LETTERS

Privatisation without protection: Are Ugandans truly safe in private hands?

Uganda's journey into privatisation, strongly accelerated under the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs), was anchored on a simple but powerful promise: improve service delivery through efficiency and competition. Guided by reforms from institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, the state gradually stepped back from direct service provision, opening space for private actors to take the lead.

In many sectors, this shift has delivered visible gains, more schools, hospitals, financial institutions, and places of worship have emerged, increasing access and choice for Ugandans. However, beneath this growth lies a critical and often overlooked gap: the safety and security of the people who use these services.

While economic efficiency was prioritised, security governance was not equally institutionalised. Private institutions, ranging from schools and churches to daycare centres and hospitals, were left to independently determine their safety standards. This has resulted in inconsistent, and in many cases, inadequate security measures across the country. Unlike financial or operational regulations, there is no universally enforced national safety framework guiding how these institutions should protect human life against physical threats such as:

Unauthorised access and intrusion, fire outbreaks and emergency response gaps, crowd control risks in high-density gatherings, child protection vulnerabilities in schools and daycare centres, terror threats and criminal activity targeting soft targets. This regulatory gap exposes thousands of Ugandans, particularly children, patients, and worshippers, to preventable risks on a daily basis.

Many private service providers operate under tight financial constraints and competing priorities. As a result, investment in security is often minimal or reactive rather than proactive. There is limited investment in security infrastructure.

Absence of formal security policies and standard operating procedures. Employment of under-trained or inadequately supervised security personnel. Weak coordination with national security agencies such as the Uganda Police Force. Lack of structured risk assessment and threat analysis mechanisms

In such an environment, security becomes an afterthought only taken seriously after an incident has occurred.

Institutions that bring people together, schools, churches, hospitals, are what security experts refer to as "soft targets."

Without proper safeguards, they become highly vulnerable to both opportunistic crime and organised threats. Uganda has not been immune to incidents that highlight these vulnerabilities. While individual institutions may attempt to address risks internally, the absence of a coordinated national safety policy creates systemic exposure.

The result? A fragmented security landscape where the level of safety depends largely on an institution's financial capacity rather than a national standard of protection.

The case for a national safety and security framework: To close this gap, Uganda must move beyond fragmented efforts and establish a comprehensive National Safety Policy for Public Institutions.

Such a framework should: Define minimum security standards for all high-occupancy institutions.

Mandate regular security audits and compliance inspections. Require institutions to develop and implement security policies and emergency response plans. Standardise training and certification for private security personnel. Strengthen coordination between private institutions and national security agencies. Introduce accountability mechanisms for non-compliance. This is not about over-regulation, it is about safeguarding human life.

Security is not solely a government function, nor should it be left entirely to private entities. It requires a collaborative approach: Government sets the standards and enforces compliance. Private institutions invest in and implement security measures. Security professionals provide expertise and oversight. The public remains vigilant and informed

Privatisation has undeniably transformed Uganda's service landscape. But efficiency without safety is incomplete progress. As Uganda continues to grow, the question must shift from "Are services available?" to "Are these services safe?" Without deliberate policy intervention, the country risks building a system where access is expanded but protection is uncertain.

The time to act is now. A secure Uganda is not just about economic growth; it is about protecting the lives that growth is meant to serve.

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