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Pierre Wokuri

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Article abstract

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How an Economic Imperative is Constructed: The Case of Oil Exploitation in Uganda

By Pierre Wokuri¹

ABSTRACT

A great deal of research has documented how extractive resources are governed once their exploitation has begun, how transnational actors and factors play a role in extractive industries, and how states stick to a path of dependency towards fossil fuel exploitation. However, most of this previous research has not taken sufficiently seriously domestic politics. Furthermore, there has been little work on how dependency is constructed before exploiting these resources. This article fills that gap by showing how oil exploitation has been constructed as an economic imperative in Uganda. Building on a research design with a broad range of empirical fingerprints, this article shows that construction of oil as an economic imperative in Uganda is based on two processes: 1) embedding the meso level within the macro level through a long-term horizon; and 2) rendering the contingent necessary through a combination of material and immaterial strategies of state political control.

Keywords: *natural resources, extractive industries, oil, Uganda, political economy, public policy*

RÉSUMÉ

De nombreuses recherches documentent comment des ressources extractives sont gouvernées une fois que leur exploitation a commencé, la manière dont les acteurs et les facteurs transnationaux jouent un rôle dans les industries extractives et comment des États maintiennent une dépendance vis-à-vis de l'exploitation de ressources fossiles. Cependant, la plupart des recherches antérieures ne prennent pas suffisamment au sérieux les dynamiques politiques nationales internes tandis qu'il existe peu de travaux sur la façon dont la dépendance mentionnée est construite avant l'exploitation de ces ressources. À partir d'une stratégie de recherche mobilisant un large éventail d'empreintes empiriques, dont certaines ont été collectées au cours de trois terrains de recherche en Ouganda, cet article montre que la construction de l'exploitation pétrolière en tant qu'impératif économique en Ouganda est basée sur deux processus : 1) l'intégration du niveau méso dans le niveau macro par le biais d'un horizon à long terme ; 2) la conversion du contingent en nécessaire par le biais d'une combinaison de stratégies matérielles et immatérielles de contrôle politique étatique

Mots-clés: *Ressources naturelles, pétrole, Ouganda, économie politique, politiques publiques*

1. PhD in political science and associate member of the Arènes laboratory, UMR 6051, pierrewokuri@gmail.com.
ORCID : 0009-0005-4295-7905

Introduction

The country is steadily moving away from aid dependency to fiscal sustainability due to our improved domestic revenue mobilization. Our domestically raised revenue for 2009/10 was Ushs 4.2 trillion, more than enough to cover the entire public investment program of the country. This is, indeed, a remarkable achievement putting in perspective where we started when the entire development budget of our country was financed by donors. With the prospect of large oil revenues, Uganda will soon be free from external influence in the implementation of our investment programs. There are those who write fiction about Uganda's oil, theorizing that it will be a curse. Those kind of people are simply telling lies.

– New Year Address to the Nation, H.E. Yoweri Kaguta Museveni, President of the Republic of Uganda, 31 December 2010.

Delivered by the then and current president of Uganda, H.E. Yoweri Kaguta Museveni, this speech introduces two key dimensions of the interplay between energy and macro-economic issues, between energy and democracy (Mitchell, 2013). The first refers to the idea that “when we build new modes of energy production, we open or close political possibilities” (Mitchell, Charbonnier, & Vincent, 2018, p. 221). In the quote above, Museveni directly linked oil exploitation in Uganda to the political possibility of achieving autonomy from foreign donors. The second refers to a famous notion used to consider the relationship between natural resource extraction and political regimes: the oil curse. Hachemaoui (2012) explains, “Formulated by economists and then political scientists, the resource curse thesis asserts, most often based on correlations between numerical variables, that oil states are among the most authoritarian countries, the most economically unstable and the most affected by political violence” (p. 211). According to Museveni in the speech quoted above, several actors in Uganda frame oil exploitation as a likely curse for this country, but he constructs this activity as a key means for achieving political and financial autonomy. The two interplays introduced here highlight competing visions about oil exploitation and are directly related to the question addressed in this article: how is an economic imperative constructed?

1. Puzzle, Theoretical Framework, Research Design and Key Case Study Characteristics

Looking at how an economic imperative is constructed using the case of oil exploitation in Uganda constitutes an interesting puzzle for many reasons. First of all, two elements make unlikely the construction of an economic imperative by the Ugandan state: the relatively weak policy-making power of the state in “African contexts where public policies are fragmented, marked by a multitude of programs and projects in the various sectors concerned, a priori poorly regulated by a diffuse state actor with weak capacities” (Darbon & Provini, 2018, p. 17); and its authoritarian character. Regarding the latter, it seems surprising to find state actors willing to construct an economic imperative through persuasion when they can use blunt force to make opponents accept arbitrary decisions. Furthermore, examining how oil exploitation is constructed as an economic imperative in Uganda is fruitful for filling critical research gaps. A great deal of research has documented how transnational actors and factors play a role in extractive industries (Meckling, Kong, & Madan, 2015) and how states stick to a path of dependency with regards to fossil fuel exploitation (Dumarcher & Fournis, 2016). However, most of this previous research has not taken sufficiently seriously domestic politics (Luong & Weinthal, 2006). There has also been little work as to how this dependency is constructed before exploiting these resources (Buu-Sao, 2021; Chailleux, 2021). Finally, while constructing oil exploitation as an economic imperative has been less controversial than in previous historical epochs, such as the Industrial Revolution in Europe (Malm, 2018), the current period is marked by the climatization of global politics through which “climate change is increasingly becoming the frame of reference for the mediation and hierarchization of other global issues” (Aykut & Maertens, 2021, p. 502). By taking into account this dynamic, it is somehow puzzling that oil exploitation can be constructed as an economic imperative amidst growing pressure to stop such economic activity.

Bearing in mind these puzzling elements, this article shows that the construction of oil as an economic imperative in Uganda is based on two processes: 1) embedding the meso level within the macro level via a long-term horizon; and 2) rendering the contingent necessary through a combination of material and immaterial strategies of state political control (Watson & Hay, 2004). The distinction here between meso and macro levels is based on three levels of analysis (macro, meso, and micro) identified in political economy. Within this disciplinary field, the micro level designates “microeconomic controversies, i.e. those that affect companies or other units involved in the financing, production and marketing of goods and services”; the meso level designates those

that partly structure the economic activity of an industry or several entire industries, in particular through multi-stakeholder mobilizations; and the macro level designates that of contemporary capitalism (Hay & Smith, 2018, p. 46).

My approach to economic imperative is based on previous work defining it as a “non-negotiable and binding constraint (such as competitiveness and austerity) used to justify policies” (Berry & Hay, 2016). While I agree with these scholars on the discursive dimension of an imperative, I will also show that economic imperatives have other structural characteristics (Table 1).

Table 1. Key Structural Characteristics of an Economic Imperative

Key characteristics	Definition	Case-based patterns
Beyond a discursive dimension	Based on a combination of “material” and “immaterial” strategies of state political control	Narrative defining the legitimate causality of extraction and marginalization of the parliament within the policy-making
Long-term dimension	Pivotal between past, present, and future	Presented as a lever to move away from past donor dependency and to foster future economic development
Combination of state actions abroad and at home	Promotion abroad to attract investors and repression at home towards challengers of the imperative	Roadshows (investment promotion events) abroad and NGO control at home
Above a policy paradigm ¹	Pivotal between a broad range of policy sectors	Key role for oil extraction within macro-state development strategy
Macroeconomic embeddedness	Key role in the “national accumulation regime” ²	Oil revenues as a tool to borrow loans

Source: Author

1. “A framework of ideas which influences the way in which policy is formulated in a given policy area with four interrelated levels: 1) ideas about the subject and how it should be governed (interpretive framework); 2) policy goals; 3) policy instruments; and 4) governance institutions” (Kern, Kuzemko, & Mitchell, 2014, pp. 514–515; Hall, 1993).
2. An accumulation regime is defined as the totality of regularities through which the accumulation of capital assures its progression (Boyer, 2015, p. 61).

The five structural characteristics of an economic imperative presented above introduce the theoretical background for this article, namely a focus on the “interfaces between extraction and wider challenges of development and political economy analysis” (Bebbington, Bornschlegl, & Johnson, 2013).

1.1 Theoretical Background

The processes of exploitation, government, and politicization of natural resources are organized around several interrelated moments and movements. Oil companies that wish to exploit oil must obtain exploration and production licenses from the states in which the deposits are located (Riofrancos, 2022). These states control access to the deposits, but the oil companies can negotiate this access (especially favourable conditions for access) by mobilizing several resources, chiefly expertise and financial power. The exploitation of deposits by these companies depends on the outcome of competition and cooperation between the state and the oil companies (Abdelal, 2013) and the latter's ability to raise capital to finance their activities (e.g., extraction, transport, refining).

Yet, oil exploitation and the financial flows supporting it are often contested by social movements (McAdam et al., 2010). Scholars have pursued different research avenues to study these interdependent moments and movements. Before introducing their specificity, it is important to mention two common characteristics they possess: 1) they all need to deal with data access challenges with extractive industries known for their opacity and sensitivity features (Buu-Sao, 2019; Watts, 2013); and 2) with few exceptions (Schritt & Witte, 2018), most of such research focuses on periods after the extraction started, a perspective I depart from by looking at political processes before oil exploitation. Some have dedicated their attention to the “examination of how extractivism organizes space, political structures, and social relations” (Chagnon et al, 2022, p. 773) through localized approaches of extraction dynamics from below (Grajales & Vadot, 2020). Others have focused on the mobilizations around extractive projects (Riofrancos, 2020), with some using research designs seeking to “overcome dichotomies between localized mobilizations, national specificities and global processes” (Allain & Maillet, 2021, p. 21). Finally, another research avenue has analyzed how extractive industries are governed (Bebbington et al., 2018), focusing on the interplay between state dynamics (building and evolutions), economic development, and extraction (Burchardt & Dietz, 2014).

This article takes into account these approaches but pursues a slightly different course. Rather than look at “how petroleum wealth shapes the development of nations” (Ross, 2012), I examine how nations frame petroleum wealth as a critical lever for their development. I also depart from scholars focused on the local scale and/or on mobilizations around extraction. Still, my perspective is similar to the one adopted by researchers paying attention to the links between state dynamics, economic development, and extractive activities (Saylor, 2014; Wright, Frantz, & Geddes, 2013). This construction

has been analyzed through a research design with a broad range of “empirical fingerprints” (Beach & Pedersen, 2013). These fingerprints have been collected to capture the construction of this imperative within the broader Ugandan political regime on the one hand, and, on the other, Uganda’s oil complex. The former “involves regular relations among governments, established political actors, challengers, and outside political actors, including other governments” (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015, p. 240), while the latter involves institutions, actors, and discourses that structure the extraction and governance of oil (Watts, 2004).

1.2 Research Design

To capture the construction of oil exploitation as an economic imperative within the Ugandan political regime, a corpus of almost two thousand hours (official transcripts of parliamentary debates) has been constructed and analyzed. In addition to academic literature about Uganda, this type of data opens up the possibility of contextualizing the oil sector within a broader and longer history of the Ugandan state. Building on previous research conducted on other oil states that used newspaper articles from the country in which oil activities are conducted (Strønen, 2017), I also constructed and analyzed a press corpus of 404 articles from the four main Ugandan newspapers—*New Vision*, *Daily Monitor*, *The Independent*, and *The Observer*—and one cross-country journal from the region, *The East African*. This corpus has been used to provide “pattern evidence (e.g., number of articles dealing with a subject), sequence evidence (timetable of events), and different forms of account evidence” (Beach & Pedersen, 2013, p. 142).

To identify and understand the interactions between actors supporting and challenging oil exploitation in Uganda, semi-structured interviews were conducted (n=22) in August and December 2021 and February 2022. Interviews were intended to capture actors’ perceptions, interactions, and practices (Musselin, 2005, p. 66). Interviewees included the member of parliament (MP) in charge of the Parliamentary Committee on Natural Resources, the chairman of the Uganda Petroleum Fund² evaluation committee, economists advising the government and the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Development on oil matters, oil industry executives (Total Energies and the Uganda National Oil Company, UNOC, the Ugandan state-owned company) and employees of Ugandan NGOs. These interviews have been supplemented by secondary sources such as policy documents, conference proceedings and presentations, advocacy documents written by NGOs, and indirect observations (i.e., videos) of 25 hours of oil industry events in Uganda (e.g., the annual Oil and Gas Convention). In an oil industry where

2. This was created in 2015, whereby all revenues collected via oil activities are supposed to be domiciled without being able to be used via the current state budget as per the Public Finance Management and Accountability Act, 2015.

the activities of certain companies constitute literally black boxes about which almost nothing is known (Watts, 2005, p. 388), 18 diplomatic telegrams leaked via Wikileaks and the Panama Papers have been integrated into my research design. I found them useful to “reduce the size of the unobservable” (Pouponneau, 2020, p. 21) and to study “the diplomatic activity that exists outside the negotiation arenas and between the negotiation sessions in these arenas” (Mangin, 2020, p. 91), such as the contacts that did not result in contracts, such as the ones established between the Ugandan government and Iran, and between the Ugandan Ministry of Energy and Mineral Development and Russian oil companies.

Drawing on these empirical fingerprints, I show that oil is constructed as an economic imperative through two processes: embedding the meso level within the macro level through a long-term horizon; and rendering the contingent necessary through a combination of material and immaterial strategies of state political control.

1.3 Modern Authoritarian and Market-led Regime as Key Characteristics of the Ugandan Case

According to Provini (2018), “[a]fter independence in 1962, Uganda experienced major regime, political and economic crises until the mid-1980s. The authoritarian rule of I. Amin Dada (1971–1979) led to a dramatic decline in the country’s resources. The return to power of Milton Obote (1980–1985) initiated a new economic and reformist turn. He declared Uganda the ‘best student of the International Monetary Fund [IMF]’ (Prunier 1994, p. 143) and his government methodically followed the first structural adjustment programs on the continent (Mugenyi, 1991). However, international enthusiasm waned with the bogging down of new political crises in the country (the Military Council between 1983–1985 and the ‘Bush War’ between 1981–1986), which put an end to agreements with international partners. The armed overthrow of power by Y.K. Museveni and his supporters on January 25, 1986, considered today as the country’s year zero, opened a new era on the national political scene” (p. 122).

Since the beginning of this “new era,” the Ugandan state has been depicted as a “modern authoritarian regime” that possesses the following characteristics: “an authoritarian regime that can be categorized as modern’ in the sense that it governs in large part by law, rather than unrestrained violence ... with a new form of modern authoritarianism—arbitrary governance—that focuses more on weakening competition than on maximizing control” (Tapscott, 2021, pp. 43–45). Indeed, the period starting from the mid-2000s to the present has been characterized by a combination of democratic and authoritarian reforms (e.g., both a shift to multipartyism and removal of presidential

term limits), with “a reduction of parliamentary powers to vet ministerial appointments and censure ministers and additional powers for the president to dissolve parliament” (Goodfellow, 2014, p. 759).

In this context, whereas there is a formal separation of power and regime tolerance over low transgressive collective action (Tilly, 2013 p. 82), “strategies of patronage, repression, and co-optation are also employed to contain other oppositional activities” (Friesinger, 2021, p. 131), always with the ruling NRM party’s hegemony maintained (Perrot, 2016). When it comes to political economy, the Ugandan state has been depicted as a “market-led regime” seeking to attract “emblematic” foreign investors (Behuria, 2021), and a “pioneer” on the African continent in adopting the precepts of the Washington Consensus through strong support for structural adjustment (Wolff, 2021; Mamdani, 1990). Within this regime, ideological orientations of the Ugandan executive focuses on state facilitation of private sector-led development and ensuring middle-income status rather than solely poverty reduction (Greco, Wiegratz, & Martiniello, 2018).

2. Constructing an Economic Imperative by Embedding the Meso in the Macro Through a Long-Term Horizon

All industry actors (meso level) share a willingness to be considered as critical sectors (Smith, 2016). However, in practice not all of them are considered as such. When it comes to studying how an activity is constructed as an economic imperative, a key process lies in embedding an industry within the broader macroeconomic order. Before showing the core dimensions of this process of embeddedness, it is possible to capture the latter by looking at macroeconomic indicators mentioned by oil industry actors. Consider the following:

Tullow Oil Country Director Brian Glover announced on December 13 that he believes Uganda has the potential to export \$5 billion worth or 200,000 bpd of oil annually when full-scale production begins in 2011. It is the largest estimate provided yet of Uganda’s oil potential. If it is accurate, oil revenues will transform Uganda’s economy, more than doubling total exports of \$2 billion, and, according to Glover, creating jobs for 10,000 Ugandans. The finds, announced on December 11 and 16, mean Uganda has between 400 million and 500 million barrels of proven

reserves. Estimates of potential reserves run upward of one billion barrels, an amount that could make Uganda one of the top three sub-Saharan African oil producers, behind Angola and Nigeria.

– New Discoveries Confirm Uganda Oil Potential, Cable, 24 December 2008, Wikileaks Ref: 08KAMPALA1648.

From this leaked cable quoting Tullow’s oil director for Uganda, the strategic dimension of oil revenues is shown. The oil deposits were discovered in 2006 (Langer, Ukiwo, & Mbabazi, 2020) with a duration of production of around 20 years (Box 1), and the following ongoing delays: in 2007, a production start was anticipated for 2009; in 2010 for 2017; in 2013 for 2018; in 2015 for 2021; in 2019 for 2023; and in 2020 for 2024 (Mihalyi & Scurfield, 2021).

Box 1. Summary of the stages and key players in Uganda’s oil industry.

“Oil exploration in northwestern Uganda, which began in 2004, has led to the discovery of a large deposit under the waters of Lake Albert. The estimated reserves are of the order of 6 billion barrels, of which 1.4 billion can be exploited over a period of about 20 years. The project is particularly ambitious, both in terms of production—which could reach 220,000 barrels per day—and transportation, with the construction of a pipeline of nearly 1,500 km across Uganda and Tanzania to reach the port of Tanga at an estimated cost of USD 3.6 billion Following the sale of Tullow’s shares, Total now holds the majority of the project’s shares (Tilenga project), with the remainder belonging to CNOOC (Kingfisher South project); ... Uganda could generate USD 6.7 billion from oil production over a period of 20 years, or 18% of the country’s GDP in 2019.”

Cited from Puloc’h (2021), p. 14.

If some of these numbers provide information about the potential weight of oil resources in the future economy of Uganda, they do not tell us how the exploitation of these resources is constructed as an economic imperative by embedding the meso in the macro via a long-term horizon. To capture this initial process, a focus on the macro-economic narratives and the macro institutions of the state (Gabor, 2020) is important.

2.1 Macroeconomic Narratives and Practices Embedding the Meso in the Macro

The Ugandan state's emergence plan, Uganda Vision 2040, is a major document for tracing how oil exploitation is constructed as an economic imperative by state actors. Released on 18 April 2013, it targets the following purposes and links oil revenues and strategy as follows:

[T]he Vision 2040, whose aspirations are to change the country from a predominantly low income to a competitive upper middle-income country within 30 years with a per capita income of USD 9,500 In the early years of this Vision, the exploitation of the oil and gas resources will be crucial to spur economic growth and development in the country.

Regarding the macro institutions of the state, the role of the central bank and its debt management is particularly significant when it comes to capturing how oil exploitation is constructed as an economic imperative. Whereas this exploitation had not yet begun in Uganda, the expected revenues from its extraction were already tightly attached to the macroeconomic interests of the state. First, this was pursued through existing borrowing, as mentioned by Lawrence Bategeka, the vice-chairperson of the Parliament Committee on National Economy, and criticized by a coalition of twenty-one Ugandans NGOS.

Debt service of Uganda's external debt is on the rise and outstripping growth of the country's income, currently at 4 per cent. This poses risks for future debt repayments, especially as the country continues to acquire external debt at less concessional terms to finance the oil developments (Hansards of the Parliament of Uganda, 4 April 2018).

Second, the future debt management seems to be highly dependent upon forthcoming revenues from oil:

Dr Adam Mugume, the director research at Bank of Uganda (BoU), notes that going by the current trend of economic activity, oil is the only prospect available to repay back the debts. "I don't see how you can generate enough money to start repaying interest and then within the next five years in foreign exchange. We are only assuming now that either we have the oil revenue coming on board or we go and ask for debt forgiveness or we default. Apart from these three options, I don't see how we shall repay our debts," Dr Mugume said during a post-budget dialogue

organised by the Uganda Economics Association (UEA). Dr Mugume's assertion is almost similar to that of Dr Fred Muhumuza, an economist, who pointed out during the World Bank report launch that: "Government says it is not borrowing on the basis of oil but the lenders are lending on the basis of oil." His assertion is on the basis that the loans that the government is getting, especially from China, are premised on the fact that Uganda is going to start producing oil and will have enough revenue to make payments on the debt" (Debt: Has Uganda mortgaged its oil with increased borrowing? *Daily Monitor*, 27 June 2016).

The interplay between oil revenues and debt management, with mutual but unequal dependence between donors and debtor states like Uganda, introduces another key structural characteristic of an economic imperative: a reliance on a combination of state action at home and abroad.

2.2 Constructing an Economic Imperative Through a Combination of State Action at Home and Abroad

A key action to construct oil as an economic imperative is an ability to attract foreign investors. To do so, the Ugandan state promotes the oil sector in two main ways. The first is done through presidential diplomatic visits abroad, such as in July 2023 at the Russia-Africa summit (The Independent *Museveni, Muhoozi at Russia Africa summit*, 31 July 2023), or in April 2009 in Iran, as mentioned within a leak and a presidential address, respectively:

Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Henry Okello Oryem, who travelled to Iran with Museveni, gave Charge a debrief on June 1. Oryem said that Museveni outlined his request for assistance for an oil refinery to Iranian officials, including Ahmadinejad. The Iranians were sceptical that Uganda's oil would be a commercially viable export given its waxy consistency. Museveni explained that the refinery would produce diesel fuel for use in Uganda and its neighbouring countries as well as to run its thermo-generators for electricity. According to Oryem, the Iranians said they would consider the refinery's viability and assist in other areas of oil production (Ugandan President seeks oil sector support in Iran, Cable, 4 June 2009, Wikileaks Ref: 09KAMPALA561).

Now that we have found the petroleum, the debate has been: do we just export crude oil or we build a refinery? Now some people were trying to tell me stories about this and that, but I was not listening to those

stories. So recently when I visited Iran, I asked the President of Iran, “Mr President, you have been producing petroleum for a long time. There are some people who say that building a refinery does not make much economic sense. What is your experience?” He told me that in Iran they already had nine refineries and were building another seven so that they could have a total of 16. And here we were being discouraged from building just one; you can see. Some people think that Africa is a play place where people can go and play games, but NRM is not in that league” (State of the Nation address by the President of Uganda to Parliament, 4 April 2009).

The second option was promoted through roadshows, such as the following presented by a press release of the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Development:

Uganda’s Second Licensing Round was launched on 8th May 2019 at the 9th East African Petroleum Conference and Exhibition in Mombasa. Five prolific blocks all located in the Albertine Graben are now available to potential investors The Manager, Second Licensing Round and the Ag. Commissioner for the Upstream Petroleum Department, Mr Frank Mugisha, says promotional road shows have been planned to be held in major cities of London on 14th October, Houston on 17th October and Dubai on 22nd October 2019 ... they will provide a platform for Government officials to deliver presentations and exhibition on the prospectivity of the blocks, legal and regulatory framework, data availability, commercial and fiscal aspects (Ministry of Energy and Mineral Development, Press release, 10 October 2019).

Another key dimension within the process of constructing an economic imperative by embedding the meso within the macro is the time horizon of this process.

2.3 Oil Extraction as a Pivotal Activity Between the Past, the Present and the Future

If states can govern economic activities through daily decision-making of everyday politics, a short-term time frame is not enough to build an economic imperative. Constructing the latter includes having a long-term time horizon such as the one mentioned in the emergence plan’s Vision 2040. By linking future oil revenues and the evolution of the Ugandan economy towards a “middle-income country within 30 years,” state actors in Uganda adopted a long-term view similar to the one used by countries depicted as “developmental states” (Weiss & Thurbon, 2021). Unlike other economic

activities occasionally promoted by the Ugandan state, such as organic agriculture (Bendjebbar & Fouilleux, 2022), oil exploitation is presented as “an important building block to realizing the long-term aspirations and objectives of Uganda’s Vision 2040” (Lakuma, 2020, p. 127).

Another key component of “the politics of time” of embedding the meso within the macro is to mobilize the future via extractive activities through a combination of two ways identified by previous research: 1) investment, characterized by the estimation of future profits and the central place given to risks that could jeopardize them; and 2) anticipation, which associates extractive activity with broader considerations likely to raise new questions (Laurent & Merlin, 2021, p. 43). A key combination of investment and anticipation to mobilize the future, as part of constructing oil exploitation as an economic imperative, lies in addressing the idea that tackling climate change means a reduction of fossil fuel production. For example, the current president Yoweri Museveni, the Petroleum Authority of Uganda (PAU), and the National Planning Authority each cited the economic viability of oil exploitation in Uganda:

“Like it or not, the world will remain dependent on oil for the foreseeable future. Eventually, we can and must wean ourselves off it. But we can do so without crippling development or becoming even more dependent on those whom we do not trust” (Yoweri Museveni, Africa can help solve the energy crisis, *The Telegraph*, 2 May 2022).

“Is the investment in Uganda’s oil resources still economically viable in light of the energy transition? ... The current global energy demand indicates that oil and gas continue to play a leading role in the world’s energy mix and will remain the largest source of fuel needed to meet 2040 global demand. Uganda’s oil will surely have market, both locally and internationally” (PAU website, January 2020).

“Commercial production of oil remains viable even though the window for profitable exploitation of oil is narrowing as concerns” over climate change increase (National Planning Authority, Third National Development Plan (NDPIII) 2020/21–2024/25, 2020:18).

If embedding the meso level within the macro level through a long-term horizon is the first process by which oil is constructed as an economic imperative in Uganda, a second one is also critical for this construction: rendering the contingent necessary (Watson & Hay, 2004) through a combination of material and immaterial strategies of State political control.³

3. Rendering the Contingent Necessary Through a Combination of Material and Immaterial Strategies of State Political Control

The combination introduced above is one of the five structural characteristics of an economic imperative (Table 1). When it comes to material strategies, a first dynamic is related to the marginalization of the Parliament of Uganda

3.1 Marginalizing the Parliament as a Key Material Strategy of State Political Control

This marginalization was introduced during an interview with the director of a Ugandan NGO working on extractive activities:

Q: Before you mentioned the role of parliament in oil legislation. How big is the level of parliamentary oversight in Uganda regarding oil?

A: There's one challenge: that you have a parliament dominated by one party So that has compromised the role of parliamentary oversight to the extent that if the party is opposed to certain policy options, then you hardly see those positions go through And we also have a very strong party leader, especially in the ruling party, who almost controls the party members. So even those who have independent views fear the party and

3. "Political control is any tactic through which the state seeks to gain compliance from society First, political control varies by the amount of violence used. When a strategy is more violent, it is more direct and overt: Intended targets know they are being targeted and are aware of the threat of force that might result if they do not change their behaviour. When a strategy is nonviolent, it can be indirect and covert: Targets are sometimes, but not always, unaware that they are being controlled. Second, political control varies by the degree to which the state uses material and nonmaterial threats and inducements. Material inducements relate to tangible outcomes, including bodily integrity, money, and goods, while nonmaterial inducements are intangible and include social sanctions, worldviews, communities, a sense of belonging, and emotions" (Hassan, Mattingly, & Nugent, 2022, pp. 157–158).

therefore they aren't able to give their open opinions. So, the party leader is a bit overbearing over the party members and that compromises the oversight law.

Q: What about the parliamentary forum on oil and gas that was created in 2010? Are the members of the forum trying to provide an alternative and raise new questions and ideas?

A: That forum has also been affected by those politics I told you about because the former leaders of the forum were members of the ruling party and when we were going through the legislative process they would have opinions on certain provisions, but the party would want to prevail over them [T]he leadership of the forum became like rebels in the party. Once the party discourages the rebels, it means they can no longer buy your position. It means that they even call party meetings and they were not invited. Or when members of this forum proposed ideas for the content of oil legislation, they were simply ignored (Interview with an NGO director, Kampala, December 2021).

As introduced by the passage above, one of the core dimensions of the parliament's marginalization is the pressure on MPs, especially the ones within the ruling party, the NRM, and, even more, those belonging to the Parliamentary Forum on Oil and Gas (PFOG). This forum was formed in 2010 to "provide a constructive platform for Members of Parliament (MPs) to meaningfully understand and influence the governance of the extractive resources sector, particularly Oil and Gas ... to collectively work together to see that the emerging Oil and Gas sector in Uganda becomes a blessing and not a curse" (PFOG website, 2019). Some of these members have been excluded from the ruling party: "In April 2013, the ruling NRM party expelled four of its Members of Parliament for indiscipline, accusing two of them of belonging to PFOG, a pressure group of legislators advocating for greater transparency in the oil and gas sector, but which the party said was 'opposed to the NRM position on oil'. The Constitutional Court later ruled that the expelled MPs should also lose their positions in the Parliament. The so-called 'rebel MPs' however successfully managed to challenge the ruling in the Supreme Court. Nonetheless the action sent a strong warning to other MPs" (Bukonya & Nakaiza, 2020, p. 121).

The parliament has also been pressured and marginalized when the ruling party rejects opposition proposals and/or rejects transparent proposals by mobilizing its numerical advantage in parliament, as in the following case:

The ruling party on Friday used its numerical strength in Parliament to overturn a House resolution that had clipped the minister's powers in the Petroleum (Exploration, Development and Production) Bill, 2012. At least 149 MPs voted to reinstate the minister's full powers to grant and revoke licences, negotiate and endorse petroleum agreements. Only 39 MPs including five NRM MPs voted against the amendment in Clause 9 of the Bill, a key section that had held the passing of the proposed Oil law. The five NRM lawmakers who voted against the government position accused President Museveni of blackmail and criticising their colleagues for bowing to government intimidation to pass what they called a bad law for Uganda's nascent oil sector (*Daily Monitor*, Oil bill passed but 198 MPs didn't vote, December 2012).

Another dimension of this marginalization is related to the fact that key documents such as production sharing agreements are kept inaccessible to MPs and, more broadly, to other Ugandan citizens despite regular requests made by MPs.

To assess the potential contribution of oil production to the national economy, government should urgently design and make the public production sharing agreements public (Mr. Mukitale, NRM, chairman of the committee on National Economy, Hansards of the Parliament of Uganda, 16 October, 2009).

As Parliament, we cannot competently debate this statement of the minister without seeing those production sharing agreements. Why are you keeping this information a secret? If you did a good deed for Uganda or Ugandans, why do you keep these kinds of deals a secret? Why don't you show them to especially Members of Parliament? (Henry Banyenzaki, NRM, Member of Parliament, Hansards of the Parliament of Uganda, 5 April 2011)

Despite these repeated requests and a cross-party resolution, these agreements have not been disclosed (Governance of Uganda's oil, gas and mining sector remains weak, *The East African*, 13 September 2021).

3.2 Constructing an Economic Imperative by Controlling Challengers

President Yoweri Museveni has declared these challengers to be “saboteurs”:

I have decided to use the rights of the President under Article 101(2) of the 1995 Constitution of the Republic of Uganda, to address Parliament. I am exercising this right in order to counter the nefarious and mendacious campaign of the foreign interests using NGOs and some Members of Parliament to try and cripple or disorient the development of the oil sector in Uganda There is now a multiplicity of NGOs on oil such as Advocates Coalition for Development and Environment (ACODE), NAPE, Global Rights Alert, Centre for Constitutional Governance, Afiego [T]he saboteurs working on behalf of foreign interests do not want our petroleum programs to succeed. The success of our petroleum programs in the next few years will mean financial independence and financial muscle for Uganda. That is the worry to the internal saboteurs and their foreign backers (President’s address to Parliament, Hansard Parliament of Uganda, 13 December 2012).

These challengers are sanctioned by the state within a Ugandan context characterized by “a shrinking democratic space” (Khisa, 2019) and materialized through increased state control of NGOs. The latter is embodied by the NGO Act of 2016, which, among other things, created the National Bureau of NGOs. This “grants wide and discretionary powers to the Bureau. These include the power to discipline an NGO by ‘blacklisting’ or ‘exposing an affected organization to the public’ or even the revocation of the permit of an organization” (Mbazira & Namatovu, 2018, p. 86). To assess potential sanctions, this legislation introduces “district non-governmental organizations monitoring committees (DNMCs) and sub-county non-governmental organizations monitoring committees (SNMCs) made up of state security officials. Therefore, the presence of state security officials on DNMCs and SNMCs creates a platform for continuous security-based monitoring of NGO activities by the state” (Ibid, p. 86).

In the case of oil, the sanctions targeted the NGOs openly challenging oil exploitation. On 20 August 2021, the National Bureau of NGOs promulgated the complete or partial suspension of the activities of 54 NGOs. Among them, eight are openly opposed to oil exploitation. One was then subject to other forms of repression, including a search of offices in Kampala and Hoima (6 and 13 October 2021), the arrest of an employee in Buliisa (14 October 2021), and then the arrest of six other employees (AFIEGO NGO

staff detained over “illegal oil sector operations,” *The Independent*, 24 October 2021). One of the founders of this organization mentioned during an interview other forms of repression before the search and subsequent arrests:

Sometimes you want to go and have a meeting somewhere, and they don't stop you, but then the state security officials come and sit in the local community meeting. And so the members of that local community don't dare to speak out. Other times, they openly prevent you from holding the meeting. For the media, we have similar situations: you organize a radio program and you invite a person, and the resident district commissioner, who is the president's representative in the district, tells the radio station concerned: do not allow this guest to come (Interview with a member of an NGO working on environmental and extractive issues, Kampala, August 2021).

In pursuing repression towards NGOs that openly challenge oil exploitation while coopting those that advocate for “better governance,”⁴ the state constructs oil as an economic imperative through material strategies of political control. When it comes to immaterial strategies, the construction of this imperative operates through the president's, government executive's, and MPs' position statements from the ruling party that bring together two structural characteristics of an economic imperative: a pivotal dimension between a broad range of policy sectors and a macroeconomic embeddedness with a key role within a “national accumulation regime.” An instance of such statement is the following speech made by the Deputy Speaker of the Ugandan Parliament, Thomas Tayebwa, two days after an EU Parliament passed a resolution on EACOP, citing human rights and environmental concerns about this project:

The European Parliament passed a resolution—Resolution No.22/28/26RSP—which has been brought to the attention of my office. Wherein, the European Parliament advises the Governments of Uganda and Tanzania not to develop the Tilenga, Kingfisher, and the East African Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP) projects I condemn this motion and the resolution that was passed, which calls on Uganda and Tanzania to stop the development of the oil and gas project in the East African region

4. An instance of such cooptation is that the five NGOs that are members of the Civil Society Group within the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) multi-stakeholder group in Uganda are not challenging oil exploitation itself, but rather promoting transparency and accountability within this industry. “The EITI is a global standard that promotes revenue transparency and accountability [I]t brings together extractive industry companies, civil society representatives, and government officials in a voluntary public–private partnership to help governments of resource-rich nations govern more effectively” (Van Alstine & Andrews, 2016, pp. 95–96). Uganda became a country member of the EITI in 2020.

It represents the highest level, to me, of neo-colonialism and imperialism against the sovereignty of Uganda and Tanzania. (Applause). The motion and the resolution seek to curtail the progress of Uganda's oil and gas development, and by extension, the country's socio-economic growth and development This represents the highest form of economic sabotage against developing countries, given that various member states in the European Union continue exploring, developing and have increased the production and use of fossil fuels in recent months (Hansards of the Parliament of Uganda, 15 September 2022).

This passage is also related to another structural characteristic of an economic imperative, namely a reliance on a combination of state actions abroad and at home. Indeed, as with other producing countries, extracting oil means attracting foreign capital to finance infrastructures such as pipelines (Janzwood, Neville, & Martin, 2023; Barry, 2013).

Conclusion

How, then, is oil exploitation constructed as an economic imperative in Uganda? This article shows that this construction is based on two processes: 1) embedding the meso level within the macro level through a long-term horizon; and 2) rendering the contingent necessary through a combination of material and immaterial strategies of state political control. By detailing these two processes, I have shown that the construction of an economic imperative is not just a discursive dimension, but that such an imperative has five structural characteristics: it is based on a combination of "material" and "immaterial" strategies of state political control; it is above a policy paradigm; it has a macroeconomic embeddedness; it relies on a combination of state actions abroad and at home; and it has a long-term dimension. On the one hand, identifying these structural characteristics provides knowledge for a better understanding of fossil fuel dependency construction before extraction and on the politics of economic activities in global south states. On the other hand, identifying these qualities raise several questions beyond the Ugandan case. When oil extraction begins, how does a boom-and-bust commodity economy influence the macroeconomic embeddedness of an economic imperative? Does the construction of fossil fuel extraction as an economic imperative constitute a necessary and/or a sufficient condition (Braumoeller & Goertz, 2000) for the durability of authoritarian regimes?

Further investigation is needed to provide answers to most of these questions. The analysis developed in this article draws on a research design that mostly captures this construction through empirical fingerprints (aside from interviews) related to public

discussions. Would we get different findings by looking at private discussions? Yet, knowing the sensitive and secretive dimension of oil industries, it seems difficult to access to such data. It would further be interesting to analyse the construction of oil exploitation as an economic imperative through a mixed methods approach to supplement, complexify, confirm, systemize, and/or enhance the existing findings (Aguilera & Chevalier, 2021).

Furthermore, building on the analysis developed in this article, three research avenues could be promising in future work. One could be about the role of oil exploitation as an economic imperative within the broader Ugandan political economy to estimate whether the interplays between oil and independence from foreign donors mentioned before is one of the instances of a new role for the Ugandan state, similar to those depicted as “developmental states.” A second could be a cross-country comparison to assess whether the construction of oil exploitation as an economic imperative in Uganda exhibits national specificities and/or shares common characteristics within states from the global south. Finally, a third could be a test in other case studies for patterns of the economic imperative detailed in this article to check whether this theorization (i.e., five structural characteristics and two processes) should be refined.

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