



THE APOCALYPSE NOW: Pathways to building a nation called Kenya

By Francis Omondi



Kenya is on the brink of plummeting into the abyss of political catastrophe. The government and the opposition are locked in an existential contest for Kenya's leadership. Either the government will cement its hold on power by employing all means possible (illicit not excluded) or the opposition National Super Alliance (NASA) will wrench power in a way not yet anticipated (but adjudged illegal). Such is the fix that my people would say, "*Thuol odonjo e ko*" (The snake has entered the guard, would we salvage the milk or the gourd?)

Could it be that Kenya is headed for apocalyptic politics?

Critics of this government accuse it of wantonly undermining Kenya's democratic principles by infringing on democratic accountability, individual rights and the rule of law. This has been manifested in its preference for tyranny rather than dialogue as a response to pressure from the opposition and other critics. Toiling to deter and deal with dissidents, the State has turned to its vast repressive apparatus on Kenyans perceived as a threat.

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The first victims of the State's assault have been democratic institutions. The opposition politicians are harassed and picked up by police on flimsy charges. Basic freedoms of expression and assembly have been restricted in practice, though not in law. Elections have become choreographed performances that are neither free nor fair. At its core, this assault has been motivated by the regime's desire to protect power and accumulate wealth. The government purports to run the country according to the tenets of Western democracy. What we have, however, is a democratic facade, paying lip service to those tenets even as they are subverted.

The repeat election on 26 October exposed what has been a closely-kept secret: a government appearing strong on the outside but whose power remains brittle at its core. It is apparent that the regime projects a nimbus of invincibility that masks the shallow roots of its public support. What else would necessitate the massaging of votes, the muzzling of civil society organisations, the swamping of social media with propaganda and the hyping of approval ratings and other forms of manufactured consent?

NASA's hopes of assuming power have been reliant on the independence of the country's institutions. The opposition demands that the principles of democracy be applied in toto. When the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) failed to conduct a free and fair election on 8 August 2017, they said that these principles had been manipulated or distorted. The opposition threatened to unleash its final bullet, "*wacha kiumane*" (let hell break loose). This meant that it would arbitrate its case on the streets, thus confronting a government ready to crush protests even if lives were lost.

The opposition has a large and increasingly radicalised and aggrieved following. These people are determined to change their situation no matter the consequences - anarchy or death don't matter.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in his book *Not in God's Name*, explained that: "Apocalyptic politics is the strange phenomenon of a revolutionary movement whose gaze is firmly fixed on the past. It arises at times of destabilising change and speaks to those who feel unjustly left behind."

In messianic politics, people believe that the destination is close and God is beckoning. "Hence the readiness of messianic militants to welcome even to initiate the terrors that proceed the last days", writes Michael Walzer. "Hence the strange politics of the worse the better and hence the will to sin, to risk any crime for the sake of the end."

The opposition's followers had high hopes of reaching "Canaan" this time around. The manipulation and illegality of the election stole this hope, and with it went the aspiration for change. They were stranded

*"wondering between two worlds,
one dead the other powerless to be born."*

(Matthew Arnold, Stanzas from the Grande

Chartreuse [c1850])

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the end of time in the midst of time, the search for redemption now. That is why this political position suspends the normal rules that restrain people from murdering the innocent.

It is like Samson in the Temple of the Philistines, bringing down the building on his enemies but destroying himself in the process.

If the event of Raila's return from his USA trip is indicative of the future, then I am certain we are on the cusp of revolt and Armageddon. The disenfranchisement in the country must be addressed, and all should have an opportunity to prosper. With increasingly dim prospects for a livelihood, health care and a future to latch on to, the protesting opposition followers cannot be deader than they are already. It's already tragic.

Nowhere is this condition as explicit as in the myth of Sisyphus. Condemned by the gods to roll a rock to the top of a mountain, whereupon its own weight makes it fall back down again, Sisyphus was trapped in this perpetually futile labour. He was condemned to everlasting torment and the accompanying despair of knowing that his efforts were pointless. Efforts to bring about change in Kenya have also been futile. Hopes hinged on the Constitution of Kenya 2010 did not materialise.

Intriguingly, Albert Camus, the French philosopher, noticed defiance in Sisyphus at the moment he goes back down the mountain. The consciousness of his fate is the tragedy, yet consciousness also allows Sisyphus to scorn the gods, providing a small measure of satisfaction. There is a mingling of satisfaction and tragedy, which is reflected in the opposition followers' loaded scorn in the face of police brutality: "I would rather die standing than kneeling."

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The opposition's unexpected decision to go to the Supreme Court shifted the direction of events and possibly averted a grave bloody encounter. The Supreme Court judges, acting according to their conscience, kept Kenya on the narrow pass between anarchy and tyranny, on the narrow way of peace. In asserting their independence, they ruled to nullify the election and called for repeat polls. This salvaged the country by redirecting energies towards reforms. The opposition recognised that pursuing the reform of independent bodies would build lasting peace for the country, and therefore demanded changes and openness within the vilified IEBC.

The opposition also sought reforms of the laws that the Supreme Court applied to nullify the polls. They opted to regularise the "irregularities" and make illegalities "legal", so to speak. Parliament, without opposition members, made changes in law apparently to make it easy for Jubilee to win in the repeat polls. This was a significant and definitive decision that, as we shall learn, took the country away from the path of peace back to the sinking sands of uncertainty. The resulting confusion at the IEBC, working under duress and alleged pressure from the State, forced a key member of the commission to quit. The president is believed to have tacitly supported the confusion; he had to win in the repeat election and so made these decisions willfully.

Yet we delude ourselves when we claim that the problems facing Kenya are due to individual politicians. Ignoring these seismic shifts that undermine the foundations of the country's democracy and fault Raila and his followers' street protests is also cheeky dishonesty. Why could we not see the obvious in the president's decisions? That he first repudiated the faith on which the nation was founded - the rule of law and therefore the Judiciary and the Constitution. Then the precepts that

governed the country, the independent institutions of the nation: the police force, IEBC, the Directorate of Public Prosecutions, all which were so systematically strangled that they effectively operate under instruction “from anonymous sources” (guessing who these sources are is not difficult). The stifling of public freedoms and the vigour with which civil society organisations were hunted threatened the moral framework that gave us the impetus for a free society under the Constitution of Kenya 2010.

These are the terrifying decisions he made. They are the kind of decisions we are making all over the world at this time. The entire global monetary crisis of 2008 was based upon a framework that defies the moral law of God. This framework allows you to violate the rules, to cheat in elections and to build your own storehouses while exploiting others and eliminating anyone who stands in your way. The truth has been simplified to the most elemental choice: agree or die. We have desecrated the very essence of human life, which is why the normal rules that restrain people from murdering the innocent are suspended. Very seldom do we talk about the right to be human. And we think we can do all of this with impunity? These are the issues that are strangling Kenya.

Consequently, the opposition lost patience. Essentially, it wanted a revolution without the slow process of transformation. Its decision to withdraw from the rescheduled election of 26 October 2017 - informed by the failure of the IEBC to act independently and to reform - reflects this frustration. In the determination to act for change, the opposition resorted to the setting up of People’s Assemblies at the county levels across the nation, as it were, invoking the sovereignty of the people as enshrined in the Constitution. It won’t accept Uhuru as president, instead demanding to swear in Odinga as the people’s president (initially scheduled for the 12 December 2017 but which took place on 30 January 2018). The details of this and how it will sit in law is still opaque. Here are an ominous sign of imminent legal confrontations and conflicts.

These political protagonists look to use power in the place of persuasion, to use daggers instead of debate. There are no listening ears among them or their followers. The government resorts to tyranny and brutal force, while the opposition urges the masses to revolt and spread anarchy.

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What ails Kenya’s politics is not ethnicity *per se*. The seismic events of 2002 - when the organised opposition seized power - proved that Kenyans can come round. Such coming together, however, has the potential to inflame violence, as we would witness five years later.

Prof. James Ogude, a Senior Research Fellow and Director at the Centre for the Advancement of Scholarship, University of Pretoria, exposed the popular use of “ethnicity as a means to establishing difference or exclusivity for political expediency”. Holders of power are bent on wantonly wrenching the thin web that binds Kenya. They dutifully ape the nation’s founding fathers, who established the country on the ethnic exclusion of certain communities perceived to be a threat to the State. What Prof. Ogude observed of the post-Kenyatta State can be said of this regime - an increase in what may be called “an ethnocratic state” whose basic political rhetoric is nation-building, while in practice it undermines any real desire for nationhood. It is unfortunate that political leaders goad ethnic hostilities like the bullfighters in Khayeka, Kakamega County. They have weaponised ethnicity.

The real shame has been the failure to transition from ethnic-based to ideologically-based politics.

Aggravating this situation is the absence of concrete class markings, which allows this void to be filled with tribalism. We are ruined when in the absence of proper political ideology, tribalism has filled the vacuum. Prof. Colin Leys, writing in the Institute of Development Studies Bulletin 7(3): *Underdevelopment in Kenya, The Political Economy of Neo-Colonialism* affirmed this when he said, “Tribalism is in the first instance an ideological phenomenon. Essentially, it consists in the fact that people identify other exploited people as the source of their insecurity and frustrations, rather than their common exploiters.”

Of course, this does not happen “spontaneously”. Kenyans are victims of political leaders who create this situation. The challenge, therefore, goes beyond individual politicians and tribalism, and to our refusal to agitate for the establishment of effective democratic institutions to serve all Kenyans.

Tribalism serves our politicians by retarding the development of mass class-consciousness, which in turn is achieved by deliberate recasting of such issues into tribal terms. Colins Legum, in his book *Africa Since Independence*, observes how “politicians seek to secure their class position by constructing inter-tribal patron-client hierarchies, defining social conflicts in terms of ethnic relationships...” What this argument reveals also is that, although ethnic categories have intrinsic reasons for existence, it is not a given that ethnic groups must develop on the basis of mutual hostility and competition.

The book of Genesis in the Bible is about the willingness to accord dignity to the other rather than see them as a threat. The classification of “others” as threats has enabled pathological dualism that, according to Sacks, “divides humanity into children of darkness and of light, all good among us but all evil in the others”.

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When a section of Kenyans would commit evil just to prevent Odinga from being president, we see an outright refusal to accept the partially good intentions of others with whom, according to Thomas Melton, “we are unconsciously proclaiming our own malice, our own intolerance, our own lack of realism, our own ethical and political quackery.” This kind of dualism must be defeated if Kenya is to become a nation.

One way out of this is role reversal. Rabbi Sacks suggests: “The way we learn not to commit evil is to experience an event from the perspective of the victim. That is what (Biblical) Joseph is forcing his brothers to do. He educates them in otherness through role reversal.”

Joseph forces his brothers to recognise that just as a brother can be a stranger (when kept at a distance), so a stranger can turn out to be a brother. Cain is able to commit murder because he asks, “Am I my brothers’ keeper?” He refuses to feel the pain of Abel but cares only about his rejected offering. On the contrary, in showing that he is his brother’s keeper, Judah’s repentance redeems not only his own earlier sin but also Cain’s. No wonder then that the nation of Israel began in Egypt with slaves so that they could know from the inside what it feels like to be on the other side.

Going forward, let truth be the foundation upon which Kenya is built. History is replete with evidence that truth can be betrayed and systems can be manipulated in the service of oppression and injustice. This has been the story of Kenya.

But aren't these the challenges also confronting the human family now, calling us to look beyond those dangers? The opposition needs to remain committed to good governance and resist half-measure application of democratic principles, individual rights and the rule of law. The government that calls on all to respect the Constitution must also be exemplary in adhering to the tenets of the Constitution. This is dealing with each other truthfully.

Addressing civil and political leaders and members of the diplomatic corps in the Presidential Palace in Prague on 26 September 2009, Pope Benedict XVI could have as well been addressing Kenya's stalemate today when he said: "The thirst for truth, beauty, and goodness, implanted in all men and women by the Creator, is meant to draw people together in the quest for justice, freedom, and peace." He questions what is more inhuman and destructive than the cynicism which would deny the grandeur of our human quest for truth, and the relativism that corrodes the very values which inspire the building of a united and fraternal world. It is imperative, therefore, to place confidence in our innate capacity to crave for and grasp the truth and allow this confidence to point us to work for the Kenya we want.

Our priority must be to pursue principle above pragmatism. To get there, we must admit that while pragmatism determines the greater part of politics, it must never be at the expense of moral principles.

Now, however, we need to also embrace the truth with all its ramifications. Kenyans have a capacity for doing right and upholding the principles of democracy, as demonstrated in the 2002 election and the referendum that yielded the 2010 Constitution. This will ensure an end to election theft. I doubt there is need for more laws. I also do not imagine that changing people at the helm of failing institutions like the IEBC, without a shift in attitude, will change the situation.

Our priority must be to pursue principle above pragmatism. To get there, we must admit that while pragmatism determines the greater part of politics, it must never be at the expense of moral principles. For the professional politician, judge, administrator of justice or manager of the country's crucial institutions, this means the priority of conscience above mere expediency. This will not be without a cost. Cardinal Ratzinger warns: "To live by the priority of moral principle over pragmatism requires moral courage. To adhere to your (genuinely moral) principles, must bring you into conflict with the powers and principalities of this world." And for politics to recover its sense of direction, argues Ratzinger, what is needed is the recovery and public recognition of those moral norms that are universally valid.

In the end, we need to pursue truth to its logical conclusion. Attempts to bridge the divide and solve the present crisis have focused on reconciliation. Needless to say, these have so far been futile, for want of honest mediators. The depth of the crisis transcends a simple reconciliation between President Kenyatta and Mr. Odinga. Reconciliation must be grounded in repentance, which means a complete change in attitude and behaviour. A role reversal would be the best way of entering the world of those with "no stake in the economy" and whose rights have been trampled again and again.

We must urgently move away from the path of apocalyptic politics and affirm, through reforms, the national institutions that accommodate us all. The day these conflicts are transformed into conciliation will be the beginning of our journey to becoming members of one family called Kenya.

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