



THE DISILLUSIONED AND THE DISCONTENTED: Will the 'Born-80s' generation finally rescue Kenya?

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Disillusionment seems to be the predominant feeling in the country, an assessment based on analyses of [some of the political events](#) and the [economy](#). A number of articles from [The Elephant's millennial edition](#) seem to bring out this sense of despondency among the younger generation of Kenyans. How does this shape or how should it shape the political outlook of millennials, particularly those who are politically progressive and interested in socio-political change? How do these times compare with the times of their forerunners who organised under the Moi and Kenyatta dictatorships? Is there a need for a different approach in political organising by progressive Kenyan millennials?

As argued by [Darius Okolla](#), a generation congeals as an identity when members of an age cluster develop an actual peer bond, thanks to a specific event of a certain type that knits them together into largely observable mindsets and world views. Based on this premise, the construction of a generational identity has some merit.

But who or what gets to define the length of this cluster? Is it the Anglo-linguistic definition of 30 years that defines a generation? Or is it the period of 30 to 40 years when the [ituika](#) ceremony would

be held in the Kikuyu community to symbolically show that power had been transferred to a new generation? Or did the political realities of the post-colonial Kenyan state make the length of this cluster more elastic than the Western or pre-colonial Kikuyu definitions? Maybe. The membership of underground, multiparty or constitutional movements, such as the December 12th movement, *Mwakenya*, the Forum for Restoration of Democracy and *Kenya Tuitakayo*, had a huge age range – few were born in the thirties, some were born in the forties while others grew up in the seventies, but as movements they nonetheless pass Okolla’s litmus test: they had a largely observable nationalistic and patriotic political outlook. They may have had differing approaches and ideologies in their political struggles – approaches that were partially informed by their various classes, as Willy Mutunga demonstrates in his book [Constitutional-Making from the Middle](#) – but they had faith in the Kenyan state as a functional unit. I will demonstrate why.

The progressive wing of the “Generation X-extended”, as I would brand them, were either born or came of age during the heady years of independence or at a time when the Kenyan state’s social services had not been privatised. Admittedly, this argument has some grey areas – it does not address Northeastern and other regions, which by far had less investment compared to Central Kenya and Nairobi, or the discontent that brewed in the Rift Valley and the Coast in the 1960s and the Shifta War in the North. The disillusionment of citizens who had been promised *Uhuru na kazi* but rallied around the *Uhuru na taabu* call, as well as fighters like Baimungi and Chui who later picked up arms and went back to the forest, also refers. Nonetheless, the zeitgeist of the 60s for the most part was one of relative optimism that was further bolstered by the *Harambee* call for nation-building. Some of those, like Willy Mutunga, who were born during the colonial era, celebrated the lowering of the [Union Jack and the hopes of modernisation and nation-building](#). They were invested in the nation-building project and the nation-state.

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Compared to the public university students over the past two-and-a-half decades, the students of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s occupied a more privileged position in society. They did not have to worry about a cafeteria system through which they would pay for meals or about supplementing their student loans – a scheme that began in 1974 – with other sources of money to pay for their university fees. In confrontations with the government, these students were constantly reminded, not only by government officials but also by members of the public, about their privileged status and the fact that their privilege came at the Kenyan taxpayer’s cost. Employment prospects for them were not as dim as they are today. Repression aside, the government to a large extent did not violate its social contract with this budding intelligentsia. There lay a caveat, however. The implied, unspoken rule was that the government would not violate the “social contract” with the university students for as long as they kept their heads down. Agitating for political freedom came at a cost – suspensions, expulsions, withdrawal of scholarships and/ or detentions.



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State industries, such as Rivatex, Kikomi and Muhoroni, employed Kenyan workers in their hundreds. A public transport system – OTC, later the Nyayo Bus and the Kenyan Bus Services – ferried people from one point to another in the city of Nairobi. It was a state that managed to keep

up an image of functionality. Under Jomo Kenyatta's regime, in particular, the [mainstream media were complicit](#) in promoting the government's project of nation-building, a project that provided a platform for a patriotic outlook to take root. This focus on nation-building obscured a parallel but insidious development - the use of state power to [amass wealth](#) for the president, his family and his cronies. Alternative and dissenting interpretations of nation-building, muffled by repression, took the form of underground movements, like the clandestine Workers' Party of Kenya, whose outlook was Marxist-nationalist, a forerunner to the December 12th and Mwakenya movements that in the 1980s, organised with the aim of deposing an acquisitive political elite that had frustrated and subverted the meaning of independence.

Those born in the early to the late 1970s may have turned out differently had they not encountered a rebirth of nation-building initiated by a man who was compelled to create a legend for himself owing to the gravitas his leadership lacked in the public eye in the early years of his presidency. The "Nyayo legend" had to lean on Jomo Kenyatta's *Harambee* nation-building legacy to get the goodwill that Daniel arap Moi needed to command a semblance of credibility. This legend was designed to create a particular kind of citizen and the "Born-70s" became its prototype.

The Generation X, born between 1945 and 1960, as posited in [Okolla's article](#), also had to be extended. This extension scaled totalitarian heights as state machinery ensured that the Nyayo philosophy permeated all corners of society, from the corridors of power to school classrooms. The Born-70s, or children of the 1980s, underwent a brainwash reinforced by a [repertoire of techniques](#) - Nyayo milk that showed how benevolent the president was, songs that extolled the virtues of *Baba wa Taifa* and repeating a loyalty pledge that underscored fealty to him and to the republic.

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These children were the real *watoto wa Nyayo*; they were the first set of child inductees into the Nyayo-brainwashing programme, and for a better part of the 1980s the image they had of the Nyayo nation-building project held strong partly [because of the state benefits they enjoyed](#), as well as the repression which on the surface put a lid on Kenyans' frustrations and fear. The discontent was there but it was costly for it to be shown; hence they were shielded from processing some of the violent confrontations between citizens and the state police that were to be witnessed in the following decade. Later in their lives, they would have trouble reconciling their constructed love for Moi with the hard times that his administration produced. As [explained by Binyavanga Wainaina](#), the idea of "demons" as a rationalisation for the deteriorating economic times took root as Kenyans were afraid of attributing this state of affairs to Moi's incompetence.

But this illusion propped up by authoritarianism could not hold for long. The opening up of the democratic space in the early 1990s coincided with the introduction of cost-sharing measures for social services, particularly in educational institutions. These austerity measures produced dwindling fortunes, unemployment and inequality, which in turn radicalised this group. Its discontent would be manifested in the university student unrest in the 1990s, as well as its militancy in Kenya's reform movement. The harsh economic conditions, accompanied by the repressive environment that they grew up in, produced progressive individuals who served as the foot soldiers

of the country's reform movement. It is important to note that in their role as "foot soldiers", some of these individuals felt that they [endured frustration](#) from the senior generation of activists who were perceived to be the leaders of the reform movement.

Although the progressive youth of the reform movement may have been [more radical](#) than the senior activists in their approach, their outlook for the most part was similar – the Kenyan state was to be rescued. The predominant assumption amongst them was that constitutional reforms would usher in an era of good governance and address the challenges that they faced. They were wrong. Although the country got a new constitution almost two decades after their struggles, the colonial logic of the state remained intact. To be fair, we can't blame this group and their forerunners; they were merely people of their time. They played the hand that they were dealt.

The Born-80s "millennial" generation

The childhood of the Born-80s came at a time when Kenya was a cauldron of different political contestations. The Nyayo nation-building project continued in our schools against a backdrop of wider events that did not portray the government of the day in as good a light. I remember the time when I was a pre-unit student in St. George's Primary School receiving Kenyan flags alongside my classmates from our teachers and being walked to State House Avenue where we were prompted to wave our flags at President Moi who shared a car with Queen Elizabeth in his motorcade during her visit to Kenya in 1991.

I also recall watching in the previous year the TV footage of women wailing in reaction to the news of the murder of the Foreign Affairs Minister, Robert Ouko. I remember reciting the loyalty pledge and shortly after or around that time the tense atmosphere under which the first *Saba Saba* rallies occurred; my parents forced me and my siblings to stay at home without offering us any explanation – our home was relatively close to Nairobi city centre.

I remember my Malkiat Singh Class 5 GHC workbook that glorified Moi and other KANU nationalists for their fight for independence but at the same time I also remember the country's mood in 1997 when police followed pro-reform crusaders into a church and clobbered them mercilessly. How brutal could a government be?

The 90s decade saw the decline of social services. By the end of the 1990s, government-provided public transport had collapsed and was in private hands. While the nation paid most of its attention to political liberalisation, its economic arm wreaked havoc on the economy. Free trade, as dictated by the IMF and the World Bank, meant that we had to open our markets to imported goods such as *mitumba* (cheaper clothes than the local alternatives but which had already been used). As a result, a host of textile industries collapsed, which also rendered [cotton farming a redundant exercise](#).

The economy was on its knees with corruption taking centre stage. The effects of the grand corruption of the Moi administration manifested itself in high levels of crime and low-level corruption. In sync with the global music trends, a somewhat new generation of artists emerged, such as *Kalamashaka*, *K-south* and Eric Wainaina, whose music spoke to social ills such as corruption and crime. This was the Kenya that we were growing up in – one characterised by disillusionment that we picked up from this new breed of artists as well as from the [experiences and insights shared between our parents and our older relatives](#).

This disillusionment would be a running theme throughout our adult lives. The country's short-lived optimism during the 2002 election quickly evaporated after the NARC government, with Mwai Kibaki as President, betrayed the unity and goodwill that elevated it to leadership. A re-emerging Mount Kenya Mafia, which was later linked to the Anglo Leasing scandal, frustrated a pre-election

memorandum of understanding. NARC became Nothing Actually Really Changes. Political realignments based on the betrayal of the 2002 pre-election MOU took shape, rekindling the ethnic animosities witnessed in the past decade.

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The 2005 referendum became a dress rehearsal for the shambolic 2007 elections, with a [period of economic growth amid structural adjustment which, to a large extent, did not benefit the poor](#), serving as a bridge between these events. The bungled 2007 elections were merely a trigger for violence that provided a vent for pent-up frustrations and disillusionment with the Kibaki regime. People were killed, raped, maimed. Their houses and places of business were gutted. The violence, of course, was limited to those outside of Kenya's power structure.

The political settlement between our elite in February 2008 managed to bring the temperatures down. It, however, set the stage for an electoral paradigm shift in Kenya - peace over justice by any means necessary - a shift that would shape the outcome and administration of elections in Kenya for the next decade.

However, the spectre of state violence still lingered - in Mt. Elgon, in the disappearances and murders of suspected members of the Mungiki sect and in the political assassination of Oscar King'ara and my college mate John Paul Oulu who investigated these murders and disappearances. The elite consensus produced by the settlement brought out contradictions between those we thought fought for us - the political elite - and those of us who supported them. In addition, a litany of scandals presided over by the coalition government showed that both of the former feuding camps were on the take. While national unity codified as political leaders from the major political parties serving in government, was sold to Kenyans as a means to end the 2007-2008 impasse, [the grand corruption overseen by a 40-member cabinet](#) did little to inspire Kenya's newfound hope. Disillusionment again defined the times. No elite could save us.

The promulgation of the 2010 constitution could not "[pack a patriotic punch](#)". Young people would later close ranks to form the [Unga Revolution](#) that protested the high cost of living at the time. A colleague described its poetry when he said, "It was the President's office on one side and the Prime Minister's on the other. We were in the middle. The lines were well defined." This political formation, however, soon disintegrated in the run-up to the 2013 electoral contest, which Uhuru Kenyatta and his running mate William Ruto won - a contest whose results, however, were said by an [observer mission to be wholly lacking in transparency](#).

Born-80s millennials under Jubilee's first and now second terms in office have had to endure unemployment, a high cost of living and extrajudicial killings, all taking place against a backdrop of corruption scandals that crop up in the media with worrying frequency. The SGR scandal, the NYS scandal (Seasons 1 and 2), the Eurobond scandal, the health scandal, and the maize scandal have been reported before our eyes with the main perpetrators walking away with impunity. While the [media focuses on token perpetrators of these scams](#), the dumbest thing would be to assume that the youth do not know that there are bigger players in the game who walk away scot free.

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It was no surprise, therefore, when the father of two sons casually [attributed](#) his arrested sons' alleged involvement in the Thika bank heist to the culture of impunity that allows senior government officials to get away with grand corruption. Unable to secure formal employment after both had scored straight A's in their A-level examinations, these youth were arguably inspired to rob a bank by the culture of impunity which from time immemorial has routinely shielded the political elite whose grand corruption is responsible for the impoverishment of many young Kenyans. Those who fell through the cracks of our education system and grew up in more hostile neighbourhoods have had to contend with [extrajudicial killings](#) for their suspected or real crimes while the officials in government who have done much worse do not pay any price for their crimes; on the contrary, they get to use their largesse to get elected or re-elected to office.

This flavour of impunity, a defining feature of the Jubilee administration, was one of the reasons why it should have been voted out in the previous election. This did not pan out, however. The 2017 August election was nullified by Kenya's Supreme court over its lack of transparency while the repeat election was boycotted by the National Super Alliance opposition, which in pursuit of "electoral justice" held demonstrations and public meetings that were sabotaged by the Jubilee administration, resulting in several deaths, [mostly of youth](#).

This cause was abandoned by the opposition leader Raila Odinga in his handshake with Uhuru Kenyatta, a handshake that [legitimised the crimes of the Jubilee administration](#). Odinga's statement at the time of the handshake ignored the impunity and extrajudicial killings that he had campaigned against with his supporters and seemed to disingenuously [attribute Kenya's problems to ethnic diversity](#). There were casualties, the youth probably the hardest group hit, in pursuit of these causes. Odinga's dramatic about-face begs the question whether he cared for such causes or whether he simply piggybacked on the discontent of his supporters to secure a deal for himself. For this, Kenyan youth are justified to be disenchanted with the candidate regarded as the ["lesser of two evils"](#).

A case for a different approach in organising

What is the pragmatic way forward for progressive Born-80 Kenyan millennials who have grown up in this era of recurrent despondency? A senior progressive, drawing upon lessons from the handshake, [recently called upon Kenyans](#) to continue building PATRIOTIC, alternative politics, for a free, just, equitably, democratic united and prosperous Kenya. But how can one, in full knowledge of the Kenyan state's past excesses, as well as the disillusionment we have been through, "love" the Kenyan state? Wouldn't love for the Kenyan state obscure [painful histories](#) that it has been responsible for? On a personal level, why should the Born-80s love a state that they witnessed commercialising essential social services? Their times are different from those of their forerunners.

As products of despondency, progressive Born-80s need to ask why the excesses of the Kenyan state have recurred and still recur in worrying frequency. How have four consecutive elections (including the repeat election) not commanded the credibility they should? How is it that senior government officials can get away with grand corruption that impoverishes other Kenyans and causes them to turn to crime? Why is it that young people, particularly those who reside in informal settlements, are gunned down in cold blood for their suspected or imagined crimes, a treatment that the corrupt political elite don't have to contend with? How can a politician dramatically abandon a cause that some of his supporters died and suffered for and suddenly strike a boardroom deal?

Progressive Born-80s millennials, consequently, need to move away from the patriotic and nationalistic approaches advocated by our seniors and to examine the institution of the state. This would mean recognising that the problems they face emanate from the exploitative colonial nature of the Kenyan state rather than from the poor quality of its political leadership.

The answers to these questions would inevitably draw one's attention to the nature of the Kenyan state, which started out as the IMPERIAL BRITISH East African COMPANY, not the East African Cooperative. It was formed to serve its shareholders; all else, including its workforce, were a means to an end - profit and the protection of it. That's why elections were designed to serve the ruling elite, that's why impunity is a privilege conferred to the elite by the Kenyan state, that's why citizens can die for a politician's gain - they are simply units of political capital ploughed into the Kenyan company for profit, the enjoyment of the benefits that come from holding state power. The company's workers - state machinery like the police - exist to serve their masters. The company's customers - Kenyans not part of the political elite - are mere commodities to be used for profit. The Kenyan state is simply doing the work it was originally set out to do - serving the political elite who were the descendants of the shareholders and the former colonial settler class.

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It appears that this approach is gradually shaping up, as demonstrated by the recent show of Kenyan solidarity [with the detained Ugandan artist Bobi Wine](#). Julius Malema's [recent condemnation](#) of xenophobic attacks against other Africans in South Africa and his suggestion to have Kiswahili as the continents' lingua franca is equally encouraging.

Progressives from the Born-80s generation can learn from the progressives from the Generation X-extended who organically organised during repressive times. (A crop of Born-80s progressives, however, have been somewhat [somnambulant in their social media activism](#).)

Going forward, this group of progressives needs to speak its times - they are the link between the previous generation and the Born-90s generation, which was born into a more or less dysfunctional state and which, therefore, easily accepts this dysfunction as a given reality that it cannot change.

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