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THE ANTI-AMIN RESISTANCE IN RETROSPECT:
THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE UGANDAN EXILE ORGANISATIONS TOWARDS
DEMOCRATIC CHANGE IN UGANDA, 1972-1979

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The Anti-Amin Resistance in Retrospect: The Contribution of The Ugandan Exile Organisations Towards Democratic Change in Uganda, 1972-1979.

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Abstract - The contemporary debate on democracy and change in Africa appears to have largely concentrated on the current and future role of political parties and the relative merits and demerits of multi-party politics vis-a-vis single party rule during the 1980s and 1990s. In the case of Uganda, little attention has been paid to the historical background to the present. In particular, a major lacuna has been the role played by organisations based outside the country for most of the 1970s in the struggle to remove the regime of Idi Amin (1971-1979) from power in Uganda. This paper seeks to make a contribution towards filling this gap by critically considering the part played by such organisations in the anti-Amin resistance which culminated in the formation of the Uganda National Liberation Front in March 1979 and the establishment of the first post-Amin government a month later. While recognizing the proliferation of similar bodies in exile particularly in the period 1976-79, this paper concentrates on two Zambia-based groups, the Uganda Liberation Group (Z) and the Uganda National Movement.

THE ANTI-AMIN RESISTANCE IN RETROSPECT: THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE UGANDAN EXILE ORGANISATIONS TOWARDS DEMOCRATIC CHANGE IN UGANDA, 1972-1979.

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Introduction

The starting point of this preliminary study of the anti-Amin resistance is the removal of the regime from power in April 1979. With the benefit of hindsight, several scholars have debated the question whether the action amounted to the 'liberation' of the peoples of Uganda and signalled the beginning of a return to democratic rule or whether it was merely the prelude to yet another phase in the struggle for the achievement of true "people's power" or popular democracy[1]. Among the most frequently repeated questions in the aftermath of the Amin regime's fall was the extent to which the 'returnees' or exiles had contributed to the 'liberation' of the country and whether the local civilian population inside the country had been largely passive observers through the years. Given the brutality and viciousness of the regime, an impression had been created that no popular resistance was possible internally. On arrival in Kampala, the exiles and

[1]M. Mamdani, 'Uganda Now', *Ufahamu*, 15, 3(1986/87),33-53; B. Nyeko, 'The Background to the Political Instability in Post-Amin Uganda', ibid.,11-32;A. Omara-Otunnu, 'The Struggle for Democracy in Uganda', *Journal of Modern African Studies*,30,3(1992),443-463.

the Tanzanian military officers who had backed them in the anti-Amin war compounded the situation by camping at the country's most expensive and exclusive hotels in strikingly luxurious circumstances that contrasted sharply with the poor state in which the vast majority of the Ugandan populace lived. The social tension that this gave rise to within a very short period was self-evident[23].

For the scholar of Uganda's contemporary history, the above picture surely draws attention to important questions relating to such issues as the nature of 'popular resistance', the links between internal and external movements, the role of the extraneous factor (i.e foreign elements such as the participation of the Tanzanian troops and the role of Libya), the nature of the political alignments amongst Ugandans both at home and in exile, and the ever-present question of national leadership[4]. This paper examines the part played by the short-lived exile organisation based in Zambia which came to be known as the Uganda Liberation Group (Z) in the period 1977-79 and not only participated in the controversial Moshi Unity Conference of March 1979 but was represented in all the four post-Amin governments in Uganda from April 1979 to December 1980. An attempt will be made to relate

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[2]An indication of this tension comes from S.Lwanga-Lunyiigo's unpublished papers where he observes that some '"liberators" felt they were entitled to the fruits of ... "liberation"'. Cited in Phares Mutibwa, *Uganda Since Independence*,London: Hurst, 1992, p. 153.

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[4]Some of these issues have been tackled by C. Gertzel,'Uganda after Amin: the continuing search for leadership and control',*African Affairs*,79,317(Oct.1980),461-489 and in her previous writings on Uganda.

the discussion to the issues identified above. On the basis of the available evidence, it seems reasonable to suggest that the operations of organisations such as the ULG(Z) and such similar bodies were best suited for the realisation of short-term answers to the social and political objectives of the membership, rather than for the achievement of long-term democratic change in the country. This surely helps explain why the Uganda National Liberation Front (UNLF), the umbrella organisation formed at Moshi in northern Tanzania in March 1979, was unable to transform itself into a political party or indeed to establish a stable administration once the Amin regime had collapsed[5].

Sources and Some Recent Interpretations

The study of comparatively recent political history is, of course, replete with several difficulties. One such difficulty relates to sources. Apart from contemporary newspaper reports from both inside Uganda and the outside world, the more established and regular overseas periodical publications such as *Africa Confidential, Africa Diary: Weekly Diary of African Events, Africa Contemporary Record* etc, and a few documents issued by the organisations themselves, one must rely on the personal testimony of some of the participants as well as one's own personal observation. Axiomatically, the information garnered from individual participants will be coloured by their desire, in nearly all the cases, to justify themselves while explaining

[5]Phares Mutibwa's recent *Uganda Since Independence* offers a fascinating account of the activities of the 'liberators'. His interpretation of the Amin regime seems to rest on a theory that can best be described as reflecting Uganda's self-inflicted agony. See especially pp.85 and 120.

their own particular role in the events they describe. Another type of difficulty emanates from the fact that for all its universally acclaimed virtues in scholarship, objectivity in the study of a subject such as this one is particularly elusive[6].

That the literature on the Idi Amin regime and its fall from power is copious and continues to grow is commonplace and has been remarked upon by several scholars. Indeed, the spate of books and articles on it in the 1970's and early 1980's may be cited as a rather fine example of the construction of populist 'instant history'. What is less well known, however, is the origins of the UNLF itself and its antecedents. It is easy enough to appreciate the inability of the UNLF to survive the heady politics of the first few months of post-Amin Uganda. Yet it would appear to be perfectly legitimate to set its activities within a historical context in order to begin to understand the present.

There have, for example, been several interpretations of the Moshi Unity Conference which gave birth to the UNLF. One of the most detailed accounts of the background and formation of the organisation was Daniel Omara-Atubo's mimeograph[7]. A young Makerere graduate from northern Uganda, Omara-Atubo had spent his exile days in Kenya and Tanzania and had himself participated in the Moshi Conference as a delegate of the 'Moshi Group', one of the numerous organizations represented there. Interestingly, he is described in one of the Conference Documents as 'Conference

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[6]This topic was briefly alluded to in Nyeko,'Background to political instability ...'*Ufahamu*, ibid.

[7]D. Omara-Atubo, *Why? The Uganda National Liberation Front, The Gospel of Liberation*, (Moshi, Tanzania, 1979).

Organizer, Moshi'[5]. His account is basically a factual narrative of the manoeuvring in both Dar es Salaam and Nairobi that preceded the actual summoning of the various exile groups to Moshi. It is also an interpretation of the proceedings of the conference itself. If Omara-Atubo's pamphlet generally steers clear of controversy over Moshi, it is quite obvious why Professor Gertzel's scholarly and hence understandably neutral discussion of the birth of the UNLF has relied upon it substantially[6]. Gertzel stresses the fragility of the new organization, pointing up especially the older social and political divisions within the Ugandan body politic which the UNLF does not appear to have overcome even as it declared itself united in the anti-Amin struggle. This account contrasts sharply with the pieces written by participants such as Dan Nabudere, a member of the Dar es Salaam organising committee - the 'Gang of Four' as they were described by their political opponents - who later became an official in the UNLF government. It is also a more balanced account compared with the interpretations offered by the major political contestants at the time such as Obote and Museveni[7]. While all three can be faulted for being clearly self-justifying, they nevertheless provide extremely useful glimpses into the story from 'within'. Nabudere vigorously defends his Dar es Salaam group against charges that they acted undemocratically

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[5]*Africa Contemporary Record*, vol. X (1978-79),p.B445.

[6]Gertzel,'Uganda after Amin', p.462-68.

[7]D. W. Nabudere,*Imperialism and Revolution in Uganda*, London: Onyx Press; Dar es Salaam: T.P.H, 1980, p. 331-46; *Speech Delivered by A. Milton Obote at Kololo Airstrip, Kampala, on 7th June, 1980* (Typescript); Y. Museveni, *Selected Articles on the Uganda Resistance War*, Kampala: NRM Publications, 1986.

in literally hand-picking delegates to the Moshi Conference and excluding those groups - such as Obote's UPC - with whose political views they disagreed. He is particularly critical of the UPC and the ULG(Z), both of whom he correctly labels as pro-Obote. He accuses them of disrupting the conference through raising numerous points of order[8]. Museveni, on the other hand, appears to have adopted a staunchly 'militarist' approach by insisting that representation of the various organisations present at Moshi should be based on their military strength. However, his claims to a considerable military following within Uganda around this time appears to have been rather exaggerated and were certainly questioned by his political opponents. Obote's own views on the Moshi Conference, which he was to repeat several times during his second Presidency, were that the meeting had been manipulated to marginalize his own party[9]. This position was shared by the ULG(Z), which under the newly assumed - but unacknowledged - name of the 'Clean Uganda Movement' (CUM), issued a document in Lusaka soon after the Moshi Conference questioning several aspects of the proceedings and decisions of the meeting. Entitled *New Uganda 1979-1980: Comments on the Moshi Conference, the Uganda National Liberation Front, the Office of the President in the New Uganda, and the Role of Comrade Obote*, the document was extremely critical of the Dar es Salaam-based Conference Organisers.

The Origins of the ULG(Z)

In its manifesto which was formally adopted at a meeting

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[8]Nabudere, *Imperialism and Revolution* ...,p.334.

[9]*Speech at Kololo Airstrip.*

held in Lusaka on March 12, 1978, the ULG(Z) recognized that 'the task of liberating Uganda [required] the joint efforts of many forces within and outside Uganda'[10]. A striking aspect of the document was its emphasis on unity and the need to 'mobilize ... the workers, peasants, the youth, intellectuals and all popular democratic organizations of ... Ugandans'. Among its professed organisational principles were 'a democratic and unified discipline [system]', 'democratic consultations' and 'collective leadership, collective responsibility and individual accountability'[11]. Membership was open to any Ugandan 'of the apparent age of 15 years and above', which would have included children of the adult exiles themselves. The manifesto does not, however, specifically state that residence in Zambia was indeed a pre-requisite for membership although this was clearly implied in the organization's name. Finally, one of the provisions of the manifesto that was used by the leadership in October 1978 to declare its agreement to work with Obote was item 6 of Article Ten, entitled 'Powers of General Meetings'. These included the power 'to determine or approve other persons, groups or organisations with which the ULG may conduct negotiations for the purpose of forging unity, a merger, cooperation ...'[12].

Given the background of the majority of the Ugandan citizens who had arrived as exiles in Zambia from 1971 onwards, it was not surprising that the social composition of the ULG(Z) membership

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[10] *The Uganda Liberation Group (in Zambia): The Manifesto*, Lusaka, March 12, 1978 (Typescript), p.1.

[11] Ibid, p.2.

[12] Ibid, p.10.

reflected their middle class status. Comprising almost exclusively professionals such as doctors, school teachers, lawyers, University lecturers and students, the group clearly belonged to the strata of educated Ugandan elites for whom it was relatively easy to start a new life outside their own country. Significantly, there were hardly any former politicians or army officers within their ranks; they all lacked any solid previous experience in government and the majority were probably apolitical. Moreover, their physical separation from Uganda obviously compounded their lack of touch with the masses. Thus the founding - and only - Chairman of the Group was the relatively elderly but rather bland and colourless Emmanuel A. Oteng, a former High Court judge who was now working for the Zambian government; the Secretary was S.K. Kabogorwa, a lecturer in Adult Education at the University of Zambia who had previously worked as an administrator in the Uganda Public Service. Other key members of the group who were subsequently to become Cabinet Ministers in the Binaisa government of 1979-80 - and who were in the group labelled by Colin Legum as the UPC/pro-Obote faction of the National Consultative Council (NCC) of the Uganda National Liberation Front (UNLF)[13] - include A.K. Tiberondwa, an education lecturer at the University of Zambia and J.K. Luwuliza-Kirunda, a medical doctor working at the University Teaching Hospital in Lusaka and subsequently (from 1981) Secretary General of Obote's Uganda People's Congress (UPC).

In terms of its origins, this group may be traced to early

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[13]C. Legum, *Africa Contemporary Record: Annual Survey and Documents*, vol. XII (1979-1980), p. B348-B349.

1977 when a number of Ugandan students met informally in Lusaka to discuss issues related to their welfare in Zambia in particular and to the possible co-operation with other Ugandan students' exile organizations in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam more generally. As was the case with the other such similar groups outside Uganda, the students' organisation in Zambia, though clearly aligned politically with UPC sympathisers such as A.K. Tiberondwa and others, was extremely cautious about engaging in overt political activity that might place their relatives back in Uganda at risk. This is quite evident from the tone of the exchange of letters - in the form of open circulars dated April 1977 - between themselves and the Uganda Students Association of Dar es Salaam University (USAD). While the conflict between the two student groups seemed to centre on the internal and external ramifications of the USAD president's controversial action in despatching a telegram to Gadaffi condemning him and Amin, the principal message from the USAD was that the rather more militant approach to resistance apparently advocated by the Zambia-based group was both 'adventurist and undemocratic'[14]. In reality, however, the divergence of opinion appears to have been closely intertwined with the perceived position of the Zambia-based student group which was known to be pro-Obote and that of the Dar students, which appears to have been greatly influenced by the

[14]Ms in author's possession: *Uganda Students at the University of Zambia - a bunch of muddleheaded reactionaries*, 26 April 1977 by A. Magara; *The Disgraced Byamugisha's Sheep - The Uganda Students at UNZA*, 30 April 1977 by A.B. Kayonga; and Chairman, USAD, to The President of Uganda, 23 March 1977. The USAD documents vigorously defend Rugumayo and Nabudere gainst charges by a 'Patriot' based in Lusaka accusing both gentlemen as 'sellouts', 'traitors' and 'Amin's bootlickers' for having worked under him.

Nabudere-led group of academics working at the University. For most of its first year of existence, however, the ULG(Z) - like its counterparts elsewhere in East Africa and Europe - was largely pre-occupied with the social welfare of its members and the countering of the Amin propaganda by disseminating as much information as possible about the reality on the ground inside Uganda. Other concerns included the organisation of relief for newly arrived exiles, the holding of discussions on Uganda and the search for educational scholarships for Ugandan refugees[15]. An accurate record of the exact numbers is unavailable, but an estimate of the total membership within Lusaka cannot have been much more than a hundred and fifty at most. As the Tanzania-Uganda conflict broke out during October 1978, the group openly declared its support for the war and pledged to work with Obote. Members were encouraged to make financial contributions for 'the war effort' and several officials of the group made extended visits to Dar es Salaam between January and April 1979[16]. When the Moshi unity conference was announced for March 1979, the ULG(Z) was one of the first organisations to claim representation. Apart from the tension created by the group's arguments with the Dar organisers of the conference, the ULG(Z) faced its own internal difficulties in the aftermath of the

[15]This entailed collaboration with similar groups overseas. For comparison, see Secretary's Report, 1977/78, in *Umoja: Ugandan Voices, A Publication of the Uganda Group for Human Rights (UGHR)* (London), no. 1(Aug.-Nov. 1978), p.3-5. In Zambia, some of the social programmes of the ULG(Z) were co-ordinated by A.K. Tiberondwa, a member of the organisation's Executive Committee.

[16]Personal information from A.K. Tiberondwa, one of those who spent nearly three months in Dar 'co-ordinating the war effort'.

meeting when some members queried the criteria for the choice of the group's representation. It appeared momentarily that these differences might lead to a split along 'tribal' lines[17].

The ULG(Z) in Historical Perspective

In her study of post-Amin Uganda, Gertzel notes that by April 1979 the 'old divisions in local society' within Uganda had tragically not been destroyed by the Amin regime[18]. These divisions were certainly reflected in the exile politics conducted in Zambia. In August 1977, for instance, a clandestine unity meeting of various Ugandan exile groups from East Africa, Europe and the Americas was held in Lusaka. Although the Uganda National Movement (UNM) was formed at this meeting, it turned out to have been stillborn. More ominously, however, the UNM - whose leader was the Crown Prince of Ankole Kingdom, John Barigye, turned diplomat - comprised largely the anti-UPC elements, thus setting it in direct opposition to the ULG(Z)[19]. Yet a further significant and potentially extremely dangerous difference was that while the ULG(Z) membership comprised largely exiles hailing from northern and eastern Uganda, the UNM was evidently an organisation of Ugandans mainly from the southern and western regions of the country. This polarisation of the

[17]This emerged at the group's first post-Moshi meeting in early April 1979, when it was claimed that Acholi members were left out and it appeared to some critics that loyalty to the group was judged by closeness to the UPC leadership. Personal communication.

[18]Gertzel, 'Uganda after Amin', p. 477.

[19]Gertzel, 'Uganda after Amin', p. 464-5; Nyeko, 'Background to political instability', p. 24.

exile population fitted neatly into the 'tribal' interpretation of the recent colonial and post-colonial history of Uganda which has attracted a considerable amount of comments from various scholars[20].

Students of the colonial history of Uganda have long recognized the way in which the country was often regarded as comprising these two major divisions. Whether one agrees with this classification or not, the socio-economic differences between the 'north' and the 'south' were clearly sharpened by colonialism itself over the years. An important legacy was the unequal economic power-sharing in post-colonial Uganda. The creation of the ULG(Z), as with other exile bodies, was most indirectly a product of this legacy[21].

Resistance pre-1977: an illusion?

As noted earlier, the image of the exiles and the Tanzanian troops who stormed into Kampala in April 1979 as the real 'liberators' of Uganda has rightly been questioned. For within a short period, the country was disenchanted with the political malaise which the UNLF itself seemed to generate through the numerous internal squabbles and endless debates and arguments. Moreover, both the socio-economic and security situation in the country appeared no better than previously. Ugandans had been

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[20]See, for example, Y. Tandon, 'Elements of continuity and change between Obote and Museveni: some lessons from Obote's rule for Museveni's government', *Ufahamu*, vol. 15, no. 3(1986/87), p.79-97; M. Mamdani,'NRA/NRM: Two Years in Power' (Makerere University,1988).

[21]For the way in which 'history' impacted on the activities of some of the political actors in post-Amin Uganda during 1979-80, see Mutibwa, *Uganda Since Independence*, p.153.

'liberated' from the tyranny of the Amin regime, but they had clearly not yet escaped its legacy. Was 'liberation' then a mere catchword for opportunist Ugandan exiles? Or did their activities contribute anything significant to Uganda's efforts to resist the Amin regime? A related question is to what extent those who cite the lack of any real organised internal resistance prior to the Tanzania-Uganda war in explaining the relative longevity of the regime are justified in doing so. We must now turn to a brief overview of the internal situation from the coup in January 1971 to around the middle of 1977.

There now exist several useful scholarly as well as more journalistic studies of this period with particular reference to internal efforts at overthrowing the Amin regime. Olara-Otunnu[22], for example, identifies at least four main forms in which resistance was presented. Apart from the Obote-led Dar es Salaam-based exiles' abortive invasion of September 1972, there were the more clandestine early guerilla activities of Yoweri Museveni's Front for National Salvation (FRONASA). The regime's response in both instances was both swift and heavy-handed: the post-invasion arrests and massacre of civilians particularly from the Acholi and Lango ethnic groups in northern Uganda, regarded as Obote's mainstay of support, was widely reported. Similarly, the public execution of several alleged FRONASA guerillas in February 1973 - each in his home town of Gulu in the north, Mbale in eastern Uganda and Kabale in the south-west - was intended to

[22]Olara-Otunnu, 'The Amin regime: some myths and realities, 1971 to 1878', *Umoja: Ugandan Voices*, 1(Aug.-Nov. 1878), p.13-18. For comparison, see P.F.B. Nayenga, 'Myths and realities of Idi Amin Dada's Uganda: a review article', *African Studies Review*, 22, 2(Sept.1979), p. 127-38.

demonstrate the regime's determination to stamp out resistance and presumably score maximum deterrent effect. Yet by carrying out these executions in nearly all the regions of the country Amin had, by default, confirmed the increasingly widespread and 'national' character of the covert but growing opposition to his government[23]. Thirdly, from as early as July 1971 and throughout the regime's existence, several internal military plots and assassination attempts on Amin were widely reported. Given the increasingly 'militarist' character of the regime as the years passed, however, it seems reasonable to conclude that these plots and conflicts would surely have amounted to little more than a palace coup had they succeeded.

Finally, several other instances of opposition usually cited include the strike action by the Kilembe Copper Mines workers in 1973, and the students' challenge to the government through their National Union of Students (NUSU) organisation and the Makerere Students' Guild[24]. A major turning point in the resistance movement was the February 1977 murder of Archbishop Janani Luwum and two Cabinet Ministers by the regime. This also clearly marked the Church's entry point into open criticism of the Amin government's excesses[25]. By this stage, both internal and external resistance had become a great deal more intense and

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[23]It ought to be noted, though, that up to this point Amin still enjoyed considerable support in several parts of the country, not least because of his expulsion of the Asians a few months back. See, among others, P. Mutibwa, *Uganda Since Independence*, p.98-100.

[24]Olara-Otunnu, 'Myths and Realities'; a useful account is B. Langlands, 'Students and politics in Uganda', *African Affairs*, 76, 302(Jan. 1977), p.3-20.

[25]Mutibwa, *Uganda Since Independence*, p.112ff.

widespread. Internally, one of its most striking features was that it had come to cut across tribe, religion, region as well as political and ideological orientation. Externally, the mass exodus of refugees after February 1977 provided evidence to the outside world that support for the anti-Amin resistance had been long overdue. It also acted as a source of inspiration for the exiles to emerge in the open.

As Olara-Otunnu correctly argues, the internal opposition to the Amin regime failed to overthrow it because it had been 'sporadic and isolated' and had not been successfully 'translated into a grassroots resistance movement'[26]. Evidently, there was widespread popular discontent but this had not found the avenues through which it could be expressed concretely and effectively. While this point is commonsensical enough, it does help reiterate the argument that resistance was *not* an illusion, and that it had begun as soon as the January coup itself had been carried out[27]. The connections between these internal efforts and the activities of the fledgling exile organisations, however, are hard to establish at this stage.

Conclusions

It will be obvious that the present paper is by no means definitive; it is merely an early attempt to construct a research agenda for the historical understanding of Ugandan exile politics during the Amin years. The UNLF was an umbrella organisation comprising a variety of social groups with unclearly defined

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[26] Olara-Otunnu, 'Myths and Realities', p.15.

[27] See, for example, Mutibwa, *Uganda Since Independence*, p.81.

political ideologies. Its short-lived existence may have been of rather little immediate political consequence for Uganda as it fizzled out almost within a year of its formation, but its historical significance cannot surely be underestimated. The ULG(Z), as a component part of the Front, would similarly seem to deserve study. If neither body could be remotely described as representing the 'popular will', at the very least their history would appear to help explain why the achievement of popular democracy in an ex-colony with a such a complex 'tribal' history was so complicated.

As for the possibility of any comparisons that might be drawn from here for Southern Africa, it would certainly be rash to suggest any at this time, given the underdeveloped nature of the study. The working out of a new form of democracy is currently under way in Uganda. Clearly, the theme is beyond the scope of the present paper, but it may well be the case that the exercise is a vindication of the argument that the country's failures in this area were the result of its past. Uganda appears to fit neatly into the History Workshop organisers' category of a 'poor country' with a history of 'weak state structures'. The UNLF and its component parts were the product of this history.