

Where is leadership after the ballot?

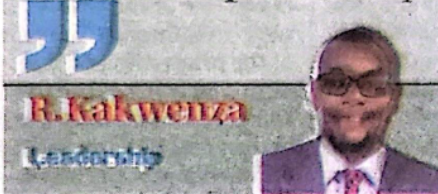
Whoever does not see that our electoral cycles since 1980 have become painfully predictable and systematically flawed has just been born or is lumbering with self-inflicted ignorance. The Opposition enters a contest widely acknowledged to be structurally compromised.

The campaign rhetoric is hopeful and defiant, with innumerable slogans of courage that act as booby-traps of uncritical hopeful young minds or opportunistic young leaders looking for political positions and the privileges that come with it. Citizens are mobilised with urgency—that vote in large numbers, protect the vote, demand accountability (*Kakube, Kakuume, Kabanje*).

Then election day arrives, and the familiar pattern unfolds—heavy military deployment, arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, Internet shutdowns, restrictions on observers and media. What should be a civilian democratic exercise resembles or turns into a brutal security operation against the Opposition and in that abyss of backwardness, the incumbent is declared victorious.

Now, after knowing that that's a pattern, the deeper question is about Opposition leadership responsibility after predictable failure. If an Opposition leader enters an election knowing that the institutional framework is controlled by the incumbent, the strategy must extend beyond ballot day lest we become professional victims of oppression and vote rigging. The Electoral Commission is appointed by Gen Yoweri Museveni, who also acts as both a candidate and the incumbent—with full State resources and command. Security forces answer to the Executive (the incumbent who is also a candidate). The Judiciary's independence has been questioned repeatedly in politically sensitive cases. Under these conditions, electoral participation is an

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engagement within a system structurally tilted in favour of the ruling establishment.

Mobilising citizens to “vote, protect and demand” carries moral and political consequences. In such an environment, Opposition leadership cannot be episodic—it cannot end when the official results of the sham elections are announced.

If the Opposition's plan is to pursue legal remedies (with the current judiciary and existing laws that the justices cannot elastically interpret, I bet my long legs if there is any recourse), that path must be credible and vigorously pursued. If the plan is mass civil resistance like the great walk to work, it must be organised, sustained, and clearly articulated. If international pressure is the intended lever, there must be visible diplomatic engagement and coalition-building that is sustainable and result-oriented. Silence or disappearance after the election undermines confidence in all three approaches.

Political leadership rests on visibility and direction. Going into hiding may be defensible on security grounds in the immediate aftermath of violence. However, prolonged ab-

sence without any modicum of action creates a vacuum quickly filled by fear, rumour and disillusionment.

We have participated in multiple elections over the past two decades with similar outcomes: high mobilisation, State repression, contested results, legal challenge, and eventual political stagnation. Participation under obvious constrained conditions, they argue, is justified because it serves to document fraud, get some few political positions, unify supporters, and expose systemic weaknesses but it cannot be presented as a decisive route to brutal regime change unless institutional realities have fundamentally shifted.

If the electoral route is structurally blocked, the citizens deserve candour. If the ballot is only one component of a broader struggle, that broader strategy must be defined before citizens are asked to risk their safety. Political maturity requires acknowledging constraints rather than theatrically overstating possibilities.

The central issue is accountability. When citizens respond to mobilisation calls and suffer consequences, Opposition leadership owes them clarity, continuity, and presence—not hiding.

In highly repressive environments like ours, Opposition leadership carries extraordinary risk and responsibility. If elections cannot remove the incumbent under current conditions, that reality must inform a new approach. If they can, then the post-election plan must be as robust as the campaign itself. Credibility is the opposition's most valuable asset and is easily eroded by disappearance because mobilising the oppressed people is not a symbolic act but a commitment that must continue.

Rukirabashajja Kakwenza, LL.B, LL.M
(LL.D candidate), Lawyer | Novelist | Playwright