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THE BACKGROUND TO POLITICAL INSTABILITY IN POST-AMIN UGANDA

Balam Nyeko

The political situation in Uganda since the overthrow of the Idi Amin regime in April 1979 has been described by various commentators as one of "un-ending muddle", "extreme political instability", and "a continuing search for national leadership and control".¹ The record certainly attests to this characterization of the position. Four governments in the first two years, a controversial general election in December 1980, a coup four and a half years later following a long guerilla resistance war throughout the life of the second Obote regime, the abortive peace negotiations between the short-lived Tito Okello government and Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Army (NRA), the assumption of power by the latter in January 1986, the outbreak of anti-NRA military activities in northern Uganda in August 1986 and large-scale cattle rustling in eastern Uganda in October, followed shortly by the arrest of three Cabinet ministers and former Vice-President Paulo Muwanga for allegedly plotting to overthrow the Museveni government - all this suggests surely that in 1986, as in 1962 at the attainment of independence, Uganda is still as far away from a universally accepted national leadership as ever. The continuing instability in Uganda is a clear indication of the Ugandan people's failure, so far, to achieve any form of national consensus since the demise of the Amin government.

This essay seeks to provide an interpretation of the events of the past seven years since Amin's exit in the light of Uganda's recent

¹ "Uganda: The Wrestling Continues", *Africa Confidential* (hereinafter AC) Vol. 20, No. 24 (November 28, 1979); "Uganda: no end of trouble", AC, Vol. 21, No. 5 (February 27, 1980); C. Gertzel, "Uganda after Amin: the continuing search for leadership and control", *African Affairs*, Vol. 79, No. 317 (October 1980), pp. 461-489.

colonial history. No mono-causal explanation of the situation would be satisfactory and therefore no attempts will be made here to identify a single factor as constituting the main cause of post-Amin problems. Rather, an examination of developments since April 1979 would seem to provide an opportunity for highlighting the difficulties besetting the student of contemporary history, especially where the subject is intrinsically a part of the life of the scholar involved.²

The first such difficulty arises from a tendency on the part of students of contemporary Uganda to interpret the current situation in terms of what is desired for the future rather than from the viewpoint of how the past has shaped the events we are witnessing today. It is a truism that the present is a product of the past, but too often it appears that Ugandans particularly have been tempted to ignore this. This tendency can only surely serve to impede rather than help advance our understanding of the problems.

A second and related source of complication is the fact that the immediate past is often very much carried over into the present. The events described are too recent to allow a dispassionate approach to the question which has been very passionately debated by both participants themselves as well as outsiders.³ There is, moreover, a paucity of sources and the debate is very much a continuing one. This has led to an issue which one sees as being one of the most fundamental to the contemporary historian: the tendency for observers to categorize the works of such scholars into "partisan" and "non-partisan" types. An approach which appears somewhat sympathetic to the regime in power is often rather summarily dismissed as being pro-establishment, unobjective and merely playing the role of "willing tool" of the administration in question and providing nothing much more than apologia for the government. On the other hand, the scholar who sets out in the main to find points of criticism of the ruling group is portrayed as the more objective and realistic. Yet since objectivity is extremely elusive (especially in the study of contemporary issues) it seems more reasonable to argue that all scholars have a position to take anyway, and that in taking a position a scholar will *ipso facto* appear

² For comparison, see S.R. Karugire, *A Political History of Uganda* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1980), "Preface", where the author admits from the outset that he is neither an impartial nor detached recorder of the events he narrates.

³ The debate is partially covered by Gertzel, "Uganda after Amin".

show support for one side or the other. It is the argument of this paper that a key factor in obtaining a better understanding of modern Uganda is not so much the issue of objectivity as the degree of empathy and concern that each observer is prepared to show in discussing the problems.

The broad outline of the careers of the post-Amin governments in Uganda thus far can be quickly summarised. President Yusufu Lule's 68-day administration was removed as a direct result of a collision between the President and the National Consultative Council (NCC) of the Uganda National Liberation Front (UNFL). The NCC accused Lule of dictatorial tendencies and of seeking to pack his Cabinet with his fellow conservatives and other "men of substance".⁴ Godfrey Binaisa, the second post-Amin President of Uganda, fell barely a few days before the first anniversary of his accession to the office. His dismissal followed a clash with the Military Commission (MC) of the Front, which rejected his decision to remove the then Chief of Staff of the Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA) during the first week of May 1980.⁵ Binaisa's first three days in office had indicated clearly his great unpopularity with the Baganda, the largest ethnic group in the country, who organised demonstrations against him throughout this period and demanded the return of Lule. The strong opposition to Binaisa stemmed in large measure from the Baganda's knowledge of his past support for Milton Obote during the 1960's and for allegedly helping the latter to dismember the kingdoms of Uganda in 1966/67.⁶ But by the end of his rule Binaisa appears to have been accepted by the majority of the Baganda who, it seems, had given up any hopes of

⁴ The expression "men of substance" became very prevalent in the vocabulary of the Lusaka delegates upon their return from the Moshi Conference in late March 1979. Used by them to describe Yusufu Lule's core supporters such as Martin Alier, the highly successful dentist who had spent his exile years in Nairobi, Kenya, and Sam Sebareka, another reportedly wealthy and highly-trained Ugandan also present at Moshi, the expression appears to have been first used by Lule himself in 1976 when, together with Alier he formed the Uganda Society in Nairobi as one of the anti-Amin resistance groups. According to Avirgan and Honey, the Uganda Society's manifesto "argued that Uganda was being run into the ground because the people in power lacked education and personal wealth. What was needed, it contended, was for 'men of substance to seize control . . .'. See Tony Avirgan and Martha Honey, *War in Uganda: The Legacy of Idi Amin*, (Dar es Salaam: Tanzania Publishing House, 1982), p.44.

⁵ "Uganda: Beyond the coup", *AC* Vol. 21, no. 12 (June 4, 1980); *Zambia Daily Mail*, May 12, 1980.

⁶ *Zambia Daily Mail*, May 12, 1980.

Lule's return to power. Binaisa had reportedly developed certain acquisitive habits which led to charges by his opponents that he had become "an ardent capitalist", thus endearing himself to the propertied groups not only within Buganda but also in other parts of the country as a whole.⁷

Whether or not one agrees with the Commonwealth Observer Group's view that the December 1980 General Elections which gave Uganda its fourth post-Amin government were "as free and fair as the circumstances permitted" seems now immaterial. For certainly as the 1980 Elections developments in the country clearly showed, there was a considerable size of the population that did not accept the verdict. Indeed, the *raison d'être* for the NRA guerilla war against the second Obote regime from February 1981 to July 1985 was their belief that the elections had been rigged. The Uganda Patriotic Movement, the political organization whose military wing became known as the NRA, believed (according to one of its officials) that Tanzania, through the President Julius Nyerere, had "finally succeeded in restoring his friend and political ally", Milton Obote, to power.⁸

The second Obote regime fell in July 1985 in a coup that originated in a rebellion led by Brigadier Bazilio Okello who was based in the northern town of Gulu. Accusations of tribalism were levelled at Obote's door by the coup makers and there were reports of prior contacts having been established between the coup leaders and Yoweri Museveni's NRA.⁹ If, as was widely reported by the media, the principal immediate cause of the coup was the Acholi army officer's dismay at Obote's failure to resolve the growing conflict between the Acholi and Langi ethnic groups, it is equally clear that the NRA effectively exploited this conflict to erode the military base of the Obote government. In the long run, however, it seems that the most crucial factor behind the coup was the split within the UNLA (and probably also within the leadership of the ruling Uganda People's Congress/UPC) between those who wished to continue the war against

⁷ "Uganda: no end of trouble"; *Zambia Daily Mail*, May 12, 1980; also C. Legum's interview of M. Obote, *Africa Report*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Jan.-Feb. 1983), p.21.

⁸ Dr. P. Kamunanjira, professor of Black Studies at the City College of New York and an official of the party, made the point at a seminar on Uganda at the Institute of African Studies, Columbia University, March 1981.

⁹ "Uganda: the Okellos' Cauldron", *AC*, Vol. 26, No. 17, (August 14, 1985).

Museveni's guerilla forces and a war-weary section who preferred to negotiate a peace agreement.¹⁰ In the final analysis, neither group survived. The rebels led by Bazilio Okello, having secured the support of the elderly Tito Okello, Commander of the army, as well as that of then Vice-president Paulo Muwanga, proceeded to form an administration with Tito Okello as Head of State. A Military Council was to be the supreme organ of state, its membership totalling ten and comprising in the main army officers from UNLA. Although peace talks were opened in Nairobi a month after the coup, by September there were reports that the NRA was building up its forces around Kampala, the capital, and that the Military Council had failed to form a truly national government.¹¹ The collapse of the Tito Okello government came a month after the signing of the abortive peace agreement of Nairobi in December 1985. By then the NRA had already effectively cut off Western Uganda and the country was clearly being controlled by different warlords with their various armies rather than by any national political leader.

To a large extent, the position obtaining today is one which reflects the relative military strength of the multiplicity of fighting groups that have emerged in the country since the resistance to Amin escalated in 1978/79 rather than a situation that truly represents the national resolution of the leadership question.¹² As suggested earlier, one can only begin to explain why this is so by casting one's mind back to the country's past.

¹⁰ AC, Vol. 23, No. 3, p. 3; *Sunday Times of Zambia*, July 28, 1985. At least one Cabinet minister in the UPC government admitted at a private gathering in Lusaka in November 1984 attended by this writer that the government had previously underestimated the seriousness of the guerrilla war.

¹¹ "Uganda: a matter of warlords", AC, Vol. 26, No. 18 (Sept. 4, 1985).

¹² This view has been most forcibly advanced by the UNFL (Anti-Dictatorship), an offshoot of the old UNLF born at Moshi, which argues that the way Museveni took power through force of arms is no different from the way his predecessors had done, and that this is the result of military alliances rather than a reflection of the people's democratic choice. See *The Weekly Review* (Nairobi), March 7, 1986, p. 13. The same argument is also used by John Okello of the recently-launched Uganda People's Democratic Front when he points out that his organization is fighting Museveni "because nobody elected him to be President", as reported on the BBC "Focus on Africa" Programme, Friday, September 19, 1986.

The Colonial Legacy: Uganda on the eve of Independence, 1962

A view that seems to have been widely accepted amongst scholars interested in the study of European colonial rule in Africa was that colonialism, by bringing together a variety of ethnic groups under a single government or administration, had thereby enlarged the political scale of the peoples involved. By placing the various ethnic groups of Northern Rhodesia, for example, into one territory and under a single administration, colonial rule had the effect (so it is argued) of drawing them into "a larger unity".¹³ In this sense, then, it is possible to argue that colonial rule had the potential capacity of bringing about the creation of new "nations" and a new "national awareness" rather than the stimulation of ethnic particularism. In the case of Uganda, however, a striking feature of the history of colonialism was its failure to create "Ugandans" and a "Ugandan awareness", a failure that is clearly reflected in the disunity - ethnic, religious, linguistic, etc. - which has dogged the country throughout its post-colonial history. In turn, this disunity and the lack of any strong Ugandan nationalism has often been attributed to the manner in which Ugandan political independence was achieved in 1962. A common characterization of the Ugandan situation on the eve of independence runs as follows. The comparatively peaceful road followed by Uganda towards the gaining of independence contrasts sharply with the "longer and bitter" campaigns elsewhere such as in neighbouring Kenya or in Algeria, or more recently in the former Portuguese colonies of Angola and Mozambique. Following on from this, it is argued, Ugandan nationalism was therefore that less strong and binding precisely because it had not been born of prolonged struggle. There were hardly any "prison graduates" among the nationalist leaders of Uganda at independence; independence had therefore been given, rather than won.¹⁴ It may well be possible to counter this argument by pointing out that regardless of the manner in which independence had been achieved or obtained, a people's nationalism could still be potent and binding in its own way, and that

¹³ A. Roberts, "The political history of twentieth century Zambia", in *Aspects of Central African History*, edited by T.O. Ranger, (London: Heinemann, 1967), p. 154; also A. Roberts, *A History of Zambia*, (London: Heinemann, p. 174).

¹⁴ G.S.K. Ibingira, *The Foraging of an African Nation* (Kampala: Uganda Publishing House, and New York: Viking Press, 1973).

not all cases of decolonization in Africa need be assessed in terms of how much of a bloodbath there had been before the colonial power finally pulled out. Whatever the merits of these views, it seems plausible to argue that the attainment of national unity has eluded the country, in part at least, as a result of this colonial experience.

But the colonial legacy in Uganda goes beyond the question of political disunity and fragile nationalism merely. The nature of colonial rule itself, the manner in which the country was administered throughout the colonial period, as well as the people's perception of colonialism - all had a significant bearing upon the country's post-colonial history. D. A. Low, one of the foremost authorities on the modern history of Buganda, has delineated the parameters of the relationship between the kingdom and the rest of Uganda from the beginning of the 20th century to the 1960's.¹⁵ His study shows how the establishment of colonial rule at the turn of the century was greatly facilitated by the collaboration between the Baganda and the British, but emphasizes the point that the Baganda's "readiness to co-operate was always coupled with an unremitting determination to see that the integrity and autonomy of their kingdom was not impaired".¹⁶ This deep-seated opposition to any major threat to their traditional society and culture was accompanied, so Low tells us, by a readiness to obtain "all the advantages which were available to them from contact with outside societies".¹⁷ Low goes on to demonstrate that throughout the colonial period the Baganda survived a number of crises arising from various threats to their integrity and autonomy. As independence approached, however, the threat was no longer coming only from the colonialists and European settlers (who had unsuccessfully tried to introduce an East African federation, bitterly opposed by the Baganda); the major fear of the Baganda was now the threat of being "submerged in a non-Baganda dominated Uganda".¹⁸ Although that threat was temporarily contained by means of the 1962 "marriage of convenience" between Milton

¹⁵ D.A. Low, *Buganda in Modern History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971), pp. 227-255.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.233

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.234.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

Obote's political party, UPC, and the Baganda's *Kabaka Yekka* (King only) party in the alliance that formed independent Uganda's first government, and by the appointment of Kabaka Mutesa II as President of Uganda in 1963, the crisis of 1966 marked the end of the kingdom, the division of Buganda into districts and the flight into exile of Mutesa. The quest for autonomy and the integrity of the kingdom as well as a special status within Uganda had been halted.

A second but closely related effect of the collaboration between the British colonial administration and Buganda has been noted by a number of scholars.¹⁹ This was the application of the Buganda "model" of administration to parts of Eastern and Western Uganda (and to a lesser extent Northern Uganda) which entailed the employment of Baganda personnel as "agents of colonial rule" and the use of the Luganda language for official business. As Low correctly points out, this led the Baganda to develop "a deep sense of their own importance to Uganda"²⁰, while elsewhere in the country the non-Baganda became rather resentful towards the Baganda.

At independence in October 1962, then, the new rulers of Uganda had been bequeathed a series of problems: unity was fragile, Buganda's fears of being sub-merged in the new Uganda had not been completely allayed, while the non-Baganda population remained suspicious and the economy continued to be lop-sided. The importance of Buganda to the politics of the whole country derived not only from its historical role in the British colonial administration but also from its position as the geographical and economic heart of the whole country. Under colonial rule, the British had concentrated their major efforts in stimulating the production of export crops in Buganda and parts of Eastern Uganda, with the rest of the country remaining only sources of labour or recruitment into the army.²¹ But aside from all these difficulties, a complex question relating to a historical claim by Bunyoro, one of the country's kingdoms, for the restoration of large

¹⁹ A. D. Roberts, "The sub-imperialism of the Baganda", *Journal of African History*, III, 3 (1962), pp. 435-450; Low, *Buganda...*, pp. 227-231; G. Emwanu, "The Reception of Alien Rule in Teso", *Uganda Journal*, 31, 2(1967), pp.171-182.

²⁰ Low, *Buganda . . .*, p. 230.

²¹ C. Ehrlich, "The Uganda Economy, 1903-45", in *Oxford History of East Africa* Vol. II, edited by V. Harlow, E.M. Chilver and A. Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), pp. 395-475; M. Mamdani, *Imperialism and Fascism in Uganda* (London: Heinemann, 1983), p.21.

tracts of land to her from Buganda, remained unsolved. The British, having initially created the problem themselves by rewarding Buganda with a piece of Bunyoro territory earlier in the century, now did a Pontius Pilate on the eve of independence and left Obote's new government to resolve the "Lost Counties" conflict. The "Lost Counties" issue, which was finally settled through a referendum in 1964 in Bunyoro's favour, helped intensify the already growing antagonism between Obote's central administration and the Buganda government, which had unsuccessfully resisted the holding of a referendum on the question. The resolution of the "Lost Counties" issue can, in fact, be seen as laying the ground for the subsequent violent clash between the two governments in 1966.

The First Obote Regime, 1962-1971

Space limitation precludes any detailed discussion of the first Obote government, the causes of the January 1971 coup or the immediate aftermath of the seizure of power by Idi Amin. There are, however, several excellent studies of the first two topics, while the period since Amin's exit has attracted a number of interesting and sometimes rather hurriedly-produced and somewhat journalistic and sensational accounts of the Ugandan experience from 1971 to 1979. Here we shall merely review, very briefly, some of the literature on the first nine years of independent Uganda, highlighting some of the continuities and similarities from the colonial to the post-colonial history of Uganda to support our original argument that there is much profit in interpreting the post-Amin situation in the context of the colonial legacy.

Nearly all the writers on modern Ugandan history recognize that the first post-colonial regime in the country had the truly undaunting task of steering a state which for a variety of reasons was a most unsteady one.²² In addition to the difficulties bequeathed by the British in terms of, for example, the "Lost Counties" issue and the relationship between Buganda and the rest of the country, there was the question of leadership and the absence of a truly grassroots country-wide political organization.²³ The earliest scholarly attempts to assess

²² Karugire, *A Political History*, pp. 170-198, esp. p. 192; J. S. Saul, "The Unsteady State: Uganda, Obote and General Amin", *Review of African Political Economy*, 5 (Jan-April 1976), pp. 12-38.

²³ Karugire, *A Political History*, pp. 144-168.

the performance of the first Obote regime were made within the country itself. Thus Professor Ali Mazrui, in a public address reported in the local papers, stated - though he later claimed that he had been misquoted by one of the papers - that the first Obote regime fell because it had alienated Buganda.²⁴ Selwyn Ryan, in his "balance sheet" of the Obote administration, devoted considerable space and time to the question of Obote's relationship with the Baganda.²⁵ In an admirable article that attempts to get at the bottom of the issue of "the relation between the fall of Obote and the wrath of the Baganda" claimed by other commentators, Professor Gingyera-Pinyowa concludes that there was only an indirect connection between the two and that it was not a direct causal factor behind the coup of January 1971:

The people who welcomed the fall of Obote most were Baganda. Frenzied and instantaneous demonstrations greeted the news of his fall throughout Buganda. His fall not only removed the man many of them considered their arch-enemy, but also gave them the promise of a political revival in that it appeared to bring with it a more vigorous role for Buganda in the political life of the country. But it was not in any way an event of their own making...²⁶

A particularly insightful discussion of recent Ugandan politics is the article by Garth Glentworth and Ian Hancock in which they consider, among other things, the continuities in the internal policies of both Obote's first regime and that of Idi Amin. Concerned to show that Amin was not simply "an aberration", the two scholars argue that (up to the time of writing their article) Amin had indeed conformed to the system he inherited from his predecessor and that "his internal policies

²⁴ *Taifa Empya* (Kampala), June 26, 1971, cited in A.G.G. Gingyera-Pinyowa, "A.M. Obote, the Baganda and the Ugandan Army", *Mawazo*, 3, 2 (Dec. 1971), pp. 32-33.

²⁵ S.D. Ryan, "Uganda: Balance Sheet of the Revolution", *Mawazo*, 3, 1 (June 1971), pp. 37-64.

²⁶ Gingyera-Pinyowa, "A.M. Obote, the Baganda and the Ugandan Army", p. 44.

can be understood, and only understood, in relation to the past".²⁷ It seems to me that this fairly self-evident point ought to be emphasized and that any assessment of the Obote government of the period 1962-1971 must of necessity also be made "in relation to the past". If one bears this in mind, it becomes quite clear that the "winner-take-all philosophy" which, we are told, resulted from the "widespread assumption that the function of government was primarily if not exclusively to benefit the governors" - and of which Ibingira makes a great deal in his book on African upheavals in the post-colonial period - is neither the creation nor the preserve of any single political leader or any particular regime in post-colonial Uganda. It is also in this sense that one finds Professor Karugire's "whipping boy" approach to the study of the period 1960-1971 seriously flawed and particularly unhelpful. It is an approach which eschews any examination of the total picture of political developments but which prefers, instead, merely to list the sins allegedly committed by Uganda's political leaders in the run-up to independence and which tends to attribute all the country's ills in the period 1962-71 to one individual - Obote.²⁸ Surely an individual's contribution to history-making can only be understood (as Professor Karugire himself admits) in the light of the foundations upon which he builds and the circumstances surrounding his actions.

The argument of this paper has all along been that underlying the comparatively well known explanation of Uganda's post-colonial political history (including the Amin coup) is the colonial legacy suggested earlier. The social anthropologist Aidan Southall has described (albeit in a not very satisfactory way) the "social disorganisation" that Uganda underwent during Amin's rule. This disorganisation is defined as:

a breakdown in previously existing rules...endemic violence and corruption [leading to] disorganisation and breakdown, in the sense that they do not facilitate but prevent beneficial change, and do not oil the wheels of the system but stop them turning altogether. They have caused an absolute reduction in

²⁷ G. Glentworth and I. Hancock, "Obote and Amin: Change and Continuity in Modern Ugandan Politics", *African Affairs*, 72, 288 (July 1973), pp. 237-255.

²⁸ Karugire, *A Political History*, pp. 170-198; Grace Stuart Ibingira, *African Upheavals Since Independence* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1980), pp. 61-183.

productivity and the availability of goods and services, as well as in administrative output and in education, health, and general welfare.²⁹

This is the theme which has run through the entire post-Amin period of the country's history thus far.

The Removal of the Amin regime and post-war politics, 1979

The Tanzania-Uganda war that resulted in the overthrow of the Amin regime in Uganda in April 1979 has recently been extensively described by Avirgan and Honey, two journalists who were permitted to travel to the war front only in the first week of April when it had become clear that the Tanzanian forces would take Kampala, the capital.³⁰ Their account is evidently pro-Tanzania in many respects, but it would be misleading to treat their work as the "authorized version" of the conflict. As the authors point out, former President Nyerere himself intervened to ensure that no Tanzanian official vetted the manuscript since he "wanted an independent and honest history".³¹ That "independence" is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that the authors succeeded in holding discussions with Ugandan individuals and groups within Tanzania whose views and political positions *vis-a-vis* post-Amin Uganda were publicly known to be always opposed to one another.³²

The friction between the two sides may be traced back to the events of January 1971 when the Tanzania government gave the deposed Milton Obote political asylum and refused to recognize the Amin government. At his very first post-coup press conference on

²⁹ A. Southall, "Social Disorganization in Uganda: Before, During and After Amin", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 18, 4 (Dec. 1980), pp. 627-656. "The article was drafted in March and revised in October 1980". It has no footnotes, and in this writer's view, it reads more like what its author chose to remember than a rigorously-researched discussion.

³⁰ Avirgan and Honey, *War in Uganda*, p. viii.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² These included Milton Obote, Ateker Ejalu, Yusufu Lule, Mahmood Mamdani, Yoweri Museveni, Paulo Muwanga, Dan Nabudere, Omwony Ojwok, and Yash Tandon. The only notable omissions here are Godfrey Binaisa and Edward Rugumayo, both of whom were key actors in post-Amin Ugandan politics from April 1979 to May 1980. See Avirgan and Honey, *War...*, p. xii.

January 26, Amin accused Nyerere of plotting to invade Uganda and restore Obote. The "Tanzania scare" became a routine charge that Amin often repeated throughout the period 1971-1978. The causes of the October 1978 scare were, in fact, not dissimilar to the causes of previous ones: internal dissension within the army threatened the position of the President and his whole power base.³³ But at this stage opposition to the Amin regime was not merely external in the sense of the "Tanzania scare". When the Amin army invaded and occupied the Kagera salient on Tanzanian territory in October 1978 and the Tanzanians decided to counter the attack, this marked the beginning of two wars: the Tanzania-Uganda war (which Nyerere insisted was only a limited one) and the war waged by Ugandan exile forces, along with internal opposition groups (whose ultimate objective was the overthrow of the Amin government).³⁴

By the beginning of March 1979, it was clear that the Amin government had all but disintegrated and that once the Tanzanian troops and Ugandan exile forces had over-run Kampala, the question of a successor to the political leadership of the country had to be settled urgently. Yet given the political history of the country and the disunity and factionalism within the various opposition movements, that task was supremely difficult. Nyerere's concern that a broad united front be formed immediately by the numerous exile organizations was underlined by the successes that the Tanzanian and the anti-Amin Ugandan forces were scoring in the war. It was against this background that nearly one hundred Ugandan exiles from Europe, America, Kenya, Tanzanian and Zambia assembled at the northern Tanzanian town of Moshi in the last week of March 1979.

A variety of exile organizations had been formed in several capitals where Ugandan refugees worked or lived. Given the risks of open opposition to the Amin regime and the need to avoid any embarrassment to host countries (particularly within Africa), most of them operated clandestinely and some remained little more than discussion groups. Only three of the organizations had any fighting forces: the group of soldier exiles associated with Obote in Tanzania;

³³ Avirgan and Honey, *War...*, pp. 48-52; A.M. Obote, *Statement on the Uganda Situation*, Dar es Salaam, January 1979.

³⁴ The early reports on the war, published in both the *Zambia Daily News* and *Times of Zambia* (and other news media elsewhere, of course) during January and February 1979, indicated by Nyerere's position. See also Avirgan and Honey, *War...*, pp. 83-84.

Yoweri Museveni's Front for National Salvation (Fronasa); and the Save Uganda Movement (SUM) which had been reportedly formed in Nairobi as early as 1973 but was unheard-of till the war against Amin had got well under way in January 1979.³⁵ Unlike the Obote or the Museveni forces, SUM had not apparently participated in the September 1972 invasion of Uganda in the first serious attempt to overthrow Amin.

The rest of the anti-Amin exile bodies were either discussion groups in the main or essentially welfare organizations which concerned themselves primarily with refugee problems faced by uprooted Ugandans. Two such groups were Lusaka-based: the Uganda Liberation Group in Zambia - or ULG(Z) - which was formed during the first half of 1977 and in October 1978 agreed to work closely with Obote's group in Tanzania,³⁶ and the Uganda National Movement which sought from August 1977 to bring together all the exile opposition groups into a broad united body but was almost still-born. The Uganda National Movement (UNM), led by John Barigye, a former Uganda ambassador to Bonn, soon proved ineffectual as Barigye's leadership style came under increasing criticism from his colleagues who openly questioned some of his trips outside Zambia. In mid-1978 he was replaced by Edward Rugumayo, a University teacher based in Lusaka. Although some of its residual members may object to being categorized as such, it is clear from the available evidence that the UNM was strongly anti-Obote. Certainly, the organization was opposed to working with his Tanzania-based group and over this (as well as on other issues) the UNM and ULG(Z) differed.³⁷

Altogether twenty-eight groups were represented at the Moshi Unity Conference. Described by the media as a meeting of Ugandans of "all shades of opinion", the groups ranged ideologically from monarchists to the ardently anti-royalist, and from conservatives to the group that came to be identified as the radicals. But though the Moshi Conference had been intended to bring about a broad and united front of

³⁵ Avirgan and Honey, *War . . .*, pp. 41-42.

³⁶ At a meeting of members of the group with Obote in Lusaka in October 1978 (which coincided with the Amin invasion of Tanzania), the Chairman of the ULG(Z) announced his group's agreement to work with Obote's groups in Dar es Salaam in order to overthrow the Amin government.

³⁷ This was clear to anyone (such as this writer) who was involved in the various discussion meetings of the ULG(Z) and in conversations with members of the Uganda National Movement from 1977 to 1979.

all the anti-Amin groups, it seems to have only intensified the already existing political rivalries and argumentation that was to characterize Ugandan political life in the post-Amin period. It seems reasonable to suggest that a major difficulty arose from the fact that the political solution attempted at Moshi in March 1979 was completely inconsistent with the military situation in the anti-Amin resistance at the time. The exact role and contribution of the Ugandan exile forces in the overthrow of the Amin regime may perhaps not be known until more detailed and rigorous studies of the war have been published. However, the existing evidence does suggest that the main guerilla forces in the war were those groups paying allegiance to Obote and Museveni.³⁸ In fact, Obote himself has argued that the Moshi Conference was anti-UPC and that by excluding the representatives of the fighting forces it was a complete fraud,³⁹ while Museveni was reported to have suggested at one stage at the Moshi Conference that only groups who were known to have military wings actively engaged in the anti-Amin war should lead the proposed united front.⁴⁰ There seems to have been considerable merit in these claims, as reports from Conference attendants suggest that the Dar es Salaam-based Conference Credentials Committee, led by Dan Nabudere, was extremely heavy-handed in the way it denied certain groups entry while permitting others, some barely an hour old and whose contribution to the military campaign was totally unknown.⁴¹

In the event, the meeting launched the Uganda National Liberation Front, comprising the groups that had attended. Yusufu Lule, a former colonial Minister in the 1950's and successively Chairman of Uganda's Public Service Commission and Principal of the then Makerere University College till his replacement in July 1970 during the first Obote regime, was elected Chairman of the Executive Council of the UNLF. His selection by the delegates appears to have

³⁸ Avirgan and Honey, *War . . .*, pp. 38-41.

³⁹ Omara Atuba, *Why The Uganda National Liberation Front; The Gospel of Liberation*, Moshi, 1979, p. 49, cited in Gertzel, "Uganda after Amin", p. 467.

⁴⁰ "Uganda: who are the leaders?", *AC*, Vol. 20, No. 9 (April 25, 1979); Obote, speech at Kololo.

⁴¹ Avirgan and Honey, *War . . .*, pp. 116-117; personal communication from certain Lusaka delegates to the conference.

been made principally on the ground of his age - he was 67 then - and his alleged apolitical and non-controversial nature, having never played any prominent part in Uganda's national politics previously.⁴² Two other key bodies were set up by the Moshi Conference: the National Consultative Council, intended as the interim Parliament and chaired by Edward Rugumayo, a former University of Zambia lecturer; and the Military Commission of the UNLF, comprising the commanders of the Ugandan fighting forces, but chaired by Paulo Muwanga, a civilian, who had himself been beaten by Lule in the election for the Chairmanship of the Executive Council.⁴³

As a compromise candidate, Lule was probably the best choice. However, he was virtually unknown to the fighting forces of the various exile groups; nor was he, it seems, particularly familiar with his colleagues on the Executive Council of the UNLF.⁴⁴ Moreover, his difficulties appear to have begun on the day he announced his Cabinet from Dar es Salaam following the fall of Kampala on April 11, 1979. The Moshi Conference had not empowered Lule to appoint himself President or indeed name a Cabinet, the only point agreed being that as Chairman of the Executive Council of the UNLF he was to head a temporary administration comprising the eleven-man Executive Council and the NCC. It seems, however, that in the euphoria of Amin's fall, those who had attended the Moshi Conference were prepared to overlook this.⁴⁵ However, a further problem arose over the interpretation of the minutes of the Moshi Conference itself, which seem to have been kept in more than one version. One of the key questions debated for a long time later was to determine who, according to the Moshi agreement, was supreme in the new UNLF set-up: the Chairman of the NCC or the Chairman of the Executive Council. Both Lule and

⁴² Avirgan and Honey, *War . . .*, p. 116-117; personal communication from certain Lusaka delegates to the Conference.

⁴³ Avirgan and Honey, *War . . .*, pp. 116-117.

⁴⁴ Avirgan and Honey, *War . . .*, p. 199, write that he was unable to introduce the Front leaders to the press at his first appearance before them after Moshi; other eye-witness accounts (which are hard to verify, of course) claim that at the swearing-in ceremony in Kampala on April 13, 1979, the President was unable to remember the then UNLA Chief of Staff, Col. David Oyite Ojok. It is hardly surprising that after his fall, the UNLA itself issued a statement that "Lule had played no part in the liberation of Uganda from the regime of Idi Amin".

⁴⁵ Personal communication from Edward Rugumayo, Lusaka, Zambia, April 1979.

Rugumayo believed that the body of which each was Chairman was supreme.

In the analysis of post-liberation Uganda, a common approach was to apply the pro- and anti-Obote paradigm in an attempt to understand the actions of the various political groups within the country. This kind of approach needs to be used with great caution, of course: the self-evident point that the man was not - and could never have been - synonymous with UPC is worth repeating, and that the role of an individual should only be seen within the context of his or her times is useful to remember. On the other hand, those who argue that it is a major mistake to see the Ugandan politics of the period 1979-80 in these terms seems to be merely pointing out, by default perhaps, the importance of taking into account the role of any former President in understanding the current politics of any given African state.⁴⁶ This essay suggests that in post-Amin Uganda, national politics were once again personalized much in the same way as they had been from independence in 1962, and that the system of alliances that was forged first at Moshi and then in Kampala at the time of Lule's dismissal and again when Binaisa was removed from the Presidency was all a reflection of this.

With no significant political or military base of his own, Yusufu Lule tended to rely on his fellow conservatives within the government, even though his Cabinet included a sprinkling of the people who came to be known as the "radicals" such as Dan Nabudere and Yoweri Museveni as well as some known pro-Obote men such as Paulo Muwanga and Otema Alimadi. If, as maintained by his electors at Moshi, Lule had not played any major role in Ugandan national politics prior to liberation, it soon became clear from his first few public statements that he was concerned to prevent a return to those politics. For example, he was reported to have denied that Obote had played any part at all in the liberation of the country and that there was no role for him in the new Uganda.⁴⁷ He was critical of the ex-President for not having organized any general elections in the country throughout his nine years in office. Lule clearly demonstrated his attitude towards the

⁴⁶ In this respect, a comparative argument may be made about the way in which the shadow of former Presidents such as Kenyatta of Kenya and Nkrumah of Ghana have haunted their respective countries after their exit.

⁴⁷ *Zambia Daily Mail*, April 17, 1979.

prospects of a possible Obote come-back by his attempt to demote those Ministers suspected of being Obote supporters (Paulo Muwanga and Ateker Ejalu, for example). In this way he antagonized those members of the Cabinet and the NCC who tended to support Obote and the UPC. At the same time, the radicals who had sponsored his candidature at Moshi were dismayed by controversial Cabinet reshuffles which he refused to submit to the NCC for approval, his close association with his fellow "men of substance", and his refusal to recognize the supremacy of the NCC over the Executive Council. Thus the radicals and the UPC supporters combined to force Lule out of the Presidency in late June 1979. In his place Godfrey Binaisa, who had been excluded from the Moshi Conference and was not even a member of the NCC or the Executive Council, was elected President, beating two other contestants, Rugumayo and Muwanga. Lule was later to accuse Nyerere bitterly of abetting the move to oust him, claiming that it was part of a plot to prepare the way for Obote's return to power.⁴⁸ Although it is true that Nyerere did nothing to stop the move to dismiss Lule, the available evidence suggests that his fall was more the result of an internal power struggle rather than an externally-directed plot.

From Lule's Dismissal to the Assumption of Power by the Military Commission

As noted already, one of the provisions of the Moshi agreement was for a comparatively weak Presidency vis-a-vis the interim Parliament, the NCC. Initially, Binaisa appears to have accepted this arrangement. However, as he consolidated his position as President, he began to act more independently. In August, for example, he announced that all political parties would be barred from participating as individual parties in the general elections promised at Moshi; in November he demoted Museveni from the Ministry of Defence to that of Regional Co-operation. His subsequent attempt to dismiss Paulo Muwanga from the Internal Affairs Ministry, however, was successfully resisted by Muwanga and his supporters and this showed how ineffective he had become by January 1980.⁴⁹

From the outset, President Binaisa seems to have been

⁴⁸ Avirgan and Honey, *War* . . . , pp. 108-109.

⁴⁹ "Uganda: no end of trouble", *AC*, Vol. 21, No. 5 (Feb. 27, 1980).

preoccupied with ensuring that he was not a mere stand-in for Obote, who had continued to live in Dar es Salaam. His insistence that all political parties would be barred from participating as individual parties in the general elections was seen by Obote supporters as part of his strategy for blocking the latter's party from returning to power. It also led to a serious division within the NCC. The country's two old main political parties, Obote's UPC and Paul Semwogerere's Democratic Party (DP) argued that the Moshi Conference had agreed to retain the individual parties within the UNLF. On the other hand, the radicals such as Dan Nabudere, Edward Rugumayo and Omwony Ojwok, who clearly had no political base of their own inside the country, insisted that a revival of the old political parties would signal a return to the divisive and sectarian politics of the 1960's.⁵⁰ Although the NCC ultimately voted in favour of the holding of general elections under the National Liberation Front umbrella, the two political parties announced that they would defy the ruling. The fall of Binaisa in the second week of May 1980 paved the way for a multi-party election, for the new Military Commission government swiftly reversed the ex-President's decision on this matter.

The final anti-Obote move (in the eyes of Obote supporters) was the attempt to dismiss the then Chief of Staff of the UNLA, Briadier David Oyite Ojok, who was known to be a strong Obote supporter, during the first week of May. The Military Commission of the UNLF, whose Chairman Paulo Muwanga was another Obote supporter, promptly took control of the national radio station and announced that it had rejected the President's dismissal of Ojok because Binaisa had "not followed proper military procedures".⁵¹ The Tanzanian troops still in Uganda did nothing to stop the coup, and the radicals, by now referred to by their opponents as the "Gang of Four" (comprising Nabudere, Rugumayo, Ojok and Tandon), scattered.⁵² The system of alliances had come full circle: the UPC-dominated Military Commission had seized power with the tacit approval of Museveni who, though lacking a political base and though clearly anti-Obote, was nevertheless an important factor because of his known military strength. The DP,

⁵⁰ Gertzel, "Uganda after Amin", p. 481.

⁵¹ *Zambia Daily Mail*, May 12, 1980.

⁵² Gertzel, "Uganda after Amin", p. 485; the Military Commission, which had taken power, referred to the four gentlemen in that fashion. *Zambia Daily Mail*, May 12, 1980.

meanwhile, welcomed the advent of an administration which was prepared to allow a multi-party election.⁵³ This time the alliance system had worked against both President Binaisa and the group of NCC members who had been most active in promoting his candidature following the overthrow of Lule.

Post-Elections Uganda, 1980-86: Conclusions

Although it is clearly premature to attempt any detailed and fully-rounded explanation of the events of the period 1980-86, it is suggested in this paper that the developments would seem to confirm our general argument, namely that the issue of a national consensus on unity, born of the colonial era, is still very much alive in Uganda. In the seven years that have elapsed since Amin's exit, a number of studies have appeared in which their authors have reviewed the political problems bequeathed to the country by the Amin years. The political scientist, Cherry Gertzel, who has had a long-standing interest in the study of the country's internal politics, has argued that in post-Amin Uganda (as in pre-Amin times) what has been witnessed is "a continuing search for leadership and control", in which no single politician has emerged with a nationally-based support. Given the political history of Uganda, and in particular the emergence and growth of political parties there, it is hardly surprising that the political leaders that emerged in colonial Uganda were often district leaders first, with an ethnically-based support within their own districts.⁵⁴ In post-colonial Uganda, these leaders were obliged to transform themselves into "national" rather than mere district leaders.

This paper began by providing the background to the political history of Uganda. The centrality of Buganda was emphasized, not in order to resurrect the old mistaken assumption by previous scholars that Buganda represents the whole Uganda,⁵⁵ or to suggest that Buganda

⁵³ Avirgan and Honey, *War...*, p. 215.

⁵⁴ Karugire, *A Political History*, pp. 144-169; C. Gertzel, *Party and Locality in Northern Uganda, 1945-1962* (London: University of London, Athlone Press, 1974).

⁵⁵ Examples abound of works that purported to deal with Uganda while in fact restricting their scope to Buganda only: D. A. Low's *Political Parties in Uganda, 1949-62*, which the author himself admits was more about Buganda and less about Uganda is a case in point; F. B. Welbourn's *Religion and Politics in Uganda* is another. For pertinent comments, see Gingyera-Pinyewa, "A. M. Obote, the Baganda and the Uganda Army". A recent effort which comes

necessarily determines what goes on in the rest of the country, but rather to demonstrate the importance of the relationships of the kingdom to the non-Baganda areas in both colonial and post-colonial times. With the declaration of the anti-Obote guerrilla war in February 1981, it seems that the system of alliances did continue, with Museveni's forces joining up with Lule's forces, Andrew Kayiira's followers and perhaps even the remnants of Amin's troops led by Moses Ali.⁵⁶ As post-elections developments unravelled, then, it became increasingly clear that the leader or group of leaders that faced the least number (and the weakest, in political and military terms) combinations against him or them would stand the best chance of holding the country together.

Obote and the UPC government tried to hold the country together in just such a way until the coup of July 1985. As suggested earlier, in practical terms, it may now seem of little consequence as to whether one accepts the claims that the Elections are without any academic or scholarly interest to the historian or to the psephologist. A casual examination of the elections results shows that the UPC derived its principal support from areas other than Buganda (where it obtained only one seat as against the DDP's 33), Busoga and Toro.⁵⁷ Upon their successful coup against Obote's regime, the Okellos attempted to continue with the alliance system by enlarging their rather limited base through the enlistment of the support of the DP both within Buganda as well as in other parts of the country - such as the West Nile area - which had been thought to have been alienated by the Obote administration.⁵⁸ The Military Council they set up also tried to woo several other fighting groups such as the Uganda National Rescue Front, led by Amin's former Minister of Finance, and Kayiira's Buganda-based Uganda Freedom Movement.⁵⁹ When he seized power after driving out the

dangerously close to being "Buganda-centric" in this fashion is H. Dinwiddy's "The Search for Unity in Uganda: Early Days to 1966", *African Affairs*, 80, 321 (October 1981), pp. 501-518.

⁵⁶ "Uganda: the opposition tangle", *AC*, Vol. 23, No. 16 (August 4, 1982); C. Legum, "After the Amin Nightmare", *Africa Report*, 28, 1 (Jan-Feb. 1983), p.16.

⁵⁷ *The People* (Kampala), December 19, 1980, for election results.

⁵⁸ It was not for nothing that the troops who drove into Kampala on the morning of July 27, 1985, to announce the coup were heard shouting the name of the Democratic Party. *Sunday Times of Zambia*, July 28, 1985.

⁵⁹ "Uganda: war of nerves", *AC*, Vol. 26, No. 16 (July 31, 1985).

septuagenarian Tito Okello from Kampala in January 1986, Museveni's NRA was clearly narrow-based, deriving its support from the Western region of the country as well as Buganda principally.

In 1983 Colin Legum described the post-Election period in Uganda as being a period characterized by the "politics of violence". In his view, this violence was intensified by the "decision of the Uganda People's Movement to seek to reverse their ignominious failure in the 1980 elections by taking up arms. Their stand was based on a claim that the elections had been rigged which, even if they were, could hardly explain away their dismal performance as against the DP which had polled relatively strongly in most parts of the country".⁶⁰ Legum lays responsibility for the outbreak of violence at the doors of the UPM and the groups that did not accept the verdict of the Elections. On the other hand, Museveni himself has recently given an account of the NRA resistance war in which he sees his organisation's role as being that of a liberation struggle against all "past dictators".⁶¹ In addition to more rigorous research based upon neutral sources, we need accounts of the same period by other actors - such as Milton Obote himself, for example - for a more complete and balanced picture of the period. For it is the scholar's task to unravel and explain these developments while avoiding the name-calling and blame-apportionment that appear to characterize the contributions of the participants themselves. What is undeniable, though, is that the "political violence", regardless of who is its author, seems to be a continuing one, just as the question of national unity remains unresolved.⁶²

⁶⁰ *Africa Contemporary Record*, Vol. XIV (1981-82), pp. B298-B320, and Legum, "After the Amin Nightmare".

⁶¹ Yoweri Museveni, *Selected Articles on the Uganda Resistance War*, Kampala, Uganda: NRM Publications (Second Edition, 1986). M. Mamdani has recently published "The capture of state power by NRA" in *Forward Magazine*, Vol. 8, Nos. 1 and 2 (1986), serialised in the Ugandan newspaper *Weekly Topic* during August and September 1986.

⁶² For contrasting and conflicting interpretations of the origins of political violence in Uganda, see C. Legum, "After the Amin Nightmare", Special Correspondent, "The Uganda Army: Nexus of Power", *Africa Report*, 11, 9 (Dec. 1966), pp. 37-39; G. S. Ibingira, *African Upheavals . . .*, pp. 65-99; A. L. Kayiira and E. Kannyo, "Politics and Violence in Uganda", *Africa Report*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (Jan-Feb. 1978), pp. 39-43.