Prisoner releases in postcolonial Uganda: Power, politics, and the public

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Abstract
This article examines prisoner releases in postcolonial Uganda, focusing on the period between independence in 1962 and the inauguration of Yoweri Museveni in 1986. During these decades, Uganda’s government enacted over 30 large scale releases of prisoners and detainees, affecting approximately 20,000 individuals. These acts of clemency were highly politicized and frequently occurred during times of political transition or tension. While framed by Uganda’s leaders and the official media as gestures of goodwill and symbols of progress, these releases ultimately reinforced executive power and the centrality of incarceration in state repression.

Keywords
Prisoners, incarceration, clemency, Uganda, postcolonial state

Introduction
On 25 January 1971, Idi Amin became the leader of Uganda through a military coup. As one of his first acts as president, he released 55 individuals detained by his predecessor, Milton Obote (Kyemba, 1977: 48). Many of those released were high-profile political figures, including former government ministers. That morning, thousands of Ugandans travelled to Kololo Airstrip in Kampala to witness the clemency ceremony. Amin used the occasion to set the tone for his presidency, giving a speech before the crowd. Addressing the former detainees, he remarked, “You are joining the other free Ugandans at a time of great excitement and joy in the country since Uganda’s military government took over. I have no doubt that you will be joining in this great jubilation.” Yet, Amin also reminded them that their freedom was conditional, emphasizing that his government “will not tolerate any form of lawlessness.” Shifting attention away from the detainees, Amin...
also announced that “all forms of political activities” would be “suspended with immediate effect,” a move that he justified due to the “present security climate” (Uganda Argus, 29 January 1971: 1). Taking advantage of the celebratory atmosphere, Amin thus used the occasion to push forward his government’s repressive agenda.

This was not the first mass release of incarcerated individuals in Uganda, and it would not be the last. This article analyzes official releases of prisoners and detainees that took place in the decades following independence, a time of considerable conflict and change. From independence in 1962 to the inauguration of Uganda’s current president in 1986, seven governments held power. Most gained office through military force. Amin was arguably the most infamous president, as his government was responsible for an estimated 300,000 deaths (Reid, 2017: 63). Although Amin has received the most attention internationally, many other leaders oversaw widespread state-sponsored violence, particularly Obote. Uganda was also at war from the late 1970s onwards: the Uganda-Tanzania War occurred during the final stages of Amin’s presidency, followed by a civil war. Yoweri Museveni and the National Resistance Army emerged victorious, and he became the president in 1986. Museveni has been in power ever since. His time in office, while marked by significant state violence, is outside the scope of this article.

Within this context of repression and conflict, Uganda’s presidents used clemency measures to try to improve their image. Between 1962 and 1986, there were over 30 official large-scale releases of prisoners and detainees in Uganda. Legally, these were made possible through the “prerogative of mercy” article in Uganda’s constitution, which outlined the power of the executive to grant those convicted of criminal offences a “pardon,” a “respite” – either temporary or permanent – from their punishment, a substitution of a lesser punishment, or remission (Uganda Constitutional Instruments, 1962). The inclusion of this article in Uganda’s constitution reflects its colonial history, as it is based on the Royal Prerogative of Mercy, which originated in England in the medieval period and became the basis for clemency measures throughout the British Empire (Strange, 2016; Hynd, 2010, 2012; Turrell, 2000). Uganda’s current constitution still includes this prerogative, the parameters of which have remained largely unchanged since independence (Constitution of the Republic of Uganda, 1995).

This article focuses on releases involving 10 or more individuals who generally shared some common feature, such as their status as a detainee or the perceived severity of their crime. These acts of clemency were often less about the individuals affected and more about the government’s agenda. The releases were performative occasions, often occurring during political transitions or holidays, and they were typically accompanied by parades, speeches, and ceremonies. The motivations for these acts of clemency were varied and often unclear, as official rhetoric frequently diverged from reality. The language around the releases was also ambiguous, as officials variously described them as “amnesties” or “pardons,” rarely with explicit mention of the prerogative of mercy.

The releases reveal several aspects of carceral politics in postcolonial Uganda. First, they underscore the categorizations that shaped the penal sphere and how these could impact one’s chance at being granted clemency. These include the distinctions between prisoners and detainees, as well as between official government prisons and informal detention sites ironically known as “safe houses.” Uganda’s leaders made calculated decisions about whether to release convicted prisoners or those who had been detained without trial and focused mainly on those held in official prisons. Second, these releases were strategic acts tied to presidents’ political agendas. Amin, Obote, and other leaders freed prisoners to try to distance themselves from previous governments, demonstrate their power, and engage the public in nation-building. These acts of clemency had a recursive and paradoxical aspect to them, as presidents borrowed from the practices and discourses of their predecessors while also seeking to enact a politics of rupture. Third, while portrayed by the
official press as a sign of government leniency, the releases reinforced the politicized and often arbitrary nature of incarceration in this period, as well as the president’s control over the boundary between freedom and unfreedom. Such dynamics are not limited to Uganda, but rather reflect the politics of prisoner releases across time and space. These issues are particularly relevant in the context of the current COVID-19 pandemic, which has resulted in an unprecedented number of prisoners being released around the globe (DLA Piper, 2020).

This article proceeds in six sections. After discussing the methodology, it situates the Ugandan case in relation to the historical and contemporary uses of clemency measures globally. It then provides some information about the history of prisons in Uganda. The remaining sections trace different periods of Uganda’s postcolonial history, analyzing releases during Obote’s first presidency, or the “Obote I” years (1966–1971); the Amin presidency (1971–1979); the series of presidents who were briefly in power after Amin’s overthrow; Obote’s second presidency, or the “Obote II” years (1980–1985); and the short-lived presidency of Tito Okello Lutwa (July 1985–January 1986).

**Methodology**

This article draws on a variety of primary sources, including official Ugandan and British archives, material from the Ugandan and international media, civil society reports, and the memoirs and oral histories of Ugandans who lived through these decades. Official newspapers in Uganda were particularly important, not only because they offered regular coverage of releases but also because they demonstrate how the government sought to represent these acts to the public. This type of source has significant limitations, as the state media rarely functioned as a “journal of record” in the context of authoritarian rule (Ellis, 2002: 16). Consequently, details about the number of individuals freed or the motivations behind the releases were not necessarily reported accurately. Furthermore, while newspaper articles and other media sources provide some insight into public responses to the releases, they only focused on celebratory images and rhetoric, making it more difficult to discern the possible range of reactions amongst Ugandans.

Rather than relying on these media sources for precise information, however, this article examines how governments used this coverage strategically. News stories offered leaders a platform to draw connections between acts of clemency and their political visions. As Peterson and Taylor (2013: 59) argue, the “infrastructure of official discourse” was a key tool of governance in postcolonial Uganda, with the media serving as the primary means by which the government sought to “address, summon, and direct the actions of Uganda’s people.” This was particularly true during Amin’s presidency, as he actively cultivated grandiose representations of his regime in the media (Peterson and Vokes, 2021).

This article approaches Uganda’s official media as a site of performance and politics. It analyzes what is rendered visible in the framing offered by the media, what sits at the margins, and what is erased. At the centre of the frame were calculated representations of the president’s power, apparent benevolence, and political vision. Scenes and accounts of the releases adorned newspaper pages, accompanied by text that communicated messages of rebirth, freedom, and national unity. At the edge of the frame, however, was the stark reality of the state’s widespread use of incarceration. Although not the primary purpose of the coverage, stories showcasing the release of thousands of prisoners on a single day made it clear that many Ugandans were being held behind bars. Finally, there were the erasures. Absent from the frame are those who were not released, particularly those categorized as convicted prisoners or detainees who were tortured and often killed in “safe
houses” (Decker, 2014). Although critically scrutinizing official media renderings provide important insights into governmentality in this period, it is important not to forget what is silenced in these portrayals. Drawing on other sources – including memoirs, oral histories, diplomatic correspondence, civil society reports, and secondary scholarship on Uganda’s history – further brings these silences and distortions into view.

**Clemency in comparative perspective**

Clemency has been a feature of diverse legal systems throughout history, and it has typically been wielded by those who hold executive authority (Novak, 2016). As mentioned earlier, clemency legislation in Uganda is still based on the British model of the Royal Prerogative of Mercy. Through this prerogative, the sovereign – who was believed to hold divine rights and therefore have power over the life, death, and freedom of their subjects – could alter or revoke a punishment. This was particularly important in the context of the “Bloody Code,” a system that operated from the late seventeenth to the early nineteenth century in which over 200 crimes were punishable by death (Walliss, 2018: 1). Yet, as historians have shown, the use of capital punishment declined in this period, as the prerogative of mercy was frequently used (Hay, 1975: 22). This use of pardons, as historian Douglas Hay (1975: 48–49) has argued, reinforced social hierarchies and the power structures that underwrote them, as it “allowed the class that passed one of the bloodiest penal codes in Europe to congratulate itself on its humanity. It encouraged loyalty to the king and the state.”

Although more research is needed on the wider significance of clemency measures, similar trends are observable across time and space. As custodial sentences became increasingly common, the early release of prisoners became an important mechanism of mercy. Typically, large-scale releases have been used to try and foster a more positive image of the government or cultivate a sense of unity (Bruce-Lockhart, 2020). They have often occurred during important holidays, such as Bastille Day in France (Lévy, 2007), or to mark the New Year in Myanmar (Gaborit and Jefferson, 2019). Other releases have been enacted to honour-specific milestones. Following the Allied victory in World War II, for example, Josef Stalin reportedly freed over 600,000 prisoners from the Gulag (Alexopoulos, 2005: 278). In 1979, over 20,000 prisoners were released in the German Democratic Republic to mark its 30th anniversary (Palenberg, 1983: 369). Releases have also been prompted by more practical considerations, such as the need to relieve overcrowding or in the wake of health crises, as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic (Marland et al., 2020).

In contrast to the extensive literature on clemency measures related to the death penalty, the early release of prisoners is not as closely studied. This is particularly true in terms of the Global South. Although both colonial and postcolonial governments selectively and strategically freed prisoners for a variety of purposes, there is very little comprehensive analysis of when, where, how, and why this was enacted. More research is therefore needed to better understand the uses of prisoner releases in the Global South and the Global North.

**Historical context: prisons in Uganda**

The history of prisons in Uganda – and much of the Global South – is deeply tied to colonialism. Following the “birth” of the prison in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, prisons spread across the globe as a tool of colonial coercion (Foucault, 1995; Dikötter and Brown, 2007; Gibson, 2011). In Uganda, like much of the African continent, prisons were forcibly introduced through colonial rule (Bernault, 2003; Balakrishnan, 2020). The first prisons were built in
the 1890s, and, by the 1930s, there were approximately 300 penal institutions spread across three prison services (Read, 1969: 108). The majority of these were smaller “lock-ups,” jails, and prisons run by local government authorities. Buganda Kingdom, which was the most powerful kingdom prior to colonization, also ran prisons. The central government had the Uganda Prisons Service (UPS), which managed all those with long-term sentences as well as prisoners categorized as “White” or “Asian,” reflecting the racist hierarchies created by the colonial state. Despite their association with colonial repression, prisons remained a central pillar of the penal system following independence (Bruce-Lockhart, 2018). The system became increasingly centralized in the postcolonial period and now exists solely under the Uganda Prisons Service (Martin, 2013: 77).

Clear information about the prisoner population in the postcolonial period is not always available. In part, this is because the way that governments recorded the data was inconsistent and also because some annual prison reports are missing from the archives.1 Furthermore, the available information usually only reflects the number of prisoners held in central government prisons, as opposed to local government prisons, those run by the Buganda Kingdom government, or informal detention sites. What is clear, however, is that Uganda’s leaders used imprisonment and detention without trial extensively, and selectively turned to clemency measures to try to generate a more positive image of their administrations.

The Obote I years (1966–1971)

The initial wave of releases in Uganda occurred during the first presidency of Milton Obote. He was initially appointed as Uganda’s prime minister after independence, while Sir Edward Mutesa – the kabaka or king of Buganda – was the president. Tensions between these leaders grew following independence, culminating in Obote’s violent overthrow of Mutesa in 1966. Obote then passed a new constitution, consolidating all executive powers into the hands of the president – a position he now held – and abolishing the kingdoms (Kasozi, 1994: 84). He also declared a state of emergency in Buganda, drawing on a mechanism frequently used by colonial authorities. Additionally, Obote ordered Amin, the leader of the army at the time, to attack the kabaka’s palace in Mengo, which resulted in many deaths and the fleeing of Mutesa into exile (Reid, 2017: 323–324). Once in power, Obote passed the Public Order and Security Act in 1967 (The Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Violations of Human Rights, 1994: 116). This enabled the “preventative detention and the imposition of restrictions on the movement of persons in the interests of public order, public security and defence” (The Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Violations of Human Rights, 1994: 116). Consequently, any person deemed a threat to public order could be detained without trial. This act had colonial roots, as it drew heavily from the discourse of the Deportation Act used by the British in Uganda (The Report of the Commission of Inquiry, 1994: 117).

One consequence of Obote’s repressive policies was the steady increase in the prison population. As mentioned earlier, there is a lack of accurate data about the number of prisoners from year to year, but the available material shows a general upward trend. At the end of 1963, a total of 9539 prisoners were reportedly being held in central government prisons (Uganda Prisons Service Annual Report, 1963). Although the population rose in 1964 and 1965, it jumped by over 25% between 1965 and 1966 (Uganda Prisons Service Annual Report, 1964, 1965, 1966). Based on the available data, it is possible that Uganda’s central government prisons held over 20,000 prisoners by 1968, with many more in other carceral sites (Uganda Prisons Service Annual Report, 1968).
Over the course of Obote’s first presidency, at least eight large-scale releases of prisoners and detainees occurred. In total, nearly 7000 individuals were reportedly freed, with the largest single release involving nearly 4000 people. These releases are notable for their variety in terms of scale, personnel, and visibility. Obote did not have many precedents to draw on when enacting these releases. There are only two recorded instances of prisoners being granted early release during British rule: in 1925, 12 prisoners were freed in honour of the Duke of York’s visit to Uganda (Tremlett, 1926: 15), and, 30 years later, the Buganda Kingdom government released prisoners to honour the return of the kabaka from exile (The Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Disturbances in the Kabaka’s Government Prison at Mengo, 1956). The Obote I government’s regular use of this mechanism was thus unprecedented in the Ugandan context.

Obote’s first direct involvement with clemency measures had occurred during Mutesa’s presidency. As part of the celebrations for Uganda’s independence, the government had announced the release of all prisoners sentenced for “offenses arising from political affairs” (Uganda Argus, 6 October 1962: 1). Reports vary, but between 2500 to approximately 3500 individuals were released (Uganda Prisons Service Annual Report, 1962). Many had been involved in anti-colonial resistance, making this act of clemency deeply symbolic. Although the remainder of Uganda’s incarcerated population stayed behind bars, a significant number were granted remission on their sentences. Speaking about the releases, Obote urged the former prisoners to seize the opportunities presented by their newfound freedom. “I very much hope that this generosity on the part of the new Government will encourage prisoners when released to be of good behaviour and to help the Government and the people of the new Uganda,” he remarked. “When prisoners are released they should work hard to assist in the maintenance of law and order, without which our country will not go forward.” (Uganda Argus, 6 October 1962: 1).

Once he became president, Obote began using clemency measures more regularly. On 15 July 1967, Obote’s government announced the release of 123 Baganda detainees who had been incarcerated under the state of emergency (Uganda Argus, 15 July 1967: 1). According to the Uganda Argus – the official newspaper at the time – “scores of relatives and friends were at the prison gates as the detainees came out” and there was “jubilation as people met up with their families again” (17 July 1967: 3). The media portrayed the release as a gesture of reconciliation: relations between the Baganda and Obote had, unsurprisingly, become very hostile following Obote’s decision to abolish the kingdoms and the army’s attack on the kabaka’s palace, but the Argus suggested that this release symbolized how “progress had been made in restoring emergency conditions to normal in Buganda, and that the end of the emergency was in sight” (17 July 1967: 3). This coverage – and the release itself – was thus highly strategic, designed to improve relationships damaged during the state of emergency. The release, however, had a limited tangible impact, as the Obote government continued to renew the emergency regulations and use detention without trial widely.

Building on this momentum, the government announced a larger scale release on 22 July 1967, which it termed “Freedom Day.” In total, 2954 prisoners were freed, and, unlike the previous release, they had all been convicted of criminal offences (Uganda Argus, 22 July 1967: 1; Uganda Prisons Service Annual Report 1967). In keeping with clemency patterns in other times and places, the government focused on individuals deemed to be non-threatening, including those who had violated traffic ordinances and local by-laws; were considered chronically ill, “crippled,” or displayed “advanced senility”; and long-term prisoners who were due for release within six months. In contrast, “habitual criminals”; those charged with “offences against the public order”; and those convicted of robbery, assault against police or prison officers, or arson...
were excluded (Uganda Argus, 22 July 1967: 1). Such fault lines further underscored the president’s power over an individual’s freedom. According to the Argus, Obote “directed” prison staff to “make it abundantly clear” to those released that “the President himself has considered each particular prisoner’s case individually” (22 July 1967: 1). Obote thus sought to emphasize his power over their fate, while also trying to highlight his generosity. Finally, much like in the Independence Day release, Obote used this opportunity to encourage the newly freed prisoners to be good citizens and participate in nation-building. He beseeched them to “lead honourable, trouble-free lives” and, more threateningly, reminded them that they should “refrain from doing anything that may be against the interest of society” (Uganda Argus, 22 July 1967: 1).

The most intense period of releases under the Obote I government occurred in 1969, with a total of five reported. These involved many different groups, including prominent political detainees, convicted prisoners, and detainees from other nations. The first release occurred on 1 January 1969, when a total of 3595 prisoners were freed (Uganda Prisons Service Annual Report, 1969). The UPS reported that Obote had “granted a Special Amnesty to certain categories of prisoners” that year (Annual Report, 1969). Although no specific details or explanation are provided, the report mentioned a “steady rise in the prison population over the last few years” and the consequent “serious overcrowding” within Uganda’s prisons, making this the likely motivation behind the release (Uganda Prisons Service Annual Report, 1969).

In March of that year, 25 prisoners were released. This group included Rajat Neogy, the founder of literary magazine Transition and arguably the country’s most famous political detainee, as well as individuals who had been tried for treason. In what became known as the “Transition Affair,” Neogy and Abu Mayanja – a lawyer and former minister who contributed to Transition – were arrested on charges of sedition (Tabire, 2007: 194; Neogy, 1997). In response, Ugandans, foreign governments, and international civil society organizations such as Amnesty International condemned the arrests (1968: 3–4). Neogy’s release in March was the second time he’d been freed: he had been briefly let go following his acquittal on 1 February of that year, but he, along with Mayanja, had been immediately re-detained under emergency regulations – a phenomenon that was not uncommon at this time (Tabire, 2007: 196). Although Neogy’s release in March resulted in his freedom, Mayanja remained in detention (Lapček-Neogy, “A Matter of Transition,” 46).

Three other releases occurred in 1969: two involving foreign detainees, and one with supporters of the Democratic Party, a leading opposition party in Uganda. In June, one Belgian and over 70 Africans from multiple nations, primarily in West Africa, were arrested in Kampala. Most of them were initially released in August, along with some Ugandan prisoners. However, many were rearrested several days later and were then subsequently deported, while an additional 15 were released in September. Both this and Neogy’s case illustrate how releases were often temporary measures that could lead to other punitive actions, such as deportation or rearrest. Later that year, in October 1969, 51 detainees – mostly from the Democratic Party – held under emergency regulations were given their freedom. This group had been arrested around the same time as Benedicto Kiwanuka, the leader of the party, who remained in prison until Amin’s coup. This was followed nearly a year later by the release of 27 detainees from Luzira Prison, including Abu Mayanja, who had been detained with Neogy (Uganda Argus, 19 August 1970: 1).

When observed together, the releases carried out by the Obote I government are notable for their variety. Some involved smaller groups of political detainees, while the largest scale release focused on thousands of convicted prisoners. There were multiple motivations for the releases, such as external pressure, overcrowding, or the desire to relieve internal tension. Despite this range, these acts are connected in several ways. First, they represented a departure from the colonial
period, a time in which releases had been extremely rare. In this way, Obote’s actions made this act a familiar political mechanism, one that his successors would readily employ. Second, while framed by Obote as an act of benevolence, these clemency measures underscored the growing centralization of the president’s power. Obote had expanded his government’s ability to arrest and release political opponents at will, without fear of constitutional checks or judicial interference. The widespread use of detention without trial, however, came at a significant political cost, contributing to the rising tide of opposition towards his regime and, ultimately, its downfall.

**The Amin years (1971–1979)**

Once he took power through the coup in January 1971, Amin strategically positioned himself as an agent of change. In his “Eighteen Points” justifying the coup, Amin outlined the key grievances against Obote, beginning with “the unwarranted detention without trial and for long periods of a large number of people, many of whom are totally innocent of any charges” (International Commission of Jurists, 1977: 19). From the outset of his presidency, therefore, Amin sought to leverage the symbolic power of Obote’s detainees, framing their newfound freedom as a metaphor for the entire nation.

However, Amin intensified many of Obote’s repressive tactics and made the military a central force in Ugandan politics. He had been trained by the British in the colonial King’s African Rifles and had risen through the ranks after independence. After the coup, Amin set up paramilitary organizations and began using a wide variety of informal detention sites – including army barracks, government buildings, and residences – to detain, torture, and kill perceived enemies (Decker, 2014). Although Obote had also used paramilitary organizations during his first presidency, he had not used informal detention sites, instead putting detainees in government prisons. Amin also issued numerous decrees enabling detention without trial and criminalized many aspects of everyday life (Decker, 2014).

Due to a lack of archival material, it is very difficult to track the prisoner population during Amin’s presidency. The Prisons Service’s annual report for 1974 suggests that approximately 10,000 prisoners were held in central government prisons that year, but there are limited data available for the rest of Amin’s time in office Uganda Prisons Service Annual Report on the Treatment of Offenders for 1974. What emerges more clearly from official documents are discussions about a decline in the prison population. Although this narrative was likely partially motivated by a desire to portray the Amin state in a positive light, it appears that the prison population did decrease at times in the 1970s. This can be primarily explained by the Amin state’s widespread use of extra-judicial killings and detention in “safe houses.” The apparent decline in the prison population was therefore not a sign of reduced government repression, but rather a shift to even more violent methods of punishment.

During Amin’s presidency, there were at least ten events honouring the release of prisoners and detainees. Approximately 4700 individuals were freed throughout his time in office. Most of these events took place in his first year in power. From January 1971 to January 1972, there were at least seven major occasions marking the release of detainees and prisoners, many of which took place in high-profile public spaces in Kampala and had significant media coverage. These took a variety of forms – including the freeing of individuals, group releases, and generalized celebrations – and occurred in a range of venues, from stadiums to places of worship. Although some convicted prisoners were released, Amin focused mostly on Obote’s detainees. By emphasizing this group, Amin sought to position himself as undoing the harm of his predecessor.
As mentioned at the outset of this article, the first release under Amin took place just days after he had become president and included 55 high-profile detainees. Both the local and international media provided extensive coverage of this event. Film footage from the Associated Press showed thousands of people cheering and embracing one another as the detainees were freed (28 January 1971). Adopting an optimistic tone that was characteristic of much of the media coverage, one Guardian reporter commented: “All Obote’s main political opponents are now free and Uganda is only a step away from a return to free elections and multi-party democracy” (Fairhall, 29 January 1971: 1). The Argus offered a similarly hopeful message, with one author arguing that the detainees’ release was “concrete proof” of the new atmosphere of “love, brotherhood, and unity” in Uganda since the coup. “Many thousands of people turned out yesterday at Kololo Airstrip not only to welcome back their relatives and friends,” the article continued, “but also to celebrate what they saw as the beginning of a new freedom for themselves too.” The Argus also featured numerous interviews with the ex-detainees. George Magezi, a former minister, used this opportunity to condemn the “period of terror and treachery under Obote’s diabolical rule” (Uganda Argus, 17 February 1971: 6). Amos Sempa, another former minister, declared that he was “quite innocent” of any crime, while his wife thanked Amin “for the salvation he has brought to the peace-loving people of Uganda and our family” (Nyombi and Nsubuga, Uganda Argus, 9 February 1971:1). Through these articles, the official media thus sought to communicate the significance of the release for the nation, drawing a sharp contrast between Obote and Amin.

Further celebrations honouring the release of Obote’s detainees followed. In early February, a prayer service was held at Rubaga Cathedral – a significant site of Catholic worship – for the ex-detainees. Religious leaders echoed Amin’s messages of unity and renewal, calling him the “saviour of Uganda,” and portraying the release as an act of God, invoking long-standing associations between clemency measures and the divine power of sovereigns. As part of the event, Reverend Nsubuga urged the public “keep peace and order” and to “forgive all people who had offended them or the nation,” echoing Amin’s messages of unity (Uganda Argus, 1 February 1971: 3). In what had by now become a familiar refrain, the Argus reported that “thousands of jubilant people” showed up to witness this ceremony.

About a month later, Amin declared 7 March to be “Detainees Day,” echoing Obote’s celebration of “Freedom Day” several years prior (Uganda Argus, 8 March 1971: 9). This began with prayers across the country and was followed by a parade, a march to Nakivubo Stadium, a ceremony, and a football game. Fourteen groups of prisoners were featured in the parade, including some of Obote’s former ministers whom he had detained in response to divisions within his party; members of Buganda’s royal family; prison, police, and army officers; local government officials; and members of the professional classes. This staging was highly strategic, likely meant to demonstrate to the public the wide range of Ugandans who had been detained by Obote. The Argus emphasized how Ugandans from “all corners” of the country had come to Kampala to witness the event and noted that the stadium could not fit all the ex-detainees’ well-wishers. In the ceremony, the ex-detainees echoed this sense of togetherness, remarking that they had gathered to “pledge our loyalty” to Amin. In contrast, they “accused Dr Obote of building a totalitarian state” (Uganda Argus, 8 March 1971: 9). That night, a dinner was held at the prestigious Apollo Hotel in downtown Kampala. It was hosted by the Detainees’ Association, which had been formed in the aftermath of the coup.8 Benedicto Kiwanuka, the leader of the Democratic Party who had been released by Amin in January, spoke on behalf of the ex-detainees. “To some of us who were still in the prison,” he said, “and who, as we knew, had been condemned to die there, the fall of Obote and subsequent order for our release from detention by Your Excellency meant real
resurrection” (Uganda Argus, 9 March 1971: 3). This event was thus not only staged as an occasion to celebrate the freedom of Obote’s former detainees but also to bring together many of the messages that had been circulating at previous clemency ceremonies, including an emphasis on national unity, the condemnation of Obote, and the positioning of Amin as an agent of rebirth.

Although the release of prominent detainees had obvious utility for Amin, he also freed convicted prisoners during his first year in power. In February of 1971, Amin announced that his government would be granting “absolute amnesty” to 1509 prisoners charged with criminal offences held in UPS and local government prisons (Uganda Argus, 27 February 1971: 1).9 As had been the case under Obote, this group included prisoners deemed to be relatively safe to release, including those who were categorized as “chronically sick,” “vagrants,” and those imprisoned for “common assault” or “nuisance and offences against public health.”10 The archival information available permits a more detailed look at the mechanics of this release: district commissioners were instructed to provide a “statistical analysis of prisoners’ populations” in their respective areas, medical reports were required for anyone who was going to be released on “compassionate and humanitarian grounds,” and the officers-in-charge of each prison were informed that they would be “held personally responsible” for releasing the “correct categories of prisoners.”11 In the media coverage, the Argus underscored Amin’s personal involvement in the process, reporting that he had “considered their cases individually on merits.” In the press, Amin yet again encouraged them to be good citizens, expressing his “full confidence” that they “will return to their homes and live honourable and law-abiding lives” (Uganda Argus, 27 February, 1971: 1).

Following this intense period of activity, there were no new releases until the following year. Three thousand prisoners were reportedly freed in January 1972 to honour the first anniversary of Amin’s coup. Of those released, about half were reportedly from UPS prisons and the rest from local government prisons. Amin also proclaimed to have released prisoners from “Military Detention Camps,” which held former members of the military who had opposed his coup (Uganda Argus, 19 January 1972: 1). This was therefore one of the few releases involving those held outside of UPS prisons. It was also the first to include individuals who had been incarcerated by Amin’s government, and thus marked a turning point in the tactics behind such clemency measures.

Coverage of the January 1972 release included familiar rhetoric. The Argus discussed the “jubilant relatives” who met the former prisoners as they “walked out of the prison to breathe the air of freedom” (19 January 1972: 1). Some of the newly released individuals expressed their “sincere appreciation” to Amin and “pledged” their loyalty to him (Uganda Argus, 19 January 1972: 1). The Argus characterized Amin’s actions as an “unprecedented gesture of supreme magnanimity” and emphasized that “there has not been any stronger action that could have been more effective in showing these people very poignantly that they can trust the humanity of their government, than this one” (19 January 1972: 4). Amin’s messaging also borrowed from past narratives, stating that “only way the former prisoners could thank him for his pardon was by their actions” (Uganda Argus, 19 January 1972: 1). To do this, he “advised them to be of good character by not repeating their past crimes, and by rehabilitating themselves as quickly as possible into the mainstream of society as useful citizens working hand in hand with others in the development of Uganda” (Uganda Argus, 19 January 1972: 1). This discourse of development was particularly significant in 1972, as Amin was launching his “economic war,” which would entail significant state persecution and repression, including the expulsion of Uganda’s South Asian population (Decker, 2013; Hundle, 2013, 2018).
Although Amin had freed thousands of detainees and prisoners during his first year in power, fewer than 50 were released in the remaining seven years of his presidency. In part, this imbalance can be explained by Amin’s tactical use of releases to position himself as undoing the harm caused by Obote. Once Obote’s detainees had been let go, only those incarcerated by Amin remained, whose very presence drew attention to his government’s repression. Another key reason for this change, however, is the Amin regime’s widespread use of informal detention. Many individuals who would have been detained during the Obote I years never made it to prison in the 1970s, as they were tortured and killed in “safe houses” such as Nakasero State Research Centre and Makindye Military Prison.

Other issues are also apparent with Amin’s releases. Former members of UPS and the military suggested that many of those freed during Amin’s presidency were “informers” who would pass on information about prisoners and prison officers to the regime (Interview with John Pancras Orau, Charles, and Martin, 12 August 2016).12 Furthermore, some of those released ended up back in prison or were killed by the government. Following his release after Amin’s coup, for example, Benedicto Kiwanuka became Uganda’s Chief Justice but was taken from the High Court in 1972 and murdered by paramilitary agents (The Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Violations of Human Rights, 1994: 151). This continued repression and violence undermined the celebratory rhetoric of the state, demonstrating the limits of these releases and showing how the freedom granted to former prisoners and detainees was often tenuous.

The post-Amin period (1979–1986)

Amin was overthrown in April of 1979 following an unsuccessful war against Tanzania. Subsequently, Uganda had a series of short-lived governments. Yusuf Lule, Godfrey Lukongwa Binaisa, and a military commission under the leadership of Paulo Muwanga each held power for several months before Obote became president again after a disputed election in December 1980. The Obote II years were marked by significant state violence, much like the late 1960s and 1970s (Kasozi, 1994: 145). Uganda was in a state of civil war for most of this period, and Obote used this as a justification for the intensification of authoritarian measures. He reintroduced the Public Order and Security Act; detained former members of Amin’s army en masse; turned to his predecessor’s strategy of using “safe houses” for punishing perceived enemies; and ordered the internment of civilians displaced by the war into camps, where they faced horrible living conditions and violence. In July 1985, Obote was yet again overthrown by a military coup, and Lieutenant General Tito Okello Lutwa was briefly in power, followed by Museveni.

During this period, Uganda’s leaders continued to release prisoners and detainees to mark political transitions, distance themselves from previous presidents, and seek to improve their image. Based on the available material, over 10,000 individuals were freed in this time. The total prisoner population during this time is unclear, as very few government reports exist from this period of warfare and political upheaval.

Before discussing the releases under the post-Amin administrations in depth, it is important to note that the Tanzanian People’s Defence Force (TPDF) released prisoners in large numbers as they advanced on Kampala. Interviewees suggested a range of motivations for this action. Some indicated that the TPDF was primarily interested in obtaining ammunition or gaining new recruits to support the fight against Amin (Interviews with William, 22 August 2016; Isaac, 3 June 2019), while others suggested that the Tanzanians considered all prisoners to be “Amin’s hostages” (Interview with John Pancras Orau, 12 August 2016). Whatever the reason, existing evidence
suggests that the TPDF completely emptied many prisons. Reporting just days after the takeover of Kampala, a journalist for the *Uganda Times* – the new official newspaper – wrote: “The Commissioner of Prisons, Mr George Ssentamu revealed that there is not a single prisoner in the Uganda Prisons at the moment” (Lubwama and Jengo, 28 April 1979: 1). Similarly, retired prison staff recalled finding completely empty prisons after they returned to work following the war (Interviews with Luke, 28 April 2016; Patrick, 28 July 2016; Benjamin, 29 July 2016). Although these mass releases were very different from those initiated by the government, they underscore how prisons were highly politicized spaces – a situation that was heightened in the context of war – and prisoners’ freedom was continuously leveraged for strategic purposes.13

Despite the large-scale releases of prisoners during the war, Uganda’s prisons soon filled up again as the new leaders reckoned with the atrocities of the Amin years. The primary target for retribution was members of the military. Wary of potential reprisals, many fled into exile, but others believed the government’s promise that they would be redepolyed (Orau, 2013: loc 206). Instead, those who remained in Uganda were detained en masse. Former soldier John Pancras Orau, who was amongst those detained, estimates that over 6000 ex-soldiers were held – a number that broadly reflects the figures provided in archival records (Orau, 2013: loc. 106). They were primarily based in the Luzira prison complex in Kampala, as well as Kirinya Prison and Mbale Prison in eastern Uganda.14 (“The Break Down of the Detainees Released,” 10 August 1981). They were not formally charged with a specific crime but were instead held due to their association with the Amin regime.

By August, when the first release took place, Yusuf Lule had already been replaced by Godfrey Binaisa. Following the practice of his predecessors, Binaisa freed prisoners and detainees to distinguish himself from previous presidents, presenting these acts as a vehicle for renewal in the wake of war and military rule. In December of 1979, for example, a thousand prisoners and detainees were reportedly freed just in advance of Christmas. The media emphasized the significance of the timing, calling the release a “XMAS GIFT” and noting that the freed individuals could now “join their families for Christmas” (Ekimwere, Uganda Times, 22 December 1979, p.1). This release thus followed past practices of enacting clemency measures during holidays or national days of significance, and was framed as a gesture of the government's goodwill. Speaking about the release, the Minister of Internal Affairs Paulo Muwanga, urged those who had been freed to “go back to your village and join hands with the government in the enormous task of reconstruction and rehabilitation.” Echoing Amin and Obote’s rhetoric, he called upon them to be “good citizens” with “clean intentions” and warned them that their freedom was contingent on good behaviour: “Remember why we have freed you…if you go back and get stubborn, you will be dealt with accordingly” (Ekimwere, Uganda Times, 22 December 1979: 1). Thus, despite seeking to create a perception of distance from Amin, the Binaisa government reiterated some of his core messages.

When Obote returned to power in December 1980, he continued the process of releasing Amin’s former soldiers, but also freed politicians, prisoners serving short-term sentences, and first offenders. During the Obote II years, there were seven recorded releases involving 4500 prisoners and detainees. Amin’s former soldiers were the focus early on. In July of 1981, for example, 1425 ex-soldiers were reportedly released. The government urged them to contribute to Uganda’s rebuilding and become productive citizens. “The UPC government believes in reconciliation,” the Minister of Internal Affairs proclaimed, “We know that in order for the country to be reconstructed every Ugandan must have a part to play.” As part of this, the Minister urged the ex-prisoners to “go and grow food,” and “have a sense of hard work” while avoiding all “lawless activities” (Nakendo, Uganda Times, 27 July 1981: 1). Orau, who was among those
released in July, wrote in his memoir about the feelings of “excitement” and anticipation as he and his fellow detainees prepared themselves for their release (Orau, 2013, loc. 2847). Recalling their final day in Luzira Maximum Security Prison, where many of the ex-soldiers were held, Orau described how they “decked ourselves out in our finest clothes and stepped out of the miserable cells for the last time” (loc. 2848) (Figure 1).

The next round of releases occurred in 1982. On 1 January, a front-page story in the Uganda Times read: “Prisoners are pardoned – President reaffirms policy of reconciliation” (1982: 1). Obote released 35 prisoners to mark the New Year, some of whom were “notable politicians,” including members of the opposition (Uganda Times, 19 January 1982: 1; Ojulu and Serwanga, Uganda Times, 2 January 1982: 1). Announcing the release, Obote again situated his decision within his government’s wider emphasis on reconciliation: “During the past year,” he said, “[the] Government pronounced policies designed to uplift society from the depths of social and economic ruin over the past ten years…[the] Government starts 1982 with a renewed call for reconciliation as a pillar of national unity. In this spirit, I have today with the advice of cabinet, exercised the Presidential Prerogative of Mercy as provided for in the constitution” (Uganda Times, 1 January 1982: 1). In this speech, Obote’s rhetoric echoed that of Amin: he contrasted his government’s

![Figure 1. Crowds gather to greet released prisoners – “Release of Prisoners at Luzira,” August 1981, Uganda Broadcasting Corporation, 7390-007. Note: The official caption of this photo has a date of August 1981, but is likely depicting the release on 27 July 1981 mentioned in this article.](image-url)
approach with the repressive policies of previous presidents and used the release to renew calls for nation-building. Obote also emphasized the constitutionality of his actions, outlining his consultation with the cabinet and his use of the prerogative of mercy – a way of differentiating himself from Amin, who largely ruled by decree. This sense of rupture was echoed in an article in the Uganda Times, where the author framed the release as “yet another manifestation of the government’s commitment towards the policy of reconciliation,” one that had emerged “as a result of a fractured historical past which our nation has passed through.” “In essence,” it continued, “this policy is an attempt to bring Ugandans towards the realisation of the noble goal of national unity” (Uganda Times, 19 January 1982: 4).

Although many aspects of these releases followed long-standing patterns, there were also some unique elements. In the case of the former soldiers, there was a degree of public vetting. At times, this played out in the media. In November of 1979, for example, the Uganda Times featured a letter to the editor entitled “It’s too early to free ‘Amin’s men,’” in which the author warned that “not all of these men are of clean records” and recommended that they not be released at this time (16 November 1979: 5). This is one of the few examples of resistance to the releases that show up in the government media. Members of the public could also weigh in through a screening process managed by the government, stating whether they would accept a former soldier back into their community. In some cases, the response was very positive. In March of 1982, for example, government officials from the Kabale area in southwestern Uganda reported that “The people of this Branch wish to hereby express their satisfaction that they never had any problem with the named persons… the people of Nyabushabi look forward positively to the day when the said ex-soldiers shall rejoin their families, friends and the community at large.”15 In other cases, however, the ex-soldiers’ presence was not welcome. One community member wrote to officials to report a former soldier who had avoided incarceration. “I have been surprised to see him comfortably while others are in prison,” the anonymous author proclaimed, providing specific instructions about the ex-soldier’s appearance and residence so that he could be arrested.16 Such varied responses speak to a side of the story that is not well-documented in existing sources: the degree to which former detainees and prisoners were welcomed into their communities after they were freed.

Obote’s government continued to enact releases throughout the remainder of his second presidency. In August of 1982, for example, 1166 individuals were “granted amnesty.” Reporting on the release, the Uganda Times noted that the act “demonstrates government principles of upholding human rights in a country that had the worst human rights record during the regime of murder and terror” – a reference to the Amin years. The article claimed that the freed prisoners “looked well fed, a fact dispelling allegations of starvation and mistreatment,” and insisted that “stories of human rights violation[s] in Uganda, are much less real today than ever before” (Uganda Times, 31 August 1982: 4). The defensive tone of this coverage can in part be explained by the growing criticisms of Obote’s government both locally – including by opposition media such as Munnansi, the paper of the Democratic Party – and internationally, especially from civil society organizations such as Amnesty International.

Obote’s government was overthrown yet again through a military coup in July 1985. General Tito Okello Lutwa was briefly in power, only to be overthrown by Museveni. Like Amin and Obote before him, Lutwa marked the beginning of his presidency with a mass release of prisoners: on 10 August 1985, over 1200 were released. According to the Los Angeles Times, the freed prisoners included “guerrillas who fought the Obote government” and some of Amin’s “top aides.” As had occurred just after the Amin coup, the newly freed prisoners were transported to Kampala for a
“ceremony in a downtown square packed with a cheering throng estimated at 70,000” (Los Angeles Times, 11 August 1985: A15). By releasing prisoners en masse, Okello’s short-lived government thus turned to a mechanism that, by this point, was a familiar aspect of public life and politics in Uganda.

**Conclusion**

In the decades following independence, the release of prisoners and detainees became a significant feature of Uganda’s postcolonial political landscape. Many of Uganda’s presidents released incarcerated individuals in large numbers. These acts had a recursive quality, as leaders learned from the actions and discourses of those who were in power before them, while also seeking to demonstrate their distance from the repressive ways of the past. The events served multiple functions, providing leaders with a public platform to showcase their power, communicate their agendas, and enact a politics of rupture. Their messages were refracted and disseminated through the official media, which proclaimed the government’s goodwill and amplified calls for nation-building. In this coverage, aspects of the state’s carceral power were made visible, while others were deliberately hidden from view. Images of euphoric crowds and smiling former prisoners and detainees belied the violent realities of punishment in postcolonial Uganda. For many Ugandans, especially those who had been incarcerated or had loved ones put behind bars, such coverage was a chimera. While these releases were portrayed as important moments of collective freedom and national progress, they ultimately reinforced the repressive and arbitrary power of the president - a trend seen with prisoner releases throughout history. (Gaborit and Jefferson, 2019). Throughout these decades, Ugandans were being imprisoned, detained, and killed by their government at a far greater rate than they were being released. Even this granting of freedom was precarious, as some of those released were later incarcerated again or killed by state agents.

The history of prison releases in postcolonial Uganda speaks to broader trends in the use of clemency measures worldwide. From medieval monarchs to the Trump administration in the United States, governments tend to enact releases when it is politically advantageous to do so. Furthermore, such releases, even when they occur on a large scale, primarily affect individuals rather than systems. Although often of great benefit to those released, it is important to reckon with the limits of these clemency measures in terms of driving transformative change. Such issues are strikingly apparent in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many activists, scholars, and public health experts have insisted that the releases enacted thus far are insufficient, calling on governments to implement further decarceration and diversion measures, as well as the abolition of prisons altogether (Macmadu et al., 2020; King, Cormack, and Keenan, 2020; American Public Health Association, 2020; Jonas, CBC, 2021). Whether in the contemporary or historical context, it is important to critically analyze the use of clemency measures, challenging the celebratory rhetoric of the state and situating these acts within the wider systems of coercive power that they too often sustain rather than disrupt.

**Declaration of conflicting interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.
Acknowledgement
Thank you to the editors at Incarceration, the anonymous reviewers, and to those who provided feedback on this work at the African Studies Association Annual Meeting in 2020 and the Warwick Global History of Africa Seminar. Thank you also to those who shared their stories through interviews and to the staff in the Africana Section at Makerere University Library and at the other archives where research was conducted.

Funding
Gates Cambridge Scholarship and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Notes
1. It is not entirely clear why these reports are missing, but they may have been lost or destroyed during the Uganda-Tanzania War in 1978-79, during which time the Prisons Service headquarters were attacked.
2. United Kingdom National Archives (UKNA) Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) 31/474, WE Stober to G Peaston, “Detainees,” 28 March, 1969.
3. UKNA FCO 31/474, “Uganda sets 98 detainees free,” Daily Telegraph, 9 August, 1969.
4. Ibid.
5. UKNA FCO 31/474, Kampala Telegraph No.4 to Bathurst, 13 August, 1969; UKNA FCO 31/474, “Uganda frees 15 and orders deportation,” Daily Telegraph, 2 September, 1969.
6. UKNA FCO 31/474, DJ White to P Seymour, “Release of Detainees,” 4 November, 1969.
7. UKNA FCO 31/474, DJ White to RM Purcell, “Arrest of Democratic Party Leader,” 26 September, 1969.
8. Africana Collection, Makerere University, AF PSF 329.96761 D 54, Speech by B.K.M. Kiwanuka, Esq., 1st Prime Minister of Uganda on Behalf of the Ex-Detainees at their Dinner Held at the Apollo Hotel, Kampala, 7th March, 1971.
9. Kabarole District Archives, DW Kaliba for Permanent Secretary, Local Administration Division, Ministry of Public Service and Local Administration to All District Commissioners, “Grant of Absolute Amnesty to certain categories of Prisoners by His Excellency, the Military Head of State, Head of Government, and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, Major General Idi Amin Dada,” 12 February 12, 1971.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Pseudonyms have been used for interviewees to protect their privacy, except for those who are public figures or have published consent for their names to be used.
13. Prisoners have often been released by opposition forces during times of war, political upheaval, or revolution. See for example: Clare Anderson, The Indian Uprising of 1857-8: Prisons, Prisoners and Rebellion (London: Anthem Press, 2007); Nikolaus Wachsmann, Hitler’s Prisons: Legal Terror in Nazi Germany (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 36; Steve Riley, “Sierra Leone: The Militariat Strikes Again,” Review of African Political Economy 24:2 (1997): 289.
14. Kabale District Archives (KDA) JLOS 23, “The Break Down of the Detainees Released from Jinja (M), Jinja (R), Upper, Murchison Bay and Luzira (w) Prisons By Regions and Districts,” August 10, 1981.
15. KDA JLOS 23 S Byarubaga, Chairman, UPC Nyabubshabi Branch, District Councillor for Kyanamira to the District Commissioner, Kabale, “Re: Detained Ex-Amin Soldiers,” March 27, 1972.
16. KDA JLOS 23, Observers to DC South Kigezi, “Re: Security,” August 1, 1979.
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