**The “Movement Legacy” and Its Impact on Uganda’s Political Parties: A Preliminary Analysis**

**A Public Lecture[[1]](#footnote-1)**

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by

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**Officials and faculty of Makerere University, Members of Parliament, leaders of political parties, ladies and gentlemen: Good afternoon and thank you for coming. I am pleased to see so many friends and a few enemies in the audience. I am particularly privileged to see my family here including my mother who is seated right here in the front.**

**Almost 15 years ago I attended a public lecture at this institution delivered by my mentor and teacher, the late Prof. Akiiki Bomeera Mujaju. I am dedicating this lecture to him.**

**This afternoon’s convocation is a culmination of 10 months of a research project involving dozens of elite interviews of party leaders some of whom are MPs, and leaders of key non-governmental organizations. The long term objective was to write a book on opposition politics in Uganda. In the course of conducting these interviews and immersing myself in Uganda’s political system, I am beginning to appreciate a point that was made by one of my interview subjects; and that is that all parties in Uganda face the same challenges albeit in varying degrees and depending on whether they are in or out of power. And this is the point of departure for this afternoons discourse.**

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**Introduction**

The concept, ‘movement legacy’ was first coined by Professor Emeritus, Goran Hyden in an article published in 2011, entitled, “Barriers to Party Systems in Africa: the Movement Legacy”. By “movement legacy” we mean a pattern of political behavior that characterized anti-colonial nationalist movements in their struggles for independence; and that continues to shape political party behavior in much of Africa. The ‘movement legacy’ is descriptive of a type of political organization. This form of behavior cum organization (described below) has continued to shape party politics in Uganda in the post-independence era, hence the reference ‘legacy’. It has also frustrated the prospects for deepening democracy. It applies to all African parties—opposition and incumbent alike, but it is most pronounced among ruling parties and extremely detrimental to the emergence of strong and viable opposition parties. This partly explains why opposition politics in Africa is profoundly handicapped.

This paper describes the manifestation of this legacy in the politics of Uganda. The second task is to provide a thumb nail analysis of the implications of this legacy to the consolidation or deepening of democracy in Uganda. Thirdly, propositions are put forth as to the mechanics and challenges of diminishing the ‘legacy’ and enabling the institutionalization of political parties, the expansion of political spaces and the provision of competition, all of which should lead to a new political dispensation in Uganda. The final objective is to draw generalizations from this Uganda case study and relate them to the African continent. But first I’ll begin with a brief historical background.

**Historical Background**

Nationalist movements in Uganda were spearheaded by three main sections: World War II veterans, a small not so well-educated elite class of clerical workers, and leaders of a nascent civil society. These groups were united by a single but multi-faceted **cause,** namely to vanquish the colonial masters, declare their freedom and self-determination, and take charge of the state apparatus. Other than this mission these groups remained committed to their particular identities.

The political/economic/social **issues** driving the nationalist movements were varied; they included substandard education, denial of voting rights, unemployment or underemployment, lack of civil right and liberties, low prices for cash crops, etc. BUT these issues remained subordinate to *the* cause, i.e. the focus remained clearly on the removal of alien power and the assumption of self-rule.

To fulfill the cause, the anti-colonial movements adopted a simple but important strategy rooted in various forms of popular **mobilization,** i.e., “rousing people both to express themselves politically and also to undertake political action” (Blackwell 1999). It was rare and in most cases illegal to engage in politics or more specifically **campaign**, in other words organize efforts which seek to influence the decision-making process within a specific group or country A decade or so before independence Africans engaged in politics but the colonial powers insisted on confining it to the local level (Hyden 2011). Most notably independence movements against the British took place at the level of **society** because there were no representative bodies such as parliaments or legislative councils until much later in the struggle. Therefore unlike the typical party system in which the main arena of operation is the **parliament**, nationalist movements were restricted to societal levels (or civil society). Membership to these movements was rather diffuse and fluid, but because of a single/shared common reference, lack of specific and formal identity patterns were not detrimental to their dynamic and operation. Typically anti-colonial movements reified the person of leader—they were personality driven or personalistic in their leadership paradigm. For example Kwame Nkurumah, Patrice Lumumba, Jomo Kenyatta, Milton Obote, Julius Nyerere and others personified the independence movements of their respective countries, and later of their post-independence parties. In sourthern Africa the various national liberation movements were tied to such luminary figures as Nelson Mandela, Robert Mugabe, Samora Machel, Jonas Savimbi and others. It should be noted from these names that the nationalist movement was primarily led by a political class that had no competing other, i.e. there were no socio-economic classes.

A critical observation about social movements is that they are not built on internal competition, nor are they constructed to engage in competition with other groups. The more people who join it and forsake other unrelated or conflicting interests the better. Clearly competition is often and was not an issue because of a necessary consensus that was built around the anti-colonial struggle and the proclivity of leaning primarily toward personalities, and secondarily on structure and organization.

Finally, because resources were scarce and the strength of the leaders and voracity of mobilization were key, concerns about formal (legal) limits to resources were irrelevant. And aside from nationalism as a guiding belief system, formal and systematic ideologies did not emerge. The exception of course were the movements in southern Africa where socialism was a systematically practiced ideology by the various national liberation movements. But I shall argue below that in their post-independence political experiences, countries like Mozambique and Angola have dramatically diluted their commitments to ideology thus mimicking their “cousins” on the rest of the continent. In fact a compelling case could be made of post-Apartheid South Africa.

Indicative of my thesis is the fact that most post-independence political parties have the word ***movement*** in them, e.g The United Democratic Movement of South Africa; Movement for Multi-Party Democracy in Zambia; Movement for Democratic Change in Zimbabwe; Movement for the Liberation of the Senegalese People; the United Ghana Movement, the Democratic Socialist Movement of Nigeria and of course the National Resistance Movement Organization (NRM-O). Not unlike the latter group of parties, in Uganda the DP, the UPC, KY and CP also emerged out of these movements. The new parties, FDC, JEEMA, and the FA have not demonstrated a departure from pre-independence national/liberation movement behavior. In short they have not freed themselves from the movement legacy.

**[INSERT/TURN TO TABLE 1]**

***It is the central claim of this paper that parties are yet to shed the dynamics of this legacy or disavow movement political behavior. This is what is meant by the reference ‘movement legacy’, i.e. a historically determined set of political values which continue to direct political organization/action thus giving rise to a creature we shall call the movement party.***

***While movement politics was important and indeed consequential for the eventual end of colonial rule. I contend that it has not furthered the cause of deepening democracy in Uganda or for that matter on the continent. Indeed while the nationalist movements were anti-colonial, I argue that they were NOT pro-democracy. To the extent that our present day parties emerged from these movements and continue to mimic their behavior, it’s no surprise that their utility value as vehicles for democracy has been somewhat suspect.***

**The Movement Legacy and Its Manifestations among Uganda’s Political Parties**

A quick survey of post-independence party behavior provides ample evidence of how impactful this legacy has been in directing politics and determining the prospects for democratic consolidation in Uganda. Let me outline 5 factors highlighting the impact of the legacy on Uganda’s political dispensation:

First, a cursory look at post-independence politics in Uganda, demonstrates how parties are driven by a “cause” rather than a systematic articulation of specific issues. The ‘cause’ of course varies from government to government, and from one political party to another according to the dynamics of the political settlements extant at any given period of time. In similar fashion Uganda’s opposition parties have also championed one cause or another at various times. Today the cause may be ‘remove Museveni’ or ‘reform the Electoral Commission’ tomorrow it may be ‘de-couple the state from the NRM-O’. In the recent post-election period the cause had as its underpinning the contestation of the election results. So ‘walk-to-work’ was the mobilizational strategy. However rarely does a discourse on issues take precedence over the cause *de jour*. This does not mean that opposition (or incumbent) parties have no platforms upon which these issues are stated/articulated. I submit however that in the conversations with the electorate, in the electioneering season and in the canvassing for votes, seldom do political elites have a systematic and concerted effort to communicate issues. This is partly a consequence of weak ideological orientations (another movement legacy) among the parties; and without ideology it’s hard to project a coherent, well-reasoned set of issues that would drive a campaign and thus enable ascendancy into government. But weak ideological orientation also raises another key issue of the movement legacy, namely the lack of specific party identity/or loyalty. Affiliation to the parties is diffuse just as was the case with pre-colonial social movements. In Uganda’s early post-independence history, this characteristic was the driver of the frequent crossings on the floor of parliament by MPs. Today, the phenomenon of so called Independents in parliament is the closest to crossing the floor given that the process of abandoning ones party midway through the terms is outside the law. But defections from party to party still take place outside parliament. Take for example the most recent ones of 250 from NRM to UPC in Lira; 300 from NRM to UPC in Amuria or the Wegulo, Osinde, Mayega trio defections to the NRM. And need I remind us of the back and forth political pendulum that is former Mayor Nasser Ssebaggala? The point is that while defections are not an unheard of political phenomenon, in Africa and Uganda in particular they are historically abundant and the numbers of defectors quite prominent, indicating that there are no deep held beliefs or ideologies undergirding party membership. Again this is a dimension of the movement legacy wherein loyalty to the movement was diffuse and only potent as long as the colonial state remained in place.

Not unlike Uganda’s opposition parties, the ruling NRM-O seldom articulates issues in a systematic manner except in the run up to elections, when roads or business parks are commissioned, banks rebranded, job centers set up, etc. The **cause** for the NRM-O party in this case has changed over time. It was initially to bring about so-called ‘fundamental change’ albeit in a restricted and controlled competitive no party system. I (Rubongoya 2007) and many others have disproved the notion that a fundamental change has taken place, to the contrary I argue that we are witnessing a convergence between this administration and its predecessor. The fallacy of competition in a no party system was exposed over time leading to its replacement by an equally contested/vacuous multi-party dispensation. Lately the cause is most notably rooted in an implicit larger project of entrenchment aided by mini causes such as Bonna Baggagawale, NAADS, Bonna Basome, etc. Moreover the intensity of party loyalty and identity with the NRM is also subject to debate with overwhelming evidence pointing to steady flows of patronage as the main motivating membership factor in the NRM-O.

Second, parties both incumbent and in the opposition typically mobilize, rather than campaign. It’s indeed hard to campaign effectively if issues are not the main elements undergirding the methods of political operation. Related to this point is that mobilization by definition circumscribes competition which explains why it is a dying breed in Uganda. In their mobilization schemes, Africa’s political organizations, most notably incumbent parties aim at co-opting and/or marginalizing political contestants while eschewing competition. In the end the movement legacy leaves in its wake something akin to an English Premier League with a lone strong team (or hegemonic party in political terms) amongst comparatively many mediocre or handicapped competitors. The quality of football (like that of democracy in political terms) diminishes quite markedly and its popularity declines proportionately. President Museveni often disparages opposition parties and chides voters who don’t elect NRM flag bearers as having made mistakes—this is a mobilizational, movement legacy characteristic. For him the weaker the opposition the better or better still he wishes it didn’t exist at all. Clearly, the NRM-O leadership puts very little value in opposition parties as building blocks of a healthy, vibrant and deepening democracy. The de-legitimation of the opposition in Uganda, also implies that political competition based on ideas and policy is not valued. The result is the emergence of a dominant (even hegemonic) movement/party system not only in Uganda but also in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Eritrea, Rwanda, Togo and else where.

Thirdly, Ugandan parties are extremely personalistic. Their organizations and structures are weak not unlike their social movement forebears. As a result when Col Kizza Besigye stepped aside, the FDC suffered a heart attack with the left ventrical (or Mafabi wing) disconnecting from the right ventrical (or Mugisha Muntu/Alaso faction). The Uganda People’s Congress (UPC) has not recovered from the demise of its founders especially Dr. Milton Obote. It too is fragmented along several quite visible fault lines. Can anyone think about/imagine the NRM without Yoweri Museveni? Or ZANU-PF without Mugabe and the Patriotic Front in Rwanda without Kagame? What is particularly intriguing in making this observation is that leaders deliberately encourage these personality cult-like tendencies.

Fourthly, in their bid to fulfill *the* cause, social movements are not restrained by law especially as they lay claim to resources. This piece of the movement legacy is also undoubtedly clear in Uganda. Rule of law is not appreciated in principle but rather in instrumentalist terms, i.e. it’s respected only when it is convenient and expedient. The implication of this is that rules and norms governing parties may be altered without reference to their significance; and constitutional engineering in the affairs of state become common practice. Some laws may be passed without quorum while constitutions may be altered to, for example, remove presidential term limits. On the opposition side we have recently seen DP president Mao appealing to the likes of Erias Lukwago and other faction leaders in the party to respect party structures and rules as they vie for leadership positions. Party election laws and norms have been contested as was the case during the recent leadership change in the FDC.

Finally, as pointed out above, movements operate at the level of society. This characteristic is even more pronounced in Uganda and in Africa as a whole because culturally we operate at informal (rather than formal) levels. Unlike typical parties whose arena of operation is primarily parliament, movements’ focus and influence is mostly limited to the (civil) societal level. It is this variable that mostly explains the use of patronage as a mobilization tool. Agents in society quickly take on the role of clients while those in power and with access to state resources become patrons. The resulting patron-clientelist networks inevitably breeds corruption and erodes the mechanisms of accountability and transparency. When examined in the context of low levels of rule of law, informalism and personalistic rule, this dimension of the legacy contributes markedly to the rather shallow and vacuous forms of democracy in Africa.

**Conclusion**

To the extent that the ‘movement legacy’ is a historically determined, genetic flaw characterizing African party behavior, it stands to reason that for now it matters not which party takes power in Uganda. Party behavior is likely to remain the same and prospects for deepening democracy rather poor. Clearly there is a need for a mutation of sorts, if party behavior is to change and point in the direction of liberal democracy.

Information I have gleaned from my elite interviews, indicates that issue politics has been railroaded by the monetization of politics especially during election seasons. This clearly is an indirect reference to the prominent place of patronage (in its financial form) in Uganda’s politics. In other words the issues fade in significance as the distribution of money and material “gifts” become key elements in guaranteeing votes. And this also means that mobilization is likely to remain key to party politicking. As well, this puts the incumbent party in a superior and advantaged position relative to the opposition. The formers’ access to state coffers and to other state-based forms of patronage has the effect of leaving an uneven political terrain. This stifles competition, diminishes political space and siphons oxygen out of opposition parties. So, clearly the movement legacy has far reaching implications for opposition relative to incumbent parties. Monetization of politics also diminishes any serious commitment to ideology as a tool for party coherence and as an instrument for party recruitment and interest aggregation. The overriding issue for all party functions is the availability of patronage and other forms of largesse flowing from either the state or its benefactors in the private sector.

Be that as it may, change must begin with concrete policies intended to improve institutionalization of political parties. By this is meant a commitment to rules, norms, procedures and a recognition and respect for the rule of law. A key aspect of the legacy is the personalistic nature of parties. This is a characteristic that collapses the entire party structure and organization to a handful of leaders and especially the founding fathers and mothers. Not only does this proclivity shift national politics from **parliament** to the informal levels of **society**, but the level of operation is also stepped down from **governmen**t to the confines of the **regime**.

But why are these important issues for both discourse and academic research?

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It is my submission that the continued presence of the ‘legacy’ in the underbelly of Africa’s politics has the effect of undermining the project of consolidating (i.e. deepening) democracy. In its present form democracy on the continent precariously revolves around the holding of regular elections **and this is simply not enough**. Never mind that elections can and are often contested in Uganda my argument is that even with free and fair elections the absence of robust political spaces, restrained political competition, patronage-based politics and lack of political transparency and accountability cannot sustain the project of democratic consolidation. And to reiterate all these flow out of the permutations of the ‘movement legacy’.

Therefore the challenge is to champion the cause of shifting from movement/parties to legitimate parties. To diminish the ‘legacy’ while highlighting the democratic components of the party as an organization for both interest articulation and aggregation.

Kyankwanzi

The Patriotism Project

The Public Order Act

The Anti-Terrorism Act

1. Dedicated to my professor and mentor, the late Dr. Akiiki Bomera Mujaju. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)