

Namilyango @ 124, Mobutu's many Generals, and Uganda's many A's

Been thinking lately about the former president of Zaire (now DR Congo), Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku Ngbendu wa Za Banga. A man who was actually worshipped, just like God is. I wonder where he is now. I'm, of course, aware that he's dead. Anyway, in his day, his army, just like many armies in Black Africa, had simply too many high-ranking officers: Majors, Colonels, and Generals. In Kinshasa, if you threw a stone at random, you were likely to hit a General.

We're talking about ranks acquired, not through merit, but political loyalty and tribal connections. Such armies are good at torturing harmless, helpless people who don't support the regime, but when war breaks out, they're crushed much too easily. And that's what happened in 1997, ending Mobutu's 32-year reign, a story I recalled as I quietly observed the celebration of the national Ordinary-Level exam results last month. It was raining A's everywhere. Suddenly, Uganda is full of geniuses! Our new "competence-based curriculum" has, overnight, turned us into a nation of prodigies! Revolution! We have moved from "*bonna basome*" to "*bonna bayite*". Translation dilutes. This country must wake up and smell the coffee!

When examination results begin to look uniformly excellent, the issue may not be that our children have become smarter. Nope. The real issue and, in fact, the danger, is that our standards have become weaker. The logic of lowered standards is simple: if the bar is dropped low enough, everyone becomes a high jumper. And the intended government policy proposal to extend the curriculum to university should make one shudder in sheer trepidation. Killing a nation just got easier!

Education systems stand on a delicate pillar: credibility. Once that credibility begins to wobble, the consequences ripple far beyond the classroom.

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Objection



If too many students are declared excellent, the meaning of excellence itself begins to collapse. Universities struggle to distinguish the truly outstanding from the merely competent. Employers begin to distrust grades as indicators of ability.

A young person who receives an inflated grade is handed a comforting illusion rather than a useful assessment. He may advance through the education system believing he has mastered skills that, in truth, he has not yet acquired. When the real world demands competence—whether in engineering, medicine, law, or business, for example—the gap between certification and capability becomes painfully clear.

Impressive transcripts but fragile skills. Industries begin to complain that graduates require retraining. Professional bodies begin to question the preparedness of new entrants. Eventually, the reputation of the entire education system begins to erode.

That is when a country gets blacklisted by the civilised world, with doors getting shut in our young people's faces in the global marketplace.

A national exam is not merely a test of stu-

dents; it is a test of the integrity of the nation's education system. The temptation to inflate results—whether to please parents, politicians, or schools—is understandable, but it is ultimately destructive.

A difficult exam result is not necessarily a tragedy. Sometimes it is an honest mirror reflecting the work still required. A system that occasionally produces disappointing results may in fact be healthier than one that produces a million A's.

Mobutu discovered too late that an army full of Generals is not necessarily an army that can fight. Education systems that manufacture A's too easily may one day learn the same lesson.

We are preparing for our Careers Day at Namilyango College on Friday, March 20, a key event leading to our Namilyango Day (traditionally March 23 – but we'll celebrate next Saturday, March 21) as we mark 124 years. We, the Old Boys, traditionally return to the College to talk to the young Ngonians about possible career paths to take. Let the Namilyango Career Day give parents all over Uganda something to think about, urgently, because the biggest victims of these lowered standards and, I argue, misleading results, are the children themselves.

Simple example: with the unenlightened craze about sciences, you'll have students rushing to take on science subjects believing they'll make doctors or engineers – just because they "excelled" in the sciences. There's strong possibility of high-sounding A-Level combinations which don't tally with the students' actual DNA. You can be sure they will crash at some point. Happy 124th birthday, Namilyango College!

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