Uganda's new CJ: A Judiciary in peril

Three crucial words: "You're all set." You'll find them everywhere across American society. They are not idle words. They explain, in part, why America—a very young nation—rules the world.

The United States declared independence in 1776. It is about 250 years old. To put this in perspective, ancient Egypt had already risen and fallen thousands of years before America existed. China, India, Persia, Greece and Rome had long, complex histories, while North America was still home to indigenous civilisations. Even most European nations trace their political and cultural roots back a millennium or more. In world-history terms, therefore, America is not even of voting age yet.

One secret is that American culture is unapologetically rigid. It focuses on process, not outcomes. "You're all set" is more than rhetorical reassurance; it is a philosophy of order. It reflects an American faith that life works when processes are followed, forms completed, and rules observed. American tradition holds that everything must happen organically, through patient growth and processing.

Africans, naturally, find life in America frustrating because, unlike our countries, America does not allow shortcuts. It believes there is a way things must be done. You cannot beat the process—and if you try, America spits you out.

> Judicial appointments... signal continuity.



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Politics

The appointment of the new Chief Justice, Dr Flavian Zeija (PhD), has sent the legal fraternity into an uproar. On January 23, the Uganda Law Society issued a reasoned and detailed statement condemning the appointment as an outright assault on judicial independence. The last time the profession witnessed such agitation was in July 2013, when President Museveni attempted to reappoint Benjamin Odoki as Chief Justice after his retirement in June that year.

That move failed. The President then took almost two years to appoint a substantive Chief Justice—Bart Katureebe in March 2015. This time, he has done the exact opposite: moved too quickly and installed a person still new to the Bench—something traditionally impermissible within the profession.

This is where "you're all set" comes in.

The appointing authority appears to presume that the Chief Justice will enjoy immediate respect by virtue of office alone—from judges and justices who started cooking before him and have broken more pots. That is an extremely ambitious assumption.

My dearly beloved, the legal profession is, by its nature, a vocation of time. At both the Bar and the Bench, seniority is not a vanity metric but a moral architecture—earned through years of disciplined judgment, accumulated restraint, and public trust patiently built. Experience tempers power; longevity refines discretion.

In this tradition, judicial appointments do not merely reward competence; they signal continuity. The elevation of a Chief Justice ought to feel inevitable, almost unremarkable—an "of course" that reassures both the profession and the public. Seniority provides that reassurance. It anchors authority in lived wisdom, disarms suspicion, and allows judicial leadership to begin without explanation, its legitimacy arriving quietly, already complete.

Seniority in the law is not nostalgia; it is a constitutional instinct. The law distrusts haste, novelty, and sudden elevation because justice is not an arena for brilliance alone, but for judgment matured by error, patience, and restraint. Time, in this profession, is not incidental—it is formative.

At the Bar, seniority disciplines ambition. It teaches younger advocates that real excellence—skill, judgment, and credibility—is built over time. At the Bench, seniority performs an even more vital function: it steadies power. A judge who ascends slowly carries institutional memory—of precedent, of crises survived, of moments when the law nearly faltered and was saved by caution rather than courage.

That is why the office of Chief Justice has traditionally been conferred on those whose careers already command assent.

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