

Debate is the thing: The colour, pomp and the lighter side

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KAMPALA. The day was Saturday, February 13, and the venue was Kampala Serena Hotel. A page of our country's electoral episode was inscribed. For the first time since 1962 at least a 1,500 audience and millions of television viewers globally watched men and (a) woman seeking to occupy Uganda's number one office package and present their vision of a better country.

That, could not have come easy, outgoing Soroti Municipality MP Mike Mukula claimed on Twitter it was the first time a sitting African president engaged in a presidential debate.

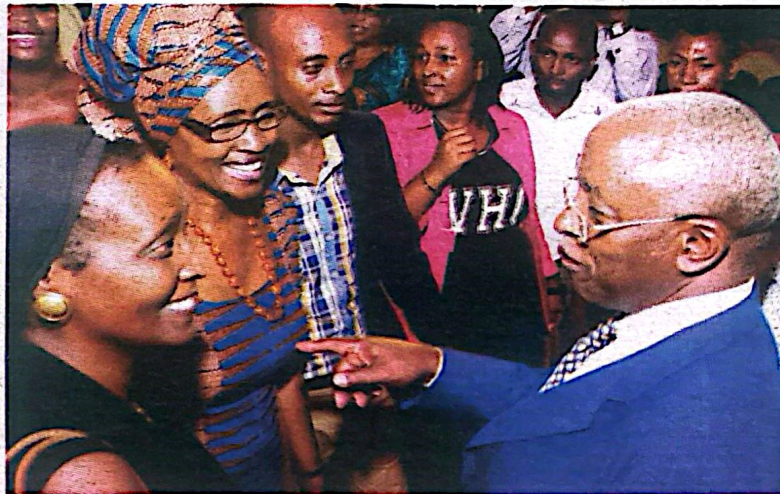
Unlike the inaugural debate, you felt Mr Museveni's presence in the men and women with *walkie talkies* with overbearing ammunition, draped in army fatigues, shoving here and there, taking charge of the atmosphere.

You smelt the President's attendance in the air, in the red carpet lined up for the eight presidential candidates and when he came at 6:56pm, the elders and religious leaders walked out.

Never mind Dr Besigye clad in a flowery blue shirt and black trousers, who dashed from Namboole stadium and came late with wife Winnie Byanyima, had not arrived.

You touched the president's presence in the hall, when his suave monster car rolled in and the audience, waiting for two hours roared in excitement and anxiety.

At this moment the vibe of a presi-



Mr Mbabazi (R) chats with Winnie Byanyima (2L) after the debate. PHOTOS BY D. BUKENYA.

dential debate had come to life.

Byanyima's appearance, surprising to some even in the FDC inner circles, added a touch of enthusiasm as she accompanied Besigye for a pre-debate presser, whispering at one point into his ear.

When she made her way to the hall, with lighting systems and decorations on the mark, the Oxfam International executive director, whose father Mzee Boniface Byanyima was in attendance, exuded elegance. She looked sharp and fresh, coating her mellow sweetness of a smiley face with the FDC victory sign.

First Lady Janet Museveni, who has been by Museveni's side on the campaign trail, was missing in the row of cream seats set aside for spouses of the candidates as was Ms Jacqueline

Mbabazi's, who fell ill at the beginning of the campaigns.

But the two erstwhile political allies didn't miss a moment to mellow the heart. In one of the breaks, Mr Museveni who sat next to Maureen Kyalya clad in African attire, patting her back, whispering sweet nothings and sending her fits of giggles with a tinge of shyness.

At one point, the former presidential aide on poverty alleviation in Busoga looked star struck, sticking palm to cheek, elbow to leg and looked on in awe as Museveni made his submissions peppered with jabs and jibes at his competitors.

When they returned from the break, holding hands, Mr Mbabazi walked to Kyalya's seat, flashing his Go Forward symbol and pulled her

over, sending the audience into bouts of laughter at the rendition of a high school prom date.

He whispered into her ear and when she returned to her seat, Mr Museveni, as though to undo his former premier's work asked his aide to serve her tea.

He certainly felt home, stretching his leg as and whenever that afforded him comfort, summoning an aide from an entrance designated for him, for a white handkerchief, pen, paper and tea. And getting cheeky when it served his mood.

Enter Elton Joseph Mabirizi, the crowd's equivalent of Feste (the jester) in William Shakespeare's age old play *Twelfth Night* and cause of rib cracks. He came over an hour late only to tickle the audience.

"You know the protocol. The president always comes late," said the engineer, who boasted he is more of a doer than a talker, admitting his competitors had advantage over him in some areas.

Mr Mabirizi sometimes got stuck in the rough terrain of the English language, occasionally reducing himself to bouts of silence and frozen ideas trapped between lips in motion and a tongue churning no word.

Mr Museveni, as did other candidates and the audience seemed to have a treat of humor and budding comedy. At one point Mr Museveni, smiling and suppressing derisive laughter employed body language, signaling to the audience as he pointed at Mabirizi and implied to the audience, "he is empty" and asked them to clap for him.

"The President has offered to be my

senior presidential advisor," Kyalya said before Museveni quipped, "She said I should be her vice president but we settled for advisor."

She said she was ready to serve Uganda if NRM wins. Her singing of the songs attributed to the NRM candidate in her youthful years got the audience feeling she had assumed Mabirizi's 'humor candidate' role.

Aside from the glitch of echoes from microphones, sections of the audience had a bone to pick with the moderators. The organisers went for the high flying, with rich curriculum vitae and yet, at the end some missed KTN's Nancy Kacungira and BBC's Alan Kasujja.

Whether it was Museveni's condition that he take no question from Voice of America's Shaka Ssali who indeed asked the President no direct question and became an effigy of a man battling conscience, or Makerere University's Dr Suzie Muwanga long whining questions, archetypal of academic focus group discussions, short in follow up, or Dr Joel Kibazo's strict to the script questioning, the moderators will have some soul searching to do.

At one point they played safe, treading carefully on a potential explosion of the Museveni-Kizza Besigye contest, intervening as quick to calm cross examination.

The debate, as Justice James Ogoola recaptured it in his trademark poetic prowess of speech was the 'thing'. Save the audience booing Museveni, there was a display of emotional intelligence, restraint and fed into the debate organisers' heart and soul.