

**Isaac Imaka** argues that Parliament's strength is of late no longer being judged by the quality of debate but by the personality occupying the Speaker's office.

In the unfortunate death of Jacob Oulanyah, Uganda's Parliament lost an opportunity to steady an institution that had already begun to drift from its constitutional path.

The Speaker of Parliament is meant to be a referee in legislation and debate, and an administrator in the management of the institution. The Constitution envisioned a strong Parliament, not an all-powerful Speaker.

Yet after the tenure of Edward Ssekandi, Ugandans—helped largely by the media—began celebrating Speakers who stretched the limits of the office. "I order government to do this." "We will not pass this Budget unless..." Such declarations increasingly became common from the Speaker's chair.

That, perhaps, is when the rain started beating Parliament.

At the time, President Museveni warned about the trend. Speaking at a State function in Kampala, he argued that the Speaker's duty was to preside over the House and put questions for ayes or nays, not to roam the country "dancing *paka chini*," his euphemism for political overreach. Many dismissed him as merely uncomfortable with someone checking Executive power.

But there was a deeper issue at stake: the growing confusion between institutional independence and personal authority.

American humorist James Thurber captured this danger in his 1939 fable, *The Owl Who Was God*. In the story, an owl earns worship from other animals because it can see in the dark while they cannot.

Convinced of its own greatness, the owl eventually accepts a challenge to prove its powers in broad daylight. Blinded by the sun and carried away by praise from its followers, it walks in-

# When did rain start beating Parliament?



Former Vice President and Speaker of Parliament Edward Ssekandi with former Speaker Anita Among recently. Mr Imaka claims that after Mr Ssekandi's tenure as Speaker, Ugandans began celebrating Speakers who stretched the limits of the office. PHOTO /FILE

to danger and is crushed together with the animals trailing behind it.

The lesson is simple: institutions suffer when individuals begin to believe their own mythology.

A decade after Ssekandi, Parliament's strength was no longer judged by the quality of debate or legislative scrutiny. Instead, attention shifted to the personality occupying the Speaker's office and the extent of the power they could wield.

When the ruling party later sought to replace the Speaker, she resisted until confronted politically at Kololo, where her influence ultimately collapsed. But by then, a culture had already taken root: the belief that the Speaker must

dominate the political landscape rather than simply safeguard parliamentary procedure.

Anita Among emerged from that environment. Before becoming Deputy Speaker, she was hardly known for any defining legislative philosophy or memorable contributions on the floor of the House. She was instead associated with managing political compromises, including efforts to neutralise Opposition resistance.

When Oulanyah won the Speakership, many Ugandans saw in him the possibility of restoring Parliament to the vision contained in Article 82 of the Constitution. He was widely respected as a stickler for rules and procedure, a man

who understood that institutions are strengthened not by noise or spectacle, but by consistency and restraint.

His death buried much of that expectation.

For those now disappointed in Among's tenure, the question must be asked: what exactly did they expect her to become that she had never demonstrated before? She was never publicly identified with the fight against government excess, corruption, or legislative independence. If anything, her rise reflected the very political culture Parliament had spent years nurturing.

The danger with glorifying powerful Speakers is that successors inherit not just the office, but also the temptation

## On the ideal Speaker.

That independence belongs to the institution, not to one individual. Ugandans today are not searching for another celebrity

Speaker. They are looking for leadership that restores discipline, procedure, and credibility to Parliament itself.

— Isaac Imaka, writer

to expand it further.

Parliamentary independence does not mean elevating the Speaker into a near-deity. In *How Parliament Works*, Robert Rogers argues that parliamentary independence is anchored in separation of powers: Parliament's ability to control its own procedures, administration, and Budget without outside interference.

That independence belongs to the institution, not to one individual.

Ugandans today are not searching for another celebrity Speaker. They are looking for leadership that restores discipline, procedure, and credibility to Parliament itself.

In Jacob Marksons Oboth-Oboth, some see a possible return to that path. He is regarded as a legislator grounded in law and procedure, with a reputation for measured debate and relatively modest politics. Whether he ultimately lives up to those expectations is another matter, but the country's yearning is increasingly clear.

Ugandans are tired of Speakers who mistake visibility for effectiveness and authority for wisdom. Not a speaker who, after passing a controversial Bill, takes to the microphone and brags about how all she needed to force through the Bill was mobilisation of numbers.

The country does not need another owl convinced it is a god. It needs a custodian of Parliament's independence and dignity.

That should not be too much to ask.

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