

Uganda Law Society decries Nigerian lawyer humiliation

BY ANTHONY WESAKA

KAMPALA. The Uganda Law Society (ULS) has expressed solidarity with the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA) following a controversial incident in which a Nigerian lawyer was allegedly humiliated in court after being ordered to kneel by a judge.

In a strongly worded statement, ULS president Isaac Ssemakadde condemned the directive issued by Justice Mohammed Umar of the Federal High Court in Abuja, describing it as a violation of professional dignity and the rule of law.

The incident occurred during proceedings involving activist Omoyele Sowore, where his lawyer, Marshall Abubakar, reportedly refused to comply with the judge's order to kneel. The directive is said to have followed a request by the defence team for a longer adjournment after the prosecution indicated it had closed its case.

Mr Ssemakadde, writing from exile, said the actions of the court amounted to judicial overreach and should be widely condemned.

"No judge possesses the lawful power to order a legal practitioner to kneel. That directive was not discipline; it was humiliation," he said, aligning the ULS with the NBA's position that such conduct undermines due process and erodes confidence in the justice system.

He warned that the incident goes beyond an individual affront, arguing that it sends a chilling message to the legal profession and the public.

"When a judge compels an advocate to kneel before the court, he wounds the entire profession, chills fearless advocacy, and signals to every citizen that justice is dispensed by fear, not reason," he added.

Mr Ssemakadde further argued that the incident reflects a broader pattern across several African jurisdictions, where he said judicial authority is sometimes exercised in ways that intimidate lawyers.

He cited his own experience, noting that he was last year convicted in absentia by the High Court in Kampala for "scandalising the judiciary," an offence he said has been used to suppress dissent within the legal profession.

"This is not a Nigerian aberration. It is a continental pattern... where we see bullying rhetoric, forced displays of submission disguised as decorum, and the continued use of archaic laws to silence critics," he said.

He warned that such trends risk undermining the independence of lawyers and weakening the administration of justice, as some practitioners abandon litigation out of fear of reprisals from the bench. The ULS's stance adds to growing criticism of the Abuja incident, with legal bodies calling for respect for professional conduct, judicial restraint, and adherence to the principles of fairness and dignity in court proceedings.