The Bar Belongs to Us All

I was advised by many friends to ignore Mr. Isaac Ssemakadde's latest letter. Ordinarily, I would have done so. Personal attacks rarely deserve a response.

But this is about more than one advocate attacking another.

It raises fundamental questions about the future of the Uganda Law Society, the meaning of leadership within our profession, the duty we owe one another as advocates, and whether the Bar should remain an independent professional institution or become a political movement.
Those are questions the profession cannot avoid.

Mr. Ssemakadde has also chosen to place our shared history before the Bar. Since he has done so, I owe my colleagues an honest account of my own. I do so not out of personal grievance, but out of respect for the profession to which we both belong.

I Was Always the Bar's Man.

Mr. Ssemakadde seeks to explain our past association. Allow me to do so myself.
I have never been a servant of personalities. I have always been a servant of the Bar.

Throughout my career, I have regarded service to the Uganda Law Society as a professional obligation. I have served under every President of the Society: Moses Adriko, Oscar Kihika, James Sebugenyi, Bruce Kyerere, Ruth Sebatindira, Francis Gimara, Simon Peter Kinobe, Pheona Wall, Bernard Oundo and Isaac Ssemakadde.

If my motives are ever in doubt, I can call a long line of witnesses. Every one of those former Presidents can testify that whenever the Uganda Law Society called upon me, I answered. They will also tell you that I never asked whether they belonged to my faction, supported my ambitions or shared my views. They were the elected leaders of our profession, and I believed they deserved the respect due to that office.

I did not support every campaign. But once the profession had spoken, I supported the leader.
That is how institutions are strengthened. We protect not only our practice but also the legitimacy of those whom our colleagues have chosen to lead us

That is why I supported Mr. Ssemakadde after his election.

The support required under his leadership was perhaps the most difficult because he chose to exercise the profession's democratic mandate as a licence for vulgarity, insult and unnecessary division. I said so publicly. At Uganda Law Society House I criticised the vulgarity but I also opposed those who sought to criminalise him and remove him through the courts.

I believed then, and I believe now, that lawyers elect their leaders and lawyers should decide their fate. Was that "bridge-building"?

If defending the democratic choice of the profession while openly criticising the manner in which that mandate was exercised is bridge-building, then I gladly accept the description.

That is not inconsistency. It is institutional fidelity. I defended neither Isaac Ssemakadde the man nor his excesses. I defended the office he temporarily occupied. There is a profound difference between loyalty to a person and loyalty to an institution. I chose the institution. I always will.

There were many who found my proximity to Mr. Ssemakadde strange. Some questioned it. Others openly criticised it. They misunderstood my purpose. I was never trying to build Isaac Ssemakadde. I was trying to preserve the Uganda Law Society. I believed then, as I do now, that once lawyers have democratically chosen their President, our first instinct should be to strengthen the institution, not weaken it. I believed that disagreements over style, temperament and politics should never become an excuse to undermine the office itself.

In hindsight, I underestimated how difficult that task would become. But I do not regret trying. Institutions are strengthened by service, not by convenience. Mr. Ssemakadde now appears to believe that without his blessing I cannot succeed in the election to the Judicial Service Commission. Perhaps. Perhaps not. That is for the profession to decide. But there are things more important than any election. If defending the independence, dignity and institutional integrity of the Uganda Law Society costs me that election, then so be it. Offices come and go. Elections are won and lost. The Uganda Law Society must endure. That is why my loyalty has always been to the institution, never to the personalities who temporarily occupy its offices.

Mr. Ssemakadde even complains that we have not spoken since Boxing Day 2025. I have spent the intervening period working. He appears to have spent it building grudges.

It is also unfortunate that Mr. Ssemakadde has chosen to use the official communication machinery of the Uganda Law Society to prosecute what is, in substance, a personal dispute. His letter was published on the Society's official platforms and circulated to every member of the profession.

The Uganda Law Society belongs to all its members.

Its official platforms exist to unite the profession, inform the profession and advance the statutory objects entrusted to it by Parliament. They should never become the vehicle for one office holder's personal campaign against a fellow advocate.

There is one final irony before I leave this personal history. Mr. Ssemakadde has devoted an entire open letter to demanding that "The Lawyer's Lawyer" speak. If he genuinely believes that the profession cannot move forward until "The Lawyer's Lawyer" has spoken, then he has made a remarkable confession. He has conceded that the leadership the profession seeks lies outside the office he occupies. If that is truly his belief, then perhaps he should stop clinging to that office and make way for the leadership he himself has acknowledged.

The Lukwago Question

Mr. Lukwago's arrest was a grave matter. Every advocate should be concerned whenever the rights of a member of our profession are threatened. Yet weeks later, instead of accounting for what the Uganda Law Society did, Mr. Ssemakadde asks what individual lawyers said.
That is a total distraction. It is also a telling sign of a leadership that is, regrettably, a day late and a dollar short. The question is not, "Where was Elison Karuhanga?" The question is, "Where was the Uganda Law Society?"

Section 3(c) of the Uganda Law Society Act leaves no room for doubt. Parliament established the Society to represent, protect and assist members of the legal profession. That duty belongs to the institution. It does not belong to individual advocates issuing statements on demand.

When Mr. Lukwago was arrested, our weekly Wednesday X Space had already been scheduled, as it always is. Those Spaces have become a forum for the profession. We have hosted Mr. Ssemakadde himself, members of the Governing Council and practitioners from across the legal spectrum. Instead of working with us, the Uganda Law Society chose to convene its own Space at exactly the same time. We could have proceeded with our own programme. We did not. We cancelled our own Space. We deliberately yielded the platform because we believed there should be one institutional voice. We wanted the Uganda Law Society, as the statutory representative

of the profession, to rise to the occasion on behalf of all advocates. We respected the institution and the office of its President.

The following week, during our scheduled Space, we discussed the Lukwago matter extensively with a senior member of the profession. More recently, we devoted another programme to the broader issues arising from the case, including the law on bail. Those are not the actions of people who were silent. They are the actions of lawyers who understood the difference between seeking the spotlight and strengthening the institution.

There is another fact Mr. Ssemakadde conveniently omits. We adopted precisely the same approach when Eron Kiiza was arrested. We did not compete with the Uganda Law Society. We did not seek headlines. We quietly supported colleagues who had taken the lead because we believed, then as now, that the Society should speak first and that the rest of us should strengthen, not supplant, the institution. Far from condemning that approach, Mr. Ssemakadde welcomed it. Indeed, as everyone knows, he became even more vocal in his support of our efforts while becoming increasingly critical of Mr. Kiiza and sections of civil society. So what changed? Not our conduct. Not our principles. Only Mr. Ssemakadde's politics. If precisely the same conduct attracted his praise in Mr. Kiiza's case but now attracts his condemnation in Mr. Lukwago's, then this cannot be about principle. It is about personalities.

It is about settling scores. Mr. Lukwago deserves better than to have his arrest transformed into a vehicle for prosecuting old grudges.

Institutional Independence

Mr. Ssemakadde's criticism of my article in the New Vision of 30th December 2025 attacks an argument I never made. He first invents a position for me, then attacks that invented position instead of the one I actually took.

I never argued that the Uganda Law Society should be neutral towards injustice. I argued that the Society should remain institutionally and politically independent. Those are fundamentally different propositions. No lawyer worthy of the name should ever be neutral between legality and illegality. The real question is this.

Should the Uganda Law Society become a politically aligned institution?

My answer remains no. That position is reflected not only in constitutional principle but in the Uganda Law Society Act itself. Parliament established the Society to represent and protect its

members, protect the public, and assist Government and the courts in matters affecting legislation and the administration and practice of law. Those statutory objects require an institution capable of engaging every constitutional actor. They do not envisage a political movement. Mr. Ssemakadde argues that there is no neutrality in a militarised State. If that is so, then the need for an independent Bar becomes even greater. The answer to excessive political power is not to politicise the Uganda Law Society. It is to preserve its independence.
The Bar must be free to criticise Government, the Opposition, Parliament, the military, the Judiciary and even its own members whenever legal principle demands it.

The moment it becomes politically aligned, it ceases to belong equally to all advocates.
It becomes another political actor. That is precisely what the Uganda Law Society must never become.

The Record

Mr. Ssemakadde asks for my statement. I have a different question for him.

What has Isaac Ssemakadde built that will outlive his press statements? What permanent protection has he secured for advocates? What institutional reform bears his signature?
Which law has he changed? Which enduring institution has he strengthened?
Which advocate today is safer because of his leadership? Which constitutional safeguard exists today that did not exist before he assumed office? Leadership is not measured by the number of enemies one makes or the number of headlines one generates. It is measured by the institutions one leaves stronger than one found them.

There is another revealing feature of Mr. Ssemakadde's letter.

There are fourteen candidates seeking to represent the profession on the Judicial Service Commission. Yet only one was summoned to account. Only one was called upon to speak.
If this was truly about principle, the challenge would have been addressed to all fourteen.
It was not. Mr. Ssemakadde has therefore made an admission he never intended to make. By his own conduct, he has identified the candidate whose voice he believes matters most in this debate. One does not devote an open letter to a voice one considers inconsequential.

It is fair to conclude that, as an experiment in leadership, Mr. Ssemakadde's politics of perpetual outrage has run its course.It has generated headlines but not reform. Notoriety but not respect.

Division rather than persuasion. The profession deserves an honest conversation about that record.

When Mr. Lukwago was arrested, the Bar needed leadership that would unite lawyers, strengthen institutional action and protect advocates. Instead, we watched fellow advocates attacked, women lawyers insulted, members of the Senior Counsel Bar ridiculed, and those who disagreed personally denounced.

Then came an "Insult Day." Now comes an open letter demanding personal statements from individual lawyers. And, in the midst of all this, an Executive Order directing lawyers how they should address judges.

That is precisely the problem. At the very moment the profession should have been asking how to protect advocates, strengthen judicial independence, reduce delay and restore public confidence in the administration of justice, we were instead instructed how to address judges.
We do not need to change how we address judges.

We need to change how we address the problems confronting justice.That is the difference between symbolism and leadership.

If, after all this time, Mr. Ssemakadde's answer to the challenges facing the profession is still to demand personal statements from individual lawyers, then he is asking others to compensate for the leadership he has failed to provide.

There is a final irony. The statutory body that Parliament charged with representing and protecting advocates now looks to individual lawyers to perform the very function the Act assigns to it. Leadership is not earned by proclaiming it. It is earned through service, through trust, through consistency, and through strengthening institutions rather than weakening them. The Bar deserves less theatre and more institution-building. Less denunciation and more leadership.Less personality and more principle. That is how professions endure.That is how the rule of law survives.

The Uganda Law Society existed before Isaac Ssemakadde. It will exist long after Isaac Ssemakadde. It has survived governments, political crises, internal disagreements and generations of lawyers because no one individual is bigger than the institution itself.

Our duty is not to inherit it diminished by personality cults or factional politics.

Our duty is to hand it to the next generation stronger, more independent and more respected than we found it.

That has been the guiding principle of my professional life.

It remains so today.