

Kampala's disorder is not a hawker problem

Street vendors are creeping back on Kampala's streets, weeks after the latest Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA) decree that declared them persona nón grata. Assuming that urban disorder begins with the hawkers (*bateembeezi*) is a misdiagnosis.

Kampala's congestion, litter, noise, and informal economy are not the handiwork of hawkers.

Hawkers are merely the most visible symptom of the city's many compromises. To mistake the symptom for the disease is to guarantee constant relapse.

This city of roughly 1.8 million (and up to 4.5 million during the day) is run by Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA). The executive director, under the President, wields technocratic authority while the political wing, led by an elected Lord Mayor, has curtailed powers.

The result is a delicate and often tense dualism: technocratic authority on one hand and symbolic political representation on the other. That tension shadows the city.

The economic context compounds the governance issue. According to Uganda Bureau of Statistics (Ubos), Kampala Metropolitan accounts for more than half of Uganda's industrial output.

It hosts microenterprises like it's a national expo, contributing roughly 60–65 percent of Uganda's GDP. It is a city of extraordinary entrepreneurial energy, yet it does not rank among Africa's economic powerhouses like Lagos or Nairobi.

Its infrastructure lags: in road density, integrated public transport, waste management, and planned housing. The city's in-



frastructure was designed for a different century and a smaller population. It now groans under the weight of its own success.

Street behaviour amplifies this disorder. Traffic lights are advisory. Lanes are flexible. Road reserves double as taxi parks. Pavements function as retail space.

Corruption is denounced publicly and facilitated privately. Enforcement is, therefore, episodic and often politically mediated.

Evicting vendors off the streets is neither new nor simple. Jennifer Musisi tried it in 2012. She cleared streets by force. The city looked neat for a while. Then the backlash hit: the ruling party lost all Kampala parliamen-

tary seats in 2016. A political cost many attributed to Musisi's sweeping reforms.

Yet a decade later, with a more disorderly Kampala, the NRM reclaimed Nakawa East, Kampala Central, and Kawempe South. It performed even better in local divisions.

Kampala's tragedy isn't hawkers. Ours is a city that refuses to absorb them meaningfully. Empty stalls in KCCA markets aren't only rebellion; traders understand that crackdowns are temporary and that compliance is seasonal. They only have to wait.

As I write this, they're already getting back on the streets.

If Kampala seeks to be a competitive regional capital, it must

address the political impasse within KCCA. The administrative and political arms must stop performing for different audiences and start governing for the same city. Often, it is the technocratic arm that evicts. When public anger arises, the political arm absorbs it—and often amplifies it.

Hawkers are not Kampala's only problem. They just remind us what the problem always was: order within the city.

Geoffrey Mugisha,
Board Member, Pan African
Chamber of Commerce and
Chairperson NRM National
Youth Forum. geoffreymugisha256@gmail.com