



SMOKE AND MIRRORS: What the demolitions are really about

By Dauti Kahura



Days after I had written on the [Kibera slum demolitions](#) by the government, I met with some senior [General Service Unit](#) (GSU) intelligence officers. The [GSU](#) is a paramilitary outfit that was formed in 1948 by the British as Regular Police Reserve to suppress native resistance in the Kenyan colony. Today, the unit supports the Kenya Police Service in accordance with Section 24 of the National Police Service Act, 2011. GSU officers are basically trained to deal with riots and civil disturbances. Menacing, merciless and ruthless, the government usually deploys them to beat up and maim Kenyans who stand up against state authorities.

“The Kibera demolition was a litmus test for the government,” said one of the officers. “The demolitions were a 100 per cent success in view of the government’s projected plans on future demolitions elsewhere in the city and countrywide, especially in the slum dwellings.” The government had gone to Kibera armed to the teeth, expecting resistance. “Tough orders had been issued from the presidency to quell any semblance of remote resistance by scorched earth policy - clear anybody and anything on site,” surmised one of the officers.

The Kibera demolitions were the testing ground of the state to gauge its effectiveness in completely subduing the bastion of opposition politics in Nairobi city and indeed in the country. “If the government succeeded in pulverising the Kibera populace, breaking its will to fight back, cowing any

remaining residue opposition to the government, the government would, easily now demolish any slum within the city,” opined another officer.

According to Jacinta Wanjiku, a resident of Mathare, the government has already issued notices for evictions from the expansive Mathare Valley in order to complete Muratina Road – the road linking Jogoo Road to Juja Road and the Mlango Kubwa slum which links to Thika Superhighway. However, the government has been dithering in effecting the demolitions for several reasons: Huge sections of Mathare Valley slum, unlike Kibera, are populated by the Kikuyu, the bedrock of President Uhuru Muigai Kenyatta’s, and by extension, his Jubilee Party’s loyal support. Some of the Mathare Valley slumlords have invested heavily in brick and mortar structures that are protected by the so-called Nairobi Business Community aka Mungiki.

Both loyal supporters and Mungiki were used by President Kenyatta and Jubilee as a bulwark against a recalcitrant and rejuvenated opposition that threatened to snatch the reins of power. If politically irritated, both can mount a backlash against a ruling party now riven with divisions. “Now Uhuru can find a justification to destroy buildings and structures in Mathare in the full knowledge that even if he faces resistance, he will cow in easily. If Kibera can come down, what other slum in Nairobi cannot come down?” posed a GSU officer.

But there is also another reason why the pulling down of a section of Kibera was possible: The March 9, 2018 political handshake between Uhuru Kenyatta and Raila Odinga on the steps of Harambee House. “The Kibera demolitions could not have been effected had the handshake not taken place,” said one of the GSU officer’s friend. “One of the enduring and biggest benefits of the handshake is that it has given President Uhuru a breather and a lifeline – he can at least now plan his exit agenda freely and without too much pressure, without constantly having to look over his shoulders and worrying what Raila could be up to.”

According to the officers, if there had been no rapprochement between Raila and Uhuru, a section of the Kibera slum would not have been flattened to create room for the link road. “We would have been deployed there to beat the people into total submission. The people, properly mobilised by Jakom [Raila] would have fought back. There would have been multiple deaths and destruction all over. Ngong Road would have been a no-go-zone and the central business district, uneasy about protests and looting, would have shut down.”

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This scenario would have likely played out given the social and economic challenges facing the country. Faced by a populace that is reeling from hard economic times because of massive theft by state officers, an already discredited President coming out of a seemingly stolen election would have found little favour among the people and, therefore, would have been forced to back down. The glare of the international media would have made the demolitions untenable.

The GSU officers told me that the next biggest slum awaiting demolition was Mathare Valley. “We have already been signalled to stay alert. The Mathare people saw what happened in Kibera – the message is clear: you cooperate or we come down on you like a tonne of bricks.” All the buildings and structures that line the valley and river, from Muthaiga to Mathare 4A, are expected to be pulled down. “But for now the government has to tiptoe around the slum, looking for the best

opportunity to pounce.”

Informal settlements and the state’s response to them

As you drive down on the Thika superhighway from Muthaiga, you descend into a depression. Looking askance on your right, there is a river at the bottom of the valley. There is a lot of activity at this point of the river: the first obvious one is the car wash that is evident from afar. But as you approach the river, you will find women washing clothes and up river young boys, some as young as 10, swimming and generally having a great time playing in the water.

This part of the river is called Githathuru River, a tributary that feeds into Nairobi River. It is from here that the demolitions will take place. The Nairobi River basin consists of three main rivers: Ngong, Nairobi and Mathare. These rivers assemble east of Nairobi and join river Athi, eventually draining into the Indian Ocean. Other than Githathuru tributary, Nairobi’s other tributaries are Kamiti River (aka Gathara-ini), Karura Ruiru, Kirichwa and Rui Ruaka.

Over the last couple of weeks, “riparian” has become a catchy word for Nairobians, much to the amusement of environmentalists and riverine settlers. The word first became prominent among Kenyans when [John Njoroge Michuki](#) was made Minister of Environment and Natural Resources by President Mwai Kibaki in 2008. As soon as he assumed his new portfolio, he decreed that all people and structures along riparian lands would be ejected and that the rivers would be restored and reclaimed.

Michuki’s first target was the polluted Nairobi River, which rises 20 km west of Nairobi in the southern extreme of the Aberdares, sometimes referred to as Kikuyu Springs. He began cleaning the river at its most polluted stage – along Kirinyaga Road and Kijabe Streets in the central business district, where mechanics had turned its banks into garages.

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But I am jumping the gun.

In reality, the fight against riparian lands, land reclamation and forest lands was actually started by Prof Wangari Maathai, the late Nobel laureate and founder of the Green Belt Movement (GBM). Prof Maathai started the GBM in 1977 and by the time of her death seven years ago in 2011, her organisation had planted 47 million trees across the country. The first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004, awarded solely on the account of her sustained battle against environmental degradation, Kenyans particularly remember her for waging war in 1989 against former President Daniel arap Moi and his Kanu party in their attempts to “grab” and erect a 60-storey building in Uhuru Park, Nairobi’s largest public park, complete with a full-size statue of Moi and an underground car park for an upward of 2,000 cars. Maathai eventually won that battle, but had to suffer repeated police brutality and arrest.

Maathai is also credited with saving Karura Forest. Today, Kenyans from all walks of life and expatriate denizens can walk, run and just saunter around the forest, thanks to Prof Maathai, who in her many battles to save the forest, which is just five kilometres from Nairobi city centre, was once

beaten by Moi's security forces and her braids plucked out, leaving her bleeding from the head. Invariably, Prof Maathai also vociferously opposed the construction of the recently demolished Ukay Nakumatt Centre and Oshwal community hall and temple, which face each other in the Westlands area of Nairobi. Together with the posh Westgate Mall, which is 100m from the Ukay Centre, Prof Maathai argued for their demolition to save riparian land from further destruction.

The first demolitions of any kind in the city of Nairobi are believed to have taken place half a century before. This was in the mid to late 1960s and mid-1970s during the mayoral tenures of Charles Rubia and Margaret Kenyatta. Rubia was the mayor from 1962 to 1967, while Kenyatta took over City Hall in 1970 and stayed till 1976.

Just like riparian is now a cautionary word, seemingly portending disaster and doom among Kenyans who have encroached on the riverine ecosystem, today Nairobians first came to learn of the word "bulldozer" - and to fear it - in the late 1960s. "Bulldozers were first sent to 'City Carton' slum on Kijabe Street along the Nairobi River around 1966, I think," says Mzee Sylvester Oduor, a long-time resident of Nairobi. "The poor lived in houses made of cardboard boxes which were considered an eyesore as well as a security threat by the city elites, said Oduor, who knows the history of Nairobi like the back of his hand. "Most of these people when they were ejected from City Carton moved to Mathare Valley and joined the people who were already living there - near the banks of the river." Once they had settled in Mathare, they took up urban farming - they started growing arrow roots, sugarcane, sweet potatoes and yams and vegetables such sukuma wiki (kales) and spinach. Sukuma wiki and spinach supplemented dietary consumption at home, while arrow roots, sweet potatoes and yams acted as "cash crops" to be sold for surplus income.

Farming was a new venture for the former City Carton dwellers. But one activity they carried along from Kijabe Street was chang'aa brewing. Chang'aa is a traditional liquor from western Kenya. The British colonial government had outlawed the brewing of traditional drinks, such as busaa, changaa'a and muratina, and the independence government, under Jomo Kenyatta, the first president of Kenya, adopted the same [colonial](#) logic and continued to view traditional brews with the same suspicion with which the British had viewed them.

The growing of sugarcane by the enlarged Mathare Valley slum dwellers by the river side was to augment their chang'aa brewing business. The brewing of the illicit liquor was the other reason that the City Carton dwellers had been ejected from Kijabe Street. The City Council, then under Mayor Charles Rubia, argued that the Kijabe Street chang'aa dens were too near the city.

The first informal settlement in the city was the Majengo slum created after World War II in 1945 in Pumwani, northeast of Nairobi, for migrant African male labour. In 1967, Thomas Joseph Mboya (popularly known as TJ), the mercurial and youthful MP for Kamukunji constituency, led the first demolition of Majengo's mud-walled Swahili houses. "TJ had the clear intention of completely doing away with Majengo," said Mzee Oduor. "He is the one who [canvassed](#) for the building of California estate next to the slum by the City Council. TJ's American connections were evident even in the naming of the well-designed estate in his constituency. TJ's policy was to house every resident who had lived in Majengo - whether they were sex workers, some of whom came from Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi - or government workers."

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Mzee Oduor told me that many of the commercial sex workers were a priority in Mboya's housing scheme and ended up getting the houses, which then were some of the best-modelled houses in Nairobi's Eastlands area. "The sex workers were compensated by being the first to acquire the houses. To this day some of the sex workers who got houses in California still remember Tom Mboya fondly and nostalgically," said Mzee Oduor.

Two of the most famous Kenyan artists in the 1970s and 1980s, Mzee Pembe (Omar Suleiman) and Mama Tofi (Aisha Juma), who lived in the slums, got houses in California estate. Another famous TV artist, Kipanga Athumani, whose full-time job was as a Kenya Bus Service (KBS) driver, was moved to Wood Street in Eastleigh. The trio acted in the popular Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC) TV skit called *Jamii ya Mzee Pembe*, a precursor to *Vioja Mahakamani*. Today, Wood Street is named after Kipanga Athumani, arguably Kenya's first stand-up comedian. Athumani was an ethnic Maasai.

Kipanga lived in Pangani slums. "In those days, Pangani slums, which stretched from today's Riverside posh residences all the way to the current Pangani Girls High School, was then one of the largest slums in Nairobi," narrated Mzee Oduor, "It bordered Ngara estate, then an exclusive estate for Indians. Pangani slums were called Pangani because the tin houses had iron sheets for their roofing. The Pangani and Majengo slums were homes to people from the coast of Kenya, Tanzanians, Ugandans and other Kenyans who professed Islam as their religious faith and that is why even up to today Kiswahili is widely spoken in Majengo. In fact, Pangani and Ziwani estates' names are derived from the Kenyan coast. The original Pangani is in Kilifi," said Mzee Oduor.

One of the reasons why TJ was unbeatable in Kamukunji was his sophisticated cosmopolitan type of politics. Itself a cosmopolitan constituency, Kamukunji, even in those days, had the ethnic Kikuyu as the majority voters, "but TJ's representation knew no tribe, or favouritism," said Oduor. "The California estate project propelled Mboya's political profile to even to greater heights - he became unstoppable and unconquerable. But as fate would have it, he was gunned down in July 1969 and that is how TJ's Majengo housing project came a cropper." Today, Majengo is hemmed in and marooned by Bondeni estate (named so because it is built on the valley across Nairobi River; bondeni is Kiswahili for valley), Gorofani estate, Shauri Moyo estate, Starehe and Biafra estates.

The City Council argued that it was demolishing illegal structures within the capital city essentially because it had enough houses for anybody who wanted to live decently and legally. "The City Council was building houses, especially in Eastlands, such as the Huruma and Kariobangi South flats and large estates like Jericho (Lumumba and Ofafa), Maringo, Uhuru and Jerusalem, where Jaramogi Oginga Odinga maintained a council house for a very long time."

When in the 1970s manufacturing processing factories and plants started expanding and mushrooming in the Industrial Area in the southeast of Nairobi, the Mukuru slums (today referred to as Mukuru Kaiyaba, Mukuru kwa Njenga and Mukuru kwa Reuben) quickly mushroomed next to the plants and along the Ngong River. "The slum dwellers were putting up structures on riparian land because they claimed it was no man's land," explained Oduor. (Ngong River runs through Kibera and passes through the Industrial area. Mukuru is the Kikuyu word for valley.)

More fundamentally, the river provided fresh water for human consumption, as well for urban farming, a practice the slum dwellers took up, just like their counterparts in the Mathare Valley. The dwellers also took up chang'aa brewing because there was lots of water, a crucial ingredient.

"In the days of Rubia and Margaret Kenyatta (Kenyatta succeeded Isaac Lugonzo as mayor who had served from 1967-1970), the biggest rationale both the City Council of Nairobi and government used for demolishing the people's structures in the slums was because they were illegal. City by-laws and the laws of the land did not allow semi-permanent structures in the city," recalled Oduor. "And,

because slums then did not have electricity, criminals used them as hideouts.”

Selective demolitions

The current demolitions are ostensibly spurred by infrastructural developments on government land that has been grabbed and illegally occupied for ages through political patronage, and like [President Uhuru said](#) on August 12, 2018 to Faith Evangelistic Ministries’ Church’s Karen congregation, “it is difficult to stop the (demolitions), because we must fight impunity”. According to the president, it is also the desire of the Jubilee government to reclaim riparian lands and preserve the fragile riverine ecosystem.

“Road expansion, fighting runaway (state) corruption, saving our environment...there is something eerily disingenuous about these suddenly discovered lofty social ideals by President Uhuru,” quipped a former Central Kenya MP. “Most of the plots of land along Langata Road all the way to Galleria Mall opposite Bomas of Kenya are owned by politicians - past and present - and were illegally acquired through political connections and impunity. Will President Uhuru ask for their demolitions now that we know from Nairobi Governor Mike Sonko that it is President Uhuru who has sanctioned the arrest of certain individuals and the demolition of the suddenly ‘undesired’ buildings?”

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In a [video clip](#) that went viral several days ago, Nairobi Governor Mike Sonko is heard telling his counterpart from Kiambu, Governor Ferdinand Waititu, that orders to arrest the latter’s wife for putting up a building on unapproved piece of land are from above. Who else would be above Governor Sonko other than the President himself? “Orders from above”, the former MP told me, can only mean one thing, and in Kenya, it has always meant one thing: the President himself.

Impunity and patronage politics in Kenya did not start today, said the former MP. “Are you aware the land where InterContinental Hotel is built was once Parliament land? Are you also aware that the land was hived off from Parliament by none other than President Jomo Kenyatta?” Similarly, the ex-MP told me, Serena Hotel sits on Uhuru Park, which was public land that was given to the Aga Khan, again by Jomo Kenyatta. “So the question we must ask ourselves as Kenyans is: From when should the government seek to reclaim grabbed government land or land meant for public use that is now in the hands of private entities?”

In the church where the President was addressing the congregation on the difficulty of stopping the demolitions, he also spoke of losing many friends because of the ongoing destructions. He said his friends had been calling him, asking him to stop the demolitions, but he reiterated that impunity must be fought. And it did not matter whether the “culprits” are politically powerful, influential or moneyed.

“Can the people of Kenya reclaim Uhuru Park, can the Parliament sue to get its rightful land back?” posed the former MP. “The current demolitions by any stretch of imagination are selective and targeted. It is doubly interesting that Java Coffee House and the Shell Petrol Station in Kileleshwa ... had to come down. Just next to the Java there are flats whose rear parking bay encroaches onto the river bank. Why was it spared?” The Central Kenya politician said the flats belong to a member of a

former First Family. “There are demolitions and there are demolitions. I can guarantee you that these demolitions are political – they have nothing to do with fighting corruption, neither are they for curbing corruption.”

“President Uhuru Kenyatta told Rev Bishop Teresia Wairimu that he is being bombarded by telephone calls from people asking him to stop the demolitions,” said the former MP. “That might well be so. My friend Maina Kamanda (former Starehe MP and now a Jubilee Party nominated MP) has two blocks of flats in Buru Buru Phase III. They are built on a road reserve and he acquired them when he was a powerful political city honcho and when he hobnobbed with the political aristocracy. Now I hear they may be pulled down. My political bird whispered to me that Kamanda had reached out to fellow Murang’a political buddy David Murathe to plead his case to President Uhuru on his behalf.” (One of the block of flats faces Buru Buru Community Centre, Church of God and houses Kenya Commercial Bank (KCB) offices and ATM machines on the ground floor.)

“President Uhuru is just entertaining the masses...bringing down a building here and there, as the masses clap and ululate. In their temporary excitement, they crave for another building to come down and momentarily forget that the President is involved in a nested game of political juggling and survival as he buys time and crafts the trajectory of his tempestuous second term,” said the former MP.

A game of optics

“Kenyan are living under one of the harshest economic times in modern Kenya, but they have been made to believe that demolishing an important building here and there will assuage their hardships,” said the former MP. “The president is engaged in a game of optics – what he is doing is creating optical illusions and mirages for Kenyan as they wallow in socio-economic difficulties. What happens when he will have demolished enough buildings and cannot demolish more? He will have to move onto something else, because Kenyan must be kept preoccupied,” he lamented.

“Just the other day, [President Uhuru enthralled](#) Kenyan by telling them that the government would import polygraph equipment that would be used on civil and public servants, in a move to ensnare corrupt employees,” observed the former MP. “What happened to the furore that accompanied the President’s June 1, 2018 pronouncements? Are government employees still waiting to be lined up for the lie detector tests? What about the much talked about lifestyle audit – is it ever going to materialise?”

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President Uhuru is stuck; he does not know what to do or, even where to move next and is desperate, said the politician. “There is no money at all in the government: all the money was scuttled in a stealing spree that emptied the coffers in the first term of Uhuru and his deputy (William) Ruto’s rule.” The 2013–2017 Jubilee coalition government profligacy was of unmitigated proportions, said the former MP, “and now the people are lurching from hope to desperation. They are disillusioned and dispirited and a trifle embarrassed: They gave President Uhuru their all. At the very least, they expected he would cushion them economically. Now that that may not happen, not even in the foreseeable future, they cannot turn around to claim they did not know that they were

being duped.”

The former MP said Central Kenya people are now quietly wishing that Raila Odinga, the opposition supremo, who led the National Super Alliance coalition against President Uhuru’s Jubilee Party in the 2017 August elections, would be in the opposition to check President Uhuru Kenyatta’s government. “Raila is the only person who can candidly and openly shout about flagrant theft in the government, expose the culprits – whether they are Cabinet Secretaries or parastatal heads – thereby shaming them and helping stop the haemorrhage and pilferage.”

Among the Central Kenya political elite, the MP former intoned, some have been audacious, albeit in hushed tones and in private corners, to suggest that President Uhuru should bite the bullet, swallow his pride and call in David Ndii to fix the economy as the Treasury boss. (David Ndii is an economist who played a significant role in the economic recovery strategy of Mwai Kibaki’s first presidential term. Until the famous “handshake” between Raila and Uhuru, he was also instrumental in steering Raila’s campaign against the Jubilee government.) “He [Uhuru} can play politics later if he so wishes...he can, after two years, either instigate his [Ndii’s] sacking or blame him for the flailing economy if it refuses to pick up,” said the former MP, seemingly capturing the sentiments of his fellow Central Kenya politicians.

“There might, after all, be a logic to the demolition ‘madness’. If that be the case, more power to President Uhuru. If, on the other hand, the demolitions end up as a sob story for those whose property has been destroyed for nothing, and if the demolitions will not have solved the economic morass that Kenyans find themselves in, then President Uhuru could as well be riding a dangerous, mutinous horse.”

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