SPEECH BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE UGANDA LAW SOCIETY AT THE NEW LAW YEAR EVENT

The Rt Honourable Prime Minister
The Honourable Chief Justice
The Honourable Justices, Judges, Registrars and Magistrates of The Courts of Judicature
The Honourable Minister of Justice and Constitutional Affairs
Your Excellencies The Members of the Diplomatic Corps
The Honourable Attorney General and The Honourable Solicitor General
The Permanent Secretaries and Other Civil Servants Present
My Colleagues, The Members of the Uganda Law Society, and
Our Esteemed Guests, I salute you all.

Ladies and gentlemen: This is a time of reckoning. The judiciary cannot insulate itself from the realities of the country. The courts exist not to be praised but to serve.

The Ugandan people, aggrieved by inefficiencies, corruption, and selective justice, are justified in their anger. Their voices, whether harsh, unfiltered, or piercing, are a necessary check on judicial power, not an “attack” on the institution. It is feedback from the taxpayer that must be welcomed without any misgivings.

The Bar does not exist to soothe the Judiciary’s sensitivities, nor to offer it applause. It exists to hold it accountable, and to defend the courts and judges from executive overreach, interference by special interests, and other threats to judicial independence.

However, we are witnessing increasing aggression from sections of the Judiciary against not only the Bar but also the Ugandan people. This is characterized by a pattern of injudicious verdicts corroding public trust, and arbitrary reliance on the power of contempt—a colonial relic long discarded in the Global North—to stifle dissent and punish criticism.

A Judiciary that responds to criticism with repression only reinforces its own illegitimacy.

The recent Supreme Court ruling declaring the trial of civilians in the General Court Martial unconstitutional is a welcome vindication of the Rule of Law.

Yet, the stain of judicial excess remains, exemplified by the tragic case of Ivan Ssebaduka—a litigant imprisoned for simply expressing an opinion about this very institution. That imprisonment stands as a permanent scar on our judiciary, a reminder of an era that must come to an end.

As the Radical New Bar, we have been, and remain, concerned with the matter of Justice as a whole. Justice is a universal, human, constitutional, and legal right. Without it, society is neither stable nor productive. “No Justice, no Peace” is not merely a slogan; it is a statement of reality.

“No Justice, no Development” is the harsh truth we must confront today, as we inaugurate the New Law Year, under the theme: “Positioning Uganda’s Judiciary to Contribute to Social and Economic Development.”

Uganda’s justice system is a leading demonstration of the general crisis of governance in the country. It does not deliver. This dysfunction is not accidental—it is engineered to serve entrenched economic and political interests that are usually not openly interrogated at forums like this one.

The Radical New Bar was formed to challenge and dismantle these interests. To be radical is to go to the root of the problem and begin to solve it from there. It is not extremism—it is necessary.

It is very common to see a radical and mistake them for an extremist, because their forms of expression and presentation seem the same.

Radicalism is from the Latin word: ***radix***, which means “root”. A radical is one who goes to the heart of a matter, and pulls it out by the roots.

Radical solutions often feel extreme, but they are not extremist, and should not be taken to be so. Extremism is a mindset where a person always simply wants to demonstrate how different their views are from another position, and moreover to the furthest degree possible.

This is not radical, just extreme.

Many extremists are mistaken for radicals, and vice-versa.

I am a radical. Some of you in the government are extremist.

Our intention remains to compel power in this country to enable the delivery of Justice as a constitutional right. This must apply to both the highest-ranking individuals and the most ordinary of citizens.

The Ugandan prison system is heavily congested. Sentencing and incarceration have become arbitrary, wielded as tools of oppression rather than justice.

More and more, imprisonment in Uganda results from poverty, political opposition, or offending the powerful. We have said before: "The practice of Law must be free to deliver justice to Ugandans who are suffering land-grabbing, bad employment conditions, racial discrimination, sexual harassment, stolen elections, corporate theft, and unjust taxation."

We are beginning our campaign to see that every imprisoned Ugandan who is entitled to bail gets it. This will go a long way toward decongesting the jails, reuniting families, re-orienting judges and magistrates, and exposing the interests profiting from this misery.

The judiciary's reliance on contempt power to shield itself from critique is an indictment, not a defense. The offense of "scandalizing the court" is a relic of colonial oppression, long discarded in democratic societies.

The courts should expect scrutiny, not silence. The modern judiciary, if it is to remain relevant, must embrace dissent, not criminalize it.

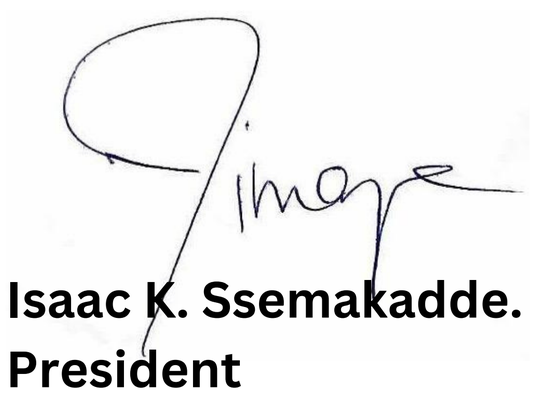
To my colleagues at the Bar, the fight is not yet over. The Radical New Bar is not a moment—it is a movement. We will be here long after the faces on the Bench have changed. We will be here until the Judiciary is truly transformed.

If the Judiciary wishes to contribute to Uganda's development, let it begin by acknowledging its failures. Let it embrace the public's anger, not suppress it.

Let it earn legitimacy, not demand it. And above all, let it discard the colonial tools of suppression and stand boldly in the light of accountability.

We, the Uganda Law Society, present no apologies. We will not be silenced. And we will remain an independent Bar—now and forever unapologetically radical, unfalteringly bold, and irrevocably committed to the fundamental principles of justice, accountability, and free expression.

Thank you.



Isaac K. Ssemakadde.
President
Uganda Law Society

This speech was originally scheduled to be presented at the 2025 New Law Year event but I was without explanation struck out from the program by the Chief Justice A.C. Owiny Dollo.