

Last week marked 44 years since armed soldiers stormed Lubaga Cathedral during an Ash Wednesday Mass in February 1982. Worshippers scattered. Priests were dragged from the altar. The Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA), acting under then President Milton Obote's government, claimed security concerns following rebel activity in the area. The symbolism, however, was heavier than the official explanation.

Lubaga is not just a cathedral. It is memory. The coincidence that Lubaga has once again found itself at the centre of public tension during the Lenten season in 2026 is striking. Ash Wednesday is not a fixed calendar date; it shifts each year. Yet twice in modern history, during the same sacred season, the cathedral has become a site where national anxieties surface.

Incidental? Perhaps. But history often speaks in patterns rather than accidents. To understand Lubaga's recurring symbolism, we must go back further to the religious wars of Buganda between 1888 and 1892.

What began as spiritual conversion quickly became political competition. Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim factions aligned themselves with external powers. Religion became an instrument of State control. Palace intrigues turned into armed conflict. Sovereignty was negotiated through faith.

The execution of Christian converts under Kabaka Mwanga II and the subsequent wars were not simply theological disputes. They were struggles over legitimacy, who held moral authority and who controlled the State.

That tension did not disappear with colonialism. Nor did it vanish at independence in 1962. Across Sub-Saharan Africa, sacred institutions have often become alternative centres of legitimacy when political systems are strained.

In Zambia and Kenya, churches provided moral critique during periods of one-party rule. In Zimbabwe and South Africa, bish-

Rubaga Cathedral: When history refuses to stay silent

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ops spoke against State excesses when formal institutions hesitated. Where political trust thins, moral institutions thicken. Uganda is, therefore, not unique in this regard.

But Lubaga carries a particular historical weight. It sits within Buganda's heartland, a kingdom whose political and religious history is deeply intertwined. Catholicism in Buganda was never merely a matter of personal devotion. It shaped elite alliances, colonial agreements, and educational structures. It formed part of the moral vocabulary of governance.

When the State enters sacred space, whether for security reasons or otherwise, the gesture reverberates beyond the immediate moment. It touches centuries of layered memory.

This is not an argument for clerical politics. Nor is it a defence of political activism from the pulpit. Rather, it is an observation: Uganda has repeatedly negotiated its political

tensions within sacred architecture.

Why?

Perhaps because churches remain among the few institutions that command moral trust across social divides. Perhaps because sacred spaces offer citizens a language that politics often fails to provide. Or perhaps because, historically, Uganda has never fully resolved the delicate boundary between moral authority and state sovereignty.

Ash Wednesday marks repentance, reflection, and mortality. It invites societies, not just individuals, to examine themselves. When national anxieties surface during the Lenten season and in such a place, it becomes difficult to dismiss the symbolism entirely.

Lubaga Cathedral has stood through kingdoms, colonialism, coups, and transitions. It has witnessed martyrdom, apology, and reconciliation. It has been both sanctuary and stage.

The deeper question is not whether incidents are coincidental. The deeper question is what they reveal.

As Uganda continues to evolve politically and socially, can we finally cultivate a mature relationship between sacred authority and state power, one in which neither feels threatened by the other?

Or will our history continue to resurface in the very spaces where we gather to pray?

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