

Building Bridges to Nowhere: Some Reflections One Year After 'The Handshake'

A year ago this month, an unexpected political commotion jolted unsuspecting Kenyans who were still reeling from the effects of two presidential elections that had taken place in a space of just 79 days. These elections had openly split the country into ethnic fault lines that were now threatening to plunge the country into an abyss of anarchy and civil strife.

The 9 March 2018 “handshake” between President Uhuru Kenyatta and opposition leader Raila Odinga - pejoratively referred to as “the handcheque” by cynics and Raila’s former front line and hard core supporters, who see the détente between the president and his main rival as the ultimate betrayal - took place against a backdrop of four months of palpable ethnic rivalry and tension that had been simmering since the 26 October 2017 presidential poll, in which Uhuru had essentially run against himself.

When he was sworn in on 28 November 2017, it was evident that President Uhuru did not seem to savour his presidential victory: In the first general election of 8 August, half of the total registered voters of 19.6 million people who cast their votes had voted against him, even as claims of rigging by the opposition outfit, the National Super Alliance (NASA) were rife. On 1 September, the Supreme Court of Kenya overruled the Jubilee Party win, and sued for a fresh presidential election in 60 days - a decision that to date rankles and startles President Uhuru, said a Jubilee Party MP from Central Kenya.

“In a country where the judiciary has always been malleable and at the beck and call of the executive since 1963, it was unheard of that a court would dare rule against the president’s wish,” observed the MP. “It had never happened, hence Uhuru was secure in the knowledge that the court wouldn’t ever dream of ruling against him, just like it hadn’t in 2013. And because African presidents don’t lose elections, at least not through the courts, he did not expect to lose his.”

So, when the Supreme Court ruled in favour of a repeat election, Uhuru Kenyatta hit the roof and swore against the court’s judges, threatening to “revisit the

issue”.

In the repeat October election, Uhuru Kenyatta garnered far less votes than in the August election. Seven and half million people supposedly voted, a figure the MP, now with the knowledge of hindsight, told me was cooked. A majority of Raila’s supporters had boycotted the October election and apathy, fatigue and a don’t-care attitude among Uhuru’s support base ensured that the October election was even less credible than the August one.

The question that has been boggling many Kenyans minds is: What exactly led to President Uhuru Kenyatta and Raila Odinga, two of the bitterest of political rivals, who had left nothing to chance - as one fought to keep the coveted seat of the presidency to himself, while the other hoped to snatch it from the incumbent - to suddenly make peace? Was this a spontaneous reaction of two leaders who had suddenly been imbued with desire to save their country, which was on the verge of ethnic and geographical fragmentation?

The politics of handshakes is not exactly a new phenomenon in Kenya, so this was not a first. Ten years ago, almost to the month, on 28 February 2008, President Mwai Kibaki and his chief political nemesis, Raila Odinga, shook hands on the steps of Harambee House to the great relief of many Kenyans. The 2008 handshake had been occasioned by a hotly disputed presidential vote between Kibaki and Raila, which had driven the country on the precipice of ethnic warfare that had flared in the Rift Valley and in several other parts of the country.

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The truce between Kibaki and Raila was a negotiated peace settlement: both politicians had been encouraged by the chief negotiator, Kofi Annan, and his team to form their own respective negotiators, who then for weeks discussed the modalities of how they would accommodate each other in a government of national unity. And so it came to pass that a government of national unity with Raila Odinga as a non-executive Prime Minister was formed. The process was transparent and Kenyans were kept abreast of the proceeding by the media.

The economic boycott and demands for secession

Fast forward to March 2018. The handshake between President Uhuru and Raila is mired in mystery and subterfuge. Days after the handshake on the steps of Harambee House, a working committee was formed on 24 March to cement the newly found rapprochement, thenceforth referred to as the Building the Bridges to Unity Advisory Task Force, also known as the Building Bridges Initiative (BBI).

The alleged behind-the-scenes secret talks, political manoeuvres and familial visits soon after Uhuru assumed his second term are as intriguing and interesting as they are revealing. Through wide-ranging interviews conducted through President Uhuru Kenyatta's intermediaries, Raila's close confidantes, Deputy President William Ruto's associates and bosom buddies, Central Kenya and North Rift Jubilee MPs and through my own investigations, I culled an array of information that suggested a presidency in crisis, trapped in a paradoxical pyrrhic victory and a withering state. Then there was a defeated opposition leader who for the very first time in his political career was caught between the devil and the deep blue sea, and was faced with the devil's alternative of either quitting politics altogether or re-engineering his ebbing political career. Add to this scenario a scheming deputy president who had already trained his guns on 2022 no sooner had his Jubilee Party won the presidential elections.

Looking back to one year ago, it is as if the clock was ticking and time was not on all of the three protagonists' side. As one of Raila's aides said to me: "Raila had come to the late realisation that he would never win the presidential elections as long as the Kikuyus were counting the votes. True, he would force them to spend billions of shillings, but that was just about it. It was about time he recalibrated his political career if he intended to keep it going."

"Nothing had scared President Uhuru like the NASA's economic boycott programme and secession talk," confided one of the president's friends. Like the Americans would say, Uhuru and his family were "scared shitless" of these two ideas. After opting out of the 26 October fresh presidential election, Raila and his team had come up with a raft of options that were meant to force President Uhuru and his Jubilee Party mandarins to listen to NASA. NASA supporters' boycott of products made by certain companies associated with the Jubilee Party and resurgent demands for secession by some opposition politicians, particularly at the coast, threatened to tear the country apart - literally.

The most potentially lethal of NASA's projects was the economic boycott, in which Kenyans of oppositional goodwill were asked to keep away from the Kenyatta family's businesses and any companies that were either associated with them, or had, in one way or another, presumed to have abetted President Uhuru's contested win. So, in addition to the family's large business empire, Safaricom, the largest mobile network company in this part of the world, was on NASA's radar of companies whose products were to be avoided. The second tier to the economic boycott was a proposal, through the creation of county assemblies in opposition strongholds, for people to decide, whether indeed they wanted to be part of Kenya.

The family business

The biggest Kenyatta family business visible on a daily basis in Kenyan homes is the Brookside Dairy Company. Plutocrats, as well as mainly urban proletariats, use one or more of the several milk products sold under the Brookside label.

Milky tea is consumed widely in Kenyan homes. Drinking a cup of tea is a habit so ingrained in Kenyans' psyche that it has become second nature for Kenyan families to round off their supper with a steaming cup of tea. It is a habit they picked from the British colonialists, who encouraged tea growing as a cash crop.

With the onset of the boycott, Brookside, a market leader in processed milk, suddenly suffered a steep slump, so much so that Christina Pratt, President Uhuru's sister, took to visiting various supermarkets, especially in Nairobi, to gauge the daily sales of Brookside products. (I confirmed this in December 2017 when I also did my own survey to measure to what extent the boycott was biting. The French consortium, Danone, had in 2014 acquired a 40 per cent stake in the milk conglomerate through the holding company Brookside Africa Holding Ltd, while Abraaj Group, the Dubai-based private equity firm, had staked a 10 per cent ownership in 2009. Danone is supposed to push Brookside products abroad, hence globalising the Kenyatta family's business and leveraging its merchandise in a world of cut-throat competition.

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“The boycott was a dangerously crippling idea as a political tool, because the Kenyattas’ best-known flagship was going down the drain, right in front of their eyes...something had to be done fast...and done very fast,” said my friend, who works for the Brookside Dairy Company in Ruiru, off the Thika Superhighway. “Let us cut to the chase,” added my friend. “Uhuru Kenyatta is not concerned with the Kenyan nation’s legacy but with the Kenyatta family’s legacy.”

“The family business had to be protected by all means, by any means necessary,” said a Central Kenya MP who is close to President Uhuru. “Instructions from the matriarch, Mama Ngina, to Uhuru and family was that the cardinal rule was to protect the business and not politics per se. In other words, use politics to shield your businesses from external interference or collapse.”

The other issue that terribly worried President Uhuru and his close-knit political cabal was the talk about secession. “It became a terrifying waking nightmare to them, that a section of Kenyans would even contemplate the thought of slicing off the country because of political dissatisfaction,” said the MP. “These were a different type of angry Kenyans, separate from the Kenyans who even when their votes had been stolen in past elections never contemplated going their own way.”

Apart from the Kenyatta family’s business agonies, Safaricom, which NASA and its opposition supporters countrywide had accused of providing servers to the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) – servers the election commission to date has refused to open for public scrutiny – was seriously looking to the possible end of its close to two decades of mobile telephony monopoly. Kenyans allied to NASA were furiously opting for Safaricom’s competitor, Airtel. “The Safaricom management team was wailing in its boardroom, wondering what to do, as scores of Kenyans daily migrated to Airtel,” said a Safaricom senior manager to me. “The team called Raila and asked him why he was hell-bent on collapsing the company. Similarly, the team was also piqued by President Uhuru because he seemed impotent in the wake of the economic boycott. They were peeing in their pants, in a manner of speaking.”

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The people's president

Raila, on the other hand, was also undergoing his own political catharsis. "Wherever he went, the people become cantankerous and difficult to calm down: *"Hapana...hapana...kula Bible kwanza, kabla hujaongea na sisi"* (Swear by the Bible first before talking to us), roared the crowds. Critically, his political career was on the cards, observed one of his aides recently in an interview. "The masses had run ahead of Raila and they were demanding he become their president, failure to which they would abandon him."

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The NASA brigade had decreed that in the light of the contested presidential elections, Raila Odinga would be publicly sworn in as "the Peoples' President". He had postponed this once on Jamhuri (Independence) Day on 12 December 2017, and the backlash from his supporters was unmistakable. "If he postponed it again, they were going to have him for supper and that would have been the end of his illustrious political career," reminisced one of Raila's aides. "On 30 January 2018, a reluctant Raila was publicly sworn in at Uhuru Park as the Peoples' President to great aplomb by the throngs of the masses who attended the rally."

Western countries' ambassadors and like-minded envoys told Raila point black: "You've been appointed the peoples' president, but know that you're all alone." They reminded him of his political stature as one of the country's leading politicians, his international reputation, and his input of many years in national and global political arenas. They asked him whether he was willing to see all that credibility washed away because of his recalcitrant stance. "Separately, therefore, Raila Odinga was also having his moments of exorcising his demons and coming to terms with the political realities of the day," observed the aide.

Although the same Western envoys did not rebuke President Uhuru, they nonetheless asked him to map out ways of accommodating and working with Raila. "It was a veiled threat because they let him know that if he failed to do so, they would institute economic sanctions on his regime and make his life as a president keen on a legacy difficult," confided a foreign diplomat friend who

works for the European Union (EU).

Raila Amolo Odinga has paid a huge price for dabbling in national politics: He has been detained for close to a decade by the state. In the 2007 general elections, he saw his presidential victory snatched. In recent times, he has also experienced personal traumas: His first-born son Fidel died in 2015; his daughter Rosemary is recovering from a debilitating sickness (both of these two calamitous situations have been energy-sapping, friends of Raila tell me); and real threats had been made on his life. At 75, Raila is also no longer the youthful adrenaline-driven politician who could pack public rallies and indoor meetings into 18 hours and still spare four hours of just enough sleep to see him through the next day's political onslaught.

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Amid all this, his dutiful wife, Ida, has borne the brunt of his oppositional politics. While Raila politicked, she held the family together, ensuring that politics did not come in the way of the family's private lives. "But the 2017 presidential elections, his swearing-in ceremony on January 30, and threats on his life had tested her great patience and worn her down," said a friend close to the Odingas.

Impeccable political folklore has it that it was the Kenyattas who approached the Odinga family for a candid sit-down, said a Central Kenya MP. "With the ongoing threats to their businesses, a wobbly economy and a hollow electoral win, the Kenyattas were in a bad place: they had to reach out to Raila, but only through Ida," said a source who was privy to the on- goings.

"Before the actual handshake on the material day, President Uhuru and Raila had met for several hours, haggling and going over issues of mutual convergence and interest," revealed an MP from Central Kenya. BBI has nine points that President Uhuru and Raila agreed to work on. They are: ethnic antagonism and competition, lack of a national ethos, inclusivity, devolution, divisive elections, safety and security, corruption, shared prosperity, responsibilities and rights.

“I remember President Uhuru telling his deputy William Ruto: ‘We’ve to bring on board Raila Odinga, if we don’t, we’ll not be able to govern this country,’” said my source, who is known to both of them. “The only thing that Ruto was not told was when and where the handshake would take place.”

Ruto had run the country between 2013 and 2017, quipped the Central Kenya MP, “and it had been a disastrous affair. Yet both Uhuru and Ruto share blame for running the country down.”

BBI and the Kikuyu-Kalenjin rift

In 2014, a year after Uhuru and Ruto formed the Jubilee government, President Uhuru summoned all Kikuyu MPs to State House and told them that if they needed anything, they should go to the Deputy President. “We must ensure our people trust the DP...you know our people are conservative,” the President is purported to have told the MPs. The two had campaigned on a platform of being the victims of the International Criminal Court (ICC) and therefore had been “joined at the hip” as they canvassed for votes from Kenyans who had been ethnically and emotionally whipped to vote for them.

“In that meeting, Esther Murugi (former Nyeri Town MP) disagreed with the president,” recounted the MP. “‘In Nyeri, we’ve had IDPs [internally displaced people] at Kinoru. Mwai Kibaki [Kenya’s third President] ruled with these people [the Kalenjin] because he feared them,’” said Murugi to President Uhuru. “This is simply untenable.” Three years down the line, Esther Murugi was one of the first Central Kenya MPs to fail to recapture her seat because she did not get the Jubilee nomination.

“Ruto is very vindictive,” the Central Kenya MP reminded me. “He doesn’t forgive: all those people he suspects of having implicated him in the ICC case must be punished.” The MP told me that some of the MPs who failed to bag the Jubilee Party nomination tickets and eventually “lost” in 2017 elections are suspected by Ruto’s people of helping to compile part of the report that incriminated him and sent him to the ICC.

2014 was not the last time that President Uhuru summoned MPs to State House. In August 2017, he met with newly elected Jubilee Party MPs. “He was soaking drunk and he lectured us, as a headmaster would his pupils,” said a first-time MP from North Rift. “Rookie MPs who had never been to State House were excited to

be called for the breakfast meeting. But when they were lectured by a drunk president, who was allegedly banging tables, cursing and swearing, they were dumbfounded.”

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“Don’t joke with a president who’s not seeking a second term,” President Uhuru is reported to have told the MPs. “I dare anyone who will not do as I say to walk through that door,” he hollered to the now cowed MPs. “Why he was angry, we don’t know. When he finished ranting, the MPs stood up and instead of heading to the laid out breakfast tables, they hastily walked to their waiting cars, and drove off in a huff.”

As fate would it, a few days after that tense meeting, the Supreme Court nullified the election on September 1. “Uhuru once again quickly summoned us to State House: ‘You’ve seen what the court has done to our win’” said a now mellow and pliant president. ‘We need to put our heads together and strategise on how to win the presidential seat again.’ He was now speaking to us in collegial terms – ‘our win’ – the insults and threats had gone, he wanted our help so badly...that’s our President Uhuru.”

“A year later, BBI has not communicated the handshake properly to Kenyans,” said my Central Kenya MP friend. “There hasn’t been enough awareness about its real and true agenda and intentions.”

Unlike the handshake of 2008, which was witnessed by, among others, Tanzanian leaders, Benjamin William Mkapa and Jakaya Mrisho Kikwete, and the Ghanaian statesman Kofi Annan, the 2018 handshake did little to reduce mistrust or to help build confidence and lend credence to the rapprochement. On the contrary, the 2018 handshake is shrouded in suspicion; many Kenyans believe it has an insidious agenda and most are hard put to explain what it means.

One of the very first things President Uhuru and Raila, now under the auspices of

BBI, had planned to do was to visit Central Kenya, as the first entry point of selling the BBI agenda, said the Central Kenya MP. "It was a natural and obvious consequence that BBI seeks to build trust and confidence among these two warring communities, but the visit has remained on the cards, postponed several times." The MP said Central Kenya has not been in the mood to welcome President Uhuru Kenyatta. "Right now, they don't feel him, they feel let down by a leader who seem impervious to their economic tribulations. This is what the intelligence reports relayed to the president have been saying."

But, said the MP, this could all be hot air: "Right now, it's true they are angry and bitter with *muthamaki*, so, to project their anger they become emotional and end up saying irrational things like, 'We'll vote for William Ruto.' Kikuyus are the most ethnocentric community in Kenya, and all this bottled-up anger melts on the D-Day [election day]. When they say they'll vote for Ruto, they mean they'll vote for him from their houses. No Kikuyu will troop to the ballot booth to line up and vote for a non-Kikuyu presidential candidate - Ruto included."

Paul Mwangi, one of the joint secretaries (the other is Martin Kimani) to BBI, disputes the assertion that there has been a planned Central Kenya visit from the two leaders that has failed to materialise. "It is not true that the two leaders have been planning to visit Central Kenya. Remember BBI has been holding town hall meetings across the country and it wouldn't be a great idea to start the visits. For two reasons: one, fear of raising political temperatures and two, fear of misinterpretation of BBI's work by some MPs, who would want to hijack the BBI's agenda for their own gain."

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Mwangi said BBI had already conducted 18 town hall meetings. "There 29 more to go, it is obvious we'll not beat the stipulated one year deadline. We're going to ask for more time from the principals."

Even with less than half of the counties visited, the emerging theme in these meetings has been - *punda amechoka...punguza mzigo* (The donkey is overloaded and therefore fatigued...let's lessen its weight). That is the literal translation. The interpretation is that the voter feels burdened and therefore fatigued by the

seemingly overwhelming extra political seats created by the new constitution promulgated in August 2010.

With a ballooning wage bill, and mounting domestic and external debts that have apparently overwhelmed the government, the state has sometimes inadvertently been giving the impression that it cannot deliver development and services to the people because it is having to spend a lot of money paying political leaders.

Be that as it may, “BBI is nothing but an entrenched political cabal’s way of controlling national politics and state power so that they remain with the people who have always controlled the two. But more importantly, it is the cabal’s way of ensuring that state power does not land in the ‘wrong hands’”, said a Jubilee MP, who is a friend to both President Uhuru and his deputy. “The Kenyatta family would like to have a political stranglehold on Kenya, the way the Bongo family in Gabon has done.” (Ali Bongo, who has ruled Gabon since 2009, took over from his father, Omar Bongo, who was president for 42 uninterrupted years.)

“BBI’s town hall meetings are supposed to culminate in a referendum and this is where the catch is – it’ll not be by popular vote, but by delegates voting by acclamation,” opined the Jubilee MP. “All these supposed town hall meetings are a ruse: BBI knows what it wants, how it wants it...these meetings are dress rehearsals that are supposed to dupe the people to believe that their voices matter. Carefully selected delegates from 24 counties will be assembled at the Bomas of Kenya for a convention in which they will all unanimously agree to pass the tabled resolutions. That’s how it shall come to be.”

Yet, in a carefully worded rejoinder, Mwangi retorted to the contrary: “BBI has no position on whether or not there’ll be a referendum, that’s a matter that will be dependent on the solutions that BBI will recommend to the principals and where the holding of the referendum will take place will be part of those resolutions.”

The referendum is a must, my sources from Raila’s quarters said to me matter-of-factly. “Raila has indicated there’ll be a referendum this year, it must happen, if it could happen before the population census, the better and he is not bluffing...if it doesn’t take place, he walks away...it is a very serious matter to him.” (The Kenya population census is slated for August this year.)

“We welcome the referendum,” said a North Rift Jubilee MP and one of the DP’s close associates. “We’re not afraid of it. We are going to frame the question

differently and better and we'll be asking Kenyans - *kama kweli punda amechoka*, (if truly the people are overwhelmed, hence, the demand for a reduction of the constitutional stipulated seats), why then expand the executive? This not our first referendum to engage in...we have been there before and we know how to play the game."

The Ruto factor

The MP observed that the machinations against Ruto by the so-called "Kiambu mafia" will not work. "Ruto is a hardened and seasoned politician, he has passed through many political tribulations and overcome them. Even this one, he's going to overcome it."

The MP pointed out to me that during the August 2010 referendum on the new constitution, in which the Greens supported the new constitution, while the Reds opposed it (with Ruto in the Red corner), "Ruto, even without having money to wage a proper campaign, still gave his antagonists a run for their money."

Recently, William Ruto's think tank has advised him to travel abroad and seduce Western countries' audiences. At a Chatham House lecture on 8 February this year, he supposedly talked tough and even alluded to Raila as a professional perennial presidential loser. These presidential losers are the people who cause trouble in Africa, he is said to have told the audience. After the Chatham House engagement, on 12 February, he dropped by at the BBC's London offices for the first of his planned media charm offensives - an interview with BBC Hard Talk host Stephen Sackur. Sackur was typically blunt and probing, even suggesting that Ruto was known to be among Kenya's most corrupt people. The charm offensive obviously failed as Ruto struggled to make his case.

But BBI is not the only juggernaut the DP will have to contend with. "Ruto rigged many of the Central and Mount Kenya Jubilee Party MPs that he felt were not on his side, or would be difficult to control, or influence," said the MP. "He ensured all loyal MPs from his side were handed the certificates easily. That was not the arrangement he had with Uhuru when he was tasked to take charge of the party nomination affairs after the fiasco of the first countrywide nominations trials."

The MP said that all the former MPs who lost their seats and who are still smarting from their loss loathe Ruto, and are just waiting for the opportune time to strike back. "Yes, they also rail against President Uhuru privately; 'the man has

never been in control of anything.’ They, therefore, have sworn to not support any venture by Ruto. They are adamant they won’t stop saying Ruto rigged them out.”

Among the most hurt of the Mount Kenya politicians who accuse Ruto of rigging them out are: Cecily Mbarire (who ran for the Embu governor seat); Kabando wa Kabando (former MP, Mukurwe-ini in Nyeri County); Martha Karua (who ran for the Kirinyaga County governor’s seat); Mutahi Kagwe (who ran for the senator’s seat in Nyeri County); Ndung’u Gethenji (the former MP for Tetu, Nyeri County); Peter Kenneth (who ran for the Nairobi County governor’s seat); Peter Munya (who ran for the Meru County governor’s seat); Rachel Shebesh (who ran for Women Representative in Nairobi County); and William Kabogo (who ran for the Kiambu County governor’s seat). “Kagwe, Kenneth and Munya are still so angry with Ruto, they won’t even talk to him,” said the MP.

Some of these politicians ran as independents after forming the Kenya Association of Independent Candidates (KAIC) led by Kabogo and deputised by Gethenji. “These are the people who will form the bulwark of opposition to Ruto in the Mount Kenya region. Take it from me, the Jubilee Party, as currently constituted, will not be there in 2022,” said the MP. Hardly surprising in a country where political parties are vehicles for convenience and conveyance and where new parties are formed during every election season.

The Mount Kenya MPs are not only privately accusing President Uhuru of political inaction, “they are also nervous and suspicious of him,” said the MP. “They know President Uhuru, on his own, cannot out-think both Raila and Ruto. They therefore cannot hitch their wagon in his current party. They are also scared of voters’ backlash: it cannot be that the country must be ruled by two communities, passing the presidential race baton to each other, back and forth...that at some point must stop, because it’s unacceptable by all standards.”