

The Search for Political Consensus in Uganda: Reality or Mirage?

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Abstract

This article attempts to answer the question why, after about two decades of democratic reforms, has achieving a national political consensus eluded Uganda? The central argument is that attaining a national political consensus has proved elusive because reforms were aimed at giving particular groups advantage over others in the form of regime consolidation and the accumulation of personal power by the incumbent. The self-perception of the leadership of the NRA/M of having 'the correct political line' or 'vision', which it sought to superimpose on the Ugandan society, is not conducive for national consensus building. The societal context of asymmetrical power relations, where the NRA/M has been the dominant actor, enabled it to impose its political views on weaker actors.

Introduction

The search for political consensus has become a dominant theme in African politics since the end of the Cold War and the post-1989 wave of democratization. Debate has been more pronounced with respect to conflict ridden societies due to the realization that a lack of legitimacy and national consensus have been at the root of most conflicts. The promotion of democracy in the foreign policy and development assistance of Western states and multilateral donors as a means of conflict resolution, and the foundation for sustainable peace and development, added impetus to the debate. By the 1990s, democratization had become so fashionable that a number of countries were implementing reforms. Pronouncements were confidently made about 'transitions' to democracy, sometimes without consideration of the complex realities on the ground.

Although there have been significant changes in the nature of political governance in Africa, there are also indications that ruling governments have controlled, manipulated and subverted reforms (Chabal, 1998; Villalon,

1998). This raises issue as to whether the democratic reform processes of the last two decades may lead to the building of a national consensus, or whether they may turn out to be a façade or sham process used to placate opposition forces, protect key clients and constituencies, and hoodwink bilateral and multilateral donors. As the experience of Uganda shows, reforms have been used for the reconsolidation of patronage networks and reconfiguration of political society. The process created opportunity for the incumbent regime to exert top-down political control. Reforms have not been based on open debates, negotiations and national consensus, but on machinations, chicanery, patronage and coercion. The description of Uganda as country that enjoys political stability with sustained and substantial economic growth; a bastion of peace and prosperity, "the model of successful post-conflict recovery in Africa" (Collier, 2001, 15), is a mirage that conceals complex realities on the ground. Uganda is a paradox. While it succeeded in reversing legacies of state collapse and has attempted to build democratic institutions, the old conflicts—regional, ethnic, religious, civil-military, and ideological—are unresolved. Uganda is more divided today than it was when the National Resistance Army/Movement (NRA/M) came to power in 1986 (Hauser, 1999). Uganda is riddled by violent internal conflicts, partial state collapse and authoritarianism.

This article attempts to answer the question why, after about two decades of democratic reforms, has achieving a national political consensus eluded Uganda? The central argument is that attaining a national political consensus has proved elusive because reforms were used for the consolidation of personal power by incumbents, and for the consolidation of their regime. Reforms have purposely privileged particular groups over others. Another factor hindering a national political consensus is the self-perception of the leadership of the NRA/M that it has 'the correct political line' and a monopoly of 'vision' that should be superimposed on the Ugandan society. Thirdly, the societal context of asymmetrical power relations enabled the NRA/M to impose, with relative ease, its political views on the weaker actors.

The Challenge of State-Building and Democracy in Uganda

Rebuilding collapsed states and achieving national consensus in multi-factional societies that are ridden with multiple violent conflicts is a daunting challenge. Understanding these challenges require examination of the social, political and economic conditions in 'weak' states (Migdal, 1988). Weak states lack cohesive national identities. They suffer from problems of

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social cleavages, competing identities, and competing loyalties between the national and sub-national. The challenge of finding an appropriate political framework to reconcile and contain different sub-national groups is enormous. Inherently, therefore, weak states face problems of legitimacy—low levels of political participation, reliance on coercion, political instability and the concentration of power in a ruling elite. There are low levels of institutional capacity, and governments are unable to implement their policies. The state is unable to respond to legitimate political and economic demands. Weak states tend to exhibit symptoms of economic underdevelopment where state resources are the main source of wealth. Concentration of wealth in the state generates intense elite competition for control of the state. The ruling elite will do everything to remain in power. Dissent or opposition is not condoned, especially if it is perceived to threaten those in power. The nature of politics in weak states generates fear about group security, undermines trust and erodes reciprocal relations among the elite, especially where there are memories of violent conflict. This makes the achievement of a national consensus difficult.

Uganda is a prototype of a weak state in which the national interests cannot be adequately defined to reflect the interests and aspirations of all citizens and component communities. The Ugandan state was an 'artificial creation' (Low, 1998) that is defined by complex and cross-cutting divides. There is a major regional divide between the Nilotic north and the Bantu south, at the centre of which is the ancient Kingdom of Buganda. There are also ethnic cleavages which cross-cut the regional divide; as well as religious cleavages between Catholics, Protestants and Moslems. These cleavages have been manifested in conflicts between proponents of monarchism and republicanism; unitary and federal systems; and single and competitive party systems. The factionalism and cleavages in Uganda presented an unlimited nation-building challenge to British colonial rulers, and to date remains an intractable problem.

Factionalism and the Struggle for Control of the Ugandan State

Domestic factionalism and cleavages in Uganda were manifested during pre-independence politics as different groups jostled for position and privileges, and the 'form of government' appropriate for independent Uganda became a major preoccupation. The question of how to handle Buganda, in a national constitutional framework, especially proved troublesome because of the privileged status it enjoyed under colonial rule (Apter, 1961; Burke, 1964). Attempts to manage factionalism and various

conflicting interests were reflected in the 1962 constitution. This compromise document provided for a federal status for Buganda (in the south) and semi-federal status for four other kingdoms, and unitary relations between the districts and the central government. To appease Buganda, the Prime Minister, Milton Obote (a northerner), agreed to make the Kabaka the president: a ceremonial and non-executive position, which turned out to be less than what Buganda was willing to settle for.

Given the circumstance, it was not long before the spirit of compromise enshrined in the 1962 constitution dissipated. In 1966 Obote ordered a military invasion of the Kabaka's palace. The Kabaka fled to exile where he died a few years later. The following year, a new constitution declared Uganda a republic and centralized power in an executive president. This resulted in a crisis of legitimacy and heightened conflict in the ethnically fragile state. Relations between the southern Bantu ethnic groups and the northern ethnic groups were strained. The Baganda were especially alienated, and have since been mistrustful of people from the north. Such memory of antagonism undermines efforts at achieving a national consensus. In 1971 the army overthrew the civilian government of Milton Obote. This was the beginning of eight years of brutal and autocratic rule under military dictator Idi Amin. Amin's rule was characterized by violence, and it poisoned ethnic relations as the regime alienated one ethnic group after the other (Legum, 1972-73; Hansen, 1977). It resulted in social dislocation and institutional decay. Hence, when he was overthrown in 1979 by a combined force of the Tanzanian Peoples Defence Force and Ugandan guerrillas, violence and disorder continued, and the successive regimes were confronted with the problems of re-establishing societal and political order (Decalo, 1990). The major political actors of the time, most of whom were political returnees, whose claim to a role in national politics rested on their 'roles' in the overthrow of Idi Amin, were deeply divided along political, ethnic, religious, military and ideological lines (Gertzel, 1980). Intrigues and manoeuvres were ripe, as different groups positioned themselves for political control. The euphoria and hopes of progress and national reconciliation that followed the end of Idi Amin's brutal rule had dissipated (Africa Research Bulletin, 1985).

Consequently, the December 1980 elections, which returned Milton Obote and UPC to power, were held under a tense atmosphere of considerable controversy, mistrust, political violence and imminent threats of civil war.

The UPC government was therefore faced with a crisis of legitimacy, which was compounded by hostility in Buganda towards Milton Obote, whom they had not forgiven for the desecration of the Buganda Kingdom in 1966. Yoweri Museveni, who had threatened to 'go to the bush' and wage war if the elections were rigged, exploited the opportunity and launched a guerrilla war against the government of Milton Obote in February 1981. Between 1980 and January 1986, Uganda endured a bloody civil war, between the central government and a number of armed groups. These conflicts polarised the country along the north-south divide, and heightened ethnic tensions and animosities, both within the north and between the northern and southern ethnicities. It also impeded the task of rebuilding the state.

By the time the NRA/M came to power in January 1986, Uganda was in shambles. There was rampant violence and insecurity. There were many rival armed groups. Hostility between these groups was so intense to make meaningful reconciliation seem impossible. The government the NRA/M overthrew had lost control, and the government army had disintegrated into armed bands engaged in looting and harassment of civilians. The capture of power by NRA/M was thus greeted with optimism about the restoration of peace, political stability and democracy. The NRM promised to restore democracy, security and to promote national unity (Ten Point Programme of the NRM, 1986). Within a few months, it had succeeded in extending its control over the entire country, and establishing a measure of stability. The NRM government also embarked on a process of political and economic reforms. It adopted IMF and World Bank Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPS), and implemented public sector reforms and the transition to a liberal market economy. This endeared the NRM government to Western donors, and resulted in a flow of aid and an improvement in Uganda's economic performance during the 1990s. This led many, especially in the Western world, to view Uganda as an island of stability in a troubled region; a country that enjoys political stability and sustained economic growth.

However, optimism was premature. The NRA/M guerrilla war polarized the country along the regional north-south divide. The war pitted a predominantly southern guerrilla army against a northern dominated government army, the Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA). The capture of power by the NRA/M, through military means, after the signing of a peace agreement with the government in December 1980, therefore caused general apprehension and fear in the north. The NRA/M was viewed

as an alien force, which the people could not identify with. For its part, the NRA/M considered the north as synonymous with the UNLA and the UPC, the enemies it had defeated. Besides, there were also numerous other southern and West Nile based armed groups who were vying for a role in national politics. From the onset, therefore, the newly established NRA/M government faced the twin tasks of consolidating its hold on power, and resolving issues related to the struggle for political control and the roles of various actors in national political life.

NRA/M and State Reconstruction: National Consensus or Political Control?

The reforms that the NRA/M government carried out were influenced by the manner in which it came to power, namely through military victory, leading to an asymmetrical power distribution in Uganda at the time; and the ideological orientation of the NRA/M. This did not favour the search for a national consensus as the basis of state building. By the time the NRA/M came to power, it was the most dominant military force in Uganda. It also enjoyed widespread popular support, especially in the southern part of the country. The NRA/M had militarily defeated an unpopular military junta with which it had signed a peace agreement in December 1985. Other rival armed and political groups in the country were either discredited or in disarray. This reduced the capacity of other groups to resist political change. It also provided the NRA/M with the opportunity to impose substantial unifying and centralizing measures. As Rothchild (1999: 25) argues, "... military victory, especially when it is not followed by guerrilla warfare, reduces the unreasonable expectations of the losing party. It eases the process of co-optation of party leaders and military cadres into state institutions."

The approach of the NRA/M to state reconstruction reflected, first and foremost, its values and ideological orientation. The regime presented itself as a 'revolutionary' movement committed to carrying out social, political and economic transformations along a scientific model (Ssenkumba, 1998). The leaders of the NRA/M held the conviction that the organisation had 'the correct political line' of thought, which it sought to superimpose upon the society and the state bureaucracy that it inherited. This suggested that the NRA/M was committed to reconstructing the state using a liberatory or Jacobin approach, which puts emphasis on central control and command (Giliomee, 1991). The Jacobin approach favours 'minimalist' as opposed to maximalist democracy (Mugenyi, 1988). It is a 'top-down' approach in which the dominant party or political organisation guides socio-economic

and political change. Politicians or cadres and party functionaries define the values and 'ideas of the state' and decree the exclusion of 'unpatriotic forces'. Such values are then imparted to the rest of the population through a programme of 'politicisation'.

To legitimise its authority and consolidate its hold on power, the NRA/M established new political institutions and governance structures, at the local and national level, albeit in an extra-legal manner (Republic of Uganda, 1993; Regan, 1995). Through Legal Notice no. 1 of 1986, an 'interim' government was established under the authority of the NRA/M. The National Resistance Council (NRC), the ruling organ of the NRA/M, was made the government of Uganda. Both executive and legislative powers were fused in the NRC, whose membership was expanded to include newly appointed ministers and deputy ministers. The new government also appointed an ombudsman, the Inspector General of Government (IGG), and established the Uganda Human Rights Commission to investigate human rights violations. The National Resistance Movement (NRM) secretariat, headed by the National Political Commissar, was established; and Special District Administrators (SDAs) were introduced to replace District Commissioners. These were charged with the supervision of Resistance Councils and Committees (RCs). The RC system was a five-tier system of local government. The RCs were promoted as structures for popular participation. In reality, RCs were used to consolidate NRA/M rule, serving as grassroot structures of support. Nonetheless, the RCs were vital for rebuilding the state. The National School of Political Education was also set up to train political cadres who were then deployed in the districts to carry out mobilization duties (Ondoga, 1998). It was envisaged that the cadres would be agents of change. The course syllabus was designed by the NRA/M, and it was based on its ideological beliefs. The political education programmes became very divisive as they were used to spread NRA/M propaganda.

In a measure, ostensibly to create national unity, the NRA/M pledged to establish a 'broad-based' government. It did this on its terms, using a mixture of intimidation, coercion and cooptation. It determined who to include and exclude, as well as the parameters of participation. On 27 January 1986, one day after the capture of Kampala, Yoweri Museveni told journalists, diplomats and representatives of international organisations that the NRA/M would talk to virtually all political and military factions. He, however, made it clear that 'criminal elements' would not be accommodated' (Africa Research Bulletin,

1986). Personalities from different political and military groups were co-opted into the NRA/M government. But participation in politics was constrained and limited by the principle of 'individual merit'. People were expected to participate in politics in their individual capacities, but not as members of political organizations. The 'broad-base' government was a coalition of warlords; those who 'fought' or contributed to 'liberation' of the country. But not all individuals were incorporated into the NRM on an equal footing. Within the NRA/M, decision making powers remained with an 'identifiable core' committed to the organisation's basic ideology. Such an arrangement is not conducive for building national consensus.

The establishment of a broad-based government was accompanied by restrictions on the scope of action of other political players. In line with its views that political parties were sectarian and divisive, on 11 March 1986, three months after it came to power, the NRA/M regime directed political parties to suspend activities—including holding meetings and rallies. Only activities "... intended to enhance national unity along the lines set by Government" were allowed (Legum, 1985-86: B476). The NRA/M also expanded its political education programme in which political parties were portrayed as divisive and sectarian, and blamed for past political evils.

Political parties initially acquiesced to the restrictions on their activities because they were in a weak position from which to mount any meaningful challenge to the NRA/M. However, it was not long before the Democratic Party (DP), whose membership had been co-opted by the NRA/M, began to complain that the NRA/M was making decisions unilaterally. A member of the DP central executive complained that the party had been relegated to 'mere passengers' in the bus, the 'drivers' being only NRA/M (Kayondo, 1989). In June 1995, Paul Ssemogerere, the leader of DP, resigned his cabinet post, signalling the end of the broad-based arrangement (Mwesigye & Zziwa 1995). The resignation of Ssemogerere also signalled a collapse of the 'gentleman's agreement', and the hollowness of the consensus on the need for a 'no party' political system in Uganda. Agitation for a return to a multi-party political system intensified as did state suppression of political activities by party activists.

The desire for regime consolidation and the consolidation of personal power for incumbents resulted in the loss of opportunities to build a national consensus and establish a framework to accommodate divergent groups and

interests during the constitution making process (Hauser, 1999). Although the constitutional commission was to "... consult the people and make proposals based on national consensus" (Uganda Constitutional Commission, 1988), it operated in a manner which gave the impression that the process was controlled and aimed at restricting unpalatable outcomes. The president appointed the chairman and members of the commission. Attempts to organize debates outside the sanctioned framework were disallowed (Republic of Uganda, 1988; Obbo, 1991). This created a perception that 'the whole exercise was a gimmick', as the government "... had already made a constitution and was only seeking legitimacy for it" (*ibid*). The draft constitution the commission submitted to the government confirmed the above view (Republic of Uganda, 1993). The commission failed to decide on contentious issues. It recommended the suspension of political party activities for a five-year period, thereby entrenching the 'Movement', or no party system of governance, in the constitution. It also provided for a review of the political system through a referendum after five years. To its credit, the commission recommended that a democratically elected Constituent Assembly (CA) should debate the constitution.

The NRA/M also preempted discussion on the role of traditional rulers when it introduced constitutional amendments and restored traditional rulers and institutions (Oloka-Onyango, 1995). This deprived the country of the opportunity to openly debate, negotiate, and come to an agreed position on traditional and cultural institutions. In restoring traditional institutions, the government acted opportunistically to win political support among the Baganda, after failing to intimidate Baganda monarchists and activists from dropping their demands for a federal system of government. It subordinated traditional rulers to NRA/M rule by not spelling out the powers or role of traditional institutions. Although traditional rulers are supposed to play only a cultural role and should not participate in politics, determining what is political depends on the president's interpretation. It is also the president who has the powers to sanction the creation or recognition of a cultural institution. The president uses the grant of recognition of cultural institutions for patronage. By his own admission, the president has turned himself into the king of kings, or *Ssabagabbe*. He has supported the creation of new kingdoms and chiefdoms where none existed, and has refused to grant recognition to others. The NRA/M government recognized, if not sanctioned, the creation of the Buruuli kingdom, and recognized the *Ssabanyala* or King of the Banyala, amidst angry protest from the Buganda Kingdom that the NRA/M was

undermining the unity of Buganda. This has led to conflict and agitation for autonomy from Buganda. Despite recognizing or sanctioning the creation of Kingdoms from Buganda, the president has vehemently opposed the restoration of the Ankole Kingdom.

The CA also was not without critics, some of whom argued that a constitution enacted under the CA statute was unlikely to create an enabling environment for political stability (Uganda Peoples Congress, 1994). Composition of the CA was designed to guarantee the NRA/M a majority and control. The directly elected 214 delegates were chosen on the principle of 'individual merit', a strategy designed to deny political parties a role. In addition, 'special bodies' indirectly elected delegates: one woman delegate per district, one delegate elected by the National Union of Disabled People of Uganda (NUDIPU), 10 army representatives, 4 youth delegates, 10 presidential appointees and 2 members from each recognized political party (Constituent Assembly Statute, 1993). The CA statute and rules of procedure were designed in such a way as to benefit the NRM. The chair and deputy were elected from amongst a list of presidential nominees, and the rules of procedure gave the chair ample powers. Besides, the NRM government manipulated CA deliberations through patronage and intimidation (Atubo 1995; Kakande 1995). It carried out a cabinet reshuffle and appointed a number of CA delegates to cabinet positions, and some to the boards of directors' of state-run parastatals, while moderate voices in government and CA were reportedly purged (Besigye, 2001).

The conduct of the CA regarding contentious issues did not encourage consensus building, which led to criticisms that outcomes were fixed in advance (Nabudere, 2000). For instance, the question of whether Uganda should become a federal state was rejected firmly without a vote. And on the nature of political systems, the CA, which was dominated by members of the NRM, voted to retain the 'Movement' (no party system) for five years, and made provision for a national referendum to determine whether to revert to a multiparty political system after five years. Entrenchment of the 'Movement' system of governance in the constitution led to increased and continued suppression of the activities of political parties on the ground that the constitution prohibited their activities (Oloka-Onyango, 2004). In this way, the country was denied the opportunity to resolve the conflict over the role of different actors in national politics, and establish a framework based on consensus.

The new constitution was promulgated in 1995. The following year presidential and parliamentary elections were held under the 'no party' Movement system of governance. Among other things, the elections highlighted intolerance on the part of the NRM government and the polarization of the country. During the campaigns, supporters of Paul Ssemogerere, leader of the Democratic Party (DP) and candidate of the opposition coalition, were branded traitors and subjected to harassment. Violence and intimidation against the opposition was more pronounced in southwestern Uganda where it was considered an abomination to oppose Yoweri Museveni and advocate for a return to the multi-party political system (Tukahebwa, 2003). The NRA/M used scaremonger tactics to undercut support for Paul Ssemogerere in the southern part of Uganda. Ssemogerere's alliance with the Uganda Peoples Congress (UPC), under the inter-party cooperation that brought together political parties, and his statement that he would not oppose the return to Uganda of former President Milton Obote were used by the NRM to scare people in Buganda from voting for him. It was insinuated that Obote's return to Uganda would result in civil war and suffering similar to the 1981-85 NRA guerrilla war against Obote's government. The results of the presidential elections showed a regional variation. Although Yoweri Museveni won the elections with about 75 per cent, he lost by a wide margin in the war ravaged northern Uganda. The same voting pattern was reflected in the subsequent elections of 2001 and 2006 (Makara, 2007) showing polarization of the country and failure to attain a national consensus.

In March 2003 the National Executive Committee (NEC) of the ruling NRM decided to amend the 1995 constitution and allow a return to a multi-party political system, and removal of the 'two term limit'. The process was marred by acrimony and allegations of government interference and high handedness. There were all manner of intimidation and manipulation (Kalinaki, 2003; *Monitor*, 2004). There was no free exercise of political rights and freedoms during debates on the constitutional amendment. Those who were against removal of presidential term limits or 'anti-third term' groups, as they were referred to, were labeled 'biased' and their views 'unresearched' and 'unreasoned'. There were situations where the police broke up rallies, assemblies and protests by groups opposed to the third term project. Critics argue that this decision to reintroduce multi-party politics was not based on the desire to promote democracy but on expediency. It was viewed as a way of getting rid of the internal opposition

from within the NRM, and of perpetuating Yoweri Museveni's personal rule (Makara 2007). Despite adopting multi-party politics, the NRA/M continues to operate like it did under the no-party 'Movement' political system. Opposition political parties are not allowed to operate freely. Harassment and intimidation of opposition politicians by security agents has continued. Multi-party politics has been controlled and distorted.

The Paradox of Stability: the Conflicts in Uganda

The failure to attain a national consensus has been reflected in a polarization of the country and endemic conflicts. As Hauser (1990: 635) observed, "Uganda is more divided today than it was when the NRA/M came to power in 1986." Regionalism and ethnicity are ripe (*ibid*). There is an increasing lack of tolerance and compromise. Thus, much as Uganda has been on the path of political and economic recovery, the country is also beset with contradictions and disparities that could ultimately undermine the much talked of successful 'transition from war-to-peace.' Two contrasting images define the record of the NRA/M regime in Uganda. Viewed from the south, Uganda is a stable, secure and prosperous country. But northern and parts of south-western Uganda indicate a country riddled with violent conflicts, internal displacement, and economic and social dislocation. NRA/M rule has entrenched the development of 'two countries', a prosperous south and an impoverished north (Pain, 1997).

The capture of state power by the NRA/M resulted in the relocation of the locus of conflict from southern to northern Uganda. This reflected the polarization of the country. The NRA/M guerrilla war had pitted a predominantly southern guerrilla army against a northern dominated army. There was, therefore, a regional variation to the capture of power by the NRA/M. In southern Uganda there was jubilation and high hopes for the future, while in northern Uganda there was a general sense of fear and apprehension. The outbreak of conflict in northern Uganda in mid-1986 and its persistence for more than two decades indicates a failure to build a national consensus and resolve the age old state building problem related to the struggle for political control. As Brett (1995) observed:

Victorious regimes are tempted to assert their authority by punishing and humiliating the vanquished. Yet coercion is an uncertain basis for political authority, since violence creates potential enemies who will comply only while they believe that resistance is impossible. (p. 144-145).

The NRA/M regime has largely relied on suppression and a military response to conflicts, and made 'annihilating' the enemy and pacification its objective (Museveni, 9 October 1987). It criminalized its opponents and presented them as 'moribund, sectarian and neo-colonial elements' who lack legitimate political demands and the right to a role in national politics (ibid). It argued that insurgents were fighting due to the fear of prosecution for crimes they committed during the tenure of past regimes; and their desire to regain power was in order to enjoy the concomitant benefits that go with it. It has variously portrayed the conflict in northern Uganda as the manifestation of 'primitivism', 'backwardness' and an inability to cope with 'modern times' (Gingyera-Pinyewa, 1993). Where the NRA/M government has accepted to engage in peace negotiations, it has done so for expediency (Omach, 2008), and with the expectation that its opponents will surrender at the negotiation table.

The conflict in northern Uganda has resulted in anarchy and lawlessness in the region. The north mirrors Hobbes' (1991) depiction of man outside of a civil state or in the state of nature, which is characterized by "... continual fear, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short" (p 89). As Hobbes argued, in such a situation there is no place for industry, the arts and society. This has widened the regional disparity between the south and north. Poverty is widespread in the north, with an estimated 66 per cent of the population living below poverty level, compared to the national average of 38 per cent (Republic of Uganda, 2004). By 2005, there were between 1.9 million and 2 million internally displaced persons in Uganda, of which 1,167,000 were living in northern and north-eastern Uganda (UNOCHA, 2005). This has resulted in a humanitarian catastrophe. Malnutrition, undernourishment, and the threat of infectious diseases are endemic. The mortality rate is well above emergency thresholds (Republic of Uganda, 2005). In 2004, the UN Coordinator for Humanitarian Affairs, Jan Egeland, described northern Uganda as 'the world's worst humanitarian crisis.'

However, the NRA/M government has continuously downplayed the magnitude of the humanitarian disaster in northern Uganda, and resisted calls to declare a national disaster. It has been more interested in presenting Uganda as an attractive haven for foreign investment (UNOCHA, 2001). The inability of the NRA/M government to provide security for the population and pursue a negotiated end to the conflict has alienated the north (Omach,

2000; Gersony, 1997; Pain, 1997). This has been reflected in three successive elections in 1996, 2001 and 2006; with the north overwhelmingly voting against the incumbent President Yoweri Museveni.

The motives of the NRA/M leadership have also been questioned. There are perceptions that the Ugandan army -- the Uganda Peoples Defence Force (UPDF) -- is not keen to see an end to the conflict. The UPDF uses the conflict to sustain its political influence and privilege and to justify high defence expenditures.¹ Private gains cannot also be ruled out since military procurement is an important source of corruption. Senior army officers, government officials and businessmen close to the presidency have been mentioned in a number of corrupt deals, ghost soldier scams, embezzlement, bribes and kickbacks in the purchase of aircraft, arms, food rations and uniforms (Tangri & Mwenda 2003). Critics argue that the NRA/M maintains the conflict to carry out revenge against the Acholi because of the role Acholi soldiers played in the counter-insurgency against the NRA during 1981-85 conflict. Others argue that the NRA/M is interested to alienating Acholi land. While others say it is aimed at controlling the population to prevent political mobilization among the Acholi, who are perceived as a potential challenge to Museveni's hold on power (Branch, 2005). In this regard, the conflict is used by the NRA/M to rally and maintain the southern or Luwero consensus, through periodic reminders about the northern threat. President Yoweri Museveni has used the conflict to militarize society and maintain authoritarian rule with full donor acquiescence in the name of fighting terrorism. But the southern or Luwero consensus is under strain from increased political agitation for reforms, to which the state responds with repression. The honeymoon between the Buganda establishment and the NRA/M is all but over.

Despite serving the political domestic interests of the ruling elite, Uganda's domestic conflicts are a double-edged role in regional and international diplomacy. The government of Uganda has used the conflicts in the north and western Uganda to align itself closely with the United States by presenting itself as a victim of, and a front in, the fight against international terrorism. This has made Uganda the interlocutor of US policy in the region. The US has used the conflict in northern Uganda as a proxy to support the Sudan Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA) and fight against Islamic

¹Yoweri Museveni, President and UPDF commander, likes reminding Ugandans that it is because of the UPDF that they are enjoying peace, stability and prosperity.

fundamentalism. However, this has exposed Uganda to counter-intervention, since states riddled with conflicts characteristically have difficulty resisting intruders (MacFarlane, 1984). It has also heightened conflicts within Uganda, and has had negative implications for their peaceful resolution (Omach, 2003). The impact of Uganda's domestic and cross-border conflicts is to undermine Uganda's role as a peacemaker in the region, since Uganda is also a major source of regional instability due to its interventionist role in conflicts in neighbouring countries.

Conclusion

There have been significant reforms in Uganda since 1986. The NRA/M has reversed the collapse of the Ugandan state, established a stable government, and restored political stability at the central government level and in the southern parts of the country. This may give the appearance that a national consensus has been built, but this is not the case. Building a national consensus is a long and complex political process, and not an outcome of a few policy reforms. The NRA/M has failed to accept diversity and mutual tolerance. It has clung to the self-conceived notion that it has the 'correct political line', and that its leader has a monopoly of 'vision' for Uganda. It has used reforms to reconfigure political society and exert top-down political control, protect key constituencies, reconsolidate patronage networks, and get aid from Western donors. Reforms led to an inflow of foreign aid and resources and enabled the NRA/M government to maintain a coalition.

Although this approach helped the NRA/M government to rebuild the state and consolidate control in the early years of its administration, it does not provide the basis for long-term political stability. There are signs that the top-down methods of central control, intimidation, exclusion, patronage and manipulation which the NRA/M government has used to carry out reforms have exhausted their potential. Patronage politics and favouritism has weakened existing institutions since they depend on personalities and networks. Consequently, ethnicity and regionalism is endemic, and the country remains deeply divided. The north-south divide has widened with the development of 'two countries' and 'two economies': an impoverished and insecure north, and a prosperous and rich south. There are also visible cracks within the southern, Bantu or Luwero consensus through which power has been maintained over the past two decades. The government's patronage policies and colonial style divide and rule strategies have resulted in the fragmentation of the country and promoted the growth of competing

loyalties. The government has encouraged people to organize around chiefdoms, kingdoms, churches and small districts, which it uses for dispensing patronage and rewards. The old ethnic, regional and state-building conflicts remain unresolved. There is growing dissent and agitation for reforms, and the government is becoming more authoritarian. There is need for more thorough reform based on open discussion and consensus among different political actors and civil societies. Guided democracy and authoritarianism are unsustainable. Internal political incoherence and conflicts undermine Uganda's diplomatic respect regionally and internationally, and expose it to negative external influence.

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