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Analysis of Some Dimensions of Political Disintegration in Uganda

by Jimmy K. Tindigarukayo

Political integration, broadly defined as a process of achieving a sense of community and stability among different parts of a given society and/or political system, has been an elusive goal rather than a reality in most developing countries, especially in Africa. Rather than moving towards political integration thus defined, the majority of African countries have been characterized by political instability, constitutional crises, breakdown of law and order, social and cultural conflicts, military coups, economic dislocations and the like. In other words, these countries have been moving towards political disintegration.

The main concerns of this study are, on the one hand, to identify constraints on political integration in Uganda and, on the other, to make an attempt to examine the likely sources of those constraints and to provide some policy recommendations. The underlying reasons for my choice of Uganda as a case study of political disintegration in Africa are twofold. First, Uganda affords unequalled opportunities for the study of political disintegration in black Africa as reflected, among other things, in the rapid and violent changes of regimes that have occurred in that country in recent years. And second, in the now considerable literature on Uganda, systematic inquiry into alternative sources of political disintegration has not received sufficiently detailed attention. Most studies on Uganda have, instead, tended to focus on social and cultural factors--ethnicity, religious differences, regionalism, class and the like--as sources of political disintegration. What is often less emphasized in that literature, however, is the fact that such socio-cultural factors themselves need to be explained.

Although socio-cultural factors exist in every country in the world, differences in degrees of their salience seem to depend on the extent to which they have been politicized in individual countries. The politicization of social and cultural cleavages in Uganda occurred mainly during the colonial period. However, most post-colonial leaders in that
country have quite often exploited such cleavages to their own advantage by using them as bases of competition and conflict over access to political power, wealth and status, thereby making those cleavages even more salient, with profound implications for the country as a whole.

Apart from the politicization of cultural and social cleavages, political disintegration in Uganda has arisen from other sources, including the manner in which political institutions in that country have been developed; the failure of post-colonial leaders to establish effective control over the military; and the inability of these leaders to acquire popular legitimacy for their respective regimes.

(1) The Inadequacy of the Modernization Theory

Given the wide range of constraints on political integration in Uganda, it appears futile to look for their explanations on the basis of traditional theories of political integration and disintegration in developing countries. The bulk of these theories, based on the modernization perspective, have identified traditionalism as the main source of constraints on political cohesion in such countries and sought to find solutions in processes of modernization. These theories, however, are subject to a number of criticisms in reference to the Uganda situation.

First, the initial emphasis placed on the process of weakening traditional patterns of authority proved to be politically disruptive and incomplete, especially in those instances like Buganda where the British colonial policy of indirect rule had been long established. Buganda's attempts to secede from the rest of Uganda, which caused political instability in the country as a whole, were primarily based on fears that the central government sought to weaken Buganda's traditional institutions which had been previously recognized and strengthened by the colonial government.

Second, the emphasis on the key role of processes of modernization -- urbanization, social communication and social mobilization, western education, and the like -- in dislodging people from their traditional primordial loyalties, thereby facilitating the transfer of their loyalties to the emergent states for identity and security, was ill-conceived by modernization theorists. For, as some studies have indicated, these processes of modernization have tended instead to increase cultural awareness and thereby to exacerbate inter-cultural
competition and conflicts in developing countries. According to Crawford Young, the spread of education brings higher levels of social consciousness which may include a more highly articulated cultural identity. The extension and intensification of communication networks brings individuals within reach of broader collectives; thus an ethnic affiliation that may be highly localized becomes extended over a broader zone of cultural affinity. The rapid growth of cities creates social arenas where competition for survival is intense and where consciousness of other groups locked in combat for the same resources deepens.

Thus in Uganda the struggle for political control between the Nilotic-speaking peoples of northern Uganda and the Bantu-speaking peoples of southern Uganda, which was completely nonexistent in pre-modern history, is now at the center of political disintegration in the country.

Third, by creating patterns of uneven socio-economic and political development in different parts of developing countries, modernization has promoted tensions at both regional and local levels. The fact that the colonial government developed Buganda to attain higher levels of socio-economic and political growth than any other region in Uganda stimulated tensions between Buganda and the other regions in the country. At local levels, the attempts by the mountain ethnic groups (the Bamba and Bakonjo of Mount Ruwenzori and the Sebei of Mount Elgon) to secede from Uganda in the early 1960s may be explained by their deprivation-based tensions, directed against their local ethnic rivals who had enjoyed more socio-economic and political growth during the colonial period.

Fourth, by uncritically identifying cultural cleavages as the main constraint on political integration in developing countries, without probing into what makes those cleavages salient, modernization theorists seem to have missed a vital consideration: that the mere existence of cultural differences in society is not a sufficient condition for either conflicts or lack of political cohesion. As I will argue in this study, politicization of such differences has to occur before conflicts, which may in turn lead to lack of political cohesion, take place.

Finally, modernization theorists have tended to view constraints on political cohesion in developing countries as being similar, thereby, overlooking constraints that may be unique to individual countries. Yet,
differences in the experiences with colonial rule, economic structures, and in types of leadership that appeared at and after independence have led to different constraints on political cohesion in individual post-colonial states, leading to the necessity of studying each country in its own historical - cultural - political context.

In the analysis of sources of constraints on political integration in Uganda, at least four factors are particularly important: (i) the politicization of cultural and socio-economic cleavages during the development of state structures; (ii) the general weakness of institutional structures of the polity; (iii) the quality of political leadership during the post-independence period, and; (iv) the nature of the Ugandan political economy.

(2) Politicization of Cultural and Social Cleavages

Since politicization of cultural and social cleavages in Uganda mainly occurred during the colonial period, it appears imperative first to provide an overview of the pre-colonial situation.

(i) The Pre-colonial Perspective: Societies in pre-colonial Uganda were divided into two major categories: segmentary and centralized. The former were composed of different clans which, though sharing a common culture and language, were nonetheless independent of one another in their social and political activities. In contrast, different clans that comprised centralized societies were held together by the hereditary institution of Kingship. The King, to whom all clans in the kingdom owed allegiance, appointed junior chiefs through whom he administered his subjects.

These two types of societies, although both pre-capitalist, differed in their modes of production. Segmentary societies were basically communal. Each clan leader, chosen by elders from among themselves, allocated land to different families within the clan according to need, and the division of labor occurred within individual families. Men defended the clan and cleared new lands. Women were responsible for both household activities and growing crops. Centralized societies by contrast were based on a feudal mode of production. Each was internally divided into peasant producers and the ruling aristocracy. The former were required to provide tribute, in the form of surplus produce and services, to the King and his chiefs in return for security and protection.
Interaction among and between these two types of societies was mainly through trade and, occasionally, through conflict. Trade existed primarily, but by no means exclusively, between neighboring societies, involving exchange of locally produced goods. Interaction through conflict was mainly based on expansionist ambitions on the part of the larger kingdoms of Bunyoro (17th-18th Centuries) and Buganda (19th Century).

Conflict based on cultural and social cleavages did not exist in pre-colonial Uganda. Such cleavages became politically salient during the colonial era, for, in the development of the colonial state, both social and cultural differences were politicized by providing differential access to positions of advantage to sub-national groups in Uganda which, in turn, led to patterns of competition and conflict along social and cultural lines. It is to the discussion of the colonial era that I will now turn.

(ii) The Colonial Perspective: Partly because Buganda was more politically organized than any other society in Uganda at the advent of colonial rule, and partly because the Baganda willingly collaborated with the colonial power in extending colonial rule to the rest of the country, the Baganda became the most favored sub-national group in Uganda throughout the colonial period. Buganda not only became the center of colonial innovation, but it also received more concessions and privileges than any other part of the country, with the result that: (i) a deprivation-based conflict, directed against Buganda, developed among other parts of Uganda; and (ii) the Baganda themselves developed separatist tendencies whenever Buganda's privileged position was threatened by the central government of Uganda, both during and after colonial rule.

Moreover, the southern part of Uganda, in comparison with the northern part, was able to achieve more socio-economic and political growth during the colonial administration. The disparity between these two regions developed mainly in two ways. First, the growth of the main cash crops introduced in Uganda during the colonial period -- coffee and cotton -- were encouraged in southern Uganda more than anywhere else, with the result that the infrastructure that accompanied the processing and marketing of these crops was concentrated in southern Uganda. And second, southern Uganda was turned into the commercial, industrial, administrative, and educational center for the whole country. While Kampala was developed as a commercial and educational center, Jinja was developed as an industrial center. Entebbe, also located in southern Uganda, was made the administrative center, being the capital of the colonial government. Northern Uganda, for its part, was turned into a labor reservoir from which the army and
police personnel could be recruited for, in the judgement of colonial administrators, Northerners displayed better martial qualities than Southerners.

The impact of this polarized pattern between southern and northern Uganda has been mainly two-fold. First, since independence Southerners have dominated the administrative and business professions while Northerners have dominated the security forces. Second, in the post-independence era, political elites from these two geographical regions have competed for the control of Uganda. During the period 1964-1966, the struggle for power between Edward Mutesa with the support from the south and Milton Obote with support from the north, culminated in the 1966 constitutional crisis, during which the latter group utilized the northern-dominated Ugandan Army to subdue their political opponents. More recently, the still northerno-dominated Uganda Army was defeated by the southern-dominated guerrilla force led by Yoweri Museveni, leading to the establishment of the present government in Uganda.

(3) The Institutional Factor

Emphasis on the weakness of political institutions as a source of constraints on political integration in developing countries derives from Huntington that the majority of these countries suffer from political disorders and violence primarily because they lack strong and coherent political institutions that are capable of controlling political conflicts and regulating the impact of rapid processes of modernization. Huntington's suggested solution was that key political institutions and other instruments of state control in the developing countries should be strengthened at the same time that popular mobilization should be minimized.

Given the fragile nature of political institutions in developing countries, Huntington's emphasis on their need to be strengthened was valid. However, he seems to have over-emphasized the disintegrative impact of popular mobilization in these countries. For, as some studies were late to show, political disintegration in post-colonial states in Africa and elsewhere has tended to result from conflicts between segments with the society rather that from popular mobilization. On the basis of these studies, some scholars have argued that since the majority of developing countries are characterized by cultural segmentation, or pluralism, the only viable solution to their problems of
political disintegration may lie in building political institutions that can provide political accommodations among all major segments of the society. To that end, at least two types of political institutions have been suggested within this mode of analysis: federalism and consociationalism. However, there are problems associated with establishing federal systems of government in developing countries. Generally, political institutions found in the majority of these countries are still new, weak, and fragile, and therefore unable to support federal structures which require long-established traditions of constitutionalism. Moreover, political elites in post-colonial states are generally more accustomed to centralized types of governments, a legacy inherited from the colonial state, and as such, they have tended to view federal structures of government as being essentially divisive rather than cohesive. Finally, cultural cleavages found in most post-colonial states are neither territorially grouped nor do such states have sufficient resources to sustain federal structures of government.

In addition to these general problems, individual post-colonial states have had their own specific problems which have made the viability of federalism problematic. In Uganda, the colonial administration developed local government to coincide with ethnic boundaries. However, two contradictory colonial policies of indirect and direct rule were applied in the development of these local governments. At one extreme, developed along the policy of indirect rule, the kingdom of Buganda was able to preserve most of its traditional institutions and to enjoy a measure of administrative autonomy. As well, the appointment of its chiefs (or native rulers) was left in the hands of the king (the Kabaka) of Buganda. At the other extreme, non-kingdom districts were developed along the policy of direct rule. Their traditional institutions were eroded and replaced by the Kiganda and colonial institutions of government. Moreover, Baganda agents were employed by the colonial power to carry out key administrative functions in these districts. Finally, these districts were put under direct control and supervision of the central government.

Between these extremes were the kingdoms of western Uganda to which both elements of direct and indirect rule applied. They retained their traditional hereditary Kings, but the latter were not delegated the power to appoint their subordinate chiefs who, instead, were appointed by central government officials—the District Commissioners. Thus, part of the traditional institutions of these kingdoms were preserved, but they enjoyed no administrative autonomy. Instead, like non-kingdom districts, they were subjected to ordinances promulgated by the central
government.

Essentially, therefore, only the kingdom of Buganda was prepared for a federal type of government. By contrast, the non-kingdom districts were prepared for a unitary type of government, while the kingdoms of western Uganda were prepared for quasi-federal structures. This power inequality among local governments in Uganda was given legal recognition by the Independence Constitution which provided Buganda with full federal status at the same time that the kingdoms of western Uganda were provided with semi-federal status. Non-kingdom districts were provided with a unitary status, which brought them under tighter control from the central government.

With respect to consociationalism, the extent to which consociational structures of government can promote political cohesion may depend on at least three conditions: (i) existence of and respect for democratic rules and procedures; (ii) a high degree of segmental isolation to minimize chances of inter-segmental conflicts; and (iii) a spirit of compromise, trust, and goodwill among political leaders of major segments in their efforts to share political power.14

However, the above-mentioned conditions are generally absent in most post-colonial states. Most post-colonial leaders, especially in Africa, have tended to pursue personal rather than institutional rule.15 Yet the success of a consociational type of government mainly depends upon the leader's respect for institutional procedures coupled with a spirit of compromise in order to make the process of power-sharing possible. Ugandan politicians to the contrary, have quite often demonstrated unwillingness to act in accordance with institutional procedures when the choice was between respect for the rules and retaining or acquiring power.

For example, in 1966 Prime Minister Milton Obote abrogated the Independence Constitution, dismissed the country's President and, with the help of the army, made himself Head of both the State and the Government. More recently, a written agreement between Tito Okello and Yoweri Museveni, intended to promote power-sharing among political factions within Uganda,16 was soon made ineffective by a continuous armed conflict between Okello's and Museveni's forces, culminating in a victory for the latter.

(4) Political Leadership

Political leadership in post-colonial states in Africa has been regarded by some analysts as one of the sources of constraints on political integration. Among the factors emphasized by these analysts,
at least three are particularly vital to this discussion: (i) the tendency of post-colonial African leaders to foster sectional identity as a means to secure political power, leading to inter- and intra-elite conflicts; (ii) the failure of the leadership to establish effective control over the military; and (iii) the failure of most leaders to acquire popular legitimacy, leading them to pursue personal and/or dictatorial, rather than institutional, rule. I will discuss these factors in relation to leadership in post-colonial Uganda.

(i) Sectionalism: Defined as a form of inter-elite competition and conflict over access to political power, wealth, and status, sectionalism has been a major characteristic of Ugandan post-colonial politics and has lead to rapid change of regimes in the country.

First, the struggle for power between President Edward Mutesa and Prime Minister Milton Obote resulted in the constitutional crisis of 1966 during which the latter, with the help of the Central Government's army, subdued his opponent and subsequently promoted himself to the position of the executive President.

Second, during the late 1960's, a struggle for power developed between President Obote and the Army Commander Idi Amin, leading to the latter's victory in the coup of January, 1971.

Finally, the Ugandan exiles who removed Amin from power in April 1979 were themselves characterized by politics of sectionalism as was reflected, among other things, by the rapid rate of regime changes between April 1979 and January 1986.

(ii) Leadership's Lack of Control Over the Military: Most Ugandan leaders have tended to utilize their respective security forces, especially the Military, as an instrument of coercion primarily to sustain themselves in power, and thereby limiting their ability to assert an effective control over such security forces.

During his first regime (1962-1971), Milton Obote utilized the Ugandan Army to abrogate the Independence Constitution and later, to promote himself to the position of executive president. Amin's regime (1971-1979) thrived on the utilization of the security force to terrorize the Ugandan Society to submit to his dictatorial leadership and so, too, did Obote's second regime (1980-1985) and Okello's regime (July 1985-January 1986). In each of these regimes, the leadership depended so much upon the army to sustain itself in power that it was unable to control the excesses committed by the army against the wider society.
(iii) Leadership's Lack of Popular Legitimacy: Lacking long established political institutions with a capacity to win both the support and faith of the governed, Ugandan political leaders have tended to rely on either personal or dictatorial rule to govern the country.

Personal rule, which entails the leader's excessive reliance on personal loyalty; the leadership's use of coercion to enforce public compliance; and an extensive application of patron-client linkages by the leadership as a means to win support, was exercised in full by Obote's first leadership (1962-1972) and, to some extent, by Lule (April 1979-June 1979); Binaisa (June 1979-May 1980); and Muwanga (May-December 1980).

Dictatorial rule, which entails the utilization of brutal force involving large scale violence and leading ultimately to massive liquidation among all strata of society, was exercised by Idi Amin (1971-1979); Obote's second leadership (1980-1985); and Okello's leadership (July 1985-January 1986).

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

In the final analysis, political disintegration in Uganda has been fostered primarily, though not exclusively, by political leadership in the country. First, the colonial leadership politicized both social and cultural cleavages, which the post-colonial leaders misused to foster sectional identity as a means to secure political power, wealth, and status. Second, inappropriate political policies adopted by both colonial and post-colonial leaders have themselves been a source of political disintegration. And finally, the rapid and violent changes of regimes, together with other recurrent patterns of political instability which have characterized the Ugandan system since independence, seem to attest that no single leadership group has been successful in establishing its legitimacy to rule. In the absence of legitimacy, previous leaders in Uganda not only failed to rule effectively, but they also failed even to save their respective regimes. Hence, recommendations designed to suggest some improvement on Uganda's alarming record of political disintegration should, of necessity, be addressed primarily to the question of leadership.

My recommendations will be based on four areas which have been main sources of political disintegration in Uganda and all of which have largely been influenced by egocentric leadership. These areas include: lack of national identity, social and economic disparities, the
general absence of political order and stability, and imbalances in the distribution of power.

(i) Promotion of National Identity: Political integration at least requires that identification with the national community transcends the more limited parochial loyalties, especially when issues attaining national significance are at stake.

According to the theory of political socialization, childhood attachment to symbols of the national system -- the national flag, national anthem, national political heroes of the past and present, and the like -- is a necessary condition for the development of a coherent national identity as children become adults. Identification with the national community in Uganda could be strengthened through civic education, which entails the use of the educational system to instill national awareness in school children. A government policy which enforces universal primary education, where the teaching of civic education, including the singing of the national anthem, frequent exposure to national political leaders, and studies of other ethnic groups within the country, with the intention of increasing the level of tolerance, could significantly promote higher levels of national identification, at least in the long run.

It is important to note, however, that attempts to promote national identity through political socialization are unlikely to be effective in the absence of a responsible, legitimate, and non-oppressive government. In circumstances where the government is repressive towards the wider society, even the most positive childhood loyalties to the national community are likely to disappear.

(ii) Reduction of Social and Economic Disparities: While social and economic disparities exist in all countries, developed as well as underdeveloped, they tend to be more disintegrative in the latter for two main reasons. First, in developed countries the majority of the population fall within the middle income group, leaving a minority in both upper and lower income groups. In underdeveloped countries, by contrast, the majority of the population are poor, leaving a small minority in both upper and middle income groups. In particular, those who control the state apparatus in underdeveloped countries not only have expanded their wealth and privilege, they have also been central in creating, reinforcing, and maintaining inequalities. And second, regional disparities in most post-colonial underdeveloped countries like Uganda tend to promote ethnic competition and conflict, mainly because of the
previous uneven colonial penetration.

Hence, government efforts to encourage balanced social and economic development at the national, regional, and local levels would be particularly vital in promoting political cohesion in Uganda. Such government efforts would include policies aimed at (i) bridging socio-economic gaps between the urban rich and the rural poor, and (ii) narrowing inequalities between the more developed southern and the underdeveloped northern parts of Uganda. The first policy calls for a dynamic rural development strategy, based on essential human needs and a long-term plan directed towards income redistribution. The second calls for sacrificing some national growth for the sake of regional socio-economic parity, without which competition and conflict, mostly aggravated by ethnic overtones, are likely to continue to rise.

(iii) Political Order and Stability: Political order and stability constitute the corner-stone for political integration in any country. In African countries where recurrent patterns of civil strife, violence, and many other forms of instability threaten to become a permanent condition rather than a transitory stage, the search for political order and stability has become particularly urgent.

The general lack of internal security coupled with the frequent arbitrary use of instruments of coercion by political leaders have led to both political disintegration and instability in Uganda. Government's effective control over security forces, leader's respect for institutional procedures and human rights, and leadership's persistent search for political legitimacy, would all promote higher levels of political order, stability and integration in the country.

(iv) Balancing Political Power: In a multi-ethnic state like Uganda where cultural cleavages have long been politicized, rule by any single ethnic group is likely to result in other ethnic groups being tyrannized. Both Obote and Amin largely fashioned their personal security forces from their respective ethnic groups. The result in both cases was the tyranny imposed on the wider Ugandan society by the ethnic group in power. To avoid repetition of such disintegrative leadership, it should be government policy to establish political procedures which allow for the accommodation of all major segments of Ugandan society at all important levels of the decision-making process.

Inherent in such policy are two vital principles: proportional representation and grand coalition government. While the former requires that government bureaucracies, including security forces,
should be representative of the larger society in both outlook and composition, the latter requires that political leaders of all major segments in the country should share power and be willing to accommodate each others' views in their quest for the integration of the country as a whole. As David Apter correctly observed in reference to Uganda, "behind the question of parliamentary forms and constitutional arrangements lies the need to create a genuine basis of association of all groups, whether ethnic, racial, or class." In my view, Apter's recommendation is even more valid now than it was on the eve of Uganda's independence when he made it, for in the absence of a genuine association among sub-national groups in Uganda, more recurrent patterns of political disintegration and other forms of political decay have developed since then.
NOTES

1. For the definition of political integration along these lines, see Philip Jacob and Henry Teune, "The Integrative Process: Guidelines for Analysis of Bases of Political Community", in Philip Jacob and James Toscano (eds.), The Integration of Political Communities New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1964, p.4.


5. Young, "Patterns of Social Conflicts", p. 89.

6. Most societies in pre-colonial Uganda were characterized by segmentary political structures. These included: the Bakiga, the Bamba and Bakonjo of western Uganda; the Sebei, the Bagisu, the Itesot, the Badama, the Banyuli, the Bagwere, the Jopadhora, and the Samia-Bagwe of eastern Uganda; the Acholi, the Langi, the Alur, the Madi, and the Karamojong of northern Uganda.

7. Centralized Societies included the Kingdoms of Buganda, Bunyoro, Toro, and Ankole all in southern Uganda.


16. For a full text of this agreement, see the Kenyan magazine: The Weekly Review, December 20, 1985, pp.10-13.


