

LETTER OF THE DAY

Knowledge of the law is not for lawyers only

Throughout this week, Makerere University will be holding its 76th graduation ceremony. Among the thousands who will be graduating is the 53rd class of law that I am privileged and honoured to be a part of. For many who will be graduating, the next step is employment and work.

Over the four years at undergraduate in the study of Law, I have come to appreciate one simple truth. It is that everyone needs the law in one way or the other.

Often times, it is the general perception of people that the law operates only within the confines of courtrooms and thick volumes on library shelves. Others perceive it as a reserve for a particular class of individuals.

On the contrary, the law is a sharp tool that can be used for social engineering. Its operation and need is omnipresent in the terms on which we exist in society through the relationships and transactions that we encounter on a basic and daily level.

There is a need to increase the general awareness of the law among the general population, more so among the young people.

To achieve this, two things can be done. First is that there either has to be a deliberate inclusion of legal related subjects into the Ugandan curriculum at all education levels or more have a more targeted approach through media in user simplified versions for easy comprehension by the ordinary Ugandan.

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) have played a huge part in this second aspect. However, the shrinking civic space has added a huge limitation on their operation and effectiveness.



The third aspect can include individual effort from those in the legal profession to increase awareness of the law and how to abide by it. This can only be done by those in the legal profession and it involves, to some extent, a level of individual sacrifice.

I think legal literacy is a fundamental skill just like every other subject that there is. Its importance lies in the ability of the general population to understand their basic rights and responsibilities not only as citizens but as human beings too.

Indeed, this is the constitutional duty that Article 4 of the 1995 Constitution of the Republic of Uganda places on the State. Article 4 requires the State to actively ensure citizens know, understand, and appreciate the Constitution by mandating the government to translate and widely distribute it in Ugandan languages, integrate its teaching in schools and armed forces training institutions, and consistently promote constitutional awareness through media programmes.

Three decades later, it is fair to ask whether this constitutional obligation has been fulfilled. In this regard, one would expect that as a basic, for example, schools are provided with or required to have simplified and original copies of the Constitution so that learners can engage with it at an early age or that national media has constant programmes specifically targeted to ensure dissemination of constitutional information and knowledge.

There is also a question of the accessibility of the translated versions of the Constitution in the different indigenous languages. This status quo contributes to the existent legal and constitutional illiteracy among the general population and its adverse effects at an individual and societal level.

The goal of increasing legal awareness is to build on the civic power that citizens have so as to ensure they understand the law, how the legal system operates and are thus less vulnerable to intimidation by procedure or misguidance that is

fuelled by misinformation.

In the famous words of former presidential candidate Mubarak Munyagwa, a lawyer is no ordinary person. After four years in law school, I am inclined to agree with him. However, this is not because of the sometimes unnecessary prestige and pomp that comes with the profession but rather, it's because of moral responsibility that accrues to one upon attaining this legal education.

Legal education equips us with the knowledge to not only understand how power is structured and limited but also about the relevance of rights, their corresponding obligations and the relevance of strict adherence to constitutionalism, regardless of how uncomfortable it seems to be, more so the powers that be.

The development of Uganda in all respects does not only depend on economic growth, but true social economic transformation lies heavily on the strength of institutions and respect for the rule of law.

This goes back to the starting point of legal and civic awareness among people. For this particular reason, there has never been a greater need for principled and courageous practitioners of law, more so during such times that are marked by huge divide between the demands of the law and institutional practice.

This is the obligation that every one graduating carries with them. This calls us to help demystify the law, to widen access to justice, and to defend constitutional values even when it is inconvenient. Congratulations to all those graduating from the 53rd class of Law and Makerere University at large!

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