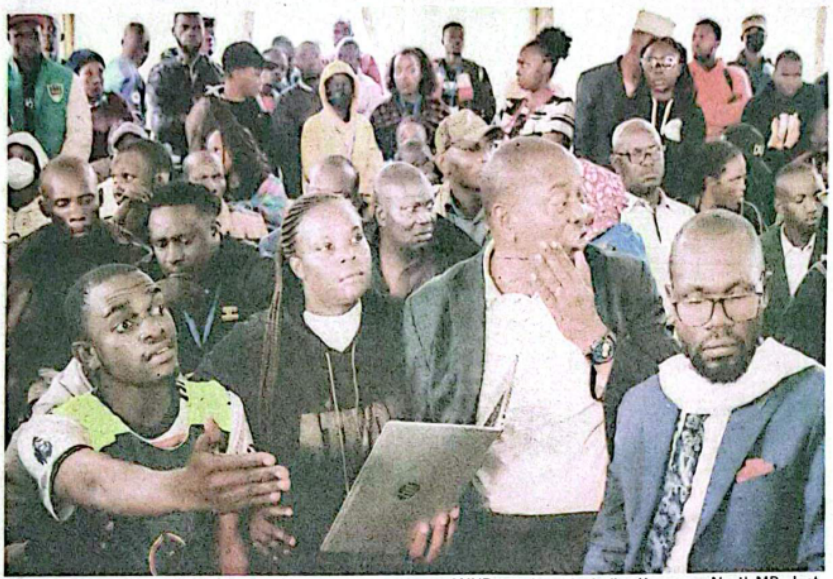
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Muscle over mandate: How gangs became kingmakers

Gangs are an asset. It is gangs that guard a candidate and his or her inner circle against attacks from rival gangs. It is gangs that deface one candidate's posters and pin another's.

BY KARIM MUYOBO & ABDUL-NASSER SSEMUGABI



L-R: Mr Emmanuel Sserunjogi (2nd right) with his supporters and NUP members, including Kawempe North MP-elect Elias Nalukoola (right) await announcement of Kawempe mayoral election results at the tally centre at Mubs Playground-Nakawa on Thursday. PHOTO/IBRAHIM KAVUMA

Time has come for Ugandans, especially those who intend to participate in elections, to recruit gangs which are meant to fight against the state, Kawempe North legislator Elias Nalukoola warned, amid frustration that his party colleague Emmanuel Sserunjogi was on the brink of losing the Kawempe Division mayoral race in a decidedly dodgy manner.

Provisional results we gathered from select polling stations on Tuesday put Sserunjogi in pole position for a third consecutive term, with former Kawempe North lawmaker Abdul Latif Ssebaggala second. But nearly 48 hours later, with all the division mayors and councillors announced, and departed the tally centre in Nakawa, Sserunjogi was staring at his victory slipping away to NRM's Faruk Bulime, who was supposed to finish a distant third.

Enter gangs

The key actors were the gangs of young, energetic, fearless men, called *Eggaali* in street lingua—whose job is to protect the interests of their candidates. They shout, fight and do all manner of electoral evil. Some are real boxers, kickboxers, martial artists, bouncers, etc., others wannabes, petty criminals. While some are just loyal, most are hired.

Towards 11am, a gang of seven young men of varying stature stormed Yiga's Parking Yard in Bwaise II, Kawempe South. When the police constables ordered them out of the polling station, a verbal exchange ensued, and voting paused.

They retreated at the entrance of Kawempe Division headquarters, whose fence borders the polling station. Then the exchange resumed.

"Get out or you'll get problems," the only armed police officer warned them. "You too will get problems," the young man warned the officer.

Walking out, they hurled more threats as everyone stared in bemusement.

"Where's Faruk's agent?" they yelled near the exit. The polling officers pointed at an NRM agent, after all, Bulime was NRM's mayoral candidate.

"Don't be stupid, I asked for Faruk's agent, not an NRM agent," the towering gang leader shouted. "You and all these policemen have been bribed to rig against us, but you'll see," he warned. The officers just looked on, relieved the gang was finally going away.

This was not an isolated case. It is becoming the new normal in our elections. On X, a parliamentary candidate threatened to deploy all boxers to guard his vote in Kampala Central. "If anyone rigs our vote," he vowed, "the city will be unbearable." Luckily, he was a fringe candidate who did not even vote for himself.

But gangs are an asset. It is gangs that guard a candidate and his or her inner circle against attacks from rival gangs. It is gangs that deface one candidate's posters and pin another's. And punishes whoever defaces their candidates' posters. It is gangs that engage in audacious acts like ballot stuffing. It is gangs that harassed NUP's David Lewis Rubongoya and damaged his car when he surveyed polling stations in Kisenyi on the polling morning of January 15. His presence threatened their operations.

In some cases, it is gangs that raid polling centres, cause chaos like destroying voter material, to secure their candidates' victory. It is gangs that intimidate polling officers, agents, and voters. They hinder participation and vigilance in favour of a particular candidate.

No safe haven

Salim Uhuru, famed for his sumptuous pilau, generosity and experience, was the favourite in the Kampala Central mayoral race. But against the NUP's red army, the incumbent could not sit pretty. Hardened by those battles with partymate and retired boxer Godfrey Nyakana and later his recent predecessor Charles Sserunjogi, Uhuru has mastered the murky game of Kampala politics.

He does not deny owning a gang. One of his lieutenants stormed out of the tally tent after a policeman sprayed pepper in his eyes. Uhuru and others shared the dose. The man, stout, in a polo shirt, was a troublemaker.

On polling day, he reportedly had been punching people at polling stations in Kisenyi. Among his victims was a man who addressed the press about the electoral malpractices. Moments later, he received a hard punch on the right jaw. He tried to flee. The gang followed its commander's cues to thump 'the fool'. The poor man had nowhere to run. He found refuge among policemen. The gang waited. Finally, they backed off.

But elsewhere, security personnel shield the outlaws. At another polling station—likely in Kisenyi—a video shows voters stopping a man in an NRM T-shirt and an agent's tag from stuffing the ballot box in broad daylight. Surprisingly, when security officials intervened, they instead roughed up a different man, hit him with batons while the real offender, in clear yellow, looked on, unbothered.

ELECTION RESULT

NUP's Emmanuel Sserunjogi, having garnered 23,714 votes defeated NRM's Farouk Swimpo Bulime who garnered 18,483 votes, a difference of 5,231 votes. Others in race were former Kawempe North MP Latif Ssebaggala Sengendo who got 5,866 votes and independent candidate Eric Katende who got 1,898 votes.

Such is the impunity the gangs of the NRM candidates reportedly export to tally centres. They come in big numbers, some in ministers' cars, and many freely access polling stations, while their rivals guarding Opposition candidates, are locked out. By the time the first ballot boxes arrived at the Kampala Central tally centre, for instance, authority had already been asserted, quietly, physically, and without uniform.

Chaotic

At the entrance, before any police officer spoke, young men in party colours had taken position. Some leaned against the metal barriers, others paced slowly, scanning faces. Entry was no longer a matter of accreditation alone, but who recognised you.

"Who are you? Why are you entering?" one asked a journalist, his voice calm but firm, his knuckles clenched.

Inside the compound, tension was evident. The ghettos of Bwaise, Katanga, Kisenyi and Kimombasa, felt safer. The gangs, mostly in NRM attire, conquered corners near the tallying tents. Some had their faces partly masked. Others flexed their arms openly, sending an unspoken message. They moved confidently, like men on duty.

When bizarre accusations sprout of an RCC—a president's agent—conniving with the main Opposition party to rig a ruling NRM party candidate out, the reaction involves shoving, kicking, batons, and dragging adults like village thieves to where they can no longer contribute to the chaos.

Presiding officers lowered their voices as they read figures. Journalists clustered together, choosing silence over confrontation. Every movement, from one tent to another, stepping closer to a results table felt negotiated. When Uhuru returned on Wednesday evening, flanked by a gang of supporters, he triggered chaos. "We have other things to do. We are not sleeping here for another night. Results are ready—so what is the delay?" one of Uhuru's alleged supporters barked at presiding officers.

Seconds later, the group surged forward, banging tables, shouting, forcing electoral officials to retreat from the tally desk. Chaos spilled across the tent as chairs were knocked aside and journalists scampered for safety.

Police officers, soldiers and Joint Anti-Terrorism operatives—some in helmets—responded to restore order. They tried to handcuff Uhuru, but failed as his supporters formed a ring around him.

Flexing muscle

Amid a sea of NRM hecklers, a deflated Sserunjogi tried once more. "Madam registrar, you should be sincere, your frustrating of my results or the results of the people of Kawempe," he said in a humble tone reflective of his nickname, "Oweddembe" (the peaceful one), but the sorrow in his bloodshot eyes evident.

"You look for your agents whom you seem to be comfortable with," the registrar responded in the emotional exchange.

Even before the ink dried on the three ballots he cast—one for himself—in Bwaise, Sserunjogi predicted these events to the journalists. "Some people don't want to canvas for votes and resort to illegal means of getting victory," Sserunjogi said.

He added: "People are telling me 'we have given you the vote but shall you protect it?' But that shouldn't be my role in a free and fair environment."

Every hour that passed triggered more tension. Whispers become loud voices. A few gang members positioned themselves closer to election officials, leaning in as figures were cross-checked.

"This is our area. No one will tamper with these results," Uhuru said before he was announced, drawing nods from those around him.

For those watching from outside the fence, the scene was unsettling. The police and army tried to conduct patrols outside the main gate to disperse one of the gangs which had taken over the road.

"You wonder who is really in charge, you voted peacefully, but here it looks like power belongs to whoever has numbers and muscles," NUP's Ronald Nsubuga Balimwezo, said.

Barely a week earlier, Balimwezo, the Lord Mayor-elect, was in the same position, trying to pull victory from the jaws of crafted defeat—even though he had beaten his two close rivals by nearly 100,000 votes.

At the Nakawa Division tally tent, he shouted "Objection," several times, eyes goggled, pointing a warning finger at the EC staff.

"*Ssebo vvaayo, ogubbi guugwo, vvaayo kibbi ggwe*, (get away, you thief) rival gangs insulted him. They even attacked his disability: *Bebbera ng'odda eri*, (limp away from there, you thug).

Balimwezo stuck to his guns, enraged the officer at the desk before an armed military officer lured him away.

Later, Shamim Nabaasa, a former Makerere University guild president, elected a councillor in Kawempe South, joined the shouting match, vowing never to accept the nonsense as the armed military personnel patrolled the tent.

"At one polling station, the directly elected councillor got 75 votes, but the woman councillor got 400, how come?" she remonstrated.

Dramatic end

Amid Sserunjogi's whining, Bulime and his fans were rehearsing celebrations, cocksure the NRM had wrested Kawempe, in addition to Makindye, where Omar Yasin sailed unopposed.

By midday, Thursday, nearly two days after the vote counting, the Kampala returning officer Jennifer Kyobutungi, now in the main tally tent, wanted to break the deadlock. She was constantly on the phone as security officials asked journalists to step back ahead of the final announcement. When she finally announced Sserunjogi winner, with 23,714 votes against Bulime's 18,483, it was a reversal of a miracle.

"You thief," Bulime's gang yelled at Kyobutungi as she was whisked away by security officials in Toyota Harrier to escape the madness. She could not formally hand over the DR forms to Sserunjogi, as required by electoral procedure.