When was the last time you went to a really good riot? I mean a proper civic disturbance: big crowds, vandalism, tear gas, live ammunition, casualties, the works. If you have to think about it, stop and ask yourself what it would take to get you into the streets knowing you were risking your life.

Most of us would come up with personal reasons – a threat to the family, perhaps. Some of us would volunteer slightly more impersonal motivations, which are nonetheless hot-button issues, like religion or patriotism. But would you face down police with a reputation for brutality in Chicago because Barack Obama prevented Pat Quinn (he’s the Governor of Illinois) from visiting Rockford?

In Uganda a few weeks ago President Yoweri Museveni forbade Ronald Mutebi, the Kabaka of Buganda, from visiting a small town in Kayunga – a place that doesn’t like him (the Kabaka) very much. The resulting two days of rioting in Kampala, Uganda’s capital, killed twenty-one people and injured around fifteen hundred.

Almost six hundred people were arrested. Fewer than fifty of those have been charged with crimes so far. You may be wondering what all the fuss was about, but Ugandans on all sides of the question are adamant that the riots were significant for national political development, which means they were worth the trouble.

Uganda is a Minnesota-sized country in central Africa. If you find a map of the continent, look for a blotch of blue in the right side of the middle. That’s Nalubaale, what most everyone now calls Lake Victoria. It’s where the Nile river begins. Uganda occupies most of the top half of its shore.

Nearly thirty-three million people live there, which means all those people in Minnesota would have to share land and resources when everyone from Illinois and New Jersey and Virginia moved in to join them.
Before it was called Uganda, the country was a collection of small kingdoms that traded and occasionally fought, but which coexisted more or less efficiently. When the British and the French and the Germans colonized Africa in the late nineteenth century, the British wound up with the northern end of the Nile basin.

They fought and bribed local kings and chiefs into submission or compliance, drew a line around what they controlled in 1900 and called it Uganda. The biggest pre-colonial piece of Uganda was the powerful kingdom of Buganda. It’s leader, the Kabaka, was not always the most powerful king in the area, but his capital at Mengo anchored the new city of Kampala.

The colonial capital at Entebbe was also built on his land, though he ceded title to it in order to create a neutral administrative district, a lot like Washington, DC. When the British completed their subjugation of territories in Uganda, the Kabaka of Buganda and other kings were given special privileges, land and a great deal of money to support the British colonial administration.

Disputes over the rights to land and privileges were common. One which persists today is about the ownership of a sliver of land in central Uganda called Kayunga. The Kabaka of Buganda claims it for his kingdom. A few people who live on the land would rather not pay allegiance to the Kabaka, and the government of Uganda supports them.

President Museveni installed a mid-level army captain as the new ruler of a breakaway Kayunga in what looks like a direct challenge to the authority of the Kabaka. When Ronald Mutebi tried to visit Kayunga, the government physically restrained him. This is what provoked the riots in Kampala.

The dispute over Kayunga may have sparked the violence of early September, but it’s not what the riots were about. There is a power struggle under way between traditional leaders like the Kabaka and the central government of Uganda, personified in its President.

The dispute began in the run up to the country’s independence in October 1962 as powerful Ugandans negotiated with the outgoing British colonial government for the balance of power in the new state. A deal was struck in the independence constitution, giving all national state power and resources to the new government and significant control of land and local politics to the kings.

The trouble with this arrangement was that it unraveled almost immediately when each side tried to arrogate all power and resources to itself. The Kabaka, who was made ceremonial President, fought with the Prime Minister – who held real power – over the role of the kingdoms. The kings wanted more power, the Prime Minister wanted them to have less.

In 1967 the Prime Minister temporarily settled the dispute using Idi Amin, an army general of later infamy, to attack Mengo and chase the Kabaka into exile. From then until today, the Kabaka and other traditional leaders have been playing a game of political catch up with the constitutional government of Uganda. The kings have tremendous cultural power, and several are personally very wealthy.
They lack the national appeal or the raw power to intimidate the central government, though.

Forced to rely on ceremonial prestige and the resourcefulness of their supporters in order to generate political power, they have wedged themselves between a corrupt and overweening central government on the one hand and the millions of people – including their own subjects – who want greater power for themselves on the other.

All of this makes a very bad recipe for democracy in Uganda. The current President has been in power for twenty three years, has changed the constitution to suit him, and has won elections of diminishing credibility.

The Kabaka and other traditional leaders call for the transfer of some governmental power to their kingdoms as *feder* – a new federal constitution – which would do little but make one autocrat more powerful at the expense of another. The violent protests in Kampala were significant, but I wonder if the two principals in the big game, the President and the Kabaka, caught the message.

Faced with the most serious challenge to public order and political stability in the capital in a generation (there is worse happening in the north of the country), the President and the Kabaka both appealed for calm, disowned the rioters and reiterated their support for their chosen, conflicting, visions of Uganda’s political future.

There was no mention of how the average Ugandan gets more control over politicians, over national resources or over the way these things are decided.

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**Editor’s note:** Michael Madill is a professor at Oakton College, who lives in Rogers Park and writes regularly on matters concerning Africa. Contact him by e-mail at: *mmadill@oakton.edu*