

Business as Usual: Why ‘the Handshake’ Has Had Little Impact on the Fortunes of the Luo People

“The Luo community is happy Raila is back at the centre,” intoned our physician friend, Dr Sam Owino. In the last twelve months, since the surprise political rapprochement between President Uhuru Kenyatta and his antagonist-in-chief Raila Odinga, the talk about town has been how the Luos are now reaping from the so-called “Handshake”. “We’re no longer the political bogeyman of the state,” reiterated the Nairobi physician. “It has never been fun carrying the tag and burden of oppositional politics in the country for all these years.”

After the Handshake, which had been preceded by a piercing palpable tension across the country, Raila, the leader of the nascent opposition outfit, the National Super Alliance (NASA), broke ranks with his colleagues Kalonzo Musyoka, Musalia Mudavadi and Moses Wetangula to sue for peace with President Uhuru of the Jubilee Party. “*Koro wan eisirkal,*” (We’re now in government...we’re no longer in the opposition) said Raila soon after the Handshake, a statement that was reiterated by President Uhuru. A visitor to the country soon after the combustible double elections would never appreciate and digest fully the import of that statement.

No community in Kenya has borne the brunt of the state’s political malice and economic sabotage than the Luo people, observed Oduor. “The Luo people have suffered the greatest political harassment and assassinations in this country, starting with Argwings Kodhek, who was killed in January 1969...”

To a section of the Luo community, “being in the political cold,” is a phrase they identify with all too well. “The Luo people have been in the opposition effectively since 1966, when President Jomo Kenyatta shunted his Vice President Jaramogi Oginga Odinga,” said Bernard Oduor, an advertising and marketing manager of a Nairobi-based publishing company. “Let another community shoulder the weight of being always on the receiving end of the state’s anti-development brutal policies and constant violence.”

No community in Kenya has borne the brunt of the state's political malice and economic sabotage than the Luo people, observed Oduor. "The Luo people have suffered the greatest political harassment and assassinations in this country, starting with Argwings Kodhek, who was killed in January 1969. Six months later, Tom Mboya, perhaps the greatest of Luo leaders, was killed, possibly by the same forces that took care of Kodhek through a freak accident."

That same year, 1969, the government detained Jaramogi with other Luo leaders for standing up to Jomo and the Kiambu Mafia's imperial tendencies, recalls Oduor. "It was a cruel testament of the political harassment by the successive government of Presidents Jomo Kenyatta and Daniel arap Moi that by the time multipartyism was being re-introduced in Kenya, in 1991, Jaramogi was already frail, old and sickly." A multiparty election was held in December 1992 and Jaramogi was elected the MP for Bondo. A year later, on January 20, 1994, Jaramogi was dead.

From 1963 to 1978, Kenya had been a *de facto* one party state. But in 1982, just before the attempted military putsch led by Kenya Air Force officers on August 1, 1982, the country became a *de jure* one party state, after Jaramogi and George Anyona, the firebrand politician from Gusiiland, walked to the registrar's office at Sheria House and demanded to register their party - the Kenya African Socialist Alliance (KASA). Feeling threatened by the duo's courage and determination to register a new party, one afternoon Moi summoned MPs and asked them to change the constitution to make Kenya a one-party dictatorship.

"Even though Robert Ouko, the brilliant foreign affairs minister, worked for the Kanu government and was a loyal lieutenant of Moi, they still got rid of him, proving that no Luo politician was good enough for a Kenyan government," opined Oduor. "It has been a tortuous long journey and it's time we enjoyed some respite."

Broken promises

In the aftermath of a contested August 8, 2017 election and the subsequent boycott of the second presidential election on October 26, 2017, the state visited violence on members of the Luo community in Nairobi County, and especially in the lakeside town of Kisumu, which is perceived as a base for the Luo community. In both cities, hordes of youth from the ghetto suburbs of Kibera and Mathare in

Nairobi and Nyalenda and Kondele in Kisumu rioted, protesting the gross mismanagement of the election procedure. Many of the youth who were felled by the bullets of state security personnel were Luo youth.

“The Handshake was meant to cool the political temperatures, which were threatening to soar overboard,” said Steve Ochuodho, a researcher in African history. “It was to allow for the country to go back to its normal self and stabilise, with the aim of the country hopefully taking off economically. True, the country stabilised, but nothing much has really happened thereafter.”

The promises that Raila made after the Handshake, ostensibly to the Luo community, are nothing new, explained Ochuodho: “They are the same promises Raila has been making since 1997 when he merged his fledging National Democratic Party (NDP) with Kanu. Since then, it is the Odinga family that has continually grown rich at the expense of the Luo people...”

“Contrary to popular belief being peddled by ‘Raila evangelists’ that the Luos are now in government, nothing could be further from the truth,” noted Ochuodho. “Luos aren’t in the government and more than ever before, they are languishing in poverty. I fret every time I hear that Luos are now enjoying and I ask: Which Luos are these? If there are any Luos in government, they must be Raila’s friends or his relatives from Siaya County,” added the researcher.

The promises that Raila made after the Handshake, ostensibly to the Luo community, are nothing new, explained Ochuodho: “They are the same promises Raila has been making since 1997 when he merged his fledging National Democratic Party (NDP) with Kanu. Since then, it is the Odinga family that has continually grown rich at the expense of the Luo people. Because of these Raila Handshakes, the Luo people are treated as the Odinga family’s captives to be traded with politically any time the family wants to reap financially from the existing government.”

“There are no deliverables, neither are there fruits to be harvested from the Handshake,” said Ochuodho. “All what we are hearing is what it intends to do, It is classic political brinkmanship.” All what the Handshake has done is to entrench even further retrogressive leadership in Luo Nyanza.”

“Through the Handshake, Cyprian Awiti, the Homa Bay governor, came back.

Every Luo voter, wherever he or she was, knew Awiti was never going to survive a by-election if the court upheld the petition.” Former Kasipul MP Oyugi Magwanga had successively petitioned both the High Court and the Court of Appeal, only for the Supreme Court to uphold his election victory in August 8, 2017.

With the coming by-election in Ugenya, Raila has already told the voters ahead of time that they should not let him down – that they should return Christopher Karan, who the court found had engaged in electoral malpractices, pointed out Ochuodho. “*Kik ukuod wiya jothurwa*, (Please don’t embarrass me), Raila told the voters when he went there recently. Even though Karan is unpopular, the ODM party still gave him a direct ticket.” David Ouma Ochieng, Karan’s chief opponent and the immediate former MP, whose petition was heard by the High Court in Kisumu, will be mounting a soap box when the by-election comes up on April 5, 2019.

“The Luo people were not ready for the Handshake,” said Mike Osilo, an information technologist in Nairobi. “Because they were ready for war. The state’s unceasing violence against the Luo people had created in them an appetite for unstoppable bloodshed. They were prepared to go the whole hog.”

Osilo said this hardline stance had been fomented during the October 26 fresh presidential elections when elections did not take place in four Nyanza counties (Homa Bay, Kisumu, Migori and Siaya). “For the first in the history of post-independent Kenya, a people had successively held back a state with all its militarised violence. From then on, the people decided there was no turning back and then the Handshake happened.”

“The Building the Bridges Initiative, the result of the Handshake, has now become a parastatal,” quipped Osilo. “It was meant to give jobs to the favoured boys. Everything is business as usual. If the Handshake and its appendage, the BBI, was serious in developing Luo Nyanza, it would have started by reviving Ahero Irrigation Scheme and the Chemilil, Muhoroni and Sony sugar factories...”

Osilo said Raila’s Handshake compensation promise to the families that lost their relatives in the last election, especially in Kisumu, has remained just that: a promise. “Immediately after the Handshake, Raila went down to Kondele, the site of the greatest state violence visited on a people. Scores of youth were killed by

the GSU and Raila that night told their families that the government was going to compensate them. The people were in a very uncompromising mood, but Raila managed to calm them down. Twelve months later, there is nothing to show for that promise.”

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“Let it be on record: The much talked about dredging vessel brought to Lake Victoria actually preceded the Handshake - Raila just hijacked its launching on January 19, 2019. Likewise, the ongoing resuscitation of the Kenya Breweries Limited plant in Kisumu is not a product of the Handshake: KBL had already given the farmers the go-ahead [before the Handshake took place] to start sowing sorghum. As for the ferry transport on Lake Victoria, the World Bank had already mapped the lake for its Lake Victoria Transport programme as far back as 2016,” noted Osilo.

“One year down the line, the Handshake had become a forum for exchanging insults,” said Ochuodho. “Those who used Ruto to thrust a poisoned dagger into Raila’s back are the same people who are now using him to stab Ruto in the back.” In Ochuodho’s view, “Canaan had become a mirage”, whose climax was deporting Joshua Miguna Miguna, a deportation Ochuodho squarely blames Raila for. “I can tell you this, the Handshake will not last - it will soon collapse, and after it collapses, Raila will walk away in shame, this time accompanied by old age.” The referendum which is supposed to be the outcome of BBI is “already poisoned,” summed up Ochuodho.

No bridges built in Kisumu

In the lakeshore Kisumu city, the Building Bridges Initiative (BBI)’s first anniversary went unnoticed. The residents we interviewed were resolute that the Handshake was still a puzzle and shrouded in mystery. Hence, the rapprochement means different things to different people. One year after it took place, it still

dominates public discussions, eliciting more questions than answers.

“Did the Handshake simply substitute Luo-Kalenjin elite rivalry with the Luo-Gikuyu elite one? Are the Gikuyu elite now holding the ring between Raila Odinga and William Ruto? Who really is our enemy?” posed a middle-aged man at the Bunge la Wananchi (Peoples’ Parliament) meeting taking place under the huge canopy of an oak-like tree off the Kisumu-Kampala Road where *real politik* is earnestly and hotly debated during the lunch break.

For some of Kisumu’s residents, what the Handshake has succeeded in doing is resuscitate puzzling questions that revolve around Raila’s political deftness and survival instincts. “Raila’s an avid football fan and right now he has the ball...will he, this time just get away with a high ball against William Ruto? If he does, will Ruto, stand between him and the goal? Or, will he this time finally score the winning goal, now that the referees of the presidential tourney seems to be on his side?” mused Willis Ochieng. “Ruto is not a leader, he’s a dealer. There’s no doubt he would be bad for the country - he’s unsympathetic to the feelings of the people. But that aside, the big question that has been disturbing us is, just what is in it for the rest of the spectator crowd?”

At the Kondele highway interchange, we met Shem Matiku, a cobbler who plies his trade below the interchange. Kondele was the site of fierce battles between the battle-hardened youth of the sprawling ghetto, who fought back the paramilitary police, the General Service Unit (GSU) in August 2017 after the first presidential election. Matiku had since put that terrible period behind him: “I’m an optimist. I believe Raila has the best interests of his people. Uhuru, unlike Ruto is not a hardliner, he could be a hard bargainer, but a bargainer nonetheless and that is why he made a pact with Raila.”

“Ruto’s too forceful,” reflected Matiku, in between shining his customers’ shoes. “It is as if he’s forcing the people to elect him: it’s either his way or the highway.” The cobbler observed that until Raila went into government, development in Luo Nyanza was lopsided. “Now we’re beginning to see some development our way: Kenya Breweries has reopened its factory and construction of roads has commenced and corruption is being fought...you know what...Raila helped Uhuru see state corruption in the government. Let the spirit of the Handshake flow. We support it one hundred percent.”

However, George Collins Owuor, an astute civil society leader, is utterly unimpressed by the Handshake. "We wanted to put up a monument in honour of the victims of political violence, preferably at the Jomo Kenyatta sports ground and have Raila Odinga launch it," said Owuor. "A monument that would tell the story of the victims of political violence, and a constant reminder to the youth of the dangers of political violence, while at the same time establishing a link between poverty and politics. The monument had been also intended to occupy a space for discussing political violence and how it distracts and destroys lives of many unhinged youth. It would remind them of the dangers of disorganised and unhelpful protests and thereby discourage them from participating in them."

"The youth are always ready to participate in protests, but where are they now? Some were killed and maimed, others were arrested and falsely accused of robbery with violence and are now languishing in jail, having been forgotten," lamented Owuor. "The irony is that the county government of Kisumu, while rejecting our proposal, was quick to fast track its own plans of erecting a statue in memory of Jaramogi Odinga."

"Jaramogi initiated the Luo Thrift and Trading Corporation, which inspired small- and medium-scale business initiatives in Nyanza region. As a social democrat, Jaramogi also led popular grassroots movements for political and cultural awareness in the whole of East Africa," said Prof Anyang Nyong'o, the Governor of Kisumu.

While the contribution of Jaramogi among the Luo community is in no doubt and cannot be contested, whether in Luo Nyanza or, indeed the entire country, to seemingly bury the history of the youth, who have paid with their lives for fighting for democracy, is callous and deceitful, bemoaned Owuor. "Let us not kid ourselves - the Handshake has not worked for the youth: the boda bodas (motor cycle riders), street vendors and hawkers are still suffering - some lost their lives, others are today living with live bullets in their bodies. Nobody talks about their plight and President Uhuru and Raila have largely forgotten about them."

Owuor said it would be pretentious to build bridges when the youth have been neglected. "The youth had been promised Canaan. Instead what they got was a Handshake between two political bigwigs who cared for nothing as far as the youth were concerned. Because of this, Raila cannot hold a rally in Kisumu - the youth are still very embittered."

The divided opinion of Kisumu residents suggested that the Handshake was a self-preservation elite pact. Raila's core political constituents, still hurting and nursing post-presidential election injuries and injustices since 2007, and suffering biting hunger pangs in these economic hard times, have been forced, yet again, to defer their quest for justice and reparations.

The civil society leader said BBI was a reward for the boys. "I've been seeing them in seminars taking selfies, and we've yet to see a preliminary report of its findings. If BBI was working, we wouldn't have heard the kind of political rhetoric and bitterness we witnessed at the Kirinyaga governors' conference. Truth be told, BBI has been overtaken by events...stupid...succession politics is the order of the day."

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Hard feelings, brought about by past betrayals by a cross-section of the Gikuyu elite, the construction of a few road projects, the appointment of a few sons-of-the-soil into public offices, and some subsidy for the beleaguered sugarcane farmers to numb the Luo people's raw wounds, as they cheat them again, are still very real.

The mixed reactions also revealed a wide gap between the politics that the Handshake enabled at the county level - where incompetent, corrupt, and nepotistic leadership is the name of the game, and where Raila's hard core support base yearns for a clean and competent government that can deliver healthcare, food, and clean water - and national-level politics, where the very same Raila has been buying for the blood of some of the corrupt, inept and ethnic chauvinists in charge of various ministries.

Drunk with power by proxy

At the county level, the Handshake, it seems, is politics as usual. It starkly reminds Kenyans, especially residents of Kisumu, Homa Bay, Siaya and Migori counties, that their political fortunes or misfortunes since independence have

risen or fallen hard with every elite pact, and the ever changing political coalitions, mostly beholden to expedient political interests.

“This time, it’s a call for a big sacrifice from Raila’s political ambitions, an exchange for the quest for justice for the electoral malpractices and victims of police violence, for some ‘development’,” and ultimately, Raila’s quest for the presidency or premiership,” posited Martin Augo.

If Raila’s core support base yearns for competent and accountable county governments is unmistakable, then the Handshake seemed to make such demands only at the national government level, points out Willis Ochieng, a tenderpreneur who has worked in several county governments in western Kenya. “The Handshake,” said Ochieng, “*ilituliza joto la siasa, lakini wananchi bado hawana huduma. Ma MCAs, wamesahau hata watu wao kabisa. Wanapigana bunge kujaza mifuko yao tu.*” (The Handshake cooled the political temperatures, but the people still lack services. These MCAs have completely ignored the people who elected them. They fight in their respective assemblies to fill their pockets).

In several social media platforms, Kenyans envy the counties that have made remarkable progress and built infrastructure that makes county residents proud, such as the stadium in Kakamega County, the hospital in Makueni County, and the level-six hospital in Kisii County. But hardly anyone envies a hyacinth-free Siaya or Homa Bay or a world class football stadium in Migori. Raila’s strongholds, it seems, have nothing to show for the six years of the devolved government experiment.

Drunk with power by proxy, the party, it seems, is wasting its energy, distracted by chasing “the rat that is escaping a burning house” rather than putting out the fire that is consuming the house. ODM, it seems, reserves its harshest punishment for minnows, inconsequential transgressions and comical infractions, rather than the life-and-death violations of the men-only governors of its core ODM political base...

One hears only an occasional gnashing of clerical teeth, a dissatisfied Anglican Church of Kenya (ACK) Bishop James Ochiel of Southern Nyanza diocese, but hardly a gnashing of the second liberators’ teeth, the custodians of the spirit of the struggle against bad government, among them the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) party’s honchos.

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The ODM mandarins and Raila evangelists would rather they shadow and listen to the double meaning of Aisha Jumwa’s supposed disloyalty and sexed-up taunts of *kiuno kiuno* (hip gyrations) or “*Kanugo e teko*,” in Kisumu-speak. Aisha Jumwa’s flaunting of her sex appeal, which seems to gain the ire of the mostly male ODM party honchos, might look comical, but it is a timely reminder than the ODM party leaders may have to work extra hard to keep women’s support. Many women who support the party are hurting and hard done by tough economic times.

No justice for victims of political violence

In Kisumu’s Obunga slum, we sat down with two women outside the aptly named New Obunga Pub, who out of fear of reprisal from ODM Kisumu party hacks requested anonymity. “*Risasi oweyo goyo udi wa. tear gas orumo*,” (The bullets have stopped hitting our houses and the tear gas is no more), said the lady with a spec of gray hair. “The only respite we have now is that people are no longer running helter-skelter...we, at least, can move freely,” intoned her younger friend. “But there is nothing much else: there is no business, no income, we can’t buy anything because we don’t have the money. You just hustle as hard and *kama kawaida* (as usual nothing has changed). There is no work for the youth.”

Many, especially women, are still hurting and carrying the scars of the political violence of the 2017 presidential elections. They are also deeply impacted by the tough economic times. “Women were raped. Some lost family members, and although some of the victims formed a support group and were given food at the Kenyatta sports ground, they didn’t get any other help,” said one of the women, a human rights defender, who was hunched over an old model laptop plastered with stickers.

Justice for the victims of political violence has remained a sticky sour question. Unlike their counterparts from Central Kenya, many of the internally displaced people (IDPs) or returnees who came back to Kisumu and neighbouring counties are still waiting for the token financial compensation for the loss of land or livelihood.

The majority of the victims of the recent political violence feel let down by their elected leaders. At best, the elected leaders have been opportunistic and at worst indifferent to the plight of the victims. Shena Ryan, who works with a youth group that runs a charity for the poor living with HIV on the outskirts of Kisumu city, said, "It's not enough to pay for the funeral expenses and give hand-outs to the bereaved for cheap publicity. A politician's still a politician, always looking out for cheap glorification."

Ryan reckons that the Handshake had restored stability, no doubt, because "Kikuyus could now again trade freely in Kibuye. We went to the streets, to protest electoral injustices, and some of us were killed. No one has got justice. They are telling us the OCS Nyalenda will be charged. Until these policemen are charged, it will remain just a narrative."

Said the social worker, "I wasn't for the Handshake and now, with the knowledge of hindsight, it would have been better had we not poured into the streets. Until the two buffaloes who shook hands come back to the people, purposefully apologise to the victims of the police violence, that Handshake means nothing. Recently, when the duo visited [to attend Jaramogi Oginga Odinga's memorial in Bondo], we were told, 'Do not heckle Jakom. Who's Jakom?'" The Handshake has returned us into a one-part state; we are all now in the Jubilee Party."

In place of the elected leaders, a consortium of civic organisations comprising the Kisumu City Residents Voice, the Kondele Justice Centre, the National Informal Sector Alliance and Kisumu Joint Bunge Initiative, among others, have stepped in to pursue justice for at least 67 people who incurred various bodily injuries, both in the run-up to and after the 2017 presidential elections.

The consortium has petitioned the office of the Chief Justice of Kenya, asking Justice David Maraga to establish a tribunal to look into how security officers singled out and policed Luo Nyanza region during the last general election, to pursue justice for the victims of police violence, and to recommend the

prosecution of the police officers who may be found to have been culpable of violence.

Mixed fortunes

Kisumu residents feel that their elected leaders are also indifferent to their economic plight. “*Tich tire*” (I’m hard at work) says Governor Prof Anyang’, who valorises the Protestant work ethic. But his constituents, such as Willis Ojwang’, retort, “*Tich tire; to kech kecho,*” (You are hard at work, but hunger bites sting).

Kisumu is no longer stuck in a socialist-like rut of drab municipal and civil service housing, uniformly dull in a state of disrepair, and the old ubiquitous rickety and dusty Peugeot 404 plying the Kondele-Kondele route that were kept on the narrow and badly maintained roads by the combined genius of the city’s mechanics and take-no-prisoners drivers.

The regional marine transport into the port of Kisumu is as good as dead. And the railway tracks are buried deep in the soil. Yet, the urban poor now cruise through the city’s new road networks and underpasses, four or five passengers in a *tuk tuk*, (rickshaw-type three-wheeler taxis) or as one or two passengers on a boda boda. Its streets, especially in the CBD, all the way to Kisumu International Airport, are well lit at night.

But the city has not yet turned a corner. Its economy is not yet as dynamic as its demography, especially as it draws in other East Africans, such as the Burundians and more Ugandans, who are hawking consumer goods in search of surplus incomes. More than the Protestant work ethic, Kisumu’s economy is in dire need of structural change, the revival of agricultural sectors and ventures into agribusiness, if only to mitigate the widening gender inequality gap and meet the demands of regional integration.

“How can Raila be happy with the Handshake when it has does nothing for us in Nyanza?” posed the women. “At least during the coalition government, the fish factories were revived. The nusu mkate [half bread] government delivered some economic dividends. The recent pact seems to have no economic agenda for the urban poor who bore the brunt of police brutality in the last presidential elections.”

Although the revival of the KBL Kisumu plant held hope for some, the two women we talked to in Obunga complained that the plant employs people from Nairobi, Uganda, Nyakach, and Machakos, not the residents of Obunga as they had hoped. Worse still, for women who have been left out of the city's better-paying male dominated boda boda and the car wash businesses, the fish processing companies, which used to employ many women directly and indirectly through trading in *mgongo wazi* (fish skeletons) is closed. "It was big business for all. But with the coming of the Chinese fish, the companies closed. These companies now use their big freezers and cold rooms to store and redistribute Chinese fish," said one of the women.

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"Prostitution is rife here," one of the women told us. "If you guys stayed a little longer, you'd see a traffic of women moving up towards Kondele, Gwara-Gwara or Ka-Lorry where sex goes for as little Sh20 per shot. What has the Handshake done for us? It has pushed us into sex slavery," moaned the woman dejectedly as the sun was setting on Obunga slum.

Youth too have missed the BBI boat. If university students' campus politics is a good indicator for the shifting political alliance, then Kathy Gitau, the articulate, urbane, and charming vice chairperson of the Maseno University students' council knows all too well how significant local politics, including campus politics, are intricately tied to the centre.

Clutching a long list of names of students who deserve bursaries this semester, which are due for submission, she agreed that the Handshake, "had cooled down political temperatures ...brought political stability, freedom of movement, and good working relationship across ethnic divides, and on campus, bridged the ethnic rift between students", making it possible for her and team to invoke the spirit of the Handshake to canvass for votes. As a coalition of three women and four men, and as a coalition of a Luo (chairperson), a Kikuyu (vice chairperson), a Luhya (treasurer), a Kisii and Turkana, they had been elected."

Stated Gitau: “Before the Handshake, it was hard for a Kikuyu or Kalenjin to get elected by the students. Ethnic discrimination against the Kikuyu and Kalenjin was rife among students. ‘Why should we give you a piece of cake here when you have the national cake?’ argued the students. Our competence, individuality, strong gender and ethnic balance swept us into office. All candidates in our coalition, except one, were elected. We won by a landslide,” said Gitau.

Still, Ms Gitau had some reservations. The Handshake, she said, “has bridged the divisions among the ordinary citizens who can now interact freely, but it has also widened the rift among the political class. It has killed the opposition. Raila now has a central role in government because he seems to have edged out Ruto. This could, as well, affect us, pitting us in an endless cycle of disputes and divisions.”

She, however, admitted that she still doesn’t understand what the Handshake is all about. “Is it supposed to end in a referendum? If so, how will we participate in a process whose outcome or end game is unknown or seems predetermined? What is in it for the youth? Be that as it may, the Handshake seems to have shifted the focus away from the Big Four Agenda issues of food, healthcare, housing and industrialisation.”