



No Longer at Ease: Uthamaki, Uhuru and a Dream Deferred

By Dauti Kahura



I returned to Kirimukuyu village, in Tumu Tumu sub-location, which is seven kilometres from Karatina town in Mathira constituency, Nyeri County, exactly twelve months after I had first travelled there to see an old lady by the name of Felistus Waguthi.

In the twelve months that had passed, Waguthi, who will be 76 years old this year, had lost her only brother, and in the last three months, she had been marooned in her house after breaking her leg. “I tripped on a slippery slope one morning as I went to the shamba, fracturing my leg bone and twisting my ankle,” she said to me, her left leg heavily bandaged and in a cast lifted up to rest on the bed. She was also hard of hearing, but “everything else considered, I have been okay, you’ve found me alive.”

When I met Waguthi in January 2018, President Uhuru Kenyatta and former Prime Minister Raila Odinga, political rivals in the controversial 2017 general elections, had not “greeted” each other. The “handshake” between them that took place on 9 March, 2018, gave birth to the Building Bridges Initiative (BBI), which is supposed to unite the country and ease political tensions.

Waguthi is not so convinced that BBI will work. “The fate of the country as currently constituted does not augur well for the future,” surmised the old lady, pointing out that the only thing the

“greeting” had succeeded in doing was to forestall the mounting tension that cast a cloud of political uncertainty soon after the controversial 8 August presidential elections of and the repeat elections on 26 October.

“The political trajectory the country is taking is perilous and doubly uncertain because not only have things gone from bad to worse economically, but politically, the country’s leadership is groping around as President Uhuru and his cohorts seem clueless and rudderless as they steer the ship in the yet unsettled stormy waters, apparently from day to day.”

I had gone back to see Waguthi to help me reflect on the leadership of the Jubilee Party, a leadership that after retaking presidential powers in 2017 had left its base – the Kikuyu voter – seemingly confused and discombobulated. At 76 and having lived in a rural area for the better part of her adult life, Waguthi’s contemporary political analysis and sensibilities were sophisticated and on point.

“Uhuru has mortgaged the country to the Chinese...the debt now is in trillions, isn’t it?” mused the old lady, waving her fingers at me. “How much money is that? Those are mindboggling figures, yet all that money has been stolen by his friends and relatives. His government has been the most corrupt to date since I came of age and got to know what politics was all about. It is riddled with thieves and robbers and all he does is curse, threaten and talk big. I’ve never seen a president with no backbone like Uhuru. The current Kenyan leadership is in a crisis and this greeting between Uhuru and Raila, whose agenda is neither known nor understood by Kenyans, is just a gimmick to confuse the people even further,” analysed the old lady. “This is Uhuru’s last term, it is incumbent he vacates power and lets the constitution guide the next elections. Any attempt to tamper with the constitution so that he and Raila can create new centres of powers can only plunge this country into turmoil,” said Waguthi.

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Waguthi told me that Uthamaki – the notion that only Kikuyus are entitled to political leadership in the country – had become a mirage, a dream deferred, a paradise lost that had left a bitter taste in the mouths of the Kikuyu people. “President Uhuru seems still hell bent in his political schemes to misuse the Kikuyus in abusing state power...That’s why there is this talk of changing the constitution...this will be disastrous, and if this is a harbinger of things to come, woe unto Kenyans. Don’t these African leaders ever learn?” Africa, she said, had been plagued with bad leadership, with leaders never wanting to leave office, which had led to many deaths and wanton destruction. Kenya, she added, was on its way to joining the league of failed state nations.

The old lady said that the move to change the 2010 constitution so that President Uhuru and Raila can presumably upstage Deputy President William Ruto in his bid to succeed Uhuru was devious and would jeopardise the security of Kikuyus in the greater Rift Valley diaspora and elsewhere in Kenya. “There has never been a time when the security of the Kikuyu people in the country has been as precarious and threatened as now...there is seemingly a truce in the country today, no doubt, brought about by the ten-month-old greeting, but one stupid move by the Uhuru leadership could see the Kikuyu peoples’ lives wrought in mortal danger.

"If it were not for the young Kalenjin man [Ruto], Uhuru would not be president, and our people would probably not live comfortably in the Rift Valley. That is a disturbing fact and, however much a section of the Kikuyu people and their political leaders will now pretend that this is not so, they owe it to Ruto," said Waguthi matter-of-factly. "Many Kikuyus are now remembering to say many things about Ruto...that's very interesting and those things could as well be true...but be knowing this, if you choose to welcome an ogre into your house, don't complain afterwards that it is overfeeding and has taken over the whole house."

"Uhuru was never a man worth being a president," observed Waguthi. "The presidency was forced on him and six years later, he has made a total mess of it. He has never been in control, much less concerned with the destiny and plight of the people. Now that he has realised that he will be leaving the powerful position, fear and despondency have gripped his presidency - he's been creating commotions and distractions to appear like he's on top of things."

Dusk was setting in and the lady who had been taking care of her was on her way back from Tumu Tumu trading centre where she had gone to recharge Waguthi's mobile phone. Waguthi summed up her prognosis: "The president led a life of privilege. He has never done anything for himself. He is laid back. Everything has always been done for him, and even in politics that has been the case. That's how a prince behaves...it isn't his fault, because that's how he was socialised. The fault has been the people who entrusted their political fortunes to a man, not because he was fit for the job, but because he came from a big political family, and therefore presumed that political power was his right." The old lady said Uhuru pales in comparison to Ruto, who is tough, hardworking and does not come off as having been pampered in his early life.

Waguthi had given me some political food for thought, surprising and unpalatable as it may have been, coming especially from an old lady. But her analysis had been echoed by a much-travelled man, who was as educated and professional as they come. Three weeks before going to meet Waguthi, I had spent some time with a former World Bank financial consultant in Ngegu on the outskirts of Kiambu town in Kiambu County.

A teetotaler and staunch Protestant Christian, the soft-spoken 68-year-old Gikandi strikes you as a man of really few words - until he is provoked to give his prevailing political views. "The handshake had calmed down the palpable tension that had been building up in the country soon after the two elections...the county is much less tense now, but that was not a license for Uhuru and Raila to introduce a hideous agenda through the formation of the Building the Bridges Initiative," posited Gikandi. "Let us be clear about one thing: were it not for William Ruto, Uhuru would not be president of Kenya. Have you forgotten how the two campaigned together in folded white shirts? We'll not be drawn into distractions. The prevailing talk about political debts or the lack thereof, state corruption, revived past sins are all unhelpful and unnecessary."

"I have lived long enough to know who has been stealing money from state coffers," said Gikandi. "Kikuyus have stolen more money from successive governments than anybody cares to know or investigate. That I can tell you for a fact: Money was stolen in Kenyatta (I), during Daniel arap Moi's tenure, during Mwai Kibaki's rule and now, more than ever before, in Kenyatta (II)."

Jomo Kenyatta, father to Uhuru, was the founding president who ruled as an imperial president for 15 years, from 1963 to 1978. His Vice President, Moi, took over from 1978 till 2003, when his second term ended and his "project" Uhuru Kenyatta, the Kanu flagbearer who he had primed and propped up to take over from him, was defeated by Kibaki on a National Rainbow Coalition (Narc) party ticket.

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“President Uhuru must be very careful how he fashions his politics now as we head to 2022. It would be extremely devious of him to not think of the security of our people in the Rift Valley. I do not want to belabour that fact, but you and I know that a political misstep or mishap could easily trigger mayhem in that part of the country. We do not want a repeat of 2008. Some Kikuyus are now remembering Ruto’s past sins. They should have remembered them in 2012, not now.”

“I believe Ruto will get things done,” said Gikandi, “because he is focused, hardworking and he is always on top of things. All the President’s men, past and present, have stolen. I am not persuaded that it is the DP and his men that have allegedly siphoned all the money from the state. We cannot have double standards if we want to curb corruption and, by the way, why has President Uhuru chosen to ‘fight’ corruption now?”

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The financial risk management consultant, who is also a revered church elder of a big Anglican church in Mt Kenya South diocese, said that if BBI lives up to its demand of holding a referendum so that the constitution is changed, he will robustly oppose it. “Uhuru should just honour the constitution and peacefully leave office. More importantly, he should honour the promise to his deputy. We can still remember it very well, made in the lead-up to 2013 general election.”

While in Nyeri County, I also spoke to millennials. Their political views were equally surprising. I met Mureithi from Skuta, a trading town six kilometres from Nyeri town. Mureithi, who is in his mid-30s, runs an electronics shop at Thunguma centre, which is separated from Skuta by two kilometres.

“We do not want to hear anything about President Uhuru,” said an embittered Mureithi. “He has wasted us, he fought so hard to reclaim the presidency only to plunge us further into deep poverty and political uncertainty. I am struggling to stay afloat. In the past one year, Uthamaki rulership has turned into ultimatums and angry outbursts from the president when confronted with issues of Central Kenya development issues. We, the young people of Nyeri County, have made up our minds. We have nothing to do with Uhuru, his projects, or his political schemes.”

In retrospect, Mureithi told me, President Uhuru’s six years at the helm was for self-aggrandisement and enriching his friends and relatives. “Tell me what one thing the Kikuyu youth anywhere can be proud of after his unswerving support for Uthamaki? Nothing. Instead, we have been served with disappointment, disillusionment and dispossession. And these 3Ds have given way to a great sense of betrayal. I made a mistake in voting for him twice last year. I will never do that mistake again,” said Mureithi.

Nigute. This Kikuyu word has in the last year become the political catchword for the disaffected Kikuyus whose views of Uthamaki presidential rule in the run-up to the first presidential elections was clouded by a vista of imagined economic Shangri-La and paradise revisited. Literally, the word means to throw away. Figuratively, it means to be wasted, to be misused, to be of no value after use, to be dumped.

“I threw my vote away,” said Mureithi, “So is the feeling of many Kikuyus. They are stuck in a rut,

angry, bamboozled and embittered. They were deceived...the truth is, they have always been cheated, but this particular deceit could not have come at a worse time: Uhuru's government has plundered the economy and destroyed Kikuyu businesses. The people have no money and they have no one and nowhere to turn to."

Mureithi told me that BBI will come a cropper, spearheaded as it is by political dynastic powers that believe it is they who must always rule Kenya and nobody else. "It is headed for defeat because we shall fight it. We know what they are up to. Here in Nyeri, the youth have decreed that they will not support the referendum that is being pushed by Building the Bridges Initiative. We shall vigorously oppose it. We are tired of Uthamaki and its appendages."

"There are some Central Kenya leaders who have been moving around the region telling us it is Ruto who is the source of all corruption and theft in government and that corruption must be fought by all means," said Mureithi. "Those leaders include our own MP here for Nyeri town constituency, Ngunjiri Wambugu. We've already warned Ngunjiri that, like Uhuru, it was a mistake to have voted for him. We should not have abandoned Esther Murugi, [the former MP]." Ngunjiri is looking at his only one term in parliament, Mureithi promised me.

"The greatest theft in government has been orchestrated by President Uhuru's close friends, who have stashed away billions of shillings," observed Mureithi. "How is it that now it is Ruto who has stolen all the money and that it is he who is the source of all our economic and political problems? By allegedly trying to antagonise the deputy president, President Uhuru and BBI are stoking future political violence and insecurity for Kikuyus resident outside Central Kenya. I have relatives in Rift Valley. I know how nervous the Kikuyus of that region are with all this careless talk about rethinking Ruto's Kikuyu support in 2022."

"Corrupt or not corrupt, I will be supporting William Ruto," said Mureithi. "What has our own Uhuru done for us? Born in riches, Uhuru has been overindulged throughout his life. That's why he couldn't care less whether the Kikuyus eat grass or sleep hungry, as long as he can get them to die for his dangerous political ventures. President Uhuru has been saying this is his legacy term for Kenya. We know what that means: "This is my legacy for the Kenyatta Family, not Kenya, the country."

I wound up my Nyeri County visit by engaging Lilian Wambui from Gikondi village in Mukurwe-ini. Barely a year ago, Wambui would have killed for President Uhuru Kenyatta. "I was so indoctrinated by the Uthamaki logic and the person of Uhuru Muigai Kenyatta that I'd brazenly taunt my Luo friends to go fishing in Lake Victoria and catch *thamaki* (fish) because we the Kikuyus had Uthamaki."

Wambui is a businesswoman: she once rented a quarry in Njiru that borders Mwiki to the north and Ruai to the southeast in Nairobi County, where her employees were all Luo men who broke and carved stones that would be picked in truckloads at the site. Wambui has also engaged in the mitumba business, where she specialised in *camera* (as-good-as-new) children's designer clothes. Lately, she has been dealing in wholesale fruits and vegetables. In three and half years, all the three businesses have collapsed. In December last year, she escaped to her rural home to run away from the hustle and bustle of Nairobi and to rethink her future.

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legacy for the Kenyatta Family, not Kenya, the country.”

“President Uhuru is a total failure: all the money from the government has been stolen while he stood by and watched. Now he is fighting Ruto, pretending to combat corruption. He should give us a break. I never believed he would waste us [Kikuyus] after all the support we lent him. I think we Kikuyus have been bewitched. It is not possible for one family to bestrode an entire community so easily and take advantage of their political foolishness for so long,” she commented.

Wambui told me that she vividly remembers President Uhuru specifically campaigning among the Kikuyus in downtown Nairobi in 2017. “On 9 February, 2017, taking time off from his State House duties, the president joined the Jubilee Party’s Nairobi governorship aspirants to galvanise the people into registering as voters. The then contestants were Peter Kenneth and the ‘Gang of Four’ - Mike Sonko, Denis Waweru, Margaret Wanjiru and Johnstone Sakaja.”

The businesswoman recalled that everyone, including the president, congregated at Wakulima Market on Haile Selassie Avenue, famously known as Marigiti. “It is not for want of a better place to mobilise the Nairobi voter that the Jubilee Party cabal chose the marketplace. Because when the president spoke, it became rather obvious why Marigiti was a good starting point. “*Woooooi andu aitu muiga nyinuke....woooooi mutikandekererie.....mutikareke nyinuke,*” (Oh my people, are you sending me home....please don’t abandon me...don’t let me go home) urged the President.

“Two months earlier, campaigning in Ruaka and its environs which are in his home county Kiambu, President Uhuru at one stop addressed the people thus: ‘I have information that some people are saying they will not vote on the 8th of August. I appeal to you, particularly the youth, not to let me down. I know what we are defending. What did President Kenyatta mean by I know what we are defending?’” posed Wambui. “The Kenyatta Family legacy. Period. President Uhuru has let down every Kikuyu voter, other than his tenderpreneur friends and relatives, who came out to vote for him. And the Kikuyu youth, abused during the campaigns and ignored after power had been recaptured, have received the short end of the stick. They are now called thieves. *Nigute.*”

I spent half of 2017 and the better part of 2018 talking and oftentimes animatedly holding court with Uthamaki ardent followers who, just before the August 8 general elections, had immersed themselves in Uthamaki’s noxious rhetoric of political perpetuity. All of them - from market women to matatu drivers, conductors, freelance touts, hawkers, street vendors, street prowlers, petty traders, seasoned businessmen and women, college students, university dons, professionals and state bureaucrats - were seemingly hypnotised by the Uthamaki political conquest: “Seek ye first the political kingdom and all the rest shall be added unto you,” one born-again lawyer had reminded me, “but we are still humble about it.” (It was Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of independent Ghana, who famously coined the maxim, which would soon become a clarion call for many an African country seeking political independence in the 1960s.)

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Yet, nothing has captured for me the hypnotic, trance-like behaviour of an Uthamaki fundamentalist

who revels in sporadic moments of lunacy than the story as told to me by my friend Baba Otis.

On 1 June, 2018, Madaraka Day, Baba Otis was drying *obamboo* (dissected tilapia fish that is smoked and oftentimes dried for storage and which is eaten over a long period). Known by its variant name, *obambla*, its tasty soup is very delicious and nutritious, especially for children. In the evening, On that day, Baba Otis heard a knock on his door in the estate plot where he lives with other tenants in Nairobi. It was Mama Shiru. "*Sasa Baba Otis, aki watoto wangu hawajakula siku tatu, nisaidia tu na piece moja ya samaki niwatengenezee.*" (Hi Otis's father, I swear my children have not eaten for three days. Please just give me one piece of the smoked fish. I will prepare it for my children.)

The evening visit by Mama Shiru was interesting, given that on 29 October, 2017, a Sunday and three days after the repeat presidential elections in which the Jubilee Party largely competed against itself, Mama Shiru, a mother of two, had broken into a frenzied dance of jubilation and had yelled for all to hear: "*Uthamaki ni witu...thamaki ni ciao...mekuigwa uguo*". (The rulership is ours (Kikuyus)...fish is theirs (Luos)...they can go hang.)

Baba Otis was there to witness the hippy dance of a woman who, for all intents and purposes, behaved as if she had been possessed by Lucifer himself. She was sporting a wristband and bandana fashioned along the colours of the Kenyan flag that have come to be associated with chauvinistic Kikuyu men and women. That night, Mama Shiru must have slept like a king in the knowledge that her tribesman had once again settled in the hallowed sanctuary of the mighty State House. *Uthamaki ni witu...thamaki ni ciao.*

Barely seven months later, when Mama Shiru stood outside Baba Otis's door, she had discarded her wristband and tossed away her bandanna. The *uthamaki ni witu, thamaki ni ciao* alliterative singsong had long been expunged from her now pursed lips. The bravado that had accompanied the wearing of the Jubilee Party paraphernalia and totems had gone. Crude reality had by then sunk in...perhaps...perhaps not.

One fact was clear though from Mama Shiru's predicament - you cannot feed your children on a tribal ideology, much less if your tribesman is the country's president. "But Kikuyus can also be impervious and shameless," commented Baba Otis.

In moments when an ethnic community finds itself in a crisis, its spontaneous response is to blame everyone but itself: introspection becomes anathema - it searches for scapegoats and scarecrows to explain away its internal contradictions and confusion. "It is the handshake." "This problem we are in now is one for all of us." "It is William Ruto who is engaged in all these state thefts". "*Ni mang'auro marea marigiciiria munene.*" (It is the scoundrels that encircle (our) leader.) "*Muthamaki ndakararagio na ti wa garari,*" (The tribal chieftain should not be criticized or contradicted.)

John Njoroge Michuki is on record after Narc came to power in 2003 for proclaiming that Kenyans (read: Kikuyus) had been agitating for constitutional reforms to remove Daniel T. arap Moi: Moi was the problem - not the almighty powerful presidency that the 1960, 1962 and 1963 Lancaster House constitution conferences had bestowed on Kenyans. But hey, as long as that individual was a Kikuyu, it was business as usual. Many Kikuyus conflate Kikuyu nationalism with Kenyan statehood. And they care less for this contradiction.

The grandstanding of *kumira kumira* (a clarion call that means to get out in large numbers), *thuraku* (safari ants) and all that toxic talk about Uthamaki and "*ni ithui twathanaga guku,*" (it is we (Kikuyus) who call the political shots) has melted away barely a year into the Jubilee Party's second term.

After my interviews and interactions with Uthamaki believers, I could not help but ponder over what could be a priority in their minds as they struggle to contextualise their economic hardships and situate their political path come 2022.

Post-2022, the Kikuyus are thinking very hard about their security and survival in ways that they have never thought before. The presidency has become a burden to them: Like a millstone around their necks, it is weighing them down. But they made their bed and must lie on it. In a real sense, the president has stopped being a factor in their yet undecided political trajectory.

For the very first time, Kikuyus do not have a bankable political leader. Ten months into BBI, not all Kikuyus are persuaded that it augurs well for their political insurance. So far, they do not know what to make of it. Suspicion abounds.

Painfully, the Kikuyus are learning to internalise their political suffering, trapped as they are like a caged bird, its only freedom being to pitter-patter around the cage. Hence, their desire to extricate themselves from the clutches of political serfdom, and hopefully, from the pain of the (late) realisation that they have been duped and dumped.

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