

UGANDA: ANATOMY OF A NIGHTMARE

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Once again, with the installation of yet another President, it is permissible to ask if at last some light is now piercing the Ugandan gloom. Other African countries have suffered abominably during the last two decades; but none more so than Uganda. Why has this 'pearl of Africa', as Winston Churchill once called it, been quite so traumatised? Are there any grounds for hoping that this time things might be better?

When in 1963 Milton Obote as Prime Minister of Uganda supported the election of Mutesa II, the Kabaka of Buganda, as President of Uganda it looked as if there had been an ingenious attempt to build into Uganda's body politic both the interests of the powerful Baganda at its core, as represented by their Kabaka, and those of the non-, indeed anti-Baganda majority in the rest of the country, which Obote had seemingly quite skilfully stitched together. In 1966 this marriage by convenience, however, broke apart, and grave uncertainty thereafter overtook Uganda's affairs.

When in 1971 Amin finally tossed Obote aside, and appointed much the most competent cabinet that Uganda had so far seen, there were those who believed the future might be more promising. Rarely can they have been quite so appallingly wrong.

Upon Amin's long awaited fall early in 1979 it became just permissible to hope once again. Yusufu Lule, the first interim President, came from Buganda. Since Kabaka Mutesa had died some years before, Buganda's principal political figure was now a non-royal; Lule was intrinsically far more acceptable as Uganda's head of government than Kabaka Mutesa could ever have been. But he and both his two luckless Baganda successors appallingly bungled their chances; and Obote returned.

This time he did no better than his first time around. In holding the first election that Uganda had seen since independence, he and his associates not only emasculated the results, but thereafter sought to hold the levers of power in a crude and soon quite ruthless manner. Five years later in mid 1985 Obote again lost his hold. In the aftermath the new military President, Tito Okello, was pressured by President Moi of Kenya into effecting a comprehensive settlement with the now plethora of contending Ugandan factions, and before the end of the year a Nairobi Agreement had actually been signed. But, as we shall see, it was fatally flawed, and thereafter the new and increasingly potent National Resistance Army under Yoweri Museveni's leadership steadily thrust to the fore. Following the capture of Kampala, the capital, Museveni was proclaimed President of Uganda on 29 January 1986, the eighth since independence (if

one, properly, counts Obote twice over), and the sixth by coup d'etat.

Elemental Structures

Like almost all of the new African countries Uganda was shaped on the green baize tables of European Foreign Offices in the late nineteenth century where no regard was had for the resulting cultural and population mix. Uganda thereupon came to consist of the northern portion of those whom the anthropologists have called the Interlacustrine Bantu, who have a complex heritage of traditional rulerships, and just some of the southern Nilotes, who had no such traditions. Like almost all of the new African countries there was no heritage of any overarching political authority other than that provided by its former colonial regime. With Independence in 1962 its politicians were thus faced with the huge task of creating a unified polity almost from scratch.

Contrary to a widespread belief that has in fact been quite remarkably well effected in a large number of other new countries, often no doubt in rough, but nevertheless frequently enough in quite ready terms. For present purposes that raises the possibility of posing the crucial questions as to why it is, how it was, that whilst so many other new countries have managed to put together a viable polity, Uganda has so far disastrously failed ?

Given the depth of the trauma that overtook Uganda it seems necessary to proceed here by paring down the issues to their bare essentials; and when one does so one illuminating procedure is to consider the range of elemental structures that have separately or collectively enabled many other new states to function, at all events adequately, and then compare their applicability to the circumstances of Uganda.

There would seem to be here six or seven different possibilities.

A few post-colonial states have been greatly blessed by the legacy of a countrywide political party that has enjoyed widespread, substantial and ongoing support. For all of India's troubles, it has in these terms benefited enormously from the support its regime has enjoyed since independence from the powerful Indian National Congress at its core (through all of its various guises). In very different circumstances a similar role has been played in China by the Chinese Communist Party. Such a boon nevertheless seems hard to come by. It has never been enjoyed, for example, in Nigeria; nor in Uganda either.

Where there is no such well based political party, various other expedients have nevertheless often been quite skilfully employed so as to

hold a political system together. Of these the most efficacious seems at first sight to be the mobilising in its support of a country's natural majority, such as the Javanese in Indonesia, the Punjabis in post-Bangladesh Pakistan, the bumiputras in Malaysia, the Shona in Zimbabwe, or the Sinhalese in Sri Lanka. Certainly this seems to generate a quite powerful central regime. It is often appalling, however, for the minorities, as the Catholics have learnt to their cost in Northern Ireland - and Ulster would have found in Eire.

Where no such natural majority exists, there have been a variety of attempts to compose a majority. President Moi heads such a majority in Kenya. Leopold Senghor's success as President of Mali turned a good deal on his creation of a novel Wolof-speaking majority in his own and his regime's support. In Malawi President Banda's regime rests, it seems, upon the support of its 'southern' majority, with his own Chewa at its core. In Uganda Milton Obote initially tried to pursue this course on three successive occasions, and then seems to have given up fatally when he was three times frustrated.

Where either of these two further possibilities proves difficult to accomplish, at all events to begin with, the 'Prussian' alternative has been tried instead. Where no natural majority exists, and no one initially seems able to compose one, a forceful group can sometimes seize hold of the central levers of power and employ them effectively. This was the procedure adopted by the Punjabis in pre-Bangladesh Pakistan, by Sekou Toure and his Malinke in Guinea, by the Sara clans in Chad, initially perhaps most notably by the Kikuyu in Kenya.

There are at least three other possibilities as well. The prophet Mohammed long ago showed at Medina just how it was possible for one man to take hold of the interstitial position between rival groups who were unable to prevail over each other and establish a position of dominance over all of them. In a famous study Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard recounted how something very similar occurred rather more recently amongst the Sanusi of Cyrenaica. Such was the principal means by which President Nyerere established his position so successfully in Tanzania. A marginal man originating from a small 'tribe' in a country where no natural majority existed, where no one seemed able to compose one, and none emerged as its 'Prussians', he seized the interstitial position that lay open, and set the Tanzanian polity in its present interstitial mould. There it seems to remain, if the appointment as his successor of President Mwinyi from the offshore island of Zanzibar is anything to go by. A similar role seems to have been enjoyed by the Cameroons President Ahidjo. 'His father', so

Professor Crawford Young writes, 'was a Fulani of middling status, and his mother was from a non-Islamic northern group. Because he was not tied to the Fulani aristocratic or clerical class, he could be relatively acceptable to the south. Because he had northern antecedents, even if he lacked high customary status, he could quieten Fulani fears of southern domination'. The longest standing of the Nigerian Presidents, General Gowon, had some similar attributes - a Christian from the Middle Belt in Nigeria's otherwise Muslim north; and there could be other examples as well.

Where all these further expedients prove difficult to effect, it may still be possible to create a working regime in which the head of government is no more than primus inter pares. This is the situation that prevails in the Southwest Pacific state of Papua New Guinea. There every cabinet has to have some nexus with each part of a country in which regional governments are very much stronger than is usually the case. The Prime Minister here is little more than just one regional representative amongst many and thus is not much more than the first amongst equals. This scarcely makes for a stable regime. Late in 1985 Michael Somare found himself toppled from its Prime Ministership for the second time. But at least there was no coup or military takeover - as indeed there has not been in any of the so much better ordered Southwest Pacific new states.

Beyond this there seems to be one further possibility for which it seems necessary to allow. This is the fifty-fifty regime. It surfaced briefly in India's interim government in the months preceding independence in 1947. It used to be most deliberately employed in Lebanon. Because of the outcome in both these instances it is hardly to be readily commended to others.

The tragedy of Uganda is that none of these expedients, some at least of which have more than half worked elsewhere, has so far been successfully operated there; and no others either.

Uganda's Experiences

Perhaps the Baganda could have become Uganda's 'Prussians'. But, in contrast to the Kikuyu in Kenya next door, they were early on used by the British as 'sub-imperialists' in the wider Uganda, and long before independence came to be greatly resented and feared in the rest of the country. They made their first run, that is, rather too soon. Knowing this they sought in the run up to independence to protect the remnants of their primacy either by a separated independence for their kingdom or by

entrenching special privileges for it in a federal constitution. That, however, only compounded the opposition to them in the rest of the country, and gave Milton Obote, a rising politician from Lango district in northern Uganda, a chance which he seized.

Around 1960 Obote managed to compose a non-Buganda majority against them. It is highly instructive that in the years 1961-1966, before and after Uganda's independence in October 1962, there were in fact no less than five successive attempts to compose a governing majority in Uganda, none of which succeeded for very long. Three of these in varying sequence were constructed by Obote himself; one by some of his opponents; one, against him, by some of his colleagues. His first attempt, institutionalised in the principally anti-Buganda, largely Protestant, Uganda Peoples Congress, which he proceeded to lead seemed headed at first for political control via the first full Ugandan national elections of 1961. Precisely because these looked like delivering control over Uganda to him and his UPC, those elections were widely boycotted by the neo-traditionalists in Buganda under Kabaka Mutesa's increasingly evident leadership. But that had the extraordinary effect of handing the victory not to the UPC but to the countrywide Democratic Party which had largely Roman Catholic support and which took upon itself to mobilise some of its following in Buganda notwithstanding the more general boycott there. In the outcome the DP only won a minority of seats outside Buganda, but on an exiguous poll won almost all of the seats in Buganda itself, and thus secured a majority in the country as a whole. Thereupon under the Muganda Catholic, Benedicto Kiwanuka, it formed the first African government in Uganda.

This second composed majority was not quite as ephemeral as is sometimes suggested, for in Uganda as a whole there were almost certainly more Catholics than Protestants. But its success gave its opponents very furiously to think, and out of that came the second of the attempts which Obote made in these years to compose a majority. Against the DP he was persuaded to concoct an alliance between his own anti-Buganda UPC and their erstwhile foes now aligned in Buganda's newly formed neo-traditionalist movement, Kabaka Yekka (the Kabaka alone). Together they thereupon forced a further general election in 1962 in which they defeated the DP, and thereafter constructed the coalition government that before the end of the year took Uganda into independence.

This coalition was then shored up during 1963 when Obote supported Kabaka Mutesa for the Presidency of Uganda whilst holding on to the office of Prime Minister himself. The alliance rested, however, less upon a

securely composed majority than upon a fifty-fifty split, and very soon suffered from all the ills that such regimes usually do. There was a special crisis over the so-called 'Lost Counties' which Obote was committed in the rest of the country to transferring to Bunyoro from Buganda by referendum. If this was to be effected something other than the fifty-fifty regime with Buganda would be required, and so Obote - who was glad to be rid of it anyway - quietly proceeded to put together his third composed majority by wooing some of the disheartened DP over to his side. This he successfully did in 1964. Several ex-DP followers were given positions in his cabinet and shortly afterwards the KY members then left his government.

But that was not the end of this earlier story, for before very long the putting together of yet another majority, the fifth in all, by some of Obote's own more conservative colleagues, principally from southern Uganda led by Grace Ibingira, in consort with a new leadership in Buganda, proceeded subterraneously. The crisis came early in 1966 when in the course of a tangled dispute, in which the up and coming Colonel Amin was also involved, the whole of Obote's cabinet supported the establishment of a committee of enquiry that was very evidently directed against him. For thereupon, feeling cheated of his rightful inheritance, seemingly at the end of his tether with all of this politicking, and now wondering where any fourth majority he might compose could come from, Obote disastrously succumbed to the African disease, and used force to assert his own personal position. He first detained a group of his disaffected cabinet colleagues, and then, when the Baganda erupted in protest against this, sent Colonel Amin to attack the palace of the President, Kabaka Mutesa, who fled into exile to London. Obote thereupon declared himself to be Uganda's executive President in the first of the country's coups d'etat, and the nightmare years ensued.

For thereafter his hold upon any majority in Uganda was invariably in doubt. The legitimacy of his successive regimes was, moreover, never to be accepted again at the core of the country. During his first term as President he tried his hand at remedying his position by pursuing various populist policies, more particularly in 1969 with his 'Move to the Left'. But none of these got him anywhere: upon their own such appeals do not seem to have any of the potency for upholding a regime that any of the elemental structures we have earlier considered can provide. As the 1970s opened the first Obote regime was thus on the run, and early in 1971, by means of a bloodily effected coup d'etat whilst Obote himself was out of the country, Amin very brusquely pushed him aside.

Amin had perhaps just one chance to be rather more skilful. A marginal man from a tiny group in Uganda's distant northwest he might just have played the interstitial role. But he preferred, paradoxically, to pursue his own versions of Obote's abortive populist options - ultimately by expelling the Ugandan Asians. But that, as Obote had found, brought him no more than passing support, and lacking the political nous to try any other political expedient, he turned instead to the ultimate resort of the political bankrupt, terror. That was the more difficult for him to resist since he had on his hands large numbers of lawless soldiery. Following a worrying mutiny in 1965, which was nevertheless expeditiously halted, Obote had greatly enlarged the Ugandan army. Many of its most senior officers were killed, however, in the course of Amin's coup d'etat, and thereafter the Ugandan army increasingly behaved like uniformed bandits. When not engaged in slaughtering each other or brutalising the populace, they stood ready to do the nefarious work of their tyrant-president. Tens of thousands of Ugandans were thereupon killed.

Terror, however, has a way of devouring sponsoring regimes from within, and after eight years of monstrous gouging when scarcely even the shell was left, the Tanzanian army and a motley of Ugandan exiles delivered the coup de grace at the beginning of 1979. That was accompanied by a raucous gathering of ambitious aspirants for the succession who eventually propelled the elderly Muganda academic-politician, Yusufu Lule, into becoming Uganda's fourth President (the third in a row by coup d'etat). Since Amin's regime had largely collapsed from within and since most of the crucial fighting had had been done by the Tanzanian army, that had the particular merit of returning Uganda to civilian rule. With Lule's appointment the Baganda were presented, moreover, with much the best chance they ever had to transform themselves into Uganda's 'Prussians'. Lule, however, was an inept politician, who badly bungled his chances, as did his two short-term Baganda successors; and that opened the way for Obote's return.

This time Obote came into office by an election of sorts (its conduct and outcome were widely questioned). But he then sat pat. Still hated by most of the Baganda; now increasingly dependent on the Acholi and his own Langi from the north, who following the fall of Amin quickly became dominant in his no less ill-disciplined army, he never now looked like being able to compose an effective majority; now ready, moreover, to condone much violence and massacre at the hands of his own soldiery (particularly at the expense of those he believed were succouring an armed opposition against him in the country) he appeared quite unable to move

constructively.

Museveni and his NRM

In this context Yoweri Museveni - a southerner from a southwestern kingdom - put together the National Resistance Movement that soon won much southern support, not least in Buganda, and created as well the associated National Resistance Army. In two respects this was a quite new phenomenon in Uganda. During Obote's first term as President (1966-70) the chief focus of opposition to Uganda's presidential regime had been the exiled Kabaka Mutesa living in London. During the Amin years it was then a miscellany of exiles chiefly clustered around Obote in Tanzania to the south. The NRA, however, always operated from within Uganda itself. It comprised, moreover, the first armed force in Uganda that was primarily composed of Bantu southerners, and the first since independence that resolutely resisted brutalising Uganda's ordinary citizenry. In due course it proved much too much for Obote's northern Langi and Acholi forces to quell, and when in their frustration these fell out with each other, the Acholi Okellos quickly expelled the Langi Obote.

Since together the Acholi and Langi had failed to suppress the NRA, it was understandable that some Acholi should have made the egregious mistake in the aftermath of looking for substitute support from the remnants of Amin's erstwhile followers. Despite the terror they continued to employ this only, however, compounded their difficulties, and late in 1985 they were propelled by Kenya's President Moi into making a settlement with Museveni and his NRM. The ensuing Nairobi Agreement of 17 December 1985 chiefly constructed, however, what was in essence another fifty-fifty regime which was still more fragile than that between Obote and Mutesa of twenty years previously. Museveni and Okello and their followings remained acutely wary of each other's intentions, and when Okello failed to ensure that his side of the settlement was effectively carried out, Museveni's forces closed in on the capital, Kampala, and within a bare six weeks of the Nairobi Agreement Museveni was installed there as Uganda's eighth President. In the weeks that followed his NRA pursued Okello's diminishing forces to the northern borders of the country, whilst he himself set about fashioning a new order in the country.

The Museveni regime possesses three distinct series of attributes that allow a modicum of hope that it may just perhaps bring to a close Uganda's twenty years trauma. It is based upon as credible a composed majority as Uganda has ever seen. It includes both some representatives of

the country's political parties and of its non-Amin military factions. Principally, but by no means exclusively, it is built, however, upon an alliance of Uganda's numerically preponderant Bantu southerners. More particularly it includes within its ranks the Baganda at the core of the country. But they are not at its head: Museveni from the neighbouring ex-kingdom of Ankole is. That is probably, however, as satisfactory a structural position for Buganda to hold as its own interests and those of the rest of the country call for. These ingredients are exemplified by the calculation that within Museveni's first 33 man government, there were 13 Baganda, 12 more southern Bantu, and 8 from various other districts in the east and the north of the country. Museveni's own position closely accords, moreover, (though by a different route) with that of Kenya's President Moi. Both now head large composite majorities. Neither of them comes personally, however, from its most potent entity (in Kenya's case still undoubtedly the Kikuyu). Perhaps that gives them something of an interstitial position with some at least of the advantages which that can provide. In Museveni's case his composite majority is close to being the same kind of coalition which Grace Ibingira was putting together in Uganda in 1965-66 when Obote delivered his fateful blow. Had Obote then retired gracefully from Uganda's Prime Ministership (as Michael Somare in Papua New Guinea has now twice done in very similar circumstances), there was a slender chance that the traumatic years into which Uganda then moved might have been obviated.

Secondly, in Museveni's NRA a southern based Ugandan political force has for the first time since Uganda's independence an army to back it. Hitherto Uganda's armies have all been dominated if not monopolised by northerners of one kind or another. The southerners are very unlikely to allow that ever to happen again. Moreover - if only to draw the sharpest contrast between his NRA and the murderous armies of Amin, Obote and Okello alike - Museveni has stuck rigidly throughout to the Maoist principle of the people's army under which the most serious offence which any of its soldiers can commit, entailing exemplary execution when the occasion warrants, is the abuse or killing of members of the ordinary populace whom it is there to defend and with whom it must live.

There is then a further consideration. Not only is there a deep-seated desire in so much of the country, the north included (which has suffered so much along with the rest), to see the interminable killings come to an end. Because there is now a southern based regime holding the levers of power in the capital that lies in the south, the new regime ought to be much less paranoid than any of its predecessors, each

of which coming from the north came to feel in grave danger there. The new southern based regime should, that is, have much less need to take to terror to maintain its hold. Correspondingly, in the course of any crisis it should be far less prone to resort to terror against its northern countrymen, since they can be so much more easily marginalised than the southerners could ever have been by the northern regimes. There are thus several grounds for a modest hope that the Museveni regime may yet put an end to the Ugandan nightmare.

But the record requires caution. Too many have misplayed their hand thus far to have any clear assurance that the dark night is over. Skill, patience, a readiness to make the creative compromise, will all be required, and a long cooling down process as well. There is meanwhile so much to do in effecting reconstruction, physical, economic and personal. Generous overseas assistance will almost certainly be called for. The military kind will require an important reorientation. The old practice of training Uganda's army in drill, firing practice, weapon cleaning, ambush setting and escaping damagingly helped Uganda's uniformed bandits to do their worst. The new military advisers will have to read their Mao as carefully as Museveni did. In the long run - it could even be the shorter - the point to watch will be whether one at least of the more promising elemental structures we have reviewed stands intact. For without that, we may be sure, the killings will too easily resume.