

CHAPTER 2

ROOT CAUSES OF THE CONFLICT

The origins of the wider northern Ugandan conflict may be sought among deeper issues that lie hidden beneath the surface of the day-to-day conflict with the LRA. These root causes, which underlay the initial UPDA and other rebellions, are critical since they have never been resolved and if left unaddressed may again re-surface and cause renewed violence. Yet, although most commentators agree on the existence of deep-rooted causes, there is no consensus on what they are or, consequently, how to resolve the situation. Gersony emphasises the “ghosts of the Luwero Triangle” that haunt an Acholi people who lost economic and political influence following Museveni’s rise to power,²⁰ but a recent report by the Human Rights and Peace Centre, Makerere University (HURIPEC) argues that it was the NRM that initiated an ethnic war against northerners even before the events in the Luwero Triangle.²¹ These and other rival analyses can create difficulties for conflict resolution efforts, as key actors seek a clear idea of the issues to address. A more thorough investigation of these root causes is essential, particularly at a time when there is renewed hope that the conflict may soon be resolved and the deeper causes dealt with comprehensively.

Based on field interviews and an analysis of the available literature, we have identified two principal underlying causes of the war. First, Uganda’s history of repeated power struggles following independence has left a legacy of domination, violent politics and militarism that is difficult to overcome, particularly in the north. Second, deep-rooted divisions between the north and south of the country have been accentuated by various leaders over the past 40 years and remain important issues in the minds of many Ugandan citizens. Each of these issues will be considered in turn.

A history of violence and impunity

Uganda’s post-colonial history of violent coups, numerous armed rebellions and lack of accountability for such violence provides the critical backdrop for understanding the manner in which the war broke out in northern Uganda.

Indeed, given this history of seeking to access power by violent means, the armed rebellion in the north against the NRM regime was seen as part of the normal course of political business.

Since the first post-independence government, the political system in Uganda has had a strong military character. Previous regimes, such as those of Idi Amin (1971-1979) and Milton Obote (1962-1971 and 1980-1985) were characterised by civil unrest and gross violations of human rights, manifested in torture, rape, extra-judicial execution and mass murders, disappearances and displacement.²² The perpetrators of these crimes got away with impunity,²³ and this eventually created a trend for successor governments to hunt down and exact extra-judicial revenge on soldiers and civilian populations associated with the ousted regimes. This practice culminated in a cycle of fear, hate, anger, mistrust, and more bloody vengeance, and served to entrench prejudices that, since the colonial period, had labelled and dichotomised Ugandans along regional and ethnic lines. Such a culture of impunity also made recourse to violence the “easy” and normal method of retaining or gaining access to and controlling state power. As one religious leader in Gulu noted of Tito Okello’s forces after the defeat by the NRA, “They believed they could get power back because it is the norm: Amin did the same, Obote did the same, and Museveni did the same. So they also could use force and topple the government.”²⁴ “Political mistakes” carried out by undisciplined soldiers became only symptoms of a culture of revenge and exclusion entrenched by historical incidents under various regimes. For example, the Federal Democratic Movement of Uganda (FEDEMU), a mainly Baganda battalion with the NRA during its guerrilla struggle, “did not enjoy the reputation for discipline” and reportedly committed many atrocities in the north during 1985–6.²⁵

Periods of uncertainty following Uganda’s numerous military coups highlight the cycles of violence that are still relevant today, including the aftermath of Obote’s removal from power in 1971 and again in 1985, Idi Amin’s overthrow in 1979, and Tito Okello’s fall in 1986. At the same time, new governments pursued vendettas against the remnants of previous regimes, following them to their home areas and committing gross human rights violations against the local population. After Idi Amin overthrew Obote in 1971, for example, he ordered soldiers who had served in Obote’s government into the barracks and killed many of them before going on to exact revenge on unarmed civilians in Acholi and Lango.²⁶ One interviewee related this background of violent politics to the current war:

[The northern Uganda conflict] is similar to the overthrows of government in our past. Once a team of people have been overthrown by violence, there is always resistance in the hearts of people. Museveni took over power militarily. This system of coming to power is grounded in this country, leaving a trail of bitterness. The government interpreted that Kony is fighting to regain power.²⁷

The absence of viable political structures allowing for the free entry and exit from the political process, as well as inadequate channels to express grievances or disaffection, further fuelled violent political change. The purging of previous army officers forced many into exile, while others were persuaded by their leaders to go into hiding or join other disgruntled groups, to fight either to restore their control of political power and related socio-economic advantages, or to push for popular support to overthrow the government. According to many people interviewed for this report, "If you don't like the government, you go to the bush!"²⁸ It is no coincidence, then, that for numerous people in Gulu and Kitgum, the sense of betrayal by the NRM over the power-sharing provisions of the 1986 Nairobi Peace Accord was the immediate cause of the conflict. As an elder in Kitgum recounted, "In 1986, I led a goodwill mission to the rebels in the bush and told them to give us their grievances so that we would convey them to Museveni ... The rebels generally wanted Museveni to apologise for breaching the Nairobi peace talks. The Nairobi Peace Talks have given the rebels '*Lapii*' or justification for fighting."²⁹

Other insurgencies related to the northern conflict have arisen because trends in official government policy were seen as deliberately designed to exclude, discriminate against, neglect and/or exploit certain groups with regard to political participation and access to the "national cake".³⁰ As a teacher in Gulu said, "The conflict originated because of the distance between the Acholi and Museveni groups. The government gave us nothing, and it made us so frustrated."³¹ For instance, the NRM went to the bush in the early 1980s to protest against what they claimed were rigged elections. In 1987, the Uganda People's Army (UPA) emerged to protest the depletion of the economic base in Teso by cattle rustling by the Karamojong with the alleged participation of NRA soldiers.³² Many local people interviewed in Soroti held strong views about this, noting that the indifference displayed by the government about this matter could be construed to indicate tacit knowledge or collaboration with the cattle rustlers.³³

Rebel groups have also perpetuated a political culture of violence by committing atrocities against the local population for non-support, while the

latter have simultaneously attracted reprisals from the government for alleged collaboration with the rebels. The most notorious example was the massacres in the “Luwero Triangle” between 1980 and 1985, where the then-insurgent NRM killed many for “informing the government of the whereabouts of the *Bayekera* [rebels].”³⁴ At the same time, the UNLA government exacted reprisals against the civilians for alleged support of or collaboration with the rebels through mass killings, looting and destruction of property. As one informant in Luwero said, “If the rebels were told you were informing the government, they would come and warn you not to do it again. If you said what they had told you, they would come and take you, and give you a hoe to dig your grave, then hit you with the hoe and you fell into the hole. Or they just killed you and left you.”³⁵ Other interviewees disputed common allegations that the crimes committed in Luwero were exclusively perpetrated by army officers from the north, Acholi or otherwise: “Some people from here who were in government would come and ask for your identity card, and ask where you came from, especially if you had something they wanted to take from you. Even if they knew you, they would call you a *muyekera* [rebel] and kill you. We know them.”³⁶

Fear of revenge thus emerges as a significant motivation for former soldiers to go to the bush. After the defeat of the UNLA, most soldiers withdrew to Sudan fearing execution for crimes committed in Luwero by the previous government, as with the murder of former soldiers when Amin took over.³⁷ As one religious leader commented,

When Museveni first came back, all was fine until the FEDEMU battalion of the NRA came with the spirit of revenge, that Acholis were the ones who killed in Luwero. So they started persecuting ... Behind the whole war I see fear. The Acholi people were too fearful and suspicious of the army coming to power since the Nairobi Peace accord failed.³⁸

These cycles of violent politics and revenge perpetuated by previous regimes have created a political environment in which armed mobilisation was seen as a legitimate means to address the grievances of one’s group and the only means to access political power. Given that Tito Okello’s Acholi-dominated government immediately preceded the NRM, it is hardly surprising that armed conflict broke out in northern Uganda.

A deep-rooted regional divide

A second major factor behind the northern conflict is the deep-seated division between northern and southern Uganda, a divide that has engendered a fear of being dominated by other regions or ethnic groups, and has served as an obstacle to national unity. This north-south divide is symptomatic of the regional divisions that exist throughout Uganda. As one former senior government official revealed, “How many people view the country as one? If you ask people, what is Uganda, it is difficult to say. The conflict is an issue of nationalism, because it is not viewed as a national issue really.”³⁹ This lingering attitude among many Ugandan citizens and even some policymakers has its roots in the policies and actions of previous governments that concentrated power and resources in the hands of specific groups in certain regions – to the exclusion of other regions. In particular, political and economic patrimonialism occurred along a north-south dividing line, with leaders such as Obote and Idi Amin exacerbating anti-northern sentiments in the south through many of their policies. Such political decisions have engendered fear among those regions not in power, and have been one of the chief catalysts of conflict, in an environment in which leaders use ethnic sentiments to mobilise political support.

Policy-driven regional splits began during the colonial era. The British colonial regime was interested in securing political control of the territory of Uganda to deny other imperial contenders, as well as establish an economically profitable enterprise for Britain. To achieve this, it adopted a “divide and rule” policy that split Uganda into functional regions for administrative efficiency, and maximum economic profit. The south was used as an agricultural base for sugarcane and tea, while the north was seen as “a disturbed, hostile territory, in which there were some tribes powerful enough to offer stiff and prolonged resistance.”⁴⁰ The Baganda in the south were rewarded generously for their cooperation with the British, with the capital, parliament, university, principal hospital and best infrastructure all built in Buganda territory. British authorities also characterised and reinforced images relative to the “usefulness”, productivity, “suitability” and competence of the people in each region, leading to ethnic-based labels and stereotypes that have persisted to this day. People from the north were described as having certain inherent traits and flaws that made them brutal and martial “tribes” unsuited to rational political administration and economic governance, in contrast with the peaceful communities in the south.⁴¹ It is important to point out that the British may have exacerbated these prejudices and rivalries, though they did not initiate them – many were present before the colonists’ arrival. This is crucial because we need to

understand not only why the British adopted a policy of “divide and rule” but also why it was successful: by exploiting existing ethnic tensions, the British were able to undermine any possible coordinated resistance by Ugandans.

Regional divisions were accentuated by post-independence regimes. At the heart of such divisions lay each government’s failure either to identify and prioritise the issue of nation-building, or their use of approaches that only partially solved the problems or inadvertently reinforced them. Narrow individual political interests including exclusion and intolerance to alternative ideas and groups were the root issues in these regimes. In order to help minimise disloyalty and the chances of revolt, successive governments in Uganda have promoted and surrounded themselves with relatives, friends and people particularly from their own ethno-regional-religious group. Tito Okello’s wide-scale looting of Teso and Lango, for example, is still remembered distinctly by many in these regions, with serious implications for the current conflict. As one local politician from Soroti (Teso) said: “Historically, the Acholi were not very nice. They brutalised Ugandans when Obote left power. They put human dung in the Lira Hotel, the Okellos. This is rekindled today often in debate. We need to introduce a serious course of peace studies in Acholi.”⁴² The domination by a single regional group, following the rule of Milton Obote from Lango and Idi Amin from West Nile, is one approach that the NRA claimed it would reverse:

The problem in Uganda is that the leadership has mainly been from the north. The southerners who are mainly Bantu have played a peripheral role all these years since independence in 1962 ... We are not against the northerners as such, and if a popular man from Acholi or Lango or even Madi wins, he will have our mandate.⁴³

Whether the system offers full representation to a national entity is another matter, but continued perceptions about a north-south divide were revealed in many interviews, from Kitgum to Kampala, which suggests that this is still an important area of concern. As one senior government ex-official recalled, “Someone came into my office once while I was away. When I came back, I asked my colleagues whether the person was a Ugandan or a foreigner. They said, ‘Oh, he was not a Ugandan. He was an Acholi.’ This is characteristic of wider things in the country.”⁴⁴ As a religious leader from the north said, “This issue of marginalisation of the Acholi people keeps coming back.”⁴⁵ Or, as a business entrepreneur in Gulu noted, “When you are this side of Karuma Falls, you feel as if you are in another country.”⁴⁶

The perception of political domination by a particular ethnic group has fuelled several regional conflicts in Uganda. Numerous Ugandans interviewed still nurture the perception that if one's ethnic group is not in power, one's security is not guaranteed.

As was apparent from numerous interviews, many northerners perceive that the recruiting ground for the government and military has shifted from the north to the west. As one local NGO worker in Kitgum alleged, "Museveni has turned the government into a family affair."⁴⁷ Many interviewees, particularly IDPs, also believe that it is the NRM's fear of challenge and domination by the Acholi that explains why the NRM permits the LRA to weaken them as a people:

This war is a ploy by the current government to impoverish the Acholi. When you are poor, you become a beggar and accept anything that is offered to you. If you are thinking of what you will eat or where you will sleep, you have no time to think about politics or your rights. You are not a challenge.⁴⁸

This does not mean that all northerners hate the government – there are many who disagree with the assertion above. However, the historical/ethnic dimension clearly continues to play a role in the current conflict, and the government needs to work harder to reach out to the people of the north.

The consequence of these policy choices is a divided Uganda with a fragile sense of nationhood in which political upheavals become geographically localised or "regionalised", and are perceived by other Ugandans as distant and unimportant, "as long as it doesn't come here!"⁴⁹ While this in itself does not cause conflict, lack of concern on the part of the general public not directly affected, and official blindness to a group's problem because "they are like that!", create fertile grounds for security-threatening elements to fester and destabilise whole communities, which in turn creates the motive and incentive for conflict. As one interviewee in Luwero said, "Those Acholi are killing each other up there, and they always will. Why should we be concerned? We have our own worries here at home."⁵⁰ This attitude may be beginning to change, however. According to interviews in Soroti, for example, most people said they knew very little about the LRA because for 17 years it did not affect them. "When they came here, we knew what the Acholi have been going through, and we now feel we need to look at this as a national problem."⁵¹

Thus the failure of successive governments to analyse and correctly diagnose the problems facing different areas of Uganda led them to pursue policies that

failed to address these problems, or to adopt strategies riddled with inconsistencies that inadvertently permitted contentious issues to degenerate into violence. In particular, lack of clear leadership that is seen to stand above prejudices both at a national and grassroots level is a recurring issue, and explains the failure to address these root causes. In the context of the northern Uganda conflict, much of the current government's official policy response to the physical and human security challenges has been to de-legitimise the rebellion by focusing on the LRA as criminal elements or terrorists who can be easily suppressed. However, extensive on-the-ground interviews show that the war in fact encompasses two much broader fundamental issues that must also be considered when dealing with the conflict today: a lingering north-south division in many people's minds and a legacy of political violence that is difficult, but not impossible, to overcome.