

ULS/163/2026



18 March 2026

Mr. Mazi Afam Osigwe, SAN
President, Nigerian Bar Association
NBA House, Plot 1101, Mohammadu Buhari Way, Central Business District, Abuja F.C.T., Nigeria.

Dear Colleague,

RE: Solidarity with the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA)

Greetings from the Uganda Law Society (ULS).

I had the pleasure of meeting **Mr. Sabastine U. Anyia, your amiable Vice President**, earlier this month in Arusha, Tanzania, at the commemoration of the 20th anniversary of the African Court of Human and Peoples' Rights. **We agreed to foster closer ties between the leaders of our organisations and fellow bar associations across Africa.** I had anticipated our initial contact would be on a lighter note, perhaps the occasional visit to each other's general meeting. Instead, circumstances necessitate our immediate collaboration in defence of the legal profession's independence.

Accordingly, I write from exile to declare **the full, uncompromising adherence of the ULS** to the NBA's principled stand against the judicial transgression committed on 16 March 2026 at the Federal High Court, Abuja. **No judge possesses the lawful power to order a legal practitioner to kneel! That directive by Justice Mohammed Umar was not discipline; it was humiliation.** The NBA has spoken clearly and correctly: such conduct violates every tenet of due process, professional dignity, and the rule of law. We stand with you, shoulder to shoulder.

However, this is not a Nigerian aberration. It is a continental epidemic infecting English-speaking judiciaries of former British colonies. From Kampala to Nairobi, Accra to Freetown, we witness the same pattern: **arrogant benches, bullying rhetoric, forced genuflection disguised as "decorum," and the weaponisation of the archaic offence of "scandalising the judiciary"** – a charge formally abolished 13 years ago in the United Kingdom that once exported this arcane law to us. Colonial humiliation did not end with the flag; it merely changed costume.

Last year, on Valentine's Day, **I was convicted and sentenced to two years in prison in absentia** by the High Court of Uganda at Kampala for "scandalising the judiciary". My actual offence was **refusing to kneel and apologise as directed by the Chief Justice** for criticisms of judges and calls for judicial reform. My appeal was unlawfully removed from the Court of Appeal's hearing schedule by the Deputy Chief Justice. Since then, an unwritten order has been given to deny calendar dates for cases involving me, or the ULS while I am still the Head of the Bar. With nearly 17 arrest warrants and investigations targeting me, **I was forced to close my practice and live outside Uganda as a fugitive.** These actions aim to intimidate, isolate me, and hinder my leadership of the national bar association. Without exile, I would be imprisoned.

I therefore have **no hesitation in joining Advocate Marshall Abubakar** and the NBA to **strongly condemn Justice Mohammed Umar's insidious misconduct**. When a judge compels an advocate to kneel before the Court, he does not merely bruise one lawyer's pride; he wounds the entire profession, chills fearless advocacy, and signals to every citizen that justice is dispensed by fear, not reason.

Across our continent we have seen many colleagues migrating from litigation to other practice areas for having been reduced to tears in court, their careers ruined, and their clients abandoned because fear replaced duty. **The Bench's obsession with decorum has turned our courtrooms into crime scenes where the slow strangulation of liberty prevails.**

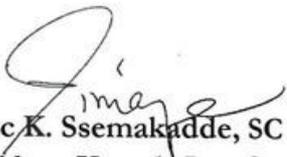
In the circumstances, the remedy devised by our Bar Associations cannot be cosmetic. **We must reject the bygone cult of performative civility – wigs, bows, ritual obeisance – and embrace functional professionalism that recognises robust dissent as an ethical imperative, not an insult.** Reform must be radical yet lawful. The following are my proposals for the time being:

1. Promote increased awareness of the 1990 UN Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers and the 1985 UN Basic Principles on the Independence of the Judiciary, as well as the IBA Standards on the Independence of the Legal Profession and IBA Minimum Standards of Judicial Independence (1982), and enact reforms to match these standards.
2. Mandatory cameras in court.
3. Mandatory judicial ethics training that teaches restraint, not lordship.
4. Independent disciplinary commissions with equal Bar and Bench representation, empowered to sanction bullying and humiliation.
5. Statutory abolition of “scandalising the judiciary” offences across the Commonwealth.
6. Public register of judicial conduct complaints and swift appellate review of contempt and recusal proceedings.

ULS pledges to fight – alongside the NBA and every sister Bar Association on the continent – for an independent Bar that cannot be cowed, an independent and accountable judiciary that serves the people rather than subjugates them, and a fraternity of respectable, resilient, thriving advocates who speak truth without kneeling.

The temple of justice must never again demand genuflection. It must demand courage.

In unshakeable solidarity and with stoic determination,


Isaac K. Ssemakadde, SC
President, Uganda Law Society