Opinion

Uganda's political destiny cannot be written abroad



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A quiet tension often runs through Uganda's political debate. It becomes most visible during election seasons, especially when the results disappoint one side of the political divide. At such moments, the struggle sometimes shifts beyond the country's own political arena.

Instead of remaining within Uganda's institutions and public discourse, some actors appeal to foreign governments and international bodies in the hope that external pressure might reshape the country's leadership. This idea has appeared repeatedly in Uganda's political conversation, resurfacing whenever domestic disagreements grow sharper and political frustrations deepen.

Yet, this instinct raises an important question about sovereignty and political maturity. Can the future of a nation truly be negotiated in distant capitals simply because its internal disputes are framed in moral language? And if citizens begin to believe that political change must arrive through outside intervention rather than through their own institutions, what happens to the responsibility that comes with citizenship? A society that consistently looks outward for solutions may gradually weaken its own democratic foundations.

History offers some perspective. On March 24, 1998, US president Bill Clinton visited Uganda during a wider tour of Africa. One memorable moment took place in Mukono, where he met Peace Corps volunteers and Ugandan leaders at Kisawera Primary School. The visit reflected a period when Africa was drawing renewed international attention. Yet even then, some observers quietly hoped that such a high-profile visit might influence Uganda's domestic politics.

That expectation soon faded. Washington's engagement with Kampala remained guided more by long-term partnerships and regional considerations than by Uganda's internal political disputes.

A few years later, the argument appeared again in a different form. On May 23, 2005, opposition leader Dr Kizza Besigye urged Western donors to link financial support to political reforms in Uganda. The proposal suggested that outside leverage could encourage change at home. But international diplomacy rarely moves according to such hopes. While discussions followed and some donors expressed concern, Uganda's political direction continued to be shaped mainly by internal forces rather than external pressure. Domestic institutions, however imperfect, remained the primary arena where Uganda's political future unfolded.

The same pattern has appeared again in recent years. After elections, opposition figures have sometimes travelled abroad seeking sanctions or diplomatic action against the Ugandan government. A notable moment came on February 12, 2026, when the European Parliament discussed Uganda's political climate and the treatment of opposition actors. Such debates can attract global attention and amplify political narratives beyond Uganda's borders. Yet attention does not always translate into decisive intervention.

The reason is straightforward. In international relations, countries rarely act only as moral referees. Foreign policy is shaped first by national interests, strategic partnerships and concerns about stability. Values may influence diplomacy, but they are rarely the only factor guiding decisions.

Uganda's position in East Africa reflects this reality. For many years, the country has played a significant role in regional security co-operation. Ugandan troops were among the first deployed in 2007 under the African Union mission in Somalia, helping push back the militant group al-Shabaab and restore stability to Mogadishu.

This contribution influenced how Western governments viewed Uganda. Kampala came to be seen not only through the lens of domestic politics, but also as a partner in maintaining regional security and counter-terrorism efforts.

Because of this role, external powers often approach Uganda with caution. They may raise concerns about governance or human rights, yet they are also aware of the country's role in maintaining regional stability. As a result, diplomatic engagement tends to balance criticism with co-operation.

In the end, Uganda's future cannot be written in distant corridors of power. It must be shaped within the country itself, among the citizens whose lives are most affected by its political decisions.

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