

A republic of arrival

Uganda found itself once again debating luxury vehicles associated with the former Speaker of Parliament. Some Ugandans were indignant, others rushed to defend the purchases, while some argued that politicians should be allowed to enjoy the rewards of their offices.

Beneath these reactions, however, lay a deeper question: why does a car like Rolls-Royce, so quickly become an issue? After all, a car is only a machine but anyone who has lived in Uganda knows that a car arrives before its owner does.

At a burial, people notice where it parks. At church they notice who steps out of it, at a wedding reception, the vehicle often introduces the person before character has had a chance to speak. I want to argue that Uganda is becoming a republic of arrival, a society increasingly preoccupied with the visible signs of "having made it" while

temptation to turn prosperity into display. In my own opinion, display will always be there. But the problem begins when display becomes the main language.

One of the central puzzles of modern Uganda is that we have become skilled at accumulating objects, yet remain weak at forming a citizenry. A country cannot be judged only by the things it builds. It must also be judged by the kind of people it produces.

I have heard stories dating decades back about the civic psyche in the 1960s. The generation that inherited independence faced immense difficulties. The country was poor. Institutions were young. The future was uncertain. They struggled with regional tensions and political instability but there existed, at least inspiration tied to nation-building.

A public office carried a public promise. To become a public officer was, in some sense, to become responsible for something larger than oneself. Today, something subtle has changed. Many people now seek a public office not to enlarge the republic, but to escape its burdens. The dream is to get a public office, build houses, send children abroad and gradually insulate oneself from the failures that others must endure.

This is the moral architecture of arrival. The politician who arrives in a convoy is often acting out a script that society already understands. When Parliament allocates millions of shillings towards cars for MPs, it is also communicating a social message. We encounter versions of the same script every day. We often admire visibility before contribution. We often ask, "What does he drive?" "Where does she live?" before asking, "What does she stand for?"

I believe a society that admires status should not be surprised when its leaders become fluent in the language they understand, the language of display. This explains why corruption becomes easier to admire and justify. We condemn extravagance in public, but often envy it in private.

We denounce excess when it belongs to an opponent, but celebrate it when it belongs to a relative or someone from our own tribe. This is why the issue cannot be reduced to one person, one car, or one institution. Beneath us lies a deeper national moral disorder, the confusion of public office with display and personal arrival. That is one of the central dilemmas of Uganda's public life. True human development begins when citizens care about a road they may never use but rather for posterity.

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Simon Okwir Kahaibale
Mindset

paying less attention to the civic and moral foundations that make society meaningful.

Politics is often made visible before it is made useful. It is visible in the politician's convoy, imported iPads, children sent to foreign schools, expensive branded dresses etc. These signs of arrival are not uniquely Ugandan. They belong to the human condition.

Every society that experiences economic changes from poverty eventually confronts the

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