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The FDC presidential candidate in the 2026 General Election, Mr Nathan Nandala Mafabi, waves to his supporters after casting his vote in Sironko District on January 15. PHOTO/DERICK WENANI

Why Bugisu political clout has declined

BY FRED WAMBEDE & ANDREW WABUSHENDA

Once a formidable political force, Bugisu Sub-region occupied a central place in Uganda's struggle for independence and in shaping the country's post-independence governance.

From constitution-making to parliamentary leadership, the region produced towering figures whose influence stretched far beyond eastern Uganda.

Today, however, Bugisu's voice in national decision-making appears significantly diminished, a decline reflected in reduced Cabinet representation and waning bargaining power within the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM).

Bugisu gave the country respected national figures such as the late Prof Dani Wadada Nabudere, one of the intellectual architects of the 1995 Constitution, and the late James Wapakhabulo Wambogo, who served as the first Speaker of Parliament under the new constitutional order.

Wapakhabulo later became the minister of Foreign Affairs and earlier served as National Political Commissar.

Wapakhabulo died on March 27, 2004. Many in the sub-region say his death symbolised the end of an era of principled and nationally respected leadership from Bugisu.

Shrinking presence in Cabinet

Currently, Bugisu has only two ministerial slots, both at State minister level: Ms Florence Nambozo, the State minister for Karamoja and Member of Parliament for Sironko District, and Mr Dominic Mafabi Gidudu, the State minister for the Elderly. This is a sharp contrast to earlier administrations when the sub-region routinely held a full Cabinet post alongside several state ministerial positions.

Mr Samuel Sakwa Napokoli, an opinion leader and minister for local government and clan affairs in the Bugisu Cultural Institution, attributes the region's political decline to the loss of leaders who once acted as unifying torchbearers.

"The sub-region has suffered in recent years under the NRM government because of internal political fights, lack of unity, and absence of strategic engagement," Mr Napokoli says, adding that leaders increasingly prioritise personal survival over collective regional interests.

Historical influence

Bugisu's political pedigree predates the NRM era. During Apollo Milton Obote's two administrations (1962–1971 and 1980–1985), the region produced several influential ministers, pioneering legislator for Bugisu North West, played a prominent role in the 1960s independence agitation and coffee price stabilisation campaigns.

Bugisu also produced Justice George Masika, who served as Chief Justice of Uganda between 1980 and 1985.

Mr Akim Watenyeli, an Opposition leader from Mbale City and a senior figure in the Uganda Peoples Congress (UPC), says Bugisu leaders were once kingmakers in national politics.

"It is widely believed that these leaders wielded immense influence over President Milton Obote, to the extent that Mbale was at one time considered as a potential capital city," Mr Watenyeli says.

Political leverage

Bugisu's political strength was historically underpinned by economic vitality. The fertile slopes of Mount Elgon supported large-scale coffee production, generating income that helped finance political mobilisation during the independence struggle.

However, Mr Watenyeli argues that today there is an imbalance in the distribution of national opportunities.

"Some regions appear entitled to numerous senior government positions, while others are left with none or only one state minister," he says, adding that Bugisu's contribution to national history is often overlooked.

He also calls upon President Museveni to recognise the region's role in the liberation struggle, adding that many resi-

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Political analysts say these leaders commanded authority and respect at the national level. The region also produced state ministers such as Michael Kafabusi Werikhe and David Wakikona Wanedeya.

Leadership quality questioned

Mr Ibrahim Magomu, a researcher and co-founder of the Bukedde Anti-Corruption Coalition (BACC), says the commercialisation of politics has produced leaders more interested in

mand meaningful government support and representation.

While acknowledging that Bugisu previously elected Opposition leaders, particularly in Mbale City and Sironko District, Mr Magomu argues that this explanation no longer holds.

"In the most recent elections, the region overwhelmingly voted for the NRM at both parliamentary and LC5 levels," he says.

The NRM secured 18 parliamentary and LC5 seats, alongside five independents and one Opposition legislator, Mr John Baptist Nambeshe of the National Unity Platform (NUP), the MP for Manjiya County.

Calls for regional ministries

Opinion leaders are now calling for deliberate policy interventions. Some have sought the creation of a Ministry of Cooperatives to revive Masaba Cooperative Union and strengthen Bugisu's coffee and cotton value chains.

"There is also a need to rehabilitate Lukhojje and Bugema ginneries and to establish a Ministry for Eastern Uganda, given the region's vulnerability to landslides and other calamities," says Mr Robert Mafabi, a resident of Mbale City.

Former Budadiri East MP Cosmas Busima Mafabi recalls a time when cooperative unions served as centres of economic and political influence.

"Bugisu once had strong, coffee-based cooperative unions that produced leaders and shaped politics," he says.

Internal wrangles

He dismisses claims that Bugisu is being punished for siding with the Opposition, insisting the sub-region has largely remained loyal to the NRM.

"Bugisu is not an Opposition zone. Blaming marginalisation on Opposition voices is misleading," he says.

Political analyst and former Islamic University in Uganda lecturer, Mr Abbas Wetaka, traces Bugisu's weakening identity to the collapse of the old Bugisu District following decentralisation. "While decentralisation brought services closer, it weakened regional coordination and eliminated a common platform where leaders could plan collectively," he says.

SOME OF BUGISU'S PAST POLITICAL FIGURES

- James Wapakhabulo: Former Speaker of Parliament
- Prof Dani Wadada Nabudere: Renowned scholar who helped craft the 1995 Constitution.
- Justice George Masika: Chief Justice of Uganda (1980–1985)
- Joshua N Wakholi: Senior minister in the Obote I government
- Patrick Masette Kuuya: Minister for Rehabilitation in the Obote II administration.
- Stephen Gidale Muduku: 1960s MP who championed coffee price stabilisation.
- John Wilson Tsekooko: Supreme Court judge
- Watsusi Wasyeba: Minister in the early NRM government.

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