

## *THE HISTORY OF UGANDA*

(Part Two)



### **Obote and Amin: AD 1962-1985**

By 1966 the deteriorating relationship between Obote and Mutesa comes to an abrupt end. Obote sends a force, led by his newly appointed army commander Idi Amin, to attack the kabaka's palace. Mutesa flees to exile in Britain.

Obote immediately introduces a new constitution. This abolishes the hereditary kingdoms, ends the nation's federal structure and provides for an executive president - a post taken by Obote himself in addition to his role as prime minister. With the help of army and police he terrorizes any remaining political opponents. But meanwhile an ostensible ally, more ruthless even than himself, is making good use of the widespread discontent.

In 1971, when Obote is abroad, his regime is toppled in a coup led by Idi Amin. Obote settles just over the border from Uganda in neighbouring Tanzania, where he maintains a small army of Ugandan exiles under the command of Tito Okello.

Here Obote bides his time while the unbalanced Idi Amin subjects Uganda to a regime of arbitrary terror. The country's economy is severely damaged when he suddenly expels in 1972 all Uganda's Asians, a mainstay of the nation's trading middle class. His obsessions take more local form in the persecution of

tribes other than his own. Between 100,000 and 500,000 Ugandans are reported to be murdered or tortured during Amin's seven years in power.

In 1978 Amin takes one unbalanced step too far. He invades Tanzania. Julius Nyerere, the Tanzanian president, takes the opportunity not only to repel Amin's army but also to topple his grotesque neighbour. Tanzanian troops, joining forces with Obote's private army, reach Kampala in April 1979. Amin flees (and lives on, to the century's end and beyond, as an exile in Saudi Arabia).

During the following twelve months there are two interim governments led by returning Ugandan exiles. But in May 1980 a Ugandan general, Tito Okello, organizes a coup which brings Obote back into power. He is confirmed as president in a general election six months later. Uganda lurches back from a mad dictatorship to a repressive regime held in check only by anarchy.

During the 1980s Obote uses violent means to reimpose his rule, while the country continues to suffer economic chaos and tribal massacres carried out by armed factions beyond anyone's control. In 1985 Tito Okello intervenes once more, driving Obote back into exile (eventually in Zambia).

But both Obote and Okello are already peripheral figures. The only well organized faction in these years of chaos is a guerrilla army led by Yoweri Museveni.

### **Museveni: from AD 1986**

Yoweri Museveni was briefly Uganda's minister of defence during the interim government after the fall of Amin. When Obote returns to power as president in 1980, and his party (the UPC) wins a majority in elections widely regarded as fraudulent, Museveni refuses to accept this turning back of the clock. He withdraws into the bush and forms a guerrilla group, subsequently known as the National Resistance Army (NRA).

During the 1980s the NRA steadily extends the area of southern and western Uganda under its control. And Okello, after toppling Obote in 1985, proves no match for Museveni.

By January 1986 the NRA is in control of the capital, Kampala. Museveni proclaims a government of national unity, with himself as president. It is a turning point in Uganda's history.

A decade later the country is back under the rule of law (apart from some northern regions, where rebellion rumbles on). The economy is making vast strides (an annual growth rate of 5% in the early 1990s and of more than 8% in 1996). There are improvements in education, health and transport. International approval brings a willingness to invest and to lend. The nation, emerging from two decades of appalling chaos, is suddenly almost a model for Africa.

The only flaw, to western eyes, is that this remains one-party rule. It is an essentially pragmatic state in which good ideas from any part of the political spectrum are welcome (even Uganda's kings now have a role restored to them). But the new constitution of 1995 limits executive power to the National Resistance Movement, the party emerging from Museveni's guerrilla army.

Democracy is a subject on which Museveni has strong and interesting views. He criticizes western insistence on the multiparty model, seeing it as simplistic to assume that a single pattern can be appropriate in every circumstance. In his view parties in Africa, often based on tribal allegiances, are often likely to frustrate democracy.

Museveni argues instead that the important elements are the benefits taken for granted in a functioning multiparty democracy - universal suffrage, the secret ballot, a free press and the separation of executive, legislative and judicial powers. He describes his Uganda as a 'no-party democracy', claiming that people of widely differing views can argue their case to the electorate as competing individuals (it is campaigning as a party that is banned).

This is a somewhat utopian blueprint depending, like enlightened despotism, on people of good will at the top. It may be in token of this that Museveni regularly promises a date in the future for the legitimizing of opposition parties.