



# Uhuru's Pyrrhic Victory: Uthamaki's Suffocating Hold on the Kikuyu People

By Dauti Kahura



On December 28, 2017, a funeral entourage from Saba Saba town in Murang'a County that was on its way back to Nairobi stopped at a Kenol petrol station some 45 kilometres northeast of Nairobi to drink late afternoon tea. The group was just in time to catch Stephen Kalonzo Musyoka's press conference on his return home that was being aired on Citizen TV.

Kalonzo, who is one of the four National Super Alliance (NASA) co-principals, had been away for close to ten weeks in Germany, where his wife Pauline had been receiving treatment and recuperating from cancer. On seeing Kalonzo addressing the media, everyone, including the waiters, stiffened and stayed glued to the television set. Kalonzo's statement supporting Raila Odinga's swearing-in as "The Peoples' President" elicited groans and moans and angry clicking and smacking sounds.

*"Kirimu giki giacoka gwika atia. Riu gioka gututhukiria bururi?"* said one of the women who was among the entourage. "This fool, why has he come back? Has he come to ruin our country?" Our country here interpreted to mean the Kikuyus' "hard won" electoral victory. Kalonzo should not support Raila in his devious schemes to make the country ungovernable - ungovernable here to mean any political manoeuvres meant to rattle or scuttle Uhuru Kenyatta's presidency. "Kalonzo ought to know that politics are over and there is no looking back," muttered the woman who had

called him a fool.

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According to the crowd gathered at Kenol, Raila's pending swearing-in, which had been postponed once, would be a disaster and did not augur well for *uthamaki* (Kikuyu political elite) rulership. With the return of Kalonzo, the NASA quartet settled for January 30, 2018, as their new date for Raila's swearing-in, with Kalonzo as his deputy.

Since Uhuru was sworn-in on November 28, 2017, the Kikuyu people have been projecting a veneer of braggadocio and showmanship, but beneath all this bravado is a real fear and vulnerability that is eating away at the community quietly. It is soon going to be obvious why this is so.

Raila was the opposition NASA's presidential candidate who contested the August 8, 2017 general election. Uhuru, who was the Jubilee coalition's flagbearer, was pronounced the winner by the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) thereafter. NASA went to the Supreme Court of Kenya, and the court, in an unprecedented ruling, annulled Uhuru's victory. When the court decreed that the IEBC must organise another election within the constitutionally mandated 60 days, it finally picked the October 26, 2017, date, a day - whether by design or default - happened to fall on Uhuru Kenyatta's 56th birthday.

However, on October 10, Raila Odinga pulled the rug under the feet of the Jubilee coalition by stating that he was keeping off the fresh presidential election. Catching Uhuru Kenyatta and his team unawares, Jubilee at first did not know how to deal with Raila's withdrawal from the repeat poll. When the election took place, Uhuru essentially ran against himself, but he ensured there were sufficient but largely insignificant "also-ran" candidates, who were supposed to give the election some modicum of credibility.

What that election did was expose Uhuru Kenyatta and the Jubilee coalition's projected myth of the much-touted "tyranny of numbers". Less than a third (just under 30 per cent) of the total registered voters cast their vote. As if that was not bad enough, votes were mostly cast in regions that are dominated by Kikuyus and Kalenjins. In the western region of Nyanza, four counties - Homa Bay, Kisumu, Migori and Siaya - did not vote at all.

**See also**

[The Ideology of Uthamaki](#)

When I asked some of my close relatives whether they had voted in the repeat presidential election, they retorted: "*Kirimu kiu gitanakirugama.*" "That fool, (meaning Raila Odinga), did not contest. It was going to be a waste of time." The Kikuyu people, generically speaking, like to believe they are a busy lot with productive work to attend to and so do not get caught "wasting time" in political rallies. "Political rallies are for idlers," they like projecting (to all and sundry) their ostensible cleverness about their political awareness. So, the question must be posed: Who used to pack the "mammoth" Jubilee rallies in Kikuyu-dominated areas in the lead-up to the August 8 general election? Wage earners or hired idlers?

The people seemed apprehensive and uptight, like they knew something about that repeat election that did not sit well with them, but could not vocalise it, perhaps for fear of exposing a community's secret and their own guilt.

The paradox of Kikuyus professing their love for their *muthamaki* (Uhuru Kenyatta), a man who will not stand by them, will soon become clearer. The fundamental question is why Kikuyus, even after witnessing what non-Jubilee Kenyans refer to as the "coronation" of Uhuru Kenyatta at Moi International Sports Centre at Kasarani - where some of the Jubilee coalition loyalists, who had been bussed from around the country, died in stampede - are surreptitiously nonchalant about his October 26 win.

The December festive season provided me with an opportunity to travel and connect with my ancestral people and Kikuyu rural folk from central Kenya and in the diaspora. As we partied, I could not help notice that they did not seem to rejoice in the October 26 victory of Uhuru Muigai Kenyatta. The people seemed apprehensive and uptight, like they knew something about that repeat election that did not sit well with them, but could not vocalise it, perhaps for fear of exposing a community's secret and their own guilt. They were uncannily silent about his "election win" and were seemingly unimpressed by his flaccid promises of improving their lives or assuring their livelihoods, even after bagging a "legacy" second term. Instead, my relatives were itching to ask me: "Why is Raila not talking?" When one of them finally asked me that question, it was with such concern that I did not know exactly what kind of an answer she was looking for.

"What would you like him to say?" I responded.

"Why is he so quiet?"

"What does it matter whether he speaks or not?" I said. "Was he not vanquished?"

"He must be plotting something sinister," posited my relative. "Why can't he leave us alone?"

I realised that Raila was the millstone that Kikuyus have chosen to carry around in their lives, or perhaps have been unwittingly made to shoulder, always serving as a reminder of the Kikuyu political elites' narrative to the ordinary Kikuyu folk that all their problems began and ended with an ogre called "Raira".

I also realised that for both rural and urban Kikuyus, Raila is damned if he speaks, damned if he does not. I found out that the Kikuyu people are not savouring Uhuru's electoral victory; rather, they seem to be fearful and silent on the victory. It is as if they are not sure about what the victory portends. I realised that they are being weighed down by Uhuru's pyrrhic victory, which has become an albatross around their necks.

To situate this apparent dilemma, I sought the audience of 70-year-old Mzee Maina from Nyeri, known to his friends and age-mates as "Doctor". "I have seen it all, young man, so I will not fear to speak my mind on this hot-button issue about our people and politics," said Mzee Maina. "It is unfortunate what has become of our community - it has been blinded by this thing called *uthamaki*. This *uthamaki* business has become an oppressive tool to them, it has impoverished them mentally and materially - but they will hear none of it." Mzee Maina said that the Kikuyu people have been brainwashed by their political barons that if they hate Raila enough, their political and economic problems will disappear.

## Hating Raila

The Kikuyu people have always been primed to think inwardly, from Mzee Jomo Kenyatta's days to the present, added Maina. "But it is worse now under Uhuru. My prognosis is that after the post-election violence of 2007, the Kikuyu people became even more manipulated by their political cabal. Since then, they have been filled with a foreboding fear and have been admonished that if they do not band together, they are finished. To this extent, the community has been used to violate successive elections and election processes in their name."

"*Raira agiathana guku nitwathira*," one of my closest aunties, told me just before the August 8 elections. "If Raila happens to be Kenya's president, we are done."

"Kikuyus have been prepped to know that if Raila ascends to the office of the president, they will not find sleep or sleep soundly. Which Kikuyu does not know what happened in the general election of December 2007?" Maina said matter-of-factly. "Their political class stole the elections in their name to perpetuate its ilk and continue oppressing the very same Kikuyus they purport to defend. This is a guilt the Kikuyu people will have to live with for as long as Kenyans will discuss electoral theft."

"This religious zeal is largely being driven by fear, the fear of future political and economic uncertainties and what they portend for the Kikuyu community. True, the Kikuyu people voted for *uthamaki*, but deep down, at the bottom of their hearts, they know all is not well and they are not in a good place," said the former politician.

"This festive season I engaged some Kikuyu young men and asked them to candidly tell me how Uhuru's presidency in the last four or so years had (positively) affected their lives," Mzee told me. "They could not pinpoint at any one thing. 'But doctor, what do we do, we were told *uthamaki* is the way and it is all what our people sing.'" Maina told me he threw the challenge to the lads because they were all ravaged by searing poverty, spent all their idle time drinking poison in the name of alcohol, and all they could sing is how 'Raila will never rule the country.'"

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In their moments of sobriety, the youth told him they had been hugely disappointed by the Uhuru presidency, which had promised big things in 2013, none of which were fulfilled, top on the list being jobs. Disillusioned and dispossessed, the disaffected youth in 2017 were lured into campaigning for Uhuru by being dished between Ksh200 and 500. "What were we to do?" said the youth to Maina. "He can do whatever with the presidency - the truth is, it will not benefit us. It hasn't benefitted us."

"The Kikuyu youth have become fatalistic and have resigned to their fate (they have convinced themselves fate is destiny), while the elderly Kikuyu men and women have sought refuge in religion and become fearful," opined Mzee Maina. "The elderly Kikuyu will not face the truth in the face; instead, they are now saying, 'we have left everything to the Lord. It is only God who will stand for us and ensure that we are protected and do not lack.'" It is a tacit acknowledgement that even after voting for Uhuru, the Kikuyu people do not expect anything tangible from him. "The crux of the matter," said Maina, "is that the Kikuyu people voted for Uhuru because they hoped he will fade away from their lives. In any case, the Kenyatta family's political juggernaut is too strong to be countenanced."

## Turning to religion

This religiousness sweeping the Kikuyu people is not without foundation, said a former elected politician from central Kenya who cut his political teeth in the fight for the second liberation in the 1990s. "This religious zeal is largely being driven by fear, the fear of future political and economic uncertainties and what they portend for the Kikuyu community. True, the Kikuyu people voted for *uthamaki*, but deep down, at the bottom of their hearts, they know all is not well and they are not in a good place," said the former politician.

"Uhuru has had no time for them and the people are pawns in a chess game, they are a cog in the wheel. Once he is done with them, he will walk away into the horizon and leave them vulnerable to the antagonistic forces that may want to eke out vengeance on them. The Kikuyu ordinary folk are in dire straits. Central Kenya people have been reduced to abject poverty. They are becoming poorer by the day. Confused and fearful, they are tottering between an oppressive *uthamaki* and the fear of setting themselves free."

Yet, the former politician told me of a more complex reason, unbeknownst to people outside the community, for why the Kikuyu people come off as religious zealots, even more religious than the Biblical Israelites of the Old Testament: "The Kikuyus are realising they have abnegated all their societal ethics and morals. They no longer believe in anything. The socio-cultural norms that tied the community together have all been broken. Kikuyus today have no culture. You cannot call the culture of pursuing money and power for greed's sake as culture.

In the mid-1990s, in the wake of the struggle for multiparty politics, President Daniel arap Moi, under pressure from the Kikuyu nation - which was furiously agitating for a return to pluralistic politics - is reported to have said: "*Hakuna Kikuyu siku hizi....hii ni photocopy tu....Kikuyu ilikwisha kitambo.*"

"Let me illustrate. During the post-election violence of 2007-2008, a group of prominent and wealthy Kikuyus from Central Kenya came together to fund-raise to help their trapped kith and kin who were being massacred in the North Rift by the Kalenjin warriors. They approached the owner of the Eldoret Express Bus company, a Kikuyu mogul who had successfully monopolised the Nairobi-Nakuru-Eldoret-Kitale route for many years. (I will not bore you with stories about this bus company.)

"The owner of the bus told them he was going to charge them KSh2000 for every Kikuyu that entered his buses from Eldoret to Nakuru - a distance of 150km. This amount per head meant that if a woman had seven children, the bus company would charge her a total of KSh16,000 (the equivalent of US\$160), irrespective of the age or size of each child. The organisers of this 'bus lift' reckoned that once they were able to bring their people to Nakuru town, they would be on safer ground and out of danger. But the bus owner did not see it that way. He saw a business opportunity in the midst of blood and death of fellow Kikuyus. The organisers of this clandestine manoeuvre pleaded with him to listen to his philanthropic heart. They told him the money they had collected was for fuel only. No more. He told them to take a walk - and they did.

"A couple of years later, when one of the architects of this scheme spoke to me, it was with a lot of angst and pain over the bus company owner's behaviour. 'On principle we told him we would not give him the money he was asking for and reminded him that it was extortion. Of course, other groups opted for the extortion, for whatever reasons,' said the prominent wealthy Kikuyu. Several months after the post-election violence, the bus company, which had a 500-plus fleet of buses,

collapsed. To date, it remains collapsed. The owner has been trying to resuscitate the fleet, but many of his buses are still grounded in Nairobi, Nakuru, Eldoret and Kitale.

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“How could have the company have survived after the owner affirmed that what drives his existence is money, money and more money? You can imagine how many Kikuyus cursed him and his buses. I will be frank with you, I cursed him too. That act of this bus tycoon made me introspect and that is when it occurred to me that we the Kikuyus had lost it a long time ago. Kikuyus are callous and cold, and we just do not care for anything else other than primitive accumulation of cash.” Bottomline: To create a smokescreen of righteousness and to cover up their apparent iniquities, they have embraced Christianity like the zealots of yore.”

### **Fear and loathing**

In the mid-1990s, in the wake of the struggle for multiparty politics, President Daniel arap Moi, under pressure from the Kikuyu nation - which was furiously agitating for a return to pluralistic politics, is reported to have said: “*Hakuna Kikuyu siku hizi....hii ni photocopy tu....Kikuyu ilikwisha kitambo.*” Loosely translated - “There are no genuine (cultured) Kikuyus nowadays...all these Kikuyus you see around are not originals...the original Kikuyu is a thing of the past.” Interpreted politically, Moi could also have been saying he no longer feared the once-powerful Kikuyu political barons who, just before the death of Mzee Kenyatta in 1978, had worked overtime to put all stops to his ascending to the presidency.

“These Kikuyus have always been left out of the Kikuyu political matrix. They have always been taken for granted. They have borne the brunt of ethnic violence in the Rift Valley for the last two decades and neither Mwai Kibaki nor Uhuru Kenyatta have given any thought to them.”

The community is undergoing a crisis of self-reawakening, said the elderly Mzee Maina. “Let me give you a concrete example. Theft in all sensible societies - whether in Africa or elsewhere - is an abomination. In Kikuyuland today, theft has been sanitised. Nowadays, you hear of parents who engage in outright corruption and pilfering of public coffers saying, “*niwamenya, nomuhaka tuthukume...gatari guthukumira ciana*” - “you know we must work (extra) hard...we must fend for the children.” When is theft just theft and when is theft ostensibly ‘working smart’? This is one of the ethical issues the community is grappling with as it also contemplates its security and survival post-2022.”

I thought about what the former politician had told me - about the Kikuyus’ undefined fear and religious overzealousness - when in the New Year I went visiting in Ngong area. Ngong, a former territory of the pastoralist Maasai, is today a cosmopolitan area that has been infiltrated mainly by the sedentary Kikuyus, Kisiis and Luhyas. I was deep in the expansive Ooloolua area, which today is settled by the Kikuyu people. Most of them have plots of land ranging from between one and three acres. “We are (already) in Canaan...let those who still dream of going to Canaan continue dreaming,” my hosts told me. The Canaan reference was a jibe at Raila Odinga and his NASA supporters, who during the electioneering campaign had used the biblical Canaan as an analogy to making Kenya a better place for all.

I asked one of my hosts whether there were any Maasai people in Ooloolua. “We pushed them all to the hills,” said one elderly man. “Consider yourself at home.”

From Oolua, you can see the famous undulating Ngong Hills, once immortalised by the Danish dame, Karen Blixen, in her memoir *Out of Africa*. The expression “feel at home” here had a wider connotation: the mzee meant to tell me that all this area is now Kikuyuland – as good as being anywhere in central Kenya. Still, this inconspicuous ethnic cockiness did not stop many prayers to be offered to God for having protected the Kikuyus in Oolua, “in one of our most traumatic year in all our stay here,” said a very prayerful woman.

Although the men told me they had successfully exiled the Maasai from Oolua, their prayer was that the Maasai would not come back to reclaim the land they had already sold to them. “2017 was a year full of political challenges to us Kikuyus in the diaspora,” said the praying woman. “Yet, the God of David threw a blanket of protection over us. We the Kikuyus are like the biblical Israelites – like them, we have gone through many trials and tribulations, but always we triumph in the end.”

None of my hosts talked directly of Uhuru’s electoral victory on October 26, but the incessant reference to religion was unmistakable. There was also another unmistakable whiff of covert paranoia. I recognised this fear of the unforeseen and unpredictable future among the menfolk as we tore freshly roasted goat ribs and chewed on *mutura* (sausages made out of stuffed offal and blood). “Last year, we had a narrow escape,” said one of the men. “You know, we are far from our ancestral home, we always have to think of our security and survival.” What he was trying to say was, “We managed to get one of our own back at State House, but what happens once he exits in five years?”

That fear was concretised for me by Keffa Magenyi of the Internal Displacement, Policy and Advocacy Centre (IDPAC) in Nakuru. Nakuru County, once the hotbed of Kenya politics, has always remained true to that moniker. “The Kikuyus of Nakuru, which is in Central Rift, as indeed the Kikuyus of Laikipia, Molo, Nyandarua, are angry, bitter, cautious, disoriented, fearful and vengeful,” said Magenyi. “These Kikuyus have always been left out of the Kikuyu political matrix. They have always been taken for granted. They have borne the brunt of ethnic violence in the Rift Valley for the last two decades and neither Mwai Kibaki nor Uhuru Kenyatta have given any thought to them.”

Keffa told me that Uhuru did not campaign in Kuresoi, Molo or Njoro and “when he stopped by in Nyahururu he was booed.” The Kikuyus were angry with Uhuru because, “he seemingly was continuing with the Mwai Kibaki policy – of treating them as collateral damage. Njoro has one of the largest concentrations of Kikuyus in the Central Rift. The people are impoverished, they are the remnants of ethnic cleansing and forced evictions and most of them are therefore internally displaced people, but Uhuru did not have a care in the world about their tribulations.”

The fact that Kikuyu interests (which incidentally include Kikuyus in the diaspora) within Jubilee were driven solely by Kiambu mandarins did not escape their attention. The appointment of Kinuthia Mbugua, the former Nakuru governor who hails originally from Kiambu and is settled in Nyandarua, as Uhuru’s diary keeper (State House Comptroller), is supposed to placate the Laikipia/Nakuru/Nyandarua Kikuyus.

Even without elaborating on the reasons why Kikuyus (especially Kikuyus in the diaspora) may not want Ruto as president, it is blatantly obvious that the killing of Kikuyu peasants in Uasin Gishu County in the North Rift – especially in Burnt Forest, Kesses, Timboroa and Ziwa, and their subsequent displacement in the thousands immediately after the bungled 2007 elections – has never endeared Ruto to the ordinary Kikuyu, try as he might.

The Kikuyus of the Rift Valley have divided themselves into three zones: North Rift, Central Rift and

South Rift. "These Kikuyus in these zones do not have a voice because politically, they are in the midst of Kalenjinland - and they have been told there cannot be two disparate voices coming from one region. So, the voice of the Kikuyu has always taken a back seat," said Keffa. "Amidst growing desperation, dispossession and hopelessness, the Kikuyus' silence in the Rift Valley is a deadly one. The Kikuyus in the Rift Valley have always felt they are owed an explanation about why they have been abandoned and neglected. They have this strong urge to avenge their hurt, yet they do not know who to revenge against."

Keffa claimed that the poverty index among the Kikuyu of the Rift Valley is around 80 per cent. "Oftentimes, the Kikuyu in the Rift do not know who their political or economic enemy is. Is it the Kalenjin or the Luo people? This dichotomy of deep political emotions were cultivated in 2012 when Uhuru Kenyatta embraced Ruto. That partnership tore the Rift Valley Kikuyus right in the middle. To date, the Kikuyus are still divided on how to treat Ruto, more so now that we are headed towards 2022." (The current *uthamaki* narrative is that the Luo and Raila are the enemy.)

## **Betrayal**

The brutal truth is that the ordinary Kikuyu man or woman cannot contemplate voting for Ruto. Although, some Kikuyu elite with selfish and vested interests have seemingly been "sanitising" Ruto to the Kikuyu voter, the rank and file will hear none of it. Even without elaborating on the reasons why Kikuyus (especially Kikuyus in the diaspora) may not want Ruto as president, it is blatantly obvious that the killing of Kikuyu peasants in Uasin Gishu County in the North Rift - especially in Burnt Forest, Kesses, Timboroa and Ziwa and their subsequent displacement in the thousands immediately after the bungled 2007 elections - has never endeared Ruto to the ordinary Kikuyu, try as he might.

Subukia farm, which stretches from Ainabkoi, cuts across to Burnt Forest into Chagaia and Hill Tea (a corruption of Kikuyu lexicon to mean a place where one stops to take tea) and then to Timboroa, grows fresh vegetable produce and potatoes, which are sold along the roads that passes through Hill Tea and Timboroa. The Kikuyus of the giant Subukia farm in Uasin Gishu aptly capture this fear of Ruto. Since 1992, when they first experienced ethnic cleansing and up to 2007, when many of their kith and kin were killed by marauding Kalenjin warriors, these Kikuyus have felt a sense of abandonment and resentment from their own government. "We have been discriminated against, neglected and victimised by a government that is supposed to empathise with our plight," said a group of peasant wazees. "Many of the families affected by the 1992, 1997 and 2007 ethnic upheavals have never really recovered. Yet, the governments' of Kibaki and Uhuru have never found it fit to concretely tackle our problems of grabbed land, internal displacement, grinding poverty, education and jobs for children."

The wazees said their children are not recruited in the regular police service, the paramilitary General Service Unit (GSU) and the military. Why? "Politically, we are in a Kalenjin county and the county's quota for the recruitments all goes to the Kalenjins. So, many of our children have given up hope and turned to cheap and heavy drinking and loitering in the major Rift Valley towns of Eldoret, Kitale and Nakuru. If Uhuru - who is one of our own - will not solve our historical injustices, how will Ruto or any other Kalenjin politician do it?"

With the succession politics uppermost in their minds, the Kikuyu rank and file recurring question is: How are we going to survive post-*uthamaki*? It is a question that is also gravely troubling some Kikuyu political mandarins. Feeling shortchanged and isolated and therefore exposed, the nervous Kikuyu ordinary folk are now blaming the political elite for betraying them. This pent-up anger and emotion is buttressed by the fact that the *muthamaki* (Uhuru Kenyatta) has not shown any indication that he has put any safeguards to protect the ordinary Kikuyu once he exits the political scene. The



common Kikuyus are increasingly feeling that Uhuru is of no use to them now and as they face 2022, they are showing signs of paranoia, and with it, resentment.

This paranoia, fuelled invariably by the political uncertainties facing the community, has not been helped by the muthamaki's perceived succession game plan: of returning the power to the Kalenjin – either by handing it over to the Kalenjin's "aristocracy" or giving it to the "hustler" kingpin, who it is now believed will stop at nothing to achieve his burning ambition of becoming president. Whichever the case, for the Kikuyu commoner, it is the devil's alternative.

When the Kikuyu rank and file think of Gideon Moi, they are reminded of the "pain" they underwent under the senior Moi for 24 long years. They do not trust Gideon because of the fear that the pain will return to haunt them. This fear, of the return of the Moi aristocracy to lord it over them again, has compounded their fears about their own Uhuru, who they now fear and suspect could be planning to negotiate with the Moises' to return the presidency to the family. The Kikuyu feels he is being prepped to accept Gideon.

Another worry that has the Kikuyus on tenterhooks is that they have woken up to the harsh realisation that, contrary to what the current political elite would like them to believe, Luos are not their political enemy – that is a false narrative. The Kikuyus now belatedly know their enemy is the 42 tribes of Kenya. This harsh fact – that they do not have political friends anywhere – has made them recoil in great trepidation when they think of a post-2022 future.

Suffice it is to say, the Kikuyus have been conditioned (by successive Kikuyu political elites) since 1963 to believe that their community's security and survival can only be achieved if they vote for one of their own. But this belief is beginning to worry the community, including some of the more reasonable and sensible people within the Kikuyu political elite (*uthamaki*). The obvious question they are now having to grapple with is: After Uhuru, where will their security come from? And how will their survival be assured?

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