



# WHO IS RUTO? The handshakes and the fear it is spreading

By Dauti Kahura



The now (in) famous March 9, 2018 “handshake” between President Uhuru Kenyatta and the opposition coalition supremo Raila Odinga has ushered in a season of political “handshakes” between presumed antagonists.

After Uhuru, Raila shook hands with former Presidents Daniel Toroitich arap Moi and Mwai Kibaki, on April 12 and April 20, when he went calling on them at their homes in Kabarak, Nakuru County and Muthaiga, Nairobi County respectively.

Weeks later, during his annual State of the Nation address to Parliament, the President in a live-and-let-live gesture asked the House members to “cross-over” and greet each other, supposedly signaling the end of electoral hostilities and the beginning of a political détente and healing through an overplayed public act of penance.

Leading the way, Uhuru shook hands with the youthful Babu Owino, the vociferous MP for Embakasi East, who, during the electioneering period in 2017, is supposed to have epitomized the opposition’s collective hatred of him.

The spin-off effect of this publicized “presidential pardon” was a cacophony of contrite pleas from and between politicians, led by Deputy President William Ruto, [who took to Twitter](#) to seek

forgiveness from those he may have “sinned” against, even as he forgave those who had “sinned” against him.

However, beneath the feigned efforts of the political class to ingratiate themselves to a discerning but disengaged electorate, the undercurrents of the 2022 presidential succession are raging.

Since that first handshake on the steps of the Harambee House, which took him by complete surprise, Ruto has not been resting easy. Raila’s meetings with Uhuru, and subsequently with Moi and Kibaki, have re-calibrated and re-oriented his political program for the next 4 years.

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Attuned to brinkmanship and sabre rattling, Ruto’s initial attempt to respond may have boomeranged on him. If the stories swirling around are to be believed, he was denied an audience with Moi after arriving unannounced and uninvited at the Kabarak home of the man whose tutelage paved his path to political prominence. He and his entourage that included his close confidante, Charles Keter, the Cabinet Secretary for Energy, were nonetheless served with hot lunch, in the truest African tradition of welcoming even your presumed enemies, when they drop by suddenly.

Moi, through his interlocutors, was magnanimous in acknowledging the visit by the Deputy President of the Republic and assured Ruto that at an appropriate and properly arranged time, he would indeed meet with him. The DP was nevertheless flustered by the apparent public rebuff. In an effort to deflect from the missed opportunity, he blamed his woes on Moi’s son, the Senator of Baringo, Gideon Moi, who he accused of shielding his father from him.

Had the DP imagined himself in this situation so soon after the elections?

“The gloves are off,” said a member of the Mt Kenya Foundation, an influential lobby group that consists of some of the richest Kikuyu barons in Kenya and which helped bankroll Uhuru Kenyatta’s presidential campaigns in 2013, as well as 2017. We were at Sagret Hotel, in Nairobi, drinking bone soup, accompanied with sizzling hot *mutura* (traditional sausages stuffed with offal). Sagret Hotel, which has existed since the 1960s, has been the haunt for old Kikuyu money, patronized by some of the richest Kikuyu men and who’s who in Kikuyu society.

“Who is Ruto?” asked the mzee, a typical Kikuyu ethnic chauvinist: arrogant, contemptuous, entitled and moneyed. The loaded question presupposed, Ruto was a non-entity in Kenya’s dynastic politics. “Who was his father?” he mused aloud. “*Bururi ni wa andu atatu: njamba, gitonga na muthamaki* (A country belongs to three types of people: the brave, the rich and the anointed leader). It is true Ruto could be a brave man ... Yet, that alone does not qualify him to rule over us. Raila is [also] a *njamba*, but we Kikuyus did not give him the presidency.”

The tycoon said the country’s influential political families had rejected Ruto. “Who are we to say he can lead us? *Ikienda guthejuo, ndionagio kahu* (if you decide to slaughter an animal, you do not make it obvious by dangling a knife in front of it). Ruto should read the sign on the wall”, he said.

That the question of “who is Ruto”, now openly being asked by the Kikuyu elites, was also quickly gaining currency among the Kikuyu rank and file, dawned on me when I bumped into my long-time friend, Njuguna Gatheca, in the city centre recently. A city of Nairobi political operative since the inaugural days of plural politics in the early 1990s, Njuguna pulled me aside and animatedly told me:

*"giothi ni githaruranie"* - the game had changed. "Who is Ruto?" It was a rhetorical question and he was not expecting an answer from me.

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"This country cannot be left to a person whose political pedigree is questionable," said Njuguna. "Who knows, there might not even be an election in 2022. You keep abreast with global politics...you know what happened in Russia with Putin when his term was coming to end? Let me whisper something to you: Uhuru is not going anywhere, he must stay around to guard his family's empire".

Vladimir Putin was inaugurated on May 7, 2018, for his fourth term as president and has ruled Russia for 18 years, save for a brief period when he served as the Prime Minister in 2008. My friend was telling me that the Kikuyu would not vote for Ruto. He described Ruto as a man who really itched to be president - a familiar label previously attached to Raila in his effort to wrestle the presidency from Kibaki and later Uhuru. Now it had conveniently shifted to Ruto. "We know Ruto's plan: he wants the presidency so much, so that he can gleefully bring down Kikuyus' riches. We will not give him the pleasure of doing that," said Njuguna.

"Ruto should not think we have forgotten, what he did in the North Rift and especially at Burnt Forest church," said the old man at Sagret Hotel. He was referring to the violence that followed the bungled 2007 presidential election, much of it targeting Kikuyus in the expansive Rift Valley region, for which Ruto was prosecuted at the International Criminal Court. Three dozen of them were killed in a single incident, when a mob set fire to a church they were sheltering in.

I began openly hearing the "Burnt Forest church fire" narrative after the repeat October presidential election. But the fact is, the narrative had all along been there, but more muted after Uhuru and Ruto teamed up in 2012 to run for the presidency. "We are not foolish and we are not forgetful," said the businessman. "We had to be tactical not to torpedo Uhuru's presidency - but now we are free, we owe no one any apology or debt."

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The mogul told me that as a Christian, he had forgiven Ruto for what he did to Kikuyus in the North Rift, but that did not mean he was welcome to be the nation's president. He reminded me of the Hungarian psychiatrist Thomas Szasz's famous aphorism: "The stupid neither forgive nor forget, the naïve forgive and forget, but the wise forgive, but don't forget."

He continued: "If Ruto is not tamed, his plan is to dethrone the dynastic families of Kenyatta, Moi and Jaramogi in that order, from future political participation." To do that, "he must of necessity first destroy their business empires. For him to survive as a president and consolidate his powers, he must bring down the Kenyatta and Moi families down. That is the only way he will be president." The mzee saw Ruto's hand everywhere in the government, and thought it did not portend well for the nation if he became president: "He will finish the country."

The old man was buoyed by the fact that in Kenya's chequered political history, "vice presidents

traditionally have not succeeded the president save for Moi only. Moi was a special case because President Mzee Jomo Kenyatta died in office, hence allowing for a smooth transition," He did not find it necessary to mention that the Kikuyu Mafia had opposed Moi's ascension to power from 1969 (when Kenyatta suffered a stroke) and increasingly from 1974, when it was evident that Kenyatta's death was imminent because of his frailty. Kenyatta died in 1978.

"Even Kibaki, who was at one time Moi's Vice President did not succeed him directly: He had to find another route. (Kibaki was dropped as VP following the disastrous *mlolongo* (queue-voting) elections of 1988 and left Kanu in 1991 to found the Democratic Party). The others, Jaramogi Oginga Odinga, Dr Josephat Karanja, Prof George Saitoti, Musalia Mudavadi, Stephen Kalonzo Musyoka, Moody Awori, fell by the way side." Kibaki's first deputy, Michael Kijana Wamalwa, died after just eight months into the job. 36 years before, Joseph Murumbi had also lasted less than a year when he resigned in 1967. "Ruto will not be the first," opined the businessman.

The old man told me Ruto is both feared and reviled by many Kikuyu MPs and politicians. "They are too afraid to come out and oppose him. All they can muster to say in their safe confines is that 'Ruto is bad because he is not good'". In April 2013, the Mt Kenya Foundation members hosted some of Ruto's bosom buddies at Blue Post Hotel off Thika Superhighway, 40km from Nairobi. "We wanted to find out from them, what exactly was Ruto's political ambition," confided the tycoon. He claimed that one of Ruto's men told them: "*Ruto anajua Wakikuyu hawawezi kumchagua...anataka kutengeneza pesa tu.*" (Ruto knows Kikuyus cannot vote for him; he just wants to make money). But it was now evident that Ruto wants to be a powerful president like Daniel arap Moi was.

"The handshake had obviously disrupted Ruto's post-October 26, 2017 election program," said a Kalenjin friend, who worked closely with Ruto's campaign team. We were sitting at a popular pub in Langata, south-west of Nairobi city centre. "His program was time specific: on Jubilee Party assuming state power, he would begin by dismantling the NASA coalition, in whichever way he could - separating and scattering the four principals, by the first half of the year. In the second half, he was to clean and revamp his image, by sprucing it up as a development conscious leader." He said Ruto has had to reorder his priorities after he was taken by the handshake surprise.

"It is now a matter of urgency for Ruto to rebrand as a development conscious leader - far from his rabble rousing and cantankerous image, having spent nearly the whole of his first term in office hurling insults at the Opposition and especially at Raila Odinga," said the friend. "He is also now vigorously pushing for the "hustler narrative" to repackage himself as this struggling, humble man who is now seeking the presidency against all political odds. If you were keen, you would have noticed the cap Ruto was wearing during the April 23, Kamagut chicken auction was branded 'Jamaa wa Kuku'. The branding project had to be fast forwarded and will increase its tempo as Ruto combats the notion that he is perpetually in campaign mode."

The "hustler narrative" is assiduously being propagated by Mutahi G. Ngunyi, the chief architect of "Tyranny of Numbers" myth that in 2013 fanatically excited scores of Jubilee Coalition supporters. In the new narrative that Mutahi is fashioning, Ruto is being cast as the underdog who, after a long and arduous political journey, is ready to be crowned the "peasant president". In crafting the "Dynasty vs Hustler Nation" message for Ruto, Mutahi is targeting the voluble millennial generation, which constitutes a significant part of the Kenyan electorate. Still, more specifically, Mutahi's new assignment is largely informed more by the emerging realization that the GEMA (Gikuyu Embu Meru Association) nation may, after all, not vote for William Ruto as a bloc. The question therefore that Mutahi is posing to the millenials is this: "In Ruto's battle royal with the dynastic families that have controlled the politics of Kenya since 1963, who best captures your political imagination and who in your estimation mirrors your daily struggles?"

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The other person who is pushing the “peasant president” agenda is the easily-provoked and provocative city lawyer, Ahmednasir Abdullahi. He has several times, through his Twitter handle, falsified Kenya political history, in his impressionistic efforts to portray Ruto as the first son of a peasant to contend for the country’s top seat.

The Kalenjin millennial who patronize the Langata pub I met my friend in are mostly the children of the Kalenjin elite who thrived during Moi’s 24-year-old reign. They are completely sold on Ruto’s presidential ambitions and his impending take-over in 2022. “Ruto’s a go-getter and that’s the kind of person, we want,” said one to me. “This talk about Ruto’s wanton corruption and enriching himself is just bull talk - who in this country among his accusers can hold a candle against Ruto? We know how the political dynasty families made their riches. You do not help to form a government then be expected not reap from it. If Ruto has a found his way of making money, why begrudge him?”

According to this group, Ruto has proven that he can deliver what he promises: “He delivered Langata constituency to us - for the first time in the history of Nairobi politics, we have a Kalenjin MP - Nixon Korir in Nairobi County. We believe Ruto is the person who will hold our hands after he gets the presidency in 2022, just like Moi held our fathers’ hands, when he became the president in 1978.”

Like Jomo Kenyatta before him and Kibaki and Uhuru after him, Moi rewarded his ethnic base with government jobs. One of the parastatals that came to be identified with Kalenjins was the then Kenya Posts and Telecommunications. “There was a time when Kalenjin dialects were the languages of instruction; nearly everyone from the Managing Director to the tea-girl and the corridor sweeper was a Kalenjin,” said a retired engineer to me.

The Kalenjin population resident in the greater Langata is neither accidental nor coincidental: many of the Kalenjin who came to Nairobi in the 1980s and 1990s from the largely rural Rift Valley, came as government employees. As it were, they were the beneficiaries of the government houses in Langata and elsewhere in the city.

If the Nairobi Kalenjins are of the view that Ruto is the man who will carry their collective aspirations, the rural Kalenjin is even more wedded to the view that Ruto should be the next president. Sila, a friend from Kapseret, in Eldoret, told me the issue is non-negotiable. “*Tunataka kura milioni nne kutoka kwa hawa Wakikuyu.*” We want four million votes from these Kikuyus. Kapseret is 20km from Eldoret town, near the Eldoret International Airport on the Eldoret-Mosoriot Road. Some of the richest Kikuyus in Eldoret live in this general area. They have hotel businesses, hardware shops and restaurants.

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Said Sila, “*tunajua Wakikuyu wote pale wanaishi Uasin Gishu County, tutaenda kwa nyumba zao kuwaitisha kura...kuna watu watahama hii counti wakileta kujua.*” (We know where all the Kikuyus

in Uasin Gishu live. We will move home to home, asking for their vote ... there are people who will vacate this county if they try to be too clever). To test Sila's assertion, I talked to some of the Kikuyu residents from Kapseret and Mosoriot. "Look at these houses, are they made of mud?" one Kikuyu man asked me. "We will vote with the people here. We do not want to court trouble. We have lived in relative peace since 2013. Kikuyus from the central region do not speak on our behalf."

At West Indies, a middle class suburb, I talked to Grace Gathoni. She emigrated to Eldoret in 1980, from Nairobi, but is originally from Warubaga, in Elburgon. "The new post-election narratives being formed by the political elites within the Jubilee fraternity are being closely watched by Kikuyu resident in Uasin Gishu County and elsewhere in the Rift Valley region," said Gathoni. "I will tell you this: the Kikuyus in Rift Valley will vote for Ruto. It is not a question of whether we like him or not - we don't. It will be a question of peace and survival."

"There are some brutal facts to be faced," said Gathoni. She blames Ruto for the brutality Kikuyus suffered in Uasin Gishu. "But he also teamed up with Uhuru Kenyatta and did what they did to form the government. Uhuru in 2013 and 2017 could not have formed the government without Ruto's help. If you cohabited with an ogre, you don't one day wake up and just walk away from it, it will certainly devour you. You must cleverly devise a system to disengage yourself from it." Gathoni told me that surprisingly, despite the 2008 violence, more Kikuyus had moved to Uasin Gishu, especially after 2013. "Today, many are engaged more in business and less in farming. And unlike pre-2007 and post-election violence, majority of them live in urban centres - Eldoret, Kitale, Moi's Bridge, Matunda, Turbo. Those in farming nowadays just lease the land. They also became the wiser: not many of them live with their nuclear families. The men returned, but their families are in Juja, Kajiado, Kitengela, Ngong and Rongai."

The outbreak of handshakes in Nairobi has startled Kikuyus in the Rift Valley where they thought they were safest. Meeting some wazees from Ng'ombe Imwe in Bahati constituency, Nakuru County, the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA) elders told me word was already quietly being subtly spread around that "it is paramount that Kikuyus wherever they are in the Rift Valley seek to live peacefully like they have been doing for the last couple of years." Ng'ombe Imwe is one kilometre from Tabuga, where the Deputy President was hosted by the PCEA Church for a Sunday service on April 23. Listening to these wazees and Gathoni, it sounded to me like peace had been commodified in the greater Rift Valley region.

Another mzee, from Elburgon, told me how some Kalenjin men pointedly told him: "It is true the Kalenjins terrorized the Kikuyus in the North Rift during the post-election violence in 2007, but I hope you people, as we approach 2022, will appreciate the cost of peace. You've lived well with us for the last five years. It is important we continue living peacefully." It was a chilling warning. "People have built permanent houses here," he said. "They have crops in the farms and animals in the fields; the last thing they want is disruption, death and destruction. I will tell you this: Kikuyus from this area and the adjoining areas of Kuresoi, Molo, Mauche, Njoro and Solai will vote for Ruto, come 2022."

It was Heinrich Himmler, one of Nazi's most influential and powerful cadre who best captured the power of political terror: Said Himmler, "the best political weapon is terror. Cruelty commands respect. Men may hate us. But we do not ask of their love, only for their fear." Talking to the 70-year-old from Elburgon, I could see terror in his eyes. The horror of the 2007 post-election violence in his area and the fear that filled his family and relatives, all were coming back to him. "I'm old now, I want to live the rest of my life here on earth in peace and watch the growth of my grandchildren," he says.

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The post-handshake fear and panic has also spread to the top echelons of Ruto's squad. An Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission official stationed in Kitale whispered to me that the triple resignations in April of IEBC commissioners, Paul Kurgat, Margaret Mwachanya and Connie Maina, were a choreographed event allegedly orchestrated by Ruto himself. “This was done with the intention of ostensibly disabling the IEBC and buying time, in case the push for a referendum catches momentum,” said the official.

Ruto's middle name is Kipchirchir. Chirchir in Kalenjin etymology, means “too quick”. When in a seemingly political crisis, Ruto supposedly does too many things too quickly. When in the storm of the International Criminal Court in November 2010, he took the bold and risky step of travelling to The Hague in the Netherlands and spent 30 hours at the Court. He met everyone except the ICC's then Chief Prosecutor Louis Moreno Ocampo. His mission flopped. When he came back, he took up a verbal war with everyone, blaming his woes on everybody but himself.

My Kalenjin friends like reminding me that the traditional symbol of Kalenjin leadership - the *Sambut* - a traditional cloak, has always remained with Moi and therefore never been transferred to anyone. In 2007, months before the controversial general election, in what came to be known as the Eldama Ravine Declaration, Ruto was enthroned as the Kalenjin leader, “but that was not the true enthronement,” say the friends. “Until and unless he hands over the *Sambut*, Moi will remain the true Kalenjin leader. When the apparently impulsive decision to fly to Kabarak for a photo-op backfired, Ruto again blamed everyone and everything save himself.

If he stays true to form, there may be tough times ahead for Kenya, regardless of all the handshakes.

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