

# Raila Odinga and the Comrades

*Forgive me, comrades  
If I say something apolitical  
And shamefully emotional  
But in the dark of night  
It is as if my heart is clutched  
By a giant iron hand:  
"Treachery, treachery" I cry out  
Thinking of you, comrades  
And how you have betrayed  
The things we suffered for*

- Dennis Brutus

During a 1998 visit to Uganda by US President Bill Clinton, First Lady Hillary Clinton was meant to have dinner with representatives of the Makerere University students' guild. However, the Makerere students took the risk and liberty to invite an extra guest to the table, a Kenyan student from the University of Nairobi with whom they had built a comradeship. The Kenyan was part of a group campaigning for the reinstatement of the Students Organisation of Nairobi University (SONU), a historically radical organisation in Kenya's largest and oldest university that had been banned in 1987. The body was reestablished in 1992, after which it was banned again.

Throughout this period, Kenya's strongman, Daniel arap Moi, was eternally fearful that SONU would partake in an onslaught against his authoritarian regime. There was a history. In 1982, when Moi was barely half a decade into his 24-year reign of terror, tens of University of Nairobi students - seen as coup sympathisers of an attempted putsch by junior Kenya Air Force officers - got rounded up by the nudged state. The majority were released after brief detentions, while those identified as lead troublemakers, including SONU president Tito Adungosi, got locked up on trumped-up charges. Adungosi was jailed for five years, dying mysteriously barely days before his release date. Those who survived the reprimand from the paranoid regime, like future Kenyan ambassador to the US, Nicholas Rateng' Oginga Ogego, who served a six-year jail term, remained living examples of the spirit of defiance SONU instilled in its

cadres – the Comrades.

Kenya's future Prime Minister Raila Odinga was similarly netted along with the University of Nairobi students in 1982, accused of working in cahoots with the coup plotters. Odinga was charged with treason, an accusation which was later dropped. He was detained without trial for six years. His co-accused, journalist Otieno Mak'Onyango and University of Nairobi lecturer Alfred Vincent Otieno, whose house was allegedly used as the coups nerve centre, were similarly detained. The twelve Kenya Air Force masterminds of the coup died by hanging after being repatriated from Tanzania, where they had sought refuge. No one could have predicted that almost four decades later, in 2018, it would be these University of Nairobi students from the 70s, 80s, 90s and even the 2000s who would anchor Odinga's political project.

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At the Kampala dinner with Hillary Clinton, the Kenyan student presented the First Lady with a hurriedly prepared dossier documenting gross human rights violations in the country. The case the student sought to make was that as Kenya stood at the time, there was no single organisation or formation – including the parliamentary opposition to which Odinga belonged – that was bold enough to stand up to the state and challenge its excesses. Therefore, reinstating SONU was the only viable option in keeping the rogue state in check. It was an exaggeration to claim that only SONU could stand in the gap at a time when the civil society was greatly emboldened, but that embellishment did not take away from the historical centrality of SONU in the clamour for change, including when such activities meant death, torture, exile or imprisonment.

As it turned out, Hillary was sufficiently persuaded by the young man's argument. Decisive phone calls were made across Kampala later that night, where Moi, who had gone to meet his US counterpart, was implored to unban SONU. It was that same night that the Kenyan president insisted on meeting Moses Oburu, the Kenyan student who had aired his country's dirty laundry in Kampala. The two

eventually met back in Nairobi, where SONU's proscription was lifted.

It is this sort of mystique that has shrouded the University of Nairobi students' organisation for decades. It now appeared that cross-generational radical figures who served within its ranks had finally found a point of convergence within the Kenyan body politic in the form of a shared national political project - the presidential candidacy of Raila Odinga, which morphed into a movement seeking more than the presidency - around which they coalesced and were reliving their days of youthful fervour, challenging a government they considered illegitimate.

As Odinga took the now infamous oath as "The People's President" on January 30<sup>th</sup> 2018 at Nairobi's largest public park, Uhuru Park - packed with tens of thousands of his supporters - one thing was conspicuous to the discerning observer. In his boldest challenge to Uhuru Kenyatta's legitimacy as President of Kenya, Odinga - who had disregarded warnings from the state, including one from the Attorney General who equated the oath to an act of treason punishable by death - lifted a green Bible with his right hand, surrounded by a trio that represented three generations of radical SONU student activists from the 70s, 80s and 90s. The three outspoken lawyers-turned-politicians formed a semi-circle ring around Odinga.

Standing on Odinga's right was Miguna Miguna, who was expelled from the University of Nairobi in 1987 and exiled in Canada, where he completed his studies and practised law for fourteen years. Miguna briefly served as SONU's Organising Secretary at a time when the state cracked down on him and his colleagues, led by Wafula Buke - a current Odinga confidant and strategist - for supposedly being funded by Libya to destabilise the Kenyan state. It was the clamping down on the likes of Miguna and Buke that led to SONU being banned in 1987. Prior to January 30<sup>th</sup>, Miguna had overtly admitted and boasted of being in the custody of "instruments of power" with which he intended to use to swear in Odinga as president, all along daring the police to arrest him.

In a dramatic dawn attack lasting at least an hour on February 2<sup>nd</sup>, the Friday after Odinga's oath, a heavily armed police unit descended on Miguna's residence in Nairobi and used explosives to blow his front door open. Apart from his role in administering the oath, the state claimed that Miguna's residence housed weapons and subversive material meant to undermine the government. The

former prime ministerial advisor to Odinga was driven away in a convoy of police vehicles and was clandestinely detained for days, with his lawyers and doctors prevented from accessing him despite successive court orders demanding his presentation in court or his immediate release.

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On Tuesday, February 6<sup>th</sup>, Miguna was deported back to Canada aboard a KLM flight. The state alleged that he renounced his Kenyan citizenship when he took up Canadian citizenship during his time in exile, an allegation Miguna continues to refute. On a layover in Amsterdam, Miguna gave interviews to international media, stating how he had been tortured by the state, not having taken a bath for five days. Speaking in Toronto, he continued issuing edicts to Odinga's supporters, asking them to stay defiant. The judiciary has since invalidated the deportation.

Behind Odinga stood MP Tom Kajwang - dressed in a black robe and wearing a white judicial wig - who coincidentally served as SONU president in 1992 after the organisation was reinstated following the 1987 ban necessitated by the likes of Miguna Miguna. Kajwang's elder brother, the deceased lawyer and MP Otieno Kajwang, like those of his ilk in the 80s, had been expelled from the University of Nairobi and forced to complete his studies at Uganda's Makerere University. By standing next to Odinga, Tom Kajwang was living up to his own convictions as well as those of his deceased brother, a renowned longtime Odinga loyalist. On January 31<sup>st</sup>, the Wednesday after Odinga's oath, Kajwang was briefly arrested for his role in the affair.

To complete the oath-administering troika was lawyer and Senator James Orengo, who stood on Odinga's immediate left. Possibly Odinga's current right-hand man, Orengo has travelled the long, turbulent liberation struggle journey together with Odinga, marked with intervals of falling out and making up. A Kenyan liberation stalwart, Orengo served as SONU president in 1972, later becoming a dependable protégé to Odinga's deceased father and Kenya's first Vice President Jaramogi

Oginga Odinga. It was Orengo, a senior respected lawyer, who led a team of litigants in successfully arguing for the nullification of the August 8<sup>th</sup> 2017 presidential election by Kenya's Supreme Court. The team argued that Odinga's victory had been stolen by the incumbent, Uhuru Kenyatta, in collaboration with a corrupted electoral commission whose head of technology, Chris Msando, was found gruesomely murdered a week before the elections.

As his two co-conspirators in administering the oath got picked up by the police, it became clear that the state was aware of James Orengo's stature within the opposition ranks - possibly being Odinga's Number Two in terms of struggle credentials - a fact that made the security agencies not pounce on him like they did on the other two. It was with the same logic - that such a high profile arrest might result in massive public unrest by opposition supporters across the country - that the state shelved any intention of arresting and charging Odinga with treason.

Constitutionally, the presidential oath is administered in public in front of the Chief Justice, in whose absence the Deputy Chief Justice does the onus. The Chief Registrar of the judiciary usually administers the oath. In the case of the event of January 30<sup>th</sup>, it appeared the three men manning Odinga's oath-taking had assumed pseudo-constitutional roles for themselves, with Miguna Miguna, the tallest and loudest of the three, administering the oath, thereby taking the place of Chief Registrar. In their political role-playing, either Tom Kajwang or James Orengo must have been the Chief Justice. During opposition rallies later on, Kajwang referred to himself as Chief Justice of "The People's Republic of Kenya". The whole performance might have been sketchy and hurriedly put together - with Odinga's only instrument of power being a piece of paper mounted on a clipboard, an inauguration certificate masquerade - but to the millions of opposition supporters, this symbolism rejuvenated their resolve for rebellion against the state.

*Like the three men surrounding Odinga on January 30<sup>th</sup>, the person appointed to chair the committee charged with organising the Peoples Assembly was Oduor Ongwen, who served as SONU Secretary-General in 1982. Before assuming this role, which was pivotal in working towards Odinga's eventual coronation as "The People's President", Oduor had been appointed executive director of Odinga's party back in 2015, a development that had ushered in the*

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This was not the first time Odinga was being pushed to take an oath either as president or as an alternative president of Kenya. In 2007, on realising that the incumbent Mwai Kibaki was probably interfering with election results in a bid to steal Odinga's victory, members of Odinga's inner circle, including James Orengo, rooted for their man to take an oath of office to preempt electoral fraud. But as they were still consulting, the electoral commission declared Mwai Kibaki as the winner of the election, which resulted in violence across the country. The chaos and bloodshed led to a coalition government, with Odinga as Prime Minister. A decade later, Odinga would have no choice but to succumb to the pressure from the Comrades to take the oath.

Following the nullification of the August 8<sup>th</sup> 2017 presidential election, the Supreme Court of Kenya ordered - based on a constitutional provision - that a fresh presidential election be held within 60 days. As they celebrated their victory on the steps of the Supreme Court, Odinga and his coalition's lawyers immediately cautioned that unless massive electoral reforms took place before the fresh presidential election, the group would not participate. In keeping to his word, Odinga pulled out of the repeat election, which the defiant Uhuru Kenyatta won with an unprecedented 98.2% majority. Odinga then proceeded to mobilise his supporters across the country, forming the Peoples Assembly - which they argued was founded within the constitution as a direct way of Kenyans to exercise their sovereignty - whose climax was the oath of January 30<sup>th</sup>.

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Like a number of vocal University of Nairobi students in the early 80s, Oduor was first arrested and detained without trial for two months following the 1982 attempted coup. He was accused of being one of the coup plotters - a

predicament that befell tens of University of Nairobi students at the time. He was later rearrested in 1986 and sentenced to four years in prison for sedition, getting released prematurely in 1988, after which he fled the country in 1990, escaping a police swoop targeted at agitators for pluralism. He was exiled in Sweden.

Before Oduor was appointed executive director of Odinga's party, Wafula Buke, a fellow political prisoner who served as SONU president in 1987 - alongside Miguna Miguna, the man who administered Odinga's oath - instigated an internal coup, declaring himself executive director of Odinga's party. Buke was serving as deputy director in charge of strategy, and upon the unceremonious ejection of the previous executive director on suspicion of spying for Odinga's opponents, Buke declared that it was only natural for him to take up the position.

Known for his militancy, Buke was among former University of Nairobi student activists who went as far as being trained in guerilla warfare in Uganda in an attempt to violently overthrow the one-party Moi state in the early 90s, a plan which was shelved when the state relaxed its repressive laws and agreed to multiparty democracy in 1991. It is not an openly discussed topic, but a larger group of dissidents, including some close to Odinga, were involved in seeking international support for the training exercise in Uganda. Other than being jailed for five years after being picked from his hostel room at the University of Nairobi, Buke was hunted down in the early 90s for being associated with the February Eighteenth Revolutionary Army (FERA), a ragtag militia that unsuccessfully attacked Kenya from Uganda in a frail coup attempt.

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manifesto. Alongside his fellow University of Nairobi detainee Oduor Ongwen, he served as a member of the committee charged with organising the Peoples Assembly, which culminated in the January 30<sup>th</sup> oath. It is noteworthy that as lawyer Miguna Miguna defiantly administered the oath to Odinga, Ndiir was standing right behind the tall bespectacled lawyer, witnessing part of the maturation of his intellectual labour.

On Tuesday, February 6<sup>th</sup>, the day Miguna Miguna was dramatically deported, the government issued a directive suspending Ndiir's passport. Ndiir had earlier been arrested on the night of December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2017, while on holiday with his family at the Kenyan coast. He was driven overnight to Nairobi and accused of incitement. Ndiir had continuously articulated the idea of splitting Kenya into different republics if co-existence within the country's current borders became untenable due to electoral fraud and unequal development, a view espoused by Odinga's radical supporters. By close of business that Tuesday, the names of senior opposition figures on the list for passport revocations extended to 15, including that of James Orengo, who got stopped from leaving the country on Monday, February 19<sup>th</sup>, and spent the night at the airport alongside the opposition's financier, Jimmy Wanjigi, before the judiciary issued orders against their illegal restriction.

The journey to this point where radical activists and intellectuals took centre stage in Kenya's push for a proper democratic dispensation - the third liberation, as its proponents called it - started taking shape back in the late 80s and early 90s during the agitation for multiparty democracy, when the group coalesced around Odinga's ageing father and deity of Kenyan opposition politics, Jaramogi Oginga Odinga. The senior Odinga pushed for an alternative politics following his fallout with his independence struggle comrade and Kenya's first president, Jomo Kenyatta. Some have viewed the Raila Odinga-Uhuru Kenyatta contest as a continuum of the duel between their respective father's divergent visions for Kenya, the older Odinga seeking an egalitarian, left-leaning state while the older Kenyatta a conservative, capitalist one.

Among those working closely with the senior Odinga at the time were former University of Nairobi lecturer Prof. Anyang Nyong'o (father to Hollywood actor Lupita Nyong'o, who was born in Mexico where the family was exiled) who later

became a confidant of the younger Odinga. Also present was the current United Nations Conference on Trade and Development Secretary General Dr. Mukhisa Kituyi, who had been expelled from the University of Nairobi in the 80s and sought refuge at Makerere University in Uganda, before proceeding to Norway.

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When Odinga's father died in 1994 after failing to clinch the presidency during the 1992 general election, a split emerged between him and these intellectuals, which resulted in Odinga parting ways with the likes of Nyong'o, Kituyi, and the man who stood on his left as he took the oath on January 30<sup>th</sup>, lawyer James Orengo. During the burial of Mr. Odinga's father, and in the presence of the then sitting President Daniel arap Moi, Orengo, in representing the youthful radicals, read a hard-hitting speech titled "Woe Unto You" targeted at the authoritarian head of state. There were murmurs of Orengo's impending arrest after the funeral. Consensus was building that the fiery lawyer should inherit the senior Odinga's political constituency, given that he had been nicknamed the senior Odinga's first-born son.

After the dust had settled following the split, Nyong'o and the likes of Ndiu coalesced around the left-leaning Social Democratic Party (SDP). The group was further strengthened by the coming on board of Prof. Nyong'o's University of Nairobi political science contemporary, Apollo Njonjo. Later, the 1984 SONU chairman and political prisoner Mwandawiro Mghanga - who remains the leader of the Marxist-Leninist party to date, and is credited with spreading Marxism to political prisoners during their stints in detention in the 80s - joined the party. Orengo unsuccessfully contested for the Kenyan presidency under the party's banner in 2002, protesting Odinga's unilateral endorsement of the lukewarm Mwai Kibaki, who won the vote and turned against Odinga, leading to their bloody 2007 electoral contest.

From the early 90s, when they operated under his father, there had been a shared feeling within the University of Nairobi grouping that the younger Odinga either lacked the ideological grounding and clarity to lead them, or that his intellectual

firepower was not up to par with the kind of leader they desired. But in the end, Odinga's charisma, scheming and ability for mass mobilisation outshined everyone else's, making him the closest the radicals could have to an ally with a real shot at Kenya's presidency.

Much as he was Kenya's longest detained political prisoner, Odinga made huge political compromises to get ahead, including merging his party in 2002 with that of Daniel arap Moi, the authoritarian who had jailed him and his colleagues. In the end, it is these alliances built for political expediency that saw Odinga appointed into cabinet for the first time, where many believe he expanded his business interests and accumulated substantial financial muscle to sustain his future political activities.

As he and his colleagues challenged Uhuru Kenyatta's legitimacy, Odinga rode in bullet-proof SUVs with chase cars and armed security - this after the state declined to provide him with security and similar benefits that he is entitled to as a former prime minister due to his continued political agitations. He similarly ran a multilayered political machine headquartered in various Nairobi suburbs. This elaborate logistical infrastructure, coupled with Odinga's fanatical following, contributed in setting him apart as the undisputed leader of the University of Nairobi grouping, himself having lectured at the institution's Department of Engineering in the early 70s.

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In Odinga the radicals found a politically viable candidate around whom to erect an ideological scaffolding that could have seen them realise the dream of a radically progressive state. On the other hand, Odinga found himself in a position where he was not the most radical person in the room, a state of affairs that afforded him ideological sustenance.

On February 4<sup>th</sup>, during an opposition rally in Nairobi, Babu Owino, a youthful Nairobi MP who served as SONU president for four controversial consecutive terms since 2011, assumed his role as trash-talker-in-chief within Odinga's party.

Previously arrested for referring to Uhuru Kenyatta as a “child of a dog”, the first-time MP requested Odinga to appoint him minister for interior once he formed “the people’s government” so that Babu could arrest Kenyatta’s security minister, who had been leading the onslaught against the opposition. Having single-handedly coined the captivating – if nonsensical – slogans used during Odinga’s presidential campaign rallies, the populist MP warned – to huge applause as is always the case whenever he speaks – that if more opposition leaders were targeted and arrested, then there would be smoke everywhere in Nairobi, hinting at violent protest action. The resounding message from the rally and subsequent ones was that the opposition would not take the state’s excesses lying down.

Then, on Friday March 9<sup>th</sup>, news broke indicating that Odinga and Kenyatta were having a meeting at the president’s office. When the two men emerged from the meeting, smiling and calling each other “my brother” – before staging the mandatory ceremonial handshake and brotherly public embrace to mark a cessation of hostilities between them – Kenya was thrown into a spin. The tens of protestors who had been shot dead by Kenyatta’s regime as they protested in support of Odinga – including a toddler and a nine-year-old – all seemed to have vanished into thin air, and all the claims by Odinga that Kenyatta was an illegitimate president seemed instantly buried. There appeared to be a new-found camaraderie between the son of Kenya’s first president and the son of Kenya’s first vice president; now the Kenyan masses were expected to fall in line and fully support the two leaders’ calls for national unity.

Neither Odinga nor Kenyatta had involved key leaders from their respective political parties in the talks, and only the two men, their very close functionaries and family members seemed to be in the know. No one in the media or political sphere had foreseen the meeting, and no one knew what to make of it. Anyone questioning the elite pact between the two families with a love-hate relationship was quickly shouted down by supporters of the two leaders.

However, as Odinga’s die-hard supporters bought into the handshake, questions abound as to what the meeting portends for the Comrades, who were not viewed as Odinga’s sycophants but as vanguards of a people’s revolution. Would they, in the words of South African poet Dennis Brutus, consider Odinga’s move to close ranks with Kenyatta to be a betrayal of the liberation aspirations of Kenyans to

whom they sold a reformist political project, or would they join Odinga in reaching an elite pact with Kenyatta, who they previously called a despot?

Asked differently, could the Comrades break away from the man who provided them a political home and a real shot at taking over the state as its new ideological architects, or have they run out of time and steam to engineer a new revolt either within or outside Odinga's party? Will they now have to work with whatever Raila Odinga and Uhuru Kenyatta hand them?