'How we escaped electoral chaos in Kazo-Angola'

Heavy military deployment, low voter turnout and rising tension turned Kazo-Angola polling station in Kawempe North into a pressure cooker, as election day slipped from uneasy calm into chaos marked by teargas, gunshots and a late-night evacuation.

BY ABDUL-NASSER SSEMUGABI

The military presence around Kazo-Angola polling station in Kawempe North on the day of the general elections was conspicuous. A white pick-up truck parked on the narrow, steep, rough ghetto road, carrying armed soldiers in green camouflage. Minutes after 3pm, a silver one patrolled the road, briefly, and parked.

"Tujja kukabanja, musaaga!" (You're joking. We must demand our victory), a boda-boda man riding past, shouted. But the soldiers did not mind him. Both vehicles were cellotaped on both front doors and number plates to conceal their identity. But the uncovered parts of the plates were blue—a colour associated with other agencies, not police, army, or prisons.

I had spent most of my day in Kawempe South but had mostly seen police officers. Yusuf Nampala, a Radio Simba journalist, who grew up in Kawempe and voted from Bwaise, concurred: "Kawempe North is different."

By 4pm—with an additional hour to end the voting—we chatted with the residents in their compounds bordering the Kazo-Angola polling station.

Soon, two armed soldiers walked on Bosa's Road, a narrow stretch of about 100 metres hosting this polling station, and rested nearby, watching the voting from an aerial view. They talked quietly. Even when the counting started, they did not move.

The Kawempe North by-election in March 2025 turned this constituency into a war zone, with Kazo-Angola one of the places where security personnel brutalised Opposition candidates, civilians and journalists. And on January 15, 2026, one first-time voter feared a repeat: "I see signs of the violence we suffered," he said. "There are too many soldiers. I doubt they will leave us in peace. That is why very few voters have turned up. They are scared."

Indeed, the turnout was low, about 30 percent at this station of more than 7,000 registered voters. Other places in Kawempe were not different.

Chaos brewing

The youth of Kawempe Republic had painfully stayed 20 metres away from the polling area after casting their votes—a new directive that dominated pre-election debate. During the counting, which started at 5:15pm, they looked mean and focused but could not tell a valid vote from an invalid one, even from the nearest counting point. Or a vote for any candidate in the race.

They had formed a human wall at the main exit to this polling area as three armed military men stood before them, at zero distance on the left, and three armed policemen in blue stood about two metres away on the right. I moved closer to take a photo. But, "safety over story," I remembered our trainers' warning. I stopped.

The youth could not move forward. Later, they refused to move backward.

But in the middle of this polling station, the 20-metre rule was impossible. People on their verandahs were barely 10 metres away from the polling area. When Faridah Nambi, the NRM contestant for Kawempe North, got just 27 votes, the women clapped for her. "*Oyo alinze kulayira*" (She's only waiting to swear in), they said, of course, sarcastically. They were fans of NUP's Elias Nalukoola, who got 116.

"I would go for a second circumcision if Museveni gets even 40 votes here," one man swore. Museveni got 35, NUP's Robert Kyagulanyi 112. NUP fans cheered the results that reflected the general picture of this polling station.

The polling officers should be neutral, but reading the room is such a safety tool. During the counting, they alternated the names of favourite candidates just to up the vibe. Even naturally low-pitch speakers adjusted to please the voters.

Colours associated with particular parties or candidates were almost forbidden at polling stations. But an opposition agent dressed in a red Arsenal jersey roamed free all day.

But as daylight slowly slid beneath the new night, security officers worried more.

"Hurry up, I give you less than five minutes. Otherwise, we will leave you here," a policeman ordered a presiding officer who still had to write three copies of the presidential candidates' declaration of results forms by hand, while standing. It was 8:08 pm. The LED solar lamps dim after just an hour of service, the darkness only slightly disturbed by phone torches of polling agents.

At 8:21pm, a young police officer showed NUP agent supervisor a summary of the presidential results from all 13 tally desks here, handwritten on a piece of paper plucked out of an exercise book. As my phone provided the light, it caught the paper on video. Museveni had 374 votes, Kyagulanyi 1,519.

I had seen three other policemen noting results.

"It's our duty," the police officer said.

"We want to minimise the possibility of chaos."

QUICK NOTES

Location:
Kazo-Angola polling station, Kawempe North, Kampala.

Date: January 15, 2026 (General Elections).

Turnout: About 30 percent of more than 7,000 registered voters at the station.

Security presence:
Armed soldiers and police deployed throughout voting, counting and declaration of results.

Key candidates' results at Kazo-Angola:

Yoweri Museveni: 374 votes

Robert Kyagulanyi (NUP): 1,519 votes.

Elias Nalukoola (NUP): 116 votes.

Faridah Nambi (NRM): 27 votes.

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