

What is ideology?

By Yoga Adhola

When Mugisha Muntu left FDC, he argued that he had had differences with his colleagues over ideology. Journalist Ivan Okuda disagreed. He wrote on his Facebook wall: "I am perplexed at why journalists and commentator in Uganda confidently say the FDC fall out was on ideological differences. In fact even General Muntu, a university graduate, says the two ideologies couldn't be reconciled. Mzee Yoga Adhola must be gnashing his teeth each time he hears this.

Defiance can't be an ideology. Building party structures can't be an ideology. Tactics, methods? Yes. Ideology? That's an insult.

We could even ask if FDC was actually ever founded and run on ideology and what that ideology was. The same question is relevant for NRM. I am not sure those who fell out with General Museveni ever did so on ideological grounds.

Sometimes it is a difference of opinion the prevailing sentiment over actions like amending the constitution, failure to resolve personal difference, egos becoming too fat or just posturing. Ideology has a long time to become in our peasant politics. We aren't there yet."

Yet Mugisha Muntu is not the only one who has problems understanding the concept, ideology. President Museveni probably has even a more serious problem. He makes number erroneous statements about ideology in his book, "The Mustard Seed 1".

On page 47, he wrote: "The whole of the 1960s decade in Uganda's political life was a period of intrigue, culminating in Obote virtually abandoning power to Amin. These intrigues among politicians had so weakened mass movements such as DP and UPC that Amin just picked up the mantle of power from a political leadership emasculated by its own ideological narrowness...." The phrase "ideological narrowness" is absolutely meaningless.

He also wrote on page 120: "Yet again, the unprincipled alliance between UPC and KY proved tragic for our country and was a testimony to UPC's treachery, political incompetence and ideological bankruptcy." I do not need to point out that there is absolutely no meaning in the adjective 'ideological' here.

He further wrote on page 175: "The ideological realization of where your fundamental interests lie is crucial if the mission is to succeed." The use of the word "ideological" is totally meaningless. The concept needs a serious look into. Since Ivan Okuda mentioned my name, I feel obligated to jump in and define this concept.

I need to point out at the outset that the concept ideology evolved. It first made appearance in the later part of the 18th century in France. The very word ideology was the brainchild of a French nobleman,

Antoine Louis Claude Comte Destutt de Tracy. He was part of a group of French intellectuals who called themselves ideologues.

The group became very critical of Napoleon's imperial policies. To this opposition, Napoleon reacted with very intense hostility. He called them names and labelled them dreamers or people living in illusions.

Thereafter, for over 50 years there was no development on the concept.

A watershed in the development of the concept was reached when Marx and Engels came on the intellectual scene. The two argued in their book, *The German Ideology* thus:

“Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc. - real active men, as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these, up to its furthest forms. Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life process. If in ideology men and their circumstances appear up-side down as in a *camera obscura*, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life process.”

This complicated argument can be simply translated that it is our common experience which gets reflected in our minds as ideology.

Our own Mamdani has put it thus: “Common conditions (experience) beget a common consciousness and when these are conditions of oppression and exploitation, they beget a consciousness of struggle.”

Marx and Engels also went on to argue: **“The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force.”**

From this statement they go on to conclude that ideology was a false consciousness. They arrived at this because the working class was getting imbued with the ideology of the bourgeoisie and interpreting the world from a bourgeois perspective. And this was giving them a false picture of life.

This was to change when Marx and Engels got more mature. *The German Ideology* was written when Marx and Engels were still developing ideologically. The mature Marx and Engels were to revise this and embrace the view that the dominated classes also have ideologies.

In their maturity, Marx and Engels came to the view that every social class has an ideology. Further, that the ideology is a reflection of the collective experience of the members as a social class. Also, that while the ideology of the bourgeoisie can be false, that of the proletariat is not.

In later time, ideology theorists came to realise that collectives like social identities too can evolve ideologies.

Contrary to this, Museveni views ideology as some sort of left-wing silver bullet or magic wand which can solve all problems. All you need to do is imbue people with it.

Yet nothing could be further from the truth. Ideology arises from the historical experiences a collective goes through. It is that experience which gets reflected in the mind as an ideology.

It is therefore not possible to artificially imbue a collective with an ideology. The most one can do is lead a people to find an ideology within themselves i.e. from their experiences. Having done that, you can then help them refine or develop it.

It is for this reason that I argue that the NRM has no ideology and cannot evolve one as some NRMs think. There is no common historical experience which brings NRMs together.

Just compare the NRMs with DP or UPC. The common experience that brings UPCs together is the identity domination of the Baganda over other nationalities. And this Ganda dominance can be traced back in history to as early as 1600.

The identity domination of Catholics in Buganda by Protestants begins with the defeat of the Catholics at the battle of Mengo in 1892. At the end of that war, a Protestant oligarchy was placed in power at Mengo. The Kabaka and Katikiro had to be a Protestants and so had the majority of saza chiefs. This set up lasted until Ssemogerere became Katikiro.

Whereas DP and UPC have historically constituted experiences which can give rise to an ideology, NRM does not.

Museveni, having inadvertently stumbled into power in 1986, conjured up this thing called NRM. NRM is an amalgam of various social forces opposed to UPC which took advantage of the relatively superior organization ability of Museveni to harass their opponent, UPC. These various social forces shared no historically constituted common experience and could not evolve a unifying ideology.

Through things like Kyankwanzi, Museveni has been trying unsuccessfully to artificially imbue the NRM with some sort of ideology. So far these efforts have failed and resort has been made to brown envelopes (money) and patronage to perform some of the functions ideology normally does. We shall next discuss the functions of ideology.

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