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**DISTRICT CREATION AND  
DECENTRALISATION IN UGANDA**

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## District Creation and Decentralisation in Uganda

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### Abstract:

*In recent years many countries across the world, especially in Africa, have created large numbers of new local administrative units. This trend has largely gone unnoticed in the scholarly community, with no attempts to understand the underlying processes at work. To examine this phenomenon I take the case study of Uganda, one of the more prominent 'donor darlings' of the 1990s. Alongside large-scale economic and political reforms Uganda has also experienced a near explosion in the number of districts (the highest level of local government), going from 39 to 79 in less than a decade. I examine six potential reasons why these districts might have been created, and argue, through the use of election results, interviews and other data, that district creation has been primarily a source of patronage in the ongoing need for Museveni to win elections. I conclude with reflections on the relationship between economic and political reforms and patronage in the developing world.*

*For God and My Country*  
National Motto of Uganda

*For God and My Stomach*  
Name of Restaurant in Gulu, Northern Uganda

### Introduction

In recent years decentralisation has come to the fore as one of the more important topics in contemporary policy debates across large sections of the world. In developing countries in particular decentralisation has been as a palliative for a large number of governance problems, and as such many countries have instituted a wide variety of reforms that have devolved various functions to lower levels of government. A mini-cottage industry has sprung up to analyse these reforms, with a large amount of controversy over their outcomes (Bardhan and Mookherjee 2006; Treisman 2007).

Within this literature, however, there has been little to no focus on one important aspect of decentralisation, namely the creation of new sub-national administrative units. This has been an especially prominent trend in the developing world, where the governments of such countries as Benin, Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of Congo, India, Indonesia,

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Nigeria and Vietnam, among many others, have created a slew of new units since the 1990s. Yet there has been very few attempts at explaining this trend, especially in Africa, and those that exist have ascribed it to a variety of factors such as gerrymandering, the desire to improve service delivery, ethnicity and electoral calculations among others (Suberu 1991; Mawdsley 2002; Fitriani, Hofman et al. 2005; Malesky 2005). Furthermore, none of these studies have attempted to draw wider inferences from their case studies that might apply elsewhere.

As such I hereby take one country, Uganda, as a case study to see both what underlying motives lie behind the creation of new units in one African country and how widely applicable these motives may be in other contexts. Uganda is a particularly good case study for this examination for two reasons. First, Uganda's decentralisation reforms have attracted a great deal of praise for their scope and construction since President Yoweri Museveni first assumed power in 1986. The process by which power has been deconcentrated and devolved to five levels of local government has been called 'one of the most far-reaching local government reform programs in the developing world' (Francis and James 2003); yet, despite the lavish attention given to these reforms in the scholarly literature, there exists as of yet no analysis of administrative unit creation under Museveni's rule.

A second reason to examine Uganda here is its extreme nature of unit creation, whereby the number of districts (the highest level of local government) has gone from 34 in 1991 to 79 and counting today.<sup>2</sup> The country recently surpassed Thailand to hold the spot of fourth on the list of the world's largest number of highest-level sub-national administrative units per state,<sup>3</sup> and, as demonstrated on Table 1, has far more highest-level sub-national units (and far fewer people per unit) than any other large African state.

**Table 1: Sub-National Administrative Units (Highest Level) for Sub-Saharan African countries with a population of more than twenty million, by number**  
(Source: CIA World Factbook, US Census Bureau)

Country	Name of Unit	Number of Units	Population/Unit
<b>Uganda</b>	<b>Districts</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>383,071</b>
Nigeria	States	37	3,563,784
Sudan	State	26	1,483,077
Tanzania	Region	26	1,555,923
Ethiopia	States	11	7,011,545
DR Congo	Province	11	5,694,182
Mozambique	Province	10	1,945,182
Ghana	Region	10	2,347,800
South Africa	Province	9	5,397,444
Kenya	Province	8	4,692,250

<sup>2</sup> Such is the state of affairs in Uganda that there is even confusion over the number of districts that exist – the websites <http://www.statoids.com/uug.html> and [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Districts\\_of\\_Uganda](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Districts_of_Uganda) list 77 and 80 districts, respectively, while Mwenda (2007) lists 81. The reason for this confusion is undoubtedly due to the fact that the central government has often announced the creation of a new district months or even years before the new district's boundaries, capital and leaders have been allocated or elected. I list 79 districts here as that is the number of districts for which I have verified district chairperson election data from the Ugandan Electoral Commission; undoubtedly by the time this paper is in print the number of districts will have been raised once again.

<sup>3</sup> The first three are Russia (83 federal subjects), the Philippines (82 provinces) and Turkey (81 provinces).

I thereby employ Uganda as an ‘extreme case,’ whereby it may be paradigmatic for what is happening elsewhere in the developing world and where the logic of unit creation may therefore be clearer than in other cases. Indeed, due to the variety of different potential causal explanations, a case study analysis is superior to a cross-national study in understanding a phenomenon like administrative unit creation (Gerring 2007). In this paper I thus explore a number of plausible reasons behind district creation and conclude that, while several of them have some element of truth, the best explanation is the use of new districts as patronage due to Museveni’s need to win presidential elections. I ascribe the rise of district creation as a political tool in the 1990s to the effects of Uganda’s dual economic and political reforms and the resultant need to find new sources of patronage to perpetuate Museveni’s rule. In this sense I argue that district creation in Uganda, while extreme, can be seen as paradigmatic for other states in the developing world that have similarly undergone reforms that have cut the availability of patronage to governments without instituting any fundamental changes in the nature of how these states are actually governed.

Below I first detail the history of decentralisation, district creation and democratisation in Uganda before exploring each of these reasons in turn. I then conclude with some wider thoughts on patronage and decentralisation in the developing world.

### **Decentralisation, District Creation and Democratisation in Museveni’s Uganda**

Uganda’s post-colonial history has been notoriously tumultuous, most prominently due to the misrule of Idi Amin in the 1970s and a brutal civil war in the early 1980s. After President Museveni came to power in Uganda in January 1986, however, he and his ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) enacted a wide range of reforms at all levels of government and society. One of the most prominent initial reforms has been the introduction of the Local Council (LC) system of local government,<sup>4</sup> which incorporates five levels ranging from the village (LCI) to the district (LCV). Elections to the LCIs began in 1987, alongside indirect elections to the other tiers; by the mid 1990s, however, the central government had both created a system of regular and direct elections at the local level and reassigned local government power from centrally-appointed technocrats to locally elected politicians. Further reforms that decentralised both financial decision-making and power over local public land to district governments meant that, by the late 1990s, district leadership positions had become quite powerful within their jurisdictions (Green 2005: 330).

Uganda’s decentralisation reforms occurred simultaneously to other governance reforms. After initially rejecting international assistance, Museveni turned to a Structural Adjustment Program in 1987, which helped to reform Uganda’s damaged economy. After a slow start, by the early 1990s Museveni had introduced such reforms as the devaluation of the Ugandan shilling, the privatisation of many large parastatals like the Uganda Commercial Bank and the Kampala Sheraton Hotel, a reduction in the size of the civil service and armed forces and the elimination of the state marketing board monopolies over coffee and cotton (Reinikka and Collier 2001). Simultaneous to these economic reforms were political ones such as the creation of a new constitution, which was adopted in 1995 after a Constitutional Commission made extensive tours and solicitations throughout the country over a period of four years. While Museveni controversially failed to re-introduce multi-party politics until 2005, he did set up competitive elections to a Constituent Assembly in 1994 and Parliamentary and Presidential elections in 1996 and 2001, all of which were largely assessed as free and fair by

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<sup>4</sup> The LCs were known as Resistance Councils until 1995.

international observers. All in all, the extensive nature to most of Uganda's economic and political reforms, alongside the high annual GDP growth rates that accompanied these reforms, were responsible for making Uganda a 'donor darling' throughout the 1990s (Adam and Gunning 2002).

While Museveni's reforms have thus drawn a great deal of praise, certain aspects of his rule have been under-examined in the scholarly literature, none more so than the creation of new districts.<sup>5</sup> Yet within Uganda this has been a topic of discussion ever since Museveni appointed a Commission of Inquiry into the Local Government system only months after assuming power. The Commission – whose members included Professor Mahmood Mamdani and the current Prime Minister Apolo Nsibambi – wrote as regards the number of local governmental units that, 'quite often, the response of governments to popular demands for a more responsive administration (e.g., better services) has been to create new and smaller units... There is no doubt that the multiplication of administrative units is a costly affair' (Uganda 1987). In so arguing the Commission was almost certainly referring to a previous explosion in administrative units under Idi Amin's rule, whereby he introduced ten provincial governments in 1974 while also almost doubling the number of districts from 19 to 37. Yet despite the subsequent dissolution of these provinces and a reduction in the number of districts to 33, the Commission noted that

We were hesitant to recommend the creation of new and additional administrative units, bearing in mind that these would increase unproductive costs of administration, both in terms of creating an administrative infrastructure and payment of personnel... Given our strong view that the exercise in creating new districts over the past decade and a half has been arbitrary, haphazard and hardly defensible, we would have recommended a review of the status of all existing districts with a view to de-grading those which do not meet minimum criteria... Should such a review be undertaken in the present circumstances, it would undoubtedly result in a large number of the newly created districts losing their existing status (Uganda 1987).

After spending several months touring the country, the Commission accumulated eleven requests for the creation of new districts, of which it only recommended four. Yet, while Museveni failed to pursue the review of existing districts as recommended by the Commission, he nonetheless withheld the creation of any new districts, only relenting on the case of Kalangala (comprising the Ssesse islands in Lake Victoria) in 1990. The next year, however, he undertook the other three recommendations of the Commission and added another, the aforementioned district of Kiboga. As Table 1 demonstrates, Museveni continued to add districts in 1994, 1997 and 2000 before announcing the creation of 22 new districts in 2005, the largest ever increase in Uganda's history.<sup>6</sup> Thus Uganda now has 79 districts, more than twice as many as when Museveni took office and more than four times as many as when Amin took office in 1971.

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<sup>5</sup> Another important underexamined aspect of Museveni's rule has been the ongoing war in northern Uganda, which, as with the argument here, has also functioned as source for patronage; cf. Tangri and Mwenda (2003)...

<sup>6</sup> The districts were created in two sets, with thirteen new ones inaugurated in 2005 and another ten – minus two that were announced in 2005 (Maracha-Terego and Tororo County), plus three that were not (Bududa, Bukedea and Lyatonde) – in 2006. The reasons why Tororo County has yet to be created are detailed below; in Maracha-Terego local leaders could not agree on where the new district capital was to be located.

**Table 2: District Creation in Uganda**  
(Sources: Government of Uganda 1987; Ocwich 2005; US Census Bureau)

Year	Number of Districts	Population per District
1959	16	443,000
1962	17	456,365
1968	18	513,711
1971	19	526,853
1974	37	292,211
1979	33	368,115
1990	34	513,412
1991	38	476,474
1994	39	514,256
1997	45	455,718
2000	56	427,786
2005	70	402,843
2006	79	383,071

This astounding trend has, however, been heretofore completely neglected in the literature on Uganda's decentralisation. Over the rest of the article I thus examine six potential reasons behind district creation, namely 1) the improvement of service delivery, 2) ethno-linguistic conflict management, 3) gerrymandering, 4) the inability of the central government to resist local demands for new districts, 5) the removal of regional opposition, and 6) patronage and electoral politics, each of which I assess in order.

### **1. The Improvement of Service Delivery**

The standard reason for creating new sub-national units in developing countries is to improve service delivery and developmental outcomes, as seen in the rhetoric from Nigeria and Vietnam, among others (Akinyele 1996; Malesky 2005). In Uganda Article 179 of the 1995 constitution allows for the creation of new districts based on 'effective administration and the need to bring services closer to the people.' Indeed, local councilors have often praised the creation of new districts as effective in promoting service delivery, even among those districts that have only recently created. For instance, Amuru district leaders in northern Uganda claimed that, only a year after Amuru district had been created, the advantages of a new district have been obvious in more boreholes, schools and roads, as well as better coordination and easier monitoring among government officials.<sup>7</sup> More generally NRM cadres like Ofwono Opondo make claims that district creation and development have gone hand-in-hand in Uganda, in that 'Uganda is more developed today than 25 years ago when it had only 39 districts or indeed four decades of only 18 districts' (Oguttu and Opondo 2007).

There is, however, little concrete evidence that the creation of new districts has benefited citizens. One source of evidence comes from the Ministry of Local Government (MoLG)'s annual assessments of district government performance, which monitor local governments according to the guidelines set forth in the 1997 Local Government Act. Specifically, if a district does not meet a certain minimum set of requirements in such areas as accounting, auditing, capacity building, monitoring and gender mainstreaming, it will fail to procure various types of grants. In its evaluations the MoLG has repeatedly shown that older districts invariably outperform newer ones in meeting its minimum conditions of governance. For

<sup>7</sup> Interviews with District Chairman Anthony Atube Omach and Chief Administrative Officer Alia Seraphine, Amuru, 16 July 2007.

instance, in 2004, compared to a Ugandan average of 58.9%, only 50% (8/16) of districts created since 1997 passed these minimum standards, with an even lower score of 45.5% (5/11) for those created since 2000 (Uganda 2004). Despite an overall improvement, in 2007 81.5% (38/44) of older district governments were able to meet minimum conditions while only 66.7% (22/33) of the districts created since 2000 were able to do the same (Uganda 2007).

Indeed, when pressed upon this issue, district leaders often admit that the creation of new districts creates as many logistical and administrative problems as it solves. In following the principle that district headquarters are to be located in the geographical middle of a district, district offices are often located far away from any sizeable town or village, thus making district officials commute long distances over unpaved roads to their offices and thereby spend less time in their actual offices. (In Amuru district in northern Uganda, this meant commuting from Gulu, a 90-minute drive away.<sup>8</sup>) More importantly, important files and documents often linger for years in rump districts before they are separated and sent along to the new district headquarters. For example, Kiboga district (northwest of Kampala), which was created in 1991, still had not received all of its relevant land office files from Mubende district in 2001, according to its district land officer at the time.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, if district creation did lead to better service delivery through the creation of smaller government units, we should be able to see it quantitatively. More specifically, we should expect to find a negative and significant correlation between service delivery and either population size or geographical size (or both). If we use immunisation rates as a proxy for public service delivery, as is common elsewhere (Khaleghian 2003), we find that linear regressions of immunisation rates from 2004 and 2005 (the latest years for which data is available) for three types of vaccines (BCG, Measles and OPV3) yield both small correlation coefficients and no significant results for any variable.<sup>10</sup>

## 2. Ethno-Linguistic Conflict Management

Arguments for decentralisation and the creation of new sub-national units are often based on the management of ethno-linguistic conflict (Treisman 2007), as seen for instance in the example of India (Mawdsley 2002). In Uganda, the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Local Government, Vincent Ssekono, similarly claimed that the creation of new districts has enabled ethnic minorities who were formerly marginalised to obtain their own district. As an example Ssekono gave the Aringa ethnic group of northwest Uganda, who had formerly shared Arua district with their Lugbara neighbors. This resulting ‘problem of communication’ was alleviated by the creation of Yumbe district in 2000, which allowed the Aringa to speak their own language at council meetings and articulate their specific development priorities.<sup>11</sup> Ethnicity could potentially explain a good number of districts in Uganda, whose constitution officially recognises 65 indigenous ethnic groups and which in one recent data set was declared the world’s most ethnically diverse state (Alesina, Devleeshauer et al. 2003).

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<sup>8</sup> Interviews with District Chairman Anthony Atube Omach and Chief Administrative Officer Alia Seraphine, Amuru, 16 July 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with District Land Officer Francis Kabanda, Kiboga, 16 November 2001.

<sup>10</sup> District poverty levels were used as a control variable, with data from UNDP (2005).

<sup>11</sup> Interview, Vincent Ssekono, Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Local Government, Kampala, 13 July 2007.

However, Ssekono's explanation falls flat for two reasons. First, despite his claim that new districts not created along ethnic lines like Nakaseke or Nakapiriprit are exceptional, there is no evidence that ethnicity has played a primary role in the creation of new districts over the past two decades. Of the 46 districts created over Museveni's reign, only 13 or 28.3% have led to a minority ethnic group becoming a majority in either the new or the rump district. Moreover, this figure does not change significantly if one breaks down the result chronologically: for the periods 1988-1997, 1998-2002 and 2003-2007 the numbers are 27.3% (3/11), 27.3% (3/11) and 29.2% (7/24), respectively.<sup>12</sup>

Secondly, far from alleviating ethnic tension and spurring development, it is clear that the creation of new districts has led in many cases to increased levels of ethnic conflict. For instance, the demands of many Bakiga and Batagwenda inhabitants of Kabarole district for their own district in the late 1990s led to a reaction from the Batoro elite in the district, who were worried both about losing control to local resources as well as the future viability of the local Toro kingdom if the new districts refused to support the kingdom financially.<sup>13</sup> Tensions between the two sides grew so high that, according to a local newspaper, 'people [in the region] are even arming themselves for a possible war', which subsequently led to intense talks between various military and security leaders from Kampala and local leaders (Mwenda and Mugisa 1999). Similarly, the Tororo district of eastern Uganda, which had been dominated by Itesot before the creation of the Itesot-majority Pallisa district in 1991, is currently dominated by members of the Japadhola ethnic group. As such, a number of minority Itesot residents in Tororo county have petitioned the government for their own district. While the Commission of Inquiry appointed by the central government agreed to create the district, it failed to assign the current district capital, whose residents are both Japadhola and Itesot, to the new district. The rift led to ethnic divisions in the February 2006 parliamentary race, with many local Itesot supporting the Ugandan Asian candidate Sanjay Tanna against the incumbent MP for Tororo Municipality, Yeri Ofwono. After winning the election, Tanna escaped a petrol bomb attack at his residence in April, while in August Uganda Peoples Defence Forces (UPDF, the Ugandan army) soldiers forcibly broke up a meeting of Tororo county councilors on the behest of the LCV chairman. More recently, in October 2006 the UPDF was deployed in town after rumors that local Itesot extremists were planning on burning down the district headquarters.<sup>14</sup>

### 3. Gerrymandering

In his analysis of province creation in Vietnam, (Malesky 2005) posits that the central government created new provinces in order to placate conservatives whose power was otherwise being whittled away by privatisation and other economic reforms. As suggested by (Malesky 2005), this process was very similar to the old American practice of gerrymandering, whereby sub-national political units are altered in size or shape in order to alter the majority/minority status of certain political, racial or ethnic groups; in the

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<sup>12</sup> There is some more regional variation, with the east receiving the largest number of ethnically-demarcated districts (37.5% or 6/16) and Buganda the least (11.1% or 1/9).

<sup>13</sup> After having been abolished by Milton Obote in 1967, four of Uganda's kingdoms (Busoga, Buganda, Bunyoro and Toro) were restored in 1993, albeit as cultural institutions with no power over taxation or administration. While districts thus do not currently contribute any funds to the upkeep of kingdom, Buganda monarchists have led the drive to create regional or federal tiers of government at the level of the kingdoms, which would then have both fiscal and political power. As LRA negotiators have also come out recently in support of a regional tier system, its eventual creation continues to look more and more likely, thereby creating a large incentive for kingdom governments to prevent districts under their nominal aegis from seceding.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with MP Sanjay Tanna, 19 July 2007.



Vietnamese case, the boundaries of the new provinces were drawn as to make them less dominated by state-owned enterprises than their predecessors. Whether in Vietnam, the United States or elsewhere, gerrymandering is often marked by the creation of oddly-shaped political units, inasmuch as the groups in question do not inhabit geographically compact areas.

Despite claims from Piron and Norton (2004) to the contrary, however, gerrymandering cannot explain district creation in Uganda, for three reasons. First, there are fewer incentives for Museveni to gerrymander districts, whose leaders have no representation at the central government level, than in other countries like Vietnam where provincial leaders have seats in the regular Communist Party congresses (Malesky 2005). Moreover, while Article 63 of Uganda's 1995 constitution allows for the redistricting of parliamentary constituencies after a census, this power is given to the Electoral Commission, which is independent from the government and which has so far not pursued redistricting according to the 2002 census results. Indeed, in its initial version of the Constitution (Amendment No. 3) Bill of 2005 the Museveni government proposed to transfer power over the number of parliamentary constituencies from the Electoral Commission to Parliament; however, under pressure to prevent the 'mushrooming of constituencies,' the Attorney General removed this clause before the bill was passed.<sup>15</sup>

Secondly, if gerrymandering were occurring in Uganda, one would also expect to see oddly-shaped districts and a subsequent uproar as there has been in other countries where gerrymandering produces strange-looking political units. Yet none of Uganda's new districts are in any way comparable in their shape to the more outrageous examples of gerrymandered districts in the United States, which resemble such entities as a mosquito, snake, starfish or a wishbone (Hill 2003), nor have their shapes been controversial or even a topic for public discussion.

Thirdly and finally, there is no evidence that new districts in Uganda have been created along lines that would move local ethnic or political groups from majority to minority status or vice-versa. As noted above, new districts in Uganda have largely not been created along ethnic lines, and there is no evidence that districts have been created along political party lines, i.e., where NRM or FDC (Forum for Democratic Change) supporters have been hived off into the new districts. If this were so, one would expect to see an increase over time in the standard deviation of electoral support for Museveni by district, inasmuch as political parties would be increasingly separated into their own districts as they are in the United States and there would thus be wider variation in support for Museveni at the district level. Yet, as indicated in Table 1, the standard deviation in support for Museveni is considerably lower in the 2001 and 2006 elections than it was in 1996, the opposite of what would be expected if gerrymandering were occurring along political lines.

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<sup>15</sup> Ugandan National Assembly Hansard, 5 August 2005. There has in fact been only one new constituency created in Uganda since 1996 (with the exception of Women MPs), namely Bughendera county in Bundibugyo district, created in May 2001.

**Table 3: Descriptive Statistics, District-Level Support for Museveni in Three Presidential Elections**

(Source: Uganda Electoral Commission)

Year	Num. of Districts	Minimum (%)	Maximum (%)	Mean (%)	Std. Deviation
1996	39	8.5	99.8	74.9	27.8
2001	53	11.5	97.8	70.4	23.1
2006	69	7.9	92.6	61.5	24.3

#### 4. The Inability of the Central Government to Resist Local Demands

One of the overriding themes in discussions of the African state is its inherent weakness, whereby governments are incapable of controlling their territory or citizens. More specifically, African politicians are seen to be at the whim of local and peripheral social forces, who thus determine government policy (Migdal 1988). Employing this logic, a majority of those scholars who have discussed district creation in Uganda ascribe it to the central government's inability to resist local demands. (Golola 2001), for instance, claims that district creation was done 'in response to the wishes of important pressure groups and political supporters of the central government,' while (Hickey 2003) worries that the central government 'has been unable to resist pressures from local elites' for new districts. On the surface this analysis appears plausible, inasmuch as Ugandans recognise the benefits of having their own district and are very vocal in expressing their desires. Indeed, these pressures often take bizarre forms of protest, as seen when residents of Nakaseke district paraded with the skulls of those who had been killed and buried in the district during the civil war of the early 1980s, as well as with residents of Tororo district who publicly ate rats in full view of President Museveni to demonstrate the seriousness of their claim (Buwembo 2005). These protests have even turned violent, most notably in the aforementioned cases of the split-up of Kabarole district in 1999-2000 and Tororo district in 2006, among others (Green 2006b).

However, the idea that district creation has been driven primarily by local demands cannot be sustained for two reasons. First and foremost, the NRM government has been able to resist a variety of other local demands over the course of its reign, most notably in regards to the kingdoms of southern Uganda. While he allowed the restoration of Buganda, Bunyoro, Busoga and Toro kingdoms in the early 1990s, President Museveni halted the restoration of the Ankole kingdom on the grounds that it was divisive and unpopular.<sup>16</sup> Despite continued support for the Ankole restoration among a section of the Banyankole population (Uganda 2003) and a dubious legal standing for denying the restoration (Oloka-Onyango 1995), the Ankole kingdom nonetheless remains a fiction. Similarly, leaders of the Buganda kingdom have been demanding the restoration of their former federal state ever since the kingdom was restored in 1993, with an overwhelming support of the Bugandan population. Again, despite continued and possibly increasing support for federalism (locally known as *federo*), the NRM government has so far refused to acquiesce to the kingdom's demands (Uganda 2003).

<sup>16</sup> While a restoration of the Ankole kingdom may not have been very popular, in fact none of the kingdoms other than Buganda held large public support, according to the Uganda Constitution Commission which measured popular opinion on the subject in the early 1990s (Uganda, G. o. 1992). Ocitti (2000) claims that Museveni's decision may have been driven by his worry that, according to Banyankole traditions, a restored king of Ankole would have been politically superior to all Banyankole, including Museveni.

Certainly the ability of the central government to resist demands from leaders of the most numerous and economically powerful ethnic group in the country suggests that it could resist the creation of new districts if it so wanted.

Secondly, if district creation has been driven from below we should be able to explain a sudden popularity for new districts in the 1990s at the local level. We should thus be able to find a political or fiscal change of policy that led to this increased demand, something akin to the way the 1970 modification of the Distributable Pool Account in Nigeria started sending 50% of federal transfers over to states regardless of their size and thereby contributed to the explosion in demands for new federal states (Ekpo 1994; Nolte 2002). As regards Uganda, there has indeed been a significant change in local government budgets over the past decade, inasmuch as the former main source of local government revenue, the Graduated Personal Tax (GPT), was reduced from 10,000 US\$ to 3000 US\$ per year in 2001 and eliminated completely in 2005 (Therkildsen 2006). Yet, as noted in Table 2, district creation predates any change in local government budget structures, with 12 districts created in the 1990s. Moreover, upon its abolition the GPT was replaced with an increased transfer of conditional grants from the central government, which are tied to social services like education and health and thus, unlike in Nigeria, are dependent on district size and population. In other words, the logic of state creation in Nigeria after 1970 does not apply to Uganda.

Rather, the incentives for demanding a new district have been constant throughout President Museveni's reign, as they are elsewhere. New districts are examples of what are called 'club goods' in the field of political economy, and their creation is an example of what (Lowi 1964) calls a 'distributive policy,' in that their benefits go to a small group of people but their costs are spread out across the entire population. As spelled out by Olson (1982) in his analysis of special-interest organisations, such a policy is likely to encounter little opposition since its cost per capita is so low that those who pay for it have little incentive to organise collectively to combat it. In other words, the cost of creating each district per citizen is very small,<sup>17</sup> and as long as new districts are not created along biased lines, all Ugandans have the potential to benefit from a new district in their own area. This logic does not, however, explain why there should have been such a sudden rush in the number of new districts since 1997, and therefore cannot be the primary factor behind district creation.

## **5. The Removal of Regional Opposition**

Rather than acceding to local demands because of its lack of strength, it is possible that central governments use decentralisation to remove local opposition instead. Indeed, Crook (2003) discusses the way that central governments in both Africa and India have used decentralisation policies as a means to destroy and fragment local opposition. In Uganda the former Minister of Local Government Jaberu Bidandi-Ssali, who fell out with President Museveni over the lifting of presidential term limits in 2003, similarly claims that the primary political goal for Museveni in recent years has been to remove any actual or potential opposition to his presidency. At the local level, according to Bidandi-Ssali, this has meant the undermining of district independence from central control, whereby the creation of new

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<sup>17</sup> Each district costs the Ugandan state between 685 million and 1.03 billion Ugandan shillings in wages per year (Ocwich 2005). With a current population at 28.8 million citizens, each district thus costs between 23.8 shillings (\$0.013) to 35.8 shillings (\$0.019) US\$ per citizen per year. Even the higher figure of 1.3 billion Ugandan shillings proposed by USAID/Uganda (2001) only comes to 45.1 shillings (\$0.024) US\$ per citizen per year.

districts has been part of a strategy to undermine the ability of local governments to both challenge the centre and build some fiscal independence for themselves. The result after the creation of so many new districts, according to Bidandi-Ssali, is that ‘no district can stand on its own’ and ‘every district must look up to the centre for its sustainability.’<sup>18</sup>

In a similar vein the creation of new districts has also led to breaking up district caucuses.<sup>19</sup> In addition to party and regional caucuses, district caucuses have existed since the election of the 6<sup>th</sup> Parliament in 1996 and, while naturally small by definition, they have nonetheless played a role in parliamentary politics, as when, upon the death of the former Foreign Affairs minister James Wapakhabulo in 2004, the Mbale Parliamentary Caucus was involved in discussions on his replacement (Osike and Etengu 2004). While not eliminating district caucuses, the creation of districts has significantly reduced their sizes. Despite the addition of one new woman MP for every new district, the creation of new districts has nonetheless lowered the average number of MPs per district, as indicated in Table 2, from 7.4 in 1996 to 4.0 in 2008.

**Table 4: Average number of MPs per district, 1996-2008**  
(Source: Parliament of Uganda)

Year	Number of MPs	Number of Districts	MPs per district
1996	288	39	7.4
1999	294	45	6.5
2002	305	56	5.4
2005	306	70	4.4
2008	330	80	4.1

Yet the evidence behind these two related reasons for breaking up districts is mixed. As regards district caucuses, the creation of new districts has not prevented district caucuses from working together, as in 2002 when members of the Arua and Yumbe district parliamentary caucuses issued a joint statement to the parliament on an alleged atrocity by UPDF soldiers in West Nile (Monitor 2002). Indeed, regional caucuses such as the Ankole, Buganda and Bunyoro caucuses, among others, allow MPs from different districts to work together.

There is, however, some evidence to Bidandi-Ssali’s claim. If he is correct, then we should be able to find areas of strong opposition to Museveni being broken into smaller districts and areas where he maintains support kept as larger districts. The 2002 census does indeed indicate that, after Kampala, Museveni’s home district of Mbarara – where he received 91.5% of the vote in the 2001 presidential election – was the only district to contain more than one million residents. Indeed, Bidandi-Ssali claims that Museveni did not want to break up Mbarara district but was forced to do so to appear being too biased towards his home district.<sup>20</sup>

Secondly, as seen in Table 4, district creation has not been uniform throughout Uganda: of the 46 districts created in Uganda since 1990, 16 have been in the east, 11 in the north, 10 in the west and 9 in the centre, to the point where each region has 24, 21, 19 and 16 districts, respectively. This trend of creating districts in the north and east, which has been especially prominent since 1996, has led to regional disparities in the size of the population per district,

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Jaber Bidandi-Ssali, Kampala, 13 July 2007.

<sup>19</sup> I owe this point to Andrew Mwenda.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Jaber Bidandi-Ssali, Kampala, 13 July 2007.

with the east and north considerably lower than in the west and centre. Museveni's support has long been in the southern/central and western half of Uganda, so it would seem here as if he were indeed pursuing a strategy of creating new districts in opposition areas.

**Table 5: Districts and Population per Region**  
(Source: 2002 Census)

Region	New Districts since 1990 (1996)	Total Districts	Population (2005)	Population per District
East	16 (15)	24	6.8m	283,333
North	11 (11)	21	6.1	290,476
West	10 (7)	19	6.8	357,895
Centre	9 (7)	16	7.1	443,750

Yet statistical tests fail to support this thesis. First, if Museveni's goal were to create unviable small districts in order to destroy or disrupt centers of local opposition and maintain large districts that continued to support him, we would expect to find a positive relationship between district size and electoral support in a statistical analysis. Yet linear regressions of Museveni's support in the 2001 and 2006 elections on district population actually show negative relationships between the two variables (although not much can be interpreted from the results as they are both insignificant). In other words, the larger the district the less likely its inhabitants were to vote for Museveni in the 2006 election, which is the opposite of what would be predicted by Bidandi-Ssali's analysis.

Similarly, if Museveni had created new districts in opposition areas as defined by those who failed to vote for him in the previous presidential election, we should be able to see this effect in a binary logistic regression. Yet there are no significant relationships between electoral support (as an independent variable) and district creation (as a dependent variable) for the 1996 and 2001 elections and subsequent new districts.

## 6. Patronage, Job Creation and Electoral Politics

Critics of decentralisation have long noted the way that decentralisation reforms have opened up possibilities for local elites to capture decentralised governments and employ public resources as patronage. Indeed, one of the more well-known studies analyzing this process was one that examined the decentralisation of education funds in Uganda, where rural elites captured the funds to the detriment of local schools and used them instead to support local patronage networks (Reinikka and Svensson 2004). Similarly, despite their intentions to the contrary, decentralisation reforms have also been criticised for allowing national politicians to create and extend their patronage networks into the countryside (Crook 2003).

Fitting in with these analyses, there is strong evidence that President Museveni has indeed used the creation of new districts to create 'a raft of new jobs, each one a patronage opportunity' (Mwenda 2007). This ongoing creation of new patron-client relationships can be seen as part of the same dynamic that has led to the ever-increasing size of the Cabinet and the Parliament, whereby potentially dangerous opposition leaders can be brought under the government payroll and thereby neutralised. Indeed, as Goetz (2002) notes, the creation of new districts has been especially beneficial for women at the parliamentary level, since, as noted above, each new district brings with it a new woman MP; the result is that woman MPs as a percentage of all MPs with voting rights have gone from 14.0% in 1996 to 25.0% in 2008. This gender-biased patronage has not gone unnoticed in Uganda; for instance, in a Parliamentary debate on new districts MP Tiperu Nusura (Women, Yumbe) appreciated the

‘many more Women Members of Parliament and jobs for the unemployed’ (Parliament of Uganda Hansard, 20 July, 2005).

Yet the creation of new districts has not only created jobs in Parliament. While the creation of a district does not entail any new sub-district positions, it nonetheless leads to a significant number of new posts at the district level. First, a whole new set of technical and administrative staff must be hired, including a Chief Administrative Officer (CAO), Resident District Commissioner (RDC), deputy CAO, deputy RDC, and a District Auditor, Clerk (and Assistant Clerk), Community Based Services Manager, Education Officer, Engineer, Extension Coordinator, Finance Officer, Director of Health Services, Information Officer, Inspector of Schools, Land Officer, National Agricultural Advisory Services Officer, Personnel Officer and Planner, among others. A new set of district councilors representing special interest groups (such as women, the youth and the disabled), averaging out to around 12 per new district, must also go on the payroll. Finally, a new district must also accommodate a district Chairman, who earns 500,000 Ugandan shillings per month, in addition to six executive secretaries (USAID/Uganda 2001). The result of all of these new jobs at the district level is a cascading effect as lower level officials are promoted upwards, thereby creating new job openings at all levels of local government. Indeed, when asked about the benefits of district creation, sub-county councilors in Nakaseke primarily answered by noting the new jobs and promotions for local citizens who had previously been unemployed by the previous Luwero district administration.<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, district creation has also led to the creation of non-governmental jobs. As many donors in Uganda have increasingly interacted directly with district administrations since 2000, the creation of new districts has led to donors setting up office in the new districts and thereby both creating new jobs and, through budget support of conditional grants to the districts, adding to potential local patronage opportunities (Walford 2006). Indeed, as the number of districts has grown, so has the coverage of the main bilateral donors: for example, due to district creation the USAID-supported Uganda Program for Human and Holistic Development has expanded its coverage from 20 to 34 districts in recent years.<sup>22</sup> In addition to donors, NGOs have also increased their presence in new districts; in Nakaseke councilors noted the added presence of both World Vision and the Adventist Development Relief Agency in particular.<sup>23</sup>

The use of districts as patronage fits well into a political history of Museveni’s Uganda, and explains why they began to multiply in the 1990s. Initially Museveni was able to buy off opposition through the creation of a broad-based government, which included such rivals as the then President of the Democratic Party Paul Ssemogerere, Second Deputy Prime Minister from 1988 to 1995. Yet as Museveni moved towards re-introducing national elections and eventually towards the re-introduction of political parties, he began to reduce the number of opposition cabinet ministers in fear that they could use their positions to build up support against him (Kasfir 1998). Furthermore, as noted above, this period also coincided with the implementation of liberalisation and privatisation reforms, which endeared Museveni to donors but simultaneously reduced his ability to use patronage to buy off potential opponents.

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<sup>21</sup> Interviews with Bushanda Peace and Kayigwa Sekesi, Nakaseke, 12 July 2007.

<sup>22</sup> <http://uphold.jsi.com/About.htm>.

<sup>23</sup> Interviews with Bushanda Peace and Kayigwa Sekesi, Nakaseke, 12 July 2007.

These reduced patronage opportunities were, however, countered in part through district creation as the number of new districts announced in the five years prior to national elections grew from five (1996) to sixteen (2001) to twenty-two (2006). Indeed, the increasing number of new districts, coupled with Museveni's diminishing electoral support over the years, fits in well with patronage theory that the more vulnerable an incumbent politician is, the more likely he/she is to use patronage to win votes (Stein and Bickers 1994). To gain maximum electoral advantage, in 2000 and 2005 Museveni chose to create new districts just a matter of months before presidential elections the following year, while in both the presidential elections of 1996 and 2006 he gave promises to create new districts after the election if citizens voted for him, leading to the creation of six new districts in 1997 and ten new districts in 2006, respectively. Museveni's use of new districts as an election ploy sits alongside his other election year promises and changes, including both a promise to reduce the level of graduated tax in the 2001 campaign and its abolition only months before the 2006 election, not to mention the creation of the Constitutional Review Commission four weeks before the March 2001 poll.

Museveni's expectation, as with any other source of patronage, has certainly been that residents in new districts would reciprocate by voting for him in future presidential elections, which indeed they did. As Table 6 clearly indicates, voters in new districts rewarded Museveni with votes in the 1996, 2001 and 2006 presidential elections, with 14.9%, 3.1% and 14.3% more support than the Ugandan average, respectively. Moreover, as Table 7 shows, voters gave the NRM significantly more support than other parties in the new districts in the 2006 elections for directly elected MPs and women MPs, whether measured through the total number of votes across constituencies or the number of seats won by the NRM;<sup>24</sup> a similar analysis shows that voters also supported the NRM above average in district chairperson elections in new districts.<sup>25</sup>

**Table 6: Presidential Election Results for New Districts**  
(Source: Uganda Electoral Commission)

Election	Type of District	Museveni (%)	Other Candidates (%)
1996:	New Districts (6: 1990, 1991, 1994)	89.2	10.8
	Ugandan Average	74.3	25.7
2001:	New Districts (16: 1997, 2000)	72.5	27.5
	Ugandan Average	69.4	30.6
2006:	New Districts (13: 2005) <sup>26</sup>	73.6	26.4
	Ugandan Average	59.3	40.7

<sup>24</sup> As MPs operated under a no-party system up until 2005, it is impossible to judge how voters responded to district creation through older parliamentary election data.

<sup>25</sup> The use of more systematic statistical examinations here is limited by several factors, including the lack of more detailed parliamentary and district chairperson election data as well as the 'noise' that exists from not being able to run a field experiment: for an example of how such an experiment can show evidence of a link between patronage and voting behaviour, see Wantchekon (2003).

<sup>26</sup> Of the 22 new districts which were announced by Parliament on 20 July 2005, only 13 had been created by the time of the February 2006 poll, inasmuch as the district was listed as extant by the Electoral Commission.

**Table 7: Parliamentary and District Chairperson Election Results, 2006**  
(Source: Uganda Electoral Commission)

	Type of District	NRM Candidates (%)	Other Candidates (%)
<b>Directly Elected MPs</b>			
Total Votes	New Districts	66.7	33.3
	Ugandan Average	51.4	48.6
Proportion of Seats	New Districts	84.6	15.4
	Ugandan Average	66.0	34.0
<b>Women MPs</b>			
Total Votes	New Districts	61.7	38.3
	Ugandan Average	53.1	46.9
Proportion of Seats	New Districts	76.9	23.1
	Ugandan Average	71.0	29.0
<b>District Chairperson<sup>27</sup></b>			
Proportion of Seats	New Districts	76.9	23.1
	Ugandan Average	72.5	27.5

In light of the above evidence it is thus easier to make sense of Table 5, which demonstrated that Museveni had created more districts in the north and east than in the centre and west. Rather than suspecting that Museveni wanted to break up districts in opposition areas, it makes more sense to argue that the opposite, namely that he created districts in borderline areas in which he needed support in future elections. Indeed, as noted by Mukholi (2006) in an analysis of the 2006 election:

Sources in the NRM said they were confident Museveni was secure in the west and parts of Buganda. So they had to contrive a strategy for the east, which was slipping away. While the FDC was running throughout the country, NRM research indicated eastern region was to decide Museveni's clear win.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, of the 22 districts announced by Parliament in July 2005, a full ten, or 45%, were from the east -- more than any other region of the country. Within the east, the Teso region was seen as one the most crucial battlegrounds before the election (Vision 2006), which goes some way to explain why three (Amuria, Bukedea, and Tororo county) of these ten new districts were created in Iteso majority areas, more than for any other single ethnic group in the region. This strategy -- whereby Museveni created more districts in politically marginal areas while also creating districts across the rest of the country to prevent 'great and obvious discrepancies' from jeopardising his support elsewhere -- is exactly what would be predicted by both patronage theory (Wilson 1961) and examinations of distributive policies elsewhere in the world (Ames 1987; Bickers and Stein 1996; Denmark 2000).

<sup>27</sup> Voting data for the 2006 District Chairperson elections broken down by political party is unfortunately poor, with 15 out of 69 districts missing data, so I have not included it in an analysis here.

<sup>28</sup> The eastern region did indeed end up as the most marginal in the 2006 election, with 56.0% support for Museveni, as compared to 61.8% in the centre, 29.6% in the north and 78.5% in the west.



## Conclusion

I have argued above that, of all the possible explanations for the creation of new districts in Uganda, the use of districts as patronage and a source of votes in elections is the most convincing one. If this is so, we should expect to continue to see a further proliferation of districts as Museveni attempts to cling on for a fourth term; most recently the creation of Lamwo district was announced in July 2007, despite the claim from the current Minister of Local Government Kahinda Otafiire that there would be no new districts for a while as they were becoming ‘unviable’ (Mugerwa 2007). Indeed, district creation has been more successful than other types of patronage like new cabinet posts and new parliamentary constituencies in maintaining Museveni’s support, inasmuch as it was only the latter type which came in for near-universal criticism as wasteful and inefficient in the solicitations of the Constitutional Review Commission (Uganda 2003). The different reception of these two types of patronage is initially puzzling, in that the Olsonian logic noted above (that as long as the costs of a patronage opportunity are spread among the entire population, opposition to district creation will be minimal) applies equally to all types of patronage. However, this anomaly becomes clearer if we remember that, whereas cabinet ministers and MPs can siphon off their salaries for personal reasons, the creation of a district necessarily brings money to the countryside and thereby benefits locals at least to some degree. Moreover, as districts have little say in policy formation in Kampala, Museveni can afford to create new districts in marginal and even opposition areas without the fear of local leaders later threatening his rule; this again marks a contrast to Museveni’s more ethnically and regionally biased appointments in the cabinet and the armed forces (Green 2006a).

This analysis also might explain why what is taking place in Uganda is extreme but not unusual across Africa, as it is highly possible that several governments have used the exact same strategy as President Museveni in recent years. In West Africa, President Blaise Compaoré of Burkina Faso created 15 new provinces in 1997, in time for a parliamentary election that year and his successful first re-election the following year, while in Benin President Mathieu Kérékou doubled the number of his country’s provinces from 6 to 12 in 1999, two years before his re-election. President Idriss Déby of Chad also doubled the number of his country’s prefectures from 14 to 28 (and renamed them departments) in 1999, two years before his first successful re-election. In Anglophone Africa, President of Malawi Bakili Muluzi’s government created three new districts in 1998, a year before his re-election, while in Ghana President John Kufuor’s government created 28 new districts in 2003 and another 28 districts in 2007, in both cases a year before presidential and parliamentary elections.<sup>29</sup> In Sudan, President Omar al-Bashir tripled the number of federal states from 9 to 27 in 1994, two years before his first election. Finally, the new constitution of the Democratic Republic of Congo increased the number of provinces from 11 to 26; while the provinces do not exist as yet the constitution came into force in February 2006, five months before the first round of the country’s presidential elections. As with Uganda, in all seven cases the Presidents were incumbents seeking (re)election and, with the exception of the DR Congo, the highest level of local governments had no official representation at the national level.

These countries have also gone extensive economic and political reforms over the past two decades; some, like Burkina Faso and Ghana, were similarly touted as ‘star pupils’ by the international donor community in the 1990s. As with Uganda, structural adjustment

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<sup>29</sup> While Ghana’s 166 districts are not its highest level of local government (an honour held by its ten regions), they are, however, the highest level local government to have elections. I owe this point to Lindsay Whitfield.

programs in these countries promoted privatisation, liberalisation and devaluation, thereby reducing the patronage resources available to leaders just at a time when they were simultaneously democratising and decentralising their states. As argued by Van de Walle (2001), African politicians have been highly capable of manipulating these economic reform processes to entrench their power; it would be remiss to assume that they were not similarly capable of using decentralisation reforms to create new patronage opportunities in order to win elections and stay in power.

Certainly the analysis presented here would suggest that more research be done on the creation of sub-national provinces and districts across the developing world. If Uganda is indeed paradigmatic in this sense, it is possible that, as with the economic reforms discussed by Van de Walle (2001), the mixed outcomes of decentralisation have less to do with poor applications of public administration theory and more to do with the way local leaders always instrumentalise any type of reform imposed from outside. In countries like Uganda the links between decentralisation strategies and patronage will therefore need to be rethought if governance reforms are to aid developing countries in any significant way.

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The Crisis States Research Centre aims to examine and provide an understanding of processes of war, state collapse and reconstruction in fragile states and to assess the long-term impact of international interventions in these processes. Through rigorous comparative analysis of a carefully selected set of states and of cities, and sustained analysis of global and regional axes of conflict, we aim to understand why some fragile states collapse while others do not, and the ways in which war affects future possibilities of state building. The lessons learned from past experiences of state reconstruction will be distilled to inform current policy thinking and planning.

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*with* collaborators in Uganda and other parts of sub-Saharan Africa

## **Research Components**

-  Development as State-Making: Collapse, War and Reconstruction
-  Cities and Fragile States: Conflict, War and Reconstruction
-  Regional and Global Axes of Conflict

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