

The Subservient Parliament

Predicting the Character of the 12th Parliament

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The transition from Uganda's 11th to its 12th Parliament marks a significant moment in the country's legislative history. This shift is defined not only by electoral turnover but also by the dramatic and humiliating removal of the former Speaker of Parliament from the ruling party's internal race, coupled with ongoing investigations into her tenure.

Viewed against the backdrop of the National Resistance Movement's overwhelming supermajority, with more than 370 seats against the opposition's fewer than 70, a clear prediction emerges: Uganda's 12th Parliament is likely to become the most compliant and executive-centred legislature in the country's recent history.

That character may not emerge through an outright rejection of democracy, but through a distinctly Ugandan interpretation of democracy, one that aligns with Guillermo O'Donnell's concept of an "informally institutionalized polyarchy."

The political fate of the 11th Speaker serves as the defining prologue to the 12th Parliament.

By blocking the incumbent Speaker from seeking re-election and subjecting her to high-profile investigations, the NRM establishment appears to have sent a chilling message to incoming legislators.

The signal is unmistakable: institutional independence can become a political liability.

In the 12th Parliament, the Speakership is unlikely to be viewed primarily as a constitutional check on the Executive. Instead, it may increasingly be seen as a reward for loyalty to the ruling establishment.

The new Speaker, handpicked by party



Speaker of Parliament Jacob Oboth-Oboth

leadership, is expected to preside over a House whose institutional backbone has, in the eyes of critics, already been weakened.

The investigations surrounding the outgoing leadership may deepen that atmosphere of caution.

Faced with such political realities, many legislators may prioritise self-preservation and strict adherence to party positions over independent scrutiny. Parliament could therefore function less as a deliberative institution and more as a chamber for ratifying executive decisions.

The numbers reinforce that outlook.

With a majority exceeding five to one, the NRM does not need to negotiate with the opposition to pass legislation or amend the Constitution.

In liberal democracies, a supermajority can create both risk and opportunity. It can raise fears of overreach, but it can also provide the political stability needed to pass long-term reforms.

In Uganda's case, however, such dominance significantly reduces legislative friction.

The opposition, now reduced to fewer than 70 MPs, lacks the numbers to block constitutional amendments or meaningfully delay government business.

Its role may increasingly become symbolic: vocal enough to preserve the appearance of pluralism, but without the parliamentary numbers required to influence outcomes.

In that sense, the 12th Parliament risks becoming exactly what critics fear, a debating society, where speeches are made, objections are recorded and political contestation appears visible, but the balance of power remains unchanged.

This dynamic also reveals a deeper tension in Uganda's democratic culture.

To understand why Parliament may remain subservient despite public support for democracy, one must examine how democracy itself is commonly understood.

Afrobarometer surveys have consistently shown a tension between democratic aspiration and democratic practice.

While many Ugandans say they prefer democracy, that preference is often defined in practical rather than procedural terms.

For many citizens, democracy is associated with roads, security, jobs and economic stability, developmental outcomes, rather than institutional checks and balances, legislative independence or civil liberties.

Because the NRM has long framed its legitimacy around peace, infrastructure and economic development, a compliant Parliament can often appear efficient rather than authoritarian.

If Parliament facilitates quick budget approvals, fast disbursement of public funds and visible stability, many citizens may still view it as democratic, even where oversight is weakened.

That tension creates room for formal institutions to remain intact while their

underlying function becomes hollowed out.

This is where O'Donnell's idea of "informally institutionalized polyarchy" becomes relevant.

He argued that some countries appear democratic on paper, with regular elections, legislatures and constitutional separation of powers, while real authority operates through informal patronage networks beneath those institutions.

Uganda's 12th Parliament may increasingly fit that description.

Formally, Parliament will continue to operate as expected. Committees will meet. Debates will be held. Motions will be tabled and votes taken.

But beneath those formal processes, the more powerful forces may remain informal: patronage networks, financial influence and party hierarchy.

The removal of the former Speaker can be interpreted as a victory of those informal political structures over institutional autonomy.

In the 12th Parliament, loyalty to the party chairman, the President, may outweigh the written Standing Orders of Parliament.

The NRM's numerical dominance makes those unwritten rules easier to enforce.

In the end, Uganda's 12th Parliament may come to be defined less by open legislative confrontation and more by quiet political discipline.

Its likely character is that of a rubber-stamp institution: shaped by fear, constrained by executive influence and marked by the limited leverage of the opposition.

That prediction is not based on parliamentary arithmetic alone.

It also reflects broader political culture.

As long as democracy continues to be measured more by material outcomes than institutional safeguards, and as long as informal power structures shape political survival, Parliament may retain democratic form while losing much of its independent function.

It may look like a legislature.

It may sound like a legislature.

But in practice, the chamber could become increasingly subservient: democratic in appearance, yet far more controlled beneath the surface.