



# SILENCE OF THE LAMB: What are the righteous doing for Kenya's little and poor?

By Francis Omondi



I once saw a UNICEF poster of a child who, when asked what it wanted to be when it grew up, replied "ALIVE!" Life is a basic right that must never be forgotten by activists, including religious leaders. Anything that diminishes or degrades life is an injustice. The purpose of all social economic and political activities of government at all levels is to enhance and protect life. I hold the ancient Greek position that the government has only one purpose: to improve the lives of citizens. The travesty is this - our government through its policies is methodically undermining the foundation upon which such should be achieved. Economic hard times are now upon us. Blogger Ephraim Njenga had [shown](#) that a widespread collapse of the economy is unlikely. Instead, he predicted that it would be a slow and painful death.

The [Psalmist](#) (Psalm 11:3) raises a question Kenyans should ask, given our circumstances: "If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?" "Foundations", here, refers to those things on which society rests, or by which it sustains social order. Things are in a topsy-turvy state here. Much is out of order and off-course, both in Church and State. People despise and disregard laws, which make the foundations of government. They pervert judgment, and justice stands afar off. The doctrines and principles of religion are subverted, so that there is no standing, either in a political or religious sense. Amazingly the political class is setting standards for the religious, and the religious are failing to push the government to protect the lives of Kenyans.

In the conduct of business in today's Kenya, we must question whether our present national economic policies promote or harm the wellbeing of a majority of Kenyans. The global monetary crisis of 2008 was caused by defying the principles of not spending what you don't have and not living beyond one's means. On such principles are sound economies built, yet they are once again being deliberately violated. Our leaders delude themselves that they can violate the rules, and that can build up their own storehouses while exploiting citizens. That appears to be their governing philosophy.

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Our government has demonstrated a reckless extravagance in the administration of the nation's resources. Former mayor of Kansas City, Mr. Mark Funkhouser, [states](#) that the government in a democracy is essentially a conservative institution. It creates and sustains markets, enforces contracts, protects private property, and produces systems of education and infrastructure that allows commerce to function efficiently.

In its wisdom or lack thereof, the Jubilee administration has presided over a massive debt, ballooning annual public spending from KShs 1.2 trillion to over Sh2.5 trillion in six years. This growth in spending rates outstrips the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth rate. On the other hand, debt obligations shot up this year as semi-concessional and commercial loans contracted over the last five years came due. As it was reported in the [Business Daily](#), "Treasury spent Sh57 out of every Sh100 it collected in July and August to service debt." Debt repayments consumed Sh118.08 billion in the first two months of this fiscal year, more than three times the amount recorded in the same period last year and more than half of total tax collections. Last year, it was less than a fifth. Despite the Kenya Revenue Authority increasing the taxes it collected, funds available for expenditure were far less.

The repayments, which are now a priority, are exerting pressure on the exchequer, and eating into other expenditure, including disbursements to counties. Treasury CS Henry Rotich, in the Statement of Actual Revenues and Net Exchequer Issues as at end of August, admitted that only 15 of the 47 counties had received cash from the Exchequer in the first two months of this financial year. But, in the period, the government spent a whopping Sh133.23 billion on loan repayments, making that the second single largest spend after such recurrent expenditures as salaries, allowances and administrative expenses.

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Kenyans are buckling under the pressure. Essential services are now neglected. Imposition of Value Added Tax (VAT) on fuel in September, ostensibly to cover the hole in the budget, has had a disastrous effect on Kenyans. The Kenya Association of Manufacturers warned that retailers would be hard hit, with the heaviest burden borne by the poorest demographic. It is now real and will ensnare us for a long time.

Consider how this greed has played in the present maize crisis. Our food security policies reveal a deliberate determination to destroy foundations on which the lives of Kenyans depend. Food security is synonymous with maize supply. Therefore, current and past food policymakers attached great

importance to the commodity, which is not only the main staple food but also the most common crop grown by poor, rural households for food.

The government set agents like the National Cereals and Produce Board (NCPB) to address the twin challenges facing the sector. The first challenge is food prices. Policymakers face the dilemma of how to keep farm prices high enough to motivate farmers to keep at production while keeping the maize meal prices low enough for consumers. The second is the production stability, which also involves dealing with food prices, a major hindrance to smallholder productivity growth and food security.

This government hides behind liberalization of maize markets to allow maize cartels to import maize at the expense of ordinary Kenyan farmers. Ariga and Jayne in their survey - [Maize Trade and Marketing Policy Interventions of 2007](#) - noted how prior to the market liberalization of the late 1980s, the NCPB received enough public funds to purchase between five and eight million bags of maize per annum. The purchase constituted more than a half of the domestically traded maize output. The NCPB set its maize purchase prices higher than prevailing market prices in the maize breadbasket areas of Western Kenya. Consequently, the incomes and living standards of many farmers improved, including large-scale farmers, who depended on the NCPB's continuing to offer support prices for maize. Ariga and Jayne infer that by offering above-market support prices, the NCPB used its market power and access to the Treasury to block private sector investment in maize wholesaling and storage.

The failure of the current government to support the role of the NCPB in favor of the private sector (cartels) is what has plunged the sector into the present crisis. This policy shift has handed the market to private traders. A Tegemeo Institute /Egerton University survey recently revealed how most small farmers in Kenya now sell their maize to private traders who then sell it to the NCPB. The survey shows that the first-order effects of NCPB price-raising operations over the past decade have been to transfer income from (poorer) maize purchasing rural households and urban consumers to larger maize-selling farms.

Elliot Mghenyi, a senior economist at the World Bank, in *Food Pricing Policy, Rural Poverty and the Distribution of Income: Insights from Maize in Kenya*, a [paper](#) presented at the International Agricultural Economics Tri-Annual Meetings in Australia, found that a 20 percent reduction in maize market prices would reduce rural headcount poverty rates and transfer income from a small proportion of maize surplus farmers to most farmers in rural Kenya. Mghenyi's analysis considers these second-order effects by considering both adjustments in production and consumption, and the accompanying responses on the rural wage labor market.

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This government shamelessly robs from its poor citizens to reward the large farmers and maize cartels. Basic questions about political ideologies come down to how we ask, and answer, questions about the production and the distribution of national wealth. Which is why economic judgments are crucial. The greatest potential for pro-poor income growth is likely to involve maize productivity growth.

These foundations are being destroyed not for lack of keen policymakers, but as Gitau Githongo, a Nairobi-based economics commentator, observed, senior public officials are motivated more by

personal interests than by public service and even outright nepotism and tribalism, spurious contracting in implementing policy initiatives in the key sectors of health, agriculture, and infrastructure. It is disheartening that public officials are exploiting for personal gain the opportunities provided by an unjust system and not working on principles anymore.

What can the righteous do? What should they do to promote justice? This form of corruption is a curse on any country; it is a plague on the poor, an enemy of justice, and anathema to all religious beliefs. Is it the responsibility of non-State actors to force such a miracle - or hold responsible those supporting evil deeds? No. It has to be fought. The first responsibility rests with the nationals of the country concerned. If the lukewarm response by parliamentarians or the silence of the Church is something to go by, then ordinary Kenyans are in for a really hard time. Too many politicians have forgotten that government's only purpose is to improve citizens' lives. They believe it's there to improve *their* lives.

While addressing us senior church leaders at the Lutheran International Conference on Ethics and Economy in September 1993, Mwalimu Julius K. Nyerere cautioned that we cannot have "a just Africa" if we limit ourselves to one of these rights - civic, social or economic rights alone. In any social unit, they are all interlinked, and the only priority should be to be active on all rights. He emphasized: "Each of us has the responsibility to use his or her own judgment on how we can contribute maximally to building a better world for mankind to live and work in."

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This is not the time for the righteous or the just to be silent! The German Evangelical Church made a public declaration of guilt in April 1950, for it did not address the Nazi regime's atrocious policies. It [stated](#): "We confess that we have become guilty before the God of compassion by our omission and silence and thus share the blame for the terrible crimes committed against the Jews by members of our nation". If the German Church judged its complicity as sin against God, it follows that the Kenyan Church that is so cozy with architects of these unjust policies is a sinner of the same degree.

The Church in Kenya will do well to heed Rev. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's directions, who in his seminal work [No Rusty Swords](#), instructed: "There are three possible ways in which the Church can act towards the State. In the first place, as has been said, it can ask the State whether its actions are legitimate and under its character as State, i.e. it can throw the State back on its responsibilities. Second, it can aid the victims of State action. The Church has an unconditional obligation to the victims of any ordering in society, even if they do not belong to the Christian community. 'Do good to all men.' In both these courses of action, the Church serves the free State in its freeway, and when laws are changed the Church may in no way withdraw from these two tasks. The third possibility is not just to bandage the victims under the wheel, but also to put a spoke in the wheel itself. Such action would be direct political action and is only desirable when the Church sees the State fail in its function of creating law and order."

In 1946, United States' president Harry Truman sent General George C. Marshall to China to broker peace between the warring factions of Communists and nationalists. While he failed, what he said upon his return is worth our attention: "We are in the middle of a world revolution and I don't mean Communism. The revolution I am talking about is that of 'the little poor people' all over the world. They are beginning to learn that there is life and to learn what they are missing." Not long after he

spoke these words, colonial empires were dismantled first in Asia, then in Africa and Latin America.

The poor will also want to have food, clothing, shelter, and other necessities of life. They will demand to live without fear, and aspire to work for their own living. For them, freedom will be imperative, at least to reject decisions affecting their lives but made without their participation. There is an undeniable correlation between economics and peace. Over the past few days, French citizens wearing yellow vests have been out on the streets of Paris, fighting against unfair government policies, particularly high fuel prices! In India, farmers are mounting a protest in New Delhi because of poor farm prices.

For men to plunge headlong into an undertaking of vast change, they must be intensely discontented, yet not destitute. They must have the feeling that comes by the possession of some potent doctrine and have access to a source of irresistible power. They must also have an extravagant hope, a conception of the prospects and potentialities of the future. These men and women will defy all odds and be ignorant of the difficulties involved in their vast undertaking. Hope springs eternal for such people across Kenya.

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