Letters

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Why Bobi Wine cannot be Uganda's Mandela

On February 1st, 2026, columnist Philip Matogo suggested in the *Sunday Monitor* that "Bobi Wine could become a Mandela". Though his analysis is not without reasons, the comparison may sound flattering, yet it is misplaced. To equate Robert Kyagulanyi, alias Bobi Wine, with Nelson Mandela is to diminish the towering legacy of the anti-apartheid icon, whose leadership was defined not only by resistance but by reconciliation, inclusivity, and values that transcended personal struggle.

Uganda's political trajectory has been shaped by post-independence turbulence—Milton Obote's contested rule, Idi Amin's dictatorship, and President Museveni's admission that the corrupt are powerful and his lenient stance toward them, likely grounded in the belief that time itself could stop corruption and rehabilitate offenders.

Unlike South Africa's racial apartheid, Uganda's challenge has been corruption and tribal divisions encouraged by political players across the divide. Any leader aspiring to Mandela's mantle must rise above these fissures.

The anti-apartheid hero's greatness was never measured by the length of his imprisonment. It was defined by the values he carried through those years and into leadership: forgiveness, magnanimity, and the courage to embrace even his fiercest opponents. He sought to unite black South Africans across tribal lines and to build bridges with the white minority that had enforced apartheid. Under his guidance, the African National Congress became a broad movement, accommodating diverse voices and races.

Mandela's presidency was marked not by vengeance but by reconciliation, setting a standard of leadership that remains unmatched. His influence extended far beyond South Africa, earning him the Nobel Peace Prize and guiding the Truth and Reconciliation Commission—symbols of healing that inspired movements across the world.

Kyagulanyi presents a very different picture. To his credit, he has galvanised Uganda's youth, given voice to urban frustrations, and challenged entrenched corruption. His rise reflects genuine discontent among marginalised groups. Yet charisma alone does not equate to Mandela's reconciliatory statesmanship. His National Unity Platform (NUP) has struggled to project itself as a national party, fielding candidates in most parliamentary constituencies. Yet the tribal undertones of his support remain visible, amplified by social media videos that he and his NUP party have failed to condemn. His rhetoric has often been confrontational, at times declaring himself a "rebel" and even calling for the release of an arrested ADF [Allied Democratic Forces] commander—statements that blur the line between democratic opposition and sympathy for insurgency. Such conduct distances him from Mandela's reconciliatory model and reinforces government claims that NUP is destabilising rather than unifying.

It must be acknowledged that the Ugandan state has sometimes acted excessively, whether provoked or not, but as a preemptive measure. In the face of repression, Mandela chose forgiveness and reconciliation, elevating himself above the fray. Kyagulanyi has not demonstrated such restraint, and his politics remain defined more by confrontation than by magnanimity.

In Uganda's own history, President Museveni's liberation struggle and international stature have sometimes drawn parallels to Mandela.

Dr Kizza Besigye, a former army officer and long-time Opposition leader, who has challenged Museveni for decades with resilience that earned him respect across the political spectrum, has yet been labeled Uganda's Mandela. This underscores how rare and demanding that mantle truly is.

Mandela's mantle is not easily earned. To force that comparison onto Kyagulanyi is to lessen what Mandela truly stood for. Uganda deserves leaders who embody Mandela's values of unity, reconciliation, and institution-building.

The task before Uganda is not to replicate Mandela, but to cultivate leadership that rises above tribalism and authoritarianism to forge a truly inclusive future.

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