

LETTER OF THE DAY

We need a new culture of political dialogue

Uganda's last elections followed a familiar script of predictable outcomes, with the security forces taking over the electoral process, moments of tension and in some cases fatalities that could have been avoided. The pattern has become so routine that many Ugandans simply move on even when the underlying issues remain unresolved.

Whereas the regime hasn't changed for the past four decades, there has been a population shift to young, energetic, and educated youth quite eager to contribute to the welfare of our country.

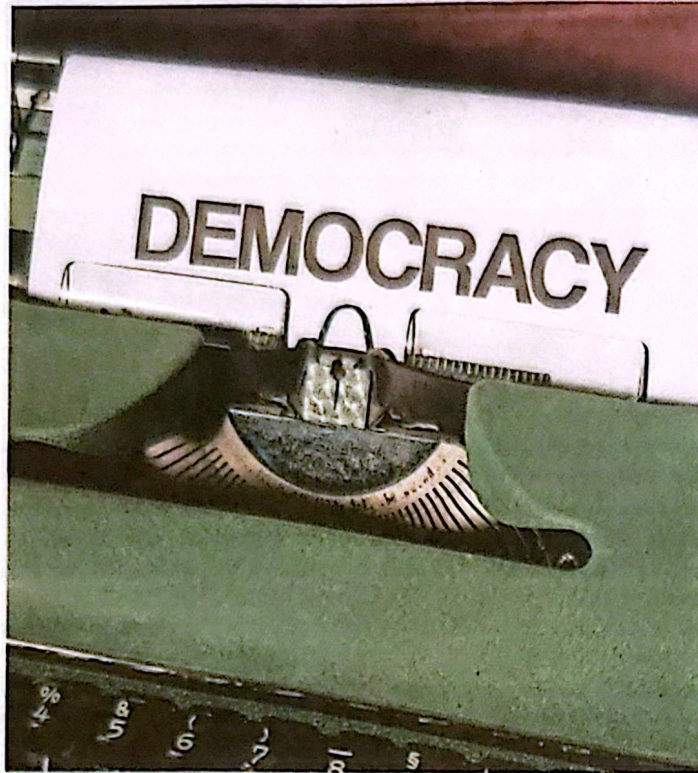
This generation does not share the political instincts of the older, militarised eras. Our aspirations, as youth, are shaped not by confrontation but by opportunity, fairness and a desire for our institutions to work and serve us all irrespective of background, lineage or tribe.

That is why we shouldn't lose the opportunity of dialogue rather than confrontation; this post-election window often opens.

Due to the strenuous electoral season, Uganda's Opposition base has been left in distress and is psychologically fatigued. Many citizens who have always hoped for change since the early 2000s have become disillusioned for there is always that same winner in every cycle.

However, far from the public's eye, even the ruling party is facing its own internal struggles ranging from succession disputes to corruption that keeps eroding the public's trust.

These dynamics from both sides of the aisle create an opportunity not to co-opt the opposition that sets alternative policies, but rather for both sides to dialogue so as to take the country forward.



Having a structured dialogue process would strengthen government, especially the Executive arm, which now fully influences the Legislature and the Judiciary.

The Ugandan Opposition public should accept that an election cycle brings out winners from the Opposition, the ruling party and independents. These then form what we call the Government of Uganda.

Whereas the Opposition is directly elected to the Legislature, the Executive branch has no real Opposition presence and can only have its involvement through being picked by the ruling party. Having Opposition leaders as part of the Executive arm of government would eliminate political brokers who get taxpayers money for derailing Opposition leaders' principles.

The corrupt officials, whose only rise to ranks is 'fishing opposition' would sober up and be

more accountable as the days of Opposition trading will come to an end, improving accountability from those who exploit political divisions for personal gains.

An election is a chance for resource redistribution. With the same ruling party over a long period, there is need to have Opposition representation in Cabinet such that the needs of Opposition strongholds are equally represented at the decision-making table. Because there has been dissent suppression, a dialogue will, for example, salvage resources the leading Opposition National Unity Platform (NUP) party uses to take care of political prisoners' families and instead use them to reorganise and build stronger intra-party institutions.

There have been leaders in the Opposition who have perfected criticising the government but lack the needed statecraft experience in negotiation, running

government projects and developing policies. These would get an opportunity to join the government and build these skills for a government in waiting to be ready for any future transition.

Dialogue does not mean abandoning political principles but rather giving the nation a chance to heal from corruption, inequality, weak service delivery and institutional fragility. For the Opposition, participating in dialogue could provide a platform to articulate political pain points and benchmarks such as the release of political prisoners, equitable resource distribution, transparent recruitment into public service and a level electoral playing field. These are issues that matter deeply to the common taxpayer and can be layered for implementation with periodic monitoring.

On the side of the ruling party that forms the government, having the Opposition as part of the Executive will promote social cohesion, giving it a chance to divert resources from managing political tensions towards long-term development projects.

A genuine dialogue process from a strong position would also ensure healing, and give a chance to rebuild lost legitimacy, while demonstrating a renewed commitment to the ethos that brought them to power. This aligns with the development partner's expectations of internal democracy as a means for stability and continuity of their regional engagements with the government.

Ultimately, Uganda must confront the simple truth that we cannot build strong institutions while remaining trapped in cycles of mistrust and confrontation. Genuine dialogue is the bridge that can take us there.

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