

CHAPTER FIVE

Progress and Challenges of Liberal Democracy in Uganda

GODFREY B. ASIIMWE

Introduction

In 1986, the National Resistance Movement (NRM) leadership took over power in Uganda and sought to entrench a no-party political system. Additionally, the NRM's initial preferred electoral system was of individual merit and open competition through lining-up behind a chosen candidate. NRM's stated rationale for the initiatives was to consolidate unity, peace and nationhood. This strategy was not new, but reminiscent of the one-party systems that were adopted by most postindependence African countries, including Uganda. This was tantamount to the imposition of unity through authoritarian suppression of diversity and dissent. Competitive multi-party politics; the first-past-the post and winner take-all which were the linchpins of liberal democracy were considered to have led to divergent out-comes, which were at variance with consolidating nationhood, peace and good governance. However, the political landscape in Uganda was characterized by contradictions like diversity contestations, repression, misrule, conflicts, and wars. Under competitive politics, specific contradictions included changes in the rules of the game, unlevelled ground, election rigging, and monetization. Such could be attributed to the inappropriateness and inapplicability of the liberal model in Africa or lack of a conducive framework for its proper operation. Nonetheless, during

both the absence and presence of liberal democracy, there were contradictions in Uganda's political scene. In any case, there were also positive aspects of liberal democracy.

There have been three multi-party phases during the 50 years of postindependence Uganda, beginning with 1962–1967; 1980–1985 and from 2006 to the 2011 elections. We show that in Uganda, there was no conducive framework for the proper operation of multi-party politics. There were no free and fair elections, and what existed was a combination of perverse militarism, repression, and a lack of commitment to the fundamental tenets of liberal democracy. While contradictions of liberal democracy included challenges—notably sectarianism—there were also positive aspects, for instance, the rigor of holding governments accountable. This chapter places emphasis on the present NRM government, and maintains that President Yoweri Museveni also lacks a genuine commitment to the fundamental tenet and operations of a liberal democratic dispensation.

The Colonial Architecture and Introduction of Liberal Democracy

In Africa, the colonial political architecture artificially constructed “nation states” for colonial expediency. As a result, most of the new states and political institutions are still evolving toward nationhood and sustainable political stability. Pre-colonial units that were largely configured along identities like ethnicity, kinship, and language were haphazardly combined to form “nation states.”¹ The complex combination of diversities into states was governed through coercion and policy designs, notably, indirect rule, divide and rule, assimilation, and different regional development schemes. For the most part, the colonial state did not institute democracy in the new states through, for instance, elections. Colonial administrative policies had the effect of undermining some of the pre-existing inter-ethnic linkages and relations through assimilation, integration, exchange relations, intermarriages, and blood brotherhoods, to name a few. In the puzzle of colonial governance and diversity management, were other identities like religion, race, gender, and class. Even within the new class structures, colonial patterns of production, division of labor, distribution, and formal education enhanced differences between and within peasants, workers, and the elite. Colonial policies instead fostered ethnic, regional, linguistic, racial, and class fragmentation that eased colonial governance.