

Struggles in the UPC in the 60s

by Yoga Adhola.

I have always desired to say something on the struggles within the UPC in the 60s, but did not have sufficient impulse to put pen on paper. This impetus has finally been triggered by the recent article by Hussein Bogere on Bidandi Ssali's reflections (The Monitor, April 20, 2008).

My reflections are not like Bidandi Ssali's which are based on experience; rather it is based on studies of political theory as well as history of Uganda. It is also based on various interviews with the actors at the time, amongst whom is Bidandi himself.

There has not been real agreement on the characterisation of UPC. Some have called it a social-democratic party; however, in my view UPC is a national-democratic liberation movement.

By national-democratic liberation, it is meant revolutions which lead to the elimination of colonial and semi-colonial oppression and are also latent with anti-capitalist tendency. They also desire to weaken the imperialist system.

National-democratic liberation also involves the forging of the nation as well as the dissolution of feudal and pre-feudal relations of respective societies.

"Practice has shown that it may take a long time for national liberation revolutions to determine their social orientation since this is not an instantaneous and irrevocable action but a consequence of contradictory process, progressive movements and retreats.

"In other words, it may be drawn out over virtually the whole period of the revolution and take place at both its phases. The national-democratic (and also the popular-democratic) tendency of development in the revolution can gain the upper hand either at first or at the second phase of the revolution."

That is the theory. And now let us link the theory to the UPC struggles in the 60s.

Bidandi tells us: "Within the UPC [in the 1960s] there was what we used to call the progressive group and the conservative group. The progressive group was led by John Kakonge who was the Secretary General of the party and who really mobilised the party on the basis of the nation, the people."

Bidandi goes on: "That was our politics. But there were also the oldies, the conservatives and somehow a political fight developed of wishing to remove Kakonge who to them was a revolutionary." In my view what Bidandi calls the progressive group should more accurately be referred to as the national-democrats.

On the other hand what he calls the "oldies" were the forces resisting national-democratic liberation. The forces resisting national-democratic liberation was led by Grace Ibingira and included people like Mathias Ngobi, Balaki Kirya, George Magezi and Dr Lumu.

It is not correct for Bidandi to say that "...somehow a political fight developed of wishing to remove Kakonge who to them was a revolutionary." As we stated earlier, the contradiction between the forces of national-democratic liberation and those against it was inevitable. And it did not happen just in Uganda. The same contradiction took place in a number of other countries.

In Kenya it took the forms of the struggle between the forces led by Jomo Kenyatta against those led by Jaramogi Oginga Odinga. In the Kenya case the reactionaries won the day.

In Tanzania or Tanu, the fight took the forms of the forces led by Julius Nyerere representing national-democratic liberation against their opposites led by Oscar Kambona. In this case, the progressives won.

The same fight took place in Malawi. National-democratic forces were led by Yatuta Chisiza by (19926-1967) and the reactionaries were led by Kamuzu Banda.

Bidandi is totally wrong to suggest that Obote "...changed colours after 1963, after the uprising of the army in 1964, when he was involved in the building of a new army for the country. I think this is where he started going wrong."

The change was in the overall political environment following independence. In the run up to independence everybody was united in the quest for independence. With the attainment of independence, the various political forces began to work for their respective interests.

Within the nationalist movements such as UPC, this was the time for determining the character of the party. This led to struggles for the character of the party. In the UPC the struggle pitted those who thought independence was just a threshold to further struggles and those who thought independence was the end of all struggles.

The climax of these struggles came in 1964, and Bidandi tells us: "They were saying no to communism, as they put it. And so they found themselves with a task of removing him in the Delegates Conference of UPC in 1964 in Gulu. That is where the whole thing climaxed and that is where they played tricks in the Delegates Conference and Kakonge was removed [and replaced by Grace Ibingira]."

It was a great feat for the anti-national-democratic forces to capture the post of Secretary General. The SG is the second most powerful post in the UPC, second only to the presidency. Soon after bagging the post, Ibingira left for the United States of America to shop for money. We are told by Dan Nabudere that he came back with one million dollars.

With this money, Ibingira began to organise. One of the first things he did was to decimate the structure John Kakonge had put in place. This is the process which led to what Bidandi describes as follows: "After the removal of Kakonge, UPC became more divided – some of the supporters of Kakonge were soon dismissed from the party. I remember Kintu Musoke, Kivejinja, Nabudere were dismissed. I was suspended, not dismissed. I don't know why."

"It was the decision of the executive after a commission was set up to establish who were introducing communism in the country. It was led by [James] Kahigiriza from Mbarara who came up with a report that I was seen personally with Kivejinja being given money by the Chinese somewhere on Masaka Road near Mpigi."

Who was Kahigiriza? He was Ibingira's protégé and hatchet man. After the elections to the Eshiangere (district Council) of Ankole in 1963, although Bananuka was three times elected Engazi (Prime Minister), Ibingira used his influence to veto the election of Bananuka as Engazi and placed James Kaigiriza in instead.

From the party, the struggle moved on to the national scene. Because Bidandi has chosen not to say much about this part of the struggles, and also because of space, we shall handle that another time.