

The Ugandan Revolution 1980-1986

Executive Summary

In 1979 former Ugandan President Idi Amin was ousted from power in a coup lead by the Tanzania People's Defense Forces. Following this coup, the Ugandan government was comprised of multiple political groups, eventually leading to a military commission which was then put in charge of the 1980 elections.¹ Four parties ran for election; the Ugandan People's Congress (UPC), the Democratic Party, the Uganda Patriotic Movement, and the Conservative Party. The UPC's candidate was Dr. Milton Obote who had lead Uganda prior to President Idi Amin's reign. Before the elections took place, the UPM, lead by Yoweri Kaguta Museveni, said it would challenge the elections in any and all ways if they were not free and fair. Dr. Obote was elected with 40% of the vote.² With that, Museveni claimed the elections were rigged and that Tanzania influenced the elections to restore Obote to power.³ He and his National Resistance Army then took to the bush.

Fighting began in 1985 between the rebels, members of the National Resistance Army, and Milton Obote's government. The Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA) at the time, though, was very unprofessional, poorly paid, and ill-trained.⁴ Museveni's forces were largely comprised of members of southern tribes who had experienced oppression by and from previous Ugandan rulers and who did not want Dr. Obote in power.⁵ These rebels wanted control of the entire country of Uganda and gained this control through a 1985 military coup which ousted Dr. Obote from power.⁶ Obote fled to Kenya and Museveni took power on 26 January 1986 and has remained in power since then. The total number of deaths from the conflict is unknown. Estimates range between 100,000 and 500,000.⁷

Assessing the 5 Factors

1. Was the country at the time of the conflict a nation?

No. Uganda was, and still is, comprised of over 13 tribes and ethnic groups and is thinly divided between Bantu speakers (about 2/3 of the population) in the south and Nilotic and Central

¹ Edward Katumba-Wamala, *The National resistance army (NRA) as a guerrilla force*, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 11:3 (2000), 161, DOI: [10.1080/09592310008423293](https://doi.org/10.1080/09592310008423293).

² Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Uganda*, PDF File, http://archive.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/arc/UGANDA_1980_E.PDF.

³ Balam Nyeko, *The Background to the Political Instability in Uganda*, *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies*, 15(3) (1987), 14, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5zh4k3q3>.

⁴ Sheila Rule, "Uganda Leader Reportedly Out in Army Coup," *The New York Times*, 28 July 1985.

⁵ Sheila Rule, "Rebels in Uganda Take Control of Capital, but Battles Continue," *The New York Times*, 26 January 1986.

⁶ Nyeko, 14.

⁷ "Uganda: 2nd Obote Regime," *Mass Atrocity Endings* (7 August 2015), https://sites.tufts.edu/atrocityendings/2015/08/07/uganda-idi-amin-milton-obote-and-the-national-resistance-movement/#_edn29.

Sudanic speakers in the north.⁸ Half of those living in Uganda identified as Christian at the time, 6% as Muslim, and the rest as animist, so there was no national religious identity either.⁹

2. Was the government seen by roughly 85% of the population as legitimately in power?

No. Most of the population thought that Obote came to power fraudulently. As the war continued as well, Museveni and the NRA gained more and more support.¹⁰

3. Did the government in power at the start of the conflict maintain or achieve security control over roughly 85% of the population in the country?

No. The government and its army, the UNLA, failed to achieve broad security of property and person throughout Uganda and instead tore apart areas where it suspected rebels were located.¹¹

4. Did the insurgents have external sanctuary to a militarily significant degree?

No. At the start of the conflict, the rebels did not have any external sanctuary and for most of the conflict this remained true. The rebels were centered in Buganda, a kingdom in Uganda, as the movement had majority support from Ugandans. In mid-1981, however, Museveni began traveling internationally to garner support outside Uganda. It was then that he received the support of Professor Yusufu Lule from Nairobi, Kenya which bolstered his image abroad.¹² Thus, while the rebels did not have had external sanctuary, they did have external support.

5. Was there an army or armed constabulary/gendarmerie force in existence at the start of the conflict which was self-sustaining and which was reasonably competent?

Yes. The UNLA was in existence at the start of the conflict but its soldiers were not trained well, lacked discipline, were poorly equipped, and inadequately paid.¹³ Obote failed to exercise control over his forces which resulted in his being ousted from power through a military coup.

Outcome

The government lost because of a military coup launched in 1985. Museveni and his rebels took control from the coup on 26 January 1986 and he has remained as president since. The Ugandan Revolution supports the theory.

Factor	
National Identity	No
Government Legitimacy	No
Population Security	No
Existing security forces	Yes
External sanctuary	No

⁸Byrnes, Rita M. (ed.), *Uganda A Country Study*, Library of Congress: Washington D.C., (1992) 49-51.

⁹ Rule, "Uganda Leader Reportedly Out in Army Coup."

¹⁰ John Kabaireho, "How UPC 'rigged' the 1980 election," *The Observer*, 10 December 2008, <https://www.observer.ug/component/content/article?id=1855:how-upc-rigged-the-1980-elections>.

¹¹ Frederick Golooba-Mutebi, *Collapse, War, and Reconstruction in Uganda: An Analytical Narrative on State-Making*, Crisis States Research Center (2008), 14, <https://www.lse.ac.uk/international-development/Assets/Documents/PDFs/cscc-working-papers-phase-two/wp27.2-collapse-war-and-reconstruction-in-uganda.pdf>.

¹² Uganda: Government, <https://ucdp.uu.se/conflict/314#header-view>.

¹³ Rule, "Uganda Leader Reportedly Out in Army Coup."