

BY RONALD KABANZA

Why NRM took over Rukungiri, Opposition stronghold

UKUNGIRI. The ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) party has tightened its grip on Rukungiri District, a region long regarded as an Opposition stronghold.

This was after sweeping key parliamentary and local government seats in the recently concluded general elections.

For more than two decades, Rukungiri, the home district of incarcerated opposition figure Kizza Besigye, consistently voted for Opposition candidates, particularly the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC), since the 2001 elections.

But the political tide appears to have shifted. In the just-concluded presidential race, President Museveni secured 85,429 votes in the district, defeating his closest challenger, Robert Kyagulanyi, alias Bobi Wine of the National Unity Platform (NUP) party, who garnered 19,290 votes.

NRM also won all three county parliamentary seats and the Woman Representative seat for the 12th Parliament. That is unlike in 2016, where FDC se-

cured Rujumbura County, Rukungiri Municipality, and the Woman MP seat, leaving the NRM with only Rubabo County. In 2021, FDC only retained Rubabo after NRM regained three seats.

At the district council level, NRM won 27 councillor seats while the People's Front for Freedom (PFF) secured five.

In lower local government elections, NRM captured 14 seats, PFF won two, while one went to an independent candidate. The party also won the Rukungiri Municipality mayoral race for the first time since the municipality was created in 2010. Out of 20 municipal councillors, NRM secured 14 seats, with PFF taking six.

Previously fronting stiff resistance to President Museveni and his party, NRM, reportedly won by margins exceeding 60 percent in Rukungiri, despite low voter turnout.

Why the shift?

Political observers and local

leaders attribute the NRM's breakthrough to a combination of grassroots mobilisation, government development programmes, and divisions within the opposition ranks.

Rukungiri District NRM chairperson and Rujumbura County MP-elect, Rtd Maj Gen Jim Muhwezi, said the party deliberately intensified grassroots mobilisation.

"This time we invested a lot of time and resources in grassroots mobilisation because we wanted to upset the Opposition from Rukungiri. I thank the people of Rukungiri for listening to what we told them," he said.

Mr Muhwezi, who is also the Security minister, added that peace and stability in the country had enabled citizens to focus on development and poverty eradication.

Rukungiri Municipality MP, Dr Elisa Rutahigwa credited government wealth-creation programmes such as Emyooga and the Parish Development

Model (PDM) for boosting support for the ruling party.

"These programmes, which aim to eradicate poverty at the household level, brought hope to desperate groups like the youth and ordinary people," he said.

Rukungiri District NRM vice chairperson Ambrose Kibuuka argued that voters had grown disillusioned with the Opposition, especially after years of backing Dr Besigye without achieving a change in leadership.

"People of Rukungiri supported the Opposition for a long time, hoping their son would become President, which never happened. They have now decided to join the winning team because they need services like other Ugandans," he said.

He added that without strong mobilisation and government interventions such as PDM and Emyooga, the district could have remained Opposition-leaning.

Infrastructure development was also cited as a factor. Mr Paddy Mugisha, a retired Church of Uganda cleric from Bugangari Sub-county, said the tarmacking of the Rukungiri-Kanungu road significantly influenced voters.

Others pointed to divisions within the Opposition. Mr George Tumwine, a resident of Southern Division in Rukungiri Municipality, said lack of unity cost them dearly.

"In Rukungiri Municipality, some opposition members supported Dr Warren Nuwagaba, an independent candidate, leaning to PFF, while others backed Ms Ingrid Turinawe of PFF. This confusion helped Gen Henry Tumukunde of NRM to win," he said.

With the latest results, Rukungiri, once considered a bastion of Opposition politics, appears to have firmly shifted into the NRM fold, signalling a significant realignment in the district's political landscape.