

## Urban planning through the barrel of a gun

*LSE's Tom Goodfellow says the authorities in the Ugandan capital are in danger of learning the wrong lessons from across the border.*

Once again, all is not well in the Ugandan capital. On Sunday 22 January, a 'routine' demolition of illegally-constructed kiosks and other small buildings in Kampala suddenly turned sinister. Amid the predictable protest by the local community, the city's Director of Physical Planning, George Agaba, pulled an AK47 out of his car and handed it to his bodyguard, who started shooting into the small crowd, killing at least two people in a seemingly indiscriminate assault.



Agaba looks on as his bodyguard points his rifle

These tragic events, which were filmed in full and make very disturbing viewing, could simply be interpreted as the actions of a mentally unstable bodyguard who should never have been hired. True though this may be, there are also deeper causes. These relate to the struggle for control of Kampala between competing political factions, politicians and bureaucrats, and the central and local government. Rarely has a dispute over the rules governing decentralisation evolved into something so ugly.

Agaba is a bureaucrat, one of eight people recently appointed by President Museveni to the "Board of Directors" of Kampala Capital City Authority, with a mandate to reverse the dire situation in Kampala regarding urban planning and land use regulation. For years – decades even – property developers ran roughshod over any efforts to regulate construction in Kampala, with almost total impunity. In this respect, the demolition exercise that took place on Sunday was far from 'routine'.

In the last two years, however, a tipping point was reached and Museveni realised that rampant illegal construction and the problems associated with it (such as flooding, congestion, building collapses and environmental pollution) were getting out of hand. Perhaps more significantly, he also decided that the power he had given to the city government under his celebrated decentralisation programme was weakening his control over the city and undermining his support there. He therefore forced through a law enabling him to re-centralise power and place the city government largely in the hands of a loyal team of bureaucrats, vested with considerable power and accountable only to him.

Museveni sent his new City Directors over the border to Kigali, the immaculately-swept Rwandan capital where Paul Kagame's iron fist has long since ensured that the streets are kept free of

rubbish and unwanted construction – and protests. It was on this trip, less than two months ago, that I first met Agaba. He and the other City Directors were deeply impressed with their field trip, and returned home with even greater zeal to “beautify” their own city.

The following week, back in Kampala, Agaba told me about how easy it would be to reverse the rot in Kampala now that the president had effectively removed politics from the city authority. He said that “everything had changed” because of the new law, noting that now “if people make noise we will continue to demolish”, with no need to account to pesky local politicians concerned about their constituents.

Kampala’s illegal construction had certainly become a major problem. Yet turning it into Kigali overnight is simply not viable. Rwanda is a largely politics-free zone, where – for better or worse – people are constantly “sensitised” about development plans and make relatively little ‘noise’ when they are told to do something, fully aware the government will not yield to resistance. In Kampala, the kiosk-owners have for years been warned their property would be demolished, only to be granted a last-minute reprieve on payment of a bribe; so it is hardly surprising they staged a protest when the bulldozers rolled in.

By attempting to rid Kampala of local politics and install the rule of bureaucrats, Museveni has empowered a group of unelected people, giving them a sense of divinely-ordained authority in a dangerously politicised environment. Agaba’s actions on Sunday show how one form of impunity (that of illegal property developers) is in danger of being replaced by another: that of the City Directors.

So far, the government and police have at least been quick to condemn the events, arrest the bodyguard and detain Agaba pending further investigations. Yet lives have been lost and the deeper problem remains. Kampala needs respect for its laws and regulations if the city is not to decay further; yet this means respect on the part of the authorities as well as the population.

It also requires far more imagination and effort with regard to changing informal norms of behaviour in the city than can be offered through the barrel of a gun. Given the highly volatile political environment in the city over the past few years, this only adds fuel to the fire.

*Read Tom Goodfellow’s working paper which covers similar issues: [The Institutionalisation of “Noise” and “Silence” In Urban Politics](#)*

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