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**Formation and Impact of Political Parties in 1950s up to
Independence (1962): Lessons for Democracy**

By:

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Introduction:

There is no doubt that the time to independence was both exciting and confused. It was exciting because it carried hope for independence but it was confused because the road map to independence after a long time of colonial rule was haphazard. There were a lot of expectations and ideals but it was also an opportunity lost for reasons not entirely of Ugandans alone but also of the colonisers. From the conceptual level of ideas like democracy, political parties and Constitutionalism to the practice of these ideas, a lot needed to be clarified and structures and institutions need to be built and nurtured in preparation for self-rule. But it was not the case. The consequence of all this messed up Ugandans up to independence and beyond. It is a legacy we continue to grapple with. Let us revisit these concepts so as to get sense out of them.

Meaning and Context

(a) Democracy

These days, when we discuss democracy we are really referring to individualism (liberalism which arose at a particular conjuncture in the history of the development of the bourgeoisie in the West) rather than a struggle for equality (democracy which has appeared in human history in different forms at different conjunctures). Therefore for most of the people, democracy is associated with the organization of the state and government structures (Parliament, courts, parties, accountability, elections) rather than a summation of the experience of struggles of the majority (Issa Shivji:1991: 352) but of course they are not mutually exclusive.

In contemporary African context democracy means **something quite different from the meanings to which twentieth-century European liberal democrats have become accustomed**. One common source of confusion is the European belief that when African Nationalist leaders demand "democracy" for their territories, they are seeking to transplant to Africa Modern British, French or Belgian institutions; criticism of insincerity are then heard when it becomes evident that African political systems are evolving along other lines. It becomes equally unreasonable to suppose that if African nationalists do not use the term "democracy" in Western liberal sense (of multipartism) they must be employing it in a Soviet Communist Sense (of single partism) (*Thomas Hodgkin 1961: 156*). This leads me to another definitional problem of the term "**party**".

(b) Political Party:

By derivation, to become a Party to something always means identification with one group and differentiation from another. Every party in the essence signifies a specific programme separated from another (*Symund Neumann: 1967*). Nevertheless the very definition of '**party**' presupposes a democratic climate and hence makes it a misnomer in every dictatorship. However, divergent political systems are hidden behind the same nomenclature, so in democracies and dictatorships. Parties carry wide variations; the

American, French, Indian and Scandinavian democratic structures differed as greatly among themselves as did the authoritarian regimes of former Soviet Union, Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany and Peronist Argentina or Racist South Africa (*Ibid*)

It is "interesting" to note however that in the whole world no regime would not like to be called democratic and they themselves claim to be "democratic" But then what is democracy? It is certainly difficult to define democracy; the countries of Eastern Europe until recently, China and North Korea each saw itself as 'People's democracy'. The now defunct disintegrated Soviet Union has for decades considered itself as a "socialist democracy" and all the countries of Western Europe including Spain under Franco and Greece under the colonels call themselves "democratic states".

But then can democracy be defined only as *the right to have a vote or the existences of party systems*? For a long time after the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959 there were no elections in Cuba nor were there a parliament in West Minister Sense. But Cubans prided themselves as being a democratic state by the fact that the majority of the population were armed. Thus the possession of an AK47 rifle was more important than a ballot paper after every four or five years. (*H. Othman, I Bavu and M Okema (ed) 1990'*)

© **Constitutions and Constitutionalism**

There are two major senses in which to understand Constitutions. There is the abstract sense and the concrete sense². The abstract sense is in a form of unwritten constitution where a system of laws, customs, conventions are known to, but not written in any formal document, define powers of organs of the State, and regulate the relations of the various State organs to one another and the private citizens. In a concrete sense of the Constitution it is referred to mean the a Constitution in a written form where the most important constitutional laws are specifically enacted in a formal document called a Constitution.

Constitutions are about limiting power to forestall arbitrariness by the-would- be powerful. It is about separation of powers and checks and balances. It must have ben Aristotle who advocated for a State governed not by good leaders but by good laws. It follows that the laws themselves in the Constitution are good in a sense that they ensure justice, equality and equity and made by the people and for the people they are support to regulate. It is about respecting the Constitution especially by those in authority. As Smith puts it "...*Constitutionalism becomes a living reality to the extent that these rules curb the arbitrariness of discretion and are in fact observed by the wielders of political power, and to the extent that within the forbidden zones upon which authority may not trespass there is significant room for the enjoyment of individual liberty*"³. This senario did not obtain in the colonial period.

¹ See Introduction.

² O. Hood Phillips and Paul Jackson " Constitutional and Administrative Law, Sweet and Maxwell,1987 p.5

³ S.A de Smith, *Constitutionalism in the Common Wealth To-day*, Malaya Law Review, 4,2:205-17 p:205

In the period of 1950s-1960s in Uganda, it is important to realise that from the establishment of the British Protectorate in 1893 until the Constitutional Conference in 1961, the Constitution of Uganda was never put in any single comprehensive document however undemocratic it was. Instead it was embodied in Orders-in-Council, royal instructions and local ordinances⁴

The central government of Uganda was formally constituted in 1920 by Order-in-Council which established the legislative council designed to legislate locally for the whole protectorate. Its powers were to “ *establish such ordinances, and to constitute such courts and officers and to make such courts and officers and to make such provisions and regulations for the proceedings in such courts and for the administration of justice as may be necessary for peace, order and good governance*” (Ibingira:p146).

In short what this implies is to reinforce the argument that the colonial state was essentially despotic. Constitutionalism was never part of the colonial order. The legal order that existed under colonialism was contrary to the notion of Constitutionalism. Power was concentrated in the executive, usually in person of the Governor, while justice was dispensed by the administrator; often a district commissioner. The legislature, if it existed, was packed by the governors appointees. While human rights with political implications were conspicuously absent (Shivji,1991 P:28). Forced labour and unlimited power of arrest by administrators informed the nature and structure of quasi-military colonial state.

Origin of Political Parties

M. Duverger (1995) in tracing the origin of parties observes that in France from 1815-1830 or in England before 1832 no committees were needed to bring together the Electors. “They were both sufficiently involved socially and sufficiently few in numbers to be able to make a direct choice between candidates without these being presented by a Party.⁸ The election took place among gentlemen, amongst people of the same world who were acquainted with one another or almost and there were no parties. (Duvenger 1959:212)

“In fact it is hardly a century since parties, in the true sense of the word, came into being. In 1850 no country of the world (except the United States) knew political parties in the modern sense of the word. There were trends of opinion, popular clubs, philosophical societies and parliamentary groups but no real parties”

Can then one say that there was no democracy before the party period? Obviously not.

In Africa too, during the pre-party period, there were African Associations based on traditional aspects of African social life. The African associations that have led into parties are modern, simply in the sense that they have specialized functions, and their

⁴ See Ibigira Grace. *The Forging of an African Nation: The Political and Constitutional Evolution of Uganda from Colonial Rule to Independence*, The Viking Press 1973

leaders however traditionalist they may be in outlook are drawn for the most part from the new elites. This group has assisted in the formation of radical mass parties, nationalist movements students organizations tribal unions and so on.¹²

All this goes to tell that the party is a recent phenomenon and democracy is a historical phenomenon and has existed in different forms at different times and therefore unfair to suggest that one model of politics (under parties) should work in all places at all periods even when conditions are different. We are going there, let see what comes out. If it is all about premised on **EE Schattscheider's** (in Eckstein H and Apter (ed) p.335) definition of a political party as "*an organized attempt to get power to control the government*", then I am afraid, I am yet to be convinced by any success story in Africa that has translated power to the benefit of its citizens, instead more misery continue to come of this power.

In fact it is at a point of capturing political power that political groups become parties and trouble ensues especially in Africa. The struggle ceases to be for democracy but for power. After independence the African ruling elites had two open options of political management; either under single party or multiparty and yet they had wanted to lead their fellow Africans to "self-rule", but now it transforms itself into the rule of a party not of the people. Nowhere was it thought of managing politics without parties in the modern sense. One wonders why movements that arose in definite social political contexts were forgotten like **Maji-Maji** and **Mau-Mau** in Tanzania and Kenya respectively. Instead emphasis on ideology tended to preclude any serious investigation of the demand (content) of these movements; did they really demand rights or privileges? They certainly demanded rights.

However, it is not the duty of this paper to discuss this question but rather to argue that where a social movement has taken place, peasants (who constitute the majority in the African States) have indeed participated actively and argue that the eventual neglect of these peasants and the working people by the ruling elites through the guise of political parties might derail the whole democratic process as **Colin Leys** comments on Kenya:

"In Kenya ... at least the character of politics, will for some considerable time be determined by the fact that the peasantry as a class has not yet reached the limits of its development and that symbiosis between it and the urban based classes is not yet fully developed either". (Coline Leys: ?)

It can be said that while parties in Europe evolved out of both objective and subjective conditions in the context of inherent contradictions between capital and labour, in Africa, it evolved out of only subjective conditions without any fundamental cohesive base. Hence the party in Africa has not only been parachuted on to the African civil society but has also proved dysfunctional to the state itself and in some cases has kept the state insecure and temporary. In the case of Uganda the experience that we have had under multipartism as been as bad as those under dictatorship because the two have reinforced each other and have led to each other's self-destruction. That is, dictatorship under colonialism led to multipartism (independence), which generated dictatorship (under Idi Amin). A semblance of stability and peace only emerged under a system that seemed to

neither of the two but a hybrid of the two (*the movement system*). Very soon the movement too will be apolitical party but very soon that too will be a political party. We are yet to be satisfied that the new arrangement will take spearhead Constitutionalism..

Political Parties in Uganda from 1950s to 1962 and their Pitfalls:

Political parties in Uganda, like in any African Country developed after World War II, when people in Asia and Africa became more determined to become independent and organized themselves to achieve independence. The first political party was formed in 1952 – UNC (Uganda National Congress). This party by independence would have developed into a national political movement dominating the politics of Uganda like in other former colonial countries, say Tanganyika's TANU, but had fundamental weaknesses like lack of strong, united and inspiring leadership with a clear vision for stable and prosperous Uganda (Ibingira, 1971)

At independence U.N.C. had broken up and three major parties had developed in its places DP, UPC and KY. These parties were influenced in their formation and activities by colonial political divisions in the country which were influenced by religion and tribe. Their activities were mainly concerned with capturing high sounding titles of leadership rather than organizing the masses for independence. This was not a problem only in 1960s but still remained a problem in 1980s when multipartism was reintroduced. The political base for these parties was still religion (UPC – Protestant and DP – Catholic). This kind of politics eventuated into the Kabaka crisis of 1966 and Obote's dictatorial suspension of the 1962 constitution and declaring himself an executive president and his 1969 "Move to the left" – common-man's charter – a replica of Tanzania's Arusha Declaration of 1967 which violated right to property. It should be noted here that Uganda by this time was a *de facto* one party state though the Constitution read multipart party state. The contradictions that ensued from these religion-tribal-based party politics created conditions for a man like Idi Amin to emerge and overthrow Obote in 1971.

Amin inherited the same fundamental problems that Obote had confronted. To create popular support Amin, the Northerner, had to appease the Southerners and more especially the Baganda who are at the core. He arranged that Mutesa's body be returned and be buried near his forbearers.

Though Amin had got support of the DP (Democratic Party) Catholics, who had seen Obote as a communist, he didn't side with any of the parties instead banned them. While such an act would be categorized as one of a dictator, there is no doubt that religious-based political parties had torn the people of Uganda apart.¹⁸ He therefore, to harmonize the relationship between religious factions, created a department under his office (President's Office) for 'religious affairs' as a commitment to religious unity. This could have been a step in the right direction but as Mazrui puts it correctly;

"...apart from his commitment to religious unity...the soldier did not have a broad ideological sense of direction for his country".(Mazrui (p.160)

A few facts about the Parties

(1) The Uganda National Congress (UNC)

- It was formed in 1952
- It borrowed the element of the "congress" from the Indian National Congress which was its inspiration which had led India to independence.
- The first president of the Party was Ignatius Musazi
- It drew its majority support from Buganda and only the militants from other regions joined it (Ibingira op.cit p.76)
- It advocated for "self governance now" as its slogan

Weaknesses

- Was unable to attract, even when supported in Buganda, as Low put it "the more forward looking better or best educated in Buganda"
- Unlike most nationalist parties it did not have a manifesto and instead had an opportunistic strategy of exploiting local issues on a district to district basis

Consequences of weaknesses

- By 1956 discontent led to a rift led by J.W Kiwanuka as chairman of UNC executive to form a different party
- In 1957 another group of intellectuals broke away and formed the United Congress Party (UCP)
- In 1959 more rifts within the UNC led by A.M Obote as President and Abu Mayanja as Secretary General
- During the Constitutional changes the UNC had become so unpopular that out of the 81 elected members in the National Assembly UNC had only **one** representative

Contribution of UNC

- Initiated party politics in Uganda
- Campaigned heavily for the return of Kabaka (Mutesa II) of Buganda who had been exiled
- The party members such as A. M Obote, B.K Kirya, J.W Kiwanuka and A.K Mayanja whose party later led Uganda to independence drew their inspiration from Musasi's UNC

(2) The Democratic Party (DP)

- Formed in 1954
- Led by Matayo Mugwanya was first President General of DP
- It is said that at its inception it was exclusively Roman Catholic in its inspiration and membership
- Initially against protestant hegemony in politics

- They had a genuine grievance against discrimination. The Catholics were discriminated against in appointments for public office. In Buganda itself it was said, may be until recently, that **there had never been a Roman Catholic Katikkiro**. Although Catholics outnumbered protestants, it was a believe and almost a tradition that there would be 8 catholic saza chiefs and 10 protestants. At the return of the Kabaka in 1955 there was only one catholic, one Muslim but four protestants
- Outside Buganda, the general belief was that the Catholics can not rule
- The DP and the Catholics, for that matter were "fighting Communism"⁵ in the UNC
- Had manifesto by 1961-in preparation for elections

Weaknesses

Over reliance on religion

Lack of commitment on controversial issues (eg form of government, who would be head of State and the lost counties problem.

Contribution

Made concrete proposals for constitutionalism and independence.

(3) **Progressive party**

- It was formed in 1955
- It drew its membership from schoolmasters, well- to- do farmers, and Baganda businessmen
- It was, in membership, exclusively Baganda and moreso in leadership.
- E.M.K Mulira was its foirst president
- It was to rival UNC and DP

Weakneses

- It is said that although they had a manifesto unlike UNC, "its leadership was not imaginative"
- Like other parties, it towards independence experienced a phase of leadership struggles which completely ran it down. By 1961 Mr Mulira was already replace by Dr Babumba.
- Much as it was able to sent its constitutional propoasals to the Constitutional Commission towards independence, it was unable to sent a represenative to the Legislative council nor to London Constitutional Conferences.

(4) **The Uganda Peoples` Union (UPU)**

- Formed between late 1958 and ealy 1959
- Leadership and membership came from different social groups and regions unlike oter parties which were largely Baganda led and Baganda based.
- W.W Rwetsiba-its first president (from Ankole); G. Magyezi-

⁵ Even without bothering to know what Communism was all about (see Ibingira Op Cit. P. 82)

- Within the two months of its formation and after the first direct elections UNC had the majority seats in the legislative council. The breakdown was UPU –7 members; UNC-3 members; DP-1 member; and independent- 1 member
- Although its founders deny the claim, it is said religion played some factor in its formation
- While the DP was formed by catholics to fight injustice, the UPU was formed to contain Baganda's political hegemony and bridge the gap where the Baganda was rly failing to facilitate the struggle for independence.
- It drew wide support but more of it came from Western Region and Busoga where their leaders came from. The personalities of the individual leaders mattered as much as their ideas.

(5) Uganda Peoples Congress (UPC)

- Formed on 9th March 1960.
- UPC was a product of a merger between Mr Rwetsiba's UPU and Dr Obote's wing of UNC.
- The two agreed to merge and consolidate party politics in Uganda and present a common programme to the people for complete independence.
- The aims and objectives declared were:
 - (a) to struggle "relentlessly by all constitutional means"⁶ for the immediate attainment of complete independence
 - (b) to uphold the dignity and prestige of hereditary rulers and other heads of African governments; and
 - (c) to promote, secure, and maintain the complete unity of the people's of Uganda under a strong government conducive to stability and rapid progress.
- UPC further pledged strong central government which was necessary at the time to hold the different groups in Uganda together in unity.

Other Parties.

There were other parties but which did not have a significant impact. Some were made of one family, one person etc⁷, a characteristic that is still with us today. Nevertheless, politically speaking, these too shape the political system and they are an inevitable though not a necessary ingredient in the democratic process.

⁶ This was a term commonly used by all parties because any measure and method beyond what was perceived as constitutional, though they were prepared for it, would lead to automatic disqualification by the imperial powers. For example one of the Parties, Uganda National Movement (UNM) which organised boycott of Asian Businessmen.

⁷ For example it is said that Godwin Kawombe's Uganda African Union with himself as a sole member, secretary and President!. There was also Apollo Kironde's United National Party of 1960s which has drew its membership from Buganda and never took off.

A year to independence (1961- 1962)

This was a year of achieving what all parties are for “capturing political power”. This has at least for that time “through constitutional means”. The route was through elections. Elections had to be won. To win you have to have majority votes. This required compromise, alliances and some other craftiness. At this time Buganda and particularly the Mengo establishment miscalculated by boycotting the 1961 elections to the legislative council. They even intimidated those who participated in it. This notwithstanding, it gave the Democratic Party a majority vote and they formed government led by Benedicto Kiwanuka as a chief Minister. It is important to note that these were elections conducted under the laws that Ugandans never participated in.

The Kabaka Yekka (KY)

This was a movement by the Baganda leadership formed overnight for purposes of defeating the DP. KY was announced shortly after the Constitutional conference as a vehicle by which they were going to contest the Lukiiko elections. This was a strange organisation. It was never intended to be permanent. It never had a manifesto. Because it hinged on “Kabaka alone” (Kabaka Yekka), according to this organisation, whoever was not part of the Kabaka was deemed to be living a “treasonable existence”. They pushed all sorts of disinformation such as that Kiwanuka was anti monarchism and threatening to overthrow the Monarch and establish a republic. Between religion and Tribe, the Mengo establishment opted for one of the evils namely to shade the tribal line and minimise the gains of the catholic tribesmen representing a political opponent DP to a protestant UPC though from without Buganda. Consequently they (KY) in 1962 sent in twenty-one elected members sent in by Lukiiko added to the thirty-seven directly elected members of the UPC, which brought UPC to power, and Milton Obote as a leader to form a government that led Uganda to independence.

Lessons for Democracy

There is a lot to learn from a decade of political parties since independence (1952-1962). For example it can be said that:

- (i) **It taught that democracy is a struggle:** The struggle for democracy is not an easy one. It matters about the perception, process and product. The perception is important because if it is conceived in parochial terms of religion, tribe, ethnicity it can never be sustainable. The process of democratisation itself needs to be inclusive of everybody and compromise based on all interests and demands of all citizens-it cannot be based on issues and demands of of a particular ethic/tribal group but of *all the people* in the country
- (ii) **It taught that Leadership is central to democratisation and Constitutionalism-** It matters very much who is leading at a particular time. The fact that leaders at the time were incapable of keeping their organisations together was an indication that there was a problem. If the Tanzanians under Nyerere could galvanise under one Party (TANU) and their leader keep in charge, how could UNC as a party and the leader disintegrate so fast? It is also

important leaders are tested on the basis not of their oratory power but of their background and credibility.

- (iii) **It taught that Constitutionalism could not be imposed from above:** There was of course no constitution to talk of. What existed was to serve the colonial interest and the citizens neither understood nor abided with clear conscience.
- (iv) **It taught that compromise in politics needs to be principled:** The marriage between KY and UPC was a marriage of convenience, which created problems in 1966. It is not enough to just form coalitions for purposes of winning power. The interest and ideologies of each party should be scrutinised to sort out major contradictions before any merger.
- (v) **It taught that democracy is beyond having several political parties:** It is about respect of human rights, addressing aspects of poverty. It did not stop Uganda to plunge into chaos even when we have a multitude of political parties at independence. Democracy is about respecting the Constitution which they have participated in making.. It is about Constitutionalism. It is about respect human rights-not just how many parties the country has. It about allowing pressure groups, interest groups and other civil society organisations. These groups shaped parties in 1930s but they disappeared in 1950s and 60s instead of growing stronger.
- (vi) **That tribal or ethnic unilateralism without national consensus on strategic issues is not politically useful.** Consensus building rather than coercion is a better bargaining tool in politics.
- (vii) **That you can have constitution without constitutionalism:** Any constitution is about limiting powers of government *vis a vis* the rights of Citizens. It did not stop the colonial government from continued misuse of its power to stifle the rights of Ugandans. Nor did it stop President Obote from abrogating the Constitution to overthrow the monarchism, which he initially pledged to support. **There has to be first and foremost a political will for the political society (the State) to respect the Constitution and the structures therein and the civil society would follow.**
- (viii) **What is said should be practiced-**Don't talk nationalism and practice tribalism. This was the problem with most pre-independence parties.
- (ix) That boycotting elections is not the wise decision for political parties. The 1961 Mengo decision to boycott elections only worked to its political loss not victory. This continues to be the case even today for the election boycotters.
- (x) **That the only available option left in politics is campaigning and practicing on a human rights ticket.** All the tricks of politicking using

political parties, movement⁸, one party, dictatorship etc are all exhausted. People would benefit more from a human rights based democracy.

⁸ Even KY used to deny it was a party as the Movement used to-which in my view was not contradictory

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