

From colonial forts at Old Kampala to modern cyber laws under Yoweri Museveni, surveillance has shaped Uganda, pushing citizens and Opposition figures into fear and self-censorship.

BY ROBERT MADOI

On a clear day—and they are never in scant supply—there are panoramic views on this tree-speckled hill. In fact, tourists have settled into a routine of adding the Uganda National Mosque to their bucket list whenever they visit Uganda's capital, Kampala. The place may not quite convey it now, but this is where the roots for the eternal verities of surveillance in the East African nation were first planted.

When Frederick Lugard, the soldier-cum-colonial administrator who gained renown as the pioneer of British colonisation of Uganda, first set foot in the picturesque raised area, he knew straightaway that turning it into a fort was a realisable aim. And so it proved.

With the Scramble for Africa already in overdrive, the British were reflecting unsparingly on any missteps as they sought to steal a march on the Germans in East Africa.

Soon, with a fortress built on the hill, and a Maxim gun making a great impression of feeling uncomfortably confrontational, the Buganda Kingdom was left with little choice but to do the bidding of the British. This was during the dying embers of the 19th Century.

The all-seeing eye

Well after the fading of the 19th Century into the 20th Century, and two decades after the British colonial State attempted to course-correct the 1900 Agreement with the 1955 Agreement, Michel Foucault released a seminal text on surveillance—*Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*.

With land disputes casting a stain of misrule on the entire administration of the protectorate government, Foucault's monograph on the subtleties that accompanied the evolution of disciplinary processes would prove instructive.

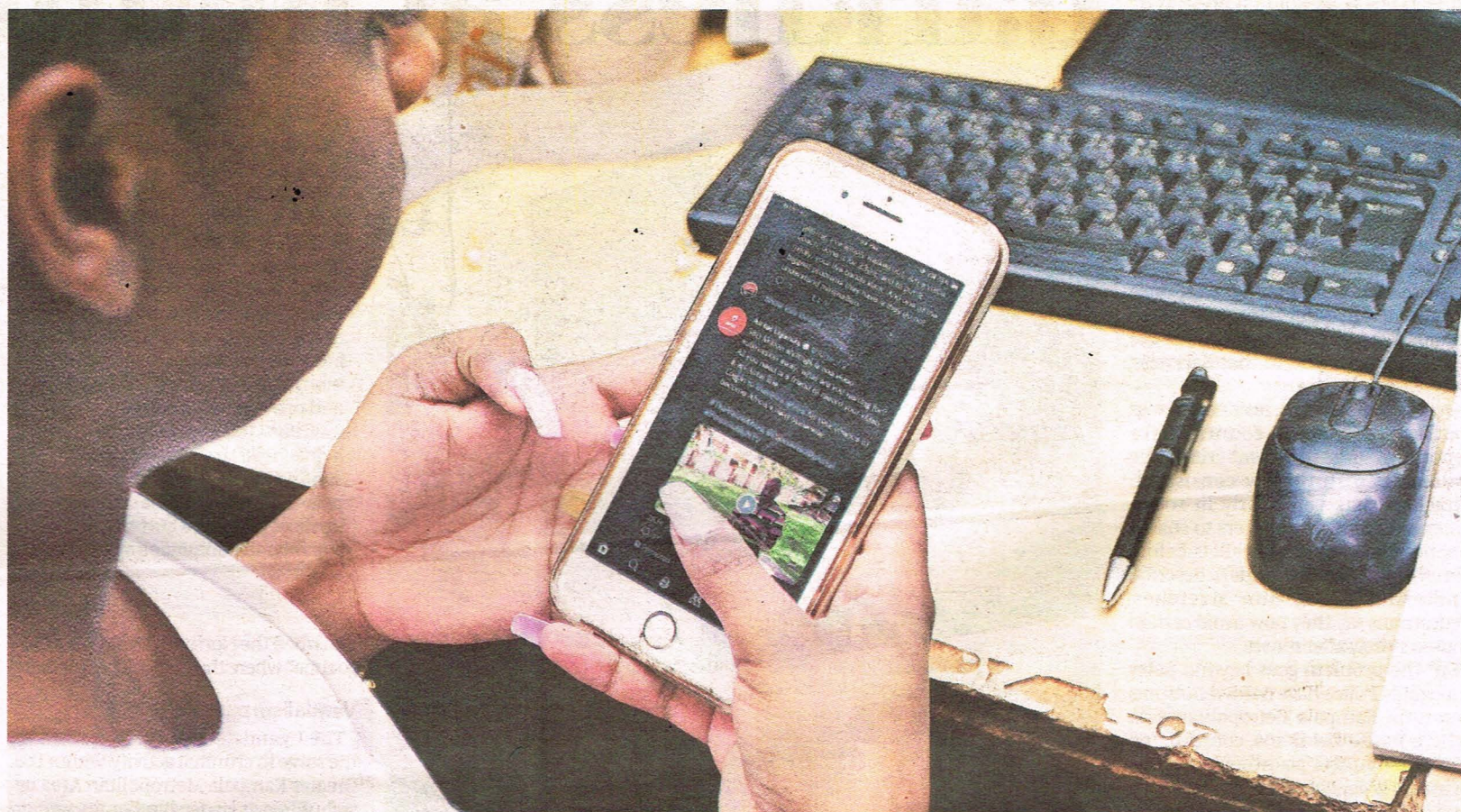
The French philosopher and historian introduced the world to the concept of panopticism while drilling an understanding of new forms of knowledge about conformity through surveillance.

Simply put, the dense term that is panopticism speaks to a form of social control where—with the all-seeing eye or surveillance logged in the back of their mind—individuals, perhaps unintentionally but not unsuccessfully, self-regulate their behaviour. They do this on the premise that they are being watched.

Panopticism draws rather heavily on Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon prison design. The design in question has prisoner cells sandwiching a central tower, or watchtower, with the basic setup forcing prisoners to be on their best behaviour since they always come in the view of a watchman.

The panopticon elements of asymmetrical surveillance produce the effect of self-regulation for fear of punishment. Foucault adds that a polity is confronted with the possibility of ending up with a disciplined, if not docile, population since, with the power of observation registering at close range, individuals conform to norms and regulations.

Big brother is watching:



The Uganda Communications Act, 2017, paves the way for the Government of Uganda (GoU) to set up the social media monitoring centre as well as an interception of communication monitoring centre. PHOTOS/FILE

Ebony and ivory

The panopticon that the protectorate government cynically willed into existence in colonial Uganda found sustenance in the 1900 Agreement. The treaty allowed the British colonial state to redraw the contours of Buganda writ large. Historians have pored over how rivers and their attendant bridges served the purpose of warning off the uninitiated.

The markers underlined the enormous chasm between the White and Black populations. The Asian population, which at times seemed to squat glumly between ebony and ivory, often bore the brunt of the in-betweenness. Ultimately, Asians' monopoly of bus routes and value addition processes to cash crops like cotton were but two reasons why they were not in the good graces of the Blacks.

It was not immediately clear to the Blacks that the multiple bridges erected across the Nakivubo River, as well as Uganda Golf Club—a bastion of White privilege—executed a striking and sinister role. The bridges meant that ebony and ivory would mesh while maintaining a calculated, if cold, distance from one another. Like hope and despair, suburbs and slums lived side by side. The slum of Kamwokya-Kyebando was, for one, within eyeshot of the leafy suburb of Kololo. Ditto the Katwe-Kisenyi slum and upscale Nakasero.

Yet instead of the panopticon elements of asymmetrical surveillance kicking in, a groundswell of dissent developed during the late colonial period. The Black labour, resident in the slum of Katwe-Kisenyi, was particularly a pain point for the British colonial State during the anti-colonial struggle.

Besides *Kadongo Kamu* (Luganda for solo acoustic bass guitar) music, whose message of change was nuanced, this is where the inflammatory leaflets of the Son of Muzinge (Luganda for peacock, an animal the tribe warns should not be underestimated) and pamphlets of entities like Bataka Union, were printed.

Enter lawfare

The underground press started mushrooming when the British colonial State used lawfare to force Uganda's vernacular press into a defensive crouch. So-called emergency powers—the very embodiment of an all-seeing eye—were used, if not to arrest editors like Joseph William Kiwanuka, alias Jolly Joe, then to force others to self-regulate.

Sedition suits that menacingly waved threats of heavy fines and punishingly long jail sentences had a chilling effect on media workers.

With self-regulation rendering many media workers void, a broad range of dissenters stepped up to the plate by using activist tactics to expose underreported issues.

This guerrilla journalism was espoused by the likes of Semakula Mulumba, a Bataka Union lobbyist whose letters and telegrams offered unstinting support to all forms and manner of political dissent.

These dissidents—determined not to be dignified in bearing, and courtly in manners—were fed up with the weaponisation of peace that became a monument of the colonial era.

This was after, among others, the Maxim gun on what is now known as Old Kampala settled the battle of the new Abrahamic faiths in favour of the British-leaning Protestant/Anglican forces.

Despite Yoweri Museveni, Uganda's ninth president, being so enamoured with Frantz Fanon's demand to make a clean break with colonialism, he borrowed and recalibrated a handful of concepts from the playbook of the colonial project.

Observers have trained most of their attention on the divide and rule policy on the one hand and the weaponisation of peace—or, in the words of Prof Joshua Rubongoya, Pax Musevenica—on the other hand.

The latter was made possible by his pacification of Uganda after the civil strife in the 1970s and 1980s.



Laws. Cyber legislations such as the Computer Misuse Act have been brought on Uganda's law books, with officials devising a series of punishments that in their cruelty, reflect the deep, pervasive fear shared by the country's Netizens. —Robert Madoi, author

Cyber laws

Museveni's uncritical embrace of what a Fanonian lens sees as tools of repression delivers a jolt. This is not least because the political philosopher's *The Wretched of the Earth* foundational text, which persists in its urging of using violence as a tool for liberation, was the bedrock of the Ugandan president's undergraduate thesis.

The weaponisation of peace in the age of Pax Musevenica has not gone unremarked. There is an overwhelming body of evidence that shows it has galvanised action from a vast array of dissidents, including those from the slum of Kamwokya-Kyebando, which Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu, alias Bobi Wine, once called home.

With the dissent on digital spaces immediately recognisable as adjunct to critical journalism, the Museveni administration has doubled down on draconian media provisions to instil in anyone who convokes an unruly public online a debilitating fear. Cyber laws that, for all intents and purposes, legalise surveillance have also been brought in.

Section 5(d) of the National Information Technology Authority, Uganda Act, 2009 gives the National Information Technology Authority (NITA-U) a mandate over software and hardware. All of which gives the parastatal carte blanche to "install spyware, blocking mechanisms and filters on government computers."

Spyware

Such legislative foundations have generated in the Museveni administration a ravenous appetite for surveillance technology as an eyebrow-raising deal with the UK-based firm, Gamma Group, showed ahead of the 2011 Uganda General Election.

Documents show that the technology was bought "to spy on the enemy, collect data, intrude enemy systems, intercept enemy communication and also manipulate transmissions."

The Museveni administration consent-

Surveillance in Uganda



Former FDC leader Kizza Besigye (atop lead car) campaigns for the party presidential candidate Patrick Oboi Amuriat (atop right 2nd car) in Ntungamo District on December 1, 2020. In 2011, the party became the object of the digital surveillance operation that would be codenamed Fungua Macho (translates to 'open your eyes' in Swahili).

ed to the purchase of the technology after being told that it could “covertly be deployed in buildings, vehicles, computers, mobile phones, cameras and any other equipment deemed worthy for information extraction or surveillance.”

The Forum for Democratic Change (FDC), a leading Opposition party at the time, became the object of the digital surveillance operation that would be codenamed Fungua Macho (translates to ‘open your eyes’ in Swahili).

“I am glad to inform you that since we started we have managed to collect [a] substantial amount of information from different targets... people deemed dangerous to State security like government officials and Opposition politicians are being surveilled,” one top secret document prepared by a senior intelligence official for President Museveni read.

A 2015 report titled *For God and My President: State Surveillance in Uganda* peels back more troubling layers on the Fungua Macho operation.

“The tool chosen as the ‘backbone’ of the operation, FinFisher, is intrusion malware at the time manufactured by the Gamma Group of companies, headquartered in the UK. Once infected, a person’s computer or phone can be remotely monitored in real time. Activities on the device become visible. Passwords, files, microphones and cameras can be viewed and manipulated without the target’s knowledge,” the report published by Privacy International discloses.

“The [Chieftaincy of Military Intelligence] CMI and police used State funds to purchase the full ‘Fintrusion suite’ in late 2011. Over a period of 2011 to 2013, at least 73 people were involved in the operation targeting key Opposition leaders, media and establishment insiders. Operatives bribed people close to their targets to get access to personal phones and computers on which they installed the malware, according to a confidential intelligence brief prepared for President Museveni. CMI officials also requested more funds to expand the operation and bribe further insiders. Obtaining personal information to use as blackmail was an explicit goal of the operation, according to secret government documents,” it adds.

SURVEILLANCE

Surveillance is the intentional and methodical observation of environments, activities, or people to spot potential risks and ensure safety. It provides essential awareness that enables trained security professionals to prevent incidents, safeguard assets, and respond promptly to emerging threats. Surveillance is used for: Intelligence Gathering. Observing activities, behaviours, and patterns helps anticipate potential threats.

Security Improvement. Verifying identities, monitoring access, and keeping a controlled environment.

Crime Prevention. Acting as a visible or discreet deterrent discourages unauthorised or harmful behaviour.

Source: Global Risk Solutions, Inc

Social media monitoring

The Museveni administration remained in the habit of surveilling perceived adversaries, and found in Section 5(u) of the Uganda Communications Act, 2017, a handy tool. The provision paves the way for the Government of Uganda (GoU) to set up the social media monitoring centre as well as an interception of communication monitoring centre.

As well as inviting bids from, revealed the 2015 report, “seven technology companies based in China, Israel, Italy, Poland and the United Kingdom” to set up the social media monitoring centre before the 2016 General Election, the “Police also attempted to procure further technologies from intrusion malware supplier and rival to Gamma Group, Hacking Team, in mid-2015.”

Ahead of the 2021 poll, Facebook shut down a network of fake and duplicate accounts in Uganda that were reportedly linked to the GoU. The GoU’s Citizens Interaction Centre was named and shamed. The fake and duplicate accounts were intended to blunt the impact of the guerrilla journalism of the

likes of Stella Nyanzi and Tom Voltaire Okwalinga, alias TVO, on digital spaces like Facebook. The Museveni administration has always had an abiding interest in closely monitoring such dissidents, with the ultimate goal of forcing them to act as if they are in a [digital] panopticon.

Cyber legislations such as the Computer Misuse Act have been brought on Uganda’s law books, with officials devising a series of punishments that in their cruelty, reflect the deep, pervasive fear shared by the country’s Netizens.

While draconian provisions in the Computer Misuse Act have been used to incarcerate dissidents like Nyanzi, attempts to silence dissent from people like TVO who use pseudonyms to beat government surveillance have perennially turned out to be a waste of taxpayers’ money.

“Amos Ngabirano, the [sic] now fired police director of ICT, was running a classified budget of 500 billion [Ugandan shillings] annually. In May 2016, he signed off 694 million and claimed he was going to Rome to meet people who would unmask TVO. He went there, deposited the money on [then police chief Kale] Kayihura’s account in a Rome[-] based bank, and he was put under surveillance [sic] during all that time by a no-nonsense team of sharp eyes [...],” TVO disclosed in a April 21, 2017 Facebook post.

Self-regulation

It’s not just guerrilla journalism that has found itself caught in the crosshairs of the GoU’s surveillance projects. Mainstream journalists like Ivan Okuda of the East Africa Centre for Investigative Reporting (EACIR) have ended up having an unwelcome spotlight placed on them.

Early last year, government functionaries leaked audios of telephone conversations the EACIR journalist had with Ibrahim Ssemujju Nganda, an Opposition lawmaker, and Erias Lukwago, the Kampala Lord Mayor, who is a fierce critic of the personalist tenor that has led to regime longevity under Museveni.

Section 4 of the Regulation of Interception of Communication Act, 2010, empowers government functionaries

to listen to private conversations via digital devices if they suspect that the communication is of a criminal nature.

Back at Lugard’s former stamping ground, where it can be argued with a degree of success that Uganda’s surveillance story started, two caucasian tourists soak in the panoramic views on offer during a crisp and cloudless afternoon.

One of them flashes a thumbs-up while basking in the glory of a Kodak moment. The thumbs up is, of course, the symbol of Museveni’s NRM party that—since the return of a multiparty dispensation in 2005—has delivered exceptionally strong mandates to control the House.

A lot has changed since Lugard left the tree-speckled hill at Old Kampala. In November of 1972, during his solitary trip to sub-Saharan Africa, King Faisal offered to build a grand mosque on the hill. After hitting several unexpected speed bumps, Muammar Gaddafi completed the imposing mosque—the largest in East Africa—in 2006. Museveni, who joined the former Libyan leader in March of 2008 to inaugurate what is now a dominant feature of the city’s skyline, shows no signs of slowing down. And, for that, he has surveillance to thank.

If Lugard’s Maxim gun, even while not in use, quietly reminded Blacks in and around Old Kampala of the futility of combating it, then Museveni stands accused of using state apparatuses to cultivate panopticon elements of his own.

Last November, Bobi Wine, of the National Unity Platform (NUP) party, shared with local media how “we don’t use some rooms” in his abode—a large, impressive house in the growing residential area of Magere in Wakiso District—because of State surveillance.

The house has been the object of interest of State sleuths since NUP became the leading opposition party in 2021, with a top police mouthpiece once [in]famously describing a drone camera that hovered overhead a star in the sky.

It is not only at Bobi Wine’s Magere home that self-regulation kicks in for Uganda’s Opposition leader. At the start of 2025, state forces descended on NUP’s offices in Makerere Kavule. Bobi Wine says he is none the wiser about “what they left” after the raid. Another raid on his abode in Magere, Wakiso District, last month, days after taking part in the 2026 presidential poll, left the Opposition leader’s wife, Barbara Itungo Kyagulanyi—still scarred by an assault suffered at the hands of suspected security forces—determined to clean out any bugs and wiretaps that could have been surreptitiously installed.

This was after Ms Itungo filled the local media in on how she refused to furnish the intruders with passwords to gadgets that, it is thought, would help State actors discover Bobi Wine’s hideout. All of this came against the backdrop of the NUP principal going into hiding after the January 15 poll. The raids undoubtedly provide more cues for more self-regulation by the Kyagulanyis. Evidently, as the clear days at Old Kampala, panopticism is alive and well in contemporary Uganda.

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