

# The rise and fall of Grace Ibingira

A study in factionalism,  
nationalism and  
machiavellianism in  
Uganda politics

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## GULU TO THE NEW CONSTITUTION

IN APRIL 1964 at its Gulu Conference, the ruling Uganda People's Congress elected a new secretary-general, Grace Ibingira, a minister of state in the Uganda government. Backed by the President of the UPC, Dr. Milton Obote, prime minister of Uganda, Ibingira ousted John Kakonge by two votes. In the summer of 1965 Kakonge became a specially-elected member of parliament — again by two votes. This time, however, he was Dr. Obote's candidate and his opponent was backed by Grace Ibingira.

On February 4, 1966, Grace Ibingira led the cabinet in reversing a key decision of the then absent Prime Minister. The issue was the handling of corruption and seditious conspiracy charges which had been brought by the opposition. On the floor of Parliament only one MP stood against the reversal — John Kakonge.

On February 22, 1966 the police Special Force swooped on a cabinet meeting and carried five ministers — headed by Ibingira — into detention. In a series of rapid moves, Dr. Obote assumed full powers, suspended the 1962 (Independence) Constitution, removed the President and Vice-President, and appointed a Judicial Committee of Inquiry into the corruption charges. On April 15 a new constitution was announced, immediately endorsed by Parliament, and Dr. Obote elected Executive President of Uganda, while on April 30 a cabinet and administrative reshuffle brought in four Junior Ministers and three new faces — including that of John Kakonge at Economic Planning and Development.

What is the meaning of this sequence of events? Do they illustrate, as claimed, Dr. Obote's lust for power and ruthless disregard for legality? Or is the gradual reinstatement of John Kakonge — vocally "anti-American" and often accused of being "the USSR's man" — evidence of a slide into East-aligned neutralism? Was Grace Ibingira the moderate, pragmatic exponent of due process and constitutional democracy swept aside by a wave of one-party absolutism and neo-Marxist chauvinism? Or, again, has the whole spectacle been one of a political machine's ruthless elimination of its own leaders and of Michel's iron law of oligarchy?

## OBOTE'S AND IBINGIRA'S POWER BASES

UGANDA POLITICS 1964-66 is *not* the story of three men. However, the recurring trio — Milton Obote, Grace Ibingira, John Kakonge — do symbolise key strands in the intricate tapestry of Uganda's political system. Grace Ibingira, still an MP, sometime Minister of State and UPC secretary-general, at one time appeared a less intelligent but more intellectual version of Dr. Obote. More conservative, aristocratic and cautious than Obote, Ibingira was

less widely popular but more orientated towards party notables than his president.

Dr. Milton Obote, Prime Minister and now President, is an astute and exceedingly able machine politician, and not a charismatic leader. He is a pragmatist and in social outlook a moderate — at least in African terms. Ideology is not of central concern to him; the maintenance, consolidation, and use of power are. On the other hand, Dr. Obote is deeply dedicated to Uganda's unity, social development, and economic progress. His real concern for his people's welfare is widely accepted and respected in Uganda.

In political tactics, Dr. Obote's pragmatic idealism takes the form of cautious waiting and of quick advance at times of his own choosing. He allows his opponents to muster strength, to let their aims become known, to build up internal factions within their own coalitions, to overextend themselves in grasping for power just out of reach. Meanwhile, he consolidates strength and removes minor weaknesses. At times he gives the impression of losing control over the situation. Then, even as rumours begin to herald his coming defeat, he moves rapidly and decisively. His immediate objective attained and the whole opposition thrown into disarray, he gains speedy adoption of major changes whose mere proposal could have cost him his office before the crisis.

President Obote's political power rests on three overlapping bases: (a) respect and trust by a majority of Ugandans in all districts other than Buganda; (b) regional support in most of Northern Uganda, based on belief held by this economically backward area that he provides an effective force for its development through state action; (c) majority support at the UPC national delegate level as the man who led the UPC to power and has the broadest favourable image with the electorate.

As a politician and statesman, the term Machiavellian might well be applied to President Obote. Not the distorted, diabolical Machiavel of polemics, although that is his image for a majority of Buganda. Nor even the slick, cynical one-upmanship of *The Prince*, that tract written for Caesere Borgia, Duke of the Romagna, who fell by not following it. Rather Obote acts on the principles contained in *The Discourses*: faith in the people not the aristocracy, belief in the necessity of national unification, concern for a system of operational justice and individual liberty, emphasis on political timing and thoroughness, recognition that to carry out high aims one must retain power but that power without aims beyond its own retention is ultimately unavailing and unretainable.

This image was always somewhat misleading. Ibingira rarely committed himself on issues unless he could do so in terms that all major forces felt supported their position. His speeches were models of platitudes dressed in superficially new and intellectual language. His forums were the corridors and ante-rooms, not the market places, of power. His tools were the private conversation and the mutual special interest, not the public address or the shared concern for national welfare. In short Grace Ibingira had the courage of all the day's popular convictions and the conviction that more power should be his.

He and his close ally — then Vice-President and Kyabazinga of Busoga — Sir Wilberforce Nadiope, had wide contacts among the more conservative and aristocratic UPC local notables. Ibingira

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is a Bahima, that is a member of the cattle-raising aristocracy who ruled the Kingdom of Ankole on watered down Tutsi lines. He is therefore a Southerner, but not strictly speaking a Bantu. He and Nadiope were instrumental in convincing Dr. Obote that Kakonge was a danger to him and in securing his removal in favour of Ibingira.

Ibingira's support sprang from four sources: (a) the Ankole UPC Machine, which he later lost to a commoner who had crossed the floor from the Democratic Party, Basil Bataringaya, now Minister of the Interior; (b) a collection of ambitious Southern local and district leaders who wanted power and feared what they saw as Prime Minister Obote's populism; (c) a coterie of relatively conservative intellectuals who viewed Obote as pedestrian and lacking in polish and glitter (which most of his speeches are); and (d) a growing working relationship with Mengo Palace and the "separatist" Kiganda aristocracy headed by the then President and Kabaka Sir Frederick Mutesa.

Until October 1965 Grace Ibingira was a Machiavellian of *The Prince*. Thereafter, he seems to have become intoxicated by the nearness of power and forgotten the danger of wounding his opponent while leaving him the power to strike back at a time and place of his own choosing.

#### KAKONGE'S ROLE

JOHN KAKONGE, Minister of Economic Development and Planning, is a very different man. He is a radical nationalist. Despite his aristocratic Nyoro background he has no roots there. A professed "scientific socialist" he has more in common with Yugoslav revisionism, the quasi-Marxist radicalism of Michael Foot, or the philosophy of African radical social reconstruction enunciated in vague words and concrete actions by Mwalimu Julius Nyerere and TANU, than with Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy. A strong proponent of East African federation and co-operation, he is well thought of both in Nairobi and in Dar es Salaam.

The most striking point about John Kakonge, however, is that he is basically not a politician either by inclination or natural ability. As UPC Secretary-General (1960-64), he built the mass base and party structure that won the 1962 elections — a base Ibingira allowed to erode away within a year of taking office. As Director of Planning (1963 onward) he supervised the creation of *Work for Progress*. He was and is an effective speaker: charismatic to mass audiences, studiously grounded and substantive to intellectual ones. No one would deny that John Kakonge has definite ideas how Uganda should develop in the interest of Ugandans or that he believes that the political system and political power are critical to realising them. However, Kakonge has never shown adequate understanding that to carry out his aims for Uganda he must hold and use political power nor *a fortiori* that he, as a radical and a man with power in his hands, inevitably has political enemies who seek his downfall.

At Gulu, he might have held the Secretary-Generalship against Obote and Ibingira had he not believed up to the last moment that both were his friends. (He held to this faith despite the warnings of his supporters.) After Gulu he did not fight back. His excursion into Buganda politics in 1965 like his condemnation of US-Congo policy early in that year and of "hired agents of foreign powers" (Ibingira and Co.) in October were fairly clearly in loyal support, and partly at the behest of, Prime Minister Obote. Apart from his lonely vote on the Ocheng Inquiry motion and an earlier muddled, and withdrawn, criticism of the Nyoro aristocracy (whom he detests as did his father, a member of the puritan Balokale sect of the Anglican Church of Uganda) when such criticism seemed to attack Obote's Bunyoro supporters, John Kakonge took no active part in the 1966 political events. A man of ideas and ideals but also of programmes and organising ability, an intellectual by temperament and ambition if not fully by training nor uniformly by performance, John Kakonge is not fully a politician. Perhaps this is largely because he is very unwilling to believe any individual he knows can be basically hostile to his ideals or to him, a noble illusion but a very dangerous one in political life.

#### POLITICAL BACKGROUND

THE POLITICAL system in which these three men operate (or operated in the case of Ibingira) is in many respects complex and confusing and certainly radically different from that of Kenya, Tanganyika, Ghana, or even Nigeria. Uganda before independence comprised one strong, separatist national group, namely the Baganda, and a number of other peoples all to some extent internally divided. Except for Buganda no district or kingdom wished to secede from Uganda. All were at least moderately national in outlook and united in suspicion of the Baganda, original agents, allies, and beneficiaries of the British conquest. True the Sebei in the East and the Bamba and Bakonjo in the Ruwenzori foothills of the West had waged near civil wars for separate districts. Until Sebei had won their district and the Bamba-Bakonjo, while still titularly in the Kingdom of Toro, had direct Central Government rule replacing that of Mtoro chiefs. In either case, their object had not been secession from Uganda itself, merely from Bugisu and Toro respectively.

Outside Buganda, nationalist politics had been primarily a campaign to inherit British power and to ensure that Buganda remained effectively part of Uganda. Opposition to the colonial regime was a useful symbol but few seriously believed independence would be denied or even long withheld. Partisanship turned on district and clan loyalties, on social groupings and on religion, the Democratic Party being seen as Roman Catholic, the UPC as Church of Uganda and, to an extent, Moslem. Thus it was fairly easy for most MPs to cross the floor from the DP once it had lost office.

Factionalism within the UPC was, however, inherent in the base of the political system, and was strengthened by intellectual discontent among both radicals and conservatives, at the rate and direction of progress. A further factor was the quasi-educated, semi-employed group which crystallised into the UPC Youth Wing. This had originally been a radical "direct action" group but was later to fragment into basically Kakonge and basically Ibingira factions.

Buganda politics centred on the Kabakaship and on Bugandan autonomy within Uganda. The events leading to the deportation of Kabaka Sir Frederick Mutesa in 1953 were far more to do with Bugandan opposition to Ugandan unitarism, as promoted by the Governor, Sir Andrew Cohen, than with anti-British or anti-Asian nationalism. The 1962 constitution entrenched separate powers, including indirect election of Buganda central government MPs by the Buganda Lukiko. This body had a *de facto* majority of aristocratic Saza chiefs, appointed by the Kabaka, and their rural, feudal, pocket constituency members.

At and after the 1962 elections the Kabaka's Kabaka Yekka (*yekka*=alone) party made an alliance with the UPC. This was partly because the KY saw the DP, with its strong Roman Catholic backing and quasi-populist programme, as a more immediate challenge in Buganda. In 1963 Sir Frederick became president of Uganda by parliamentary election. The vice-president, Sir Wilberforce Nadiope, Kyabazinga of Busoga, was, at least up to that point, a sharp political foe of the Kabaka's.

[To be continued]