

Etyang on NRM service,

When the NRM government took power, Paul Etyang Orono was working as a diplomat with the United Nations in New York. It is at this time that the NRA government appointed him a minister of co-operation in 1988. He took a hard decision to leave his family behind so as to rebuild the country that was in a shambles. His major contribution is undoubtedly the liberalisation of the media in the early 1990s. He told PRISCA BAIKE about his service to the NRM government.

Why did President Yoweri Museveni appoint you minister?

When NRM took power, they came up with an idea of having a government of national reconciliation by appointing ministers on a regional basis. They needed people who knew how to manage government affairs.

The policy at that time was to pick ministers on the basis of experience and from Tororo, I was the only one who met their needs. I had just been given a good post in the UN and was slated to move to Nigeria as the Resident Representative of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) when the appointment as a minister of regional co-operation came.

Also, as a student at Makerere University, *Independence now* was the song we had at the time. We had a very anti-colonial stance and it was partly because of that commitment that several years later, I was given the position in Museveni's government.

How did you react to the appointment?

It was not easy to return with family to Uganda, having left the country safely, especially since I had hardly settled in New York.

My wife and children rebelled against me. We were previously under government scrutiny because of my wife, Zahara Etyang, who is a Tanzanian. They thought that being married to a Tanzanian woman, I would bring a lot of problems between Amin and Nyerere since Tanzania was at war with Uganda.

I left my family in London and came back to Uganda. I had to come back because I did not want to be misunderstood for refusing to serve in the new government.

I was asked to help the Government stabilise and eventually go back to my post in New York. But when I came back here, I found so many challenges.

The UN, at that time, gave me two years to sort out issues back home, but by the time they ended I was still embroiled in government work.

What was your role then?

As the minister of regional co-operation, I was in charge of all East African matters in the country. The economy was in a shambles at that time and coming from the border in Tororo, my role was to encourage everyone to give the new government a chance to stabilise the country.

I played the role of a diplomat in the context of the East African



(Left-right) Former minister Paul Etyang, foreign affairs minister Sam Kutesa, the then Kenya High Commissioner to Uganda Gen. Geoffrey Okanga and permanent secretary Ambassador James Mugume during the launch of the national 50th anniversary celebrations of the African Union at Kampala Serena Hotel in 2013

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was under state capture. How did that work out for you, especially in your struggle to liberalise the media?

The information sector was just a department of the Government.

At that time, no one could imagine that a private radio could come up. That was alien to most people.

It fell on me to organise a move to liberalise the information sector and pave way for freedom of expression.

Between 1990-1991, that was my preoccupation at the ministry of information. I presented a paper to cabinet and that started the debate about the liberalisation of radios.

That must have been a challenging task

Yes. Although some people were excited, there was a lot of objection from many others.

There was a lot of skepticism by some of my colleagues in cabinet. They wondered how we could

Community. The community was still going on in spite of the war between Uganda and Tanzania.

I was not a politician in the sense of wanting to become a minister since I was only appointed. The government needed people like me who had public experience to run the country while they themselves were managing the politics of the country.

At the end of two years, I found that there was no need for me to go back to New York and so I informed the UN that I was unable to return and asked that my name be deleted from the staff list.

You became minister of information at a time the media



Etyang says working with the NRM government has enabled him to influence positive change

possibly have a radio undertaken by an individual.

They feared that individuals could use the radios for political influence. We debated for almost a whole year whether the radios should be liberalised or not. That time helped us explore as to whether it was a bad or good thing. After almost a year, we tried it and the private radios were operationalised.

Why did you feel the need for private radio stations yet we already had a state radio?

A state radio would be

liberalisation of the media

giving you one view without looking at the situation from a different angle.

One cannot have two or more radios sell the same idea so having more radio stations that were private would give us not only different angles to the issues, but they would also offer, to the state, diverse ideas and propel its growth and development. That was the whole essence of liberalisation.

Didn't private radios cause you and the President to clash at some point especially when the content was considered controversial?

Not at all. It was easy for me as the minister in charge to say which position cabinet was taking. The cabinet took a neutral position, but provided a framework within which the radios would be operated and monitored.

As someone who has worked in different governments, tell us what it was like serving in the NRM government

In the colonial government, I was nothing more than a public servant. I was taking orders and executing them rather than a policy maker in the subsequent governments. However, working with the NRM government has been fulfilling. As a policy maker, I was able to influence positive change in the country and that has given me satisfaction.

Has NRM delivered on its promise of peace and prosperity?

That is a difficult question to answer. Initially NRM came to power through a physical struggle so it took them sometime to show results. But I think they have achieved what is seeable. The majority of those in government have got academic knowledge. I have served in all the governments, under each and every president in Uganda starting with the colonial government. So I maintain that despite its shortcomings, NRM has delivered peace and prosperity to Uganda.

What would you like to see change within the NRM government?

I wish the NRM government could encourage intra Uganda relationships in terms of appointments in public office. I think this has been a problem in Uganda ever since independence. As I earlier said, NRM started very well by picking people from all over



Former Managing Director of New Vision, William Pike (centre) and Etyang (left) with other officials looking at a copy of New Vision

the country, but along the way, we somehow slipped back to our nature, practices and tendencies that are very biased. Also while they have maintained the multi-regional representation in cabinet, the cabinet has become too big. They should maintain one minister per portfolio and the rest, as ministers of states, should be assistant ministers.

What is your message to the Ugandans as we mark 33 years of NRM?

Each Ugandan should learn about the parts of Uganda they have not been to. The problem I have come to notice with our county is that people do not know the other parts of the country except where they come from. We are Ugandan citizens by convenience and not by heart. How do we call ourselves Ugandans when we do not know Uganda? It is only when we traverse our country that we shall appreciate each other and nurture within us the spirit of statesmanship.



Gen. Mugisha Muntu (right) of the New Formation being hosted on Bukedde Radio recently



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