

When liberation speaks too soon after the ballot

Every January 26, Uganda marks Liberation Day to commemorate a decisive historical moment. The symbolism matters. Nations need memory, and they need to honour sacrifice. But memory does not operate outside time. When and how a society remembers can either bind it together or quietly strain it.

For much of Uganda's post-1986 history, Liberation Day has fallen soon after national elections, often following intense campaigns and contested outcomes. In such moments, the country is rarely emotionally settled. Winners are relieved and celebratory; losers are processing disappointment, grievance, or exclusion. It is into this fragile national space that a victory ritual is inserted.

The intention is understandable: to reaffirm continuity, stability, and national origin. But intention does not cancel effect.

When liberation celebrations follow closely after elections, memory risks being heard not as shared inheritance but as validation of present power. Over time, liberation rhetoric can slip into something else: the celebration of conquest itself, look at me, I am the victor, I control the state. At that point, the focus quietly shifts from collective sacrifice to personal victory. The unanswered question becomes: victory at whose cost, and remembrance for whom?

Uganda's own history offers sobering lessons about victory-based memory.

On January 25, 1971, the military takeover that brought Idi Amin to power was initially welcomed by many Ugandans as a liberation from the excesses of Milton Obote. For a brief period, that date functioned as a moment of relief and hope. Yet it did not endure. As Amin's rule descended into mass violence, fear, and economic collapse, the "liberation" narrative collapsed with it. Today, no one argues that January 25 should be celebrated. The ritual could not survive moral scrutiny.

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Liberation Day



The same pattern appears elsewhere in Uganda's history. Moments tied closely to regime consolidation, such as the Republic milestone of 1963 or the constitutional rupture of 1966, never settled into durable national rituals. By contrast, Independence Day, rooted in a people-centred transition rather than a personal victory, endured. History is clear: rituals tied to power expire; rituals tied to shared experience last.

This is why many societies, over time, adjust how they remember. Britain, once an imperial power, offers a useful comparison, not because it is innocent, but because it learned to separate memory from domination. In 1902, Britain introduced Empire Day to celebrate imperial conquest and loyalty. As the empire receded and Britain became a more diverse, multipolar society, the celebration grew increasingly uncomfortable. It was gradually abandoned and later reframed as Commonwealth Day, reflecting partnership rather than

conquest.

More enduring still is "Remembrance Day," defined by silence, restraint, and honouring the fallen. Governments change, parties rotate, but remembrance is institution-centred rather than leader-centred. This was not moral purity; it was political wisdom. Celebrating domination indefinitely fractures cohesion, especially in plural societies.

Uganda's history is different, but the lesson travels. As calls grow for a national dialogue, about a forged national marriage whose partners have taken different trajectories, it may be time to ask whether our rituals still serve unity in their current form. This is not an argument to abolish Liberation Day. It is an invitation to interrogate its effect, especially when it follows elections.

It is also a case for imagining a national remembrance day one that honours all Ugandans who have fallen for this country across regimes, regions, and generations without validating any single political moment.

Liberation secures the State. Remembrance secures the nation.

A country that only celebrates victories risks repeating them. A country that remembers its dead learns restraint. If Uganda is to build a future that belongs to all its citizens, our memory practices must evolve alongside our politics. That conversation, perhaps, is where genuine national dialogue should begin.

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