



By Kumekucha



In late 2016, some people who had earlier come looking for my views in another confusing lifetime circa 2007, returned hoping that I would be able to repeat my prediction magic.

Very easy this time, I told them, the Jubilee government will be re-elected and they will not even need to break into a sweat to get back into office. My view was informed by the moves Uhuruto made early in their administration to distribute all manner of goodies including title deeds in counties where the alliance had been weak in the 2013 polls. The Coast was one area that really hit the headlines with an unprecedented confirmation of title deeds that year and in subsequent years too.

In places like western Kenya, popular politicians were wooed into the Jubilee camp, the most notable being Budalangi legislator Ababu Namwamba.

Not many perceived what was happening then but clearly the ruling duo were starting their re-election campaign early.

Today, less than a month to the polls, my prediction barely a few months back is clearly not going to come to pass. Indeed, every analyst seems to agree that if the incumbent Jubilee government does win re-election, it will certainly not be without plenty of sweat.

So, what happened here? What shifted the political equation so dramatically and so quickly, turning a confident incumbent into a struggling one?

Recent polls by reputable pollsters like Ipsos Synovate have shown Raila Odinga rapidly gaining on Uhuru, with the latest showing that 47 per cent of Kenyans would vote for the Uhuruto duo while 42 per cent would vote for the Raila-Kalonzo ticket. It is instructive that the polls have shown Uhuru hardly gaining in popularity while the graphs have shown huge Raila leaps in contrast.

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Travelling through most of Kenya outside the erstwhile central province and the Rift Valley, one would begin to think that Raila Odinga will win the polls easily, contrary to the scientific polls. For many years now, I have done regular surveys using my contacts on the ground. Since early this year, they have shown a rapid rise in Raila's popularity. So much so that I suspected they may be more than a little exaggerated. More so when compared with scientific opinion polls. And so in early June I visited Eldoret, Uasin Gishu, Kitale, Kitui, Mwingi, Meru and Embu. Coupled with what I saw in Mombasa where I resided at the time, the general impression I got was that the Nasa candidate's potential votes in most of the country was in fact being grossly understated in the information I had been seeing in the mainstream media and opinion polls.

Still, there is an interesting aside here that may explain why the figures never seem to favour a challenger to the incumbent in Kenya.

AN EXPLANATION FOR SKEWED FIGURES?

I witnessed a fascinating scenario during the 2010 census somewhere in rural Kiambu. As census officials took a neighbour through the questions, an older member of the family warned them in vernacular to be careful not to give the wrong answers to the government. Over the years I have witnessed a few other such instances. It stems from the fact that there is still a fear of government in many rural areas, especially among older Kenyans and there is often a deep instinct that it is better to give the right answer rather than the wrong one. An answer that they feel will please the government rather than what they actually think. To make matters worse, it is taboo in many Kenyan cultures to support somebody who has not gone through the traditional rites of circumcision. As primitive as it may sound, these are factors that could easily affect Raila Odinga numbers with a pollster. And they are factors that may not be easy for pollsters to capture and compensate for in their samples and analyses.

WHAT THE FINAL VOTER REGISTER FIGURES SAY

The IEBC released the final voter register as I was putting finishing touches to this article. It may be a good idea to delve a little deeper into the figures by crunching the numbers based on the 2013 results and bearing in mind that voting patterns in the country are predictably tribal.

Putting Musalia Mudavadi's 2013 votes into the Nasa basket, the opposition voter tally improves dramatically but still falls short of victory

This time, putting Musalia Mudavadi's 2013 votes into the Nasa basket, the opposition voter tally improves dramatically but still falls short of victory. Assuming the same voter turnout percentages, Nasa would lose by polling 8.28 million votes to Jubilee's 8.57 million. Bearing in mind the very unpredictable nature of voter turnout, these figures would make the race much closer than any poll

has seen so far.

If anything, these estimates are based on registered voters, underlining once again just how terribly important voter turnout is going to be for both candidates on August 8.

WHY RAILA'S SUDDEN POPULARITY?

So the burning question would be what has made opposition leader and Nasa flagbearer Raila Odinga so popular so suddenly?

It emerges that asking the same question the other way around has a higher chance of getting you the answer. And that question would be: What made Uhuruto so unpopular so quickly?

Indeed, this is one of the many similarities the 2017 election has to the ill-fated 2007 one. In that earlier election, Raila Odinga received widespread support and votes right across the country but it was not his popularity that triggered it. Rather, Kenyans were registering an emphatic protest vote against president Mwai Kibaki and his administration. What we have here are very similar sentiments against the Uhuruto administration that have created a huge block of protest votes.

The sober truth is that, in comparison with past governments, the Jubilee administration is the best the country has ever had. Even with its glaring mega-corruption scandals, Kenyans actually have not had a better government to show. Huduma Centres countrywide and even in opposition strongholds like Kisumu have dramatically eased the public's access to government services and wiped out the corruption cartels on that front at least. Infrastructural projects are visible and even with the county governments in place, there is a lot of solid progress that the Uhuruto duo can take credit for. And that is the truth.

But alas, in politics, elections are won or lost on the emotions of voters and on this front Jubilee has had some rather rotten luck. A number of factors, some of which are outside the control of the government, have coalesced as we go into the polls, suddenly making the incumbent a hard sell. Or at the very least, harder to sell than he was just a few months ago to the majority of voters outside his home turf in the former central province.

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The clearest illustration of the bad mood of voters on the ground currently is an Ipsos survey in March this year that revealed that seven out of every ten Kenyans felt that the country was headed in the wrong direction. The shocking translation from that statistic was that even those who support the Jubilee government are not happy with things the way they are. Although they will probably still vote Jubilee anyway, based on ethnic considerations.

HARD TIMES FOR VOTERS ACROSS THE BOARD

The hard times most Kenyans are facing currently have to top the list of things upsetting the voter just now. Here the opposition has cleverly managed to link recent corruption headlines to the hard times, thus solidifying their support and releasing pent-up emotions that make for a bigger voter turnout on August 8 that much easier to achieve.

STRONG ANTI-KIKUYU SENTIMENTS

But the most decisive factor in deciding the 2017 presidential poll will end up being the strong and escalating anti-Kikuyu sentiments sweeping right across the country.

If Jubilee ends up losing these elections, then analysts will have the glee of including in their pieces the story of how the government knowingly helped grow the very monster that ultimately felled it.

And here is how it has happened: Uhuruto handlers, missing the rallying factor of the ICC cases that they rode into power on in 2013, have been looking for another emotive factor to rally their troops. They have resorted to actively provoking anti-Raila rhetoric and feelings while promoting among their core supporters a feeling of being under siege from enemies of the Kikuyu, thus leaving the community with no option but to fight for an emphatic win at all costs. Mwai Kibaki used a similar strategy in 2007. One of the deadly by-products of this kind of approach is intensifying anti-Kikuyu feelings among the other tribes in the country, not just among the Luo whom it is mainly targeted at.

The result is that today most Nasa supporters can hardly wait to vote out the Jubilee administration. This kind of tribal war leaves virtually no room to talk issues or to analyse development achievements. Little wonder that the biggest development project since Independence, albeit weighed down by many issues, has not had even a fraction of the anticipated impact most analysts, including this writer, thought it would have. I am of course referring to the single gauge railway (SGR) project. Reducing the travel time between Mombasa and Nairobi is something that is expected to revolutionise many Kenyan lives and create numerous business and work opportunities that would otherwise not have been possible. Still, the political impact has been disappointing, at best.

RIFT VALLEY MUMBLINGS

These anti-Kikuyu feelings could not have come at a worse time because there is mounting evidence that they could end up impacting on Uhuruto's vital support base in the Rift Valley.

Uhuru Kenyatta swept into State House on the solid support base of not only central Kenya (his own community of Kikuyus) but also Deputy President William Ruto's Kalenjin community. Both regions are vote-rich and the numbers impressive enough to almost guarantee one the presidency. Naturally, it is expected that the same support base will play a key role in the president's re-election. The long and short of it is that any slight dent in Uhuruto's chunk of Rift Valley Kalenjin votes will almost certainly spell disaster for the incumbent.

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Actually, the growing anti-Kikuyu sentiments in the region could snatch away much more than just a chunk if recent developments are anything to go by. Two very scary events related to anti-Kikuyu sentiment in the region are worth noting here.

Uasin Gishu is a county at the heart of the Rift Valley, where incumbent Governor Jackson Mandago is fighting the political fight of his life to retain his seat against a strong and well-financed challenger called Zedekiah Kiprop Bundotich, better known as simply Buzeki. Buzeki has won the hearts of the sizeable local Kikuyu community, who see him as a breath of fresh air in comparison with the controversial and ethnic-oriented Mandago. Mandago is from the Nandi, who make up about a third of the voters, while Buzeki is a Keiyo who has managed to also muster the support of other non-Nandi Kalenjin voters in the county.

Mandago has felt the heat of this challenge so much that he has openly threatened the Jubilee high

command that if they do not force the wealthy businessman to withdraw from the race, he and his Nandi community will influence most of Rift Valley to vote for Nasa instead of Jubilee. Despite a flurry of meetings, the issue is yet to be resolved. And meanwhile the Kikuyu community in the county is feeling threatened and have clearly been warned that a Buzeki win in August will result in dire consequences for them. Not all these warnings have been conveyed in secret and some have in fact been captured by various media houses and news outlets. In one chilling instance widely quoted in the media, the Governor declared that on voting day his aides would carefully monitor the first 100 votes cast by members of the Kikuyu tribe in Uasin Gishu and if they turned out to be for Buzeki, he would signal the entire Rift Valley Kalenjin community to vote for the Nasa presidential candidate.

It is not clear how Mandago's aides will be able to "monitor" actual voting in the secret ballot setup we have in the country.

Whatever the outcome in Uasin Gishu, it is hard to imagine a situation where President Kenyatta's vote tallies will go unscathed with so much anti-Kikuyu venom flying around.

ISAAC RUTTO THE GAME CHANGER?

The second possible game-changing thing happening in the Rift Valley is credited mainly to the efforts of Bomet Governor Isaac Rutto. Isaac is a bitter rival of DP Ruto, who was a close ally in 2007. The Governor has helped fan anti-DP Ruto sentiments right across the Rift Valley. The result today is that there are many areas in the region where the DP cannot give a speech without being heckled. Despite the opinion polls and what many analysts are saying, it is indeed difficult to envisage the same voters agreeing with Isaac Rutto's sentiments but voting for the president who is on the same ticket as the man they now love to hate.

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But even more telling is a development widely reported in the media but ignored by most analysts looking at Rift Valley voting patterns. Early in the year and before Isaac Rutto announced his decision to join the opposition Nasa as one of the principals, the populous Kipsigis community gave him their blessings and pledged support for his Chama cha Mashinani political party. The community also gave him the green light to join the opposition. Such arrangements in the Rift Valley are taken very seriously indeed and this can only mean one thing. That virtually all the Kipsigis vote will go to Chama cha Mashinani and the presidential candidate that the party supports, namely one Raila Odinga.

Below are population figures of the various sub-tribes of the Kalenjin nation from the 2009 census; you can see that the Kipsigis outnumber all communities by a significant margin:

Kipsigis.....1,916,317

Nandi.....949,835

Pokot.....632,557

Keiyo.....313, 925

Terik.....300,741

Marakwet.....80,149

Tugen.....109,906.

The long and short of all this is that the Rift Valley could easily turn out very differently from what everybody is expecting. This is because, although it already seems that almost half of the Kalenjin vote will go to the opposition, the Rift Valley has never been divided in the past. That means one of two things could happen at the last minute: The vote could end up being divided, which is unprecedented; or it could all shift at the last minute to the opposition, which has happened before and is precisely what happened in 2007. A Nandi revolt, which as we have seen has already been threatened, coupled with Kipsigis influence spreading to the other smaller Kalenjin sub-tribes, could well deliver such a shocking turn of events. The growing anti-Kikuyu sentiment in the Rift Valley makes a strong Jubilee comeback in the area highly unlikely.

UNRESOLVED ETHIC ISSUES IN THE RIFT VALLEY

One of the reasons why many analysts have always said that the peace in the Rift Valley after the 2007 troubles is fragile at best is obvious enough. And it is the fact that the ethnic issues that were used to trigger the bloodletting have remained largely unresolved.

It is a no-brainer that reviving anti-Kikuyu sentiment in the region will help turn the Kalenjin vote away from Jubilee. Isaac Rutto's handlers are reported to have repeatedly asked voters in the region to show what they have gained from being in government

Amazingly, the approach has been that if people do not talk about it, or make any efforts to revive debate on it, the issue will eventually go away, somehow. Somebody should have had the foresight to remember that politics has a way of digging out dirt and unearthing what has been buried if only it will help win votes.

This has already started happening in the Rift Valley. It is a no-brainer that reviving anti-Kikuyu sentiment in the region will help turn the Kalenjin vote away from Jubilee. Isaac Rutto's handlers are reported to have repeatedly asked voters in the region to show what they have gained from being in government through DP Ruto. This has been followed by an assertion that their man in government is in fact being used in the same way that Daniel arap Moi was used as vice president under Jomo Kenyatta. This is very effective vote-winning political rhetoric. Unfortunately, given the circumstances of 2007, it is also very dangerous.

The bottom line is that any vote expectations that Uhuruto may have that are pegged on the Rift Valley are extremely shaky at best. Which means that fate has just handed Raila Odinga his best chance yet of winning the presidency.

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