How long must our time be put on hold

That is the question lingering in our minds and at the centre of public debate, as we converge to discuss the way forward for our country. Like me and most other young people who make up the largest percentage of the population, I was born after President Museveni captured power in 1986. While there has been a certain level of inclusion for some in our generation, it remains a frustratingly small percentage, often more symbolic than meaningful.

History, however, presents a markedly different narrative regarding the transfer of power in Uganda. When the National Resistance Army (NRA) captured power, the youth were not mere observers; they played pivotal roles. Maj Gen Mugisha Muntu became an army commander at the impressively young age of 31, given the responsibility of leading a national army during a period of transition and uncertainty. He was not alone in this regard. Numerous individuals who propelled the revolution were young men and women in their twenties and thirties, including notable figures such as Fred Rwigyema, Salim Saleh, Jim Muhwezi, Amama Mbabazi, and others who took on significant responsibilities early in their lives.

That generation possessed the courage to view youth not as a vulnerability but as an asset. It recognised that true renewal necessitated risk, inclusivity, and trust in the upcoming generation. Almost 40 years later, Uganda seems ensnared in a political cycle. The same individuals continue to occupy leadership positions, and even when some leave public office, many eventually return. The hope for renewal has slowly transformed into mere recycling. Political careers extend indefinitely, while the transition to a new generation is delayed without end.

The 12th Parliament exemplifies this trend quite clearly. We have noted the return of individuals who have previously occupied the highest offices in the government. Ephraim Kamuntu, Moses Ali, and Henry Tumukunde, who has served as a military officer, security chief, and cabinet minister, are back in Parliament once again. Similarly, Kahinda Otafiire, a veteran of the Bush War and a long-serving minister, has also bounced back into the Legislature after years in and out of frontline politics. While these individuals have made notable historical contributions, their repeated returns raise important questions about renewal and succession.

The more profound concern lies in how we prepare, organise, and showcase ourselves as a viable leadership alternative.



Edward Kazibwe
Leadership

These instances are not merely isolated occurrences; rather, they are indicative of a larger trend where long-serving politicians oscillate between Parliament, Cabinet positions, and temporary absences before making their return.

This normalisation of political comebacks clutters the political landscape and restricts opportunities for newcomers, especially young leaders who may lack established patronage networks or credentials from the liberation era. The implications of this trend are significant. The extended tenure of the same leaders hampers innovation, stifles policy discussions, and keeps institutions tethered to outdated priorities instead of adapting to contemporary realities. Consequently, the involvement of youth in politics tends to be largely symbolic, confined to superficial roles and rhetoric that lack genuine decision-making authority.

Nevertheless, a sincere dialogue requires us to engage in self-reflection. The challenge may not solely stem from the denial of space but also from the reality that, as young people, we may not have adequately claimed that space or done so with sufficient strategy. Simply having numbers does not translate to power. Demographics that lack organization, clarity, and discipline rarely succeed in changing established systems. The generation that took power in the 1980s did not passively wait for inclusion; it worked diligently, built networks, articulated a clear vision, and was willing to make sacrifices. In contrast, contemporary youth movements are often fragmented, divided by political affiliations, personality cults, short-lived activism, or social media outrage that fades as quickly as it ignites. We are outspoken but not always unified.

This presents a challenging yet essential assertion that we must change our approach. The more profound concern lies in how we prepare, organize, and showcase ourselves as a viable leadership alternative. We need to evaluate whether we are sufficiently investing in ideology, policy development, grassroots initiatives, and long-term institutional growth.

This does not exempt the political establishment from accountability. Gatekeeping is a tangible reality, and the obstacles to youth engagement, financial, legal, and cultural are considerable.

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