

From history, Kizza Besigye and all political prisoners need prayers

Yesterday, prayers were scheduled at Rubaga Cathedral for four-time presidential candidate, Dr Kifefe Kizza-Besigye, and all other political prisoners languishing in various jails across the country [the prayers were blocked - Editor].

Uganda's turbulent history has, from time immemorial, produced people incarcerated for having views disagreeable and considered a threat to those in power. These are the people called political prisoners.

In the days of the British colonialists, they would even rusticate opponents to far flung areas like Karamoja or even the Seychelles and Britain in the case of Buganda king, Ssekabaka Sir Edward Muteesa, in 1955. It was this act by British Governor, Sir Andrew Cohen, that introduced the vituperative, *Kawenkene* (the Ganda pronunciation of Cohen) in the Luganda language to mean an abominable and despicable character. After the 1966 attack on the kabaka's palace (Lubiri), *Kawenkene* was specially reserved for president Milton Obote.

After Independence, on February 22, 1966, Obote ordered the arrest of five Cabinet ministers: Grace Ibingira, Balaki Kirya, Mathias Ngobi, G.B.K Magezi and Dr Emmanuel Lumu during a Cabinet meeting. They were accused of plotting to overthrow the government. Peculiarly, the Obote government was under pressure following a scandal involving allegations of gold, ivory, and coffee theft against Obote and army officials.

After the abrogation of the independence constitution and the imposition of the UPC government as a de facto one-party State, the late president general of the Democratic Party, Benedicto Kiwanuka, and Paulo Kawanga Ssemogerere found themselves in Luzira prison for allegedly at-

tempting to overthrow Obote. So did Abu Mayanja and Rajat Neogy, the editor of *Transition Magazine*, for 'publishing seditious material intended to cause disaffection of the Obote government.'

The Idi Amin era needs no introduction. Any threat meant jail or extrajudicial killing. Obote, in his second helping between 1980 and 1985, continued using this old trick. DP leaders like Yoweri Kyesimira ended up behind bars when they failed to cave into the peer pressure that saw most DP MPs from Busoga crossing to UPC. Many people ended up in Luzira after being suspected of supporting the NRM rebels in the Luweero Triangle.

Others were picked up using public screenings named *Panda Gari*. Able-bodied men would be rounded up and lined up in an identification parade before captured rebels called 'Computers.' They would point out collaborators. I remember my elder brothers, Norman Nkanji and Douglas Kuleekana and their contemporaries like Roger Wamara telling chilling tales of the ordeal. The NRM threw in Evaristo Nyanzi and Andrew Lutakome Kayiira for treason and misprison of treason.

During the insurgency in northern Uganda, especially the infamously abusive 'Operation North,' led by then Minister of State for Defense, Maj Gen Daudi Munungu Tinyefuza, later known as Sejusa (which in the Luganda language means "I don't regret"), joined the long queue. Ministers like Omara Atubo were allegedly frog-marched and beaten for 'aiding and abetting rebellion.' Others ended up in Luzira prison as lodgers, detained for long periods without trial.

Ever since Besigye joined the fray of opposing the current president, Museveni, 25 years ago, the conveyor belt that produces political prisoners has been hyperactive. Besigye's own brother, Jo-

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Nicholas Sengoba
Plainly speaking



seph Musasizi Kifefe, passed on after he was released from long detention. They were accused of belonging to a rebel group, the People's Redemption Army that was allegedly operating to remove the NRM government from power.

Then came National Unity Platform of Robert Kyagulanyi, alias Bobi Wine. We have had waves upon waves of his youthful supporters going in and out of jail for similar 'threats to government.' What is interesting is that in Uganda's jurisprudence history, it is easier for a hunchbacked camel in stilettos to walk through the eye of a needle than to find a successful prosecution of treason and misprison of treason. Yet there are thousands of people who have been charged and detained for long periods for the same.

Most times, they are tortured and their rights abused. The long period of remand is their come-uppance for being perceived as a threat to the government. It is the way the government plays the abusive role of accuser, prosecutor, and judge. It is a trick used to break the law and abuse rights by ironically taking shelter under due process

through the courts of law. The police, the DPP, and the Judiciary are all complicit in this matter. They take people to court, then look for charges to prefer. Then they take forever 'investigating,' while the Judiciary denies them bail.

They suffer irreparable damage in jail. Many come out with poor health. A friend developed high blood pressure. Others lose employment opportunities. Some lose property. Families break up. Children miss the emotional and economic support of their parents. Some drop out of school. All this shows us that there is a very small difference between the colonial government and whatever we have had after independence.

From the pseudo democracies like the NRM to the military dictatorships of 'swine' like Amin, they all use prolonged imprisonment in deplorable conditions as a weapon to suppress their opponents and make them cave in.

It is a deliberate evil scheme devoid of empathy that warrants prayers and divine intervention. The existing laws and legal framework can't solve it on their own. There must be a spiritual healing to guide those in charge to do the right thing. That is, a speedy trial if at all there is evidence. Some of the NUP supporters have been on remand since 2021.

Besigye and his co-accused Obeid Lutale have been there for more than a year. Is the prosecution collecting the evidence from the Mars or under the ocean? Granting bail is the rule and not the exception, since all the prisoners are presumed innocent until court determines otherwise. In these cases, it simply remands suspects endlessly. This gives the State a blank cheque to abuse the rights of citizens.

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