

When politicians get rich, the public gets robbed

Dear Tingasiga: Harry S. Truman, the 33rd President of the United States, reportedly believed that genuine public service and accumulation of personal wealth were fundamentally incompatible. His reported sentiments have been paraphrased: "Show me a man who gets rich by being a politician, and I will show you a crook." A shorter version of this is: "No man can get rich in politics unless he is a crook."

Whereas Truman did not practice what he preached, for he misappropriated funds from a White House Expense Account and took the cash into retirement in 1953, his words have lost none of their sting. Nowhere do they cut deeper than in Uganda, where political office is not a calling but an investment.

In 2022 alone, Uganda lost an estimated \$2.7 billion (about Shs10 trillion) to corruption. Transparency International continues to rank Uganda's public sector among the most corrupt in the world.

Uganda's very institutions, designed to enforce accountability, have been absorbed into the system they were supposed to police. Corruption in Uganda has been cultivated deliberately — votes bought with cash, loyalty bought with public contracts, dissent starved of resources, and criminal protection extended to those inside the patronage network. Senior politicians are almost never convicted. So, impunity in Uganda is not a failure of the system. It is the system.

The citizens pay twice: in the taxes that vanish, and in poor social services and the poverty that never lifts. But this need not be a permanent fate, for Uganda faces a particular inflection point.

Uganda needs the sincerity of José Mujica, Uruguay's president from 2010 to 2015, who embodied a rare form of leadership defined by humility, austerity, honesty, and an unshakeable moral compass. Mujica, "the world's poorest president", donated around 90 percent of his presidential monthly salary of \$12,000 (Shs45m) to charitable causes, lived modestly on his wife's small

farm outside Montevideo, drove his old Volkswagen Beetle, and shunned the royal lifestyle of the presidency.

Mujica governed without pretence. He spoke plainly and directly, refusing diplomatic euphemism when honesty served better. He did not govern for legacy or comfort. He governed out of conviction and did what was right regardless of political cost. His was authentic leadership.

That takes a combination of humility with firmness of purpose, and an unshakeable resolve to put civic duty above family loyalty. Uganda has had plenty of anti-corruption speeches, strategies, and commissions. What it has lacked is political will to practice zero tolerance for corruption, and to deal a decisive blow to the vice without circumventing the country's laws.

We need structural change, with four non-negotiable reforms. First, genuine judicial independence, with judges who are appointed through a transparent, merit-based process.

Second, the Inspector General of Government (IGG), and the Auditor General should be nominated through a joint agreement of the leaders of all political parties that have at least one member in Parliament and are confirmed through a secret ballot by at least two-thirds of Parliament. The IGG and the Auditor General should then serve a single, non-renewable term of 10 years, free from meddling by the Executive.

Third, a Witness Protection Law is needed. Without witnesses willing to testify, corruption prosecutions collapse before they reach a verdict. Uganda currently has no adequate framework to protect those who come forward. Passing such a law is not a technicality — it is a prerequisite for justice.

Fourth, campaign finance regulation cannot come too soon. Politicians who buy elections arrive in office already in debt, some to criminal networks. A comprehensive Campaign Finance Law — with spending limits, transparency requirements, and real penalties — would strike at corruption before it begins.

But reform of institutions, however necessary, is

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Muniini K. Mulera
Letter to a Kampala Friend

not enough. It leaves unanswered the most urgent moral: What happens to those who already got rich through corruption?

If the architects of Uganda's decades-long looting simply retire to their mansions and mega-farms and leave their children their ill-gotten inheritance — then the message to the next generation of politicians is clear: steal boldly and retire comfortably. Impunity that is merely paused is not justice. It is a delayed invitation to repeat the crime.

The powers that be must pursue stolen wealth with uncompromising determination. The starting point is a comprehensive Asset Recovery Law, empowering the State to confiscate assets where

evidence of illicit enrichment is clear, even when criminal prosecution stalls. The onus of proof of the source of wealth should be on the public servant when asked by the IGG. This law should be a first-term priority for the next president.

A single, committed, autonomous, and adequately financed asset recovery institution is essential for implementing the Asset Recovery Law. Currently, that work is scattered across agencies with overlapping mandates, little coordination, and corruption-prone staff. The result is predictable: in 2023-24, Uganda recovered just Shs30 billion against losses estimated in the trillions. That is not enforcement. That is theatre.

Much of what has been stolen sits in foreign banks, offshore companies, and luxury properties abroad. These funds must be pursued internationally — through mutual legal assistance treaties, through Interpol, through the Asset Recovery Inter-Agency Network. Stolen public money must have no legitimate resting place, wherever it has travelled.

And when assets are recovered, they must be visibly returned to the people through direct funding of better health and educational facilities. When citizens see justice made tangible — not just announced in press releases and political speeches — trust in public institutions will begin to rebuild.

President Mujica left office without a fortune. He left with something the corrupt can never buy back once they have sold it: a good name. Uganda does not need another speech about fighting corruption. We need courts that work, agencies that bite, laws that reach the offshore accounts of the powerful, and the visible proof that public money belongs — irrevocably — to the public. The corrupt have had decades of grace. It is time for a reckoning.

Muniini Mulera is a Toronto-based paediatrician and neonatologist.