

LETTER OF THE DAY

Uganda continues to speak of national dialogue but rarely convenes one

Every few years in Uganda, the notion of a national dialogue re-emerges in the public arena. It surfaces at conferences, finds expression in newspaper commentary, and gains urgency during periods of political tension.

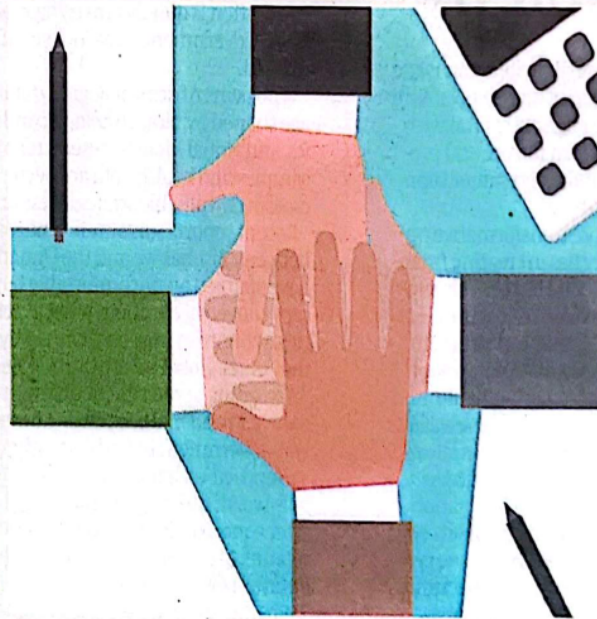
Civil society organisations advocate it. Religious leaders lend their moral voice to it. Political actors debate its timing and scope. And then, almost as predictably the discussion subsides.

Uganda thus occupies a somewhat curious position: the principle of national dialogue enjoys broad rhetorical acceptance, yet its practical realisation remains elusive. The question is no longer whether dialogue is desirable. Across much of the political spectrum there is tacit agreement that it is. The more consequential question is why the idea seldom advances beyond discussion.

Part of the explanation lies in political power itself. Historically, governments that have exercised authority for extended periods often grow wary of processes that might redistribute influence. A national dialogue does precisely that. By bringing together opposition actors, civil society organisations, and state institutions, it expands the arena within which political decisions are negotiated.

Once that arena widens, decisions previously shaped by a narrow circle of actors become subject to broader deliberation. For political systems accustomed to highly centralised authority, such a shift can appear unsettling.

Political thought has long recognised this tension. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, the philosopher Frantz Fanon observed that systems of domination frequently sustain themselves by fragmenting socie-



ty and discouraging the emergence of collective political consciousness. Likewise, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire argued that genuine dialogue possesses a transformative quality precisely because it enables people to recognise shared conditions and begin interrogating the structures that shape their lives. In this sense, dialogue is not merely conversation. It is a political process.

Uganda's own political trajectory since 1986 offers some perspective on these dynamics. Over time, debates concerning national dialogue, political conferences, and broader forms of political inclusion have periodically surfaced without maturing into sustained national processes. Instead, Uganda's political system has largely remained organised around a strongly centralised executive structure.

When tensions arise, they are frequently managed through negotiation with individual actors or particular groups rather than through an inclusive na-

tional forum. Such an approach can produce short-term calm. Yet it does not necessarily resolve deeper political questions.

The consequences are visible in the contemporary political landscape. Mistrust between political parties endures. Regional grievances occasionally reappear. Electoral cycles frequently conclude with unresolved disputes. None of these challenges are uniquely Ugandan; they appear in many political systems. What differs is the way societies choose to address them.

Comparative experience suggests that countries which postpone dialogue often find themselves compelled to undertake it later under more difficult circumstances. Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, Sudan, and Sri Lanka illustrate different variations of this pattern. Dialogue eventually occurs, but typically after tensions have intensified and the space for compromise has narrowed considerably.

Uganda is not inevitably destined for such a trajectory. The country continues to display

considerable social cohesion in many areas and has avoided some of the more violent ruptures that have affected parts of the region. Yet cohesion is most durable when citizens feel a sense of shared ownership over the national political project.

That sense of ownership is not easily generated through appointments alone. From time to time, opposition figures assume positions within government, and such developments are occasionally presented as evidence of political inclusion.

Yet inclusion through individual appointments differs fundamentally from a structured national dialogue. One incorporates individuals into an existing arrangement; the other re-examines the political settlement itself.

As Uganda gradually approaches an eventual political transition, whether in the near or more distant future, questions about the country's political architecture are likely to return to the centre of national debate. Discussions surrounding a Government of National Unity may again emerge as one possible pathway toward a more inclusive political order.

Should that moment arrive, it will require careful preparation, broad participation, and clearly defined institutional frameworks. Dialogue is most effective when undertaken deliberately rather than hurriedly, and when designed to address enduring structural questions rather than immediate political pressures.

For now, Uganda remains a country in which the language of dialogue is widely understood. The enduring challenge is translating that language into political practice.

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