Second-in-command accuses justice minister of dividing party

CROSSFIRE: MAO, MBIDDE CLASH OVER DP, SPEAKERSHIP RACE

BY UMARU KASHAKA AND ISAAC NUWAGABA

Democratic Party (DP) president Norbert Mao and his deputy Fred Mukasa Mbidde have locked horns over the party direction. At the centre of this split is the coveted speakership seat of the 12th Parliament.

Mao, who is also justice and constitutional affairs minister and the Laroo-Pece Division MP-elect, says Mbidde and other DP members cannot stand in his way to the top job at Parliament.

"I see people talking a lot, including some members of DP; I can only say they don't know me because you should speak about something you know. I can never open my mouth unless I know something. I left Parliament 20 years ago. Why am I going back after 20 years?" Mao said.

He also referred to the working co-operation agreement he signed with the National Resistance Movement (NRM) on July 20, 2022, saying it will come in handy when the ruling party MPs are handling the speakership issue.

Mao argued that Mbidde's reaction is a clear indication that DP is run on democratic principles of freedom of speech and expression.

"Contesting as a Speaker of Parliament is not a DP or a Laroo-Pece constituency matter, but it is a national cause which did not require me to get the opinion of Mbidde before I declared to stand. I was elected MP, and I qualify to stand on that ground," Mao said.

MBIDDE HITS BACK

However, in an interview with *The Weekend Vision*, Mbidde, who is supporting the current Speaker, Anita Among, for the speakership job, hit back at Mao.

He argued that Mao's competition for speakership is not based on the co-operation agreement with the ruling NRM.

"That agreement clearly states what he must be given, and that is the ministry. It named him the Minister for Justice and Constitutional Affairs. It [the agreement] has not been amended, it has not been reviewed, it is expiring; there is no way you can run for things it hasn't provided for," he said.

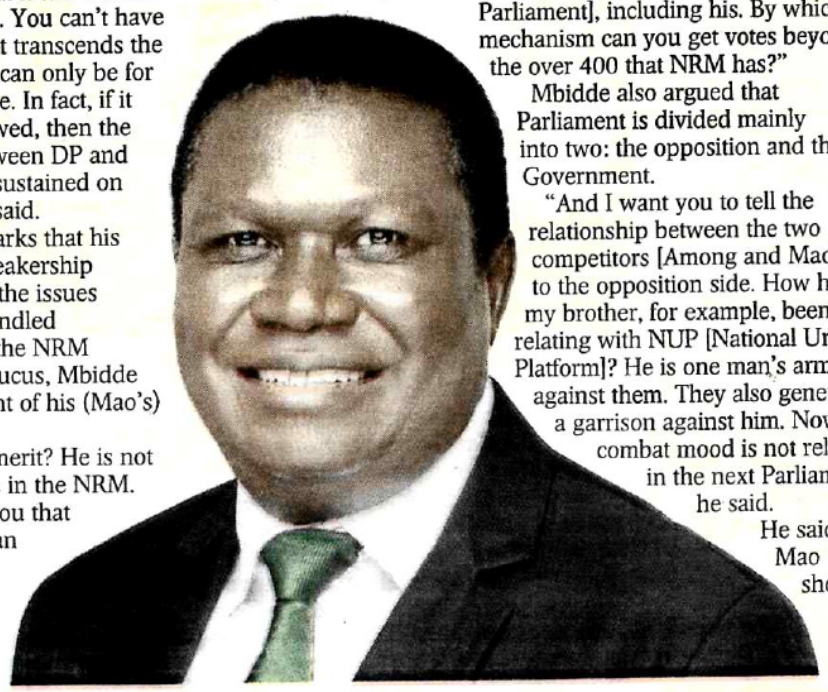
MBIDDE EMPHASISED THAT THE AGREEMENT WAS PEGGED TO THE 2021 ELECTION MANIFESTO, AND MAO'S MINISTERIAL APPOINTMENT WAS ALSO TO RUN UP TO THE EXPIRY OF THE TERM.

Mbidde emphasised that the agreement was pegged to the 2021 election manifesto, and Mao's ministerial appointment was also to run up to the expiry of the term.

"There is no provision within the agreement that it will extend to any other term. You can't have an agreement that transcends the terms of office. It can only be for each term of office. In fact, if it doesn't get reviewed, then the co-operation between DP and NRM cannot be sustained on the records," he said.

On Mao's remarks that his candidacy for speakership would be one of the issues that would be handled on merit during the NRM parliamentary caucus, Mbidde said it is a figment of his (Mao's) imagination.

"Now, which merit? He is not part of the issues in the NRM. I have just told you that we do not have an agreement that makes him an issue. In fact, that letter never even mentioned his name. That was an internal party communication that excluded non-members. But in law, there is what we call a 'figment of a fertile imagination'. So, I don't know whether my brother is not suffering from that," he said.



Mao, the DP president, is certain that the NRM-DP co-operation agreement to help him in his bid for speakership



Speaker Anita Among (left) with DP's Mbidde at her residence in Nakasero, Kampala, on March 5. The DP vice-president and Mao have presented different views on how the NRM-DP co-operation pact will play out in the 12th parliament

On Mao's statement that many of his cards are facing down and nobody knows them, Mbidde said: "The overall implication is that for him he's just playing, but matters to do with the speakership are not games where you are now having what you call cards, that some are facing up, some are facing downwards. These are real issues to do with livelihoods and running a manifesto that has won the aspirations of the people."

On the vow Mao made to take over the House in the name of the people, his party deputy said: "There is no way he is going to become Speaker. We have got six [party] votes [in the 12th Parliament], including his. By which mechanism can you get votes beyond the over 400 that NRM has?"

Mbidde also argued that Parliament is divided mainly into two: the opposition and the Government.

"And I want you to tell the relationship between the two competitors [Among and Mao] to the opposition side. How has my brother, for example, been relating with NUP [National Unity Platform]? He is one man's army against them. They also generated a garrison against him. Now that combat mood is not relevant in the next Parliament," he said.

He said Mao should continue by way of debating where he is required to be on the Government side as a minister and they (NUP MPs) also maintain their "own gain as the leaders of the opposition".

Mao recently said Mbidde's election to the East African Legislative Assembly (EALA), where he served for two terms, was through negotiations with NRM.

"I was one of his [Mbidde's] key campaigners. DP didn't have the capacity to send a candidate to EALA. His win came through negotiations. The same can happen to me," he said.

However, Mbidde denied winning the EALA seat through negotiations.

"What I want him to know is that I have won two elections in that Parliament and I know how I won them without a co-operation agreement. I went to EALA [first in 2012] because I went to court. When I went to court, rules were amended, and when rules were amended, I got voted. And that first vote had nothing to do with it. The second vote [of 2017] was conducted when I had met the President [Yoweri Museveni], who invited me to Masindi, and that is where he referred to me as a good DP member. Now, do we need to tell the public about that?" he said.

Mbidde also accused Mao of dividing DP.

"My brother has run DP as a dichotomous party. It is divided into two opinions. Those that are for him are with him; those whose opinions are contrary to his are definitely away from the party. Sometimes they choose to go away for good, other times they choose to keep fighting him. You don't want that kind of antagonism. That style of leadership is extremely antagonistic. This [speakership] is an administrative job that I don't think my brother is in a position to generally succeed with," he said.