

Life from the back of a boda-boda



THOMAS FROESE

Writing about his observations of Uganda's recent election, this is the view seen by Thomas Froese from the back of a boda-boda driven by a man named Godfrey.



THOMAS FROESE
OPINION

MUKONO, UGANDA Before I tell you about the boda-boda driver Godfrey, let me thank the government of Uganda for helping with my recent internet cleanse.

Authorities turned the internet off during Uganda's mid-January election to apparently give opportunity to reflect, to look in the mirror. I mean, really, how did the world manage before the internet?

Not that Uganda's government is the only one to make such a fantastic manoeuvre. Even so.

Two days before the vote, from my annual university perch near Kampala, I talked with a Canadian friend in Germany on WhatsApp, the free platform that millions of Ugandans use. Hours later the internet went off. Like during the election five years ago. And, surprise, five years before that.

Millions of Ugandans were muted. (It's election time. What's there to talk about?) Same with the flow of mobile money going through millions of phones. It stopped. (What. Does business and trade need money every day?)

"Aren't you disturbed without internet?" A Ugandan engineering student asked me on Day 2.

"I'm working around it," I said. No Netflix. Ugandans were in internet darkness for five days but social media brownouts continued.

Nationwide, security forces killed at least 12, although the unofficial death toll is higher from unrest following President Yoweri Museveni's return to office for five more years. Thirty minutes from where I stay at least one person was shot dead in an opposition MP's home.

The 81-year-old Museveni has ruled Uganda for 40 years. Some voters, especially young, unemployed urbanites in Uganda's central region, say his eventual passing is their only hope for a more democratic future. As one told me, "Nothing lasts forever."

They support opposition leader Robert Kyagulanyi, the former musician known as Bobi Wine. After the vote — he campaigned in a flak jacket — he and his family were put under house arrest before he escaped to a location unknown. Previous opposition leader Kizza Besigye has been in jail for 14 months on treason charges.

Rural voters, significant in this nation of 46 million, often support Museveni. As do older voters remembering the pre-Museveni era when hundreds of thousands died during bloody reigns of Milton Obote and Idi Amin.

It's context, because beneath the thin veneer of civility, any nation can have lurking beasts. Museveni represents relative peace. Thankful for it, one older woman told me, "We don't have a democracy. We have a kingdom something."

But about my friend Godfrey, a burly Ugandan with a large, easy laugh. He drives boda-boda, the East African motorcycle taxi that, somehow, gets you around. While aboard it's my habit to talk to drivers while taking photos. It's not an entirely safe routine. I realize, but it works well while I'm with Godfrey on election day.

And what do I see? Order and calm, mostly. I see people, warm and beautiful people, really, like any of us, muddling through this life, but with uncommon grace and resilience amid challenges for food, shelter and education beyond what most Canadians can imagine.

"How are the children?" Godfrey asks. As always I show a fresh family photo, and he always laughs joyfully. He names all three, remembering each well from when they grew up here. He congratulates me and my entire family.

Then he tells of the great sadness in his own fathering life. He had three young adult children similar age to mine, but his eldest daughter, for work, went to u.a.e. and died there recently of an unforeseen illness. Silence. Then a few words and hug before we part.

So life goes. It's just one story, one example of how we live and move in a noisy, even dangerous world of politics and technology and shaky culture and more. But it's other things, more human commonalities, even personal suffering, that can quiet the spirit and bring us closer together with perspective.

No, nothing in this world lasts forever. Somehow in this truth there's a larger hope.

THOMAS FROESE WRITES ABOUT NEWS, TRAVEL AND LIFE. FIND HIM AT THOMASFROESE.COM AND AT THOMASFROESE.SUBSTACK.COM.

LETTERS

City must make this tax hike count

Re: Mayor Andrea Horwath proposes 2026 tax hike of 4.25%, Jan. 20

I am willing to cough up more in taxes if the mayor will use it to house those out in the streets in freezing weather. She seems to want to dodge the issue at every turn, preferring to talk about concerts and upcoming events at the newly renovated coliseum, most of which are unaffordable for the average taxpayer in Hamilton.

I am looking for new leadership who acknowledges the problems we are facing and intends to provide viable solutions so that our city can grow and be a home for all of us.

Katherine Borthwick, Hamilton

NIMBYism has to stop

It's time we stopped allowing the "neighbours" to interfere in the decision as to whether or not multi-family/high-rise housing is allowed in their precious neighbourhoods. Everyone wants to blame the province, the country, the mayor and the realtors for the housing issues and the outrageous pricing, but the real problem is "not in my backyard" mindsets.

"Please don't block my view. I don't want that obstruction or those people in my neighbourhood." This should not be allowed any longer. Where there is land to build, zoning works and there is a builder willing to build a structure that would accommodate geared to income or low-income families, and get people out of the tents, it should be allowed. It should not be up to the neighbours while they sit in their warm and cosy homes, enjoying their meals and their holidays.

Why is it they have the right to protest these builds? Don't take away our park or green space where our kids play while others are on the street in a tent or under a tarp freezing to death.

Let's all think about that when

we wonder how much we actually care about the people in encampments, on the sidewalk and in the forest trying to sleep to night.

Everyone thinks it's someone else's problem, not theirs. However, this is a government problem that could be solved once it's determined that the rights of the neighbours should not outweigh the needs of the masses.

Blair Dickson, Grimsby

A week to cross city?

I mailed a birthday card to my granddaughter from Dundas to east Hamilton. It took eight days to get there. I can see why Canada Post is losing business and money.

It said on the mailbox it took two days for local mail.

Brenda Cheers, Dundas

Premier needs some consistency

Re: Doug Ford calls for 'boycott' of the Chinese EVs Carney is letting into Canada, Jan. 21

I guess Premier Ford thinks the people of Ontario can't remember what he says from one day to the next. Today he is advising us to boycott EVs from China and a few days ago he was advising us to spend our money and support Michigan tourism by going on vacation to the U.S.A. and specifically Michigan. I think he needs to take a step back and think before he reacts. We need a consistent message. We need to support our country and look at the big picture.

Mary Hickey, Burlington

Will action follow Carney's words?

I listened to Mark Carney's speech. He indeed is a great speaker and I concur with much of what he said. Great salesman,

but can he deliver? There are a couple of domestic issues that will make it impossible to deliver in a timely fashion, until they are resolved.

He now must address environmental and Indigenous road blocks that have stymied resource development. This will mean back-peddling on things near and dear to his heart. Can he, and is he willing?

Gary Aikema, Flamborough

Keep politics out of this

Re: 'Max's death has to mean something,' Jan. 22

Shame on provincial NDP Leader Marit Stiles for politicizing the tragic accidental death of seven-year-old Max Samao. Anyone who has lost a loved one plays the "what if" game. To use it as a political soapbox is reprehensible.

Troy Smillie, Binbrook

Chinese EVs a game changer

Premier Doug Ford believes it is a mistake to allow Chinese vehicles into Canada because they are subsidized by the Chinese government. So, does he believe billions of dollars of incentives to North American, Korean and Japanese manufacturers to build plants in Ontario are not subsidies? And when those North American manufacturers decide to abandon Ontario because of pressure from U.S. President Donald Trump, what then?

Once these Chinese EVs are made here, Canada would then in fact be the only North American producer of better, cheaper, more attractive cars of the future. That sounds like a lot more secure future for jobs in Ontario than the ones on which Ford spent billions. Maybe that is the real reason he is angry.

Peter Bangarth, Orangeville

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Hamilton needs to step up and do what's right

ALICE PLUG-BUIST

Thanks to Teviah Moro for the front-page article on Thursday titled "Homeless turn to library, mall for warmth."

I always appreciate Moro's articles, as he actually goes to speak to people and doesn't shy away in fear from those who are often looked on as "other."

I was taken aback, however, by what he reported were going to be the repercussions of the difficult situations being faced by the Central Branch of the Hamilton Public Library.

Later in the day, I saw a social media post by the Hamilton Public Library confirming their response to the crisis will be to open an hour later each day and to shift to being closed on Sunday starting on Feb. 1.

I understand that this safe space cutback is due to lack of adequate and appropriate staffing (particularly social workers) at those hours. However, I would hope

that this issue could be resolved in a way that doesn't increase the burden on vulnerable Hamiltonians who find themselves homeless during an incredibly cold and snowy winter.

Various news sources have recently shared that we are experiencing, and will continue to bear the impact of, the coldest weather in the past decade as a polar vortex arrives in the wake of the coldest air mass on earth descending on Ontario.

It is in this reality that city council is about to allow what has been a consistent, safe community space to provide less consistent safe community space for our fellow constituents, with potentially fatal and definitely health-impacting implications.

Our vulnerable homeless neighbours need more safe, warm spaces to survive the same cold that many of us are hunkering down in our homes to avoid.

We should be exploring how we can ensure that appropriate staffing and support capacity is in place at safe community spaces such as the Central Branch of

the Hamilton Public Library and Jackson Square, not less.

If the current Hamilton Public Library budget can't handle increasing social worker availability on site at the Central Branch, then the City of Hamilton has an obligation to its vulnerable constituents to supplement the library's budget to ensure they are able to maintain a safe community space for all.

In addition, since Jackson Square is also a known place of refuge for our homeless neighbours, we need to step up and figure out how we can provide support in the mall as well, instead of just posting security guards to chase fellow Hamiltonians out.

Decreasing library hours is not good enough. With the coldest air mass in the world descending on Ontario, we need to step up and do what's right, ensuring that each person in Hamilton is safe from the cold, no matter what the cost.

ALICE PLUG-BUIST IS THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF HELPING HANDS STREET MISSION.