

An illustration of Ugandan representatives attending the Moshi Conference in Tanzania in March 1979. ILLUSTRATIONS/ IVAN SENYONJO

Moshi Conference opens in Tanzania

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BY ISAAC MUFUMBA

Forty seven years ago on Tuesday, a meeting of Ugandans who had fled into exile during the reign of then president Idi Amin and representatives of groups that had been opposed to his rule opened in the Tanzanian town of Moshi.

The meeting, which has since come to be famously referred to as the Moshi Conference, opened on March 24, 1979, and closed on March 26, 1979.

Some of those who attended were representatives of the Kikosi Maluum, which was loyal to Milton Obote; the Front for National Salvation (Fronasa) of Yoweri Museveni; the Save Uganda Movement of Akena p'Ojok, William Omaria and Ateker Ejalu; the Uganda Liberation Group of Immanuel Oteng and Uganda National Movement of John Barigye.

Others were the Uganda Human Right Group of George Kanyeihamba; Uganda Action Group of Paulo Muwanga; Popular Front for the Liberation of Uganda of John Odongkara; the Uganda Freedom Union of Godfrey Binaisa; the Relief Educational Training Uganda Refugees Now (RETURN) of Bishop Festo Kevengere and the Uganda National Unity and Reconciliation Organisation of Eric Otema Alimadi.

Binaisa was later to serve as president between June 21, 1979, and May 12, 1980. He died on August 5, 2010, at the age of 90.

Alimadi was prime minister under Obote II. He died on August 7, 2001, of kidney failure. He was 72 years of age.

The rest were the Uganda Society of Yusuf Lule and Martin Aliker; the Uganda Discussion Group of Tarsis Kabwegyere; the Uganda Nationalist Organisation of Robert Serumaga; the Uganda Liberation Movement of Dani Wadada Nabudere.

Prof Nabuderre died on November 9, 2011, in Mbale at the age of 78.

Amin's ouster imminent

By the time the conference, where Prof Kabwegyere was the convener, opened, it was evident that Kampala would be falling to the advancing Tanzania People's Defence Forces (TPDF) and Ugandan fighting groups such as Fronasa and the Kikoosi Maluum under the joint command of Gen Tito Okello and Brig David Oyite-Ojok was imminent.

The fighting spirit of Amin's forces, the Uganda Army (UA), had broken during the March 11, 1979, battle of Lukaya in which Col Godwin Sule, the man to whom Amin had relinquished command of the war, was killed along with more than 200 Libyan fighters and another 200 or so UA soldiers.

Some 59 Libyan fighters were taken prisoner. Others fled back to Kampala.

OBJECTIVES OF THE CONFERENCE

The conference was sponsored by the president of Tanzania, Julius Nyerere, but he did not want to impose any leaders on Uganda. "Mwalimu was very clear. He wanted the world to know that this was a Ugandan effort. Among those who attended the conference was Lule, who had been known to Nyerere from when the Tanzanian president was a student at Makerere," Prof Kabwegyere.

Objectives of conference

Once Lukaya fell, it became clear that Kampala was within reach. It was against that background that the conference was convened to work out a plan on how Uganda would be managed during the post-Amin era. Of utmost importance was the need to avert the possibility of a power vacuum following the fall of Amin.



Former presidents Milton Obote (left) and Idi Amin. PHOTO/ FILE

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"Mwalimu (Nyerere) was very clear. He wanted the world to know that this was a Ugandan effort. Among those who attended the conference was Lule, who had been known to Nyerere from when the Tanzanian president was a student at Makerere," Prof Kabwegyere told Sunday Monitor in a previous interview.

UNLF formed

Late on the afternoon of March 24, it was announced that the Uganda National Liberation Front (UNLF) had been formed.

The UNLF was to be governed by a 30-man National Consultative Committee (NCC) and an 11-person National Executive Committee (NEC).

It was at the same time agreed that there would be three special commissions, one on finance and administration, one on political and diplomatic affairs, and one on military affairs.

It was also agreed that the contingent of Ugandan fighters who were fighting alongside TPDF would be constituted into the Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA).

Lule unopposed

Obote had acquiesced to Nyerere's request that he stay away, but Obote's influence hovered over the conference like some giant sphinx. His party, the Uganda Peoples Congress (UPC), fronted Paulo Muwanga to contest for the post of chairperson of the UNLF, which meant taking over as president once Kampala had fallen.

Others who were eying the chairperson's seat were Lule – who had earlier served as the first Black principal of Makerere University College, and later assistant secretary general of the Association of African Universities, and much later assistant secretary general of the Commonwealth Secretariat – and Dr Aliker, a dental surgeon and businessman.

It is not clear whether Nyerere had anything to do with it, but it should be remembered that Lule's arrival in Moshi had not been on the cards. He turned up as a special guest of Nyerere, to whom he had been known when the latter was a student at Makerere.

Despite the fact that the trio had initially expressed interest in the contest, no votes were cast. Again, it is not known whether Nyerere had anything to do with that.

"Dr Aliker stood down for Lule, and he went ahead to campaign for him. In his campaign for Lule, he (Aliker) told Muwanga to also step down because he was not a man of substance," Prof Kabwegyere revealed in a previous interview.

Dr Aliker died on April 15, 2024, at the age of 95.

Lule was unopposed and was named chairperson of the UNLF and President of Uganda.

Paulo Muwanga was named chairman of the all-powerful Military Commission. He later became chairman of the Military Council, which took control of matters of State after president Binaisa was deposed on May 12, 1980.

Muwanga, who took over control of the Electoral Commission (EC) during the controversial 1980 General Election, also served as vice president and minister of Defence during the Obote II days. He also served as executive prime minister for 24 days after Gen Tito Okello took power.

Muwanga died on April 1, 1991, at Nsambya hospital, six months after he had been released from jail. He was 67 years of age.

Eighteen days after he emerged as chairman, Lule was sworn in as president on April 13, 1979, in the presence of Museveni and Gen Tito Okello. Both would later become his successors.

Tito Okello was president between July 1985 and January 1986, when he was ousted by rebels of the National Resistance Army (NRA) who shot their way to power on January 26, 1986, a development which saw Mr Museveni become President.

Gen Tito Okello died on June 3, 1996, in Kampala at the age of 82.

Lule was ousted on June 20, 1979, after only 68 days in power.

He was ejected following a vote in which 18 out of the 32 members of the National Consultative Council (NCC), which served as Uganda's interim Parliament after the fall of Amin, voted on June 20, 1979, to remove him.

The NCC accused him of having "ignored democratic methods" of work, saying he had failed to consult on key appointments and policies. He was also accused of having failed to set up systems to facilitate recovery of the economy, adding that he had gone about attempts at reorganisation of local governments "arbitrarily".

The NCC decision to eject Lule was relayed to the public in a broadcast aired on Radio Uganda.

Lule died on January 21, 1985, in London, the United Kingdom, at the age of 72.

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