

## NRM AND UGANDA'S REALITIES

*Greg Larkin*

The triumph of the National Resistance Movement (NRM) has dramatically changed the complexion of Ugandan politics. Most observers of Uganda have, in large part, attributed the victory of the NRM in January 1986 to the movement's support among the much abused Ugandan people, especially the peasantry. In an interview given shortly before assuming the Presidency of Uganda, Yoweri Museveni credited the success of the National Resistance Army (NRA) to its commitment to the principle of popular sovereignty: "We tell our soldiers that the people are the sovereign force in our land and that anybody who is against the people is an enemy of the country."<sup>1</sup> Given the extreme levels of corruption, decay, and brutality which have characterized Ugandan politics for the past twenty years, it would seem very unlikely that the NRM could radically transform the state in Uganda in a short period of time. Nonetheless, there is growing evidence that democratic elements are emerging in Uganda. Indeed, a fundamental reality of Ugandan politics which cannot be ignored is that the Ugandan people are both willing and able to defend their rights and interests. Thus, the challenge facing the NRM is whether the principle which guided it into power can be built upon to create a democratic political system.

Until the victory of the NRM in January 1986, two leaders dominated post-independence Ugandan politics: Milton Obote and Idi Amin. Most observers of Ugandan politics agree that these two individuals were loosely aligned during the 1960's. In fact, when

---

<sup>1</sup> "Yoweri Museveni - My Mission," *New African*, March 1986, p. 7.

Obote scraped Uganda's independence Constitution in 1966, it was Col. Idi Amin, then the Army Deputy Chief of Staff, who led the military attack on the Kabaka's palace, which temporarily aided Obote in clinging to power.<sup>2</sup> In January 1971, Amin staged a *coup d'etat* ousting Obote who was attending a Commonwealth conference in Singapore. The causes of Amin's coup have been vigorously debated by scholars, yet the consequences of his rule have become negative, and, in many ways, have yet to be overcome.

Amin's excesses justified by grandiose delusions (if at all) were well reported by the Western media and in the popular press.<sup>3</sup> This can be partially attributed to Amin's volatile relationship with the Zionist state. His first trip outside of Uganda was, in fact, to Israel.<sup>4</sup> However, as Amin's need for foreign patrons to consolidate his rule diminished, Ugandan-Zionist relations quickly deteriorated and became hostile. This process culminated in one of the most infamous events of the 1970's: the Israeli raid on Entebbe in July 1976.

The military overthrow of the Amin regime by Tanzanian troops and various Ugandan liberation groups did little to end political chaos and violence in Uganda. Milton Obote was returned to the Presidency of Uganda in what was argued by opposition groups as rigged elections in 1980. Thereafter, Obote's second Uganda Peoples Congress (UPC) government maintained itself in power mostly through force of arms. The magnitude of the atrocities committed by Obote's 1980-85 regime, especially by his National Security Agency (NASA), have only recently been exposed and reported.<sup>5</sup> There really cannot be an accurate death toll from the political violence which has engulfed Uganda for the past twenty years. It has been estimated that over half a million people were killed during Amin's regime. Furthermore, during Obote's second government, there are reports that perhaps 300,000 people perished in the violence, especially in the "Luwero Triangle" where the atrocities of

---

<sup>2</sup> Jan Jorgensen, *Uganda: A Modern History*. (London: Croom Helm, 1981). p.229.

<sup>3</sup> See Mahmood Mamdani's *Imperialism and Fascism in Uganda*. (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1983).

<sup>4</sup> Jorgensen, pp. 272-273.

<sup>5</sup> See *New African*. February & March, 1986.

Obote's troops reached genocidal proportions.<sup>6</sup> The political violence also took its toll on the Ugandan state so that by the time that Obote was again ousted as President of Uganda in July, 1985, the Ugandan state had almost completely ceased to function.

### Armed Popular Sovereignty

One of the critically important consequences of the political chaos in Uganda is that a significant proportion of the Ugandan people have armed themselves for their own protection. In fact, one of the startling revelations of the NRA victory was that among the NRA soldiers there were women and children. This is not to infer that the NRA is a children's army, but even Museveni acknowledged that the presence of 12 or 13 or 14 year-olds posed special problems: "The solution is to provide them (the children) with security. By security, don't mean guards, but education and the certainty of employment afterwards."<sup>7</sup> The real significance of armed children is that it clearly indicates that modern weapons have penetrated virtually all levels of Uganda's society, due to constant rebellion and warfare dating from the Amin regime.

Certainly, the NRA victory can be partially attributed to harnessing support among the victimized Ugandan people. In fact, Museveni has stated that the law of the NRM included provisions for the execution of NRA soldiers for the intentional killing of a civilian, and that five NRA soldiers have been executed for violating this code.<sup>8</sup> Yet obviously, the distinction between soldier and civilian has been severely blurred in Uganda, and this, in turn, has unmistakable implications for Museveni and the NRM government. It is extremely unlikely that the NRM government will be able to quickly find a means to disarm the Ugandan people. Given that popular sovereignty is armed, the NRM government would seem to be extremely constrained in making policies that might antagonize any segment of society and possibly lead to violence. This could be one factor in the inability of the NRM

---

<sup>6</sup> "Children of War", *New African*. May, 1986. p.18.

<sup>7</sup> "Children at War", *New African*. May, 1986. p. 19.

<sup>8</sup> See *New African*. March, 1986. p. 7.

government to formulate a national budget during its first year in power. In short, the successful resistance tactics which brought the NRM to power may, in turn, hinder its ability to govern. Thus, Uganda has radically changed from the one political extreme of virtual anarchy to the other extreme of democracy - democracy in the sense that the Ugandan people may have more power than the Ugandan state.

### Human Rights

The issue of human rights in Uganda can be divided into two areas. First, there is the monumental problem of prosecuting those individuals who, under the Amin and Obote regimes, so flagrantly violated the human rights of the Ugandan people. Second, the NRM government must find a way to presently safeguard human rights in Uganda and guarantee these protections in the future.

Certainly, one of the challenges facing the NRM is how to confront the brutality of Uganda's recent political history. It probably would not be possible to prosecute all those people who terrorized the Ugandan people; given the nature of the political violence, it could be very difficult to distinguish the guilty from the innocent. Nonetheless, it is very possible that the credibility of the NRM government would suffer if the NRM neglected or chose to ignore the crimes of the Amin and Obote regimes. This dilemma is highlighted when one considers that most of Uganda's judicial and legal professionals were either killed or fled into exile during the 1970's and 80's.<sup>9</sup> Obviously, it is still possible for more traditional African methods of justice to be carried out, especially at the local level. Yet, it could be that those most responsible for the state violence against the Uganda people may never be brought to justice. Museveni referred to this dilemma when reflecting on short-lived peace talks in Nairobi with Tito Okello's Ugandan National Liberation Army (UNLA) government: "Okello was not in control of UNLA and not in control of the situation. That was part of the problem, because the people who committed crimes must be tried and punished and since...the criminals were very high up...in the hierarchy, we could hardly succeed whether we had an agreement or not."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> See Jorgensen, pp. 309-315 for description of the Amin era.

<sup>10</sup> "Yoweri Museveni - My Mission," *New African*. March, 1986.

One critical test of the NRM's ability to govern Uganda will be the protection of human rights. The establishment of law and order in Uganda has to be regarded as essential in the safeguarding of human rights. The NRM must be given credit for the reduction (but not elimination) of violence since gaining power. However, the NRM has correctly defined human rights as being more comprehensive. As one NRM Commander, reflecting on the politics of the 1980 election stated: "[A] friend voted UPC because they promised her a blanket. But the blanket was her right, not a favor to be bestowed on her."<sup>11</sup> Human rights includes such basic needs as food, clothing, shelter, and medical care, then the NRM government obviously has a great deal of work yet to accomplish. However, it does seem very likely that the Ugandan people understand all too well that human rights cannot be taken for granted. Thus, human rights in Uganda is really an everyday struggle for survival and dignity. Indeed, the success of the Ugandan people in their daily struggle to secure their human rights may very well determine the potential for positive change in Uganda.

### Unity and Pluralism

Many observers of Ugandan politics have identified ethnic conflict as a major factor in Uganda's disunity and instability. The method of analysis would presently emphasize that the NRM is dominated by people from the south of Uganda and that Museveni is from the south-Ankole district. Thus, the NRM needs to expand its political support into the northern and eastern regions of Uganda if it is to become more than an ethno-regional entity, according to this school of thought. By contrast, Museveni has rejected such claims of southern ethnic dominance in the NRM and stated that it was Uganda's former political parties which were "tainted with religious and tribal factionalism."<sup>12</sup> It is accurate to assert that the NRM support is weaker in northern and eastern Uganda. However, this perspective should not overlook the fact that Ugandan unity is stronger today than it has ever been and that pluralism has been revived since the triumph of the NRM.

In 1966, when Milton Obote scraped Uganda's 1960

---

<sup>11</sup> "Uganda, What Next?" *New African*. November, 1986. p. 11.

<sup>12</sup> See *New African*. November, 1986. p. 10.

Constitution, he justified his rule using the slogan: "One country, one Parliament, one Government, one people."<sup>13</sup> In reality, however, Ugandan unity was very precarious. The Lukiko, Buganda's Parliament, passed a resolution calling for the removal of the central Ugandan government from Buganda and even attempted to take their case of "sovereignty" before the United Nations.<sup>14</sup> Undeniably, ethnicity still remains an important factor and will continue to play a role in Ugandan politics. In fact, among the Baganda, there have been calls for Ronnie Mutebi to take his late father's place as *Kabaka* (King) of Buganda. Nonetheless, it is critical to note that the sovereignty of Uganda as one nation is not presently being questioned or challenged by any major political force, including Baganda monarchists. It could be that the Ugandan people understand that Uganda's instability and divisiveness helped fuel the brutality and political violence of the past. Obviously, the fate of stability and peace is heavily dependent on Ugandan unity.

It is very possible that an important guarantee of unity is pluralism. Diversity does not and should not lead to conflict, unless acted upon by other antagonistic factors. During its first year in power, the NRM government has demonstrated a tolerance for Uganda's diversity. One of the surest indicators of pluralism is the right of expression and free press. In Kampala, there are over twenty publications currently available. Many of these newspapers are shoe-string operations, published irregularly. Yet, it could be that politics in Uganda is debated mostly through these newspapers because many of these publications are backed by various political groups.<sup>15</sup> The NRM government must be given credit for permitting such debate. Clearly, the NRM believes that support for Uganda's older political parties such as the UPC and the Democratic Party will decrease and become insignificant as the NRM creates a new political order. Such a strategy for political consolidation is remarkably different from repression by attempting to impose uniformity on an unquestionably plural society. Without the political acceptance of some form of pluralism, it will be

---

<sup>13</sup> Jorgensen, p. 230

<sup>14</sup> Jorgensen, p. 230-31.

<sup>15</sup> "Uganda's Press Gangs," *New African*. December, 1986. p. 16.

impossible for the NRM to build a genuinely stable and democratic system in Uganda.

### *Magendo* and the Limits of Ideology

The surest sign of Uganda's political decay has been the fact that the official economy in Uganda no longer functions in any significant manner. Government control over the Ugandan economy deteriorated quickly under the Amin regime, due mostly to officially sanctioned corruption on a massive scale.<sup>16</sup> The "liberation" of Uganda in 1980 only served to further the breakdown of the official economy.<sup>17</sup> In its place, *magendo* has become the dominant feature of the Ugandan economy. Since *magendo* is black-marketeering and illicit, unregulated trading, it is, by its nature, extremely difficult to measure. However, Reginald Green has estimated that it accounts for two-thirds or more of the Ugandan economy.<sup>18</sup>

Coffee traditionally accounts for about 90 percent of Ugandan exports, and thus the most profitable sector of the *magendo* economy has been coffee smuggling. In order to protect and control this lucrative trade, *magendo* enterprises have created private "enforcement" organizations staffed by *Bayaye* (lumpens).<sup>19</sup> Thus, the *magendo* economy has been characterized as being very exploitative because it is quite possible that enormous wealth has become highly concentrated in the hands of a few powerful individuals, known as *Mafuta mingi* (fig. - dripping wealth).

An extremely complicating factor is that *magendo* has penetrated the government, and thus has blurred the distinction between official

---

<sup>16</sup> Jorgensen gives an excellent description of the colonial roots of state corruption in Uganda, pp. 161-168. The political economy of the Amin regime is also discussed, pp. 285-303.

<sup>17</sup> Nelson Kasfir, "State, *Magendo*, and Class Formation in Uganda," *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*. Vol. 21, No. 3, 1983. p. 92.

<sup>18</sup> Reginald Green, *Magendo in the Political Economy of Uganda: Pathology, Parallel System or Dominant Sub-mode of Production?* (Sussex, England: Institute of Development Studies, 1981.)

<sup>19</sup> See Kasfir, p. 92.

and black markets. Uncontrolled inflation in the 1970's and early 80's has made the salaries paid to civil servants virtually worthless. Thus, state officials have been forced to find alternative sources of income. For example, until Uganda's currency, the Uganda shilling, was traded freely, many officials were able to take advantage of Uganda's grossly overvalued currency by buying imported goods at official exchange rates and selling these goods on the black market at many times their cost.<sup>20</sup> The critical issue now is whether such "rent seeking behavior" is simply a response to Uganda's political and economic chaos which can perhaps be changed if more rational economic policies are implemented by the NRM government. The other possibility is that *magendo* has become the entrenched economic system in Uganda, and thus will continue to function beyond the authority of the Ugandan state for the foreseeable future.

There has been a great deal of speculation over the socialist orientation of the NRM. Certainly, its peasant based strategy is very similar to the strategies employed by Mao in China and by Frelimo in Mozambique. However, since gaining power, the NRM has yet to adopt a national budget or draft any major guidelines for the future economy of Uganda. In fact, the NRM has avoided the issue of economic ideology. Dr. Ronald Batta, Minister of State for Defence and one of President Museveni's confidants, has stated that "it is not our idea to define our policy between capitalism and socialism."<sup>21</sup> The reality of the Ugandan economy is that the economic resources of the NRM government are meagre in comparison to the central role of *magendo*. Thus, the ability of the NRM to implement economic policy, let alone ideology, is severely limited by *magendo*.

In order for the NRM government to regain authority over the Ugandan economy, it must adopt policies which benefit Uganda's agricultural sector where the vast majority of Ugandans still work and live. This is especially true for coffee production which remains Uganda's most important export product. By the mid-1970's, Uganda's coffee growers, including many peasant households, were paid only a tiny fraction of the world market value of their coffee production. The difference was "absorbed" by the Ugandan state. It

---

<sup>20</sup> Kasfir, p. 91

<sup>21</sup> *New African*. March, 1986. p. 12.

was this type of official corruption which gave rise to the *magen* system. Until Uganda's agricultural producers are paid a rational price for their produce, it is extremely unlikely that the Ugandan state will be able to exert any significant authority over the Ugandan economy.

### Defining Revolutionary Uganda

A critical issue in all political systems is how the rights and duties of membership are defined. In the mid-1970's, Ali Mazrui argued very persuasively that the Amin regime was essentially based on kinship. Furthermore, Mazrui asserted that kinship was the traditional African criteria for membership in a political community.<sup>22</sup> Thus, it is virtually inevitable that Amin would order the expulsion of Uganda's small but relatively affluent Asian community because Uganda's Asians were simply not ethnically related. It would be a substantial error to believe that the issue of kinship in Ugandan politics ended when the Asians emigrated. Indeed, defining membership in Uganda's political community will remain a central question in the NRM revolution. The choice confronting the NRM is whether citizenship or kinship will be the basis for defining the new Uganda. Citizenship implies that all Ugandans are basically equal in their rights, duties and responsibilities within the Ugandan nation, regardless of ethnicity. By contrast, kinship implies not only that ethnicity is the criteria for membership but also that most people will remain merely subjects as Ugandans were under British colonialism, since it is inevitable that some people are going to be more closely related than others.

The principles which guided the NRM to power would certainly indicate that membership in revolutionary Uganda will be based upon citizenship. The first steps toward the political reintegration which the NRM has taken has been the establishment of resistance councils. There are three levels of resistance councils: village, parish, and subcounty.<sup>23</sup> There are at least two striking features of the resistance councils. First, the councils are elected by the people and there is no restriction on membership is being of "known good character", which is a major step towards defining the notion of citizenship in Uganda.

---

22 Ali Mazrui, *Soldiers and Kinsmen in Uganda: The Making of Military Ethnocracy*. (London: Sage Publications, 1975).

23 *New Africa*. November, 1986. p. 10.

Second, the councils can be dismissed by a vote of no confidence by the people who elected them. As Mahmood Mamdani has suggested, the right of recall within the resistance councils is extremely important.<sup>24</sup> If the Ugandan people have the power to recall their elected authorities, then state officials would be accountable for their actions. This would be a significant advance towards popular democracy in Uganda. It has to be pointed out that the Ugandan people have not had a meaningful role in the selection of their leaders since the 1962 independence elections, and consequently, the Ugandan state has not been answerable to its people.

Clearly, the success of the NRM will ultimately depend upon its ability to institutionalize the Ugandan revolution. The nation-wide formation of resistance councils is an extremely useful start in this direction, especially because the resistance councils should serve to bring most of the Ugandan people into the decision-making process at some level. Yet, at some point, the NRM government will have to draft a new constitution, a new political system for Uganda. There have been speculations both within and outside Uganda on the constitutional mechanisms which might be best suited for Uganda given its past political problems. Yet, the critical issue in creating a new constitution for Uganda should be creating a consensus which will remain viable in the long run. Most Ugandans are peasants, yet they know very well what their real interests are. Thus, it is absolutely essential that the Ugandan people are consulted in the creation of a new political order. Otherwise, they will not develop any sense of responsibility for the nation's political system, and whatever constitutional mechanisms are adopted could be easily subverted due to lack of popular support.

The victory of the NRM has ushered in a new era of hope for Uganda, but this should be tempered with the realization that the obstacles facing it are enormous. The habits of survival which the Ugandan people learned under Amin's regime will probably not be overcome quickly and there remains a large potential for violence in Uganda. So far, the NRM has relied on the charismatic leadership of Yoweri Museveni to rally the Ugandan people. Yet, no political system can be sustained simply on the charisma of a single leader. Nevertheless, there are indications that President Museveni and the NRM government have integrated democratic principles into revolutionary Uganda's emerging political system. Perhaps, this is as

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

much due to necessity as it is to choice, yet it does bode well for Uganda.