

Uganda at a Glance

British colonial officials announced the creation of Uganda in an 1884 publication of the London Gazette.¹ Colonial fiat thus incorporated a nation completely unaware of its own existence. The Protector saw fit to delineate its new colony regardless of existing economic, political, and social relationships in order to secure the headwaters of the River Nile, a *coup* in the struggle against the rest of Europe for imperial advancement. Britain's new "protectorate" received its name, its borders, and its *raison d'être* without its knowledge or assent. Uganda gained its independence in 1962 with relatively little turbulence due to foreign assistance, but hardly enough to compensate for the seeds of discord which colonial interests had sown.

Uganda occupies 241,000 km² of land near the center of Africa, bordered by Sudan to the North, Kenya to the East, Tanzania and Rwanda to the South, and The Democratic Republic of Congo to the West (see map below). Uganda's most important geographical feature is the headwaters of the River Nile, which divides the land along its flow towards the Northwest across the middle of the nation. Mountainous regions along the Eastern and Western borders cradle a fertile crescent bordered on the North by the Nile. North of the Nile, Semi-arid rangelands provide little opportunity for agriculture. Since agriculture is the most important sector of the country's economy, and the North suffers from aridity, the North and South are divided by the Nile into two regions of economic disparity, accentuated by ethnic divisions along the same boundary.

The Kingdom of Buganda was and is the largest ethnic entity in Uganda. The Baganda people occupied the aforementioned fertile crescent of land, comprising about ¼ of the modern country's territory. Britain chose to deal chiefly with Buganda since it was the richest and most powerful tribe. The Protectorate was named for the tribe and all administrative activities likewise emanated from there. The Brits gained a foothold in the new land, and Buganda gained dominance over its enemies by cooperation. The limeys adopted Buganda's form of government for expediency, but also because it resembled British monarchy. Under the Buganda Agreement of 1900, the British employed members of the Buganda tribe (Baganda) as agents of its administration in a strategy called "indirect rule," whereby the power of the Bugandan King, called the Kabaka, and his parliament were preserved, while chiefs were rewarded with land for their compliance with Imperial administration. Such a high concentration of land ownership and power in one tribe among many ensured massive tribulation in the country's future. As the country moved towards independence, Buganda tightened its grip in order to hedge against unified power in a central national government.

In the lead-up to independence in 1962, the antagonism between the different elements in the prospective ruling class was more severe than that between Britain and the nation-to-be. So, the process of becoming independent was deceptively smooth. The placid surface betrayed powerful undercurrents that would rip the country apart. Underneath the appearance of a national constitution were effectively two states in one country. Buganda had significant powers by virtue of precedence and an autonomous economic base, while the rest of the country was united against it. Buganda's interests were represented by the Kabaka Yekka (KY) Party, which means "King Only." The

¹ All of the information for Uganda's political history is from Ian Leggett's Uganda (Leggett, Ian. Uganda. Oxford: Oxfam, 2001).

Uganda's People's Congress (UPC) was founded to oppose the KY party, and Britain's concessions to it. Initially, these two forces joined to oppose a third party, called the Democratic Party. The unlikely bedmates won the first democratic election, and divided the spoils of victory, the Kabaka becoming President, and UPC's leader, Milton Obote becoming Prime Minister. When the marriage of convenience ceased to be necessary, the factions swiftly turned against each other.

The twenty years following independence were fraught with terror, blood, and tumult. A 1966 clash pitted Prime Minister Obote and his infamous Deputy Army Commander, Idi Amin, against the Kabaka and his loyalists. Obote and Amin won the day by commanding the loyalty of the army, a key strategy in all future conflict. He proceeded to rewrite the constitution, thus abolishing constitutional government, parliamentary democracy, and the rule of law in the land. As if that were not enough to arouse international suspicion, he went too far when he declared his "Move to the Left," a move towards nationalization and state control of market forces. In a time when world politics was divided between capitalism and communism, western countries saw a red flag, and Obote's days were numbered. Against this man, who defied constitutional procedure, the only means of removal would be military force.

Idi Amin's 1971 *coup* introduced an era of "politics of the gun." Uganda's Bugandan capital, Kampala, welcomed Amin as a liberator because Obote had deposed Buganda's king. The West welcomed Amin as an ally versus communism. But enthusiasm faded when Amin introduced his bloody reign of terror. Obote's loyalists were hunted and destroyed. Civil servants were dismissed "in the national interest." Finally, parliament was abolished. From the international perspective, the most egregious affront was perhaps Amin's expulsion of Asians, mostly Indian, from the country.

Britain had invited Asians into the country to build railroads, a key to imperial control. The Asian population was denied the ability to own land, so it turned to trade. The Asians succeeded spectacularly, and eventually came into control of Uganda's imperial economy under Britain's sponsorship. After independence, the Asians posed a great nuisance as the richest and most economically powerful constituency to rival the native elite. Obote tried to wrestle control from the Asians through state control of the economy, and Amin finished the job by expelling the entire population and dividing their wealth among his loyalists. This expulsion of the country's collective merchant capacity eventually led to national economic impoverishment.

With a weak economy and a discontented army, Amin committed an act of desperation in waging war on neighboring Tanzania. His army was swiftly repelled and dissolved by a Tanzanian army comprised partly of Ugandan exiles. Kampala fell in April of 1979, marking the end of Amin's rule in his self-styled capacity of "Life President and Conqueror of the British Empire."

In the wake of defeat, a short-lived band of *mal-contentes* rose to power under the name of the Uganda National Liberation Front (UNLF). Comprised of twenty political and military groups, this motley crew shared only their opposition to Amin. Without their common enemy, the party dissolved within 68 days of its rise.

1980 until 1985 saw the terrible reign of Milton Obote, returned from exile and ready for vengeance. His second reign is commonly referred to as Obote II. After his election, Obote met immediate resistance by a man named Yoweri Museveni, who started

a guerrilla resistance movement under the name National Resistance Army (NRA). In retaliation, Obote expelled all Rwandans from Uganda partially because many of them were Amin sympathizers, and also because Museveni was from a tribe which was associated with Rwanda. From this violent act was born the Rwanda Patriot Front, yet another band of violent *mal-contents*. Museveni won the day, however, when his well-trained guerrilla army captured Kampala in 1986, deposing Obote once and for all, and promising “fundamental change.” Museveni has maintained power in Uganda ever since, winning the first direct presidential elections in 1996, 2001, and most recently in February of 2006.

The political drama surrounding the capitol in the South little affected the poorer populations in the North because policy was stacked against them no matter who reigned. The aforementioned aridity of the Northlands prevented its inhabitants from contributing to the economy, since agriculture provides Uganda’s only significant source of wealth. The national government favored the South in all of its policy, depriving the North of protection under the law, infrastructure, health care, education, and economic assistance. Tribal conflicts lead to grave injustices, unchecked by exercise of the law. One of the most notable instances of affront was perpetrated by the Karamajong in 1987, who plundered over 250,000 cattle from the neighboring Acholi tribe. Both reside within Uganda’s borders. This kind of unchecked internal conflict ravages the Northern population, and creates an environment of fear and instability.

One of the chief agents of violence and injustice in the North of Uganda is the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA). The LRA was founded by a man named Joseph Kony among the Acholi people in the tradition of the Holy Spirit movement. In this tradition, political leaders enjoy virtually unchecked power based on their claim of being inspired by God. Kony could thus invoke superstition and devotion in his followers to perpetrate immense evil in the North. While the LRA is officially opposed to Museveni’s National Resistance Movement, presumably because of this National government’s neglect of its Northern constituency, the LRA’s actions suggest that it is simply opposed to peace and justice.

The LRA wages its wars indirectly and covertly, avoiding outright conflict with the NRA. In the absence of popular support, the Lord’s Resistance Army kidnaps the young to fill its ranks. Child abduction in the North is so pervasive that most Northern families live in constant fear and even despair. The Justice and Peace Commission in Kitgum, a northern town, estimates that the LRA has abducted more than 20,000 children throughout its short history. According to Amnesty International, two thousand were abducted in 1995 alone. The LRA receives material support from the government of Sudan in order to support Sudan’s Army against the rebellious Sudan People’s Liberation Army. The LRA uses its ill-gotten ranks and Sudan’s support to rape, pillage, and terrorize the Northern countryside.

The accounts of its operations are horrific. Jan Egeland, the United Nations undersecretary-general for humanitarian affairs, told the BBC in 2003 “I cannot find any other part of the world that is having an emergency on the scale of Uganda that is getting so little international attention.”² In order to protect the population in the North, Museveni’s government has relocated 90% of the two million inhabitants in camps that lack food and security, where people endure disease, malnutrition, and nighttime attacks

² Uganda Conflict Action Network, www.ugandacan.org.

from the LRA.³ One old man reports "Since 1985, we have just had restless nights...In some ways, we are already dead. We yearn for peace, but we have no hope anymore."⁴

AIDS poses another horrific threat to Ugandan livelihood, comprising the most common cause of death among adults. 1.9 million people, or 10% of Uganda's population, are HIV-positive. Uganda is thus representative of Sub-Saharan Africa in general, which, by some estimates, is home to 34 million HIV-positive people, or 70% of the world's HIV-positive population.

The prevalence of AIDS in Uganda and its neighbors is commonly linked to their material poverty. Uganda's economy is handicapped by its reliance on agriculture, which employs about 80% of the national workforce. This reliance is one of many deleterious vestiges of colonialism. Britain set up an agricultural economy that relies too heavily on exports, and therefore, on market prices that are out of Uganda's control. Coffee crops, in particular, account for around 60% of Uganda's export earnings. Low coffee prices can be ruinous. This and other risks are significant in an economy with a very small base. Export earnings total a mere \$768 million⁵, about one one-thousandth of those of the United States, and a GDP of only \$7.9 million⁶ for an estimated July, 2005 population of 28,816,000⁷.

Despite the country's crippling poverty, education has recently made great strides. In 1997, free primary education was made available for four children per family, helping to boost numbers of primary school students from 2 million in 1986 to 6 million in 1999.⁸ Unfortunately, however, only 40% of these students go on to receive secondary education, and only about 25% of secondary graduates to receive post-secondary education.⁹

The National Census of 2002 revealed that Uganda's citizens are predominantly Christian, with 85.1% of Uganda's population claiming adherence, and among these, 41.9% of the population claiming to be Catholic. 31.9% of the citizenry are members of the Church of Uganda, a local Anglican denomination. According to the 2002 Census, Muslims represented 12.1% of the population. Islam grew under Idi Amin, himself a Muslim, although today Muslims experience some degree of discrimination. Only 1% of the population professes Traditional Religions, and 0.7% are classified as "Other Non-Christians."¹⁰

While the official language of Uganda is English, around forty languages are regularly and currently in use. The Second official language is Swahili, made important by Uganda's trade relationships with its neighbors Kenya and Tanzania. Luganda, the language of Buganda, is the language with the largest number of native speakers, who mostly inhabit the area in and around Kampala.

Uganda's linguistic demography is a metaphor for its history. The nation's main language has as little historical or cultural relevance as its main crop, its name, its

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ CIA World Factbook.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ www.wikipedia.com, citing "[East Africa Living Encyclopedia - Ethnic Groups](#)", *African Studies Center, University of Pennsylvania*.

⁸ www.wikipedia.com.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

borders, its government, or its international identity. All of these were thrust upon a collection of tribes by opportunistic Europeans. It is no wonder, then, that today Uganda trudges along under the burdens of crushing poverty, immense internal strife, a plethora of terrorizing military factions, and little hope for future prosperity or security. The brightest hope for change is in external powers, the same that wrought so much discord in Uganda's past. Imperial benevolence must undo the evils of imperial abuse. Whereas Britain violently imposed colonial structures to facilitate abuse, the powerful nations of today must cooperate with Uganda to create peace and well-being through structures of justice and charity.

To that end, many encouraging efforts are being mounted, one of which goes by the name of Uganda Conflict Action Network (www.ugandacan.org). Started by recent graduates of the University of Notre Dame, UgandaCAN seeks to

- Raise the profile of the war in northern Uganda among policymakers and the media, particularly highlighting the voices of Ugandan peacemakers.
- Provide the latest and most accurate news and commentary on the conflict for policymakers and activists.
- Build an effective broad-based grassroots network of concerned citizens committed to monitoring and using their power to work for peace in Uganda and the Great Lakes Region.
- Take creative and targeted action to push for more responsible U.S. and U.N. policy that helps bring an end to the war and build peace in the region.¹¹

Efforts like this are a source of great hope for Uganda's future. Conscientiousness in the citizenry of the United States and other powerful nations can lead to action on Uganda's behalf, and healing for the people of this deeply troubled nation.

¹¹ www.ugandacan.org

Map of Uganda

