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'Some are More Reliable than Others': Image Management, Western Perceptions and the Global War on Terror in East Africa

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To what extent can African governments manage how they are perceived by Western audiences, particularly major donors? What strategies have they employed to achieve this? Why have some regimes been more skilled at controlling their international 'image' than others?

This paper seeks to address these important questions by comparing Ugandan and Kenyan diplomatic responses to the Global War on Terror. Both states have fallen victim to acts of domestic and international terrorism since 1998 and the governments of both Museveni and Kibaki have cooperated, to varying degrees, with the US on a regular basis in initiatives to apprehend and neutralise suspected terrorists. Both have also played a major role, both unilaterally and as part of IGAD, in regional efforts to stabilise the situation in Somalia, a key terrorism 'trouble spot' for Western policy-makers for over a decade.

Nevertheless, while Uganda has long been perceived in Washington and London as a 'steadfast' and 'trustworthy' donor ally in the fight against terrorism Kenya, in contrast, has not. Indeed, Nairobi's commitment herein has often been questioned, both publicly and privately, by frustrated Western envoys and politicians. Moreover, while donor narratives on Uganda have often stressed, first and foremost, the regime's reliability in the War on Terror, those on Kenya, even before the electoral violence of 2007-8, have usually dwelt on more pejorative characterisations relating to 'ethnic tribalism' and corruption.

This paper will assess how far the governments of Uganda and Kenya themselves have been responsible for managing, or failing to manage, these differing donor perspectives. It will explore their private and public diplomacy, use of lobbying firms and engagement with Western media and non-governmental organisations and then attempt to evaluate the degree to which these governments' successful and unsuccessful employment of image management strategies can be held responsible for the contrasting views donors have of them. In so doing, broader questions can be posed about the role of 'image' in foreign and development policy.