



Fighting the Good Fight: Why We Should Welcome the Brawl in Uganda's Parliament

By Mary Serumaga



We should be glad that Uganda's Parliament has joined the select list of legislative bodies that have descended into physical altercations. On the 27th of September 2017, MPs came to blows for a second day running over a move to change the constitution to remove age limits and allow President Yoweri Museveni seek re-election at the next polls scheduled for 2021.

Excluding Ancient Rome and the assassination of Julius Caesar by the Senate, there are at least twenty-three countries that have witnessed their representatives 'put decorum aside' or as we say in Luganda, *okweyambula ubuntu bulamu*; literally: to disrobe oneself of Ubuntu. Many are serial offenders.

Top of the league is the United States of America with ten brawls either in Congress or in State legislatures. Granted many American cases are antique, but four of them occurred this century and involved fists. Turkey takes second place with seven incidents featuring weapons as diverse as a glass of water and two guns, with at least one fatality. Interestingly, one of the Turkish incidents was about the alteration of the Constitution to favor the incumbent. The Government was attempting to remove Parliamentary immunity, making Opposition MPs vulnerable to legal action. A similar hijack of the Constitution is what triggered the Uganda affair.

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The United Kingdom and Taiwan tie for third place with six Parliamentary malfunctions. In 1975, Nigel Lawson (one-time Chancellor of the Exchequer) struck a colleague with an Order Paper. In a separate incident a year later, Michael Heseltine who held various senior positions including Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense and Deputy Prime Minister and was touted as a potential successor to Margaret Thatcher, picked up the mace and swung it over his head in anger at being heckled before he was disarmed by a Labour Whip. After a twenty-minute break was called, and as MPs were moving out of the chamber, an all-out affray ensued involving Mr Tom Swain, a miners' MP who fought Mr Michael Spicer a Tory.

None of the lists in the media or on the internet is complete. For instance, nobody seems to remember a scuffle over seating after the Social Democratic Party broke away from the Labour Party to become the third Party in the UK Parliament. It was Clare Short (once Labour Minister for International Development) who tried to block David Owen, leader of the SDP, from speaking by putting her feet on the side of the Table. I remember it because one columnist commented that 'loutess' would have been too tame a word for her even if it existed and suggested that perhaps (18th century creator of the Dictionary of Modern English) Dr. Samuel Johnson's 'slubberdegullion' was more accurate.

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After Peru (5), come Jordan, Mexico, India and Kenya (4). Ukraine (3), Canada, Israel, Nigeria, South Africa, South Korea, Philippines (2). Most of the rest are not serial offenders; Bolivia, Egypt, Estonia, European Parliament, Japan, Morocco, Suriname, Somali Government in exile in Nairobi, Venezuela, and now Uganda, have had one incident each.

Fight in Uganda Parliament

Video courtesy of NBS TV

That Uganda should be joining such an ignominious club is not a source of shame to many. It was frankly unpleasant seeing a Member of Parliament darting about on the Table of the House swinging a microphone stand. Many others exited on their backs, being dragged out by, we are told, plainclothes policemen and security operatives passing as Parliamentary bailiffs. Women held on to men to prevent them being dragged out.

Yet we understood it. It has often been asked what it would take to make Ugandans resist political abuse *en masse*, in a meaningful way. The fact that the physical resistance has this time come from Parliament rather than from easily detainable anonymous demonstrators in the street is what makes it so significant.

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There have certainly been enough provocations. The country is at or near the head of every poor performance rating - the Corruption Index, Poverty Index, Primary school drop-out rate (one of the highest on the continent despite the much-praised Universal Primary Education programme), Maternal Death Index, Land-grabbing Matrix. Attempts to protest this state of affairs are usually met with police brutality, qualifying Uganda to be the teargas capital of the world. Yet we have maintained the restraint for which we are known.

When Kenyans received their election results in 2007 with national riots and inter-ethnic violence we regarded them with pity and an air of moral superiority. But dignity in the face of political abuse was beginning to look and feel like apathy. Thinking the electorate was irredeemably docile, the President feels confident enough to try to impose himself, his family and his incompetent regime on the country forever.

But by attempting to block the parliamentary opposition the Government and Speaker Rebecca Kadaga accomplished what political activists have been trying to achieve for at least twenty years: they facilitated an *effective* civic education 'workshop'. Everybody with access to a smartphone has seen the footage and everyone within hearing range of a radio is debating the fundamental issue: Whose country is it? The message is that the country is broken and needs mending and the people must insist on deciding who they want to do the job.

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President Museveni and his cabal ignore these political developments at his peril. In calculating the breaking-point, both he and the international lending agencies that enable him would do well to take the experience of Mobutu Sese Seko in Democratic Republic of Congo and the more recent ejection of Blaise Compaoré from Burkina Faso as case studies of what lies in wait.

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