

When sanctity meets politics, order is fragile, and the events at Martyrs' Church Katwe showed just how quickly tempers can flare.

BY TONY MUSHOBOROZI

It was the last place one would expect to witness scenes reminiscent of a bruising national election. Not a church. Yet on February 22, Martyrs' Church Katwe descended into chaos as an internal parish election sparked accusations of rigging.

This is a church under the Church of Uganda (CoU), where believers are routinely reminded to love their neighbours as themselves. Instead, tempers flared, voices rose, and, at one point, the parish priest, Rev Flobia Sebunya Mboowa, was caught in a physical jostle with a lay leader over plastic buckets repurposed as ballot boxes.

For some observers, the drama felt uncomfortably similar to the tensions that characterised Uganda's recent 2026 General Election. The difference, however, was the setting: a house of prayer.

"I entered the church at about 7am and found people protesting an influx of outsiders in our elections," said Mr Gaster Lule Ntake, a businessman and lay canon at the parish, who oversees development projects.

"There were individuals we did not recognise as members of this congregation. There was also a bishop's directive barring outsiders from voting. When I raised the matter with the reverend, she said the election would proceed and that everyone was welcome," he added.

That response did little to calm nerves. Jennifer (not her real name), who attended the service, said the mood shifted quickly from suspicion to open protest.

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When God's house became an election battleground



Martyrs' Church Katwe. There was chaos at the house of God during election of the head of laity at the church on February 22. PHOTO/IBRAHIM KAVUMA

"People started shouting that the process was not clear; it was no longer a normal church service," she adds.

Mr Ntake says his decision to approach the microphone was an attempt to restore order, not inflame tensions. "Even a bishop can be corrected privately if the integrity of the Church is at stake. I was trying to redirect the process," he says.

But the central question lingered: were there indeed outsiders? Several congregants confirmed that unfamiliar faces dotted the congregation that morning. Others cautioned that in an urban parish such as Martyrs' Church, Katwe, occasional visitors are not unusual. Still, suspicions hardened.

Mr Brian Kakande, a boda boda mechanic in Katwe, said some individuals were identified as having come from

THE KEY FACTS

Event: Parish leadership elections for laity positions

Key Issues:
Alleged Rigging: One position, leader of laity, reportedly received 70 more votes than expected.

Outsiders in Voting: Several people not belonging to the congregation reportedly participated; two were allegedly armed.

Procedural Change: First-time use of printed ballots instead of traditional show-of-hands voting.

another CoU parish in Namasuba.

More startling were allegations that some of the suspected outsiders were armed. Mr Ntake said two men wearing sunglasses drew attention during the heated exchanges. "Members pointed them out. It later emerged they had concealed arms. I asked them to stand and leave. They stood up and consulted the reverend, which made people even angrier," he said.

Daily Monitor could not independently verify claims of armed individuals inside the church.

Multiple congregants alleged that the parish leadership appeared to favour a particular candidate for the influential position of head of laity.

During vote counting, they claim, discrepancies became evident. "For most positions, about 250 people voted," Mr

Ntake said. "But when it came to the leader of laity, more than 320 votes were counted. We wondered where the extra 70 had come from," he added.

The race pitted Peter Yiga against Nalongo Sara Kalyango, who eventually emerged victorious. Several congregants alleged she was the preferred candidate of Rev Mboowa and her allies. There is, however, no official confirmation of irregularities.

Long-time members say this election cycle differed markedly from previous ones. James (not his real name), a congregant for more than 20 years, described a departure from tradition that unsettled many worshippers.

"In the past, candidates were nominated from the floor," he said.

"They would accept or decline, and then we would vote by show of hands. This time, printed ballots were handed out with two pre-selected names for each position. We did not know how those names had been chosen," he added.

The change, he argued, created fertile ground for mistrust. After the first service degenerated into shouting and confrontation, security personnel were deployed. Congregants say subsequent services proceeded peacefully, but largely because of the visible presence of soldiers.

Mr Joshua Kitakule, the spokesperson for the Inter-Religious Council of Uganda (IRCU), condemned the involvement of armed security in a church election. "Such matters should be resolved internally without resorting to security forces," he said.

Efforts to obtain comment from Rev Mboowa and Church of Uganda Archbishop Stephen Samuel Kaziimba Mugalu, were unsuccessful by press time.

For many congregants, the episode left lingering questions about governance, transparency and the creeping politicisation of spaces once thought immune to such tensions.