

Religion and democracy in Uganda: A historical perspective

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This is so broad a subject! Any attempt at tackling it in half an hour easily comes across as pretentious. I am reminded of a line in that famous old film, *Sound of Music*: “How do you catch a cloud and pin it down?” I don’t promise to pin down any cloud. I will only make use of a few historical examples to make a few arguments and raise questions for our reflection.

I wish to start with some general preliminary observations which I hope will help provide context to my brief historical analysis. One of the most cited lines on Traditional African Religions, from the late Kenyan theologian John S. Mbiti, is that ‘Africans are notoriously religious’. The notoriety of (black) Africans is reflected by a kind of spirituality that binds every aspect of life in Africa – whereby religion is not a performance of the Sunday or Friday. It is part and parcel of the everyday – farming, celebration, marriage, social relationships, environmental conservation, leisure, hunting, fishing, dying, mourning, etc.

While the influence of spirituality on the everyday has significantly changed today, religion still plays some role in influencing everyday choices. However, I am not oblivious of the fact that there are significant variations in how people relate to traditional spiritual beliefs as compared to foreign religious expressions – especially on how religious views may inform political choices or not; heeding to religious leaders or not ...

According to the 2014 Census, 39% of Ugandans are Roman Catholic, 32% Anglican, 11% Pentecostal Christian, 14% Muslim, while other religious groups and those with no religious affiliation constitute 5%. Agnostics and atheists combined are only 0.2%. Thus, over 99% of Ugandans are affiliated to some religion. Of course, the statistics do not tell us what percentage practices, what percentage is simply nominally affiliated or just by default. Nevertheless, the statistics are telling about the place of religion in the sensibilities of the country.

The historical role of religion in shaping the governance of the country needs to be understood within the above context – both in consideration of the precolonial and postcolonial dynamics. The setting is such that politics and religion are intricately infused and entangled in such a way that none can do without the other. Throughout the country’s history, at varying degrees, it has been of interest for religious leaders to shape national politics – both as evangelical exercise and for their own survival or personal interests. Similarly, it has been of strategic consideration for politicians to court, guide, manipulate and arm-twist religious leaders or their bodies.

In studying the historical role of religion in Uganda’s democratisation process, there is a temptation to simplify the agency religious denominations by saying the Anglicans did this,

Muslims did that, Catholics did this, Pentecostals did that, etc. This prevents us from appreciating the complex and sometimes non-unified agency from within that is sometimes strongly counter to officialdom. Also, sometimes what we consider to be a strong voice of a certain religious group is basically an outcome of individual religious personalities at the helm of the group. This can be seen in the changes in voice from a particular group/institution that come along with the change of the group's leader. These variations can be seen even within joint bodies like Uganda Joint Christian Council and Inter-Religious Council of Uganda. And, among non-centralised religions such as the Pentecostal and Traditional ones, judgement on political action is varied depending on individual leaders' own considerations that may depend on a wide range of factors.

What democracy?

For a clear conversation on the role of religion in shaping democracy in Uganda's history, we need an operational understanding of democracy – which I will treat in very general terms. I consider democratic governance to be that which seeks to maximise the happiness of people and to minimise suffering. This necessitates people's involvement in making decisions that affect them – hence the importance of elections as means through which people would delegate those that can best represent their interests. Elections are just one component, but, for many, they have come to mean the entirety of democracy. Perhaps this speaks to the importance of this component, since if people have no power to determine who governs them then other elements like accountability, responsiveness, etc. become difficult to achieve. Therefore, in assessing if an individual or institution serves to foster democracy, we need to look at both how that individual or institution's work **shapes the public** and how it **shapes or influences those in public authority** (or government).

On shaping the public, we need to ask if they enhance people's civic competences, i.e., capacity to participate in governance; to demand for accountability; resist exploitation and oppression; understand their rights, entitlements, and responsibilities as citizens; and capacity for free speech. Key among the critical interventions for enhancing the above capacities/capabilities is education – both formal and informal. Education for grooming democratic leaders (right from early formative stages); education for enhancing civic awareness; education for integrity; education for reducing public gullibility; education for boosting communicative capacities; education for critical exposure and critical reflection ...

In saying that “the best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter”, Abraham Lincoln was basically pointing at the danger of an ignorant populace in a democracy. Reducing civic and general ignorance is therefore of key importance. Notably, the majority of outstanding schools in Uganda are founded by religious bodies. As such, the historical role of religious bodies and individuals in the education sector needs to be considered in any discourse on their contributions to building democracy in the country.

Quite often, assessments of religious contribution to democracy are limited to direct speech or activism by religious leaders against undemocratic practices. This can take the form of pastoral letters, press statements, homilies, views in the press, social media posts, street protests, etc. These tend to elicit more public recognition and commendation due to

their directness, immediacy, drama and the courage they tend to exhibit. The attention they draw is also partly because they easily stand out as they are few.

My focus will also be on the direct contributions, mainly because:

- i) while others such as formal education are very important, they can easily be used as excuses for not taking other equally critical bold steps;
- ii) the indirect ones tend to be too general, not easily rendering themselves being assessed on their direct contribution to democracy;

I will now briefly turn to the history.

Born conjoined: Religion and Ugandan politics

Buganda was perhaps the earliest point of 'foreign' contact in present-day Uganda, the earliest recorded interaction being with Arab traders in 1845. With these came Islam. Europeans explorers were to arrive seventeen years later, soon followed by Anglican and later Catholic missionaries towards the close of the 19th Century.

Since all the three were (among other reasons) interested in recruiting converts, the palace became a space of religious competition for royal attention and for controlling the throne. The oversimplified story of the Uganda martyrs is best understood within the context of these political contestations. Dan Mudoola (1993) notes that: "Such was the polarisation of forces that a combination of Christians and Moslems overthrew Mwanga and imposed a Kabaka of their own", Kiweewa. According to Lwanga Lunyiigo, in his book on Mwanga (2011), with such an alliance, "the destruction of the monarchy and the state was given an ethical veneer. The 'evil' Mwanga was against the forces 'virtue'". However, the 'virtuous' alliance had nothing to hold it together beyond the overthrow of Mwanga. It thus collapsed soon after. The Muslims took power and installed their own Kabaka, Kalema, with strong ties with the Sultan of Zanzibar. Contrary to the Baganda cultural norm against kings shedding own blood, Kabaka Kalema was soon circumcised and named Nuhu. He declared Islam the state religion, decreed that every Muganda male had to be circumcised, and that Sharia law was to be followed. In an extract from the letter he is said to have written to Sultan Seyyid upon ascension onto the throne in December 1888, Kalema declared: "*I am now the King of Buganda and Muslim. I believe in Allah and his prophet Mohammed and I always thank God for that. Please send me your flag, Islamic books, teachers and arms and ammunition to convert the infidels*".

In countering Islamic establishment, the Christians mended fences with exiled Mwanga and he even took the name Leo after Msgr Leon Livinhac. In a new Catholic-Protestant alliance, the Moslems were defeated. With British support, the politico-religious fights that lasted over 13 years eventually culminated in victory for the protestants in 1892. Their victory was further cemented in the 1900 Agreement, with a lion's share of chieftaincies within Buganda and in the rest of Uganda. Both Muslims and Catholics were denied access to the positions of Kabaka and Katikkiro. This status quo came to define much of the postcolonial political set-up, and to a large extent, the political agency of different religious groups. The ethno-religious character of early political parties, such as DP being Catholic and UPC Anglican, is rooted in the above history.

This history also meant that while religious leaders would continue providing critical guidance on national affairs as part of their prophetic and spiritual duty, they would as well tacitly mind about their proximity to power and its benefits to their institutions and individuals. This brought forth a complex relationship which has been evolving over time - mediated by increasing state patronage and violence, shifts in religious funding, and the emergence of Pentecostal churches in the 1980s. The eventual formation of joint bodies such as UJCC and IRCU would later help in bolstering the civic agency of religious institutions plus overcoming the historical trappings and political vulnerabilities of going it alone, but with some new challenges.

Religious voice and patronage

On many occasions, some religious leaders and umbrella bodies have been outspoken against undemocratic practices and they have sometimes come out to suggest alternatives. The response of the state has mainly been five-fold: *Sometimes it has been dialogue; sometimes silence; sometimes violence; sometimes reminding religious leaders that it was not their business; and sometimes material inducement.*

All through Uganda's history, presidents have at one time or the other invited religious leaders for dialogue over issues they raised. Perhaps many outcomes of such dialogues go unannounced. In a paper we co-authored with Henni Alava, following on the nomenclature from the data, we referred to this approach as 'diplomatic'. Some religious leaders indicated that much of their work happens behind curtains, making some people think that they are silent. While this approach is at times more effective, it comes with a danger of breaking public trust in religious leaders. The public is left to guess what is happening, often suspecting cowardice or being compromised – especially where at the same time people see government or politicians handing over huge 'gifts' to religious leaders.

The phenomenon of gifts is not new to Ugandan politics. It appears that all presidents understood the old saying which says: 'No matter how far an eagle flies up the sky, it will definitely come down to look for food.'

President Milton Obote, an Anglican, had a lukewarm relationship with the Catholic Church under Archbishop Joseph Kiwanuka, especially following his government's move to take over church schools. When Archbishop Kiwanuka died in 1966 and was succeeded by Emmanuel Nsubuga, Obote saw this as an opportunity to mend fences with the Catholic Church – since even the Protestant group had split into two factions, one supporting Obote, another sympatic to the Kabaka that had been overthrown by Obote. At a church service at Rubaga Cathedral, Obote personally handed over a present of a Mercedes-Benz to help the Archbishop with his duties.

In his book, *The Social Origins of Violence in Uganda*, A. B. Kasozi notes that when Amin took over power from Obote in 1971, having observed the challenges the latter faced from religious leaders, he was initially keen on creating an impression of a religious pacifist, or, as some called him, an 'ecumenical mediator'. He soon created a Department of Religious Affairs and organised religious conferences in 1971 and 1972. He as well persuaded the various Muslim factions to work under one body – The Uganda Muslim Supreme Council (UMSC) and urged Anglican factions to as well unite. He often consulted and sought the

company of religious leaders. One striking gesture is when he was accompanied by the Muslim Chief Kadhi, plus the Catholic and Anglican Archbishops to the OAU summit in Morocco in 1972. On 31st December 1971, Amin's government donated 100,000/- to the Muslim, Catholic, and Protestant faiths, each. He also donated 12 acres of land in Old Kampala for the construction of a mosque and headquarters of UMSC. Towards the project of constructing the Catholic Martyrs' shrine at Namugongo, he donated his salary. Outdoing Obote in car donation, he gave each of the three religious leaders a Mercedes Benz.

Later in Amin's leadership, seeing that there was still resistance from religious leaders towards his excesses, he gradually replaced donation and consultation gestures with threats and violence. While it is the murder of Archbishop Janan Luwum that took prominence, several others were killed, including Muslims who either resisted or seemed to stand in his way.

Donations to religious leaders have taken interesting new twists under President Museveni. At almost every consecration of a new Catholic or Anglican Bishop, a car has been donated by the President. Some not only get car gifts but also the privilege of convoys with military escorts. The irony is that there has been no public report of any of the 'men of God' seeking to establish the source of funds for the random cars that are never accounted for. I imagine that it is conveniently assumed that the source must be the official presidential budget for donations. Besides, and for more convenience, isn't it impolite to look a gift horse into its mouth?

The German philosopher Frederick Nietzsche asked: "Shouldn't the giver be grateful to the receiver?" Indeed, the President must be grateful. In 2013, Muslim leaders in Luwero district expressed discontent with the President for side-lining them in his donation of vehicles and other things to religious leaders. In 2015, the President donated cars to eleven Muslim district leaders. Shaking hands with him while receiving the car keys, they chanted: "Allahu Akbar". In a more dramatic case, this year, Christians in Kigezi complained on behalf of their Bishop that the car which had been donated to him at his consecration was inappropriate. Two months later, a Toyota Land Cruiser GR-Sport was delivered in replacement, and the Bishop thanked the president for listening to the concerns of the Christians.

These gifts remind me of a certain government official whom I drew in a critical cartoon and he reached out to me commending me for it. He requested to buy a framed copy of it, for which he gave me more money than I charged him. I know how it feels criticising him again, and therefore understand when concern is raised about the random gifts to religious leaders. It is not helped by the fact that many beneficiaries go quiet or vague after.

Where some religious leaders have remained critical, they have been reminded by government to stick to their work and not meddle into politics. At the 16th Coronation anniversary of Omukama Solomon Gafabusa of Bunyoro in 2010, President Museveni used the analogy of *Olubimbi* (digging allocations) to demonstrate that politicians, religious, and cultural leaders each have their role. In a subtle threat, he said that if one suddenly abandoned their *lubimbi* and crossed into another person's, he/she could easily have his

head cut off and become a casualty. “I have never baptised anyone, though I know how they baptise. I am a Christian but I do not baptise—that is not my role”, he added. Ironically, religious leaders who actively join the government side are welcomed with open hands and some are directly appointed into political positions.

It is possible that, following the constant reminders to not trespass, out of fear, some religious leaders have in self-preservation decided to either tread very carefully, withdraw from politically sensitive matters, or operate on an evasive level of generality – such as in making blanket calls to all Ugandans to be fair to each other. Besides, there is also the awareness that being seen as a critic of government can come with other survival costs to religious institutions and individual leaders. Some religious leaders have raised concerns about spies being planted amongst them and divisions being sowed in their spaces in ‘divide and rule’ strategies.

There is as well an emergent category of churches built around individuals. Without national and international structures, they know they are more vulnerable than their institutionalised colleagues. They can be very easy targets of state repression. Some of these have carefully studied aspects of existential desperation in the country and constructed their religiosity around those – poverty, relationship challenges, unemployment, disease, etc. With promises of spiritual and mystical intervention, they financially exploit their followers. Because the state can always find good reasons for closing them, such church leaders know that their security is either in aligning with government interests or remaining silent about government shortcomings. As the adage says, a person who sells eggs should not start a fight in the market. After all, with a few exceptions, they have observed that their ‘connected’ colleagues who have committed scandals walk away scot-free.

Religious (de)politicisation

Important as religion might be, it has been and can be used to serve various pretexts. It could as well bring forth inadvertent outcomes contrary to the good faith with which its initiatives might arise.

For instance, during the 2016 elections, in fear of a possibility of violence, different religious leaders prayed for and urged people to remain peaceful. Constant messages urging people to keep peace ran on different TV stations. While public violence often arises from injustices or perceptions of so, in these calls for peace, JUSTICE only featured by inference. Well intentioned as they might have been, these messages fitted in well with government’s clamp-down on opposition in the name of peace and security. They as well had an effect of demobilising legitimate alternative actions in response to injustices. Little wonder then that in 2021, when doves symbolically released by religious leaders under UJCC in prayers for peace did not fly, many Ugandans read solidarity and metaphorical defiance in the doves’ act. Perhaps the birds were just fatigued, but their act offered an opportunity for public feedback. For instance, one Aldrine Nsubuga Snr had this to say:

Never before have doves or pigeons on a peace carrying mission disobeyed the messenger. From the biblical days to modern day history, these birds always oblige. Not this time. God is now using anything; including birds, to send out his message. He is not happy. It’s a warning sign to the religious leaders. In refusing to carry the peace message, the birds were telling the men

of God that it was the wrong message. Ugandans in this moment want to hear religious leaders speak out against inhumanity, injustice, murder, inequality, insecurity and unfairness. Without these, there can't be peace” (NewzPost, January 14, 2021).

Notably too on depoliticisation, some religious leaders have selectively preached that “leaders come from God”, thus laying down a theological determinism that would make their followers withdraw into a conviction that their own actions meant nothing and that, no matter the means with which authority is acquired, it should be respected.

A case in point is the 2016 elections which UJCC took part in observing and came out with critical preliminary remarks noting a litany of anomalies in the exercise, as did the EU observers. However, soon after, before the petition challenging the results was disposed of, the Chairperson of UJCC congratulated Mr Museveni upon the ‘victory’! Once the petition was later curiously dismissed, he stated that this proved that Museveni was indeed “lawfully elected and is a leader chosen by the Almighty God”. Some religious leaders have also told their followers that the only solution is prayer, and that God will respond at His own time. Apart from its demobilisation effect, the other side to this spiritual deployment is that in times of political helplessness when much has been tried in vain, it provides hope and consolation.

Conclusion

Drawing from this short historical analysis, and with admission that there is much more complexity than I have spoken of here, what is very clear is that religion has been critical in Uganda’s journey of building democracy – both as a progressive and problematic factor. The most significant contribution in my view is the indirect one, through fostering education to address illiteracy, ignorance, and boost civic agency. While some Ugandan religious leaders have actively lobbied for governments, or silently condoned authoritarian practices, others have sought to expand public debate by voicing popular concerns. The choices of religious actors have been shaped by state behaviour, fear, individual character, material interests, and varied circumstances. Diminishing non-government funding amidst huge capital ventures has also increased the vulnerability of religious leaders to state manipulation. Lastly, while the conscience of religion is important in the democratisation process, Uganda’s history has as well showed that the agency of religion also needs to be regulated by the state. As Robert Heinlein warns, “almost any sect, cult, or religion will legislate its creed into law if it acquires the political power to do so”.