

LETTER OF THE DAY

About rebel MPs and the cost of political dissent

As Parliament bids farewell to a generation of legislators this year, few exits carry as much political symbolism as those of the former National Resistance Movement (NRM) rebel Members of Parliament.

For nearly two decades, this group represented a rare brand of political courage within Uganda's ruling party. They challenged official positions, questioned powerful figures, resisted caucus pressure and, in some cases, paid a heavy political price for it.

Among the most recognisable faces of that generation was former Ndoorwa East MP Wilfred Niwagaba.

An ex-seminarian and lawyer by profession, Niwagaba entered Parliament in 2006 on the NRM ticket after defeating the late Avitus Tibarimbasa. At the time, he was part of a youthful and energetic crop of legislators that included Theodore Ssekikubo, Barnabas Tinkasimire, Henry Banyenzaki, Muhammad Nsereko and Dr Chris Baryomunsi.

These were not ordinary backbenchers.

At a time when many ruling party MPs were expected to simply defend government positions, the "rebel MPs" built a reputation for scrutinising decisions within the NRM itself. They openly challenged controversial government actions, questioned corruption scandals and offered dissenting views on major national issues.

Their popularity stemmed from their willingness to speak beyond party lines.

Henry Banyenzaki became widely known during the Temangalo controversy involving the National Social Security Fund (NSSF) and former prime

minister Amama Mbabazi. Dr Chris Baryomunsi attracted national attention when he publicly questioned the official narrative surrounding the death of former Butaleja Woman MP Cerinah Nebanda.

Later, the group became even more prominent during debates surrounding the removal of the presidential age limit under Article 102(b) of the Constitution. While many MPs aligned themselves with the ruling establishment, the "rebel MPs" openly resisted what they considered dangerous constitutional amendments.

For many ordinary Ugandans,

they represented a rare form of internal accountability within the ruling party.

But political dissent within dominant political systems often comes at a cost.

Over time, relations between the rebel MPs and the NRM leadership deteriorated. Some were reportedly isolated within party structures, excluded from key caucus activities and treated with suspicion by sections of the establishment. Others faced disciplinary action, political hostility and growing pressure from within their own party.

Eventually, the group began to fragment.

Some members gradually aligned themselves with the establishment they once criticized. Others accepted government appointments. A few attempted to balance both worlds by maintaining elements of their reformist image while remaining politically connected to the centre of power.

Now, with the 2026 elections bringing an end to many of these political careers, the era of the "rebel MPs" appears to be closing.

And perhaps that is the bigger story.

The fall of the "rebel MPs" raises uncomfortable but important questions about the nature of Uganda's politics today. Can politicians sustain independent political positions outside the protection of State power? Can ideological conviction survive the pressures of political survival, financial uncertainty and changing alliances?

Ugandan politics has increasingly shown that many politicians, whether from the ruling party or Opposition, often drift toward the establishment after electoral defeat or prolonged political isolation.

Recent political shifts involving figures once considered fierce government critics only reinforce that reality.

This is why the story of the "rebel MPs" matters beyond individual personalities.

It is ultimately a story about the cost of dissent within a dominant political system.

As this generation exits Parliament, Uganda is left with a deeper national question: does the country still have room for independent-minded politicians willing to challenge power from within, or has political survival gradually replaced political conviction?

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