

IDENTITY MANIPULATION AND SPONTANEOUS MOBILIZATION: THE PERSISTENCE OF LOW-INTENSITY CONFLICT IN THE RWENZORI REGION

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Among the violent events that have affected – and unfortunately still affect – Uganda, a prominent place is undoubtedly occupied by the insurgency in the northern regions, the key figure of which is the infamous Joseph Kony. Less well known, also due to lower levels of violence, are the vicissitudes affecting the western portion of the country, in particular the region called Rwenzori: an area on the border with Congo, which has a long tradition of rebellion against the Ugandan government. It has also become infamous for a series of episodes that have caused several hundred deaths altogether.

The first episode, and also the bloodiest, dates back to July 2014, when some hundreds of young people affiliated to one of the cultural institutions of the area, the "Rwenzururu Kingdom" (*Obusinga bwa Rwenzururu*), launched a series of coordinated attacks in the Bundibugyo, Kasese and Ntoroko districts (the latter created in 2010 in the northern portion of the Bundibugyo district and not yet

indicated on the map below). Violence was mainly directed against personnel and governmental structures, but civilians and the king palace of another cultural institution, the "Bwamba Kingdom" (*Obudhinghiya bwa Bwamba*), were also attacked. The level of coordination behind the attacks, which affected a very wide area within a short period of time, led analysts to believe that some unruly Islamists based in Congo (particularly coming from or linked to the Alliance of Democratic Forces – ADF) organized them, even if this remains a groundless hypothesis. The attacks of July 2014 and the reprisals that followed caused the deaths of about a hundred people, but the existence of several mass graves with unidentified bodies has led to an estimation that doubles the number of initial estimates. In the second half of 2014, the government rushed to start a rehabilitation program that ended with an amnesty being granted to about 500 of those who participated in the attacks.

Tension rose again between February and March 2016 after the presidential elections, which ended in yet another confirmation of the president in

Map of Uganda. The Rwenzururu Kingdom comprises the Western districts of Bundibugyo, Kasese and Ntoroko, the latter of which was created in 2010 in the northern portion of the Bundibugyo district and is not yet indicated on the map.



charge Yoweri Museveni. There were clashes between the numerically dominant ethnic group in the region, the Bakonzo, and other ethnic groups (primarily Bamba and Basongora), and new attacks on government installations. Violence affected the Bundibugyo and Kasese districts and caused a few dozen deaths. In the end, in November 2016, some guards loyal to the Rwenzururu Kingdom attacked policemen and soldiers in Kasese, generating a violent reprisal that saw government forces raid the kingdom's palace, arrest or kill militiamen loyal to the king and indict the king himself, Charles Wesley Mumbere.

So how do we understand what is going on in the Rwenzori region? Extensive research on the issue suggests that two factors are particularly crucial: first, history, and second, the form that "identity politics" has taken in recent years, intersecting with political issues at the national level. With regards to history, the focus is on the Rwenzururu Movement (1962–1982), an insurrectionary and secessionist movement mainly (although not exclusively) composed of Bakonzo. The quantitative predominance of the Bakonzo in the region helps to explain the dominant role of this ethnic group in the movement, but it is important to remember that other ethnic groups (firstly the Bamba) were also included in the movement and shared its agenda. It was not accidental that, besides the Bakonzo Isaya Mukirania, there were two Bamba co-founders: Yeremiya Kawamara and Petero Mupalya. The presence of common enemies initially overshadowed ethnic differences; but over time, the weakening of the perceived "shared threat" not only broke up the unity of the movement but also increased tensions among the groups that composed it. In 1982, the activities of the movement stopped with a ceasefire agreement between the government of Uganda (again ruled by Milton Obote, who succeeded Idi Amin) and Charles Wesley Mumbere, son of Mukirania.

How is this history linked to the latest cycles of violence, then? In 1995, the Constitution of Uganda, which was still in force, reintroduced the kingdoms that had been abolished by mid-1960s leader of Uganda, Milton Obote, although it did not recognize them as having any power. It also offered the opportunity to establish cultural institutions for the preservation of local customs. An issue though is that a cultural institution can be called a "kingdom" even if there is no historical basis for such a designation. In the Rwenzori region, the effects of this rule became negative when they intersected with the electoral dynamics: the 2005 constitutional amendments introduced multipartyism in Uganda, and this made the ethnic card an interesting "weapon" from the electoral point of view, both for

Yoweri Museveni and for his national opponents. It was not by accident that in the electoral campaign before the 2006 general elections (the first multiparty elections), the opposition to Museveni – organized in the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) lead by Kizza Besigye – promised the foundation of a "Rwenzururu Kingdom" and won the election in the Kasese district, although it was defeated at national level. After the elections, Museveni granted the foundation of the *Obusinga bwa Rwenzururu* and recognized Charles Wesley Mumbere as king. This generated two effects that have formed the basis of the violent events that have occurred from 2014 to the present.

First, this caused a "spontaneous mobilization" of some Bakonzo extremists, who still identify themselves with the struggle for independence led by Isaya Mukirania and want not only to secede from Uganda, but also to unify Bakonzo and Banande in Yira State. This explains why most of the attacks carried out by affiliates or people close to the Obusinga were aimed at the government. Second, the foundation of the Obusinga itself triggered a defensive reaction from Bamba and other minorities in the region who do not share the agenda of the Rwenzururu Kingdom and do not feel subordinated to it, despite the years of shared struggle. For this reason, even the Bamba claimed an autonomous cultural institution of their own. In May 2014, the son of Yeremiya Kawamara, Martin Kamy Ayongi, was thus crowned king of the Bwamba Kingdom (*Obudhingiya Bwa Bwamba*), which generated resentment in some Bakonzo. This progressive stiffening of

identities thus explains the increase in clashes among ethnic communities.

Musuvani has been in power for thirty years now. This, combined with the ambitions of self-styled local traditional leaders, implies that the scenario observed in the Rwenzori region is replicating in other parts of the country (there were several applications for recognition of cultural institutions during the last election campaign). It also leads to imagine a probable repetition of these dynamics in the near future, to the detriment of the unity of the Ugandan common identity and of the stability of central institutions. Unfortunately, it is a scenario that is very conducive to the proliferation of violence.



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