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BY PHILIP WAFULA

What was meant to be a solemn afternoon of prayer at Rubaga Cathedral in the capital Kampala turned into a storm of controversy.

Ms Winnie Byanyima, the wife of jailed Opposition politician Kizza Besigye, alleged that President Museveni ordered the postponement of special prayers that had been organised for her jailed husband at Rubaga Cathedral.

Ms Byanyima claimed the prayers were stopped despite congregants already being present for an earlier Mass, describing the move as an attempt to suppress solidarity with her detained and ailing spouse.

The prayers, which were meant to start at 2pm, were postponed, with the Catholic Church yet to issue a statement. However, when Ms Byanyima took to the dais, she blamed President Museveni for the last-minute cancellation of prayers for her husband.

"I was called on Sunday by Archbishop (of Kampala Diocese), Paul Ssemogerere, who told me that he [had] received a call from President Museveni, asking him to cancel the Mass," Ms Byanyima told a congregation of mainly Opposition politicians and journalists yesterday.

According to the Order of Mass, Archbishop Ssemogerere was supposed to be the chief celebrant.

She added: "I pleaded for the Mass to proceed partly because of tradition. We were married here (in the Catholic Church), and that is why I came to pray for Besigye during this Lent period."

Per her account, President Museveni reportedly relented, but asked that the Mass be postponed to another day, citing fears that it could be political.

Ms Byanyima then asked the congregation three times if there was anyone among them who was a priest, but no affirmative answer came through.

"So, we are unable to have Mass because of the presidential order. However, let us pray quietly, but this is the first time in my many years to see a Head of State ordering that a citizen isn't prayed for," she said before leading prayer, after which congregants exited the Church.

Efforts to get a comment from the presidential press secretary hit a brick wall as calls and messages to him went unanswered by press time. President Museveni was, therefore, unable to defend himself on the allegations.

Our attempts to cross-check Ms Byanyima's claim with the spokesperson of Kampala Diocese, Fr Joseph Mukibi, did not bear fruit as he neither answered nor returned our repeated calls by press time.

Ms Byanyima said the prayers were meant to "ease the pain of political prisoners, including her husband, and bring them before the Lord."

Yet as congregants filed into the pews, they were met with an eerie silence, with the Catholic priests conspicuously absent from the altar. It was only then that the penny dropped; the Mass had been postponed.

Immediately after taking their seats, the former Kamuli District chairperson, Ms Proscovia Salaam Musumba, called for calm, saying "a few things were being figured out," even when it became apparently clear that the Mass was not going to take place.

How 'call from above' ruined Besigye Mass



THE CASE

Dr Kizza Besigye, accompanied by his long-term ally, Mr Obeid Lutale, was on November 16, 2024, arrested in Nairobi, Kenya, where he had gone to attend the launch of a book by the country's Opposition politician, Ms Martha Karua. Four days later, the pair re-emerged in Uganda, arraigned before the General Court. Martial in Makindye, a Kampala City suburb, charged with being found with two pistols and ammunition, and seeking to buy weapons from foreigners in Geneva, Athens, and Kenya. They denied all charges and were remanded to Luzira Prison, where they have remained for the past 15 months.

In attendance were the outgoing Kampala Lord Mayor, Mr Erias Lukwago, Kenyan lawyer and Opposition politician Martha Karua, former Buganda Katikiro (premier) Mulwanyamuli Ssemogerere, the Leader of the Opposition in Parliament (LoP), Mr Joel Ssenyonyi, former LoP Philip Wafula Oguttu, National Unity Platform (NUP) Secretary General David Lewis Rubongoya and NUP's treasurer, Mr Benjamin Katana.

As congregants made their way out of the cathedral, there was a police presence in the church's parking lot, further reinforcing the postponement of the Mass.

Mr Rubongoya described Mr Museveni's alleged cancellation of the Mass as "shameful," adding: "Luckily, Ugandans know the captivity our country is currently in, but we shall overcome."

Mr Lukwago expressed dissatisfaction with President Museveni's purported interference in the leadership of the Catholic Church, saying his alleged conduct, which he described as "abhorrent," invites condemnation from all Ugandans, and not just the People's Front for Freedom (FFF) party to which Dr Besigye belongs.

Mr Ssenyonyi said Mr Museveni "fears" the Catholic Church that he had to allegedly call the Archbishop to cancel the Mass.

"Ugandans should know that the regime is full of cowards, but I urge you (citizens) to keep pushing for reforms," he said, describing as "shocking" that Mr Museveni, who claims to have got 71 per cent of the votes in the January 15 presidential poll, is afraid of people attending Mass.

The NUP deputy president for western Uganda, Ms Jolly Jacklyn Tukumushaba, said she was "disappointed" because she had come to pray for a fellow prisoner. The Chief Magistrate's Court in Kabale recently released her on bail after spending nearly a month in detention over allegedly inciting violence.

Ms Byanyima had earlier on rallied Ugandans, particularly women, to throng Rubaga Cathedral for the prayers.

The former National Resistance Movement/Army (NRM/A) combatant, along with her husband during the five-year guerilla war that ushered President Museveni into power, said they fought tooth

and nail to bring women into political decision-making and public space, but such space has shrunk.

"If women want to have an independent voice or want to speak freely and be critical, they are gagged lest they be punished," she said on NTV, a sister media company, adding that today, Ugandans have lost much of what they gained

A TV screen at Rubaga Cathedral shows the postponement of prayers for Dr Kizza Besigye yesterday. PHOTO/ABUBAKER LUBOWA

when they were in an armed struggle against the dictatorship.

Ms Byanyima added: "The women who participated in NRM/NRA war were mostly peasant women, not even educated, but respectful girls, young women from Luvuvu Triangle, who were given the opportunity to serve in both combatant and non-combat roles."

"Even in the NRC (the first parliament after the war), you found there a woman like Capt Zizinga who didn't have much formal education, but was a member. So, there was respect for women's rights, empowerment of women, and bringing them into governance."

Ms Byanyima said the prayers were meant to draw everyone regardless of their religious denomination or political party affiliation.

"If you care about human rights and about these prisoners, come and pray with us at Rubaga Cathedral Holy Mass at 2pm," she said, adding that the prayers were for the alleged injustice against all political prisoners.

Ms Byanyima, however, regretted that lately, the language of the people with power has reportedly degenerated into insults, humiliation, and violence.

Besigye's health

Ms Byanyima described Dr Besigye's health as "being of serious concern to his family, friends and political network," saying she visited him twice last week and he reportedly told her that he has developed "an allergic reaction."

"He is continuously coughing, and the coughing saps his energy and he loses his voice. That is why he is unable to meet some of his guests some of these days. We are concerned about his health and angry that he has been denied bail four times," Ms Byanyima said.

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