Ethnocentrism and National Elections in Uganda

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The paper focuses on ethnocentrism as an active factor for national election turmoil in Uganda. The bewitchment of the military by ethnocentric virus, the subsequent coups and overthrows, to the military regimes and dictatorships by successive presidents since 1966, the 1980, 1996, 2001 and 2006 presidential elections, can account for ethnocentric tendencies in the Pearl of Africa. Thereafter, the paper discusses the 1996, 2001 and 2006 general elections held in Uganda before propounding implications for the country's future.

Introduction

Uganda is in the easterly region of the African continent with a diverse ethnic composition. It borders Kenya in the East, Democratic republic of Congo in the west, Southern Sudan in the north and Tanzania in the south, Ssekamwa (1994). The area has attracted almost every ethnic group for settlement and business, and this has sensitized ethnocentrism among the settlers. This trait has been practiced in the politics of the state especially in national elections.

Ethnocentrism exists in most countries across borders, but how it affects the political endeavours of a state with multi-ethnic populations vary. For the case of Uganda, ethnic differences make a significant impact on political activity, like national elections. The awareness of these differences has been referred to as "tribalism", or ethnicity. The term ethnocentrism is a commonly used word in circles where ethnicity, inter ethnic relations and similar social issues are of concern. Its definition is "thinking one's, group's ways as superior to others", or "judging other groups as inferior to one's own", K. Barger (2010). "Ethnic" refers to cultural heritage and "centrism" refers to the central starting point. Violent inter-communal conflicts in Ugandan have occurred because of the persistence of ethnocentrism – a phenomenon rather unlike racism in its economic and political outcomes of inequalities in that, allegiance to an ethnic group, patronage based on ethnicity, family and kinship ties, and networks of ethnic interest trump other networks in society. It is this extreme ethnocentrism that manifests into ethnic hostility with regards to national issues.

Evolution of Ethno-political Conflicts in Uganda

A primordial interpretation of ethnocentrism advocates that societies have differences in value system, differences in language, culture,

political systems, and this arises out of issues that are hard, or difficult to change. Some ethnic groups speak Luo, others Luganda, Lusoga, Runyakitara, Lunyoro, Lutoro, Rukiga, among others, and this goes back to the differences in the philosophy of life, for example, an eating habit where some people eat matooke, others millet, rats, animal blood and this applies to drinks as well. In addition, some people were born under monarchies and were/ are thought to be more civilized naturally than others, whereas others were born under acephorus societies and were/ are thought to be backward and primitive; therefore this situation is an archaic reality underlying modernity (Okulu, 2000: 8).

Before colonialism, ethnocentrism had not been awakened to the levels of today, because market economy had not started in Africa. The bonds of common interest and the period over which these bonds had been forged had consolidated, made the bonds of friendship too solid to be shaken by short term benefits that could be reaped from collaboration with the aliens (Karugire, 1980). In Uganda, ethnic wars existed in 1894 between Baganda and Banyoro, Bahima and Bairu in the west, the Teso and Karamojong in the north, and the Banyoli and Chapadhola in Tororo District. Among these societies up to now, there existed derogatory and moronic vocabulary terms which were/ are used against each other, one ethnic group claiming to be more civilized than the other.

The intensity of ethnocentrisms in Uganda is indeed a frightening one, as it transforms long-time neighbours into mortal enemies overnight based on ethnic – affiliations. Long term neighbours become marauding killers, and ethnic differences become reasons for denying humanity to others, and all other social relations and interactions cease to matter (Yoku, 2003).

During colonialism in Uganda, the British put together different ethnic groups under one leadership, for example, Toro ruling Bakonzo and Bamba in the West, Buganda ruling Eastern Uganda under Semei Kakunguru, Bafumbira under Bakiga, and others. In this administrative policy, the Parish chiefs and sub-county chiefs were posted from the ruling ethnic group. This caused resentment to the rest of Uganda, which resentment took a violent form after independence (Karugire, 1988: 18). This amalgamation of a large number of ethnic groups caused, and strengthened ethnocentrism, as divisions among Ugandan created struggles, jealousy, envy and finally ethnical conflicts in national affairs. The post 1945 to 1962 in Uganda marked the beginning of interest groups over who would inherit the post-colonial state. From then, Ugandan politics was aimed at when Uganda would recover independence and on whose terms. It was in this trend that ethnic

groups redefined their interests and took positions in the struggle for political dominance, and since then, Uganda's instability became a function of a negative polarized imbalance of political forces in which groups dictate political terms only acceptable to themselves, to overthrow the established order (Mudoola, 1993: 1).

After 1962, the limits of political analysis began to surface in political violence. Different political parties based on ethnocentrism in effort to satisfy their desires, began to injure each other as squabbles over desirable objects rotated around national resources and dominance, and since independence, Ugandan liberators / presidents have lacked reform insurgencies committed to the revolutionary ideologies found in East and South Asia, as well as in Latin America (Clapham, 1998). These insurgencies arise towards a change of leadership which does not entail the creation of a state any different from that they seek to overthrow.

Ethnocentrism and National Elections in Uganda

On 9th October 1962, Uganda achieved independence from Britain and became a republic replacing the white Governor General with an African president. This transfer of power has marked the only peaceful change of government in Uganda's history as an independent state. Since then, the change of government and several institutional transformation have no democracy, instead have taken a violent form, involving loss of life and property among the guilty and innocent Ugandans, and this has failed Uganda leaders to realize that violence, once employed as an instrument of internal policy becomes very difficult to control. The presidents of Uganda, past and present, have taken a political culture known as dictatorship, which stems from ethnocentrism. The dimension of this culture is plastic and can change quite dramatically in response to regime performance, historical experience and political socialization, and once established, these orientations have a momentum of their own and may act as autonomous influences on the political set up (Diamond, 1999).

Fore ethnocentric tendencies, bullets rather than ballots have dominated politics in Uganda since 1962; where two governments have been removed by coups, and by a foreign invasion, and another by an armed rebellion. This situation of cultural-military rule, has threatened the economic and social basis on which democratic – processes and progressive development depends. The ethnocentric – military rule and civil wars in Uganda have destroyed lives, skills and assets, undermined institutional competence and accountability, caused widespread personal trauma, suppressed autonomous organisation in

civil society and intensified ethnic hostility and conflict;- an element that has made the Pearl of Africa to languish in decay. The post-independent period in Uganda has been characterized by violence and warfare since the end of Idi Amin's bloody reign, putting groups from different regions against each other, as political manipulation of ethnic and religious differences has / is the primary means for the political elite to legitimate their claim and hold on to power. During the 1962-1971 and 1980-1985 Milton Obote regimes, the national armed forces were dominated by soldiers from northern Uganda, particularly the Acholi and Langi regions, during 1971-1979 late Idi Amin's regime; the national armed forces were mainly dominated by Amin's kinsmen from the northwest Nile region. It should also be noted that the downfall of Professor Yusuf Lule was partly due to his ethnic tendencies in government affairs. This set precedence to every leader who captures power to count on his tribesmen in order to influence state affairs, 1980 elections and after Museveni's National Resistance Army (NRA) had captured power in 1985/86, the pattern created a climate of fear, with an underlying fear of reprisals, should the power captured be lost together with perceived economic injustices.

This has created a negative attitude in the minds of observer, and in 1989 Museveni's NRM regime began to face resistance against other ethnic rebel- based groups centred in northern Uganda, notably a faction from the Uganda People's Democratic army (UPDA) and the Uganda Democratic Christian Army (UDCA), formed out of the government's abuse of human rights – throughout Acholi region in the name of crushing an emerging rebellion. These two rebel forces merged and formed the Lord Resistance Army (LRA) headed by Joseph Kony in 1987. While in the north-west region of West Nile bank, relative peace prevailed until mid 1990s, however the West Nile Bank Front rebel group (WNBF) emerged, claiming to fight for the introduction of multiparty democracy, led by Juma Oris, a former foreign minister in Amin's regime and in 1996, a large group of soldiers broke away from WNBF and created the Uganda National Rescue Front II (UNRF) after soldiers in WNBF, loyal to Conel Ali Banuze opposed the idea of making a possible deal with the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) government. Finally in Western Uganda, primarily in Ruwenzori Mountains, a rebel group calling itself – Alliance for Democratic Forces (ADF) emerged in 1996 in protest of NRM's government policy of one party state.

In addition, we have inter-state conflicts and the damage of these conflicts is growing up as conditions in the region surrounding also play a part in the Ugandan civil wars, most especially in the

neighbouring Sudan, and Democratic Republic of Congo have had significant implications on Uganda. The Sudan government, a radical Islamist agenda from 1994 provided essential support from the LRA claiming that the NRM government since 1986 aided the Sudanese rebel group SPLM/A. In return thus, the Khartoum government up to 2000 supported LRA, by providing bases, weapons and military training. In return LRA fought alongside Sudanese government against Ugandan government. More so, Sudan also provided ammunition to WNBF, UNRF II, and ADF. In Western region, DRC has actively supported rebel groups against NRM's government, by providing bases on DRC territory, the WNBF, ADF, LRA and PRA as claimed by the NRM government of Uganda.

Most civil wars in Uganda and subsequent coups have been waged with the superficial intention of national character, however with clear observation of military or civil governments in Uganda reveals that these leaders and groups have a strong element of ethnocentrism, and this can explain why such governments captured power through repressive measures. These armed conflicts waged after national elections. Like 1980 to 1986 NRA bush war can be attributed to the Collier-Hoefller model of conflicts. This model suggests that, civil wars are distinguished between two possible motives, "justice seeking" and "loot seeking", referring to them as "greed and grievance". These are elements of ethnocentrism and can explain why people take a violent form to capture power in multi-ethnic societies.

Huntington (1996), argues that the explanatory factors explaining the emergence of civil wars after elections are not ideological, but cultural. In this situation, what counts is blood and beliefs, culture, norms and customs of a group where people identify themselves. In Uganda, ethnicity discriminates humans in a sharp and exclusive way, even more than belonging to a country would do.

Bwengye (1985) in his study about the electoral process in Uganda, analyses the 1980 controversial general elections and its aftermath. He argues that the 1980 presidential election was indeed sham. This election did not only put the country into ridicule, but also endangered political chaos, kidnapping and killing of political opponents, faking of the registration exercise, gerrymandering the constituencies, defrauding of the palling, concoction of results and acquisition of power by fraud and force of arms. This election made no doubt that any future rigging of elections will be met with unprecedented resistance, and that the natives, and Ugandans will continue to live in political and economic agony. Whereas his argument is partly true, it underestimates the central idea which led to sham elections in 1980, which I attribute to

ethnocentrism. Elections in multi-ethnic societies like Uganda make people to elect persons that belong to one's group, speaking the same language, share culture, history and prejudice, while deselecting others who are from remote areas, speaking unintelligible languages, with different cultures and contrasting interpretations of history.

Bakahumura (1997) believes that in divided societies, ethnic conflict is at the centre of politics. In Uganda, ethnic divisions pause challenges to the cohesion of state where ethnic conflicts based on cultural background of groups cause political marginalization, for competition of limited positions and resources.

The 1996, 2001 and 2006 Elections in Uganda

Ethnocentrism is a stronger factor of identification and much more politicized in Ugandan politics. In assessing how and to which extent ethnocentrism influences elections in Uganda, the paper focuses on how the voting patterns of Ugandans reflect specific groups' interests in relation to the 1996, 2001 and 2006 national elections. However, the paper randomly selects samples of election results generated from the electoral commission of Uganda and categorize it into four dimensions; West, East, North and South. From an analysis of the three contested elections in Uganda the paper reveals a drastic change of voters' perceptions on the presidential elections as the graphs reveal.
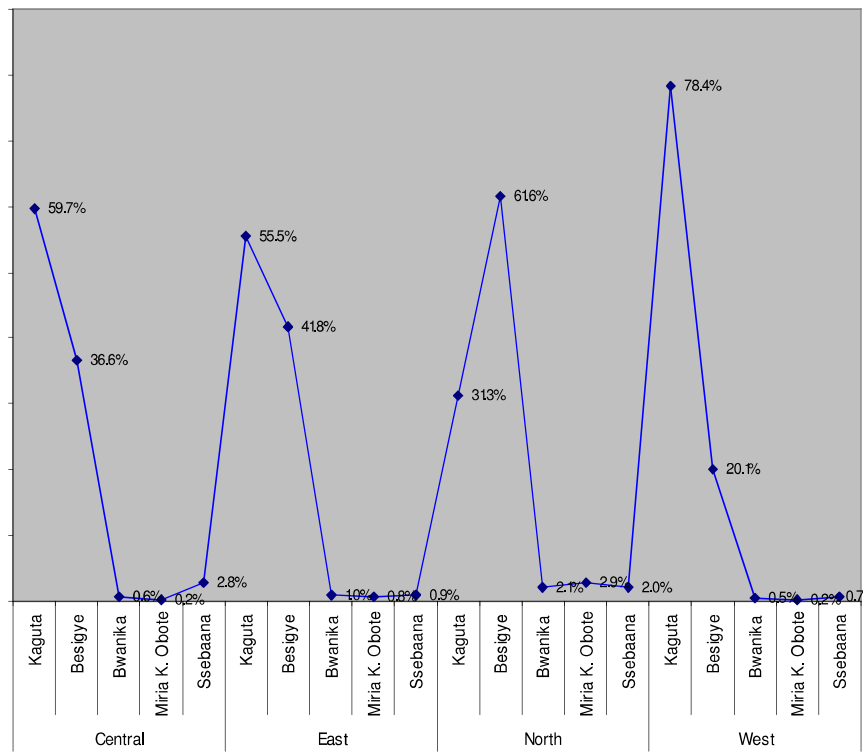
Figure 1: Perceptions of voter groups from 1996 national elections
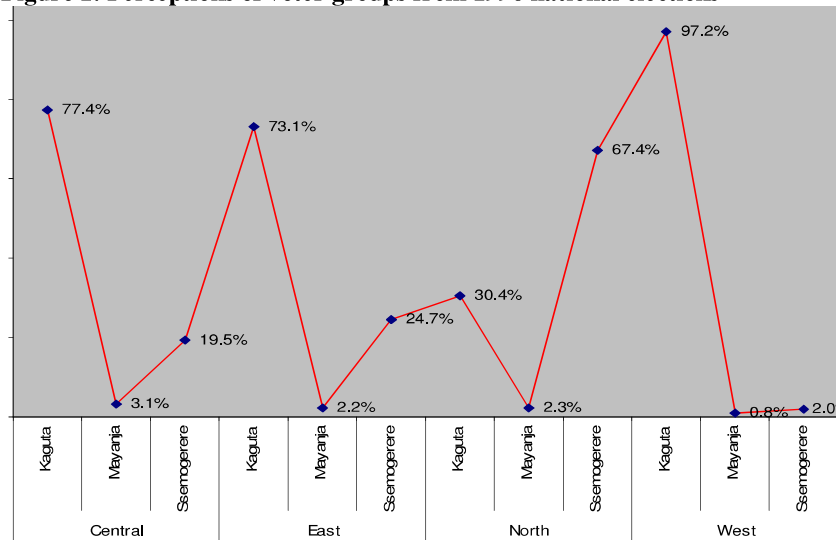
Fig.2: Perceptions of voter groups from the 2001 elections
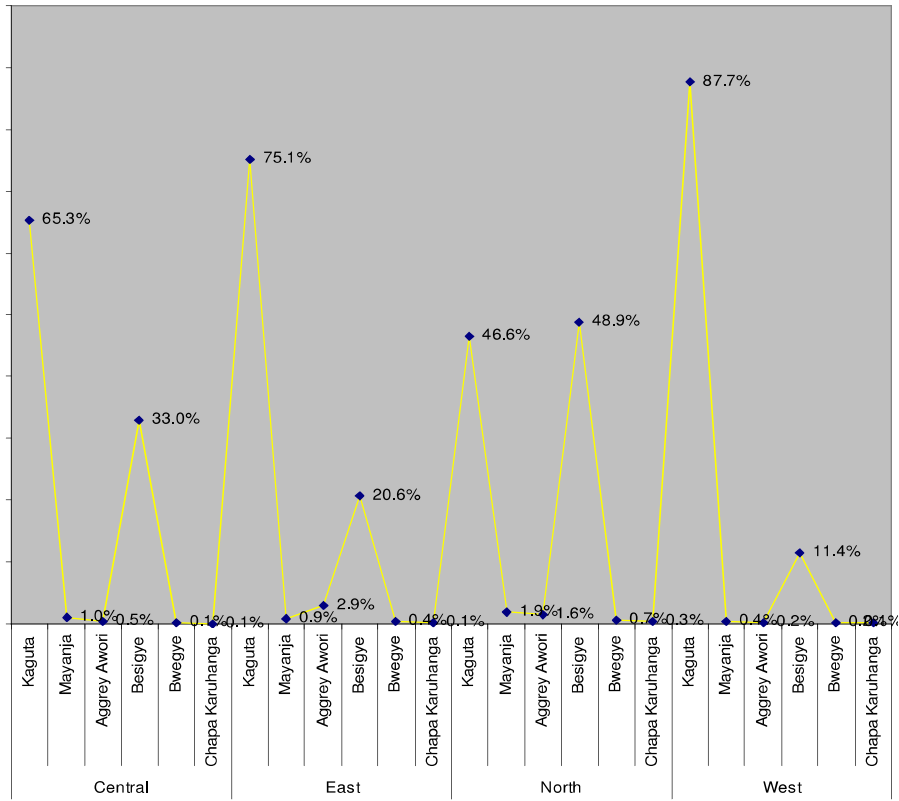
Figure 3: Perceptions of voter groups from 2006 elections

From Figures 1, 2 and 3 reflects an increase in perception of ethnocentric tendencies in national elections of Uganda. In 1996, elections reflect presidential candidate Y.K. Museveni as strong in all regions with 77.4% in central, 73.1% in East, 30.4% in north and 97.2% in the west – his home region, while his fellow candidates; Mayanja and Ssemwogerere lost heavily even in central; their home region with 3.1% and 19.5% respectively. While in 2001 elections, Y.K. Museveni got 65.3% votes in central, 75.1% votes in East, 46.6% votes in north and 97.2% votes in the west; his home region. Mayanja received 1.0% in central; his home region, 0.9% in the East, 1.9% in the north and 0.4% votes in the west. Besigye got 33.0% votes in central, 20.5% votes in East, 48.9% votes in north and 11.4% votes in west; his home region. Bwengye got 0.1% votes in central, 0.4% votes in East; his home region, 0.7% votes in north and 0.2% votes in west, while Karuhanga got 0.1% votes in central, 0.1% votes in East, 0.3% votes in north and 0.1% in the west; his home region.

In 2006 elections, Museveni got 59.7% votes in central, 55.5% votes in East, 31.3% votes in the north and 78.4% votes in west: his home region. Besigye registered 36.6% votes in central, 41.8% votes in East, 61.6% votes in north and 20.1% votes in the west; his home region. Bwanika and Ssebaana got 0.6% votes and 2.8%votes in central, 1.0% votes and 0.9% votes in East, 2.1% votes and 2.0% votes in the north, and 0.2% votes and 0.7% votes in the West respectively, while Maria Obote got 0.2% votes in central, 0.8% votes in East, 2.9% votes in the north; her strong hold region, and 0.2% votes in the western region.

Implication of Ethnocentrism on Ugandan Elections

The elections in Uganda are increasingly competitive along, and seem to be more characterized by a cultural impulse. An analysis of the three election phases reveals that there is a significant change of people's perceptions on national elections, where people vote specific candidates, tribesmen, or not, because they believe these candidates will better satisfy their group interests. This implies a drastic change, or decline in support of either the ruling party candidate or opposition party candidate. The study reveals that there is a decline of Y.K. Museveni's support in different regions and an increase in support of opposition candidates in other regions. In Figure 1, Museveni got 77.4% votes in central region compared to his 65.3% votes in 2001 (Figure 2) and 59.7% votes in 2006 (Figure 3) in the same region. In East, Y.K. Museveni in 1996 (figure 1) got 73.1% votes while his support increased to 75.1% votes in 2001 (Figure 2) and was reduced in 2006 to 55.5% votes (Figure 3). This implies that people vote certain candidates, not because they are their darlings, but because they believe such candidates can better serve their group interests. The failure of the candidates to satisfy individual group interests result in hatred and support of an opposition candidate deemed relevant to specific groups' interests. A prototype of such is revealed in Figures 1, 2 and 3 in the northern region, where Y.K. Museveni got 30.4% votes in 1996, while his counterpart Ssemwogerere got 67.4% votes In 2001 election, Y.K. Museveni got 46.6% votes while his greatest challenger Besigye bagged 48.6% votes while in 2006, in the same region, Museveni's support declined to 31.3% votes while that of Besigye increased to 61.6% votes.

Ethnocentric tendencies are complex in such a way that, groups tend to support candidates of different regions at the expense of their own. This trend is experienced in all regions of Uganda, with the exception of Western region, where Y.K. Museveni has overwhelming won in all the three contests, implying that Y.K. Museveni better satisfies their

interests than any would- be candidate. However in other regions, ethnocentrism tends thwart the region's candidates at the expense of outlying factors. This is so, because the people in their respective regions tend to concentrate on those candidates, whether tribesmen or not, who convincingly promise to fulfil specific group's interests. This explains why in 1996, 2001 and 2006 presidential elections, Y.K. Museveni won in Central region with 77.4% votes, 65.3% votes and 59.7% votes, and Kiiza Besigye in 2001 and 2006 won with 33.0% votes and 36.6% votes respectively in central region at the expense of Ssemwogerere and Bwanika who trace their origins in same region.

From the above discussion and analysis, it was discovered that ethnocentrism and ethnocentric tendencies have a significant bearing on the national elections of Uganda. It creates and strengthens ethnocentric divisions among Ugandans , and the reaction is observed when national Presidential elections take place, like the in 1996, 2001, and 2006.

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