

A Special Report from Uganda, the "Pearl of Africa"

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【TICAD9 Special Feature】

Uganda's Current Situation:

The Foundation: Thirty Years of Museveni's Rule and its Policies

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President Museveni of Uganda seized power in 1986. He is one of the longest-serving presidents in Africa. I entered the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1988, so his presidency predated my career.

Uganda gained independence from Britain in 1962. It was not a hard-fought independence, as it was under indirect rule. The 1970s saw the dictatorship of the infamous Idi Amin. However, local opinions on Amin are varied. Some Ugandans say he was popular, cycling among the people and approachable. Following the 1980 presidential election (whose results were not accepted, leading to civil war), the 1980s were marked by a bloody civil war lasting several years, which Museveni brought to an end. This civil war is called the "Bush War" because Museveni, rejected the 1980 election results and continued fighting from the jungle. It is said to have claimed over 300,000 lives. Museveni is credited with ending this chaos and bringing over three decades of stability and peace. The generation that fought alongside Museveni in the "Bush War" is now in their seventies and eighties, and many are still at the heart of the current government. The National Resistance Movement (NRM), the ruling party, was formed at that time and remains the dominant political party governing Uganda nationwide.

After seizing power, President Museveni reportedly considered various approaches to governing the country. He even attempted to adopt Tanzanian socialism, implemented by a political figure he respected. However, socialism, with its restrictions on individual economic activity, was met with resistance from the public. Museveni then shifted towards a free-market economy, allowing foreign investment and minimizing restrictions on domestic economic

activity. During the civil war, Museveni himself temporarily sought refuge in Tanzania, biding his time for a counterattack. This experience is said to have shaped Uganda's relations with its neighbors. Uganda has an "open-door policy," actively accepting refugees. It currently hosts 1.9 million refugees, demonstrating a tolerant policy. It also positions itself as an "island of peace," aiming to be a cornerstone of stability in East Africa. When I asked a Ugandan politician about the significance of the "open-door policy," I was told it was because neighboring countries had helped Uganda in the past. Regarding the domestic political system, the introduction of a multi-party system was approached cautiously, with a national referendum considered. The current constitution, enacted in 1996, initially limited presidential terms to three and set a maximum age of 75. Both restrictions have since been removed through constitutional amendments.

Through this process, Uganda's current system emerged: an open economy welcoming foreign investment with minimal regulation; and a multi-party political system with active debate between the ruling and opposition parties in parliament. President Museveni has won six consecutive presidential elections, but opposition candidates consistently receive 20% to 30% of the vote.

As a result, from around 2010, Kampala is said to have undergone remarkable development. The year 1996, when Museveni enacted the new constitution, was the year after the Great Hanshin Earthquake in Japan. 2010, when substantial economic growth began, was followed by the Great East Japan Earthquake in Japan. These two major disasters, fresh in our memories, coincide with a period of significant socio-economic change in Uganda. Uganda's development is relatively recent.

Regarding Japan's diplomatic structure, Uganda ceased being under the jurisdiction of the Kenyan embassy in 1996, with an ambassador appointed in 2003. Japan's diplomacy towards Uganda has kept pace with Uganda's development.

I arrived in Kampala, last year in March. More than a year has passed since my posting. Even in this short time, I have witnessed significant changes in Kampala. For example, the numerous buildings and high-end apartments under construction; old signs being replaced with new electronic billboards; the abundance of used Japanese cars; and the ubiquitous boda bodas (passenger motorcycles), almost all of Indian manufacture. The name "boda boda" reportedly originates from the use of motorcycles to cross borders, with "border" repeated as "boda boda." A traffic signal system is finally being implemented in Kampala, with Japanese-

made signals installed with JICA's cooperation. By the time this article is published, the traffic control center built with grant aid will be completed.

Japan's infrastructure cooperation is highly visible. The Jinja Bridge, completed in 2018, spanning the Nile River, is one example. Ugandans take great pride in this Japanese-made bridge, considering it one of the achievements of the Museveni administration. In March of this year, the Kampala flyover was completed and, the design for a second flyover is underway. Furthermore, the Karuma Bridge in the northwest is being replaced with Japanese support.

The Impact of the Trump Administration and China's Activities

The Trump administration's policies affected many African countries, including Uganda. Under President Biden's Democratic administration, the Anti-Homosexuality Act (AHA) became a major issue, forcing the Ugandan government to make revisions. However, strict enforcement of the AHA is not reported. Under the Trump administration, there were concerns about USAID aid. Many USAID personnel left the country, and local staff were laid off. However, it's true that aid doesn't solely come through the US State Department. Private aid and NGO support are less affected by US aid cuts. The impact of reduced aid from the EU and the UK is also significant. Long-term effects need to be observed.

China provides support across various sectors, including infrastructure, agriculture, and healthcare. Support is not concentrated on central government projects but often targets specific counties and regions. I have had many opportunities to exchange views with the Chinese ambassador to Uganda, and he has mentioned various difficulties. For example, a successful fisheries project supported by China was handed over to the Ugandan side, who claimed they could manage it themselves. However, the subsequent management proved unsuccessful.

The Ugandan government consciously avoids excessive debt, as much of China's support comes with conditions. The government self-regulates borrowing to less than half of its GDP.

Relations with Japan: Looking Towards Uganda's Future

As mentioned earlier, Japan's contribution through ODA is significant. However, investment from major Japanese companies is virtually non-existent.

The biggest economic topic in Uganda is when oil exports will begin. TotalEnergies of France is leading the oil development, with Chinese support. President Museveni reportedly wanted to attract US companies, but this did not materialize. Museveni himself has worked with Tanzania and Kenya at the political level to advance the construction of export pipelines.

Uganda's macroeconomic stability, including its balance of payments and currency, is a strength. Gold is actually Uganda's largest export item, supporting its balance of payments. It also has significant rare earth reserves. Neighboring Congo (DRC) also possesses abundant resources in this area. However, for Japanese companies, finding suitable partners is a key challenge.

In May of this year, Eri Alfiah, a political officer from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, visited Uganda for the first time in a while. This was the first political-level visit since Foreign Minister Hayashi (at the time) in 2023.

The political officer and President Museveni held extensive discussions at the State House in Entebbe. While various topics were discussed, the President's wishes regarding future development cooperation were clear: support and investment in infrastructure development, human resource development, and the creation of higher value-added agricultural products. These are clear development goals, and I, as the ambassador, fully agree.

Even during my year in Uganda, I've seen improvements in roads and sanitation, and high-rise buildings springing up. The signs advertising products have been updated, shifting towards luxury consumer goods like cosmetics. "Outdated content" no longer sold in Japan is still in demand in Africa. China has capitalized on this, producing construction equipment and consumer goods in industrial parks, penetrating the local economy. The Japanese manufacturing sector will likely continue to see a shrinking domestic market. Considering the potential population growth and economic expansion in Africa, determining how to secure a share of the African consumer market for Japanese products is crucial for the future of Japanese manufacturing. Some Japanese companies, recognizing the growing importance of the African market, are starting to show interest in Uganda.

A major challenge for Ugandan domestic politics is the lack of a clear successor to President Museveni, who is campaigning for a seventh term. Presidential and parliamentary elections will be held in January or February next year.

An immediate concern is the potential for social unrest leading up to the elections. However, virtually no Ugandans want to relive the civil war and turmoil of the 1980s. Museveni's ambition is said to be the revival and strengthening of the East African Community. Britain once established an economic office to unite Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, achieving economic integration. There was a common currency, airline, and railway system. Museveni frequently mentions the "African dream"—independence and solidarity. African countries achieved independence from colonial rule, but what about solidarity? This is the goal of the African Economic Community (AEC) and the East African Community (EAC). It's becoming rare to find African leaders with such a grand vision. I believe Museveni aims to build a foundation for prosperity for the next 50 to 100 years.

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