and good governance is tainted” (Tangri 2010, 31). Whatever merit this argument holds, it cannot dispute the profound negative effects of ‘Big Man’ rule. The fact that ‘Big Man’ rule can be seen as better than some alternatives does not negate the fact that it has created serious harm in states with ‘Big Man’ leaders.

The figure of the overbearing and all-powerful leader has caused massive problems for the institutions of their states. One problem arises from the composition of the bureaucracy. Presidents appoint individuals who are part of their patronage network to important positions in order to maintain and service the relationships for the next election (Van Cranenburgh 2008, 953). The obvious issue with this is that individuals are not selected to these important roles for their competence or heir merits. There is no filter for incompetence or ethical conduct when hiring for these positions, which often leads to an unethical and incompetent bureaucracy. Museveni clearly demonstrates this by
insisting he make all senior appointments (including army official posts) himself (Tangri 2010, 36). This leads to an unprofessional and casual work environment, as everybody is friends with each other, and no one is trying to impress anyone. Impressive behaviour is discouraged, as exceptional individual performances may threaten superiors who are concerned for the security of their own positions (Booth 2006, 24). The bureaucracy is further undermined as there are many cases of “politicians’ refusing to delegate any significant decisions, in case they lose the power to use policies for short-term political gain or patronage” (Booth 2006, 24). These factors contribute to the ineffective, biased, and corrupt nature of bureaucratic institution in Africa. Institutions such as “parliament, the judiciary and the Electoral Commission have had their independence eroded in the face of Museveni’s desire for untrammeled power” (Tangri 2010, 36). Similarly, Mugabe “ensure[d] that the judiciary should not be a recourse for his numerous opponents […] with the appointment of judges sympathetic to ZANU-PF” (Law 2014, 220).

Another serious consequence of the ‘Big Man’ rule is the inappropriate allocation of resources. Tripp points out that “In Uganda, patronage resources are increasingly distributed along lines of ethnicity and region. This practice undermines governance and erodes the viability of institutions and leadership based on merit.” (Tripp 2004, 7). The state receives revenue in the form of taxes, foreign aid, and loans, giving the government significant access to monetary and other resources. “[Museveni] has control over ample public resources, which he has for many years allocated in favour of loyal legislators” (Tangri 2010, 38). Citizens of Uganda do not receive the full benefit of public money and often suffer in poverty while government officials accumulate vast amounts of wealth. For example, Museveni has bought a private jet valued at $60 million with government funds while only 12.3% of Ugandan households had electricity in 2010 (Tangri 2010, 46) (Daniels 2015, 129). This is but one example of many that illustrate the use of government funds for the personal benefit of the leader.

‘Big Man’ rule in Zimbabwe and Uganda has led to governments that are incapable of effectively serving their citizens due to inappropriate resource allocation, corruption, and incompetent institutions. This essay recognizes that ‘Big Man’ rule is rooted in a colonial legacy and has detrimental consequences to the functioning of an accountable government. The tactics of power building used by ‘Big Men’ reveal a complete erosion of democracy leaving only a façade. ‘Big Men’ are not accountable to their citizens via a properly functioning democracy, as they are instead focussed on servicing donors and others in their patronage networks to consolidate power. They also use violence and subversion to remove democratic safeguards that limit their powers. By highlighting the consequences of these tactics, this essay clarifies the profound negative impacts that leaders such as Museveni and Mugabe have had on their people. Future scholarship should investigate whether the same principles which apply in Uganda and Zimbabwe can be applied in other post-colonial African states.
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