

THE NAME AND SHAME LIST WILL DEPEND ON THE COMMITTEE'S FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS

PAC vows to bite through name and shame campaign

By Nicholas Wassajja

The notion that Parliament accountability committees are mere barking dogs might soon be a thing of the past as the Public Accounts Committee (PAC), is now set to roll out a name and shame campaign. The campaign is meant to expose public servants and government institutions that have a perennial corruption record.

The move, which was announced at the beginning of this year, is aimed at making corruption, especially in Government institutions, a risky venture.

According to the PAC vice-chairperson, Gerald Karuhanga (Ntungamo Municipality), those qualifying for the name and shame list will depend on the committee's findings after scrutinising the annual reports from the Auditor General (AG) and emerging accountability issues.

In the past, the parliament accountability committees have grappled with writing reports that include recommendations to plug gaps that could be causing the rampant corruption, but the Government has often brushed off the recommendations as merely advisory.

In a new move, the committee now notes that the list will also expose institutions that frustrate the anti-corruption work of Parliament by ignoring its recommendations.

"Every year, Ugandans are going to know the most corrupt accounting officers and their institutions. This will enable Ugandans to exert more pressure on the executive for accountability," Karuhanga says.

PAC is the legislature's accountability committee that studies public audits and invites ministers, permanent secretaries or other ministry officials to the committee for questioning. The committee issues a report of their findings subsequent to a government budget audit. The board bases its interrogation on the annual AG's report.

The Government is required to report back to Parliament with a treasury memorandum on recommendations suggested by an accountability committee within a specified period, but more often than not, this has not been presented.



PAC members during a recent meeting. Photos by Miriam Namutebi



Committee chairperson Angelina Osege and her deputy Gerald Karuhanga

Based on their findings, PAC often makes recommendations to ministries requiring that they change certain policies and procedures to improve their operations.

In the Commonwealth practice, opposition members chair PAC and in the case of Uganda, the committee is chaired by Angelina Osege (Soroti Woman MP), who works along with a team of about 30 members, both from the ruling party and the Opposition.

In the past, accountability committees of Parliament

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complained about other MPs mobilising to frustrate their tough recommendations against politicians and public servants. Osege notes that such MPs will be exposed

in a similar manner and that the electorate will take note of them.

"We shall also expose colleagues who try to protect corrupt officials that swindle

public funds knowing the challenges that people face due to poor service delivery," Osege says.

Under the Parliament rules of procedure, PAC is the mother committee of the four accountability committees of Parliament. These include the Committee on Commissions, Statutory Authorities and State Enterprises, Local Government Accounts Committee and the Government Assurances Committee.

Osege says although they have produced a number of reports and with many still in the pipeline, her team is proud that in their report on the 2014/15 AG's report on the health sector, they named the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Local Government as the worst performing in Uganda and recommended sanctions against their accounting officers.

The committee has since revealed that the health ministry only recovered sh23m from the individuals who swindled money from the Global Fund and pinned the ministry for refunding in excess sh1.3b yet Sh1.8b was refundable due to prior years' loss of donor funds through fraud.

Osege wants the accounting officer in the Ministry of Health to recover the remaining amounts from the individuals cited in the Auditor General's report and those involved in stealing this fund and are still in public service to be retired.

Challenges

The Public Accounts Committee is faced with a number of challenges, but key among them is that the office of the Auditor General is often poorly funded, and the audit reports may be lengthy, complex, poorly organised and difficult to understand.

"We appreciate the parliament staff, our leadership and the Auditor General's office because they have done a thorough job in investigating these institutions. But, poor funding and staff shortages mean that audit reports are often years behind, so the ministry officials needed for questioning might have moved on," Jessica Ababiku (Adjumani Woman MP), says.

She adds that in many cases, staff of the Office of the Auditor General is appointed by the executive and so may have little incentive to uncover problems that could embarrass those who appointed them.

For Karuhanga, besides failure to implement recommendations, killing the morale of the committee members, investigating report findings is time and labour-intensive. He says Parliament needs a big team of professional staff, but they are not available due to resource constraints.

The tenure of the office for the PAC leadership under Osege expires in June next year. However, what remains to be seen is whether the committee will make a lasting impact compared to predecessors.

Clearing case backlog

To pave way for efficiency and the smooth running of the committee, PAC strategised to ensure that it deals with the report backlog in their first year in office. Karuhanga says although it has taken them more time than they anticipated, some progress has been made.

The AG's reports on audited accounts of the energy sector for 2014/15 and those of the Ministry of Local Government, Office of the Prime Minister and Ministry of Public Service for 2014/15 are all under consideration. The others under consideration are the Auditor General's report on missions abroad for financial years 2013/14- 2015/16 and on the entities with unqualified opinion in 2014/15.

PAC has a draft report yet to be considered on the accountability sector for 2014/15.