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UGANDA RIOTS REVISITED

A conversation with
Emily Drani and John De Coninck

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Colophon

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Uganda Riots Revisited

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Pluralism Working Paper no 4

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The Pluralism Working Paper series

Welcome to the *Pluralism Working Paper series* for the Promoting Pluralism Knowledge Programme. The series provides a vehicle for early dissemination of knowledge and aims to reflect the broad range and diversity of theoretical and empirical work that is undertaken by academic researchers and civil society based development practitioners in association with the Promoting Pluralism Knowledge Programme.

The Promoting Pluralism Knowledge Programme (PPKP) is carried out in an international cooperative structure that includes the Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (Hivos) and the Kosmopolis Institute of the University for Humanistics, both in the Netherlands, the Centre for the Study of Culture and Society (CSCS, Bangalore, India), the Center for Religious and Cross Cultural Studies (CRCS, Yogyakarta, Indonesia) and the Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda (CCFU, Uganda).

The working paper series is intended to stimulate discussion and critical comment on a broad range of issues addressed in the knowledge programme and contains publications in three categories:

- A. academic research (-in-progress) papers**
- B. practice-based reflections**
- C. interviews and conversations**

To orient different target groups of readers, each paper will be listed in one of these categories.

We welcome feedback and encourage you to convey your comments and criticisms to the working paper series editors and directly to the authors.

For more information about the Hivos Knowledge programme initiative please visit www.hivos.net and the Kosmopolis page on the University for Humanistics home page at www.uvh.nl

On behalf of the international Promoting Pluralism Programme staff, we thank you for your interest in our working papers.

Caroline Suransky, Hilde van 't Klooster and Ute Seela

Editors of the *Pluralism Working Paper series*

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Editor's preface

On the 10th of September 2009, violent unrest broke out in Kampala, the capital of Uganda in East Africa. Groups of youngsters attacked people and destroyed property. Police and army responded with force. Within two or three days, 27 people were killed and many more injured. Journalists were arrested and hundreds of people taken into custody.

The rioting came after the central government moved to prevent the *Kabaka* (king) of the Baganda people – Uganda's largest ethnic group – from visiting a part of his traditional territory. Although Uganda is a republic, the constitution allows kings and other traditional leaders in most areas where they existed before Independence in 1962. Officially, their traditional leadership is meant to play an exclusively cultural role and they are barred from participating in politics. In reality, the riots demonstrated the great extent to which culture and politics intersect.

As the country recovered from the civil disturbances, many Ugandans began to make sense of why and how the violence was able to spread so quickly throughout Kampala. In a combined statement, civil society based organisations expressed their grave concern about what happened and signaled that the riots are symptomatic of deeper tensions in society. Their statement included:

*"While calmness was restored a few days later, it is important that we do not lose sight of the underlying problems our Nation Uganda faces (...) The riots should not be narrowly interpreted as a clash between the Buganda Kingdom and the Central Government; rather it should be seen as representing existing tensions in our society today which, if approached in a strategic and inclusive manner, can be resolved. We believe that having a cultural identity does not necessarily stand in the way of a Nation; it is possible to celebrate unity in our diversity"*¹

This statement goes to the heart of promoting pluralism. The Cross Cultural Foundation of Uganda (CCFU), the coordinating partner of the Promoting Pluralism Knowledge Programme in East Africa, was a signatory to the abovementioned civil society statement.

In this paper, Emily Drani and John De Coninck of CCFU reflect on the September riots. The conversation took place in October 2009, when Ute Seela, co-chair of the Promoting Pluralism Knowledge Programme visited them to discuss ongoing work. The conversation sheds new light on the background of the unrest and its implications for the work of the knowledge programme in Uganda.

Dr. Caroline Suransky,

Chief editor of the *Pluralism Working Paper series* for the Promoting Pluralism Knowledge Programme

¹ 'We all bear the responsibility to forge the Ugandan nation'. A Statement by Civil Society on the recent riots in Kampala and neighbouring Districts (September 15 2009). For the full statement, see: <http://www.ngoforum.or.ug/news/newsDetails.php?unique=66>

Uganda riots revisited

A conversation with Emily Drani and John De Conink

Ute Seela

Unrest in Uganda's capital Kampala has recently reached international headlines. Between September 10-13th 2009, groups of young people were destroying shops and vehicles as well as attacking other persons. The violence prompted a heavy response by the police and army, causing several deaths. As subsequent reports revealed, the riots took the outward form of ethnic tensions. Such concerns also reflect the desire of academicians and practitioners to work together on the pluralism programme. The following article is a conversation with the Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda, coordinator of the Knowledge Programme in Uganda.

Following the events from abroad, it was not easy to get a clear understanding of what was happening there in Kampala. Can you describe your own experience being right at the centre of the violence?

On that day, September 10th, we were gathered at our offices, working with a coalition of individuals involved in cultural rights and heritage issues. Sitting here at this very table we suddenly heard a lot of noise outside. People were shouting, there was shooting in the distance, we felt a strange irritation in our eyes which turned out to be teargas and all of a sudden there were gunshots right outside our gate.

Not knowing what was happening we remained where we were until early evening. When we left, the streets were deserted, except for the army riding around in *mamba's*². There was no public transport, people walked to reach their homes.

What we learned during the following days was that 27 people had died, at least 13 of them shot by the army or the police³. Journalists had been arrested, radio stations shut down, and hundreds of people are still in custody.

What had caused people to protest? Or can you call it a riot? And why did the government forces use so much violence?

The *Kabaka* (king) of Buganda⁴ wanted to visit a part of the kingdom in the district of Kayunga, about 100 km away from Kampala. In Kayunga, about 15% of the population comes from a minority group (the Banyala), some of whom have opted out of the kingdom. The government was in the process of recognizing the legitimacy of this claim. One can assume that these developments have caused the *Kabaka* to want to reinstate his authority over the area by making his presence there. Some of the Banyala had opposed the visit, saying that the *Kabaka* should first get permission from their leader. When - in preparation of his visit - the king's aide attempted to travel to Kayunga, he was stopped by the police who said that a visit by the *Kabaka* would incite violence.

² Armored personnel carriers.

³ According to investigations by Human Rights Watch. See the report "Uganda: Investigate Use of Lethal Force During Riots" (October 1st, 2009) at <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2009/10/01/uganda-troops-killed-unarmed-people-riot-period>

⁴ the kingdom is situated at the centre of Uganda including the capital Kampala.

The news about this incident quickly traveled to Kampala via the Buganda kingdom and other radio stations and spread further through mobile phones. Young Baganda men took to the streets to protest. A police station and police posts were attacked, shops were looted, vehicles set on fire and non-Baganda were singled out and molested.

The police could not control the situation and the army was quickly called in. We would say that the government forces were caught off guard. The police and army were rough in dealing with the protesters and the general public. Several people were shot. However, in spite of calls to investigate excessive use of force, no army or police person has been arrested so far.

Is it true that Ugandans of Indian background and people from the Western region⁵ were especially targeted and molested?

It was mostly young unemployed men who took part in the riots. Many of them have migrated from Baganda villages to Kampala in search of jobs and end up in very miserable circumstances in the semi-lawless slums of the capital. At the same time, there is a popular perception that some groups have been given preferential treatment. The Westerners are seen to get all the senior government jobs, the Indians own the hotels and dominate big business. There is visible wealth side by side with extreme poverty.

So that September night, instant rules were being set on the street to identify non-Baganda. People were being asked to sing the anthem of Buganda or give the names of one's father as a way to prove their ethnic identity .

So the anger was not so much directed at the police or the government but at fellow citizens?

Well, both. There is a lot of frustration about the continuing poverty, unemployment, land rights –and about lack of influence. Much of the disappointment is attributed to the current government. Also, over the years, Kampala has become a city where the majority vote for opposition candidates. So there are multiple reasons for dissatisfaction and the rebuke of the *Kabaka* by the President – for those who identify with the kingdom - just added the spark that led to the fire.

And indeed, the innocent passer-by fell victim, especially people of Indian origin and Ugandans from the Western region. But there were also cases of women wearing trousers who were being attacked for not having dressed as real Baganda. So probably one must conclude that the issue of 'identity' and the feeling that one's identity is being threatened from various sides has played a significant role here.

But what about the minority group, the Banyala. Were they not specifically targeted?

You know, Kayunga district is a hundred kilometers away from Kampala. Besides, people are wondering who the Banyala really are. They were hardly present in national politics and, for those who knew about them, they were seen as a small immigrant group in a far corner of the Buganda kingdom. It is suspected that the central government has stirred up the controversy to undermine the unity of the Buganda Kingdom. President Museveni and the *Kabaka* have had a troubled relationship for some time. Museveni reinstated cultural kingdoms as legitimate entities within Uganda in 1993. However, this move has not quite resulted in the loyalty the President may have wished for – at least not on the part of Buganda. Museveni himself is from the West. There is a widespread perception that he has favored his own ethnic group when it comes to government positions and all attendant benefits. Many Baganda feel that 'now is their turn to eat'. So leading up the elections in 2011, there is a lot of tension here. The move to support the Banyala against Buganda can be seen as another manifestation of the same divide-and-rule strategy that led to the restoration of Buganda and other kingdoms in the first place.

⁵ 'Western region' refers to the Western and South-Western provinces of Uganda. In public debate the use of this term often implies reference to the Banyankole, the ethnic group of President Museveni.

How would you assess the different responses, i.e. the official statements by the government about the necessary steps to resolve the crisis? For instance, the calls for having a clear policy on the role of cultural and traditional leaders? But also the allegations of foreign interests sponsoring cultural leaders – Libya has been mentioned – to ascertain themselves vis-à-vis the central government?

The restoration of law and order was the immediate government concern. The violence on the streets was described as acts of 'terrorists' that needed to be punished and who had acted with the complicity of elements in the Buganda Kingdom who - it was alleged- had overstepped their authority by attempting to make a provocative visit. Hence the second element in the government's response which was to call for a policy that would have to stipulate clearly what cultural organizations would be allowed to do and where the 'cultural' would end and the 'political' would start. This is bound to stir further controversy. The government will for instance consider the issue of land rights a delicate political issue, whereas the traditional kingdom will also want to have their say in such matters.

As to external influences, who knows? It is however common knowledge that the Libyan leader Gaddafi has had a number of differences with President Museveni and that Gaddafi had once invited hundreds of cultural leaders (kings, clan leaders etc.) from African countries to discuss the future of the African Union and their role in this respect. So if Gaddafi had tried to forge closer ties with the *Kabaka*, that would not seem illogical, but we would doubt that this could have led to an orchestrated protest against the current government.

A few days later, President Museveni started talking about the lack of economic prospects for the youth which leads to frustrations, idleness and crime of one sort or the other. This is absolutely true: a growing group of unemployed young men is forming an urban underclass that is prone to manipulation for political ends. However, if the President really was to do something about this issue, he would also have to refer to the growth of our population in general. In ten or twenty years time there will be even more jobless, disillusioned youngsters. Yet regulation of the birth rate is a taboo. Many children are considered a blessing and a necessity in our cultures. We do not see Museveni starting to question that norm.

Now there has been a meeting between the Kabaka and the President...

... which is a good thing. It was, we are told, the first in two years. But what they talked about and whether this will translate into any concrete action – we don't know. We only saw the media images of diplomatic smiles and handshakes.

More generally, the events were quite alarming, considering their effect of undermining any feeling of stability and threatening freedom of expression. There has been a feeling of lawlessness, even regarding the way the police and army have handled the conflict, without being held to account. Media houses have been closed down and journalists arrested on charges of sedition, some of them after being abused by unidentified security operatives. Radio and television talk shows are circumventing sensitive issues these days. We hear that some of the people arrested during those two days in September included people who had called in at those radio talk shows to give their opinion on the events. While some may well have crossed the line of inciting violence, the crackdown on the media has certainly increased self-censorship.

From your own analysis, where should change happen first? Is it the political process, or the system of governance, or for instance a programme of education and employment for youth? And who could be the driver of change?

This question sounds simple, but there is no easy answer. Much depends on your time horizon: structural issues such as poverty and land issues have to be resolved, but change will not happen in the next few months. In a sense, this question is the core of our collective search as civil society for effective strategies to have an impact on the current developments. The next presidential elections are in 2011; President Museveni has been in power since 1986 and wants to run again. There is a level of cynicism: there ought to be a free and fair competition, but people have become cynical about elections. They feel disenfranchised. While in the past local councils were considered a part of governance where communities would feel a degree of decision making power, today even the very local level is seen as an extended arm of the government.

So now we have a situation where political tensions are mounting as we approach 2011 and citizens become increasingly frustrated by a lack of access to the political process. This needs to be addressed before developing all kinds of new initiatives for youth and the unemployed. We should work on a re-configuration of the national debate – something we are aiming at with this knowledge programme on pluralism. Inclusion of voices down to the community level, across all ethnic groups, taking the youth seriously, returning full freedom of speech to opinion leaders, allowing more space in the debate to religious institutions...

Is there any perceivable pressure by international donors on the government?

We have not seen a strong response following the September events. There has been a rather mild statement initiated by the British and signed by several other countries, including the Netherlands if we recall correctly. On the non-governmental side, Human Rights Watch has issued several statements on the need to investigate the deaths supposedly caused by police and army bullets and on the restricted freedom of expression. Civil society has also issued and published a statement.

To what extent donor criticism would lead to policy changes is debatable, but a visible international community would show to the Ugandan people that there is a certain level of concern and a sense of solidarity.

Will these events have an impact on research work currently underway as part of the pluralism programme in selected communities in Northern and Central Uganda?

In some cases the 'events' have already caused respondents in those communities to consider the subject of pluralism as 'delicate' and 'politically sensitive'. It means the interviewers need to be well prepared, using different methods to distill genuine views from answers given to describe a desired situation. We need to work more with individualized engagements, rather than group discussions. Also taking a historical perspective might be useful, comparing pluralism 'now' and 'then'. To gain confidence, researchers have worked (and continue to work) with local relay persons, for instance local people who have worked with the local NGO fora before. In this respect, having academicians and practitioners join forces has already helped us here.

What would be your dearest wish thinking of the outcomes of the local researches?

Unfortunately these events and the responses to them are not the end of the story. There is just so much fertile ground for the tensions to erupt again. But we would wish that our local research also shows positive examples of how communities have managed diversity and developed togetherness. Such a positive approach could help us regain the initiative in shaping the public debate on national unity.

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