Expansion of Parliament: Another white elephant?

The Parliament Building. A lot of water had flowed under the bridge since 1960, when a colonial-era chamber, designed by the British firm Peatfield & Bodgener to accommodate 88 members, shot up on the watch of Mowlem Construction Company Ltd. PHOTO/ FILE

Criticism. With the roar of heavy-duty machines hovering above the 28-storey tower office block adjacent to the colonial-era 1960 chamber, having gone silent, observers have been relentless in their advice and criticism.

BY ROBERT MADOI
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On September 30, 2017, when the reconstruction and expansion project of Uganda's Parliament officially commenced, under the auspices of Roko Construction Company Ltd, the understanding was always that the new chamber would hold more than the 459 members that constituted the 10th Parliament. That, however, was only half of the story. The other half captures the worst human impulses that threaten the project's success.

A lot of water had flowed under the bridge since 1960, when a colonial-era chamber—designed by the British firm Peatfield & Bodgener to accommodate 88 members—shot up on the watch of Mowlem Construction Company Ltd. What wasn't disputed then—and still isn't—was the fact that the numbers in the House were on steroids, exploding with such reckless abandon. The tally of 459 lawmakers in the 10th Parliament represented a startling, if troubling, jump from 326 lawmakers in the 8th Parliament. In between, the 9th Parliament had 375 lawmakers under its belt.

The smart money had installed another jump so much so that a revision of the expansionist plans was inevitable. Little wonder, in November of 2019, the Parliamentary Commission's request to expand the seating capacity of the new parliamentary chamber from 500 to 600 was rubber-stamped by the Solicitor General. The revision, intended to cater to the growing number of lawmakers, however, succeeded in pushing the estimated cost of the project from Shs179 billion to Shs206 billion.

"When we first planned, we were planning for a maximum of 500 members, which we thought would happen in 20 years. But already, as we speak now, we have 470 members. I don't know what will happen at the next general elections," Ms Rebecca Kadaga, the Speaker of the 10th Parliament, said after the contract changes came to light, adding that most of the aforesaid changes would take root "underground." Whatever that meant.

The ambiguities surrounding the project notwithstanding, the inching of the lawmakers' tally to the 600 mark can be interpreted as vindication of the 2019 revisions. The numbers have since ballooned to 556, including 353 constituency representatives, 145 women representatives, 10 UPDF representatives, and others representing the elderly, the youth, persons with disabilities (PwDs), workers' representatives, as well as ex-officios. Yet last week, Ms Anita Among, the Speaker of the 11th Parliament, disclosed that the reconstruction and expansion project has managed to carve out "only two offices and committee rooms."

The disclosure, coming as it did when the 11th Parliament moved to pass the country's National Budget for Financial Year (FY) 2026/2027, jolted many. Mr Joel Ssenyonyi, the Leader of the Opposition in Parliament (LoP), said: "The reason I am concerned about this is that this Parliament spends billions of shillings renting office space for MPs and staff at private facilities. Why are we spending billions of taxpayers' money to rent office space, yet someone was paid to build new chambers for Parliament? Why?"

High rental costs

The reasons behind the growing numbers and the attendant problems are manyfold: the

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most obvious is the politics of patronage. And, as Mr Ssenyonyi notes, it has been pernicious in its consequences on the taxpayer. The amount of money the House spends on renting properties has been widely described as astronomical. At the start of the 11th Parliament, the director of Communications and Public Affairs, Mr Chris Obore, disclosed that at least Shs9.8 billion would be spent on renting office space for lawmakers and staff at the Kingdom Kampala.

"The Parliamentary Commission will pay Shs9.8 billion per year for 9,030 square metres at Kingdom Kampala. In addition to the office space, there will also be parking space for 300 vehicles," Mr Obore told this publication in June 2021.

This was not the first time that Mr Sudhir Ruparelia, the businessman who owns Kingdom Kampala, was entering a deal with the House. Back in 2016, the Parliamentary Commission awarded a Shs4.5 billion rent deal to Mr Ruparelia to rent office space at one of his properties, Queen's Chambers on Parliamentary Avenue. After signing on the dotted line, the property was used to host about 200 lawmakers and staff.

The size of Parliament has, for the last 25 years, grown exponentially. The number of lawmakers soared from about 290 in 1996 to 556 in the current 11th Parliament. Consequently, the reconstruction and expansion project of Uganda's Parliament commenced in 2017 to reduce the high expenditures on renting office space for lawmakers and staff. Yet all indications now show that the legislative branch of government will continue to spend a sizeable chunk of taxpayers' money on high rental costs. Roko has found itself taking the flak for the stalled progress.

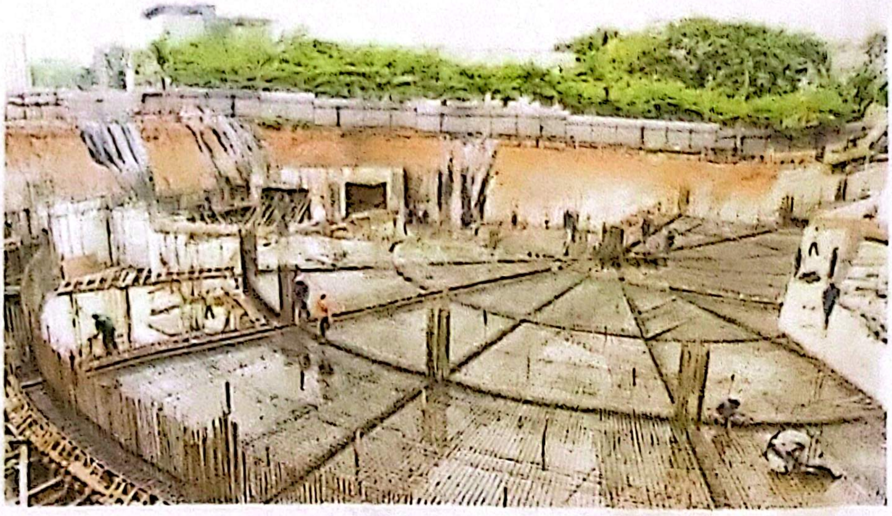
"The issue of the [new] Parliamentary building, when we came in [as the 11th Parliament], we opted to terminate the contract with Roko because the work was not moving," Ms Among said during last Friday's plenary session, adding, "Roko had already taken more money. So, if we terminated the contract, we would be the ones at loss [...] So what we decided, what we agreed as a Commission [and the Ministry of Finance], that we will not pay Roko money [for construction]. Now the money is being paid directly to the suppliers [of the construction materials]."

Bailout

Roko's travails continue to persist despite the Government of Uganda (GoU) spending nearly Shs208 billion to acquire 150,000 preference shares in the construction company. Finalised in July of 2022, the equity investment was supposed to secure the completion of key GoU projects like the expansionist plans of its legislative arm.

A fixture in Uganda's construction sector, Roko ran the rule over the construction of countless iconic buildings in Uganda after its incorporation in the country in 1969. The construction behemoth put its distinctive stamp on structures like Mulago National Referral Hospital, Bank of Uganda and Crested Towers. This was after earning its stripes following the completion, in 1973, of the construction of the Uganda Martyrs shrine in Namugongo.

Since the passing of its founders, Max Rohrer in 2005 and Rainer Koehler in 2013, Roko has found itself sinking rather fast in financial quicksand. In 2020, it suffered the ignominy of being fingered by 27 companies—Roofings Group inclusive—for reportedly failing to pay off colossal debts. To this day, debts remain a millstone round the company's neck.



Workers at the construction site of the new Parliament Chamber in 2019. The new chamber is expected to seat at least 600 MPs when works are completed. PHOTO/ FILE

High rental costs:

The reasons behind the growing numbers and the attendant problems are manyfold: the most obvious is the politics of patronage. And, as Mr Ssenyonyi notes, it has been pernicious in its consequences on the taxpayer. The amount of money the House spends on renting properties has been widely described as astronomical. At the start of the 11th Parliament, the director of Communications and Public Affairs disclosed that at least Shs9.8b would be spent on renting office space for lawmakers and staff at the Kingdom Kampala.

"The NRM government has included in next Financial Year's budget Shs32.2 billion to help Roko Construction Company meet its debt obligations. Roko debt problems are now also part of Uganda's public debt servicing courtesy of Mzee Museveni," Mr Ibrahim Ssemujju Nganda, the shadow Finance minister, disclosed while reading the minority budget report last Friday.

"Remember Mr Museveni forced Parliament in July 2022 to authorise a Shs207.13 billion bailout to the struggling Roko. We have since then been using taxpayer's money to resuscitate this company [...] This Financial Year ending in June, we are paying Roko Shs60 billion. In total, we will be injecting Shs207 billion in Roko," Mr Ssemujju, also the outgoing Kira Municipality lawmaker, added.

Freefall

With the roar of heavy-duty lifting machines hovering above the 28-storey tower office block adjacent to the colonial-era 1960 chamber, having gone silent, observers have been relentless in both their advice and criticism.

"This Roko here is the one that has been for donkey years constructing the parliamentary chambers. Maybe it is due that we get an update. What is happening to the [construction of the new] parliamentary chambers because the [completion] date has kept on shifting," Mr Ssenyonyi opined.

Ms Among told last Friday's plenary session that Roko has found itself hitting one speed bump after another because of its failure to pick up the tab of firms supplying construction materials needed for the new parliamentary chamber. Terse on details, Ms Among, who also serves as the chairperson of the Parliamentary Commission, disclosed that the 11th Parliament had resolved to terminate the contract with Roko. The uncleared arrears with a dizzying number of suppliers of construction materials to Roko had become way too many to keep up with.

The growing unease around Roko comes as the stock of the National Enterprise Corporation (NEC) increased a bit more. In July 2021, President Museveni directed that, starting FY2021/22, all new government school and hospital projects be entrusted to the care of NEC.

Established in 1989 by an Act of Parliament, NEC is the commercial arm of the Ministry of Defence and Veteran Affairs/Uganda Peoples' Defence Forces (UPDF). The NEC Construction Works & Engineering Ltd, one of its subsidiaries, has, in the main, covered itself in glory, acquitting itself in reconstruction and expansion projects such as the ones at Mandela National Stadium in Namboole and halls of residence at Uganda's oldest public university in Makerere.

Officials from Roko were not readily available for a comment about their travails. The construction titan has previously blamed the stalled progress of Parliament's expansionist plans on the repeated redesigning of blueprints. For one, after one of the twin bomb blasts that rocked Kampala on November 16, 2021, took place along Parliamentary Avenue, there was a change of heart.

"There was a change of design, and, in that change of design, because of the bomb blast which took place here, we said we needed a bomb-blast resistant glass. So, when that change of design came in, [the Ministry of Finance] and [the Parliamentary] Commission agreed to pay directly to the suppliers of [the construction materials]. As we speak today, money is not paid directly to Roko. The money is given to suppliers," Ms Among said, revealing how Roko would still contrive to shoot itself in the foot.

Mr Peter Ogwang, who at the time chaired the finance and planning unit of the Parliamentary Commission that approved the move to erect a new parliamentary building, confirmed Speaker Among's position.

Mr Ogwang said the plan okayed by his colleagues on the Commission, which was then chaired by former Speaker Kadaga, falls short of the general public expectation. Mr Ogwang, who now serves as the Sports mini... the said building being put up... Construction has committe... gym, executive cafeteria for ... parliamentary chambers.

RUNNING LATE

The parallel drawn between Roko and NEC comes as Parliament runs terribly late on tying up the loose ends on its expansionist plans. The latest Parliament of Uganda Strategic Plan, released last September, reveals that "the chamber that had originally been targeted to be completed on July 27, 2020, stands at 44.9 percent complete as at September 1, 2024."

He, however, wants the curren... mentary Commission that is ... chaired by Ms Among to com... revisit the said plan.

"I would really want to imple... office to get back and look at th... nal design and plan of the new ... bers," Mr Ogwang said.

Running late

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The same plan makes a d... ate-sounding pitch for the expedi... completion of the new parliam... chamber to decisively addres... space constraints. Evidently, it is ... to break ranks with a prevailing ... that inflicts pain in some places ... alleviating it in others.

"Further, the 11th Parliam... operating with 14 standing comm... and 15 sectoral committees, brin... the total number of Committees ... There are only 12 committee r... in Parliament, implying that ... Committees do not hold mee... as and when necessary, due to la... seating space," the plan reads in pa...

"There is need to exp... construction of the new cham... order to avail a conducive enviro... for effective legislation, oversigh... representation in line with the St... Plan of Parliament for FY 202... 2029/30," it proceeds to add.

House records show that the p... works that commenced July ... 2017, had been pencilled in to ... on September 1, 2020. The rec... further outline the structural ... undertaken on the parliamen... building, including the constru... of a multi-level parking space ... parking consists of one ground ... plus five underground levels, suff... to accommodate more than 50... The parking lot was constructed b... Seyani Brothers & Co (U) Limited ... December 15, 2010, until its comp... on October 29, 2013.

The other structural change inc... the construction of an extra floor o... west, north and east wings of the Pa... mentary Building.

Given the successful works d... on the parking lot, Weekend Mo... understands that the Parliamen... Commission handed Seyani Brothe... Co (U) Limited the task of constru... the additional floor on the north, ... and west wings of the House.

This started on September 26, 20... and was completed on Decemb... 2014. House officials would doub... give anything to have the constru... of a new parliamentary chamber ... at a similar inconceivable pace.

This, more than anything, is bec... where smoke once belched as the ... of Roko's machinery threshed thr... construction materials resides a wh... elephant tag that keeps promp... uncomfortable questions.