

The impact of political rhetoric and dangerous speech on mobilization of violence in Uganda

Authors:

Owiny, Moses & Ntahondi, Venance Leonard

August 2019

Abstract:

Violence is not caused by hatred, ethnic differences or conflicts based on ancient traditions. Violence becomes probable when there is failure to provide essential services such as food, housing or basic necessities in which people will feel ultimately threatened. When people's survival and livelihood are threatened, it elicits pathological fear among communities. Its such arrangement of things coupled by other distortions in politics, marginalization, lack of opportunities etc. that makes it easy for political demagogues to mobilize to cause group violence. This piece of works shows the historical trajectory in Ugandan politics as one inundated by violence and yet at present, the political atmosphere in Uganda remains volatile and precarious. Political rhetoric and speeches have a tendency to be manipulated by politicians to mobilize people to cause violence. Its on that basis that two recent speeches attributed by the President and his long-time bush war commander is instructive of the arrangement of things in the Ugandan politics at the moment.

1.0 Introduction and contextual background

The political history of Uganda is inundated with among other inherent problems issues of violence that has shaped politics and nation building since independence. The Uganda state was a creation of British colonialism defined by the complexities around its regional, ethnic and political divides (Low, 1998). The subjugation of different tribal groups by the British using methods such as divide and rule polarized the country along ethnic, regional, military and political cleavages. The divide between the Northern Nilotic group and the South Bantu group shaped nation building in post-colonial Uganda (Omach, 2009). In 1962, the country got its independence and the euphoria with which the country celebrated this self-government could not be sustained for long as the spirit of independence reflected in the 1962 constitution was sooner than later lost when the Rwenzuru rebellion of the Bakonzo and Bamba tribes escalated against domination of Toro Kingdom and they fought for recognition within the new independent Uganda (Africa Research Bulletin, 1986)

Again in 1966, the Uganda Prime Minister Milton Obote who was the Executive Head of Government business according to the 1962 Constitution ordered military attacks on the palace of the Kabaka Muteesa. The Kabaka fled his palace and later died in exile. Prime Minister Obote consequently abrogated the 1962 constitution and became the Executive Head of State and President. This Political development caused a lot of tension among major political actors of the time as the future of constitutionalism in Uganda had been destroyed and the country was headed on the dark path of dictatorship. In 1971, the Obote I Government was overthrown in a military coup by his army Commander Idi Amin -Dada setting into precedent eight years of military dictatorship characterized by disappearance and killings of civilians, arrests and detention without

trial and lack of constitutional governance. The Military Junta led by President Idi Amin was eventually toppled by a combined force of Ugandan exiles in Tanzania and the Tanzania People's Defense Forces. Several warring factions and political actors of the time had divergent interests and opinions as well as political and ideological lines of thoughts on how Uganda could be governed in the post – Idi Amin (Gertzel, 1980). Many of these actor's engagement was characterized by mistrusts, maneuvering and backstabbing of each other's back in order to take control of state power (Omach, 2009).

Despite these political developments and charting a way forward for Post Amin rule, the 1980 General election was held in Uganda to ensure a democratically elected Government assumes office and takes Uganda towards the path of democratic governance amidst widespread discontent on how it was organized. There was suspicion mainly among party leaders and politicians of the time that the election had been organized in order to bring back former UPC leader and President Milton Obote to Power. Many political groups had opposed such a scheme of things and political leaders like Yoweri Museveni at the time threatened violence and use of force if election had been rigged. The results of the 1980 election was announced in very suspicious manner in which Milton Obote was declared winner. Yoweri Museveni eventually went to the bush to wage a 5-year guerilla war fare. Meanwhile, the Obote II regime was again overthrown in a military coup by his army officers and the military Junta headed by Obote's former Army Commander Tito Okello assumed power. Museveni overthrew the military junta in 1986 and became President.

By the time the NRA/M came to power, the country was disoriented and in shambles. Insecurity and violence were prevalent, the government had lost control of the army that had integrated. The conflict had also polarized the country along regional north-south divide and along ethnic lines (Legum, 1985-6). The NRM has since been in power for nearly 33 years. Uganda has never seen a peaceful democratic transition and transfer of power from one elected Government to the other civilian authority. The country is currently deeply polarized along ethnic lines with corruption, nepotism, sectarianism characterizing the regime and eliciting a lot of public outcry. Political activists and human rights defenders are jailed for their critical views against the regime as is the case of Makerere University Academician Dr. Stella Nyanzi.

Uganda is currently grappling with high rates of Poverty with 21.8% of Ugandans reported as being poor by 2018 (UBOS, 2018). Unemployment, corruption, failing health and education sector remains the biggest problems in Uganda today. Impunity by those that hold and or are connected to centers of power dominate the public discussions and social media. In other words, the problems that Uganda is grappling with among others is a ticking time bomb. Its on the basis of the above historization that this piece of work seeks to look at two important speeches articulated by the President and one by one of his army bush war commanders and how such speeches has negative implication on the already volatile and precarious political atmosphere in Kampala. First, the speech will be presented and the context with which the speech was spoken will be illustrated and then, its implication on the risks it presents on an already polarized society will be discussed before the second speech is presented and discussed in the same format. A conclusion will be drawn and recommendation as to why these speeches needs to be further interrogated in order to avoid political demagogues taking advantage of such arrangement of things to mobilize and cause violence will be presented.

2.0 The speeches and its analysis

It should be noted that when Yoweri Museveni's army took over power in Uganda, there was jubilation and hope for a new and better Uganda. The new regime promised Ugandans a fundamental change and not just a mere change of guards. Earlier in his administration after assuming power the President reportedly argued that leaders ought to be servants, serving the interest of citizens and not their own.

Thirty-two years later, Museveni was criticized by his former bush war doctor and later political protagonist Dr. Kiiza Besigye. Besigye accuses the ruling regime of patronage and serving interests of political elites for the sole purpose of perpetuating Museveni's rule (Besigye, 1999). Besigye argues that President Museveni as a leader of the country is essentially citizen's servant. Citizens must demand for accountability and the President should be accountable to the citizenry he serves. President Museveni in response to these statements by his political rival while addressing gatherings at the NRA/M Day celebration in Masindi District reportedly retorted "*I am not an employee. I hear some people saying that I am their servant. I am not a servant to anybody. I am a freedom fighter, that's why I do what I do. I don't do it because I am your servant. I am just a freedom fighter fighting for myself, for my beliefs that's how I come in. If anything thinks you gave me a job, he is deceiving himself. I am just a freedom fighter whom you thought could help you*"

The remarks above have been widely debated and interpreted in Uganda's public circle and social media. It presents a case of extreme authoritarianism and sense of entitlement from political leaders of Uganda. There is a deep sense and argument in the public domain that such statements reflect the deeply divided country, the underdevelopment of other parts of the country and the selfish and personal aggrandizement of the ruling elites to amass wealth, retain and control state power. Its within such context where Uganda currently characterized by poverty, failing health and education sector, corruption and nepotism is structured. Its my interpretation that such statements can be used by political demagogues to mobilize citizens against each other to cause violence. The risk is certain. Conflicts within States can be explained by economic unfairness and social poverty which leads to social discontent and stress hence leading to insecurity. Distortions in development makes mobilization for group violence probable. Furthermore, human development focuses on human needs and where human needs are not provided, the survival of people is threatened including their human security hence political demagogues can easily use that to mobilize to cause violence (Kaweesi, 2015).

The second speech is attributed to an army General, a bush war hero and an army representative in the 10th Parliament of the Republic of Uganda. General Elly Tumwine as is publicly known is accused of allegedly uttering the statement when a colleague in Parliament – a one male Member of Parliament from Kasese District reportedly asked the general to reign in over the army following a security shoot out to kill order on civilians who were demonstrating peacefully the closure of an abattoir in Kasese District. The general allegedly retorted "*Who is the Speaker, who is she, what is Parliament? Speaker rules over Parliament she does not rule over Uganda. This country was liberated by our army and not Kadaga's (Speaker) Parliament. The army cannot be directed by civilians*".

The above speech has equally elicited a lot of public debate in Uganda. Many believe the regime and its henchman operates and acts without restraint. The speech shows a sense of arrogance from Uganda's leaders especially those who went to the bush to overthrow a legitimate and democratically elected Government of Dr. Milton Obote. Such speeches may not immediately

elicit citizen's wrath and condemnation but deeply remains in their heart. They are often reminded by their lack of essential goods and services, their insecurities about means of survival because of lack of opportunities, lack of employment, and or marginalization. Its on the basis of such context that at an appropriate time when political demagogues begin to remind and draw people's attention to such speeches that citizens wrath are manifested and displayed through violent means. People can easily be mobilized on the basis of such rhetoric to cause violence.

3.0 Conclusion and recommendation for research

It's the opinion of this submission that a deeper analysis by way of research on whether these speeches constitute dangerous speech within the five distinct framework - a tool of analysis developed by the Dangerous Speech organization, this need further scrutiny to ensure that whereas the political atmosphere in Uganda for the past 33 years could be a tickling time bomb, actions and speeches of leaders as reflected above may not or are not used by political demagogues to mobilize Ugandans into violence.

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