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Powerful personality who as PM twice failed Uganda

By Michael Holman

Apollo Milton Obote, first prime minister of an independent Uganda, had a unique claim to fame. Alone among African leaders, he won back at the ballot box in 1980 the office he had lost in a coup nine years earlier to Idi Amin.

Unfortunately for Uganda, both his sessions in office proved disastrous, and the country is still recovering from his malign legacy.

Obote, who died in a Johannesburg hospital on Monday, was among the last members of a group of east and southern African politicians who led their countries to independence from Britain: Hastings Banda of Malawi, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, and the sole survivor, Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia.

All coupled the mystique of their office with powerful personalities; all ultimately failed the countries that owed them so much. But the spell cast by their status, experience and sheer presence was almost tangible.

And when Obote made his official return to Uganda in 1980 after exile in Tanzania, at a rally of his Uganda People's Congress party, he was welcomed by a smartly turned out police band tootling the party song: "Oh Uganda, we are moving forward." Even the cynics conceded that a fresh start might indeed be possible. It was not to be.

His first term in office had been marked by a determination to pursue his socialist agenda, coupled with an increasingly autocratic approach.

There was little sympathy from British officials when news of the coup led by Idi Amin reached the Commonwealth conference in Singapore, where Obote was clashing with the British prime minister Edward Heath over UK arms to South Africa.

Almost certainly there was British complicity in the coup, and most of the British press welcomed his successor, initially treating Idi Amin as a bluff and honest soldier.

During his exile in Dar es Salaam, Obote radiated frustration at his circumstances, made tolerable by his intense conviction that a second chance was yet to come.

With the support of his host, President Nyerere, whose invasion in 1978 of Uganda ensured Amin's overthrow, Obote regained his office. But the elections that brought him back to

office were rigged, and Commonwealth observers endorsed a flawed election.

Once back in office, Obote's first moves were to reverse the economic policies he had introduced nearly a decade earlier, and he pursued IMF and World Bank reforms with vigour.

But economic development was overshadowed by a human rights record that some compare to that of Idi Amin, and Obote remained at heart a ruthless man.

"Uganda is a fairy tale," wrote Winston Churchill in 1908. "You climb up a railway instead of a beanstalk, and at the end there is a wonderful new world...Is there any other spot on the whole earth where the dreams and hopes of the negrophile, so often mocked by results and stubborn facts, have ever attained such a happy realisation."

This characterisation is itself part of a fairy tale. But like all fairy tales, the cast of characters includes ogres, and Uganda's great tragedy is to have endured two of Africa's most notorious.

Michael Holman

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