

Parliament isn't the best place to fight the Museveni system

There have been many lamentations about the fall of great parliamentarians, especially from the Opposition, and how it will affect the 12th Parliament and the Opposition. Ibrahim Ssemujju Nganda, Medard Lubega Ssegona, Asuman Basalirwa, Mathias Nsam-ba Mpunga, and Jonathan Odur have been very vocal on the floor of the 11th Parliament. They lost their deposit in the January 15 election.

For many, the blame was on the Opposition National Unity Platform (NUP) party leader Bobi Wine whose real name is Robert Kyagulanyi Sentamu. That he made efforts to see them off by placing candidates against them in order to bring in lower calibre leaders who he can tower over and control.

This is because he allegedly is insecure and detests people who are superior to him intellectually and in stature plus experience as politicians. But it also means that the great parliamentarians have not built bases of their own and are dependent or vulnerable to the influence of others. No doubt the names above have been star performers on the floor of the 9th, 10th and 11th parliaments. Social media exponentially gave them reach with the clips of their debates going far and beyond. So is Uganda doomed that they are out of Parliament? The answer, especially for those seeking change from the four decades of Museveni rule lies in the tangible impact debates on the floor of Parliament have had.

Ever since the multiparty dispensation was reinstated in 2005, the Opposition has only played a cursory role in the most important matters on the floor. Yes, there have been many significant pronouncements and insights that awaken those who follow the debates. They have highlighted issues of social justice, corruption, and the welfare of Ugandans at home and abroad. In some instances, they have influenced government action on treatment of people.

They make for good headlines. Where they are overwhelmed, they have on a few occasions voted with fists and flying chairs. They have walked out

in protest too. But in the end it is what the NRM, with its numbers wants, that carries the day.

The good thing about a politician being in Parliament is that it obviously is lucrative. A person with some money in the pocket may be facilitated to fight for social justice, as they are not seriously distracted by the hunt for money to buy bread and pay school fees. The next lot is assured of Shs315 million for a vehicle the moment they swear in. There is a hefty salary, per diem, foreign travel at the taxpayers' expense, and other health, education, and housing allowances.

There are opportunities for corruption and self-enrichment too as we have seen in the cases where some members of oversight committees get paid to look the other way. Besides, one may influence development and infrastructural development in their areas if they play their cards well.

But in many cases, they must be 'good' or 'friendly' Opposition. They must make compromises, and this may in turn dent their credentials and limit the extent to which they may go to fight for social justice and hold the government accountable.

I suspect that is the reason why, surprisingly, many voices mourning the loss of the good Opposition parliamentarians are actually from the NRM.

In any autocratic setting like Uganda's, it is safer to have a predictable and controllable opposition. There is an impression created that if one is not elected, they become irrelevant and cannot constitute or lead significant opposition to the government. That is why when people fail at the election they go into hibernation and wait for the next election cycle. It creates an impression that for one to fight for social justice, they must be paid.

That is the certificate of authenticity. It is like taking up employment by the government. This narrows down the forces of Opposition.

Throughout history the most prominent forces of change have not been in paid positions. Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela and even Yoweri Museveni and his band of Luweero revolutionar-

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Nicholas Sengoba
Plainly speaking



ies. They simply had an idea and went for it. They were motivated, made sacrifices and the money plus followers came in with time.

Today's preferred genetically modified Opposition figures are those who speak out loud but will not go to extremes to challenge the status quo like taking to the streets. They create an impression that they are doing something about changing the situation, whereas not. This pacifies the people into relaxing from taking matters in their hands.

If you look at the most significant challenges to the status quo in Uganda's history, they were mostly led by the intelligentsia. But they were never from the controlled confines of Parliament.

They followed the Bismarckian tenet of negotiating with the weight of force in the picture. The Bakata Movement in Buganda in the 1920s fight for indigenous rights. The early struggles against the British rule and exclusive plus exploitative economic policies in the 1940s, plus the Augustine Kamyia-led late 1950s boycotts and how they influence the independence of Uganda.

The 1971 coup had forces outside Uganda to back the guns that shot Obote out of power. It was not speeches and resolutions on the floor of the house. The concentration of the intelligentsia in the composition of the first cabinet helped steady

the ship.

The 1978-9 war against Idi Amin's dictatorship. The 1981-86 so-called revolution led by Yoweri Museveni, against Milton Obote's second helping. That aside, entrenched systems like the one run by the NRM for the last 40 years needed sustained opposition from all possible spheres of influence.

Alas, religious organisations like the church and the mosque in Uganda are almost co-opted with clerics receiving money and vehicles from the Executive. These are no Janani Luwums. Trade unions and labour movements are another. In Uganda, they are now dead. You instead have workers MPs who are predominantly NRM, pretending to represent workers. The intelligentsia and student movements are supposed to turn universities into hotbeds of influential thought. Most scholars are now muted as opinion is weaponised if it does not tow the line.

The captains of industry form a big and influential part of keeping governments in check as they sponsor alternative ideas. They have been replaced by foreign investors, many of whom are faces for local politicians who use them to get free land and exemption.

The Opposition politician is almost the last stand in the line. Now they are controlled in the narrow confines of Parliament with money and other goodies. If they 'escape' and mobilise outside of this net out of genuine desire for change without expecting monetary rewards, it can be re-awakening that turns crisis into opportunity. It will create another front that will give the NRM a headache it would rather do without but can't easily control.

Unfortunately, knowing Uganda well, most of the figures there in are going to go mute. Occasionally appearing on TV and radio talk shows as they wait to go back in the parliamentary rat race in five years' time, to speak and earn big as their way of haplessly opposing the status quo.

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