

Civic Standstill in the Pearl of Africa

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The leaders of present-day Uganda boast that it is a democratic state. However, according to the model for this form of government, qualification as a democracy is contingent upon the presence of a politically involved public. In the "Pearl of Africa," ordinary Ugandans are disengaged and even the political spirit of the country's intellectuals is lackluster at best. Explanation for this absence of public participation in the affairs of the state lies in the analysis of the enduring effects of colonialism and repeated flawed leadership at the local, regional and national levels. Additionally, analysis of the power dynamic within this diverse country sheds light on the causes of this civic standstill. Drawing from personal experience in Uganda, the conclusions presented in this paper are that the concept of Ugandan democracy remains illusory and the boastful leadership, both present and past, is largely to blame.

In the democratic model, an involved citizenry is one of the main tenets. The idea surrounding this involvement is known as the republican tradition, which contributed to the formation of modern Western democracies. This republican tradition holds that the people of a republic are motivated by civic virtue, and it views "public participation as a form of moral education and sees its purposes as the attainment of justice and the public good" (Bellah 1985, 335). Although America is far from perfect in fully realizing this tradition, the strong presence of grassroots political and social movements and the ever-increasing focus on voter registration and education are all indicative of civic republicanism and its significance from coast to coast. Conversely, some nations, particularly those that gained independence as recently as the twentieth century, claim to be democracies but consist of citizens that demonstrate little to no civic virtue or participation. I experienced a taste of this during my two month stay in Uganda this past summer.

My observations of life in the smaller, rural village of Lukaya, Uganda revealed an overwhelming disconnect between the public and the political realm, even among the most educated and prominent people in the town. Since its independence in 1962, Uganda has been down a tumultuous path, and I was intrigued to learn which factors in its complex and chaotic history were most influential in the making of this current state of national division and public indifference. The failure of the national government, local governments and system of traditional chiefs to define both shared and separate domains of power and achieve authentic integration into the diverse public has created a citizenry that is disillusioned with government and generally uninspired to engage in the republican tradition.

Following Independence

In 1895, Uganda was placed under British power, and after nearly seventy years of colonial rule, it achieved independence on October 9th, 1962. While a nation's independence usually holds promise of advancement and is a hopeful occasion, Uganda was left with a model constitution, resembling that of its colonizer, that "paid insufficient regard to the country's traditional institutions, multi-ethnicity, customs and values, particularly tribal and religious loyalties" (Furley and Katalikawa 1997, 243). Thus, from the dawn of independence, the national government was constructed in such a way that it discounted the facets of life most important to ordinary Ugandans. The country inherited this constitutional framework, but it seemed to adequately compensate when it filled the roles of president and vice-president with men from two different traditional kingdoms. President Edward Muteesa II, representing the largest kingdom of Buganda,

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and Vice-President William Wilberforce Nadiope, hailing from the significant Busoga kingdom, demonstrated that cohesion could exist amidst great diversity. However, these symbols soon fell to the first of many government coups in Uganda, and their demise marked the beginning of a lengthy period of rule by an illegitimate military might.

The most notorious of these leaders is Idi Amin, who seized power in 1971. His eight year reign of terror continues to have troubling effects on Uganda, and scholars often cite it as one of the stages in the nation's history that most significantly contributed to the public's prolonged government distrust and disengagement. Amin, similar in mentality to other African leaders at the time, believed that the main objective of the newly independent countries of Africa ought to be to develop at a remarkably swift pace. According to Amin, such development would allow these fledgling countries to eventually stand alongside the wealthy, established world powers. As George B.N. Ayittey writes in *Africa Unchained: The Blueprint for Africa's Future*, Amin and his contemporaries' "need to 'catch up' was understandable, but the impatience led to haste, which made waste" (Ayittey 2005, 58). These leaders encountered three primary options for development, which were a free-market capitalist route that would rely on the private sector to spark growth, a somewhat modernized take on the indigenous African way of operating or a path in which the state assumes hegemony and controls and guides the economy. Nearly all of those at the head of state detested anything that mirrored Western capitalism and simultaneously deemed that "Africa's own indigenous institutions were 'too backward,' 'too primitive' for the rapid development and transformation of Africa" (Ayittey, 58). This latter mindset illustrates that shame, a complex of inferiority and embarrassment of what it traditionally meant to be African shaped the manner in which many of the continent's nations were formed.

Consequently, those Africans in charge opted for the third path of government direction of the economy, but unlike several of these leaders, Amin pursued this road to development with the extreme ideology of military nationalism. Only three other leaders on the continent adopted this radical approach, and in doing so, they shattered any illusion of a presidency and assumed the role of dictator. These despots "address key issues haphazardly," and they have "provided the cover for the exercise of brute force" as a means to legitimize their mismanagement of government (Ayittey, 60). Needless to say, Amin's preferred ideology rid Uganda of any shred of civic republicanism that had been generated among the public by the victory of independence. Uganda's subsequent dictators, chronologically being Obote and Okello, also seized power and enacted rule via military nationalism.

False Promises

Yoweri Museveni, Uganda's current president, may have secured power by way of coup d'état, but he was nevertheless viewed by the majority of the citizenry as the first source of hope for the country since independence. Museveni advocated the need for fundamental change, and he promised to achieve this through his Ten-Point Programme, which entailed no less than the creation of a truly popular democracy and national unity (Flanary and Watt 1999, 517). While the initial years following his presidential inauguration in 1986 suggested that that he was striving toward the fulfillment of these goals, the prospects for a genuinely democratic nation and consequent emergence of the republican tradition soon grew dim. The first of Museveni's missteps was his introduction of the 'no-party' system, which "still involved using the institutions of parliamentary democracy, but did not allow the formation of opposing parties" (Flannery, 517). Arguing that a nation free from political factions would limit the likelihood of divisions based on opposing ethnic, religious and regional interests, Museveni reasoned that such a system could work as long as there was "participation of people at all levels of governance" (Flannery, 517). However, Uganda was rife with these varying interests, and by essentially crushing any opportunity for them to be properly vocalized, the president lost the loyalty of his public. This disheartening move must have been painfully reminiscent of those taken by Okello and his predecessors. The extent to which his 'no-party' system failed to make the government accountable to the people and bring them into

the political sphere is evidenced by the fact that “twenty years from when he took power, the most powerful people in the country are those who were closest to him when they fought their way to power” (Dowden 2008, 74).

Another of Museveni’s flawed actions involves his approach to constitutional reconstruction. While he did establish the Constitutional Commission in 1988, this was more of symbolic endeavor than one aimed at actually gathering what Ugandans needed and wanted out of a new constitution. This is made clear by taking into account that the commission was grossly under resourced and comprised of men associated with the National Resistance Army, the party of Museveni. Entrusted to draft a constitution based on the information and recommendations they collected from the citizenry, the members of the commission were found to have actually falsified the draft by replacing real suggestions with their own invented ones. Therefore, Ugandans identified a correlation between this process of constitutional review and the ‘no-party’ system: Many felt that the continued unilateral suspension of political party activities by the NRM Government, at a time of constitution-making, was a clear manifestation of the determination of the NRM government to keep the other political parties out of the constitution-making process, thus ensuring the imposition of its own constitution upon the people of Uganda (Furley and Katalikawa, 248).

The people of Uganda have been repressed for over a century, but this blow has proven especially cataclysmic. This blatant disregard of their interests from a figure that had been associated with such promise seems to have left any display of civic republicanism at a standstill. Museveni has been allowed to retain power for over twenty years. Though he and his government impose that same seemingly unassailable nature evident in Uganda’s previous despots, their rule has been challenged, albeit by ill-intentioned people. Mostly though, it is as if Ugandans feel that even political participation by means of uprising would fail to be effective. In the village where I worked and taught, the teachers were among the most educated and influential people; even Francis, a social studies teacher, acknowledged the corruption of Museveni’s government at the polls and elsewhere yet expressed that he had no interest in the political dynamic of the country.

The Unbalance of Local Government and Traditional Chieftdom

The national government, though a carrier of much of the responsibility, is nevertheless one factor in a complex web of entities that has led to the Ugandan public’s present-day disillusionment with the government. Local political bodies and those headed by tribal chiefs have also fallen short of effectively adhering to the tenets of federalism, particularly checks and balances. Moreover, these bodies have failed to get in sync with the multifaceted citizenry and its needs. Unlike the nations of Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and a few other sub-Saharan nations, Uganda holds local elections with a degree of regularity. Given that the federal authority can seem out of reach for many ordinary citizens, sub-national governments are essential for localizing the political process and thereby emphasizing the impact that the public can have on it.

The attraction of participating in government at the local level stems from the fact that these bodies are supposed to be more heterogeneous than those at the national level, therefore better representing their specific constituencies. However, in Uganda, this only rings true in rare instances. For example, the members of the Lukaya Town Council, though seemingly warm people, are all male, landowning, Christian, and native of Buganda. Given that the village has a sizeable presence of women, renters, Muslims, and citizens from other kingdoms, this makeup seems far from inclusive. Whereas surrounding nations, equally as diverse as Uganda, have adopted a “best-loser system” at the local level, in which an electoral commission will attribute some amount of seats to “those representatives of underrepresented minorities that won the highest percentage of votes...without having been elected,” Uganda has not (Hartmann 2004, 234). Subsequently, people like Betty, a teacher at a Lukaya elementary school who originates from the eastern part of Uganda, and Frank, a native Rwandan who owns a village inn, are less than accounted for by

their council and accordingly have little desire to participate in this institution. Although the nation's political figures have acknowledged and celebrated Uganda's immense diversity since the time of its independence, this aspiration nonetheless remains a distant dream. As a result, the citizens, resoundingly frustrated with the rhetoric, continue to further disassociate themselves from the political realm entirely.

Due to the five kingdoms in present-day Uganda and numerous clans within each of these kingdoms, chiefs, already well integrated into their respective groups, have the potential to mediate across ethnic and governmental lines and serve as unifying forces in the country. However, just as the national government has modernized in an often times detrimental direction, so too has the institution of chiefdom. Following independence, the position of chief began to require merit and ability as opposed to mere hereditary lineage. Although this is a step that could potentially be viewed as an embrace of the wider public, additional changes that came with the modern chief did not echo this desirable theme. Largely the fault of the head of state, the current role of the chief with respect to local and national governments was never explicitly defined. Instead, the state placed arbitrary limits on chiefs' powers, and "this loss of political independence and the innovations which accompanied it were made much more palatable to the rulers and chiefs by the support which they received...by newly developed sources of wealth" (Fallers 1984, 298). Thus, while vocalizing an agenda of national unity and the establishment of a democracy representative of its citizenry as a whole, the federal government was actually stripping traditional leaders of their typical powers and pumping them with money in order to alleviate the guilt that would inevitably arise when the people began to distrust even their respective chiefs. In addition to illegitimizing the chief in the eyes of the public, this secretive exchange only further enhanced Ugandans' skepticism of the entire government structure (Bunker 1983, 758). Clearly, the ever-enduring disregard for both intergovernmental cooperation and meaningful incorporation into the diverse public and its varying needs, wants, aspirations and fears had resulted in a pseudo-democracy that suffers from a lack of adherence to the republican tradition.

An Apparently Powerless Public

Although the sequence of historical events that have contributed to Uganda's politically disengaged citizenry have been outlined, E.E. Schattschneider's theory on the nature of power and roots of said quiescence helps to more fully explain this phenomenon. While some scholars place blame on the non-participant for his political apathy, Schattschneider (1960) argues that "absenteeism reflects the suppression of the options and alternatives that reflect the needs of the nonparticipants" (105). Furthermore, in the case of Uganda and its continuously increasing gap between the wealthy, political elites and the underrepresented poor, "it is not necessarily true that people with the greatest needs participate in politics most actively—whoever decides what the game is about also decides who gets in the game" (Schattschneider, 105). In present-day, Museveni and his power-hungry aides dictate the rules, while ordinary Ugandans, ostracized altogether from the process of decision-making, suffer at the sidelines. In this situation, there can be no attainment of justice or realization of the public good that serves as the very reasoning behind public participation. Therefore, the everyday citizen begins to feel utterly incapable, and "this sense of powerlessness may manifest itself as extensive fatalism, self-deprecation, or undue apathy about one's situation" (Gaventa 1980, 17). Although similar juxtapositions of dominance and powerlessness occur in even more developed democracies, the widespread political disinterest that has evolved in Uganda is nevertheless dismaying in its inclusiveness. Perhaps, as is the case with so many theories on Africa, the impact of colonization and the haphazard carving out of "nations" still retains influence. Whatever the case, it is evident that the inability to seal the chasm that exists between Uganda's government and public has been profoundly detrimental to its ambition of democracy.

Firsthand Experience

While my two month internship in Lukaya, Uganda focused more on the task of establishing a solid educational institution amidst extreme poverty, I was fortunate enough to interact with Ugandans from opposite ends of the socioeconomic spectrum and subsequently inquire to them about their thoughts on the current political dynamic that exists between their country's government and its general population. The argument of this paper reflects and elaborates upon the notions and perceptions that were evident in the aforementioned discussions. One of the most emphatic sentiments I came across was the shock and disbelief felt by Ugandans concerning Museveni's unforeseen fall from grace. As of late, even the World Bank has expressed concordance with and sympathy for the current predicament of Ugandans. In a recent report, it conveyed pessimism toward the nation's present political situation, and even admitted that "the Government has largely failed to integrate the country's diverse peoples into a single political process that is viable over the long term" (Busharizi 2005). This failure has significantly impacted Ugandans. Undoubtedly, the nation's political climate has caught worldwide attention, and those people who have adopted a global civic virtue will observe its continued evolution with ever-increasing interest.

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