How 12th Parliament can make a difference

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The 12th Parliament on Monday elected its leadership, with West Budama Central MP Jacob Oboth-Oboth being elected Speaker and Ruhinda North MP Thomas Tayebwa getting elected Deputy Speaker. I join the nation in congratulating the two stewards of the new Parliament in whom the nation has a lot of trust and expectations.

Thanks to President Yoweri Museveni, who was present during the process held at Kololo Independence Grounds in Kampala, for always giving Parliament necessary support and guidance in choosing its leaders; from the initial endorsement by the central executive committee of the National Resistance Movement and the decision of the parliamentary caucus at State House, Entebbe, during the weekend, and the final voting on Monday. The process went smoothly!

This smooth legislative transition is an improvement from past editions that were very heated and threatened to tear the House right in the middle. With the Speaker and Deputy Speaker in the chair, next will be constituting the committees (standing and sessional), electing caucus chiefs, commissioners and electing the leader of opposition in Parliament, after which the House will be fully constituted ready to commence business.

While at Kololo during the Speaker elections, I noted with satisfaction as opposition legislators freely acknowledged Museveni, who was present, when they spoke. This is a good sign that opposition MPs in the 12th Parliament may be different from their predecessors who put defiance ahead of national interests, protocol and decorum. How can a leader expect to be respected if they do not extend the same courtesy to others, more to the head of state? That is how many former MPs lost direction and missed opportunity to connect their constituencies to the centre, hence being voted out.

MPs are reminded to shelve political differences and build working relationships and networks that give them leverage for lobbying for their people. Lobbying is not corrupt dealing. When done openly and with accountability, it is a basic duty of an MP.

Successful lobbying is more beneficial to a constituency than for an MP simply being seen speaking on the floor of Parliament on general issues, shouting 'order!' as the President has noted in his public statements guiding and challenging parliamentarians to perform over and above the ordinary standard.

We pay tribute to the previous parliaments for what they were able to achieve, under different or similar circumstances. Where things did not go well, there are five years for the 12th Parliament to set a new standard in parliamentary performance and make a real difference in the lives of Ugandans.

There is concern that parliamentary culture and adherence to timelines has been eroded over time. This likely arises out of bad planning and failure by responsible officials to meet deadlines in preparing reports and legislative business. On this, the blame can be placed anywhere in the hierarchy of administration, sometimes a result of incompetence and laxity, and other times a consequence of antagonism and possible sabotage.

There was a time when plenary would sit on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday in the afternoons. Morning hours would be for committee work. On weekends, members would travel to the constituencies. But this changed at some point. The House started sitting daily, often from morning till late hours in the evening. Some week days stretched into the weekend, eating into "constituency hours". Under this cover, some MPs started dodging their constituents.

Hours of operation may not be written in the Constitution, but there is a way that old or traditional practices made parliamentary work orderly, and which everyone was conversant with to deliver results.

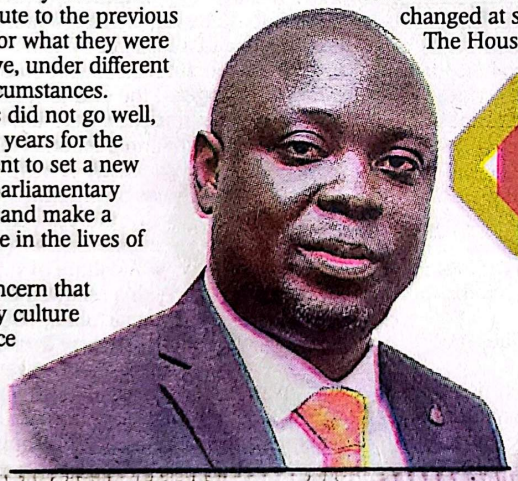
MPs in the 12th Parliament should set a time window for meeting constituents, either at Parliament or in the constituencies, to ease consultation and tracking of community development projects and service delivery at large. If possible, the Parliamentary Commission should provide for specified constituency engagement space, where all MPs are required to be in their constituencies and each of them reports with feedback on issues identified for due action.

These reports should be in writing. At the next interaction with the constituents, the MP reports to them on what he or she has done on issues raised and the way forward.

While this may come off as too controlling on the legislators, it is beneficial because it bridges the gap between the people and their representatives in an organised way that can be tracked and co-ordinated with respective ministries, departments and agencies (MDAs). Citizens are also able to prepare well to meet with their representatives as opposed to unplanned and not well publicised constituency runs, where an MP sets a programme as and when it is convenient for them. That is how many of them end up never returning to meet with the people until the next election.

End result is neglecting the constituencies, failure to adequately monitor government programmes and lacking a connection with leaders on the ground and MDAs critical to bridging service delivery needs. Eventually, Parliament's overall performance is compromised and the great promise notable at the start is lost in a maze of unclear timelines, bureaucracy, antagonism and posturing in the search of personal glory.

Before we know, five years are over and citizens are still wallowing under pressure from the old ills of poverty and backwardness in the midst of great opportunity. Institutional betrayal!



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