

Cabinet posts: Fallacy of group 'eating'

With every announcement of a new Cabinet or reshuffle, there are questions about which ethnic group has 'eaten' big or what regions took bigger, better portfolios. It is called sharing the 'national cake', but it is fallacious.

In the latest Cabinet appointments that President Museveni announced this week, there have been reports of protests from groups that ostensibly got short-changed, for example, the Muslim community and the Bagisu of eastern Uganda.

The fallacy is that an appointment to Cabinet represents access to the national cake for the entire community of the appointed person. This is one of the tragedies of postcolonial Africa – viewing appointments to government or holding a powerful public position as an avenue for group access to resources.

It is a widely held perception, but the reality does not always square with the expectation. Cabinet composition should reflect the country's regions, religions and ethnic diversity, but this is far from expecting some cosmetic balancing and representation.

A minister is appointed to serve the country, not their village or district, not their region or religion. Better, they do not have the power to channel resources or development projects exclusively to their favoured community, if they did, it would be classic corruption!

The iron sheets (*mabaati*) scandal is a good recent illustration of this pathology of ministers as potential conduits for resources. Several ministers had their hands in the till of iron sheets meant for distribution to the wretched of Karamoja. They used their ministerial powers and influence to get a share of what they were ineligible for, doing so illegally and to the detriment of the target community.

A few of the ministers did distribute the iron sheets to groups and institutions, including faith-based ones, among their co-ethnics.

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Others put them to personal use, with one minister roofing a shelter for his goats!

Once the scandal exploded into the open, there was a stampede to return the iron sheets to the Office of the Prime Minister. But only one accused minister was prosecuted, convicted and is serving time in prison. Everyone else walked free.

In the broader scheme of things, there is no compelling evidence to suggest that a ministerial appointment leads to development outcomes in a district or region, nor improved wellbeing for a religious community.

Mr Amama Mbabazi, once famously a super-minister, was simultaneously the minister of Security, Attorney General and minister for Justice, Attorney General and minister for Justice and Constitutional Affairs. He was also a very powerful secretary general of the ruling NRM party. Later, he became prime minister. But Kanungu, where he hailed, was never one of the most developed districts in Uganda by any measure or indicator.

Consider Bugisu, where *Daily Monitor* reported that citizens are unhappy with their representation in the latest Cabinet lineup. James Wapakhabulo (bless his soul) chaired the Constituent Assembly (CA) that passed the 1995 Constitution. In 1996, he emerged

as the Number Three in Uganda's power hierarchy as Speaker of Parliament. Later, he was National Political Commissar, and finally minister of Foreign Affairs before he died in 2004. Bugisu has not had someone as politically powerful as Wapa. Yet, it's hard to argue that the sub-region thrived or had noticeable development, including physical infrastructure, between 1994 and 2004 than since then.

Contemporaneous with the late Wapa, Sylvester Wanjuzi Wasieba was minister of State for Works, but Bugisu did not get tarmacked roads or improved standards of living. In fact, in Wasieba's backyard of Manafwa District, part of which he represented in the CA and 6th Parliament (Bubulo West), the very first inch of tarmac arrived there in 2022, more than two decades since he was a minister!

Ms Irene Muloni was Energy minister for a decade, but Bugisu, or even her district of Bulambuli, did not top the nation in rural electrification.

The notion of sharing the nation-cake through Cabinet appointments is overrated, more illusory than real. Beyond appearances of representation, there is hardly any substance.

Ms Jessica Alupo has been Vice President for five years. Mr Edward Ssekandi was Speaker of Parliament for nearly 10 years, then Vice President for a decade. Katakwi and Bukoto in Masaka are not booming with development. They don't have the best-performing schools in the country and are not markedly better than Bugisu, which hasn't had a powerful Cabinet appointee in a while!

Part of the regressive politics of NRM rule over the decades is conjuring up the illusion that a minister and an MP are chief development officers to engineer socioeconomic transformation in their ancestral regions.

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