

# Remembering Idi Amin

Davies Bagambiire's crowded Halifax law office is in a state of mild chaos. He has just spent the last 20 minutes on the telephone frantically trying to wrangle a payment out of a reluctant client and there's another caller still on hold.

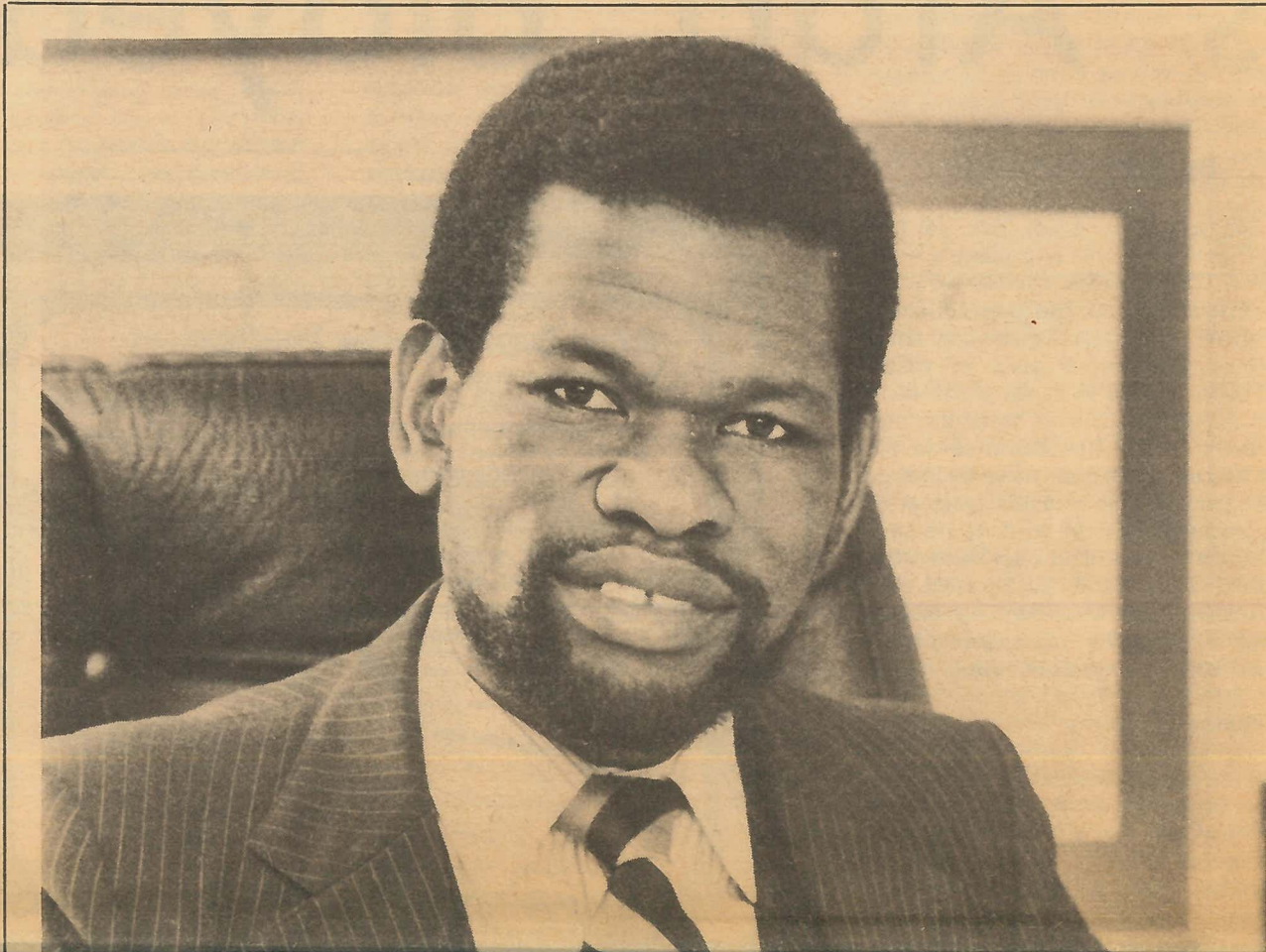
Bagambiire is one of the few lawyers in the Halifax area specializing in immigration law — with the exception of income tax law, one of the most complex of legal areas.

The only problem is that many of his clients have left their wealth behind when they came to Halifax, so he has to do a lot of family and real estate work to help pay the bills. Immigration law may not pay well but he doesn't really mind; there's a soft spot in his heart for people fleeing repressive regimes — and with good reason.

The Ugandan native knows all about repression. He was just completing high school when Idi Amin grabbed power in Uganda in 1971. Bagambiire was head boy of a student council which was relatively supportive of the Obote government that Amin overthrew. And when Amin's soldiers began interviewing the various student council heads, thinking — quite correctly — that they didn't support the new regime, Bagambiire fled to nearby Tanganyika.

A few years later he returned: this time with a law degree from the University of Dar-es-Salaam and an even more burning hatred of the Amin regime.

"In Tanganyika there were lots of schools of thought on how to oust Amin from power: some believed external circumstances or forces were needed; others — myself included — thought no



activity would be successful unless it was spontaneous and had the backing of the people," he recalls.

Bagambiire wanted to mobilize the workers and students to topple Amin. At Makaree University in Kampala — where he managed to land a job teaching law — he found the perfect environment.

Amin's government had driven all of the expatriate professors from the university and all the teaching was being done by young graduates and tutorial assistants. The teachers were the same age as the students; they socialized together and spent long hours discussing the political fate of the country.

"We concluded that there was no way to dislodge the Amin government without an armed struggle," Bagambiire says. "The movement which later overthrew Amin was rooted in this — we were talking about arms and guerrilla warfare."

It was about this time that he began receiving anonymous messages that Amin's supporters were watching him. Bagambiire's brother was also attending the university, and when he vanished after leading a demonstration protesting the death of a fellow student, Bagambiire knew his days in Uganda were numbered.

One day, after yet another denouncement of the government by the students and faculty, Amin's soldiers came to Makaree University. They ran amok, beating and arresting thousands of students, workers and teachers. Bagambiire and two other students managed to escape to his apartment, where they spent 30 heart-stopping hours hiding in the attic among the live electric wires and heating pipes while Amin's soldiers ransacked the rooms below.

Days later, when some semblance of restraint was restored on campus, Bagambiire slipped quietly out of the country; first to Kenya and then to Tanganyika, where he applied to



Wamboldt-Waterfield

Davies Bagambiire specializes in immigration law — after living in Uganda under the regime of Idi Amin he has a soft spot for people fleeing repressive regimes.

come to Dalhousie University.

He had little trouble obtaining refugee status shortly after landing in Halifax. But his legal experience has taught him that this isn't always the case. In fact, he bristles at the weaknesses inherent in the whole process of entering a country as a political refugee. For one thing, the claimant is not allowed to plead his own case before the Refugee Status Advisory Committee in Ottawa.

Then there are the committee's political biases. "If a claimant came from a free and democratic but right-wing government, they would be

deemed as making false claims, while people from left-wing ruled countries are given a much greater benefit of the doubt," he says.

It is an imperfect system but Bagambiire keeps working within it for the same reason he heads up the Halifax branch of Amnesty International, the Nobel Prize winning humanitarian organization: he knows what it is like to be on the other side. ■

*John DeMont is an editor  
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