

The power a Speaker of Parliament

Analysts say Parliament holds the purse strings, appropriates funds, demands accountability, and keeps a watchful eye on government expenditure, with the Speaker expected to steer the ship.

BY SYLVIA WAFULA
& SYLVIA KATUSHAZE

Lawmakers in the 12th Parliament will today elect a Speaker and Deputy Speaker.

The Speaker of Parliament is the third-highest office in the land in order of precedence, and is one of the most powerful and revered offices in the country's governance structure.

Article 82 of the Constitution provides that there shall be a Speaker and Deputy Speaker of Parliament, who are elected by MPs from among their number.

The Speaker, who is the chairperson of the Parliamentary Commission, the Committee on Appointments, and the Business Committee, among others, chairs all sittings of Parliament and ensures debates are handled in accordance with the Rules of Procedure.

As head of the institution of the Legislature, the Speaker represents Parliament in its corporate relations and may after consultation with the President, prorogue Parliament by proclamation.

The Speaker may also, by proclamation, appoint such a place and time within Uganda where Parliament shall sit.

The outgoing Speaker, Ms Anita Among, on May 17, took to her official X handle and said she was poised to leave office after serving only part of a five-year parliamentary term.

Ms Among became Deputy Speaker of Parliament on May 24, 2021, after being elected during the first sitting of the 11th Parliament at Kololo Ceremonial Grounds in Kampala. She later became Speaker on March 25, 2022, following the death of her predecessor, Jacob Oulanyah.

Her announcement ended days of speculation following security operations at her residences in Nakasero, Ki-gori, and Bukedea in Eastern Uganda, all linked to an ongoing State investigation into alleged corruption-related offences and claims of illicit enrichment.

But what does the role of a Speaker mean in the current political dispensation?

The Speaker performs official duties as stated above and unofficial functions, including presiding over private ceremonies, upon invitation, holds power in reality and practice, and to some extent determines who gets appointed, among other roles.

The Speaker does not ordinarily wade into debates and casts a vote only when duty calls, in line with parliamentary rules.

Prof Morris Ogenga Latigo, a former Leader of Opposition in Parliament, emphasised that the Speaker of Parliament bears the mantle of presiding over sittings, steering crucial committees such as the Committee on Appointments and the Business Committee, which sets the agenda of the House.

"The Speaker, as the presiding officer, is supposed to recognise that there are two sides to the house. Both sides must play the roles they play. The government side must advance the agenda of the government in power, while the Opposition side must check the government in

power. And that means that as a presiding officer, one must ensure those two roles are played," Prof Latigo said.

He lamented: "This used to happen a lot in our days, but now I hear things have changed a lot, some decisions are made by the Parliamentary Commission without consideration of the members of the commission, like the leader of Opposition."

Prof Latigo explained that the Commission, during its tenure, carefully weighed Parliament's budget, presented it before the Budget Committee for approval, and oversee appointments, promotions, and contracts.

"Normally, when we have a review of promotions, for example, there will be main applicants, and then the application will come to the parliamentary commission. And once it was before the parliamentary commission, then subcommittees will be formed to look at each of the elements of those applications. And then the report will come, and it is out of their report, and their affirmation by the parliamentary commission, that appointments, promotions, or contracts of retired staff would be granted. And the clerk would merely be directed to write. Now I hear people get appointments directed from the speaker," he said.

Ms Winnie Kiiza, a former Kasese District Woman Representative and Leader of Opposition, underscored the Speaker's role as the captain of the legislative ship. She noted that the Speaker ensures Parliament convenes, budgets are passed in rhythm with the cycle, motions sail through, and unity among members is maintained.

Ms Kiiza stressed that Parliament holds the purse strings, appropriates funds, demands accountability, and keeps a watchful eye on government expenditure.

"Office of the Speaker, in my opinion, they have done their work because there has never been a time when Parliament has not sat."

However, there are times when they sit, but they do not do their work. She added: "I remember when members really wanted to discuss the issue of corruption after the online Parliament exhibition, they were stifled from discussing that serious matter."

Ms Kiiza also observed that while the Speaker chairs the Parliamentary Commission - the body responsible for Parliament's welfare - some members, including the Leader of Opposition, have occasionally been left out in the cold when critical decisions were made.

"I hear the Leader of Opposition and other members of the Commission complaining that they would hear some things have been passed by the parliamentary commission, when they were not in the know," Ms Kiiza said.

Ms Alice Alaso, the former MP for Serere, explained that the Speaker's twin pillars of responsibility are managing the House's business and superintending over the Parliamentary Commission, which safeguards the institution and its staff.

"Ideally, those would be the two critical roles, but I like to take it a little further and simply say that we will not ex-



President Museveni hands over a mace to Ms Anita Among after she was elected Deputy Speaker on May 24, 2021, alongside Jacob Oulanyah who was voted Speaker on the same day. PHOTOS/Parliament of Uganda



President Museveni, who is also the NRM national chairman (centre) poses for a photo with the ruling party's candidates Jacob Oboth for the Speaker (left) and Thomas Tayebwa for Deputy Speaker in today's election, at State House Entebbe yesterday. PHOTO/COURTESY OF YOWERI MUSEVENI X HANDLE

pect much from the legislation that is pro-people because of the way the Parliament has now become merged with the Executive. It doesn't matter who the Speaker is, it's going to give us the same thing, bad laws, bad things," Ms Alaso said.

She argued that if given free rein, the Speaker should put Uganda first, guide legislation, representation, and the budget process with when critical decisions were made.

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"A Speaker comes from Members of Parliament, and most Members of Par-

liament and stripping the country of its most vital constitutional check against absolute Executive power.

This historical pattern of compromise is clearly illustrated by the legacy of the former Speaker, Rebecca Kadaga. While steering the house, Kadaga simultane-

ously sat as a top member of the NRM's powerful Central Executive Committee (CEC), creating an explicit obligation to advance party interests. Because her allegiance to the party machinery ultimately eclipsed her duty to parliamentary neutrality, she was instrumental in pushing through deeply controversial pieces of legislation that the vast majority of the country fiercely opposed."

Mr Kija stated that beyond inheriting the same CEC party obligations as Ms Kadaga, Ms Among actively engaged in deliberate, behind-the-scenes maneuvers to systematically compromise and co-opt opposition lawmakers into the NRM fold.

He said that while maintaining a veneer of objectivity, Ms Among openly

boasted about effectively "swallowing" the Opposition in the 11th Parliament, and publicly confessing that whatever President Museveni desired would inevitably pass.

"Ms Among took it a notch higher by actively patronising the Judiciary, the Electoral Commission, members of the Cabinet, and even key sections of the public, including religious groups, cultural institutions, and hospitals."

"Using this sweeping, extra-legal influence, she compromised the State machinery to protect her personal and political interests. For instance, she influenced the Electoral Commission to strike her political opponents off the voter register, preventing their nomination altogether. She similarly manipu-

lated the judicial process to ensure individuals she disliked were systematically dismissed or legally frustrated. Aringa South MP, Mr Alomzi Yoke Odria, recently also alleged that "the leadership of Parliament" employed over 500 staff illegally here (at Parliament) without any job advert either in the newspapers or internally."

Ms Among's lawyer, Mr Caleb Alaka, when contacted, declined to comment on the matter.

Mr Godwin Toko, a lawyer and activist, however, said the alleged appointment of 500 people in Parliament was not part of Ms Among's unofficial roles. Officially, she vetted government appointees as the chair of Parliament's vetting committee - just like Ms Kadaga

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POWERS AND ROLES

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"Oversees the functioning of the Parliamentary Service through the Clerk to Parliament."

"Links Parliament with the Executive."

"Receives dignitaries and high-profile visitors to Parliament."

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