

The House That Was

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How the 11th Parliament's committees blew hot, cold

In the second instalment of a four-part series titled *The House That Was*, **Arthur Arnold Wadero** sizes up the performances of different House committees in the 11th Parliament whose mandate runs from May 2021 to May 2026.

The bulk of the duties shouldered by legislators are executed at committee level before the outcomes of such sittings are considered on the floor of Parliament. Mr Charles Mugendi, a policy analyst interested in the East African Community (EAC) affairs, says like the Kenyan Parliament, Uganda's lawmaking body relies on committees to do the heavy lifting.

As such, the 556 legislators of the 11th Parliament split their time between the House's standing committees and sectoral committees. On average, each committee has about 35 Members of Parliament (MPs). Every MP sits on at least two committees, with the House's official website defining the standing committees as those that "play a crucial role in the legislative process by conducting in-depth reviews, investigations, and discussions related to particular subjects." It adds that "standing committees are a fundamental part of the legislative system in many countries and help ensure efficient and informed lawmaking."

Elsewhere, sectoral committees stand in a cluster as "specialised groups or panels that focus on specific sectors or industries within an organisation, government, or other institutions." These committees, the website adds, "are responsible for addressing issues, making decisions, and formulating policies related to their designated sectors."

Ano-show

House records extracted from the Fourth Strategic Plan of Parliament shows that majority MPs skipped committees throughout the five years of the 11th Parliament. An average of only 16 MPs attended committee sittings in the Financial Year (FY) 2020/2021 and 2021/2022. This further deteriorated because FY2022/2023 had captured 15 MPs while only 13 MPs attended committee sittings.

Mr Mugendi believes that low attendance of MPs in committees need to be viewed as "symptoms of a dysfunctional Parliament" that strike "at the heart of Uganda's democracy." He reasons that "when you have such less scrutiny over the budgets and matters that are brought, then oversight becomes less dysfunctional."

He added: "If committees themselves are less attended to, then the oversight mandate which is supposed key is less done. Then that at the end of the day is giving the Executive power, which entrenches impunity and corruption."



Members of Parliament during the plenary session chaired by the Speaker Anita Among at parliament on July 2, 2024. PHOTO/DAVID LUBOWA

MP Committee attendance

Item	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Average attendance of Committee business	16	16	15	13

SOURCE: FOURTH STRATEGIC PLAN OF PARLIAMENT

Mr Timothy Chemonges, the executive director of the Centre for Policy Analysis (CEPA), concurs. "When only half the members show up, it weakens the quality of legislation, reduces oversight, and short changes the citizens MPs are supposed to represent. It also suggests a broader culture issue within Parliament where visibility in the plenary is prioritised over the substantive work that actually improves governance."

Effective oversight

The low attendances notwithstanding, the opening half of the 11th Parliament saw three committees stick out among the 16 sectoral committees. These were the Committee on Defence and Internal Affairs then chaired by Ms Rosemary Nyakikongoro (Sheema District); Health Committee then chaired by Dr Charles Ayume (Koboko Municipality) and the House Committee on Trade that was chaired by Mr Mwine Mpaka (Mbarara South). They provided effective oversight of government entities that appeared before them.

The Mpaka-led committee, for one, left Ms Geraldine Ssali, the former Trade ministry Permanent Secretary (PS) bruised following allegations that she diverted money intended by the government to compensate war-loss victims through their cooperative Sacos. In August 2023 the sectoral committee resolved that Ms Ssali be relieved of her duties as PS at the Trade ministry. Attempts by Ms Ssali to fight back were futile. In January 2024, Mr Mpaka led his members to push for her removal when they refused to process the Trade ministry's budget for FY 2024/25.

Earlier, in January 2023, the sectoral

committee had grilled top officials at the National Social Security Fund (NSSF) over the gross mismanagement of the savers' fund and power fights among top leaders at the Fund.

Similarly, Karim Masaba (Mbale City Industrial Division) displayed his financial brilliance when he deputised Ms Faith Nakut (Napak DWR) on the six-member Ad-hoc committee that investigated issues that were eating away the already struggling Posta Uganda. During a string of probes, Mr Masaba, who mostly took lead in cross-examination of witnesses at the ICT ministry and Posta Uganda top management, found that the said entity had been operating illegally for three years.

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— Mr Charles Mugendi, a policy analyst

Elsewhere, during his tenure as the chairperson of the Committee on State Authorities and State Enterprises (Cosase), Mr Joel Ssenyonyi cracked the whip on State entities that were maladministered. In mid 2022, he exposed the rot in Uganda Airlines. It was found that the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Uganda's flag carrier, Ms Jenifer Bamuturaki, had, after being appointed under questionable ways, among others, caused losses of more

than Shs500b. A report into the mess that Cosase was shelved at the behest of Speaker Anita Among, ostensibly because it was leaked to the media.

A similar clean up was done at the Uganda National Bureau of Standards (UNBS) where the former Executive Director Mr David Livingstone Ebiru had in June 2023 told Cosase that he paid a Shs100m bribe to secure the job. Mr Ebiru's position at UNBS became untenable in July 2023.

The rough edges

During the tenure of the 11th Parliament, the Committee on National Economy processed and persuaded Parliament to approve colossal sums of loans, worsening the country's debt burden. For instance, in just a single House sitting held last December, plenary approved loans to a tune of Shs9.622 trillion much to the dismay of the Opposition.

The Opposition was not alone. Many a time, a section of the public felt dismayed when key concerns attracted minimal or no pivotal action from line committees. This mostly occurred in committees chaired by MPs aligned to the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) party.

For instance, there was deafening silence exhibited by the House committee chaired by Fox Odoi on Human rights while gross cases of rights violations rocked the country. Similar displeasure was registered on the Committee of Foreign Affairs that was mute in the face of the plight of Ugandans in Arab countries.

"Parliament needs a combination of institutional discipline and stronger accountability mechanisms to address this matter," Mr Chemonges said of the failure to provide effective oversight, adding, "Attendance should be tracked and published regularly, with consequences for persistent absenteeism, including loss of committee positions or allowances."

Continues next weekend

Museveni hails Trump for mass deportations

BY ANDREW BAGALA

KAMPALA. President Museveni has thanked United States President Donald Trump for his mass deportation programme that has seen thousands of immigrants, including Ugandans, sent packing. Mr Museveni, who described migrants as wanderers, said deportations will teach the immigrants a lesson to stay in their countries and create jobs out of the numerous opportunities.

"I like Mr Trump myself. He has said 'don't come here to America.' I said thank you so much for chasing those wanderers. What are they going to do in America? I don't want to go anywhere. Why are you going? So I love Trump for chasing you, people who don't want their countries, who are always going wowo all over the place," Mr Museveni said during his rally in Arua City on Friday.

The Trump administration has intensified deportations and also issued Visa restrictions to foreigners travelling to the US. Ugandans are among the countries the US slapped with Visa bonds. Uganda immigrants in the US are also facing deportation. Uganda is also working on an agreement with the US to receive deportees removed by the American authorities.

Last August, the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), Mr Vincent Bagire Waiswa, said: "The Agreement is in respect of Third Country Nationals who may not be granted asylum in the United States but are reluctant to or may have concerns about returning to their countries of origin. This is a temporary arrangement..."

Job creation

In Arua City, Mr Museveni said Uganda has made job opportunities. He cited an example of a man in Busoga Sub-region who was jobless but he helped him start a poultry project in which the farmer now earns Shs7.2b a year.

"He is earning Shs20m per day. That is Shs600m in a month. That is Shs7.2b in a year here in Uganda; not Dubai (United Arab Emirates) the other place where people go. How do you people leave Uganda and go to Dubai? I cannot understand it. Go to Dubai? You leave the West Nile, here! This is a nice climate! The plateau, here! If you go to Zombo [District], it is so nice," Mr Museveni said.

He said Ugandans should create their own job in the agriculture and services sectors in Uganda. He identified riding boda bodas, and taxi operations as some of the sectors the unemployed people can venture into. On Labour Day in 2022, Mr Museveni said labour export isn't his government's job creation idea.

But his government has been signing agreements with countries in the Middle East to export labour to them. Last financial year, Ugandans in the Middle East remitted \$1.6b (Shs5.7 trillion) to Uganda. The diaspora remittance was among the top three areas Uganda gets its foreign earnings.

However, many Ugandans in diaspora allege that they are treated inhumanely by their hosts.