

Partisan defections in contemporary Uganda: the micro-dynamics of hegemonic party-building

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ABSTRACT

Party defections have increasingly become a major trend of Ugandan multiparty politics, not only for individual elites at the national level and in the parties' leadership but at the grassroots level by local party members too. These shifts of allegiance are now systematically part of the staging and imagery of President Museveni's electoral campaigns. A common explanation of this phenomenon points at the inconsistency of partisan loyalties and ideologies. It is often taken for granted that defections are expressions of clientelism, political opportunism and above all democratic immaturity and a misunderstanding of multipartyism. This paper argues on the contrary that mass defections reflect the social technology of the National Resistance Movement hegemonic rule at the local level, and the constraints for opposition parties whose structures it co-opts. They are part of the monopolisation of organisational initiatives at the grassroots level by the regime. Defections are not simply a symbol of electoral opportunism but part of a routine economic posture in a context of straddling lines between the economic and political spheres. Following up the trajectories of two specific groups of defectors from Teso over several years, this paper seeks to give precise insights on the local presence and rooting of political parties, their modes of mobilisation, recruitment, their repertoires of action, and more generally on the transformation of identities, partisan practices and political activism but also on the hegemonic ruling party's mode of governance at the local level. This micro-sociologic approach opens windows on how hegemony is built in a dialogic way with local political entrepreneurs and vote brokers. Hegemonic rule therefore also contains its own limits as it requires a permanent renegotiation with individual actors embedded in a set of local power relationships.

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In November 2013, Teso local newspaper *Etop* ran stories on the defection of two youth groups who had recently crossed from the opposition Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) to the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM). They had been presented to the local press flanked by the Soroti NRM Chairman and the NRM LC5 Chairman from Serere. Party defections have increasingly become a major trend in Ugandan politics at the national level and in the parties' leadership but also, over the past two elections, at

the grassroots level by local party members. At various functions, ‘converts’ are paraded in front of party leaders and mass defections are now a quasi-ritual, especially of presidential rallies. Although also present (to a lesser extent) in opposition rallies, these mass shifts of allegiance and the swearing of oaths to the NRM are now systematically part of the staging and imagery of President Museveni’s electoral campaigns. At the end of official speeches, dozens, sometimes hundreds of defectors hand over their FDC party cards and don the yellow NRM T-shirt to prove their authenticity. This is either done before the president himself, or to one of his closest representatives with a promise to meet Museveni in State House or at his home in Rwakitura.

These collective defections echo some of the central issues raised after the 2011 elections: how, despite alarming anticipation, did the NRM succeed in canvassing such large rural support, including in regions considered opposition strongholds, like Teso? For some analysts, the NRM bought or stole the elections;¹ for others, like the Afrobarometer report, the 2011 electoral outcome had to be understood as the expression of the underestimated NRM popularity and of an ‘uninspiring opposition’.² But none of these papers really explain either the opposition’s failure to strengthen their local grassroots support or the success of the NRM to do so in very concrete terms. We still have a weak understanding of the mechanisms, structures, and practices of vote canvassing by political parties at the local level.³ Therefore, these local mass defections are intriguing entry points to suggest hypotheses on the local presence and rooting of political parties, their modes of mobilisation and recruitment, repertoires of action, and more generally on the transformation of partisan identities and political activism.

Defections are quite common in multiparty political systems. They are most often analysed as being part of the democratic game, more consequentially for new multiparty electoral democracies where they are considered a threat to both party institutionalisation and democratisation itself.⁴ In Uganda, if high profile defections are widely commented upon, grassroots defections have been overlooked by academics and remain almost unexplored.⁵ Among journalists and politicians, a common explanation of this phenomenon points at the inconsistency of partisan loyalties and ideologies. It is often assumed that defections are expressions of clientelism, political opportunism and above all democratic immaturity and misunderstanding of multipartyism.⁶ This theory assumes that converts would soon re-defect to their mother party after the opportune ‘electoral season’. Both feared locally as a shock wave for the party and officially brushed aside or dismissed as being opportunistic or temporary, defections are a phenomenon whose magnitude is difficult to measure, given that party records, when existent, are very decentralised and barely accessible to researchers. Moreover, parties play numbers, images and symbols’ games about defections in the media that gives a biased view of the true extent of this phenomenon. It is nevertheless noteworthy that while parties have developed legal strategies to prevent defections among the national elite,⁷ they still proactively encourage mass local defections as part of their campaign strategies – especially the NRM. Party crossings emerged as a major issue when interviewing local party officials about electoral practices.

Most of the literature about party defection examines legal provisions, the impact of floor-crossings on parliamentary balances of power or representation; whether the constitutional framework restrain or encourage defections; or anti-defections laws and their consequences on parties and party system.⁸ This paper approaches the phenomenon of defection from a different perspective. My idea is to try and understand defections not

at the national level but at the grassroots one. I don't focus on national or even local candidates, but on (micro-)local political leaders and mobilisers present behind the scenes of campaigns who are in direct contact with voters.⁹ This paper is based on five periods of fieldwork conducted between 2010 and 2016. It presents a 3-year follow-up I made on the two particular groups presented below – micro-local leaders and followers – who defected from FDC to NRM in Serere district (Teso sub-region, eastern Uganda). It gives humble and partial insights into the socio-political analysis of grassroots defections. Although there are limits to this micro-level approach, this research should be read as a contribution to a more refined analysis of the mechanisms of defections and of the perceptions associated with them, and therefore of partisan mechanisms through direct and protracted contact with some of their protagonists, and observations of their individual and collective trajectories. This paper therefore does not aim at generalising its hypotheses to the whole of Uganda, but to propose paths for reflection and discussion on partisan mobilisation and hegemonic domination at the local level. It is based on interviews with local and national party leaders and mobilisers, an observation of local rallies during the 2010–2011 and 2015–2016 campaigns, and on a careful review of the Ugandan national and Teso newspapers. Defections are used here as an entry point to provide a window on the realities of partisan daily practices but also on the mechanisms of defections, on the link between the party and voters, on political activism and local networking.

In this paper, I hope to transcend the idea of an 'ideological gap' of voters to reflect on the use and practices of defections in contemporary Uganda. I argue that mass defections reflect the social technology of the NRM hegemonic rule at the local level and the organisational constraints faced by opposition parties (section one). I then seek to analyse how partisan hegemony is exercised and to understand its modalities through the monopolisation of organisational initiatives,¹⁰ showing how defections in this context reflect a survival strategy within local political economies (section two). Finally, I show how this kind of hegemony is built in a dialogic way with local political entrepreneurs and vote brokers; containing its own limits as it requires a permanent renegotiation with individual actors embedded in a web of local power relationships (section three).

The building of a hegemonic party

The two defectors' groups presented in this paper originate from Serere district, in Teso. Teso is a particularly good place to observe defection, as it has switched from being an opposition area to an increasingly strong NRM support base in 2011 and 2016. A former UPC stronghold and a recruitment area for former President Milton Obote's Special forces, Teso remained an armed opposition zone until the mid-1990s after the military rout of armed combatants and the co-optation of some of their leaders, who were appointed to administrative and ministerial positions. Even though the NRM party had gained some seats in 1996 due to the peace dividend, the government's incapacity to contain the incursions of the Lord's Resistance Army (based in northern Uganda) in 2003, and the consequent resurgence of insecurity and internal displacement created fertile ground for the NRM political disarray by 2006. At that time, the FDC had become the main party in the whole region, and the NRM performed worse here than in any other sub-region. According to the NRM Vice-Chairman for Eastern Uganda, Mike Mukula it was impossible then to wear an NRM T-shirt in Teso.¹¹ 2011 was a

totally different scenario. Museveni came first in five out of eight districts, and the NRM swept a large majority of MP seats. In 2016 the NRM was again dominant at the Presidential, MP, and local elections,¹² confirming its strong footing in the sub-region. Teso is therefore an interesting case study as it illustrates the different parties' strategies to recapture a competitive area. Serere district is even more interesting as the continued elections of two prominent national FDC leaders – general secretary Alice Alaso and the popular former national representative in charge of funding Elijah Okupa – gave it the appearance of an FDC stronghold.

I have argued in the past that the NRM's electoral success can be partly explained by the clear and now entrenched and internalised perception among the electorate that despite recurrent elections, the opposition will never be able to win at the national level and that the incumbent regime will remain in power.¹³ However, the surprisingly large victory of the NRM in 2011 also encouraged scholars to reconsider its strategies on the ground in order to explain its performance. The importance given to the control of the local scene grew increasingly ahead of the 2001 national poll. The NRM's parliamentary cohesion was then threatened because of the defections of key figures of the Movement.¹⁴ It became even more essential after the adoption of the multiparty system in 2005, when Museveni personally filled some of the gaps left open by the weak structures of the NRM party. The mistrust had grown against political leaders unable to give reliable feedback on the president's popularity on the ground and on the weaknesses and loopholes of the party. Museveni became more 'intrusive' in the selection of local candidates,¹⁵ and the NRM leadership established a clear strategy to penetrate opposition parties and entice their leaders and mobilisers.¹⁶ Since 2010, the NRM has reinvigorated and strengthened its grassroots structures through nationwide registration exercises, the renewal of its office bearers, primary elections for its official flag bearers and the setting up of elected 30-member NRM committees in each village whose task is to mobilise and recruit new members.¹⁷ Looking at defections adds an extra lens on the strategies of local party-building in this context.

The two groups I will present are not related to one another even though they were in contact once. They both operated on a strict hierarchy, and requested that I wait for their leader before I ask questions, some arguing that they did not speak English, others just telling me I should talk to their leader first. The first group, which I will call group A, was located in a small village surrounded by hills a few kilometres far from Lake Kyoga. Group A is led by James, the chairman of 37 youth defectors who crossed to the NRM in November 2013. James convinced the others to cross over during discussions in a primary school, defending his decision in reference to unfulfilled promises by the opposition, lies during the campaign, and the willingness of opposition leaders to cling to power just like the other ones. As he explained:

During campaigns, candidates speak a lot of words and most of them are lies. They promise a lot but never fulfil what they pledge. Some of us were used as polling agents, mobilizers, but we were just being lied to [referring to the incapacity of opposition parties to provide political dividend for mobilization but also to attract government projects]. Whenever they use to come, they said each time they would go back to the government and put our project forward. Eventually the elections come and they come back. [...] In their manifesto they said they would come only for two terms and that's it. Besigye said NRM wanted to stay in power but FDC leaders are lying. They're also stuck to power. Worst of all, we also

thought that FDC would take the presidency. But we saw it would never happen. We hope that Besigye would take the lead but he also left the FDC leadership.¹⁸

James initially joined the FDC in 2001, where he stayed for 12 years. He was the parish chairperson for the party, and he used to organise meetings of villagers and village leaders on how to strengthen it. Information from the party leadership came through him, and he had to identify where the FDC was the weakest and find out why it was weak in that area. At this time he was not paid, instead being a 'volunteer for the good of the party'.¹⁹ Ever since FDC arrived here, 'the NRM has always been weak', he adds smiling.

Group B, located a bit closer to Soroti road in a small trading centre, is led by Ben, who crossed with 45 youth defectors mainly from the same village. Ben has a similar mobiliser background to James. He is a farmer, a community leader, a leader of his clan (in charge of families), an assistant catechist at the church and a member of the parents-teachers association at school. He is now in charge of mobilising for NRM candidates as he did for the FDC. He would do it for the NRM, he said, because of the skill he showed in the FDC, where he was 'at his best'.²⁰ All the defectors had been active FDC members.

The studied defectors are neither candidates nor key figures of the opposition but active support staff. They are former opposition local mobilisers, political agents, and vote brokers, who go door-to-door until the eve of elections to encourage people to vote. Defections certainly tarnish the image of the opposition and demoralise its members. But these trajectories also give organisational insights. In Teso, grassroots defections have partly dismantled or at least disorganised the grassroots support network of the FDC. This brings some nuances to the official narrative about the opposition's incapacity to develop grassroots structures and documents the concrete setbacks they face in their efforts to reach out to constituents. For this task, the party intermediaries, between structures and the electorate, are the ones who prepare the ground. They are people who can 'effectively mobilize significant segments of the population'²¹ and closely monitor the electorate. The political neutralisation game played against the opposition by the NRM does not only target the most vocal personalities but also aims at uprooting opposition structures or influential figures at the micro-political level.²² They defang their capacity for action and even prevent opposition from campaigning efficiently by introducing unpredictability in the support of campaign teams. This creates an atmosphere of diffuse paranoia and disrupts the fluidity of information by the fear of 'moles' or people 'approached' by another party and on the verge of defection.²³ Candidates therefore do not trust their agents. Through soft power more than repression, this undermines the work of opposition political parties and raises the importance of informal intelligence networks and underground mobilisation.²⁴

Defectors therefore are efficient informal subsidiary conduits of the NRM's partisan hegemonic strategy. Former opponents were now regulating agents of the opposition itself, even more effectively as defectors were encouraged to be zealots. Ben explained that they were given a transition period, a period of study. The GISO and the LC1 had the role of studying their 'authenticity', whether they had truly crossed over to NRM, if they were 'genuine'. They already went through that stage so they had now been accepted. It lasted about 3 or 4 months. Then the LCV Chairman sent a vehicle to them and took them to the district. They gave them T-shirts. 'That was to show that we were transformed

because an FDC would never wear that'.²⁵ During our first interview at the end of November 2013, James' group was still being 'studied'. He had received neither support nor promises, which could not be provided until they were certain, he said. To prove he was a true NRM supporter he had now to convince other people and was expecting more defectors. He was registering some of them at the time of the interview.²⁶

As chairmen, Ben and James were approached by those hoping to stand for offices from MP to Local Councillor. Ben was the one to help mobilise for votes, as he previously did for the FDC. Smiling proudly, he listed to me a number of his personal qualities that made him good at this: he was given the gift of speech; he could easily talk to people well; he was trustworthy; if something was delivered to him, he would not disappear with it but make sure it reached the right people; he was popular; he was a leader in all aspects – in his clan, in the church, and at school. He was asked to attend presidential rallies, which he mobilised people to attend. Before the candidate spoke, he was given the platform to introduce them, and when the president was around, a vehicle was sent for him. 'Anybody can go into these trucks, even other parties if they want to see the *mzee* [Museveni]. It is good to woo them to cross over while in these trucks'.²⁷ 'Being the defectors', adds Ben, 'we get the privilege of being given a specific role: help other people to defect. They will see that there are benefits, certain privileges that you get out of defecting'.²⁸

Defections, therefore, have been part of a multi-pronged strategy to degrade perceptions of the opposition in the electorate, neutralise its organisational capacity at the very grassroots level and to expand the ruling party's organising capacity. Even though the defections of high profile political figures tend to be much publicised, the defections of this level of support staff are at least as important in terms of party organisation – and opposition *disorganisation*. However, given the large numbers of defection groups, they also affect the popular perception of the parties. 'When you're disciplining a child, if you strike him softly he won't feel a big pain, but if you're disciplining it more, he will cry more'.²⁹

The NRM's 'social incorporation'

Both groups reflect the NRM's sectorial approach to mobilisation (*via* youth groups, women's groups, veterans' groups, etc.), and its tendency to value such groups in big numbers. Interestingly, the groups of defectors consistently present an identified leader, and an already socially structured organisation. Mass youth defections are not – as presented in the media – a broad movement of the youths towards the NRM, but a more specific defection of politically active segments of the community. Ben's group pre-existed as a youth group working together on a collective-led orange plantation. When they defected, it was the LC5 Chairman who first received them because he was a former FDC member too. James was the chairman of a self-help youth group of farmers, businessmen and unemployed students in which people shared money for personal or professional projects (like weddings, or to start a small business). When they decided to cross, James crossed with 37 fellow FDC members from the same parish. He called the LC5, also NRM Chairman for Serere, and Museveni's political advisor, Emily Otekat, who was from the same area. 'I knew their numbers', he added. 'They connected us to other people like Elasu [the district NRM chairman]'.³⁰ They crossed as a group: according to James, 'if the leader is good, the group will follow'.³¹ When they realised

that their group had become big they looked for a leader to register them as a group in the government system. They met a councillor at the parish level who contacted Elasu. The councillor told them ‘to organize themselves and he would bring visitors. Elasu was on the list of visitors’.³² The visitors became interested in their association and became members, even paying registration fees to join (5000 Ugandan shillings). During a wedding ceremony for example, these people would attend and bring a goat, or more. That was how the group came to know them; they became their ‘best friend’ (friendship symbolising financial support). ‘The FDC leaders wouldn’t do it. But it was not a problem that Elasu was in NRM. There was no party involved. That was in 2006. We were not talking about politics at this time’, James added.

These processes raise several important points. First, the local political organisation of parties is highly hierarchised and segmented, regulated by the access to phone numbers and the negotiated status of ‘friendship’. Secondly, the highly decentralised mobilisation practices raise questions about the coordination of the different levels and even personalities within the NRM (non-institutionalised party, led by local political entrepreneurs). And thirdly, it gives us insights about electoral temporalities. Under the Movement System, Carbone describes the process of ‘setting up an *ad hoc* electoral machine to get through the electoral process; once the electoral process is over, the electoral machine gets disbanded’.³³ What is interesting in the Teso defections is that there is, on the contrary, an extension of the ‘extraordinary’ electoral time to the ordinary daily life. The actual canvassing starts well before the official one.³⁴ This trivialises the notion of electoral mobilisation as the NRM prepares the ground on a non-stop basis, not only during election time but all-year long. In a way, it apparently depoliticises mobilisation and blurs the lines between the political realm, and the daily life of people. Politics infuses their domestic spaces. This corresponds to a process of social incorporation and building of the party’s ‘social robustness’.³⁵

The ‘electoral season’ appears as an acme of a more continuous mobilisation process that starts at the very first day after the previous elections through routine activities and perennial social organisations. If the office of local branches closes out of campaigning periods, this does not mean that there is no partisan activity at the grassroots level. The strength of the party is not necessarily based on its structure but on its actual capacity for canvassing popular support, be it informally and in an uncoordinated manner. The background of the defectors is very meaningful to understand how the party grassroots activities do not rely on party structures but on individuals. In a common context where it is ‘difficult to get an accurate assessment of local cells’ activities’³⁶ or ‘consistent reports on branch activities or party structures’,³⁷ where local branches are entangled by personal intra-rivalries,³⁸ and where MPs avoid returning to their constituencies to escape social demands, political agents, and mobilisers have become essential tools to perform in elections and to make sure that the ballot paper really goes into the ballot box.³⁹ Parties rely on popular individuals, (micro)-local notables, and local political entrepreneurs who act as critical intermediaries and bring their followers with them.

More generally, there is a need to revisit the electoral temporality and replace it with a larger continuum. The daily work of political parties is not only about their physical institutionalisation. Social organisations are working all year long, even if they are politically mobilised only during elections. Elections are therefore a peak of this activity: an acme of a more diffuse and blurred relationship between the economic and political spheres

of daily life. NRM penetration of Teso resembled capillaries – reaching to the very grass-roots level, through pre-existing social structures, organisations and networks.⁴⁰ Elections are moments to organise people in groups that become politically salient. Partisan hegemony is exercised through the monopolisation of organisational initiatives at the local level.

This routinisation of mobilisation is important to understand. The NRM not only delivers tangible goods but it has also built hegemonic partisan structures intimately related to social and economic daily life. Interestingly, Ben's group grew from the original 45 people to 320 across the parish within two years (beyond the original orange plantation group) in the inter-electoral period, between 2013 and 2015. Since they crossed, Ben recorded some marginal benefits. He received 24 digging hoes to be distributed, as well as government projects perceived as partisan rewards. 'After seeing it was the region where they had so many defectors from FDC to the NRM, we've started getting benefits such as school blocks. They promised more classroom blocks'. A broken mud wall primary school was replaced by a concrete one, and the teachers now have their own hut. 'Some people have also been registered for the cattle restocking project [for the cows stolen by the rebels or the army during the war or by Karimojong rustlers]', he added. There is therefore a perception that being on the 'yellow book' (the NRM registration book) represents an entry point for economic survival.

James had not seen so many benefits after more than two years, but he was proud to say that he was elected in the NRM primaries for LC1 Chairman in 2016 – even though there was no subsequent general election for this position. When asked if the party was supposed to support them, he said: '*Noi*' [loud with laughter], meaning very much. 'They're supposed to perform, to build school, roads, health centres. They definitively have to do so'. Defections are therefore a way to maximise the electoral exchange.⁴¹ However, more than a mere top-down patron-client relationship during the 'electoral season', they develop recurrent calls for performance and accountability of political leaders, which shows the leverage local people can seize by defecting.

I argue here that defections are not simply a symbol of electoral opportunism but part of a routine economic posture in a context of straddling lines between the economic and the political spheres. The analysis of defections therefore gives us insights about the hegemonic ruling party's mode of governance at the local level. Party life is part of micro-economic politics. It is embedded in the economic fabric, itself being closely related with security organs. The two groups' follow-up confirms the already very well-known merging between the party and the security organs and the very tight and decentralised intelligence networks in the rural parts of Uganda. When I asked if they had been asked about their party affiliation when they try to apply for a government project for example, Ben said:

But they already know by the time you get to them, the GISO, the LC1. They already have information on everybody.

[I asked, How can they know?].

There's a way they already know.

[Another member of the group added:] This one even if he's a pastor, they know his thought, they know where he stands. They know as regards to certain program where he is inclined to [stand politically].⁴²

The ruling party does not use repression here but dissuasion. The hegemonic domination discourages opposition by instilling doubts, suspicion and uncertainty. Defectors in a way take part to the hegemonic power exercise by closely monitoring their former party comrades and acting as NRM zealots during their scrutiny period.

The seminal work of Béatrice Hibou on the micro-dynamics of domination in Tunisia is very useful to understand here more precisely why defection to the ruling party in Uganda is less an act of staunch support than an act revealing that one is not an opponent any more.⁴³ There are perceptions, fuelled by persistent rumours and NRM and opposition leaders' discourses, that the government will block economic opportunities, loans, development projects to those identified with opposition. 'Sometimes people cross to protect their lives, many opposition supporters lost their businesses. They were harassed by taxes. Some people even died [political executions]. So now people are defecting in numbers', commented a prominent national FDC mobiliser.⁴⁴ As Ben commented in 2013:

In today's politics as usual in opposition you receive less

[I said, You mean in terms of ... ?]

Like for projects [...]. You being in good terms with the government, the government recognises your existence more easily and you communicate more easily if you're in the support of the party.⁴⁵

'How long are we going to be rebels in this party [FDC]?', James confirms. By opposing the current government (being a 'rebel'), he saw himself in a battle he could not win.

You cannot oppose a ruling party [...]. In the former party, I was like a rebel but now I feel safe because it is the ruling party. It is even difficult to approach the ruling party. Now I feel secure about approaching them. When you get a problem, no one will help you because they don't know you.⁴⁶

Partisan postures therefore are part of a struggle against state neglect, and tell us as much about the relationship to the state as about political representation and leadership.

When we met their group again two years later, James was complaining that original people in NRM still did not trust them:⁴⁷

We are not facilitated but we still work on mobilisation. At primary schools when boys come for football we mobilise them to go and see the candidate [...] when people are moving, we ask them please pass my place. You put anything on fire (potatoes, cassava, even dry tea) and tell them they can call any time. We are in a poor country. Anything you give, you win them. It is difficult for us. Once you take your migration [from FDC to NRM] people expect change. But there was no change (I am not rich, we got no support from NRM). But at least if nothing comes into our hand, at least we're in peace ...⁴⁸

James now felt 'liberated'.

Defections are determined by a refined evaluation of power relationships and conjunctures. They are as much about being appreciated politically as about 'being inserted "normally" in the economic sphere'.⁴⁹ Defections are not thought of in terms of political or

programmatic adhesion but in terms of protection, taking into account ‘the power relationships within the business sphere, the relationship between entrepreneurs and social actors, conflicts and necessary compromises between them, state actors and partisan actors’.⁵⁰

The issue of defections raises interesting questions about domination more generally. Along the lines of what Hibou shows, NRM domination is exercised through ‘continuous routine interventions’ from the state (which is closely linked with the NRM party in Uganda): for sectoral subsidies, allocation of micro-credits, tax exemptions, arbitration about loosely defined regulations, management of individual debts, informal agreements with the police or judiciary institutions, among other things.⁵¹ Defections are the product of mechanisms of hegemonic production, of what Hibou after Foucault names ‘insidious sweetness’ of authoritarian regimes that oil the wheels of the socio-economic arrangements and hegemonic compromises as long as you respect the rules of the game.

Defections partly transform the relationship to the official party representatives, to the party and to the government by giving a fluidity of connections in a segmented and highly hierarchised socio-economic realm. To defect is a decision made against state neglect:

You being in good terms with the government, the government recognizes your existence easily and you communicate with the government. Since that time it is easier to connect with the local government, the LC5, the RDC, the police. It is easy eating more than when being in the opposition.

[Do you mean that these people don’t receive you when you’re in the opposition?]

They receive, but the results are minimum.

[What if somebody doesn’t have any party?]

(smiles) Right now [during election time] it is difficult to say that you don’t have a party during the period you’re in

[Pastor:] Except an independent, like me, a church leader. We, we don’t have problem with them. We have good relationships with them all. We welcome them all equally. When they come to the church, we say, talk to your people, whether FDC, NRM ... We always tell them talk to your people.⁵²

Ben added: ‘There are privileges that you get after defecting’. He was given the role of the chairman, giving him direct connections to the parish, the sub-county and even the district.⁵³

‘Even [small] players can decide to make you down’:⁵⁴ the limits of uniformalised mobilisation mechanisms

Defections curtail and bypass representation hierarchies and negotiate more direct connections between the people and the top representatives. The more levels of authority you bypass, the better – a welcome by Museveni himself being of course the best. Defections therefore point to problems of internal functional mechanisms within partisan structures in terms of cadre identification, membership expansion and induction, internal cohesion and diffuse leadership struggles. Insofar as defections of candidates give candidates and party cadres leverage to transform the way they are dealt with within the party,⁵⁵ defectors try to build or consolidate a more direct and unmediated link with

the top level of the decision-making process. It reveals the non-institutionalised and fragmented nature of party organisations as they operate on the ground, as they depend on the various survival strategies of local agents and mobilisers.⁵⁶

The management of defections is a tremendous balancing act, and the ruling party must skilfully negotiate the tightrope between retention and cohesion as defections also led to internal wrangles. Defections have raised a lot of expectations and have even become a business for local NRM representatives. It fuelled a ‘culture of parading converts’⁵⁷ during presidential rallies that has become a perceived way for the NRM leaders to win the president’s favour by exhibiting the biggest number of defectors. Along this inflationary pressure, rumours about mock defectors driven by bus from Kampala, fake opposition party cards made on Nasser road or money paid to FDC party agents are common.⁵⁸ It even created an amusing situation in Kapchorwa a few days before elections when so-called defectors remained seated after being invited to be paraded in front of the NRM vice-chairman Hajj Moses Kigongo and Prime Minister Ruhakana Rugunda, arguing that the NRM leaders had mobilised members from opposition in the region to discuss land issues, not to defect. A few days later in Soroti, hundreds of youth presented as defectors from the Go Forward camp of presidential candidate Amama Mbabazi were paraded before First Lady Janet Museveni at Soroti State Lodge, but refused to stand to be dressed in yellow T-shirts. The leader of this defectors’ group argued that ‘their demands as condition for their defection had not been fulfilled’. He explained that at the beginning of the meeting he had provided files with the defectors’ proposals to the First Lady and was told ‘they would be forwarded to President Museveni for consideration’. The announcement of the first lady’s premature departure because of nightfall created a tussle, as the NRM deputy treasurer Kenneth Omona and the state minister for Teso Affairs, Christine Amongin Aporu was supposed to represent her. ‘The Police had to intervene and the meeting was paralysed for about 20 minutes, until each was paid 50,000 [Ugandan shillings] and given an NRM T-shirt’.⁵⁹

By bringing uncertainty and fluidity into politics, defections also generate their own potential limits. The personalised networks on which defection strategy relies multiply the opportunities for renegotiating the links between defectors and the party. They also fuel vibrant debates within the party about whether Museveni should welcome defectors in person and let party local intermediaries hope for some benefits from him.⁶⁰ Some prominent members of the National Executive Committee of the NRM suggested that defectors ‘should do it at village level and not after “negotiating” with Museveni in Kampala’.⁶¹

Interestingly, in October 2016, the Teso Strategic Mobilizers Move – a group of 8000 opposition defectors, according to the media who allegedly joined the NRM in November 2015 during one of Museveni’s rallies⁶² – held a demonstration to express their concern that ‘some leaders in Teso, who had promised to help them meet the president for votes in Soroti, Serere and Kaberamaido, are blocking and denying them chance to meet the party president’.⁶³ ‘I introduced them to the president in Soroti flying school but they later even abandoned me who did that’, Charles Elasu is reported to have said.⁶⁴

This case-by-case management circumvents the party’s decision-making process in the name of electoral efficiency. This pragmatic management of defections highlights the importance of the logics of local and even micro-level politics and the shaky foundations of this extensively decentralised and informalised mobilisation procedures and electoral support staff. This speaks to the party’s ability to hold onto its gains and raises interesting

questions about the sustainability of this expansion and domination strategy. On the other hand, the party primaries (and particularly the NRM ones held in October 2015) – marred by delays, allegations of fraud, outbreaks of violence and inadequate supervision – resulted in many political dramas during which materiality played a central symbolic role as supporters or disgruntled candidates burned their party cards and defaced posters or urinated on partisan T-shirts.⁶⁵ According to one local NRM official:

Those [defectors] are wounded people. And they realize the party was not willing to listen to them, especially in the electoral commission [after the primaries]. Mbabazi and Besigye came shopping for these people. [...] That's like a football match, you can have the best players in the world but at the end they can be beaten. Why? Because you never prepared them and they never coordinated and at times they can go and let you down in the field because you're their coach. They could have tried to sit down with you and they tell you something that you fail to settle with them, you fail to agree with them, they'll do the things the opposite way. Even players can decide to make you down.⁶⁶

Conclusion

This empirical investigation provides useful insights and gives nuance to two dominant narratives on Ugandan political parties: the so-called absence of political parties out of electoral times and their lack of grassroots infrastructure on one side, and the electoral winning machine of the NRM on the other one. It highlights the role of party intermediaries and the way they 'maximize the electoral exchange'⁶⁷ in a landscape where political, economic and security issues are very intricate. Defections are interesting for what they tell us about the mechanisms of political mobilisation that rely less on party structures – weakened by personal rivalries within the leadership – and more on informal recruitment of significant local personalities; individuals with grassroots campaigning skills and mobilisation credentials. This is part of both a top-down and bottom-up process of circumventing official representatives of the party: for the president to get more accurate feedback from the ground. In so doing, he mitigates the backlash effect of the personalised politics of favour he developed, as some local leaders would overstate his true support on the ground to be in the good graces of the president. Defectors negotiate an appropriate answer to their needs through an unmediated relationship to the president. This partly explains why, paradoxically, the party primaries can be marred by fraud and personal feuds, party structures are often crippled by interpersonal rivalries, partisan coordination is weak, and yet the party remains so efficient in vote canvassing.

This decentralised mobilisation process necessarily complicates campaigning and comes with a price of instability, as it requires a permanent renegotiation of grassroots support, and individual rather than party campaigning. However, this phenomenon is part of a larger hegemonic attempt of the Ugandan hybrid regime and its effective regulation, which relies on the idea that the NRM is undefeatable, thus restricting the range of options for grassroots defectors and shrinking the space left to contest its hegemonic domination. The building of a social robustness and the importance given to the cooptation of pre-established groups can be interpreted as a regulation tool, an organisational means of retention and a bigger hindrance for opposition parties. As Morse says, 'opposition parties are going to find it immensely difficult to expand their operations to these [socially robust] areas without facing much higher start-up costs than in other areas'.⁶⁸ It creates a mutual

dependence between the president, the NRM and the defectors, raising questions about the sustainability of such a personalised relationship. Marine Poirier highlights in her analysis of the ruling party in Yemen that material dependences are not necessarily exclusive, and even maintain and develop ‘multiple forms of affective and ideological attachment to the ruling party’.⁶⁹ In the Ugandan case and in the example I studied, security and a more secure freedom of entrepreneurship are probably incentives to maintain a *status quo* for the time being. As such, defections to the NRM are a reasonable accommodation to the local power relationships and to the NRM national trajectory as a hegemonic party.

Notes

1. Izama and Wilkerson, “Uganda: Museveni’s Triumph.”
2. Conroy-Krutz and Logan, “Museveni and the 2011 Election.”
3. This is a general statement for Sub-saharan political parties. See Gazibo, “Pour une rehabilitation des partis.” Although an emerging literature gives new clues about partisan practices (see for example LeBas, *From Protest to Parties*).
4. See Janda, *Laws Against Party Switching*. The phenomenon is not new in Uganda: floor crossings were common at the end of the 1960s when the ruling Uganda People’s Congress became dominant.
5. Desposato, “Parties for Rent?”
6. Interview with FDC local and national mobilisers, November 2013 and January 2016 as well as NRM local officials, January 2016.
7. The prohibition of defections is enshrined in all Ugandan parties’ constitutions. It is noteworthy that in Uganda, recurrent high-level defections led to very lively legal and political debates during the inter-electoral period within the ruling party, the National Resistance Movement (NRM), but also in Parliament where it led to a constitutional amendment in 2015. The constitution was amended as follows: ‘Art. 83 (2a) Clause (1) (g) and (h) shall not apply to an independent member joining a political party political organisation or a member leaving one political party or organisation to join another political party or organisation or become an independent member within twelve months before the end of the term of Parliament to participate in activities or programmes of a political party or political organisation relation to a general election’. The constitution (Amendment) Act, 2015.
8. See for example Booyesen, “The Will of the Parties Versus the Will of the People?”; Desposato, “Parties for Rent?”; Heller and Mershon, “Dealing in Discipline”; Malhotra, *Anti-defection Law in India*.
9. Perrot et al., “Looking Back at the 2011 Multiparty Elections in Uganda.”
10. Mamdani, “Social Movements and Constitutionalism,” quoted by Brisset-Foucault, “Prendre la parole en Ouganda.”
11. Interview, Soroti, February 2011.
12. In 2016, Museveni emerged victorious in every district in Teso except for Soroti and Ngora. The NRM also won six of the eight LCV seats and 19 of 26 parliamentary seats. We showed however that this vote outcome should not necessarily be interpreted as a political but an electoral choice: see Perrot, “A NRM Recapture of Teso in 2011?”
13. Ibid.
14. Carbone, *No-Party Democracy?*
15. Ibid.
16. Interview with an NRM official, Soroti, February 2011.
17. Perrot et al., “Looking Back at the 2011 Multiparty Elections in Uganda.”
18. Focus group interview with Group A, December 2013.
19. Interview with James, October 21, 2013.
20. Focus group’s interview with group B, November 2013.
21. Morse, “Party Matters,” 657.

22. Some influential people also defected at the national level, like Maj. (rtd) Rubaramira Ruranga, the former head of the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) Electoral Commission who was in charge of Nandala Mafabi's campaign during the FDC primaries. It is noteworthy that Ruranga defected a few days after a group of about 400 alleged "FDC supporters" from Rukungiri crossed to the ruling NRM and were received by President Museveni at his country home in Rwakitura. Kaaya, "FDC Defectors."
23. Interviews with local MP candidates and party mobilisers, December 2015–January 2016.
24. For a broader argument on the NRM's use of soft power, see Golooba-Mutebi and Hickey, this volume.
25. Interview with Ben, Focus group, January 2016.
26. Interview with James, November 2015.
27. Ibid.
28. Interview with Ben, January 2016.
29. Interview with James, November 2013.
30. Interview with James's group, November 2013. Charles Elasu was the district chairman for Soroti, which was the district Serere at the time.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. Carbone, *No-Party Democracy?* 137.
34. Ibid., 145.
35. According to Morse, authoritarian parties' strength on the ground can be apprehended through: Physical institutionalisation of political parties (regular internal elections, geographical breadth, coherent government rules); structural articulation; elite recruitment and retention (competitive primaries, potential for advancement, institutionalised succession, disciplinary means of retention through ideological enforcement); party positions; social mobilisation (youth leagues, affiliated unions, party cells + informal sources of mobilisation capacity: income transfers, the divergence of development funds, ideological proclamations, and party institution building in the countryside). Morse, "Party Matters," 657.
36. Ibid., 663.
37. Ibid., 669.
38. Interestingly, during the presidential campaign, the local NRM office, although active, does not organise Museveni's rallies. Another regional *ad hoc* structure is in charge, the regional NRM office. In Soroti, the two offices are very distinct even geographically.
39. See the seminal research group of H el ene Combes, Lucie Bargel and Elise Massicard at CERI on the support staff during elections.
40. Kritof Titeca already showed that youth groups are encouraged to form Saccos. See Titeca, "The Commercialization of Uganda's 2011 Election."
41. Ban egas, "Marchandisation du Vote."
42. Interview with Ben's group, January 2016.
43. Hibou, *Anatomie politique de la domination*.
44. Interview with a national FDC mobiliser, Jinja, December 2013.
45. Interview with Ben's group, January 2016.
46. Interview with James, November 2013.
47. Interview with James, October 12, 2015.
48. Ibid.
49. Hibou, *Anatomie politique de la domination*, 169.
50. Ibid., 162.
51. Ibid.
52. Interview with Ben, January 2016.
53. Ibid.
54. Interview with an NRM official, Soroti, November 2015.
55. For candidates, defections are a way to circumvent electoral irregularities and informal pre-primaries decided upon in closed-doors meetings rather than in an open selection process. Carbone, *No-Party Democracy?* 141.

56. Thanks to Sam Wilkins for raising this point to me.
57. Kirunda, "Museveni Shouldn't Receive Defectors."
58. The state minister for micro-finance, Ruth Nankbirwa was suspected by the FDC party leader in Kiboga to be involved in a party card business. Some FDC party agents would sell party cards to the ruling NRM for an amount of 1,000 shillings per cardholder. Ruth Nankbirwa would then pay them between 10,000 and 30,000 shillings to parade defectors in front of Museveni during his rally in Kiboga, "FDC, NRM in Secret Party Card Business."
59. Onyango, "Paraded Mbabazi Youth Refuse to Defect to NRM."
60. Kirunda, "Museveni Shouldn't Receive Defectors."
61. "Museveni Lango Defectors Named," *The Observer*, February 14, 2010.
62. "Uganda Needs Experienced NRM Leadership."
63. Alomu, "Soroti NRM Mobilisers Protest Over Museveni Meeting"; Emwamu, "NRM Leaders in Bitter Fight."
64. Alomu, "Soroti NRM Mobilisers Protest Over Museveni Meeting."
65. "Angry NRM Supporters Burn Cards, Urinate on Museveni T-shirts."
66. Interview with a local NRM official, 2016.
67. Banégas, "La marchandisation du vote."
68. Morse, "Party Matters," 657.
69. Poirier, "Le bon parti."

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