

# Why Masaka always burns to save Uganda

Exactly 49 years ago last night, the combined forces of the Tanzanian People's Defence Forces and Uganda exile groups, the Uganda National Liberation Front/Army, dealt a decisive blow against the regime of Field Marshal Idi Amin in the Battle of Masaka (February 23 and 24, 1979).

You don't hear much about that battle these days, or about Masaka as the pivot of Uganda's 20th Century politics. Yet the three most seismic political changes in Uganda of the last 65 years all centred on Masaka.

In the 1979 war, Masaka (followed by Mbarara) suffered the greatest destruction. It was no accident. When the TPDF crossed the border alongside Ugandan exiles, it wasn't just looking to defeat Amin. One of its goals was to punish the Amin regime for its invasion of Tanzania's Kagera Salient between October 9 and 10, 1978, with the full-scale occupation culminating on 30 October 1978.

The TPDF used the Russian BM-21 Grad rocket launchers, nicknamed "saba saba". The bombardment was extensive and indiscriminate because the objective was psychological. Amin's troops, the vaunted Suicide Battalion, did not stand and fight for the glory of the Second Republic. They fled.

The reason Masaka (and Mbarara) were the hardest hit towns in that war was a matter of Tanzanian military doctrine. President Julius Nyerere wanted a buffer zone. By levelling Masaka, the TPDF ensured even if they had to withdraw, Amin would be left with a charred skeleton of a southern gateway, incapable of quickly supporting a counter-offensive.

Additionally, in 1979, Masaka was the heartbeat of the Ugandan economy. The Greater Masaka region produced 25 to 30 per cent of Uganda's robusta coffee, at a time when coffee accounted for nearly 90 per cent of foreign exchange earnings. When the town fell, the destruction of the Masaka Growers Co-operative Union was a body

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Ear to the Ground



blow to the State's liquidity.

The second big seismic economic shift came in 1985/1986. When Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Army (NRA) cut off the south-west region from the Tito Okello Military Council regime after it overthrew the Milton Obote second government in July 1985, Masaka became the NRA/NRM's de facto capital. The coffee stored in the Masaka Union godowns became the NRA's political magic potion.

By seizing these stores, the NRA didn't just feed its soldiers. It engaged in rudimentary but effective barter and international trade that funded the final push to Kampala. Without the Masaka coffee booty, the NRA might have remained a struggling guerrilla force longer. With it, they became a state-in-waiting.

Masaka was also an important cog in the third and earlier seismic change – Uganda's independence. It was the heartland of the Democratic Party and the landed Catholic elite. To the extent that the DP represented a liberal democratic hope at independence, that hope was birthed in the parishes of Buddu. Benedicto Kiwanuka, the first prime minister and a son of the soil, represented a vision of Uganda that was liberal-centrist, Catholic, and (unsurprisingly) independent of both the Mengo establishment and the Protestant hegemony of the Uganda

People's Congress. Masaka was the base for this "third way." There was great naivety to it, and so ahead of independence in 1962, it was outmanoeuvred by the tactical alliance between Obote and the Kabaka Yekka.

Still, it is the only town (city) in Uganda that has hosted the ideological pivot for three different eras. In 1962, it was the bid for civic democracy. In 1979, it was the graveyard of military fascism. In 1986, it was the launchpad for the military triumph of the current NRM liberation party rule.

All this makes Masaka's economic dynamism today remarkable because its recovery was a long, painful slog that differs from the rest of the war-ravaged country (even contrasted with Gulu, for example). After 1979, most of the town was a wasteland of pockmarked concrete. While Kampala saw a frenetic, chaotic boom in the 1990s, Masaka suffered from a double trauma.

First, the physical destruction of its infrastructure. More deadly, the decimation of its population by the HIV/Aids epidemic, which hit the Masaka-Rakai corridor with biblical ferocity just as the town was trying to rebuild from the 1979/1986 wars.

A less deadly, but still significant hit, had started in the 1962 post-independence marginalisation that led to a flight of intellectual capital from Greater Masaka. The 1979 war led to a destruction of physical capital. The 1986 conflict and the ensuing epidemic led to a collapse of its human capital. This is why Masaka's recovery is a special case. It had to rebuild its buildings, its farms, and its families all at once.

With Mbarara and Arua, no major towns of Uganda of the time carried the same level of burden, but Masaka remains the more symbolic of the three. The place that gets destroyed, and its wealth seized, so that Uganda can be saved.

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