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Opposition party institutionalisation in authoritarian settings: the case of Uganda

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the process of institutionalisation among Ugandan opposition parties and highlights the tensions at play between party institutionalisation and broader party goals in authoritarian settings. Based upon qualitative research conducted between 2016 and 2023, we offer a historical analysis of the steps towards institutionalisation – understood as a process, rather than a state – taken by two Ugandan parties: the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) and the Democratic Party (DP). Uganda features historical parties such as the DP that were severely weakened by the ‘Movement era’ but endured despite losing ground, and newer opposition forces, such as the FDC, that proved relatively stronger despite being divided over the question of building party structures, thus providing an interesting case study. Ultimately, this article demonstrates the complex, and at times conflicting, implications of institutionalisation for opposition parties’ ability to achieve their objectives in an authoritarian regime.

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Introduction

Uganda’s political landscape has been deeply scarred by historical repression of party activities, from the ruthless military regime of Idi Amin in the 1970s to the no-party ‘democracy’ promoted by Yoweri Museveni between 1986 and 2005, which have greatly disrupted parties’ mobilisation capacity, entrenched the perception of party politics as divisive, and supported the establishment of a highly dominant ruling party. Yet surprisingly, partisanship has remained salient (Carlson, 2016; Conroy-Krutz et al., 2016), with over two-thirds of

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Ugandans regularly declaring they ‘feel close to a political party’ according to Afrobarometer surveys. Pre-independence parties have endured against the odds – and despite not being in power – though they have been overtaken by newer political organisations in the polls. Even opposition leaders who have publicly questioned the value of engaging in party politics to dislodge Museveni, such as Kizza Besigye and Bobi Wine, have still created and used parties as electoral machines (Kalinaki, 2014; Wilkins et al., 2021). This context raises significant questions about the way opposition parties, in particular, organise, operate, and endure in Uganda, and in other one-party dominant authoritarian settings across Africa and beyond.

African political parties are generally described as weak and poorly organised (Erdmann, 2004; Cooper, 2018), a critique particularly aimed at opposition parties, whose perceived weakness has been blamed for the democratic deficit throughout Africa (Randall & Svåsand, 2002b; Rakner & van de Walle, 2009). In particular, these parties’ poor institutionalisation – and the resulting lack of an institutionalised party system – has been considered a problem. Indeed, even though party system volatility is not necessarily a bad thing in a democracy (Riedl, 2014; Stroh, 2019), the institutionalisation of parties and party systems is usually considered key in enabling democratic consolidation (Diamond, 1989; Dix, 1992; Lewis, 1994). Yet, an uneven institutionalisation of political parties – with the ruling party benefiting from historical legacies and controlling public resources – can lead to institutionalised but uncompetitive party systems that are detrimental to democratisation prospects (van de Walle & Butler, 1999; Randall & Svåsand, 2002a; Mozaffar & Scarritt, 2005). In these circumstances, the institutionalisation of *opposition* parties becomes crucial to promote democratisation even in cases where they are too weak to obtain power (Van Eerd, 2017).

Yet very little attention has been given to the challenges and risks of pursuing a strategy of institutionalisation for opposition parties operating within a one-party dominant regime. In this article, we address this gap by questioning why and to what extent opposition parties have institutionalised (or not) in Uganda, and how this has impacted their ability to mobilise, coordinate, and ultimately challenge the incumbent. In doing so, we highlight the tensions that exist between party goals and party institutionalisation.

We draw from the rich conceptual literature on party institutionalisation (Huntington, 1968; Randall & Svåsand, 2002a; Weissenbach & Bukow, 2019) to understand institutionalisation as a multi-dimensional process through which parties acquire value and stability, and in which party operatives have agency. In contrast to the existing literature, which tends to portray party institutionalisation as universally positive and necessary for democratisation – often associating it with accountability, sustainability, and cohesion – we argue that its significance is much more complex. We highlight the tensions that exist between party institutionalisation and the party’s broader

goals, and uncover a potential disutility of party institutionalisation in authoritarian contexts. While institutionalisation can help a party to endure in the face of external constraints and internal challenges, it may also render opposition parties vulnerable to co-optation strategies by the incumbent regime, stretch their already-limited organisational and financial capacities, or hinder flexibility in mobilisation. Our argument matters to the study of one party-dominant, competitive (or not so competitive) authoritarian regimes, and to the broader democratisation scholarship, as it questions the general criticism of opposition parties for their weakness and their lack of efforts to become institutionalised.

This article compares two different political parties in Uganda: the Democratic Party (DP), which was founded before independence, in 1954, and endured despite having lost ground, and the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC), which emerged in the modern multiparty era, in 2005, and was the main opposition party until the 2021 elections. Though the DP is a much older party than the FDC – meaning the timeframe available to each organisation to institutionalise has been different – a prolonged ban on party activities has severely curtailed the DP’s development between 1969 and 2005, and this difference is, in our view, more an opportunity for further historical analysis than a problematic bias. Both of these parties have also been supplanted following the establishment of the National Unity Platform (NUP) around Bobi Wine and its positioning as the main opposition force. More recently, the DP entered an ‘alliance’ with the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) in July 2022, while the FDC has experienced a debilitating crisis following allegations of NRM infiltration since August 2023 – putting in serious doubt the future of these parties. As we will discuss, both of these parties have experienced intense internal debates over their institutionalisation and have made strides on some dimensions of this process, and not others, over time, which has informed their respective trajectories.

This article is based upon qualitative data collected by the authors over several phases. As part of broader research projects about the organisation and activities of opposition parties in Uganda, we conducted a total of 113 semi-structured interviews in and around the capital city Kampala, and in the towns of Gulu, Kasese, Masaka, Mukono, and Soroti – areas where the parties under study were comparatively better implanted – over two periods of fieldwork (February to December 2016, and March to May 2018). Interviewees included party officials, Members of Parliament (MPs), and activists from FDC and DP, civil society representatives, journalists, and other political experts. The research was subjected to the ethical review processes of the authors’ respective institutions at the time of data collection, as well as that of the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology. All interviewees were asked for their informed consent (either in writing or orally). None

was considered vulnerable, but considering the sensitivity of the research topic – opposition politics in an authoritarian regime – all interview statements have been anonymized. These interviews were complemented by a continuing review of media coverage of opposition parties' activities. Our research was then further updated through monitoring of media reports, day-to-day discussions, and observation of events by one of the authors based in Kampala between October 2020 and October 2023. Our analysis of each party's institutionalisation process is guided by a set of questions investigating four key dimensions laid out in the literature: roots in society, organisation, autonomy, and coherence. This approach is further detailed in the next section.

This paper is structured in the following manner. We first introduce our conceptual approach, grounded in the existing scholarship on party institutionalisation in Africa, and explain our analytical approach. Second, we provide a brief overview of party politics in Uganda in order to locate our study and provide useful context for non-specialist readers. Then, we discuss in turn the institutionalisation process of the DP and the FDC from their respective creation to 2021. Finally, we provide a comparative discussion bringing together the two case studies, highlighting the mechanisms of our argument, and analysing recent developments affecting our party cases. A brief conclusion summarises our findings and their implications for the study of parties elsewhere.

Conceptual and analytical approach: party institutionalisation as a historical process

Our understanding of party institutionalisation is rooted in the extensive literature on the subject, starting with Samuel Huntington's (1968, p. 12) original definition of institutionalisation as 'the process by which organizations and procedures acquire value and stability'. Contrary to approaches seeking to measure institutionalisation as a state or level achieved at a given point in time, such as those used by Basedau and Stroh (2008) and Bizzarro et al. (2017), we focus on this conceptualisation as a process to be unpacked.

We also draw upon Randall and Svåsand's (2002a) reworking of the concept to apply it beyond the old Western democracies. Randall and Svåsand make an important distinction between the institutionalisation of party systems and that of individual parties. Even if they are related, our focus here is on the institutionalisation of political parties, particularly those in the opposition. Randall and Svåsand also highlight the importance of behavioural aspects of the institutionalisation process, rather than merely organisational ones. Their conceptualisation is therefore multidimensional, incorporating both internal and external dimensions as well as structural and attitudinal dimensions, and focuses on four dimensions:

systemness, value infusion, decisional autonomy, and reification. In this article, we use the slightly refined dimensions outlined by Basedau and Stroh in their Index of the Institutionalization of Parties (IIP): level of organisation, roots in society, autonomy, and coherence. We also incorporate Weisenbach and Bukow's (2019, p. 166) understanding of the concept as sequential and 'subjected to stagnation and setbacks', and add that party operatives have some degree of agency over the steps taken (or not) toward 'institutionhood'.

Building upon this theoretical literature, we contribute to a smaller body of empirical research about party institutionalisation in Africa. While party systems have received slightly more attention (Bogaards, 2004; Manning, 2005; Erdmann & Basedau, 2008; Riedl, 2014), and despite a growing interest in how African (opposition) parties are formed and operate (Elischer, 2013; LeBas, 2013; Krönke et al., 2020; Meng, 2021), research on the extent, drivers, and consequences of party institutionalisation across Africa remains limited, especially with reference to opposition parties. This article adds to only a handful of other case studies from the continent. This includes Kalua's (2011) assessment of the level of party institutionalisation in Malawi, as well as Wanyama (2010) and Kanyinga (2014) who each argued that the lack of party institutionalisation subverted democratic prospects in Kenya. Rakner (2011) observed the *Zambian Movement for Multiparty Democracy* (MMD) and also found it poorly institutionalised, arguing that the context of political and economic liberalisation in the early 1990s weakened pro-democracy parties' ability to institutionalise. In Tanzania, Morse (2014) looked at the institutionalisation of the ruling *Chama Cha Mapinduzi* (CCM) as a source of regime stability, while others have looked at the various strategies pursued by its opponent *Chadema*, from branch-building to 'lone organizers' to 'walking rallies' (Paget, 2019, 2022; Kwayu, 2023).

This literature makes valuable contributions to our understanding of (opposition) parties across the continent, but we argue that a different approach is needed – one that does not take for granted that party institutionalisation is necessarily desirable, but instead highlights the tensions between a party's institutionalisation and the goals it is pursuing. Understanding party institutionalisation as a process in which parties, politicians, and activists have agency is therefore crucial in order to better understand how they can effectively challenge the incumbent. In this article, we trace back how two Ugandan parties have gone about becoming institutionalised, the steps they have taken, and the constraints they have faced in this process.

Our analysis focuses on four key dimensions: roots in society, organisation, autonomy, and coherence. While we kept in mind the indicators listed in Basedau and Stroh's (2008) IIP, our analysis was guided by four broader questions which allowed us to paint a more coherent and comparable picture of each case. Firstly, how embedded into society has the party been? We were

particularly interested in the party's ability to adapt to changes in the political environment, and its links with the broader society, including civil society organisations and voters. Secondly, how complex and effective has the party's organisational apparatus become? We looked at both the existence and implementation of formal rules and structures, and at the geographical expansion of the party's presence. Thirdly, how autonomous has the party been vis-à-vis individuals and other organisations? Fourthly, how coherent has the party been as a unified organisation?

Contrary to other scholars' endeavours, our focus was on analysing processes that evolve over time, rather than attributing scores at a given point in time, thus allowing us to unpack internal dynamics in a more meaningful way. While we do discuss the progress each party has made, we pay close attention to the internal debates and the constraining factors affecting the party's trajectory towards institutionhood. Before diving into these case studies, we provide contextual information about party politics in Uganda to better situate our analysis.

An overview of party politics in Uganda

Political parties emerged in Uganda in the 1950s, prior to the country's independence in 1962. The two main political forces were the Democratic Party (DP), which had won the pre-independence elections in 1961, and the Uganda People's Congress (UPC), which came to power in 1962 thanks to an alliance with the Baganda monarchy. Parties were banned by Milton Obote in 1969 and remained outlawed during Idi Amin's infamous regime, until the latter's overthrow in 1979 (Mutibwa, 1992). Multiparty elections were held in 1980 and returned Obote's UPC to power, but allegations of rigging led to a civil war between the state and Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Army (NRA) (Willis et al., 2017). When Museveni seized power in 1986, he established a 'Movement system' under which political parties could exist but were restricted from organising activities (Mugaju & Oloka-Onyango, 2004). This system, promoting 'individual merit' rather than partisan affiliation, endured until 2005, when multipartyism was officially restored. However, this did not translate into genuine liberalisation, but rather into a regime qualified as 'hybrid' (Tripp, 2010; Bertrand, 2021) and increasingly authoritarian (Khisra, 2019).

The NRM, because of the lopsided playing field structured by the Movement system, retained overwhelming dominance in the new multi-party setting (Makara et al., 2009). Yet, despite this long-standing dominance, the NRM itself has been described as an 'institutionally hollow' party with 'no core identity whatsoever except for its attachment to [Museveni's] personality' (Wilkins et al., 2021, p. 633). Its structures and bureaucracy are extremely weak: they still rest upon state organs set up during the Movement era and

are tightly controlled by Museveni himself (Collord, 2016). Local committees rarely endure beyond election time, policies and party procedures are regularly undermined by informal patronage networks, and national organs have no autonomy or resources (Wilkins, 2019, p. 1494). The NRM's organisational weakness is illustrated, for example, by the high number of 'NRM-leaning' independent MPs, who often lost the NRM primary but successfully ran as independents (against an NRM candidate) in the general election. Internal factionalism is in fact a key aspect of pro-regime electoral mobilisation in the rural South (Wilkins, 2019).

The authoritarian nature of Museveni's regime creates serious constraints on opposition parties activities. Opposition figures face high levels of violence and intimidation (Khisra, 2019). Elections are usually characterised by the repression of opposition candidates (Wilkins & Vokes, 2023) and pervasive vote-buying, and their results are routinely rejected by the opposition (Abrahamsen & Bareebe, 2016; Wilkins et al., 2021).¹ Though Uganda has an active and diverse civil society, it operates mostly in an apolitical and technical manner due to a constraining legal framework, while the trade union movement has been completely co-opted by the NRM regime, thus leaving little room for opposition parties to create strong connections that could foster deeper roots in society (Barya, 2010; Nassali, 2016). Opposition parties also face financial challenges, as public funding is limited and heavily monopolised by the NRM, and fundraising hampered by obtrusive legislation and economic operators' fear of political retaliation (Ssenkumba, 2007; Kiiza, 2008).

Despite the reintroduction of multipartyism in 2005, prominent opposition politicians have often perceived party-building as pointless, and 'contentious and confrontational politics' as the only viable option against Museveni (Wilkins et al., 2021). The strategy dilemma faced by the opposition, between movement and party, defiance and structures – itself a legacy of the Movement system created by Museveni – is at the core of the tension we highlight when it comes to party institutionalisation in an authoritarian setting, as discussed later on. Yet, historical parties founded before independence endure, and political parties still appear to be necessary institutions embraced and valued by politicians, activists, and voters. Afrobarometer data shows that in 2017, 41 per cent of Ugandans stated that they were a card-carrying member of a political party, while other studies have shown that partisan cues influence Uganda voters (Carlson, 2016; Conroy-Krutz et al., 2016). The continuing relevance of parties is illustrated by the fact that many independent MPs tried (and failed) to stand on a party ticket, and that populist figures such as Kizza Besigye and Bobi Wine have set up and used political parties. In this context, we compare the institutionalisation processes undertaken by two Ugandan opposition parties: the DP and the FDC.

The Democratic Party (DP): a small but enduring party

Founded in 1954 by a group of Catholic civil servants, before the country's independence, the DP is Uganda's oldest party. The party proved a resilient opposition force through decades of repression, and remained embedded into society despite waning electoral support, until July 2022 when the party's president, Norbert Mao, signed an agreement with President Museveni and was appointed to the government. Though its electoral weight is marginal today, it once had significant electoral support. Indeed, it won a majority of seats in 1961, but was denied an opportunity to govern an independent Uganda the following year in fresh elections in which representatives from the Buganda region – where the DP was popular – were appointed by the King instead of being elected, and who then allied with Milton Obote's UPC (Lwanga-Lunyiigo, 2015, p. 77). In the 1980 elections held after Idi Amin was overthrown, the DP won the popular vote amidst a very high turnout and despite widely acknowledged electoral fraud, though it obtained fewer seats than the UPC due to the first-past-the-post system (Willis et al., 2017, p. 233). The party's resilience during no-party regimes has been partly attributed to the dynamism of its youth wing at that time, the Ugandan Young Democrats (UYD). Autonomous from the party's organisation until its official integration into the party structure in 2015, the UYD was a strong mobilising force and a link to civil society, especially at Makerere university in the capital. However, the party's electoral support waned over the course of Museveni's regime, first losing substantial ground in the 1996 elections (held under a no-party dispensation, but in which the DP's President, Paul Ssemogerere, was standing), and receiving single-digit scores at multiparty presidential elections ever since according to official results (when it fielded a candidate). Still, by 2018, it retained a small but stable presence in Parliament (8 seats in 2006, 12 in 2011, 15 in 2016) and remained relatively prolific: its MPs, mostly hailing from the Buganda region but also from Acholi in the Northern region, were often described as 'articulate' (interview, CSO representative, Kampala, 19 September 2016) and participated actively in the shadow cabinet. Before 2021, the DP still retained roots in some areas, especially in Buganda and Acholi, where many interviewees explained they come from 'a DP family' (interview, Kampala, 12 October 2016) and talked about 'DP values' of truth and justice. These values are grounded in the Catholic convictions of its founders, while loose enough to resonate widely (and differently) across the party's constituents (Earle & Carney, 2021, p. 11).

The DP had also established some routinised processes, providing a level of organisational strength, but these processes were not systematically followed and did not always avoid controversies. It had a national structure and a decision-making process inscribed in the party's constitution, providing

a rather high level of internal democracy. The National Executive Committee (NEC), whose members are elected, was responsible for the implementation of decisions voted by the National Delegates' Conference (NDC) emanating from the grassroots or, if it was not in session, the National Council. This process was supposed to guarantee the legitimacy of decisions taken, but this did not always work, as the 2016 elections illustrated. Following a failed coalition-building attempt, the DP's leadership voted to back an independent candidate, Amama Mbabazi, rather than the FDC's Kizza Besigye in the presidential race (Beardsworth, 2016). This choice was questioned by many MPs and local councillors (observation, DP workshop, Masaka, 9 April 2016), leading many parliamentary candidates to stray from the party line and to campaign for Besigye, and voters to punish DP officials running for a seat by refusing to re-elect them (interview, DP official, Kampala, 20 April 2016). The candidate selection process was rather opaque, with two DP figures from the same area providing different accounts of this process. The first, a local official, explained that 'it is the constituency committee which nominates the MP [candidates]' (interview, Masaka, 18 May 2018), while the second, an elected MP in the area, stated that 'you have to get endorsement from the headquarters' (interview, Masaka, 18 May 2018).

The party's organisational capacity was however curtailed by a lack of resources. Its membership was difficult to assess and no interviewee was able to provide a number of actual party members, even at the branch level, though the party claimed to have sold 500,000 party cards in 2007 (Ssenkumba, 2007, p. 20). The party received some support from foreign political foundations, but heavily depended upon elites at the national and local levels to maintain its structures and fund its activities. This hampered the party's attempts to remobilize support and build structures across the country after its territorial reach was severely damaged during the repressive years of Idi Amin's regime and Museveni's 'no-party democracy'. In Gulu and Mukono, when we visited these areas, the party had a functional office – supported by the local MP – used to coordinate activities across the county, but this did not extend to lower administrative levels and failed to meet the expectations raised by Norbert Mao's accession to the party presidency. According to a Ugandan civil society activist, 'when Norbert Mao was elected, it created a belief that DP would be able to expand outside of the Central region and attract young people, but that hasn't been the case' (interview, Kampala, 21 November 2016). In particular, the DP lost ground in the capital, with figures such as Besigye, and later Bobi Wine, effectively supplanting its support among urban youths.

Despite its reliance on individual elites, the DP demonstrated a considerable degree of autonomy. While it has historically been dubbed either pro-Catholic ('Dini ya Papa' (the Pope's party)) or pro-Buganda, and its political agenda has been influenced by the Baganda royal establishment – illustrated

by the party's support of federalism and the participation of DP figures in the 'Suubi' royalist pressure group in 2011 – the party's aims and strategies were never dictated by either institution (Kassimir, 1998, p. 13; Brisset-Foucault, 2013). Significantly, the party had, at least until 2018, experienced multiple leadership turnovers, demonstrating its ability to outlive its founders and to become more than its leader. The emergence and consolidation of this norm within the DP could be observed at two critical junctures. One occurred after the death of Benedicto Kiwanuka, an early leader of the DP who was assassinated by Idi Amin's regime in the 1970s. Contrary to the UPC, who never managed to step out of Milton Obote's shadow after his death, Kiwanuka's family did not make any claim on the DP (interview, civil society representative, Kampala, 21 September 2016), and the party's leadership passed on to Paul Ssemogerere, Kiwanuka's former Private Secretary. Though Ssemogerere remained at the head of the party for over 25 years, he eventually stepped down, thus setting a precedent. With this transfer of power to John Ssebaana Kizito (a Muslim Muganda) in 2005, then to Mao (a Catholic from the northern Acholi region) in 2010 – showcasing limited forays beyond the party's original Buganda-Catholic core – this precedent became a fairly solid norm, strengthened by the fact that both Ssemogerere and Kizito remained respected elders in the party until their respective passing. A Ugandan researcher argued that 'Ssemogerere and Kizito are pillars of DP now, and the young generation won't change the rules with these elders around' (interview, Kampala, 7 December 2016). Even though the election of a party president occasionally fuelled tensions and factionalism, as occurred after Mao's accession to the position, the principle of a turnover at the head of the party was not questioned.

The DP maintained a certain level of internal coherence, but that was frequently undermined by defections, factionalism, and dissidence. Mao's election to the party's presidency, in particular, opened a deep cleavage within the DP. Some have interpreted this divide in ethnic terms: Mao, a northerner, was elected president of the party in 2010 thanks to the support of party representatives from Northern, Western, and Eastern Uganda, breaking the dominance of the Central region, where Buganda, the DP's core constituency, was located. Others argued this stemmed from strategic disagreements, focusing on the party's priorities and its relations with the rest of the opposition. Indeed, there had been frictions over whether to form alliances with other parties and, more particularly, whether to support Besigye as the opposition's flagbearer. This issue, particularly controversial within the DP, reflected wider divisions among the opposition, stemming from competition for the same constituencies and a fear by smaller parties that they would be swallowed by the then-larger FDC (Beardsworth, 2016, p. 758). This factionalism led to the defection of prominent DP figures – such as Erias Lukwago, the Kampala Lord Mayor – and to DP candidates and activists straying from the

official party line – for example in campaigning for the FDC’s Kizza Besigye, as discussed above. But the party had tolerated this dissidence to a significant degree, and many dissidents had remained in the party because they still saw DP as a ‘selling card’ in some constituencies, particularly in Buganda (interview, Kampala, 30 June 2016). This included MP Betty Nambooze, who ‘came back into the fold’ between 2016 and 2020 – though not without frictions. Interestingly, even though she joined Bobi Wine’s NUP in August 2020, she indicated in a press interview that she still had the ambition to stand against Mao in the DP (The Observer, 2020).

In summary, by 2021, despite a weakened electoral support concentrated in two areas, the DP as an organisation had endured. Until recently, it remained a useful brand in some areas of the country. It benefited from routinised processes and a strong leadership turnover norm, although this did not prevent factionalism around leadership disputes and strategic disagreements. The party was able to accommodate these internal tensions, and notwithstanding a low electoral weight, it remained significant in the Ugandan political landscape, at least until 2021.

The forum for democratic change (FDC): institutionalisation as a dividing issue

The FDC emerged from the pro-multipartyism movement that gained traction in the late 1990s, and was officially founded in December 2004 around the figure of Kizza Besigye, a former NRM figure who had become critical of the Movement system and challenged Museveni in the 2001 elections. It emerged as a merger between various groups, including the Reform Agenda, a pressure group which had backed Besigye’s 2001 candidacy, and the Parliamentary Advocacy Forum (PAFO) – a group of legislators founded in 2001 to push for multipartyism, thus bringing together disenchanted NRM historical figures and ex-members of older parties such as the DP. It quickly positioned itself as the main opposition party, supplanting the older parties in the first elections held under the new multiparty dispensation in 2006, and retaining stable electoral support until 2021. The FDC has a youth wing, but its level of funding and power were difficult to assess – in any case, it did not have the same capacity to root the party among the youth as UYD once had for the DP (Kanyadudi, 2010). The activist approach upheld by Besigye and other FDC figures led to important alliances between civil society activists and politicians, best illustrated by the Activists for Change (A4C) coalition leading the Walk to Work protests in 2011. Yet A4C involved figures from other parties, including the DP, and was purposefully non-partisan (Mutyaba, 2022). As such, it did not foster strong links between FDC and civil society organisations in a way that could support the party’s institutionalisation – but on the contrary triggered intense internal

debates about the desirability of institutionalisation itself, detailed below. The FDC's social roots were even thinner in rural areas, where the party's limited echo mostly derived from Besigye's charismatic appeal.

The FDC had an organisational structure similar to that of the DP, including a National Delegates Conference, a National Council, and a National Executive Committee, as well as a smaller Working Committee acting as the party's cabinet. The FDC constitution included term-limits for all party leadership positions. The party periodically held elections to designate the party's national flagbearer, who was not always the party's president, as illustrated by the selection of Besigye as flagbearer in 2016 against the then-party president Mugisha Muntu. The party constitution stated that primaries should be held for parliamentary and local elections too, though this was not systematically implemented (Mugambe Mpiima, 2016, p. 31). Parliamentary primaries that had taken place were described as 'free and fair' and gave the party the 'moral high ground' in some instances (Malinga, 2010), but violent and chaotic in others (The Observer, 2015). The party's resources came from member contributions, and discreet support from diaspora chapters (interview, Soroti, 7 May 2018), but like the DP, heavily depended on key individuals (interview, Kampala, 6 April 2016).

Expanding and strengthening the party structures became the subject of an intense debate within the party at the time Besigye stepped down from the party's presidency. His successor, Muntu, was elected on a platform focusing on building those structures, and some FDC members and political observers saw progress under Muntu's leadership. A Ugandan civil society activist argued that 'Muntu is very strong on institutionalising the party, and for the last three or four years that's what he has been doing. He has covered around 60 per cent of the country in terms of having a structure in every district' (interview, Kampala, 6 April 2016). Yet these efforts have been conducted 'very quietly' and 'without any leading speeches' (interview, Kampala, 8 April 2016), and others have been frustrated about what they perceive as slow progress. As one activist wondered, the 'FDC has structures, but the question of the day is how functional are they, are they operating?' (interview, Soroti, 9 May 2018). At the same time, observers have noticed the lack of engagement of some FDC figures in those efforts. As an international NGO representative argued:

Muntu won on a ticket promising to reorganise the party and he was hoping to do that, and the party MPs went 'fair enough, you get on with that', they didn't see that they should be involved, [that] it was part of their larger responsibility. (interview, Kampala, 8 April 2016)

Some in the party actually argued against building party-structures, seeing it as pointless or counter-productive in an authoritarian setting. For example, one FDC activist in Soroti said that 'if you try and create structures,

[Museveni's] emphasis will be to target structures, intimidate members, buy them off or even kill them' (interview, Soroti, 9 May 2018). The intense division over this issue impeded the party's ability to build strong structures across the country.

Despite formal provisions promoting the party's autonomy, this was very difficult to achieve in practice. The party's constitution included term limits for any elected position within the party, which were meant to ensure a circulation of elites at all levels, and an alternation of party leadership. Abiding by this provision, Besigye indeed stepped down from the party's presidency in 2012, a decision perceived as a positive attempt to move the FDC away from personality politics but which also illustrated Besigye's own disillusionment with party politics (Kalinaki, 2014, p. 312; Beardsworth, 2016, p. 108). This apparent circulation of elites at the head of the party was, however, undermined by the fact that Besigye retained an important – albeit informal – role and influence within the party. In the 2012 party elections, for example, while the party's leadership refrained from openly endorsing either candidate, Besigye was widely understood to favour Nandala Mafabi against Mugisha Muntu and his camp, who favoured a strategy of building party structures. Despite Muntu's victory, Besigye retained influence and leadership – not exactly in but neither totally out of the party. From that point onward, the FDC effectively had two leaderships:

There [was] the formal leadership of Mugisha Muntu, focused on building the organisation and regional structures; and the informal leadership of the party's founding president Kizza Besigye, focused on activism, defiance to remove Museveni from power. (interview, NGO representative, Kampala, 21 September 2016)

Besigye's persisting prominence was best illustrated by his re-election in 2016 as FDC flagbearer (in other words, the presidential candidate), a status not subjected to the same term limit as party positions, which allowed him to run for election on an FDC ticket three times.² This flagbearer status retained potency beyond the election as civil disobedience movements (the Walk-to-Work protests in 2011 and the Defiance campaign in 2016) served as extensions to the electoral campaigns: though Besigye was no longer the party's president, he was the 'People's President', following a mock swearing-in ceremony in April 2016, and an over-bearing figure within the party. The FDC's failure to step out of Besigye's shadow was illustrated by the fact that, according to official results, Besigye as an individual received a much larger share of the presidential vote than the FDC as a party in the concomitant parliamentary elections each time he ran, or than the party's presidential candidate in 2021, when he declined to stand.

The debate over strategy and the de facto dual leadership described above severely affected the party's coherence. It pitted a 'structures' faction against

a 'defiance' camp (Wilkins et al., 2021; Mutyaba, 2022). The former, headed by Muntu, contended that the NRM's authoritarianism notwithstanding, the opposition party should utilise the limited space offered in order to build its grassroots structures and gradually work towards beating the NRM at the polls. In contrast, the 'defiance' faction, following Besigye, criticised formal party politics in contemporary Uganda, arguing that political parties, elections, and other trappings of democracy were manipulated by the ruling NRM to enhance its legitimacy, making them meaningless. Every political contest – for party president or presidential flagbearer – within the party saw these two factions clash. The tension re-emerged following the 2016 elections, when the party had to decide on its official response to Museveni's re-election. Muntu, the FDC's president, preferred to concede the party's defeat and move on while Besigye rejected the results, was sworn in as the 'People's President' in a mock ceremony, and called for an ill-defined 'defiance' campaign. This factionalism deeply hurt the party – with Muntu himself being branded an 'NRM mole' by some FDC figures (Daily Monitor, 2017). This factionalism at the national level also affected the party at lower levels, as these internal divisions 'trickle down to lower structures', causing 'uncoordinated command, opinion contradictions, confusion over the official party position' and thus 'weaken[ing] support and loyalty to the party' (interview, FDC activist, Soroti, 13 May 2018).

In summary, despite formal progress towards institutionalisation, the FDC had, by 2021, failed to become autonomous from the figure of Besigye, and its appeal was grounded on his personality. The issue of party institutionalisation was in itself a topic for debate within the party. While described as a 'healthy ideological debate' (interview, FDC official, Kampala, 21 March 2018), this in fact drove factionalism with dual leaderships and each faction's strategy interfering with the other. With the 'defiance' faction winning over the 'organisers' in the 2017 leadership contest, the party strengthened its own brand in terms of protest and change, but also saw the Muntu-led wing of the party exit to form the Alliance for National Transformation (ANT), raising questions about the sustainability of the FDC without Besigye as its flagbearer. This was further reflected in the party's disappointing results in 2021, when Besigye declined to contest the presidency. The FDC's party president Patrick Oboi Amuriat only scored 3.26 per cent of the presidential vote according to official results, and the party was overtaken by Bobi Wine's newly established NUP in parliament as the main opposition force.

Discussion: the tensions between party goals and party institutionalisation in authoritarian settings

The DP and the FDC have each followed a distinct path, favouring certain dimensions of institutionalisation over others, and experiencing different

internal debates. This has shaped their respective ability to operate, endure, and challenge the regime (or not) over the years. It also sheds light on recent developments that have put in serious doubt the future of both parties.

Before 2021, the DP had significantly enhanced two external dimensions of party institutionalisation: roots in society and autonomy. Its roots in society were relatively strong, partly building upon the UYD's grounding among the capital's educated youth and in enduring historical attachment in certain regions. According to a Ugandan scholar, 'historical attachment has made the [DP] survive, it is their social capital' (interview, Kampala, 7 December 2016). The party had also proved to be an autonomous organisation, both from external interest groups and from individuals within the party. It had established a solid leadership turnover norm, contrary to other Ugandan parties. This had greatly contributed to the party's endurance for over 60 years despite a highly repressive environment, and counter-balanced the party's short-comings along the other two dimensions of institutionalisation: organisation and coherence. Even though the party gained lower electoral support than it once did, it retained a core set of voters and activists in certain areas who continued to find some value in the party, even when factionalism ran deep. The sentiment of belonging to a 'DP family' was expressed by officials and activists alike throughout the country. For example, a local official stated that in his area: 'DP is in genetics, you can't cross, it is in your family morals and beliefs' (interview, DP local official, Mukono, 16 November 2016). This kind of attachment aligns with what Randall and Svåsand (2002a, p. 13) describe as 'the party's success in creating its own distinctive culture or value-system', which can contribute to party cohesion. The fact that defectors sometimes came back into the party illustrated their belief that the party would endure and retain value to their own political ends. It showed that the DP as an organisation had become 'valuable in and of itself', to use the words of Panebianco (1988, p. 53), meaning that the party's survival became an objective in itself, detached from the party's broader political aims.

This aspect of party institutionalisation was a significant obstacle to the opposition's broader objective to unseat Museveni. The DP's fear of being swallowed by larger parties – partly justified by its history of seeing members and leaders crossing over to the NRM or the FDC – has repeatedly hindered coalition-building attempts (Beardsworth, 2016). This has also contributed to the failed alliance with Bobi Wine's People Power movement. Some in the DP had hoped they could get Bobi Wine to join the party and that his popularity would re-energise the party – illustrated by the DP reunions held across the country between 2018 and 2020 and the formation of the 'DP bloc'. But while they might have hoped to ride on his coattails while staying in control, Bobi Wine repeatedly stole the show and it became clear he would not be pigeonholed into the DP, creating tensions within the party.

While Bobi Wine may have sought to use the DP's implantation in the Central region at first, he ultimately decided to take over a hitherto unknown party, the NUP, more amenable to his own ends.

In the meantime, the party's roots in society have progressively been eroded. The 'historical attachment' to the party has progressively faded away as younger generations have become less attracted to a party perceived to be turned toward the past. As highlighted by an international NGO representative working with political parties, a key feature of many DP meetings and events has long been a reference to the party's official history, marked by the independence struggle, the party's marginalisation, and the robbery of their election victories throughout the post-colonial period (interview, Kampala, 8 April 2016). This history no longer resonates as much with younger generations, who are also less bound by family ties to the party. This erosion of the party's appeal is well illustrated by the trajectory of Bobi Wine himself. A Catholic born in a DP family in the heart of the Central region, he entered politics as an independent, rejecting parties as 'agents of division' and made of 'career politicians [who] instead of being a solution have become a problem to the process of change' (interview, Kampala, 30 May 2018). Young people – the bulk of Bobi Wine's support – have increasingly perceived old parties like the DP as outmoded and dominated by the past. The weakening of the party's roots in society meant the party was no longer able to accommodate internal tensions as well as it used to. This left the party divided and vulnerable to co-optation by the regime. Following the devastating losses in the 2021 polls, where the DP was clearly overshadowed by Bobi Wine's NUP within its old stronghold in Central Uganda, Museveni seized the opportunity to co-opt the embattled party, capitalising on Mao's own disillusionment and frustration.

On the other hand, the FDC had achieved some success on the stability dimensions of institutionalisation: organisation and (to some extent) roots in society. It set up some party structures (especially under Muntu's leadership) and obtained widespread electoral support, quickly positioning itself as the main opposition party. Its leadership wove strong links with activist networks, illustrated during the Walk-to-Work campaign.

But these steps were not correlated with progress in terms of value infusion. The formal mechanisms in place to promote autonomy, such as term-limits, were undermined by informal practices. Besigye's influence has remained pervasive after he stood down from the party's presidency, and even after he stopped being the party's flagbearer. When Besigye did not run, the party lost much of its electoral support, as reflected in the 2021 poll results, especially at the presidential and local council levels. Factionalism deeply hurt the party's coherence, plaguing every internal election, and disrupting the party's activities – from campaigning to legislating to protesting – and ultimately resulted in a party split. But this factionalism did not end with

the exit of Muntu's wing in 2017: since 2023, the party has once again been deeply fractured between a Besigye-led faction (allied with Bobi Wine's People Power movement) and another led by the party's official cadres (notably party president Amuriat and secretary general Nandala Mafabi) following allegations that the latter received campaign contributions from Museveni in 2021.

This half-measure of institutionalisation was the logical result of half-hearted efforts to pursue it by party cadres: a significant section of the party's leadership (and membership) vocally rejected party institutionalisation as an objective, both because they did not see it as a priority – compared to the goal of removing President Museveni from power – and because they saw it as counter-productive in a highly repressive context. This demonstrates the importance of taking agency into consideration when studying processes of institutionalisation. It also makes clear that formal structures are not sufficient.

To be clear, our contention is not that the DP or the FDC are, or were ever, fully institutionalised parties. Rather, we argue that each party has experienced internal debates and made choices that have shaped their respective (non-linear) achievements along four dimensions of the institutionalisation process. This has shaped these parties' ability to operate, coalesce, challenge the regime, and endure. Importantly, internal objectives and dynamics related to this institutionalisation process – such as ensuring the party's survival as an organisation or following established procedures – have at times come into conflict with broader party goals, such as challenging the incumbent, highlighting the tension between the two and the potential disutility of party institutionalisation in authoritarian settings.

Conclusion

The confrontation of these two case studies shows that even in authoritarian settings, pursuing party institutionalisation brings some dividends to political parties, contributing to their perceived value or setting up an organisational foundation their electoral success can rest upon. However, the institutionalisation of individual parties – even if only partial – creates a conflict between different sets of priorities for these opposition parties, namely ensuring their own organisational survival, succeeding in toppling the authoritarian incumbent, or laying out foundations for a future democratic system.

Smaller parties are often overlooked, despite their increasingly acknowledged influence on opposition cooperation and coalition-building dynamics (Bob-Milliar, 2019; Bertrand, 2021). Yet the endurance of small parties, and the leadership turnovers these parties can experience internally, has at times contributed to the collapse of opposition coalition-building efforts that would have made it more likely to effectively challenge Museveni in the polls (Beardsworth, 2016). Even when focusing on regime change as an objective,

a distinction needs to be made between short-term goals (for example, toppling the dictator), for which party institutionalisation can be unnecessary or even a hindrance, and longer-term aims (setting up a democratic system) which will require institutions.

Over the last decade, the repressive nature of the regime has worsened, making it more difficult for opposition parties to organise (Khisra, 2019). Meanwhile a large section of the opposition has embraced the prospect of ‘democracy by revolution’, seeing this as the only way to topple the regime (Mutuyaba, 2022). This is illustrated by the fact that the pro-defiance camp ultimately won the internal power struggle within the FDC, but also by the emergence of Bobi Wine’s ‘people power’ movement (Wilkins et al., 2021). In this context, these parties’ respective strides towards institutionhood were limited and uneven. Meanwhile, the progress they made on some dimensions actually conflicted with their ability to remain appealing towards an ever younger population that increasingly distrust political parties: over the past decade, Afrobarometer data has consistently shown that barely one in three Ugandans trusts opposition parties ‘somewhat’ or ‘a lot’ opposition parties. For example, the DP’s historical grounding, which gave the parties relatively strong roots in society and helped the party endure for decades, now contributes to its perception as part of the broken system and a thing of the past. In this context, both the DP and the FDC have found it increasingly hard to accommodate internal tensions and resist co-optation attempts.

Overall, in authoritarian settings such as Uganda’s, the benefits of party institutionalisation (providing avenues for accountability and stability) matter less, while its costs increase. They have limited resources to invest in such efforts – contrary to the ruling party which tends to be built on the back of state institutions – and face threats of repression and co-optation (Arriola et al., 2021). Beyond this, opposition parties must perform functions that are different from those that parties undertake in a democracy (Bertrand, 2021), and some of these functions are much less dependent upon party institutionalisation. Less institutionalised parties can be more flexible in their mobilisation strategies, while charismatic leaders with a strong hold on a party can play an important part in attracting support and in appearing as a credible challenger to the incumbent. This echoes findings from scholars working in other parts of the world, such as Kenneth Greene (2007), who has argued that in Mexico, the ‘rigidity’ of opposition parties and that of their routines, internal organisation, and identity, has been found to severely constrain their ability to expand their reach and seize their chance when the dominant party started to decline. Meanwhile, in Central Europe (and elsewhere), new parties have achieved striking electoral success to the detriment of old, institutionalised parties (Haughton & Deegan-Krause, 2020).

Lessons from the Ugandan case have broad implications for other authoritarian settings, both for scholars studying political parties and for practitioners

involved in party-strengthening activities. Party institutionalisation has benefits when it creates a durable brand that can promote intra-party coherence and voters' trust, but it can also constrain the opposition's capacity to come together and defeat the authoritarian incumbent. A more complex and historical understanding of party institutionalisation as a process allows us to unpick the positive from the negative, and to give proper credit to the agency of political parties and the individuals that make them up.

Notes

1. This means that official election results should be treated with caution when used as research data, including in this article.
2. His first bid, in 2001, was as an independent candidate prior to the FDC's formation.

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