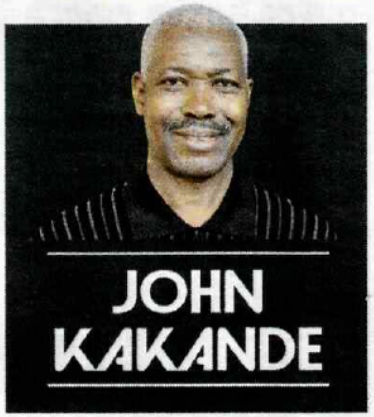
RACE FOR SPEAKER: WHY IT COULD BE A BUMPY RIDE FOR ANITA AMONG



The race for the Speaker of the 12th Parliament has generated intense debate in the corridors of power.

So far, at least six aspirants have declared interest in the position. These include the incumbent Anita Among, Democratic Party's president Norbert Mao, Lydia Wanyoto, Persis Namuganza, Florence Akiiki Asimwe and Yorke Odria Alioni.

The National Resistance Movement's (NRM) Central Executive Committee (CEC) recently expressed its stand in favour of retaining Among as the Speaker and Thomas Tayebwa as the Deputy Speaker for a second term.

After the CEC endorsed Among, it appeared as though the matter had been closed, though the manner in which the endorsement was hurriedly made raised eyebrows. Did CEC seek to avoid an acrimonious fight that could tear apart the NRM caucus as President Yoweri Museveni kicks off his new term? If this was CEC's calculation, then it has backfired.

WHY IS THE SPEAKER KEY?

The Speaker is number three in government's hierarchy. But in the power game, the Speaker supersedes the vice-president. What makes the position stand out is that the Speaker determines the character of the Legislature. The success of the Parliament in its oversight role largely depends on the presiding officer. Parliament cannot be effective if its presiding officer is weak, timid or submissive to the Executive arm.

The Speaker wields substantial powers and influences the debates and decisions in the House. Parliament has powers to censure cabinet ministers or impeach the president. In the censure of ministers or impeachment of a president, the Speaker's role is critical.

Though the Speaker is elected by the Parliament, there is no question that the president plays a major role in the election. No one in Uganda has been elected to the position without the endorsement of the President. This is the reason Norbert Mao is seeking Museveni's endorsement.

The Speaker is not ceremonial. The office of Speaker constitutes a power centre that can rival the presidency, depending on the character of the holder of the office. This is why the NRM leadership has sought to ensure that opposition MPs and NRM dissidents never occupy the position of Speaker or Deputy Speaker.

Currently, Among has significant advantages. She has demonstrated unwavering loyalty to Museveni and the NRM. Among is a clear frontrunner, but given the infighting in the NRM, there is still a possibility of her (Among) experiencing an upset or being bruised.

Public attention has focused on Norbert Mao, an eloquent politician, but the real threat for Among could be Namuganza. True, Mao has a partnership with the NRM, but he is not within the NRM. Actually, Mao's bid could be to Among's advantage.

Many NRM rank and file are unhappy that Museveni has been very generous to the opposition politicians who defect to the NRM. They are unlikely to support Mao's bid.

Furthermore, Mao's primary campaign platform appears to be that he has a legitimate claim to the Speaker's position because the late Jacob Oulanyah, an Acholi, died before serving his two terms. This does not sound nationalistic or compelling. He has also argued that his bid will ensure "balance" in government. He seems to have conveniently forgotten that recently the Speaker and chief justice were from his region!

Namuganza is clearly an underdog who does not stand high chances of becoming a Speaker. However, she could be the most lethal for Among. Elected as an independent, she is not bound by the CEC's endorsement of Among. She has the ability to drag Among to the gutter, in the fight. Though Among is a shrewd deal-maker, she has had long-standing conflict with Namuganza, a fiery politician who takes no prisoners in a fight. It is very unlikely that the two would agree to a deal and avoid a showdown.

Namuganza could rally the support of some disgruntled NRM MPs and independents. She could benefit from a 'protest vote'. So it could turn out a bumpy ride for Among.

When Among contested for the position of Deputy Speaker and subsequently for the speakership, she surprisingly took the block National Unity Platform (NUP) vote. It is startling that so far, NUP has remained tight-lipped on the race for Speaker.

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