

Money over merit: The hidden engine driving Speakership race

With Uganda's January 15 General Election now in the rear-view mirror, national attention has turned to the election of the Speaker and Deputy Speaker of the 12th Parliament. The new MPs will be sworn in between May 13 and 15, before proceeding — under Article 82 of the Constitution — to a secret-ballot vote that will determine who occupies both positions.

Publicly, the race is framed as a contest of leadership qualities, legislative vision, and commitment to parliamentary reform. Behind the scenes, however, a far more pragmatic reality prevails. As one sharp-tongued commentator recently observed: "It's not about articulation but managing the loans from the money lenders. The winner of the race will not be based on ideas but moneybags."

This candid assessment exposes the transactional undercurrent of Ugandan parliamentary politics. Candidates must finance vehicles, voter handouts, music systems, mobilisation teams, and endless "facilitation" across vast rural constituencies. Several MPs — both newcomers and incumbents — fund these expenses through high-interest loans from informal moneylenders, commonly called shylocks. Interest rates often exceed 20–30 per cent per month, turning modest borrowings into crippling debts within weeks.

By the time MPs reach Parliament, a significant number arrive burdened by loans that threaten personal and political survival. In this environment, the speakership contest becomes less about policy platforms and more about who can best deliver immediate financial relief — whether through cash envelopes, access to soft loans, diverted constituency funds, or protection from aggressive creditors.

The "broke MP" syndrome is a recurring feature of...politics.



Martin Odongo
Elective politics



The leading contenders present contrasting visions. Incumbent Speaker Anita Among (Bukedea Woman MP) leans on her record of legislative stability, efficient handling of government business, and strong party discipline. Ms Among and Deputy Speaker Thomas Tayebwa reportedly enjoy the backing of the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) Central Executive Committee. Mr Norbert Mao (Laroo-Pece MP-elect and DP president) launched his bid on February 24, under the slogan "Balancing the Boat". He promises to advocate for a bicameral legislature with proportional representation, tackle entrenched corruption and rebuild public trust in the House.

Mr Mao has openly condemned money-driven campaigns and urged MPs to judge candidates on whether or not their election would genuinely strengthen the institution.

Other aspirants include Persis Namuganza (Bukono County MP-elect), who entered the fray independently; Lydia Wanyoto Mutende (Mbale City Woman MP-elect); and Alioni Yorke Odria (Aringa South MP-elect), who pledges to restore Parliament's dignity, fight

internal graft, promote media freedom, and establish an independent constituency development fund for MPs. Each offers compelling rhetoric — yet insiders insist the decisive factor for many voters will be financial pragmatism rather than eloquence.

The "broke MP" syndrome is a recurring feature of Ugandan politics. Past parliaments have seen legislators grappling with bounced cheques, court cases over unpaid loans, and urgent appeals for executive bailouts. Campaign debts compound the pressure: many voters expect tangible support, while salaries and allowances arrive only after swearing-in. A Speaker perceived as able to "manage the loans" — through direct assistance, project slush funds, or creditor influence — gains a decisive edge in the secret ballot.

Voting rules reinforce this dynamic. The election requires a simple majority in a secret ballot. The NRM's commanding majority gives party leaders leverage, but disciplinary frays when personal debts are at stake. Political upsets prove that endorsed candidates can lose when enough MPs prioritise immediate survival over loyalty.

In hushed caucus conversations, discussions rarely centre on bicameralism or anti-graft; they focus on practical questions: Who will clear my Shs150m–Shs300m shylock debt? Whose team offers the most generous "thank-you"? Will this Speaker shield me from audit scrutiny?

The implications for democracy are serious. A Speaker chosen principally for debt relief capacity is unlikely to champion aggressive oversight of the Executive or genuine anti-corruption efforts.

As May approaches, Uganda's 12th Parliament will reveal whether or not the broke MPs hold the ballots — and the "moneybags" are circling closely. The outcome will shape the character of legislative oversight for the next five years.

Mr Odongo is a lawyer. | Martindodongo85@gmail.com | X: @martindodongo85

Daniel Kalinaki
Chekwech

29/35 8th Street, P.O. Box 12141
Kampala, Uganda

Phones 0312301100/101
Fax 041232369

Email editorial@ug.nationmedia.com
Registered at the GPO as a newspaper