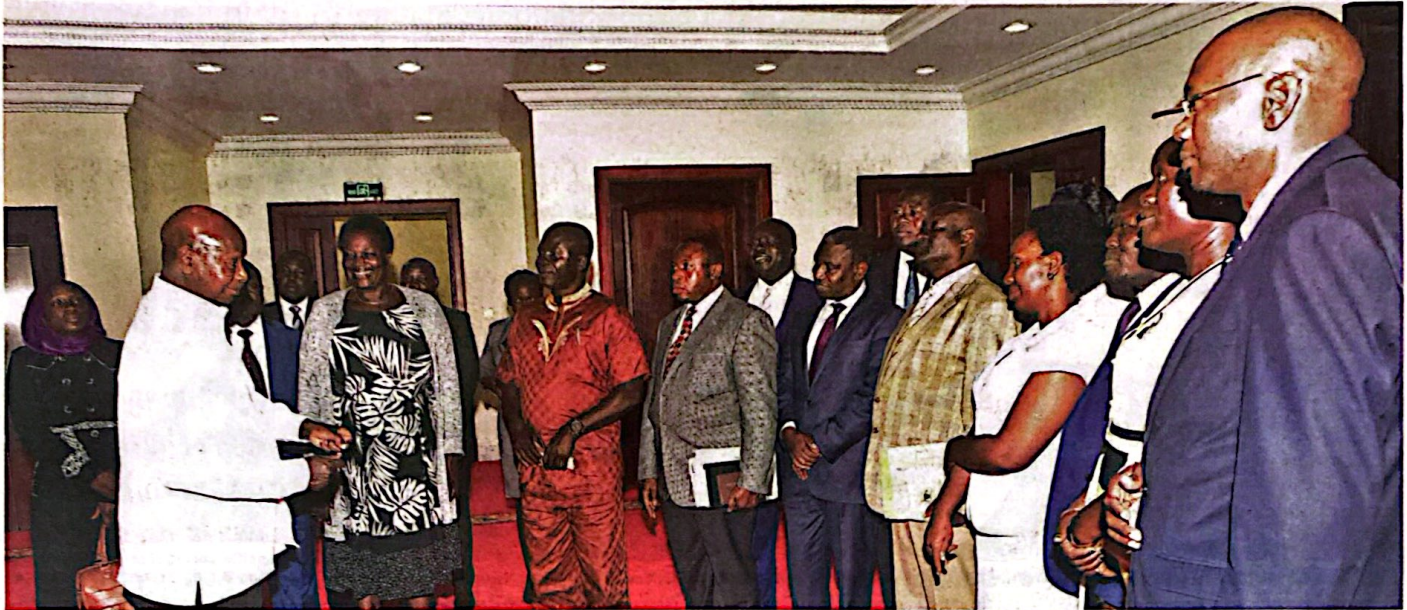




President Museveni (left) talking to members of the legal and parliamentary affairs committee at State House Entebbe in Wakiso district on Tuesday

Politics is not Olympics or rugby, Museveni tells age limit committee

By Mary Karugaba

Ugandans should be given the opportunity to decide who and how they should be governed, President Yoweri Museveni has said.

Giving his views on the controversial Constitutional Amendment Bill, Museveni told the legal and parliamentary affairs committee that since Ugandans are the custodians of the Constitution and their country, they should be given the ultimate duty of determining how and who should lead them, through regular free and fair elections, instead of being merely "legalistic."

"If someone votes, why can't he be voted for?" President Museveni asked while meeting the committee members at State House Entebbe in Wakiso district on Tuesday.

The committee, chaired by Jacob Oboth-Oboth, was meeting President Museveni as the last witness. The committee has been holding public hearings on the Bill and is expected to table a report to Parliament next week.

The Bill

The Private Member's Bill tabled by Igara West MP Raphael Magyezi, seeks to amend Article 102 (b) of the Constitution to remove the presidential age limit.

This means anybody registered as a voter should be allowed to stand for any electoral position, including presidency. The Bill also seeks to increase the period within which elections should be held.

A statement issued by State House indicated that during the meeting, President Museveni argued that the presence of age limits for any elective office goes against Article 1 of the 1995 Constitution, which says: "Power belongs to the people."

Amendment good

Oboth Oboth, who led the team of legislators, said they had sought the President's views as a former presidential candidate and leader of a political party. During the meeting, the President dismissed the notion that the amendment was tailored to benefit him, pointing out that the removal of the 35-year minimum for presidential candidates, would, instead give room to more young people who had been locked out, to have a chance to run for the presidency.

"The MPs asked President Museveni a number of questions on the age limit debate, which he comprehensively responded," a statement issued by the State House after the two-hour meeting said.

The President said in a continent like Africa, where there has been a leadership crisis and is still faced with many challenges, there is need to be flexible, not merely legalistic and utilise all the potential from both the young and old.

"This is because it is more about our safety, survival and prosperity and not who leads us on that journey," President Museveni said.

Citing cases of the US, China, Russia and Israel, among

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- Politics is not Olympics or rugby, where you need to compete physically. The presidency is a guiding role.
- For these countries with all these problems, two terms of five years is just a joke. Those who talk about this are looking at improving their CVs. We might not discuss it now, but there is merit at looking at the seven years.

MUSEVENI'S VOICE

others, President Museveni explained that many of these countries, in their push to develop and transform, had been guided by leaders who were of advanced age and led the countries for decades.

"Israel has since 1948 been rotating leaders young and old. Israel is a super power yet in a largely hostile environment. The great leaders that transformed China, Deng Xiaoping and Deng Yingchao, were of advanced age," President Museveni said.

"UK Prime Minister Winston Churchill was leader up to the age of 81 and offered some of the best leadership to his country. In Tunisia, which in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, had seen 91-year-old Beji Caïd Essebsi elected president to stabilise the political situation," he added.

He said the problem of Africans is concentrating on trivialities yet the issues should be about the African destiny and how to guarantee our future.

on the other hand is about representation. Do not mix service with representation. Service is technical," said the President.

Opposition threats

Commenting on the MPs' concerns about hostility of the Opposition exhibited during the course of the debate, including violent behaviour, President Museveni said it was because the Opposition had nothing constructive to offer.

"The intolerance is because the Opposition is ideologically bankrupt and have nothing to offer. They are desperate because NRM has revamped the economy and generated revenue and we are able to deliver to the population. They now think that the only way to get rid of the Movement is to do away with particular players," he noted.

The President also dismissed claims that incumbency gives him an edge over his opponents, saying it instead placed a bigger burden on the candidate as the voters' expectations are higher.

"Incumbency, in a way, is a disadvantage. You get blamed all the time," he said, adding that where incumbents have been unpopular, like it was with Kenneth Kaunda in Zambia, Kamuzu Banda in Malawi and several other cases, they lost elections.

Politics is not a sport

On the performance of leaders above the age of 75, President Museveni said politics is about ideology and service and not

sports where one needed to compete physically.

"Politics is not Olympics or Rugby, where you need to compete physically. The presidency is a guiding role," he said.

When asked about the proposal by some people to restore term limits and remove the age limit, the President argued that at this stage of development, limits are not the most important issue for Uganda because the country has more pressing concerns.

"It took America more than a century-and-half while developing their economy and political class to put presidential term limits in their constitution. When they finally did so in 1947, everything they wanted had happened. They had developed and the colonies had integrated," he argued.

Seven-year term?

The MPs also asked the President about the proposal to increase the years of political term of office from five to seven years.

He said leaders in Africa have much more to do and need adequate time to develop the continent and saw no harm in having longer terms. However, the issue can be discussed later.

"For these countries with all these problems, two terms of five years is just a joke. Those who talk about this are looking at improving their CVs. We might not discuss it now, but there is merit at looking at the seven years," he said.