

From Moshi to Namuwongo and back, what should the Monitor do?

es
al
e

ailouts.
o long-
e planned
s stretched
anda
chew: fo-
s, tighten
ver-prom-
cannot
A lean-
e load
er con-
cash
rowth.
nda's re-
ts for air-
cerns
tion
invest-
argen-
ease of
'Lith-
paci-
selec-
clear
st pro-

re-
al-
but
l mix
has-
a
ed
dge
ig
fi-

nce
pi-
avi-

Pinned on a noticeboard behind my old desk when I became editor of the *Daily Monitor* was a column by Charles Onyango-Obbo (COO), the founding editor, about the role of the newspaper.

A lot had happened between 2002, when COO left the newspaper for a new life in Nairobi, Kenya, and October 2007, when he wrote the column. The violence seen in the 2001 election had increased exponentially in 2006, where the main Opposition candidate, Dr Kizza Besigye, had mostly campaigned out of prison, battling rape and treason charges.

Armed commandos had raided and besieged the High Court in Kampala, and presidential term limits, seen as a safety valve for Uganda's new constitutional order, had been removed from the Constitution before even being implemented. For good measure, the *Monitor* newspaper had been shut down in 2002 and its sister radio, *KTM*, in 2005. Although Nation Media Group had been given a licence to start NTV, the launch of the television station had been delayed by several months – and at great cost to the company – as punishment for the *Monitor*'s sins.

Unsurprisingly, Onyango-Obbo's advice was that the *Monitor*'s primary responsibility was to simply survive and try to outlast President Museveni's government. It was an argument informed by past events and future possibilities. The second safety-valve in the Constitution, the presidential age-limit, would, in the case of the incumbent, kick in within the decade and force some political change, at least within the ruling NRM party.

I printed out and pinned the column above my desk as a constant reminder, first, that I was merely a temporary occupant of a role that others had played before and would play after me, and that I had a responsibility to keep the lights on so that the *Monitor* would

As I leave the newsroom, it is my view that the *Monitor*'s core role must shift from waiting on biology to trying to positively influence society...



Daniel K. Kalinaki
In My View



be able to make a contribution when the environment was more amenable to progressive political reform. My primary job, as I saw it, was to avoid a shutdown of the *Monitor* or any of its outlets.

Yet that is exactly what happened barely a fortnight after I left the paper for my own sojourn in Nairobi, over a story about the overseer of the intelligence services alleging a plot to eliminate officials opposed to the 'Muhoozi Project'.

That the closure did not happen on my watch did not matter in the grand scheme of things; the political space was and would continue to be hotly contested, as seen in the violence of the 2021 elections, as well as that around the removal of the age-limit safety valve.

As I leave the newsroom, it is my view that the *Monitor*'s core role must shift from waiting on biology to trying to positively influence society and the inevitable looming change. It can – and should – do that by imagining and platforming debate on the many scenarios

by which the country can derisk the political transition. This was the opportunity that the Moshi Conference presented in 1979; we continue to pay the penalty for failing to seize it.

Mainstream media no longer commands a monopoly on the public discourse, but the festering swamp that is social media cannot be the arena in which a new elite grand bargain and social contract will be negotiated or agreed.

Difficult choices will have to be made. The anger and extremism of the aggrieved will have to be tempered, as will the impunity and entitlement of the privileged. Those on the inside will have to be nudged to see that opportunistic alliances, be they with political figureheads or ghetto superstars, are temporal and will not fix systemic issues like poor service delivery and the collapse of the rule of law.

Those on the outside will also have to accept that they cannot wish away existing power structures or all the people inside them and will have to identify incremental reforms and imperfect attempts, as long as they are in the right direction.

The *Monitor*'s role, therefore, is to find and recreate the missing middle in our politics, bring back evidence-based argument into policymaking, and allow calmer and cleverer voices with a diversity of views to emerge.

Over the last decade or so, political decay has degenerated public life into a clock-watching race to the bottom. The *Monitor* can reinvent itself by creating and curating new conversations about possibilities for the future, and the Uganda we want. It needs to stop merely trying to survive and find new ways to thrive.

Mr Kalinaki is a journalist and poor man's freedom fighter.
write2kalinaki@gmail.com; @Kalinaki

climate finance flows over \$600 billion annually signalling a rapidly expanding market