

The threads that weave up the storyline of Denis Hamson Obua are of soft cotton and hard steel in equal measure. Over lunch, at his residence in Mbalwa, Wakiso District, he walks Arthur Arnold Wadero through what it feels like serving in the NRM government.

A vast stretch of Denis Hamson Obua's career has been spent in the big, cozy offices of Uganda's Legislative and Executive arms of Government, which have placed enormous tasks on his shoulders.

When we met over lunch at his residence in Mbalwa, Kira Municipality, Wakiso District, the father of five looked happy on responsibilities that, among others, included supervising Rebecca Alitwala Kadaga, who joined Parliament in 1989 when Obua was just nine.

At just 46, Obua has already sat in Cabinet for seven years and served as a Member of Parliament (MP) for 20 years. He first entered Parliament as the Youth MP for the northern region in 2006.

Just 24 months after entering the House, Obua became a backbench commissioner, thereby joining the Parliamentary Commission that serves as the top-most decision-making body of Uganda's lawmaking arm.

Despite being a political novice, Obua managed to provide strategic guidance, financial advice, and administrative support to Parliament.

Leadership. In executing my roles and responsibilities, in addition to that strategic guidance that I got time and again from the national chairman of [President Museveni], I was also helped by the mere fact that in my leadership career, I have always taken humility and some bit of silence.

- Denis Hamson Obua, former Ajuri County MP and Government Chief Whip

He heavily relied on the leadership experiences gained as the spokesperson of the Commonwealth Youth Forum in 2007. He also leaned on knowledge earned while he served as senior clerical officer in State House under the wing of the Vice President's office in 2005.

In 2011, Obua returned to the House, this time as the Ajuri County legislator on the National Resistance Movement (NRM) party ticket.

"In executing my roles and responsibilities, in addition to that strategic guidance that I got time and again from the national chairman of NRM [President Museveni], I was also helped by the mere fact that in my leadership career, I have always taken humility and some bit of silence," Obua stated.

A golden run

In December 2019, Obua was appointed State minister for Sports, thereby taking over from Charles Bakabulindi, who had occupied the dock for 14 years. Obua marvels when he

'Holding four offices at once was no small feat'

looks back at having to work with a constrained budget.

It did not help matters, he adds, that at the time the National Council of Sports (NCS) and the Uganda Olympic Committee were embroiled in power fights. The Covid-19 pandemic that arrived in 2020 threatened to make a bad situation worse.

Yet, on Obua's watch, Joshua Cheptegi wrote some of Uganda's greatest sports chapters, including setting world records in the 5,000m and 10,000m.

"In the Commonwealth (Games), we posted the best results in the record of participation of Team Uganda. In the Tokyo Olympics, we posted the best results. All [those] are yet to be broken," he purrs, adding, "I left that ministry with the nickname of a golden minister."

Then came the switch in July 2022 when Obua was appointed Government Chief Whip. He replaced Thomas Tayebwa, who served in the same position for only 10 months before being elevated to become Deputy Speaker. The office of Deputy Speaker had fallen vacant after Anita Annet Among was elected House Speaker to replace Jacob Oulanyah, who had died in March 2022.

The new position came with two Cabinet offices—at the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) and the Office of the Leader of Government Business at Parliament—which by extension made him the chairperson of the NRM Parliamentary caucus.

This was in addition to his duties as the Ajuri County MP. He chuckles at the task of juggling four positions. Discipline is paramount. One can only manage to have an old head on young shoulders if they are disciplined, he says.

Aged just 42, Obua was tasked with enforcing party discipline among all 337 NRM-leaning MPs of the 11th Parliament. He also had to schedule government-led Bills, give direction to policies made at the Executive meetings and also mobilise MPs to physically attend sittings to provide the necessary quorum needed to endorse Bills.

This, he says as we move to the balcony of his house for a drink, didn't come easy. He acknowledges that out of the 138 Bills passed during the 352 plenary sittings Parliament held under his tenure, a number of them stretched him.

"All of them were challenging in equal measures, in my opinion, because we are not like other parliaments, which would be faced with one challenging moment. When you look at, for instance, the 9th Parliament, it was only faced with *Tajjik watako* [Uganda slogan loosely translated to mean 'do not touch'], which was politically to oppose the removal of 75 year cap for presidential candidates through amendment of Article 102 (b)," he said.

The tough Bills he refers to include the Anti-Homosexuality Bill; Rationalisation of Government Agencies and Public Expenditure (RapeX) Bill; National Social Security Fund (Amendment) Bill; National Coffee (Amendment) Bill; Uganda People Defence Forces (UPDF) (Amendment) Bill; and Protection of Sovereignty Bill.

"In all these turbulent moments, I can say that the [NRM Parliamentary] caucus was able to sit many times. I remember, like, during the Coffee Bill, we sat about four times," Obua recounts.

"But more prominent under rationalisation was the coffee, which became very hot. Thereafter, we had the UPDF amendment Bill, which was another controversial subject matter.

ABOUT OBUA

Denis Hamson Obua was first elected as Northern Uganda Youth MP in 2006 before representing Ajuri County from 2011. Re-elected in 2016 and 2021, he became State minister for Sports in January 2020 and assumed office as Government Chief Whip on August 16, 2022.

But in my humble opinion, really, when you look at the content of the Bills, they meant well for Uganda," he adds.

His colleagues in the Opposition proved strong and occasionally came hard on him. Leader of the Opposition in Parliament Joel Ssenyonyi mounted a charged shadow cabinet that didn't relent easily.

Tough as nails

Despite having the numbers, the government wing struggled to sail through and, in the end, most of Obua's successes stemmed from strategic meetings.

"So, in each and every debate where the party had interest, we were so intentional in terms of knowing who will debate, who will move which motion and what point," he says, adding, "So, we would always plan in advance in order to ensure that when it comes to execution, we are ticking the boxes."

There was another challenge, he says after sipping his bottled water.

"There are some MPs, for the lack of a better word, who don't prepare. Why do I say they don't prepare? They hardly read. They wait to be called to come and perform their duty."

Obua's job also re-

quired him to push at least four of his senior colleagues in Cabinet to attend plenary without fail. These included Vice President Jessica Alupo, Prime Minister Robinah Nabbanja, First Deputy Prime Minister Rebecca Kadaga, Second Deputy Prime Minister Moses Ali, and Third Deputy Prime Minister Bukia Isanga Nakadama.

"First of all, it starts with you. The whipper. You, the leader. You, the one in charge of whipping. You must demonstrate and provide the highest degree of leadership. You must control your temperament," he says.

"You must act with the highest degree of emotional intelligence. And you must be able to develop a one-on-one or a peer-to-peer approach, especially on controversial matters where some Members of Parliament would want to come out against the position of government," he adds.

Bowing out

After spending two decades in the House, Obua lost the parliamentary race in January. A recount was needed to confirm the defeat.

"I am happy the time I took over leadership of Ajuri, it had only three big sub-counties. But as I leave, Ajuri is now composed of seven sub-counties, implying there are four additional sub-counties that came into existence during my tenure," Obua shares, adding that his tenure came with four new seed schools, three more health centres, and ensured electricity supply is extended to nearly all sub-counties in his constituency.

On his watch, he further discloses, an average of 100 boreholes were repaired annually.

"In this last term, every week I would be sparing a minimum or spending a minimum of Sh3m, supporting a Catholic chapel, an Anglican church, then maybe one of the Pentecostals," he proceeds to reveal.

So, why was he voted out of the House in favour of a Uganda Peoples Congress (UPC) candidate?

"The MP seat loss was occasioned by external factors. These are external members of the NRM who feel threatened by the presence of Obua serving as an MP," he says.

He is, however, unwilling to pursue the undisclosed official, because "the God I serve will give them probably the same menu of the food that they gave to Obua."

During the 2026-2031 term, Obua will serve as the vice chairperson of the northern region on the Central Executive Committee (CEC) of the NRM, one of the ruling party's top decision-making organs.

As President Museveni prepares to name his new Cabinet for his seventh elective term, it remains to be seen if he will hand Obua any responsibility.

