

# Leaders should rehabilitate, not exploit young people

Politics is, and must always remain, a contest of ideas. It should be a place where different visions compete peacefully, never descending into violence. That is why what happened in Gulu on December 6 was not only shameful but outright barbaric. Those responsible must be held accountable, and any attempt to justify such acts as part of political competition must be firmly rejected.

The images of security forces beating people while trying to stop National Unity Platform (NUP) presidential candidate Robert Kyagulanyi, alias Bobi Wine, were deeply distressing. Even more troubling were pictures of young people, often called "ghetto youth" or "Aguu," acting alongside security forces, attacking people and looting businesses. It is alleged that these youth were hired by some leaders to disrupt the NUP campaign. If true, this poses a serious threat to both our democracy and public safety.

Like many urban areas in Uganda and the wider region, Gulu City struggles with the issue of street children. These young people, driven by harsh social conditions or personal hardship, survive by living on the streets. Many resort to theft and other crimes simply to get by. Unfortunately, some residents have suffered serious harm, being killed, injured, robbed, or even raped by street children.

Despite the security risks posed by these vulnerable youth, government efforts at all levels to address their situation have been minimal. Few initiatives focus on identifying, rehabilitating, and resettling them. The local community-based organisation Hastag Gulu is one of the few groups actively working to engage these children by providing skills training and reuniting them with their families through their Paicho booth camp. Yet, their reach remains limited.

It is disheartening that instead of developing policies to rehabilitate and uplift these young people, some people choose to ex-

Politics should be about ideas and policies that improve people's lives, not about using the most vulnerable as pawns in dangerous games

**Walter Akena**  
**Violence**



ploit them as political weapons. While this may temporarily serve selfish ambitions, the long-term consequences are devastating for the city's social and economic security. By involving street children in violence, politicians risk pushing them into a life of hardened crime that will be difficult for law enforcement to control.

History offers stark warnings. In the 1980s, a group known as the Mungiki Sect arose among the Kikuyu people of Kenya. Initially, they sought to promote Kikuyu political interests, cultural traditions, and a rejection of Western values.

However, funded by powerful politicians and families, this group quickly turned into a violent criminal gang involved in murder, kidnapping, extortion, and illegal taxation. They committed numerous atrocities, including killing 23 people in Nairobi's Kariobangi area in 2002 and shooting police officers in 2006. The Mungiki also played a major role in Kenya's 2007 post-election violence, which left over 1,200 people dead, thousands injured, and displaced hundreds of thousands more.

Similarly, in Gombe State in the northern part of Nigeria, a youth gang emerged in the early 2000s known as "Yan-Kalare" or "Sara-Suka." Politicians reportedly used these gangs for intimidating opponents and attacking rival supporters. Like the Mungi-

ki, the Sara-Suka evolved into a dangerous criminal force, engaging in killings, robberies, and sexual violence.

Today, they represent a serious threat to social stability, no longer just political tools but violent gangs.

The situation of street children is tragic. Without guidance or support, their lives are often filled with despair and hopelessness. Society frequently rejects and stigmatizes them, leading many to believe they are worthless.

When someone feels they have nothing to lose, they may resort to anything, including violence. Introducing such vulnerable young people to political violence is like pouring kerosene on a fire. It can quickly spiral out of control.

It was, therefore, reckless and irresponsible for any political leader to mobilise street children for the violence witnessed in Gulu. This city and northern Uganda in general still bear the scars of the brutal 20-year conflict between the Government of Uganda and the Lord's Resistance Army. This history partly explains the plight of street children today. Using them to fuel political violence threatens to undo the fragile peace and progress that Gulu and the surrounding region have experienced since the guns fell silent in 2006.

The political leaders must focus on finding solutions that rehabilitate and transform these young lives rather than exploiting them. Investing in programs that offer education, skills training, and family reunification can help restore hope and prevent future violence.

Only by supporting these vulnerable youths can Gulu truly move towards lasting peace and security.

In the end, politics should be about ideas and policies that improve people's lives, not about using the most vulnerable as pawns in dangerous games.

We must protect our youth, uphold peace, and preserve the hard-earned stability of our communities.

**Mr Walter Akena is a research officer at the Advocates Coalition for Development and Environment (Acode).**