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Decentralization and territorial politics: the dilemma of constructing and managing identities in Uganda

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By examining the process of internal boundary adjustment in the Karamoja region of Uganda, this paper argues that internal boundary adjustments in Uganda have been pursued along ethnic lines, leading to a territorial kind of citizenship and an ethnic ‘containerization’ of communities. Based on an examination of the 2001 and 2011 presidential elections in Uganda’s Acholi and Lango regions, the paper further argues that internal administrative boundary adjustments in Uganda have a political usage and meaning that goes beyond the official rhetoric of administrative efficiency used to justify these reforms. Internal boundary adjustment does not, however, always lead to the political ends intended by the ruling party. Both the National Resistance Army/Movement (NRA/M) government and opposition parties have attempted, and benefitted from, internal boundary adjustments. The empirical data presented are based on official reports and documents from the Government of Uganda, Electoral Commission election reports, and a review of published books, journals and newspapers articles.

Keywords: boundary adjustment; political power; ethnicity; National Resistance Army (NRA); National Resistance Movement (NRM); Uganda

Introduction

Although internal boundary adjustment under the policy of decentralization in Uganda is justified on the basis of democracy and administrative efficiency, it has resulted in the creation of both ethnic districts and a territorial regime of citizenship and rights. Internal boundary adjustment has also offered structures for political mobilization at local levels especially, particularly where the district structures are captured by political elites. This paper examines the process of internal boundary adjustment in Uganda. It uses the Karamoja region of north-eastern Uganda as an example to illustrate the extent to which internal boundary adjustment has created ethnic districts, furthering ‘divide and rule’ techniques for the benefit of existing political elites. It also examines the 2001 and 2011 presidential elections in the Acholi and Lango regions to demonstrate how internal boundary adjustment has been used, beyond the official rhetoric of administrative efficiency. The process of extending the reach of the state apparatus through decentralization has gone hand in hand with increasing calls¹ (Carbone 2001) for separation and recognition by different ethnic groups in their attempts to address a legacy of socio-economic

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injustices and marginalization. These demands and pressures reflect an organic process of social mobilization, amidst politics to which the state responds with two forms of justification: first, by justifying and explaining the demands as a sign of democratic growth; and second, in terms of delivering development. Using these two reinforcing justifications the state has managed to present this ‘balkanization’ as part of the democratic and developmental agenda, effectively derailing internal and external scrutiny of the entire internal boundary adjustment enterprise.

In 1993, as part of structural adjustment reforms recommended by The World Bank, and internal political desires to address a legacy of socio-economic imbalance and a history of political turmoil and injustices, Uganda initiated a rigorous decentralization policy. Its stated aims were: (1) transferring real power to local government in order to reduce the workload on remote and under-resourced central officials; (2) bringing political and administrative control over services so that they are actually delivered, and thereby promoting a degree of popular participation; (3) improving financial accountability and responsibility by establishing a link between the payment of taxes and the provision of services; and (4) improving the capacity of local governments to plan, finance and manage the delivery of services to users (Kauzya 2007). The policy of decentralization thus articulated administrative rather than the political objectives which have since become visible in its application. These political objectives can be identified through careful scrutiny of the political rationale and process of internal boundary adjustment.

Post-independence governments in Uganda have adjusted internal boundaries, although the magnitude of these efforts and the reasons given for them have differed from one government to another. They include, but are not limited to, the correction of colonial internal cultural and boundary distortions (The Daily Monitor June 1, 2009), and the promotion of democracy. When the current decentralization policy was launched the country was divided into 38 districts. Since then the number has increased to over 100. One thread has been shared across each phase of district creation. Districts have been created whenever the country is preparing for an election, or after an election specifically to fulfil the campaign pledges. Although the National Resistance Army/Movement (NRA/M) has over time exhibited great enthusiasm in creating districts – justified as vehicles for social service provision and participatory democracy – it has hardly managed to tame the thriving elite capture and corruption that has occurred within these structures (Golola 2001; Government of Uganda 2006; Muhumuza 2008).

The post-independence boundary alterations and their implications for ethnic identity and political power

The principle of local administration in colonial Uganda was based on the philosophy that prestige and influence of the indigenous authorities could best be upheld by letting peasants see that the government itself treated them as an integral part of the machinery of administration, based on their ‘tradition’ and ‘custom’ (Gore 1935). District councils were given corporate powers and responsibilities in those areas where no agreements had been signed (Karugire 1980), although recognized indigenous authorities in districts had to act within the parameters of accepted policy (Mamdani 1996; Richard and Sheridan 1975). Acting within accepted policy meant that districts were to be ‘pure’ in ‘culture, custom and tradition’. The 1949 ordinance spelt out clearly that districts were to be composed of one ‘tribe’. As such, in the process of determining district boundaries, much care was taken to include, wherever possible and practical, one ethnic group in each district (Karugire 1980). To post-colonial governments this situation was unattainable in some places because it marginalized many communities, especially the numerically small ones. Table 1 indicates the extent to which each government has adjusted the internal boundaries of Uganda by region.

Nevertheless, post-colonial boundary adjustments did not really seek to reform the internal colonial boundaries. The new subdivisions that have happened have taken place within the

Table 1. Number of new districts created by the regime (per region and in total) in Uganda since 1962.

Region/ province	Number of independence subdivisions	1966–1971 (first Obote government; first Republican Constitution)	1972–1979 (Amin government and UNLF government)	1986–1996 (first NRA/M government under the Republican Constitution of 1967)	1996–2001 (first NRA/M government under the 1995 Constitution)	2001–2006 (Second NRA/M government under the 1995 Constitution)	2006–2011 (First NRM-O government under a multi-party political system)	Total
Acholi	1		1		1	1	3	7
Ankole Kingdom	1		1	1		3	4	10
Buganda	1	3	2	3	4	3	7	23
Bugisu	1	1			1	2	1	6
Bukedea	1			1	1	2	1	6
Bunyoro Kingdom	1		1	1		1	1	5
Busoga	1		2	1	2	2	3	11
Karamoja	1		1		1	2	2	7
Kigezi	1			1	2			4
Lango	1					3	3	7
Madi					1			1
Sebei	1					1	1	3
Teso	1		1		2	2	2	8
Toro Kingdom	1		1	2	2		2	8
West Nile	1		1		1	2	1	6
Total	15	5	9	10	18	24	31	112

Source: Republic of Uganda (1990).

Note: UNLF, Uganda National Liberation Front; NRA/M, National Resistance Army/Movement; NRM-O, National Resistance Movement-Organisation.

bigger colonial boundaries. For example, there is no division – district – created out of territory annexed from two different colonial subdivisions. As Table 1 indicates, Buganda as a region has witnessed the highest number of subdivisions. This region has been central to the political history of Uganda, being the seat of government, home to its largest ethnic community and recipient of the majority of its economic development. Each post-colonial government has had to court this region, or at least struggled to win its support. From Table 1 it is clear that under Yoweri Museveni (President since 1986), the total number of districts created has increased with each successive electoral cycle.

Obote 1, the Idi Amin regime and the politics of boundaries

It is not the intention of this paper to review exhaustively all the internal boundary changes made by the Milton Obote and Idi Amin governments, or even to discuss their politics, since it is well discussed in the literature. They will only be discussed briefly for the purposes of illustrating the extent to which internal boundary adjustment was used to further the political interests of these two first post-independence governments. The first alterations of internal boundaries within Uganda took place under the Obote government, which divided Buganda into four districts. The division, an outcome of the starting point for confrontation between the Buganda government and the central government in 1966, also mirrors the manner in which the central government responded to what has become known as ‘the Buganda question’. Through the constitutional crisis of 1966 and the subsequent promulgation of the 1967 constitution, the Obote government viewed Buganda as agitating for secession. Obote and the Kabaka (or ‘King’ of Buganda) had personal differences and interests. Each of them wanted to be Uganda’s president, yet neither fully understood how a parliamentary system operated. These misunderstandings, disagreements and conflicting interests led to the criminalization and demonization of Buganda as a region by Obote’s government, and dividing it into four districts was part of a process of reducing Buganda’s influence and power in the body politics of Uganda.

In 1971 Amin justified his military coup, in part, on the basis of how Obote dealt with the Buganda question. To some sections in Buganda, he was viewed as a saviour in the initial years. Although Amin subdivided and recognized the internal boundaries, he did not substantially change the outlook of the internal boundaries. If it had been the colonial state that had given birth to a politics of territorial identity within Uganda, then both Obote and Amin reconstructed that politics in a manner that radiated distrust in ethnic politics, but did not do away with it. During Obote’s government, Buganda was branded an enemy of the state. Although Amin mostly favoured people from West Nile for recruitment into the military, he did not subject any region to demonization. His demonization was individual not communal (Kasozi 1999; Mamdani 1996).

Both governments ‘entered into marriage’ with individuals from different ethnic and political groups as a means of securing and maintaining political power. None of the groups felt bound to resist the terrorizing arm of the state, unless that terror happened within its territory or targeted its own group. These techniques of divide and rule and the highly territorialized form of citizenship it engendered were so deep rooted that no ethnic group imagined that terror as a form of rule could overflow to everyone at the same time. Both Obote and Amin’s governments construed the threat to their political power as one of ethnic identity, the solution therefore called for the isolation and containment of specific ethnic groups, with the help of other groups.

Museveni’s districts: carving out space for a little known force

After capturing state power in 1986, the NRA/M was faced with the problem that it lacked legitimacy in most parts of the north and east of Uganda because it was perceived to be a southern

military government. It is true that the political elites of the previous governments had come from the north and east. The colonial state had created a north–south divide that too was reinforced by all post-independence leaders, including those of the NRA, in the initial years of their rule. The core of the rank and file of the NRA were mostly people from the south, yet previous governments and their militaries had mostly recruited from the north – Lango and Acholi – and West Nile.

But the composition of the NRA guerrilla movement was more a reflection of its historical base of the NRA than its ideological disposition. Although it mostly comprised of communities from the south, it was not the policy of the NRA to exclude on the basis of ethnicity. Indeed, it responded to the link between ethnicity and political participation by introducing reforms that sought to disentangle territory from political rights – in particular voting rights. It pegged voting to residence rather than ethnic territory, including banning political party activities if those parties were considered ethnically based. While this offered an array of hope to the Ugandans, it was short lived. The NRA considered itself as a movement to which every person in Uganda belonged. However, like any political movement, when it was exposed to competitive politics it became increasingly difficult to maintain its ideological principles. Its rhetoric was that of a movement, but increasingly the manner in which it functioned exhibited more the tendencies of a political party (Mamdani 1995; Mugaju and Olukoshi 2004). During the 1993 constituent assembly elections the NRA/M was faced with a real political challenge to its power from the older political parties, in particular the Democratic Party (DP) and Uganda People's Congress (UPC).

The NRA/M responded with a solution which not only listed 56 indigenous communities in Uganda, but also territorialized those communities just as the colonial state had done. Under the tutelage of The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), as well as internal pressures, the NRA/M devolved power to the districts – local administrative units. This reduced resources at the disposal of the central government, limiting its ability to keep up the existing patron–client leadership model. But the new reforms suffered a theoretical deficiency. The World Bank and IMF argued that decentralization of power would increase citizen participation in politics. But politics was defined to mean elections, without interrogating the decision-making dynamics inherent to decentralization (Muhumuza 2008). In addition, local governments were treated as though they were politically free and totally detached from central government politics. Hence, over time the political elites in Uganda have utilized the political opportunities and incentives within the structures and policy of decentralization to create and increase their political capital, utilizing both state and non-state resources and structures. One of those opportunities is the creation of districts under the rubric of local democracy. In 2005, during the launch of Nakaseke district, Museveni eloquently outlined the challenges and opportunities of this local democracy. He observed that ‘although a new district takes a lot of money, this is the democracy we fought for. People must ask for what they want and get’ (*The Daily Monitor* August 8, 2005).

By imprinting it as democracy, local and national political elites have been able to justify and legitimize their actions of redrawing boundaries and managing identities within a particular territory. It is, however, imperative to distinguish between state policy and the interests of the individual political elites. State policy – mostly represented by the bureaucrats in the ministries and districts – views district creation in an administrative manner, whereas individual political elites mostly view the created structures in terms of the political opportunities they create. The present author's interest is the actions and inactions of the political rather than the bureaucratic elites. Internal boundary adjustment has afforded political elites the opportunity to maintain patron–client relations, albeit using government funding and structures, with limited scrutiny from the development partners and the citizens. Where internal boundary demarcation has been based on ethnicity, it has led to divisions. First is a division between the rural and urban in a manner prescribing culture for the former and politics for the latter (Mamdani 1995). The second division has happened within the territories created at the local level, separating those considered

‘indigenous’ and those considered non-indigenous settlers (Nsamba 2009). Indigeneity in this regard is considered culturally permanent, turning cultural identities into permanent political identities. While cultural identities are adaptive to change, political identities are not (Berman 1998). Despite the argument that politicizing cultural identities in Uganda is intended to keep cultures ‘pure’ (*The Daily Monitor* June 1, 2009), the real political purpose is to disrupt social movements that challenge central government by dividing up ethnic groups. Karamoja region in north-eastern Uganda offers a clear picture of how boundary changes have created ethnic ‘containers’ in Uganda.

Karamoja region: ethnic compartmentalization

Internal administrative divisions in Karamoja are punctuated by the desire to create ethnic and sub-ethnic compartments, in part justified on the basis of security and development. Karamoja has long experienced cattle rustling as a particular cultural form associated with pastoral societies, which over time has attained a more economic motive. This has changed the methods and objectives of rustling. While in the past it was seasonal, planned and constrained by clearly known rules of engagement/war, in the recent past the introduction of the AK-47 guns has transformed rustling into economic raiding. This has had impacts upon and limited socio-economic development in the region, as most of the time the population is in fear. With a history of colonial marginalization the socio-economic situation in Karamoja went from bad to worse. Both colonial and post-colonial governments have long underrated pastoralism as a form of livelihood. Part of the process of changing and contributing to socio-economic development in the region has included sedentarization of pastoralists through district creation and livelihood zoning. For present purposes the paper restrict itself to district creation not livelihood zoning. Table 2 shows boundary changes in the region.

Table 2 indicates a trend common to districts creation in Karamoja; they have all been created when Uganda is preparing for an election. But as indicated, district creation has resulted in ethnic compartmentalization in the region, with each dominant ethnic community getting its own district.

Table 3 shows the dominant ethnic communities by district in Karamoja region. This internal ‘balkanization’ of Karamoja has succeeded in creating ethnic and sub-ethnic containers for each community in the region. Each district and often sub-counties now represent a dominant ethnic community. In 2006, Nakapiripirit district council passed a resolution for the creation of Amudat district and Figure 1 summarizes the key justifications as presented to parliament, which approved the creation of Amudat district on the same basis.

If ethnic ‘purity’ was one of the key reasons for internal boundary adjustment during the colonial period, the NRA/M government used the same rationale to create Amudat district in Karamajo. Compared with all 18 districts considered by the parliamentary social services committee and local government, it was only Amudat district that was justified partly on the social

Table 2. Karamoja internal divisions by year and parent district.

Parent district	1971	2000	2005	2006	2009	2010
Karamoja	South Karamoja					
Moroto (South Karamoja)		Nakapiripirit				Napak
Kotido (North Karamoja)			Kaabong	Abim		
Nakapiripirit					Amudat	

Source: Republic of Uganda “Ministry of Local Government” (2010).

Table 3. Dominant ethnic communities in Karamoja by district.

District	Date created	Dominant ethnic/sub-ethnic community
Moroto	1971	Matheniko
Kotido	1971	Jie
Nakapiripirit	2000	Chekwi
Kaabong	2005	Dodoth
Abim	2006	Acholi-Labwor
Amudat	2009	Pokot
Napak	2010	Bokora

Source: Republic of Uganda “Ministry of Local Government” (2010).

features of its people (Republic of Uganda 2009). While in other parts of the country ‘balkanization’ has taken several trajectories sometime devoid of ethnic or social features, in Karamoja there is a strong emphasis on ethnicity. Social features and ethnic identity have been sharpened to justify ‘balkanization’ whose essence is to pin each ethnic country to a particular territory. These ethnic cubicles in the name of districts have territorialized citizenship, political rights and the freedom of movement. For example, movement of animals between districts is administratively controlled through the office of the chief administrative officer and the veterinary officer. These two officers have to approve the movement of animals inside and outside the district boundaries. Persons wishing to graze their animals beyond the boundaries of their district have to seek permission to move outside. It is not just people who have been sedentarized, livestock have equally been pinned to territory.

A common notion now is that one is Jie because one is from Kotido and someone is from Kotido because they are Jie. While this may be perceived as a right – at least to those interested in sedentary livelihoods – it is also a restructuring of identities and citizenship that is framing conflicts in the region. A district senior official observed that: ‘districts define and permanently create conflictual tendencies. When people here raid the Pian the politicians here would like to protect

- a. The size of the proposed Amudat District is 1,638 sq. Km and consists of one County which has three sub-counties namely: Amudat, Loro, and Karita. It has a population of 63,572 people.
- b. **Geographical Features:** The proposed district of Amudat is partly semi-arid and partly very dry with a flat land and has savannah type of vegetation which makes survival very hard. Granting Amudat a district status will help ease access to some of the basic services.
- c. **Distance from Nakapiripirit District Headquarters:** The furthest sub-County of Karita is 105 km from Nakapiripirit District Headquarters on the border with Kenya. This great distance makes it impossible for effective administration and provision of services by Nakapiripirit district headquarters.
- d. **Social Features:** The Pokot of Amudat speaks a very different language from Akirimojong. Transacting business in Nakapiripirit District Council is very difficult because of the distinct differences in languages. Elevating Upe County to a District Status will, therefore, enable the people of Upe County to access the social services and infrastructural services and also enjoy their cultural autonomy and fulfillment.
- e. **Economic Activities:** The main economic activities are cattle keeping, subsistence farming and limestone mining.

Figure 1. Justifications for the creation of Amudat district. Source: Republic of Uganda (2009).

people whereas the other would want to recover animals.² The desire to respect district boundaries is placing strain on watering and grazing lands, which have to be used without fallow. It has created a false perception that justifies raiding outside ‘your’ district – which now represents a birthplace. It is very common for the Jie to raid the Matheniko, or the Dodoth to raid the Bokora. The raiders now have no remorse, because victims of their actions are enemies, not brothers or sisters, justifying the use of force, killing and arson in the process of raiding. Furthermore, within these geographical ‘containers’ there are other small and sub-ethnic communities, either because the divisions left them on the borderlines or because they are numerically too weak to stand up to the dominant ethnic communities. Such ethnic communities include, but are not limited to, the Ike and Tephth who are increasingly threatened by this dominant notion of territorialized citizenship. Although recognized in the constitution, the process of internal boundary changes is yet to grant such small ethnic communities an ethnic home, in effect turning them into non-indigenous ‘settlers’.

There is limited questioning of the processes of district creation, decentralization and the reconstruction of identities it has involved, because it has happened within the current framework of democracy and good governance. Thus, decentralization feeds into existing notions of ethno-territorialism and the contested politics of belonging, prevalent in Uganda (Espeland 2007; Kulumba 2004; Schelnberger 2005). District creation has entrenched popular as well as political perceptions of the indigeneity of certain ethnic communities, while excluding others. Subsequently, regional origin are background matters in terms of political rights. Similarly, the reconstruction of identities in Uganda is masked by the notion of service provision, back grounding ethnicity. If the need for taxation, security and cultivation to support the colonial economy underpinned how the colonial state approached sedentarization in Karamajo, the current government’s policy of district creation and sedentarization is buttressed for similar reasons. The increasing availability of weapons in the region in 1970s changed the security equation making it more difficult for the government to maintain law and order (Mirzeler and Young 2000). The government approached the security problem in the region in the same way as the colonial state had, by encouraging sedentarization, but also, most importantly, by restricting inter-ethnic movement.

It is clear from the above analysis that internal boundary adjustment in Karamajo has sought to pin each ethnic community to a particular territory. This has had ramifications for the region, in particular in terms of inter-ethnic relations, citizenship and rights – the freedom of movement as well as political rights. It has redefined the politics of belonging, that is, who is considered indigenous and who is not. It has changed the way in which cattle raiding takes place and is justified, introducing the notion that it is okay to raid a community outside of your own increasingly territorialized community, district or ethnic group. Whereas the government might have pursued the policy with the intention of resolving security challenges in the region, and justified it on the basis of administrative efficiency, it is clear that the consequences have not always matched the policies’ intentions or justifications. The following section uses the example of Lango and Acholi regions to show the relationship between district creation and political power retention in Uganda.

District creation and electoral politics: comparative analysis of the 2001 and 2011 presidential election results in Lango and Acholi regions

If the colonial state had sometimes used ‘tradition’ to ethnicize and ‘contain’ Africans, in the era of liberalization and people-centred government, *service delivery* became the new catchword. But services had to be provided by districts as new centres for local participation in governance, not the central government, whose role was to be restricted to that of policy formulation. Over time districts became centres of power, to the extent that district political leaders would use both private and public resources either to support the NRA/M or to denounce it. In the absence of

well-developed political party structures, the district apparatus came in handy. To the NRA/M there has been the added advantage of not only being able to disperse political patronage in the form of increased numbers of Resident District Commissioners (RDCs) appointed by the president, but also the opportunity strategically to position its cadres in districts even where the NRA/M does not have political support.

In 2008, President Museveni elaborated the importance of districts in politics, but also highlighted the place of social service provision in that equation. During a parliamentary by-election in Buikwe, the president said:

I have found it imperative to grant Buikwe district status as a way of making service delivery to our people ... the government would tarmac the main roads in the district if you vote for NRM, beginning with the stretch from Kyetume to Nyenga.

(The Daily Monitor April 28, 2008)

The emphasis on social service provision is in part intended to create an incentive to the communities to demand for districts if they want services to be provided. However, no empirical study has shown that the increase in the number of districts has resulted in better service provision. The manner in which a district votes can either improve its relations with the government by way of improved funding outside official government transfers or deny it the same. This is partly because there is no set formula the central government uses to distribute project funds to districts, outside of the grants all districts receive.

In 2010 while on an anti-poverty tour of the country, President Museveni is reported to have said that ‘areas which voted for the ruling party candidates have easy access to resources and government services ... the same will apply to areas which will vote NRM aspirants in the coming polls’ (*New Vision* February 11, 2010). The manner in which a district votes determines not just what it gets from the central government, but also has an impact on the number of ministers, ambassadors and RDCs appointed from the district. This relationship was eloquently elaborated in 2009 by President Museveni while in Arua, a district he considered opposed to his rule. He is quoted to have argued that:

I am looking to 2011 elections in naming the cabinet by rewarding areas that voted overwhelmingly for NRM and sidelining those that did not ... if you give me 20% of your votes and another area gives me 90% votes then I will consider the region with the higher votes.

(Daily Monitor, February 17, 2009)

The control and distribution of the central government resources for party politics, electioneering and patronage in particular districts can clearly be effective. During a focus group discussion in Kasese district, a participant observed that ‘for higher positions we vote for Movement [NRA/M] because they offer protection when the district leaders do not want to help.’³ But it can also work in reverse, so that the control of district structures by smaller opposition parties can hinder effective mobilization in a particular district by the larger dominant party controlling central government. While the NRA/M created districts in other regions of Uganda as early as 1991, it only created the first district – Pader – in Acholi in 2000, and later, in 2005, it created Amolatar in Lango. While this experience is in part explained by the conflict in the two regions, it is also true that the opposition which was in control of the district structures in the two regions ably used them well to deny the NRA/M means for political mobilization. Figure 2 shows how NRA/M and opposition performed during the 2001 and 2011 presidential elections in the two regions. During the 2001 presidential elections the NRA/M experienced losses in Acholi and Lango, getting only 21% of votes in Lango while the opposition garnered 79%. In Acholi the situation was no better: the NRA/M got 14% against an opposition that garnered 86%. Whereas the

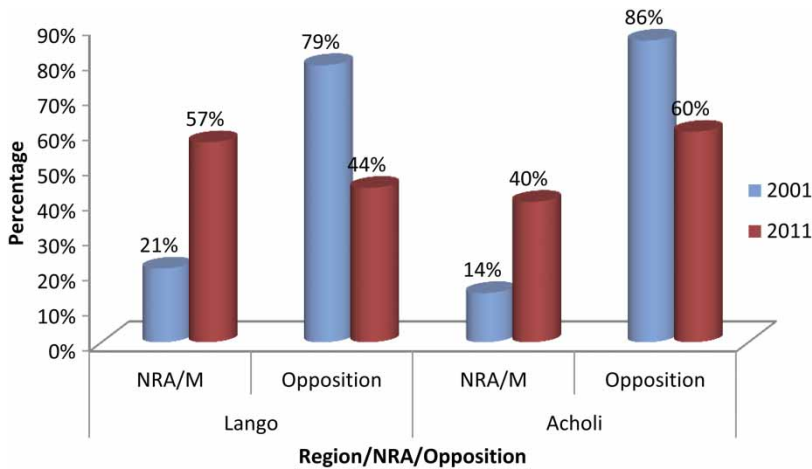


Figure 2. Comparison of the National Resistance Army (NRA) and opposition performance during the 2001 and 2011 presidential elections in Lango and Acholi. Sources: Republic of Uganda “Electoral Commission” (2011); Republic of Uganda (2001).

NRA/M had the state machinery and was more organized compared with the fragmented opposition, this did not help it win in Acholi and Lango regions. The opposition used its control of the district structures – especially in Acholi – in the context of local conflict and instability, to drum up its political support. With the districts under the control of the opposition and weak NRA/M structures in the region, the NRA/M lacked the infrastructure for political mobilization. The 2001 experience taught the NRA/M lessons which were later to inform its approach and political mobilization in both Lango and Acholi.

Between 2001 and 2011, the NRA/M increased its presence in the region especially its control of the local structures of governance. One of the mechanisms used was increasing the number of districts. Between 2001 and 2011 the number of districts in Acholi increased from three to seven. In Lango the number of districts increased from two to eight. Most of the new districts were two or single county districts, but these were also strategically created in areas in which the NRA/M knew it was easy to garner political support. The NRA/M managed to win the local council elections in most of the new districts in both Lango and Acholi, effectively putting these new local governance structures under its influence and cadres. During the 2011 elections, these local structures and cadres were very instrumental in mobilizing political support for the NRA/M. But like the 2001 experience, the NRA/M did not focus on building party structures, preferring to use the local governance structures for political mobilization. It is also imperative to note that NRA/M managed to increase its influence and political support in Lango and Acholi because of the increased peace and stability of that time. Figure 2 indicates an improvement in the NRA/M performance during the 2011 presidential elections, and shows that the opposition’s performance was far from what it had been in 2001.

To understand the influence that the creation of these new districts in these two regions had on electoral outcomes, it is useful to disaggregate further the performance of the NRA/M and the opposition in Lango and Acholi in 2011, according to the new and old districts the NRA/M government had created. It is worth comparing how the NRA/M and opposition performed in the new and old districts. What percentage of the 56% and 40% the NRA managed to get in Lango and Acholi, respectively, is from the new and old districts?

Figure 3 disaggregates NRA/M and opposition performance in Lango and Acholi, highlighting how they both performed in old and new districts. The NRA/M got 57% in Lango: 36%

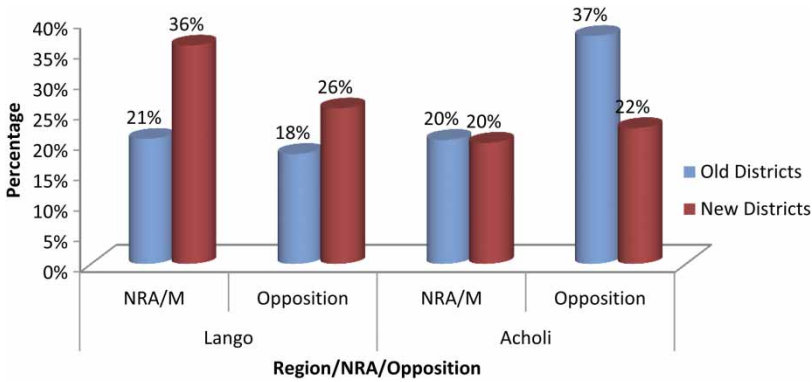


Figure 3. National Resistance Army/Movement (NRA/M) and opposition performance in new and old districts in Acholi and Lango regions during the 2011 presidential election. Source: Republic of Uganda “Electoral Commission” (2011).

from new districts and 20% from old districts; in Acholi the NRA/M managed to get 20% from new and old districts. In Acholi, despite the increase in the number of districts, the NRA/M still lost to the opposition. This is a clear indication that adjusting internal boundaries does not always achieve its intended political objectives, yet in Lango it was clearly effective. The poor performance of the NRA/M in Acholi can be explained by a number of factors including the fact that there was a presidential candidate – Mr Nobert Mao – who was not only from Acholi, but also had been the chairperson of Gulu district. His personality was very instrumental in denying the NRA/M votes in Acholi. The other factor was the alleged illegal land acquisition by some of the NRA/M cadres in Acholi region. The creation of new districts in Acholi was vehemently opposed by the opposition and some sections of the public as it was seen as an attempt by the NRA/M to access land in the region during the processes of post-conflict reconstruction and the return of former refugees and internally displaced persons. These factors combined to deny the NRA/M victory in Acholi, even when it managed to create districts, most of which were controlled by its cadres.

Conclusion

Although often justified on the basis of administrative efficiency, and the promotion of decentralization, democracy and good governance, it appears that internal boundary adjustment in Uganda often serve far more than just these purposes. Some of the not-so-frequently-cited, but clearly apparent, political objectives and advantages of internal boundary adjustments include enabling the expansion of political patron–client relationships and political mobilization into areas of limited electoral support. This has been done both in perceived NRA/M and opposition strongholds. However, internal boundary adjustment does not always fulfil the political intentions that may lay behind them. Furthermore, both the NRA/M and opposition can benefit from internal boundary adjustment because both struggle to control the local governance structures in lieu of effective local and regional party structures coupled, and their limited appetite to develop them.

Part of the process of adjusting internal boundaries has involved appealing to ethnic communities in a manner that creates incentives for them to demand the alteration of internal boundaries and the creation of new districts. Hence, the narrative of boundary alteration is underwritten in both a language of democracy and political inclusion, and of ‘indigeneity’, belonging and exclusion. The altering of internal boundaries by political elites is often portrayed as being responsive

to the demands of society, portraying society as the active catalyst in these processes. This narrative is important for dismissing claims that boundary changes serve political interests. It is also imperative for responding to the concerns of development partners and sections of the Ugandan population about the financial costs of creating new districts. Whenever questions about efficiency and the cost of administration are raised, the political elites are quick to justify internal boundary alterations as part of the democratization process, arguing that they are responding to popular demands.

Although the extension of social services has also been used to justify the creation of new districts, there is little empirical evidence to suggest that the creation of new districts has really achieved this. Boundary adjustment offers some incentives to the local elites who are very important in keeping the process rolling, and benefits some local communities around the headquarters of the new districts. Sometimes incentives have included increased employment opportunities for those considered ‘sons and daughters of the district’, but often these same opportunities have been denied to those now considered non-indigenous ‘settlers’. For local political elites the creation of a new district is a way of greasing patronage networks and accessing government tenders. For new communities created there is sometimes a new perception of government being close, and even accessible, and sometimes a few new miles of tarmac roads around the district are delivered. But the creation of new districts has also given communities a new focal point to voice their frustrations with poor services, and it has not always clearly improved the electoral prospects of those implementing it. Because boundary adjustment has often been cushioned with incentives to local communities as well as national and local political elites, it has sometimes been difficult to develop objective analysis of these processes in Uganda, but it is very clear that not only do these processes have long historical and colonial precedence, but also there is far more than just ‘administrative efficiency’, ‘decentralization’, and the promotion of ‘democracy’ and ‘good governance’ involved.

Notes

1. For a detailed insight into who is, and is not, considered indigenous, see the parliamentary debates of 20 July 2005.
2. Interview with a male senior district official in Moroto District, 12 November 2007.
3. Focus group discussion in Kabaka trading centre in Karusandara, 13 April 2008.

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