



Gen Idi Amin (behind steering wheel) greets crowds in Kampala after the coup against president Milton Obote in January 1971. PHOTO/FILE

When Ugandan minds needed rehabilitation after fall of Amin

In the second instalment of the serialisation of the book titled *Reinventing Uganda: Political Imagination and Social Change After the Fall of Idi Amin (1979-80)*, Florence Brisset-Foucault, Jessica Kabasila and team delve into the 'archipelago' of moral rehabilitation and explore how the wealthy mafutamingis, who thrived on corruption; the omnipresent magendoists, who smuggled goods; and the rootless bayaye, whose opportunism and violence made daily life chronically insecure, were looked at, in the post Idi Amin period, with a considerable degree of disdain.

Constantly in the air: More widely, rehabilitation was seen as a moral challenge, not an economic one. It was not Uganda's roads, nor the dilapidated equipment of its factories, nor war-damaged buildings that needed rehabilitation—it was people.

After Idi Amin's fall, the word 'rehabilitation' was constantly in the air. It was identified as one of the goals of the Moshi Conference; it was present in the title of the report produced by a team of Commonwealth experts who were rushed into the country only weeks after the Uganda National Liberation Front (UNLF) took power; it was everywhere in the press, on the radio and in daily conversation. But what was rehabilitation? For the Commonwealth experts, rehabilitation was a matter of economics, to be solved by investment and institutional change. But for politicians, and correspondents writing to the newspapers, it often meant much more.

Some did use rehabilitation to mean renewing the physical infrastructure of government—'houses, canteens and vehicles' for the police and prisons. But the material expectations of rehabilitation were also personal, as well as national: 'rehabilitation' could mean support to returning exiles to help them settle back in Uganda, and jobs for them.

One wrote to the *Weekly Topic* from Nairobi demanding that the UNLF 'rehabilitate all exiles indiscriminately in their former jobs'. The allocation of basic commodities—sugar, salt, cooking

oil—could be used as a 'rehabilitation'. So could the allocation of the property of those who had been expelled by Amin, or permission to exchange Uganda Shillings for foreign exchange. Rehabilitation could also just come as cash: in July 1979, it was announced that in the future, 'rehabilitation' for returning exiles would mean the cost of travel and a Shs40,000 grant. But should 'rehabilitation' also compensate those who had remained, the 'stayees', who kept the State going and suffered the direct consequences of Amin's rule? The debate raged in the press.

More widely, rehabilitation was seen as a moral challenge, not an economic one. It was not Uganda's roads, nor the dilapidated equipment of its factories, nor war-damaged buildings that needed rehabilitation—it was people. The catalyst for this anxiety was perhaps the widespread looting that accompanied Amin's fall. Yoweri Museveni, then Defence minister in the new government, directly linked the looting to 'physical and spiritual damage' inflicted by Amin. This moral language was widely echoed: 'Ugandans' minds need to be rehabilitated', complained one letter writer in the *Weekly Topic*. Another lamented the fact that the young no longer respected 'even an old lady or a clergyman' and called for a 'year of re-

habilitation'. Poor time-keeping on national radio should be addressed by 'rehabilitating' its staff; the undisciplined soldiers who robbed the public should be tamed by 'rehabilitation'.

A word with punitive overtones

Rehabilitation was a word with punitive overtones; in late-colonial East Africa, it had been the euphemism of choice for the system of detention and abuse devised for those accused of being Mau Mau. In Uganda, at the end of the 1970s the archetypes of this moral failure were not insurgents, however. They were the wealthy mafutamingis who thrived on corruption; the omnipresent magendoists who smuggled goods; and the rootless bayaye, whose opportunism and violence made daily life chronically insecure.

But behind the routine denunciations of these villains lay a deeper concern—that the population as a whole had gone astray. Some intellectuals, like Rev Kefa Sempangi, argued that the bayaye should be treated with compassion, because they were the product of Amin's regime: 'Bayayism is a direct result of an Aminist system. Everything produces after its own kind. This is a law of nature. (...) Amin's unpredictability is found reproduced in many sectors of our society'.

The boldest public critics, however, articulated an unease felt more widely: how could Amin have ruled for so long, if the population as a whole, from journalists to civil servants to farmers, had not been complicit? For them, Amin's regime was a shared moral failure.

This concern particularly shaped the political agenda of the new elite. Dani Nabudere, one of the key figures at Moshi, took the role of minister of Culture, Rehabilitation and Community Development when Yusuf Lule was replaced as president by Godfrey Binaisa. Nabudere saw the 'lack of moral and spiritual values' as more than just a consequence of Amin's rule. 'Unless every individual is accordingly rehabilitated, there could be more trouble'.

For Edward Rugumayo, who was chairman of the National Consultative Council (NCC): 'Our people must regain their dignity... Their morale must be gradually brought up to ensure that their destiny is in their hands'. Their vision of rehabilitation was to create a new kind of popular involvement and commitment through the UNLF itself: 'Rehabilitation will take place in two forms, regular education and active participation of the masses'.

An inversion of proper authority

Rehabilitation, then, became shorthand for the idea that a wider population needed the firm hand of government to remind them how to behave.

The book.



The Uganda Past and Future team

And for this indeed, education, schooling and authority had intertwined since the colonial era and the belief that the people should be taught their role as citizens in a mediated government practice. The Amin period was a crisis of proper authority: a crisis by 'illiterates', who wanted to be educated. As Nabudere wrote: 'The country had been in a state too long, and the people had been educated in the four principles of LF'.

Newspapers were full of debates on education: had schools been over by self-interested Aminists? Should the role of parents in the education sector be seen as a major undertaking by the state, or by the community, but also as a central part of the more general rehabilitation of the country. Youth needed to be disciplined home with strict moral authority and emphasis on work and moral responsibility as crucial. As a letter writer to the *Uganda Times*: 'Discipline your children at home, visit schools to see they behave and help us to shape people into good citizens of the home, the rest will be easy'.

Catholicism, moral rehabilitation

One of the most coordinated efforts to answer this call for restoration came from outside the Catholic actors, especially the Daughters of St Paul and the *Daughters of St Paul* magazine took this mission as its theme. In a pastoral letter titled *Rehabilitation of the Nation*, the bishops pointed to the moral degradation of Ugandans and have to struggle to eradicate the greed to become rich overnight to have an easy life of selfishness.

Good government and stability 'never be obtained unless the citizens of this country accept and recognize their own mistakes. There is no meaningful conversion without a severe contrition'. This could only be done by 're-educating' oneself. Rehabilitation offered an opportunity for the church to regain authority and reposition itself within the public sphere: 'It is our duty to teach the people and inform the government of what is right and wrong, and to advise it when it is going wrong'.

Christian intellectuals put forward an alternative definition of 'moral rehabilitation', reclaiming the moral of carrying out this fundamental process. The Catholic 'moral rehabilitation' campaign produced tens of thousands of leaflets and posters that encouraged this process of contrition. Through this material, the ambition was to 'help building the moral fibre of the nation'.

Their conception of rehabilitation relied on a particular interpretation of Amin's regime as the result of the collective responsibility of each and every Ugandan: corruption had not been produced by Amin's regime: it was there before and had produced Amin. The regime change was not enough. The Pastoral Letter Prayer for Moral Rehabilitation avowed that 'due to our human weakness and disobedience to You, we have turned into a den of thieves and murderers'. Cast in distinctive religious language, this expressed a common view: regime change should be a moment for Ugandans to reinvent themselves, individually and collectively.

The book serialisation continues...