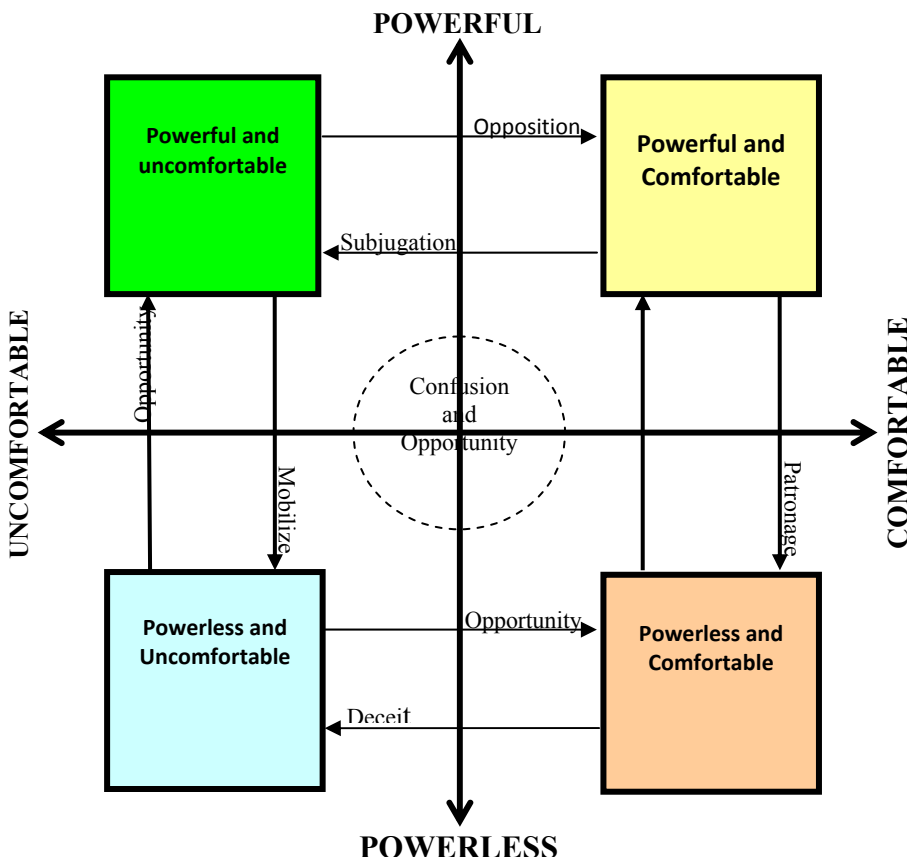# Understanding and Challenging the 'Survival' Power Alliance in Uganda

A Note by Arthur LAROK and Benson Ekwee

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Introduction

In seeking to cause positive change in our society, it is important that we fully understand the nature of the society and why it is the way that it is. Using a simple tool that has been shared in the Citizen Manifesto Process in Uganda, an anatomy of the Ugandan state is done to unravel a power alliance that at best can keep the country in the present condition and at worse endanger the collective future our country. The challenge of our generation (those united in the quest to change the course our country is taking in order to secure a better life for the future generation) is to expose, challenge and weaken the dominant power alliance currently pertaining, develop an alternative agenda for the future that can be used to mobilize and create a mass movement for change.

The Survival Alliance - the comfortable exposed!

Uganda's political, economic and policy regime feature a dominant survival alliance of the 'comfortables' consciously and sometimes sub-consciously working to maintain a corrupt, unjust and patronage based statusquo. The illustration on the right demonstrates the positioning of Ugandans along 2 axes.

Not withstanding borderline cases, majority of Ugandans would ordinarily fall in 4 major groups: powerful[1] and comfortable; powerless and comfortable; powerful and uncomfortable; powerless and uncomfortable. Each category is not strictly homogeneous, but share significant features.

The **powerful and comfortable** is the most protective of the statusquo. They have the means and are 'largely in charge'. Working through an array of institutions, they expend soothing programmes that on face value seem populist, but on closer inspection only appease but keep everyone else, but themselves in the fringes. They occupy the inner circle of the ruling elite and are found heading powerful ministries and institutions of state. Their main agenda is maintaining the statusquo through subduing alternative power centers and running a patronage system that keeps those in the category 'powerless and comfortable' working to maintain a kleptocratic[2] system.

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[1] Power is seen as a factor of knowledge, comprehension, political influence, authority, infrastructure, money and connection

[2] Kleptocracy is an unofficial form of rule of government that takes advantage of governmental corruption to extend the personal wealth and political power of government officials and the ruling class via the embezzlement of state funds at the expense of the wider population, sometimes without even the pretense of honest service.

Next up is the category **powerless, but comfortable**. This group shares a common agenda with the powerful and comfortable category, but is unable to stand on its own or challenge their patrons found in the powerful and comfortable category. They are in a situation of naïve awareness - live a life of pretence, seek to be like and collude with the powerful and comfortable to maintain the statusquo in which they are both comfortable. Many public servants in central and local governments belong here, so are state dependent or patronized private sector agencies and businesses. They are able to see the ills in their midst but are comfortable and would rather have the statusquo unchanged because they live by it. They at best seek to move up the ladder towards the club of the powerful and comfortable or keep their businesses afloat. They are in charge of programs expended to sooth the masses or run businesses which fan the powerful and comfortable. They are used by the powerful and comfortable to pacify the most dominant powerless and uncomfortable category. Their agenda is therefore one of survival and pacification.

The **powerless and uncomfortable** are the majority category who if mobilized can cause change. However, many of them are ill informed, vulnerable and most used and abused - they live to die another day. They are an important group to work with and restore a sense of hope in. Because of their systemic vulnerability, they look up to any group or source for survival. The final group is the **powerful and uncomfortable.** They possess some (not all) of the attributes of the powerful and comfortable group. They have knowledge and comprehension but do not have a robust infrastructure of their own. They have some money but not enough to expend soothing programmes to the population. They are influential but don't control critical institutions, especially those that have monopoly over the use of force. They seek to create change but have severe limitations of outreach, access and language. With their comprehension, they vehemently criticize and oppose the powerful and comfortable. In spite of their limitations many seek to mobilize, but some prefer to search for 'greener pastures' in human capital flight out of the country.

Breaking the Survival Alliance: An Agenda for the willing and daring

When the powerful and comfortable and powerless and comfortable collude, they form an alliance for stagnation and regression. When the powerful and uncomfortable succeed in forming an alliance with the powerless and uncomfortable, there is a likelihood of a progressive alliance. The agenda for transformation will inevitably require this generation to mobilize and organize the *'uncomfortables'* and challenge the dominant power alliance between the *'comfortables'*. This struggle is a difficult one because it requires sacrifice at a very personal level, especially getting out of the elite comfort zones. It demands a close inspection of where we belong in the power alliance framework. It requires us to form alliances and coalitions of the willing and the daring and develop a programme for transformation that will weaken the survival alliance. In pursuit of this difficult, but essential agenda, we must be systematic and tactical. Three major propositions moving forward emerge:

A) Develop a vision, mission and action agenda for transformation that represents a good level of political, social and economic consensus. We would the need to *identify* or *create* a political platform to take this action agenda forward.

B) Build civic agency to fight apathy and fight the open and covert injustice in society, and establish a mass movement for change. This will be built around an alliance for progress that draws from different socioeconomic and political groupings.

C) Focus on supporting economic empowerment and economic programmes for ordinary Ugandans who because of systemic and pervasive poverty live by the day and remain very vulnerable to the 'comfortables'.

It is important reiterate that a key factor for success in the above agenda is **leadership**. It will require a new cadre of leadership that we can count on to organize and not agonize. Finally our own generation doesn't have too much time either, so we must aspire to inspire before we ourselves expire.