

## IN DEFENCE OF IDENTITY POLITICS

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On November 8, 2021, President Museveni wrote an 18 page letter to the Central Committee of the National Resistance Movement asking them to adopt an “interests-based mobilisation” and completely abandon manipulation and obscurantism. “You need to look into the political laboratory of Uganda to understand the importance of interests-based mobilisation, produce more durable loyalty than, for instance, the opportunistic use of identity (tribe, religious sects, gender-chauvinism) for mobilisation and loyalty generation,” he wrote. In the letter Museveni asserted that at independence, Uganda was manipulated into three identity factions such the Uganda People’s Congress (UPC) for Protestants and some Moslems, the Democratic Party for Catholics and some tribes and the Kabaka Yekka for Baganda Protestants and some Moslems, the NRM rejected the idea of politics of identity.

This is not the first time President Museveni has addressed himself on the issue of identity politics. It all began when President Museveni stumbled into power in 1986 and found himself confronting a situation in which he had to contend with two political parties which had existed since the terminal period of colonialism, namely the Uganda Peoples Congress (UPC) and the Democratic party (DP). The two parties, unlike Museveni's contrived political "party", the National Resistance Movement, had social bases as well as relatively well tested organization apparatuses. There was no way Museveni could have competed with these two juggernauts. This is how Professor Kasfir, who was initially sympathetic to Museveni and his NRM, evaluated the initial political strength of Museveni and his NRM:

"No previous Ugandan political organisation was less well-known, and only the Okellos, and perhaps Amin, had been socially less representative than the NRM was at the moment it took power. The NRM desperately needed a formula that would provide it with national acceptance: 'Movement' democracy provided part of the answer to this dilemma. In large part this fact was the consequence of how the NRM came to power! Even seven months before it did, when Obote was still President, no one in the NRM could have imagined they would run the government so soon. The history of the NRM demonstrates how slender its social base had been—the product of one man, Museveni, a young not yet influential leader though an ingenious organiser. Neither the Front for National Salvation (FRONASA), the military faction he had created in exile in Tanzania, which fought in the liberation war against Amin, nor the hastily formed party, the Uganda Patriotic Movement (UPM), he led in the 1980 elections had attracted 'a significant representative social base.

The Popular Resistance Army (PRA), which Museveni organised to begin guerrilla warfare against the second UPC government, was minuscule and ethnically concentrated, consisting mostly of those of his trusted Banyankore friends from his school days who had also participated in FRONASA.

Since its theatre of operations was in Buganda, it mainly recruited Baganda. In its first year, the NRA was an army comprised of a large number of Baganda officers, but to this day the Banyankore who have been there since the beginning predominate among the top leadership." (Kasfir, N. 2000:63).

There is a point which Professor Kasfir misses in the above passage. Social bases are not simply attracted--they are historically constituted. In the case of Uganda there were three social bases which by the time the NRA came into the scene had already been politically organised by UPC, DP and Kabaka Yekka, which later became the Conservative Party (CP). That being the case, there was no social base for the NRA/NRM to organise. It is this congenital problem that beset the NRM from its beginning. To deal with this problem, upon getting to power, Museveni virtually banned political parties. This was done through Legal Notice Number 1/1986. He thereafter prosecuted a strategy to contain them and possibly obliterate them. Part of that strategy consisted of attempting to delegitimise them. (Byanyima, W. )The way he was to delegitimise them was to launch a campaign to characterise them as sectarian. This is how he characterised the political parties in his book, "As soon as political parties were introduced, they became sectarian, based on ethnicity and religion. Thus, in Uganda, the Democratic Party was for Catholics, the UPC for Protestants, and Kabaka Yekka, the party for Buganda Protestants." (Museveni, Y. 1997: 200)

Let us first correct President Museveni's misrepresentation of the composition of the political parties. To do this I need to first point out that President Museveni tends to treat Uganda's history as beginning at independence. This is why he can easily come up with the erroneous position that the Democratic Party is for Catholics or it is a confessional political party. On this subject, it was Professor Michael Twaddle who asked a very relevant rhetorical question. "Is the Democratic party a purely confessional party?" (Twaddle ) To understand the social/political content of the Democratic Party we need to travel back in history to the late 19th Century. In the last quarter of the 19th Century, Buganda was characterised by what has come to be called religious wars. During the course of those wars, Catholics and Protestants, apart from being religions, also assumed forms of social identities. It is as social identities that they fought the last battle of 1892. That battle ended in the defeat of the Catholics. And from that defeat on, the Catholics as an identity ended up being treated as second class citizens in Buganda. It is this treatment that led to the formation of the DP to redress Catholics of this treatment.

President Museveni is terribly wrong when it comes to the political content of Kabaka Yekka. KY was not for Baganda Protestants and a few Moslems as President Museveni asserts. It was a movement for all Baganda. What probably confuses President Museveni is the fact that the founders of Kabaka Yekka were all non-Catholics. Notwithstanding this, the object of Kabaka Yekka was to unite all Baganda, more than half of whom were Catholics. It was to get the Baganda to struggle to defend the special position of Buganda in Uganda affairs. The thing which bound them was a strong belief that Buganda was a separate entity, distinctive above all because of its throne and institutions, the cornerstone of the Ganda identity. Professor Low, then teaching at Makerere University captured this feeling very well: "...the Baganda continued to regard themselves as a separate people and to view Buganda as an autonomous political unit. Buganda, not Uganda, was their nation. They belonged to Uganda as part of British overrule. It touched neither their affections nor their sentiments. There was little sympathetic interest in being incorporated into a larger African nation and there was great sensitivity to any slight to tribal pride." (Low, D.A. & Pratt, R.C. 1960: 253) Ever since the return of the Kabaka from exile in 1955, these sentiments had become even more focused on the Kabaka as the symbol and guardian of the Ganda interest. For the founders of Kabaka Yekka, if the Kabaka was superseded in the kingdom, then Buganda would cease to exist. Sam Kalule, from Wandegeya, who had been involved in the Uganda National Movement, summarized this very well

in the second Kabaka Yekka letter he wrote in August 1961: ".....without him (meaning the Kabaka) there is no Muganda."

Having delineated the political parties at independence, we now need to show how President Museveni's assertion that at independence "Uganda was manipulated into three identity factions" is terribly wrong and demonstrates a serious lack of knowledge of our history. The engagement in identity politics was not by choice. And it was not manipulation either. It was the only politics available. To understand this, we need to embrace the analytical tools of the theory of modes of production as well "base and superstructure". A mode of production is "...defined as the way a society is organized to produce goods and services. It consists of two major aspects: the forces of production and the relations of production. The forces of production include all of the elements that are brought together in production—from land, raw material, and fuel to human skill and labor to machinery, tools, and factories. The relations of production include relationships among people and people's relationships to the forces of production through which decisions are made about what to do with the results." (Ashley Crossman) Each mode of production is constituted of a base and superstructure. A base is and the superstructure is It is the economic base that conditions the superstructure. And politics is an aspect of the superstructure. In our present circumstances, the level of development of the economic base has not yet reached the level of giving rise to politics based on social classes. It is for this reason that our politics is still based, at best, on social identities. This is not something we have chosen; it is a result of the material conditions then obtaining.

Contrary to this, President Museveni recently blared out in a statement against identity politics and in favour of what he called NRM politics of needs which was produced by New Vision and circulated on social media. That statement went as follows: "NRM is based on the common needs of the people. The NRM differed with other groups such as UPC, DP and Kabaka-Yekka because they were based on identity of religion and tribe but not common needs of the people." This statement is the clearest self-acknowledgement on the part of President Museveni and the NRM that they have no social base whatsoever. Apart from it being totally meaningless to talk of politics being based on social needs of the people, we have made it clear that politics is either based on class interests or social identities.

President Museveni also took a swipe at the UPC-Kabaka Yekka alliance. "Delving into history, the President explained that, unlike Ben Kiwanuka who had told off Mengo in 1961, Dr Milton Obote lacked straightforwardness on the issue of Mengo chauvinism, which led to the political fissures in the UPC-KY alliance." This is yet another area where President Museveni is displaying his ignorance of our history. This was a very delicate situation which required a lot of tact, and not simply telling off. Mengo demonstrated that it had the political power to mobilize the population. The first time this power got demonstrated was during the boycott organised by the Uganda National Movement. The Baganda elites of disparate political persuasion desperately closed ranks behind an all-Baganda protest movement, the Uganda National Movement (UNM). (Ghai, D.P. 1970: 755-770; Kiwanuka, M.S.M. 1976 :) Ostensibly to protest the British insistence upon minority safeguards, the UNM was essentially to forge unity among the Baganda who were then scattered in numerous small and insignificant parties, so that they could preserve their identity and protect what they viewed as their vital interests. The UNM leadership ingeniously chose the dominance by non-Africans of trade and

business as the issue to rally around. Because of the widespread dislike of Asian traders throughout Uganda, a trade boycott was bound to enlist popular support; indeed, the boycott they called for was an immediate and total success in Buganda. However, largely because of the deep mistrust of the Baganda by other nationalities, and also the opposition to the boycott from the influential non-Ganda leaders of the rest of the country in the Legico, the UNM failed to gain ground in areas outside Buganda. In any case the essence of UNM was resistance to the Wild Committee which, as has already been indicated, was warmly received by the rest of the country. The UNM also lost a lot of support by hurling insults and attacks at the Legico, a body which the rest of the country recognized and was represented in. Finally, because some of the principal concerns of UNM were with the prestige and status of the Kabaka, the rest of the country was totally aloof, if not hostile in some cases. As though to deliberately rub in the alienation of the Baganda from the rest of the country, the UNM organized large meetings in Kampala. These meetings always culminated in the singing of the Buganda national anthem as the crowd faced towards the Kabaka's palace at Mengo. As a Ganda movement intended to rally all the Baganda, UNM was undoubtedly a tremendous success. It declared war on all political parties, and nearly all the Ganda political leaders were drawn into it, with Mulira and Musazi playing the most prominent roles. This demonstration of this political power was also to come out very clearly when they called for a boycott of the elections. The population boycotted the election. Secondly, when they eventually went for the elections, they voted solidly against the DP. Such political strength could not be confronted head on like Ben Kiwanuka did. What would have happened if the Ben Kiwanuka method prevailed and the Baganda had taken to war?

As part of the preparation for independence, a constitutional conference was held in London to write the constitution for the newly independent country called Uganda. The first conference was held in As there was some unfinished business, another conference was scheduled for Buganda declined to attend the second conference unless the issues she was raising were first settled. To settle this impasse, Obote went into negotiations with Mengo to persuade Buganda to attend the conference. Subsequently, on September 5, 1961, Obote, as UPC leader, issued a statement in which he outlined a strategy for persuading Buganda to participate in the forthcoming constitutional conference to prepare for independence. He invited the Lukiiko to join hands with the UPC and form a "partnership" during the conference. He pointed out that it was the Lukiiko, and not the Buganda DP members of Parliament, that was supported by the overwhelming majority of the people in Buganda. He argued that since, as evidenced by the results of the elections, UPC represented the majority of those outside Buganda, then "in the event of the opposition party (UPC) coming to an understanding with the Lukiiko, the British Government must accept that understanding with the Lukiiko, as one between Buganda and the rest of the country." Four days later, a UPC delegation led by Obote met a Buganda delegation led by the Katikiro, Michael Kintu. Later in the day a reliable source was quoted by the 'Uganda Argus' as saying: "that full and complete agreement had been reached on points which were either left open when the Constitutional Committee saw the Governor, or on which there was disagreement.

Following this accord, Buganda took steps to attend the conference that began on September 18. As expected, the UPC supported Buganda's desires on the manner of selecting her 21 representatives to the National Assembly. The two parties also advanced their common position on the timetable for the next elections. Against strong opposition from the DP, these two demands were endorsed by the conference, and a de facto alliance between UPC and the neo-traditionalists was sealed.

The Constitutional Conference also arrived at a unanimous consensus that however important the elections of March 1961 had been, in view of the boycott, they could not constitute the basis for governance. To remedy this, the DP had proposed that fresh elections should be held after independence. Both the UPC and the Buganda delegations pressed for fresh elections immediately and before independence. The Conference eventually resolved that elections would be held in April 1962. It was also ruled that the elections of the Lukiiko of Buganda should be early enough for it to take decisions on the form of elections in Buganda at least 14 days before the nomination day for national elections. This deadline was necessary in case the Lukiiko opted for direct elections, and so voters in Buganda would have had to be registered at the same time as those of the rest of the country.

Elections for the Lukiko were held on February 22, 1962 and KY won 69 out of 72 seats and proceeded to elect the 21 representatives from Buganda to the National Assembly. In April, after national elections in which UPC won 37 as against DPs 22 seats, the alliance between UPC and KY formed the government led by Obote as Prime Minister. Later on, as it had been agreed, Kabaka Mutesa was elected ceremonial President of Uganda.

President Museveni is further wrong to allege that it was Obote's lack of "straightforwardness on the issue of Mengo chauvinism, which led to the political fissures in the UPC-KY alliance." The breakup of the alliance came about when serious steps were taken to resolve the lost counties issue. It had been agreed at the Constitutional Conference in London that a referendum would be held in the lost counties to determine where the citizens desired to be governed, whether in Buganda or Bunyoro. The Baganda believed the counties belonged to them and so could not be the subject of a referendum. It is when Obote began organising for this referendum that the alliance collapsed. Buganda and the Baganda could not countenance in a process to dismember what they believed was their kingdom.

We also wish to cite a number of authorities who have spoken in defence of identity politics. Although not citing these authorities in any particular order, we shall start with Professor Cohen. "The need for identity does not, standardly drive people to seek to achieve an identity, and that is so for two reasons. The first is that people do not usually lack identity: they receive an identity as a by-product of the rearing process. The right thing to say in most cases is not that people are motivated by their need for identity, but they are motivated by their identity, for which they have a strong need, and the motivating power of identity reflects the need it fulfills. Quebecois do not have a need for identity which drives them to become Quebecois. Since they are raised Quebecois, their need for identity is readily satisfied. Quebecois are motivated not to acquire an identity but to protect and celebrate the identity they are given." (Cohen, G.A. 348)

The need for identities to protect themselves arises from the fact that some identities end up being dominant and others being dominated. The dominant identities have been described as those identities which possess "disproportionately positive social values, or all those material and symbolic things for which people strive. Examples of positive social values are such things as political authority and power, good and plentiful food, splendid homes, the best available health care, wealth and high social status. While dominant groups take a disproportionately large share of positive social value,

subordinate groups possess a disproportionately large share of negative social value, including such things as low power and social status....." (Sidanus, J 199: 31-32)

Another person who has expressed himself on identity politics is Professor Gitlin.

In his book, "Sowing the Mustard Seed.....", Museveni forcefully attacks identity politics: "As I have shown earlier in this book, pre-capitalist polarisation based on identity rather than rationality can be extremely dangerous to a country." (Museveni, Y. 1997: 187) This is not just wrong; it is deception. Museveni's view is contradicted by Professor Gitlin from the United States, a developed capitalist country. Professor Gitlin argued: "This logic is more than a way of thought. Identity politics is a "form of self-understanding, an orientation toward the world, and a structure of feeling which is characteristic of developed industrial societies. (For purposes of this discussion I beg the juicy question of whether it is characteristic of human societies altogether.)" ..... What Professor Gitlin is saying here is that identity politics is not just limited to pre-capitalist societies. In fact, as far as he is concerned, identity politics is an issue of developed capitalist countries; he simply wonders whether it is not also found in the pre-capitalist societies. (Gitlin, T. 154)

The last academic we shall refer to is Professor Tully of

The next issue that we need to interrogate is his assertion that

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