



Makerere, Mamdani and perils of one-man vision

MOSES KHISA > DIALOGUE

Arguably, the core problem for a country like Uganda, is the absence of a culture of having rules that govern everybody and to which every actor is subject. Rule-based behaviour is the hallmark of modern society. The catchword liberally evoked is 'rule of law.' The principle is very simple and straightforward: Basic rules and regulations must apply at all times. They must be consistently followed and have a uniform standard.

The mark of a poorly managed society is having some individuals or groups exempt from the extant rules or, worse, when they get away with violating the law or when the rules are conveniently changed. Uganda's ruling class today changes the rules so easily when the need arises. They tend to be above the supreme laws of the country, can break the law and not be sanctioned. This has also extended to others with the right connections, either through kin relations or political and business cronyism.

Today one can commit murder and get bail if they have the 'right' relatives and can raise the money to exact bribery pressure on the justice system.

Dubious practices have so afflicted the public sector that the default

thought is to plot how to game the system and not how to follow the rules. We are at a point where to abide by the law is costly and ignoring the rules pays for those who enjoy the protection of holders of State power. This is the ultimate route to personalisation where individuals pursue personal interests in the name of public service.

Makerere University is in the throes of scandals that underline the perils of ignoring or bending rules to suit specific individuals. Mahmood Mamdani, the director of the Makerere Institute for Social Research (MISR), is at Makerere irregularly if not entirely illegally. Technically, he is way past the retirement age to hold a teaching position at Makerere, let alone be director of a unit. There have been all sorts of controversies at MISR at the behest of Mamdani. It all goes back to the beginning. The precedent was set at the onset – that Mamdani was too important to play by the rules of the university.

First, upon his appointment in 2010, he unilaterally decreed that MISR, a research institute, would become a training unit because Makerere was not producing researchers. This was a most outlandish charge.

I was somewhat of a lone voice

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when in 2012, I wrote in *The Observer* challenging Mamdani's evidently self-serving and grossly misleading assertion that Makerere was not a research university because it was not training its own researchers through a taught/course-work PhD programme.

Self-serving because Mamdani was using a sleight of hand to declare that he had come to 'save' Makerere in a project where he had no personal interests. Misleading because nowhere in the world is a research university defined primarily by course work-based PhD programmes.

In fact, the course work PhD model is uniquely American/Canadian (exported to MISR), not used in other research universities around the world.

The second, and easily the most