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Obituary

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## Idi Amin

Ruthless dictator whose rise to power was facilitated by the British colonial authorities, he went on to devastate Uganda

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Patrick Keatley  
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Idi Amin, who has died at an age thought to be 78, was one of the most brutal military dictators to wield power in post-independence Africa.

While chief of staff of the Ugandan army, under Dr Milton Obote's civilian government, he seized power in 1971. He made himself president, with the rank of field marshal, and after eight years of power left Uganda a legacy of bloodthirsty killings and economic mismanagement. Parliament was dissolved; no elections were held; secret police - most of them in plain clothes - exercised absolute power of life and death; and the courts and the press were subjugated to the whims of the executive.

The death toll during the Amin regime will never be accurately known. The best estimate, from the International Commission of Jurists in Geneva, is that it was not less than 80,000 and more likely around 300,000. Another estimate, compiled by exile organisations with the help of Amnesty International, put the number killed at 500,000.

For Tanzania's president, Julius Nyerere (obituary, October 15 1999), Amin was "a murderer, a liar and a savage". In the perspective of history he will go down as one who damaged the cause of African nationalism. His rule of Uganda became a synonym for barbarity.

Amin was neither well educated nor particularly intelligent. But he had a peasant cunning which often outflanked cleverer opponents, including Uganda's civilian president Milton Obote, who was displaced in the 1971 coup.

He also possessed a kind of animal magnetism; a quality he used with sadistic skill in his dealings with people he wished to dominate. In his relations with women it brought him a succession of casual mistresses, longer-serving concubines, and six wives. Turned against men, this magnetism was used as by a snake on a rabbit; Amin soon learned how to exploit it to frighten, dominate and command. It explains the otherwise bizarre decision by his last British colonial regimental commander to select Amin as one of the first two black Ugandans to be promoted to commissioned rank, when his educational background was virtually nil.

That was in 1961. With independence the next year and the rapid Africanisation which followed, he was elevated to army commander by 1964. He claimed to have been the officer who, virtually single-handed, put down the army mutiny at Jinja, Uganda's second city, in that year. Whatever the truth of it, Obote trusted him enough to put him in charge of the highly political military operation two years later: the attack on the "new palace" of the Kabaka (king) of Buganda on Mengo Hill. There was no military glory involved - Sir Frederick Mutesa and his supporters had only a few hunting rifles - but the victory of this Moslem officer of peasant origins over the Christian patrician ruler of the sophisticated Baganda, hitherto the dominant tribe, invested Amin with a mystique that was to make him a legend and carry him to the heights of power.

The Battle of Mengo Hill, as he liked to describe it, was something he never ceased to describe to visitors like myself, in greater and more gory detail with the passage of the years. It gave him the conviction he was not as other mortals; that bullets could not touch him, that he was selected by God to walk with kings, presidents and prime ministers alike and, when directed by God in mystic dreams, to humble them. Indeed,

the time was to come when, in the Denis Hills affair, he was to humble the foreign secretary of Great Britain, bringing him grovelling to Kampala to plead for a British resident's life.

Amin was born around 1925 - exact records were not kept for Africans in those days - in Koboko county in West Nile district, home of the Kakwa tribe. His father had spent much of his life in the southern Sudan, where the Kakwas, an Islamic people, had originated. His mother was from the ethnically related Lugbara tribe. Violence and bloodletting were observed, by early Victorian explorers, to be particularly marked among these Sudanic-Nubian peoples; the homicide rate there is still one of the highest in Africa to this day.

Amin's first foot on the ladder was the traditional one for poor boys with little training, seeking to better themselves: he joined the army. He became an assistant cook in the King's African Rifles. He claimed to have fought with the regiment in the Burma campaign in the war. This was true of many Africans who joined the British colonial forces, but in Amin's case was an audacious lie. His record file shows his entry into the KAR took place in 1946.

A mere 16 years later, after training in Wiltshire, as a commissioned officer, he was to command a battalion of the 4th KAR and, when in civvies, wore the KAR tie all his life.

His only distinction in terms of overseas service was to be identified as leader of a scrimmage among Ugandan troops stationed in Mauritius, which was put down by British-led police. The other black mark in his regimental book was an entry indicating, in 1955, that he had been repeatedly infected and cured of venereal disease. He is said to have acquired his taste for bordellos, and for variety in women, when serving in army posts in the sheikhdoms of the Gulf, from Aden northwards, in colonial times.

The first sign of his sadism came after the fatal decision to make him a commissioned officer. In 1962, commanding troops of the 4th KAR, he carried out the Turkana Massacre, an operation that began as a simple assignment to check cattle rustling by tribesmen in the Turkana region of Kenya. Complaints from villagers reached the British authorities in Nairobi; bodies were exhumed from pits and it became clear that the victims had been tortured, beaten to death and, in some cases, buried alive.

But Amin was lucky. The British authorities in Kampala, with Uganda's independence only months away, decided it was politically impossible to court-martial one of the country's only two black officers. The man who was later to be toppled by Amin, Dr Milton Obote, concurred.

In December 1969 came the mysterious episode when assassins, never identified, tried to kill Obote as he walked from a party rally. Badly wounded, he ordered an investigation while recovering in hospital. Amin could not be found but turned up later at the meeting where Brigadier Okoya, the deputy army commander, indicated that the net was closing in. A date was set for a second meeting, on January 26, when decisions would be taken and the guilty ones named.

At 11pm on January 25, shots were heard in the Kampala suburb where the deputy commander was living. Friends called police and went to the house, to find Brigadier Okoya and his wife both dead from multiple bullet wounds. Nothing had been stolen.

Later in 1970, while the Obote government was still in power, police investigating an armed hold-up, arrested a gang of kondos, the local word for thugs in illegal possession of arms. Under questioning, one of them indicated he took his orders from Brigadier Amin. This was embarrassing, as Obote was about to promote Amin to chief of staff, so the police commandant, Inspector-General Cryema, took no action.

The kondos were released from detention and were killed in unexplained circumstances soon afterwards. Cryema was arrested and executed soon after Amin took power, in the coup of January 25 1971, while Obote was attending a Commonwealth prime ministers' conference in Singapore.

As this reign of terror got under way, the chief of Justice, Kabimu Kiwanuka, a former prime minister of Uganda, was arrested in his robing room and brutally killed by plain

clothes thugs. The Anglican Archbishop, Janani Luwum, was killed in a simulated car crash in Kampala. Other leading figures were expunged in similar brutal circumstances, including the vice-chancellor of the university.

About six weeks after Amin seized power came the explosion at Makindye Prison in Kampala, when 32 army officers, crammed into a tiny cell, were blown up by a charge of dynamite. The group was made up of Christian tribes such as the Acholi and Langi, which had supported the government of the fallen President Obote. It now seems that two thirds of the Ugandan army's soldiers, out of a total of 9,000 men, were executed in Amin's first year of power. The pattern had been set for the mass blood-letting that was to come.

I myself had a glimpse of Amin's cruelty and cunning one morning in Kampala, when the police band were giving a concert as part of a major ceremony. The dictator, in full uniform, stepped forward at a break between numbers, seized the baton from a quivering conductor and barged into action. The official police photographer appeared on cue to record this "spontaneous event". Then came a trap.

Spotting me in the crowd, Amin declared: "There is my best friend, Patrick; he will do the next number." With that, he signalled to the cameraman, who moved into position, ready to take the compromising photo that would have me standing next to the dictator. It was clever; it would make me immediately suspect in the media world.

I hastily resorted to a coughing fit, face in handkerchief, and scotched. When I recounted this over lunch that day, sitting on the verandah of the Speke Hotel with Anil Clerk, QC, the acknowledged leader of the Ugandan bar, he discreetly pointed out a plainclothes police officer.

"Patrick," Clerk said, "the time to leave Uganda is now, this afternoon." I took his advice. I never say my distinguished lawyer friend again. His body was found a fortnight later, doubled up in the boot of a partly burned car, his throat cruelly bound with razor wire.

Some months later in Nairobi, I was tipped off by an old friend, an African airlines official, who advised me to avoid refuelling stops or even overflights in Uganda air space. My name had been added to the death list of those to be taken off any flight and shot.

According to Amnesty International, the ICJ, and exile sources, Amin deliberately created four rival and overlapping agencies to carry out his mass killings. These were the Military Police, the Presidential Guard, the Public Safety Unit and the Bureau of State Research. His bodyguards were drawn from his own Kakwa tribe and, with their special language and accent, they were well placed to detect any attempt by an outsider to infiltrate their ranks. This, combined with Libyan security experts, and Amin's own good luck, headed off seven major assassination attempts organised by dissident army and air force officers between 1972 and 1979.

Amin was a considerable linguist, and once explained to me that he was much more fluent in his own Kakwa or its two related northern languages, than in English, which he had mastered only after joining the army. He was fluent also in the language of southern Uganda, and in the East African lingua franca, Swahili.

In 1977, after Britain broke diplomatic relations with his regime and then withdrew the two remaining diplomats who had stayed on attachment at the French Embassy, Amin declared he had beaten the British and conferred on himself the decoration of CBE which, he said, stood for "Conqueror of the British Empire". Radio Uganda then solemnly read out the whole of his title: "His Excellency President for Life, Field Marshal Alhaji Dr Idi Amin Dada, VC, DSO, MC, CBE". Frequently, when the national radio made an announcement, referring to "a military spokesman," the text had been dictated by Amin himself at the presidential lodge in Kampala, which he re-named the Command Post.

He was a man who acted on hunches and impulses. His decision to expel the 35,000 Asians of Uganda in the space of three months between August and November 1972 came to him, he said, in a dream. He expounded the dream the next day to troops at a military post in the north, and the policy came into effect before nightfall.

Until a bitter quarrel with Israel, when he ordered the diplomatic mission in Kampala to be closed, Amin was proud of the parachutist's wings which he wore above all his ribbons on his elaborate marshal's uniform. He brought back this badge from the course he took in Israel while still an army sergeant. Later another parachutist on the course, Reuben Cohen, declared that Amin had failed his tests but was given the wings for reasons of diplomacy at the time.

Then in 1976 came the hijacking of an Air France plane bound from Athens to Paris, initially by two members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and two from Germany's Baader-Meinhof gang. The plane was forced down at Entebbe and the crisis only ended with an audacious airborne raid by Israeli commandoes. But one passenger, the unfortunate Dora Bloch, who held joint Israeli-British citizenship, had been taken from the airport to hospital in Kampala.

After the raid, according to Uganda's minister of health at the time, Henry Kyemba, who later escaped into exile, Mrs Bloch was taken screaming from her hospital bed and brutally executed the same day. This incident did much to convince world opinion that, in Amin, the international community was dealing with a madman.

The Bloch affair loosened tongues in Israel and a doctor who had served in an Israeli medical aid team in Uganda told a newspaper correspondent in Tel Aviv: "It's no secret that Amin is suffering from the advanced stages of syphilis, which has caused brain damage".

When, in 1975, the then British foreign secretary James Callaghan, had to fly to Uganda to plead for the life of the British lecturer, Denis Hills, held hostage in prison after being given a death sentence by a military court, he was given a confidential file referring to the same theory: that Amin was infected and insane.

The Islamic religion became a fetish for this unbalanced man, and his uncouth espousal of it did great harm to the Muslim cause in Africa. Amin succeeded in enlisting the support of his Islamic near-neighbour, the Libyan leader Colonel Gadafy. But other Muslim leaders in Syria, Jordan and Iraq rebuffed him when he travelled to their capitals looking for alliances. However, contingents of Libyan troops and planes helped his regime survive, against the odds, on more than one occasion.

Amin's fanaticism came to a head in a bizarre telegram sent to the then United Nations secretary-general, Kurt Waldheim, when he purported to analyse the Middle East situation and focused his hatred on the Israelis.

The message contained these phrases, personally dictated by Amin to his secretary: "Germany is the right place where, when Hitler was the supreme commander, he burnt over six million Jews. This is because Hitler and all German people knew that the Israelis are not people who are working in the interest of the people of the world, and that is why they burnt the Israelis alive with gas."

Reaction in black Africa was profound. Leaders like Nyerere and Zambia's Kenneth Kaunda, who had condemned Amin from the start as a dangerous, unbalanced man, were vindicated.

Amin's family life remains cloaked in mystery. He divorced his first three wives at various times. A fourth, Kay, disappeared and her body, butchered into chunks and then reassembled, was seen at a mortuary by one of Amin's ministers, who then fled into exile. There were two other wives, the sixth being a nightclub singer, Sarah, whom he married when she was 19 and he 50. He claimed to have fathered 32 children.

Amin's downfall came in 1979 after some weeks when Ugandan troops crossed the frontier into Tanzania, looting and wrecking in villages along the Kagera river. The Tanzanian president, Julius Nyerere, retaliated by despatching an armoured column, led by three tanks. Hundreds of Ugandan exiles volunteered to join it, and when it triumphantly entered Kampala, it was led by a young Ugandan army officer, Colonel Oyite Ojok.

Libya's maverick leader, Colonel Gadafy, had begun sending troops to help shore up the regime, but hastily reversed the airlift after some 400 Libyan casualties. Amin followed

them into brief exile in Tripoli and then moved on to Saudi Arabia, where he was given a villa in Jeddah on condition that he remain incommunicado indefinitely. The Saudi motive was to silence him because of the harm they believed he was doing to Islam.

In the subsequent 24 years, he gave no interviews and stayed close to home. His life appears to have been a dull round of sports events, gym sessions and massage parlours. He had a Range Rover, a Chevrolet Caprice and a powder-blue Cadillac for his aimless shopping trips, and visits to the airport to clear through customs the parcels of cassava and other food items sent by relatives in Uganda.

Amin brought bloody tragedy and economic ruin to his country, during a selfish life that had no redeeming qualities.

• Idi Amin Dada, politician and soldier, born around 1925; died August 16 2003