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# President who ruled in shadow of tyrants

By Michael Holman

Shortly before the swearing in of Godfrey Binaisa, the former Ugandan president who died last week aged 90, an ominous notice appeared. Nailed above the entrance to the country's central bank – a dilapidated building in war-ravaged Kampala – it declared: “This structure is in danger of collapse.”

The warning could have served as the leitmotif of Binaisa's brief and unhappy time in office from June 1979 to May the following year.

Uganda's liberation from the evil thrall of Idi Amin by Tanzanian troops in April 1979 had cost the country dear. Fighting with the dictator's retreating army had left towns destroyed. Law and order broke down, and Kampala – the commercial capital – was left at the mercy of looters.

The Amin years of neglect, economic incompetence and cruelty – which included the deportation of the country's 80,000 Asians – had reduced Uganda's once-thriving economy to subsistence. Putting all this right would have been a formidable challenge in itself for the new president. But Binaisa's malign inheritance went beyond a collapsed economy and shattered towns.

He had to juggle with old and divisive loyalties: he was Muganda, the dominant ethnic group in the south, while his exiled rival, former president Milton Obote, was Langi from the north. Finally, Binaisa had to deal with the machinations of Tanzania's wily leader Julius Nyerere. Nyerere had long been determined to re-install his friend Obote, whom he had sheltered in Dar es Salaam since Amin seized power in 1971.

The amiable, good-humoured Binaisa never stood a chance in the maelstrom that was Ugandan politics. Yet on the face of it, Binaisa's elevation to president was justified by his impressive political and intellectual record, including a leading role in the campaign for independence from Britain.

Born in Mityana, west of Kampala, Binaisa was precociously clever. At 17 he won a place to read law at Makerere, then one of Africa's top universities. He soon made a name for himself as a fiery student leader.

Banished from the campus in 1940 for demonstrating against the British war effort, he had a spell managing a mine. It helped him win a scholarship in the late 1940s to study geology

at Glasgow university. But to be a miner was never his ambition, and he dropped out. Law was his vocation. He studied at Kings College London, was called to the bar in 1956 and returned to start a practice in Kampala.

It was a heady time for young African idealists. Nationalism had propelled Ghana to independence from Britain in 1957, and the rest of the colonies were champing at the bit. Ghana's leader, Kwame Nkrumah, was seen as the continent's driving force, delivering a potent and populist message of pan-Africanism, anti-colonialism and anti-capitalism.

For Binaisa these were exciting days, and he threw himself into the struggle. He was arrested in 1959, accused of leading a violent underground movement against British rule, and banished to a remote village in north-east Uganda. At independence in 1962 he was rewarded for his efforts, appointed the country's first African attorney-general.

He worked closely and initially harmoniously with Obote, and the two men drew up a new constitution. It reflected an authoritarian streak and a socialist ambition that was *de rigueur* in Africa: Zambia's Kenneth Kaunda called it "humanism"; Nyerere invoked "ujamaa" or villagisation; Binaisa called for "ekigaali". All had in common a communal, consultative system. All failed dismally.

Soon Obote's autocratic style was losing him friends and making him enemies. Binaisa resigned as attorney-general, objecting to a statute that gave the president powers of detention, and returned to his law practice. When Amin moved against Obote and political assassinations became common, Binaisa was put on the hit list and went into exile.

He returned to Uganda soon after Amin's overthrow and immediately made a favourable impression on western diplomats. "I was struck by the breadth of his practical experience, laced with classical knowledge and human understanding," wrote one.

Engaging as he was, these qualities were not enough. Susceptible to flattery, he failed to see through the National Consultative Council, a *de facto* cabinet dominated by Obote supporters. Binaisa unwisely accepted their invitation to become president. Had he been able to make a difference to the country's living conditions, the story of his presidency might have been different. But although the war was over, life remained hell for Ugandans.

Government offices in Kampala and Entebbe, ransacked by looters, were unable to function; hospitals and schools lacked the most basic of necessities; and nights in Kampala were punctuated by the sound of gunfire. It was the only city in the world, joked Binaisa, where if your car travelled in a straight line you risked being arrested for drunken driving.

Less than a year after the Council appointed Binaisa, the same body sacked him, paving the way for an election that was almost certainly rigged and returned Obote to power. Binaisa left for New York in 1987, returning to Uganda in 2001.

For many Ugandans, Binaisa and the war are distant history. Their lives have been

dominated by President Yoweri Museveni, the man who led a guerrilla campaign that overthrew Obote in 1986. Nearly 25 years later, he shows no sign of stepping down.

“Godfrey lacked the killer instinct”, mused one Ugandan. True – but no bad epitaph for a Ugandan politician who reached the top in turbulent times.

Godfrey Binaisa, who married three times, is survived by three sons and four daughters.

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