

Visionary or False Prophet: Why Did Raila Odinga Agree to Drink from the Poisoned Chalice?

“Hide nothing from the masses of our people. Tell no lies. Expose lies whenever they are told. Mask no difficulties, mistakes, failures. Claim no easy victories...”

- Amilcar Cabral

On 1 February 1979, the political world’s attention was fixated on a chartered Air France plane flight number 4721 flying from Paris to Tehran, Iran’s capital. Aboard the flight was an unlikely passenger, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who was returning to his home country from a long stint in exile and who had emerged as the de facto leader of the January 1979 Iranian Revolution. Khomeini was returning to Tehran after living in forced exile for almost 15 years. First sent to Turkey, where he detested the country’s overt secularism, he moved to Iraq, where he stayed for over a decade. Saddam Hussein kicked him out on allegations of regime change. Khomeini’s last base was at the Neauphle-le-Château on the outskirts of Paris, where he arrived in 1978, barely a year before the revolution.

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One hundred and twenty international journalists accompanied Khomeini on the flight as insurance, fearing that if he flew alone, the plane could become a target. He had sustained Iran’s revolutionary embers by ceaselessly sending home handwritten periodicals, which saw his popularity grow both at home and abroad. When Khomeini landed in Tehran, the airport was packed with thousands of Iranians yearning to catch a glimpse of the spiritual figure who had come to symbolise his people’s struggles and their eventual victory against the Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. It became extremely difficult for Khomeini to leave the packed airport, prompting his handlers to resort to a change of plan more than once. Despite the pushing and shoving, Khomeini managed to make his way to

central Tehran, where in a symbolic gesture of solidarity with fallen Iranians, he visited the Behesht-e Zahra cemetery - the burial site of those killed during the revolution - giving his first address to the country, signifying complete victory for Iranians.

Raila Odinga returned from a trip to the United States on 17 November 2017, right in the middle of agitations for electoral justice. The toll of the election protests, according to the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights, had left scores injured and about 100 civilians dead, including ten children, among them a six-month-old infant. Hundreds of supporters thronged Nairobi's Jomo Kenyatta International Airport to receive the opposition leader. The intention was to escort Raila's convoy to Uhuru Park, the historic grounds meant to host a much-anticipated homecoming rally at a time when opposition supporters were eager for a way forward. There was consensus within the opposition ranks that the Uhuru Kenyatta regime was illegitimate, thanks to a flawed electoral process that had resulted in the nullification of the 8 August 2017 election by the Supreme Court, followed by the 26 October 2017 vote that was boycotted by the opposition for fear of repeat irregularities courtesy of a non-reformed electoral commission.

With Uhuru's wobbly regime in panic mode, hundreds of heavily armed security personnel were deployed at the airport and throughout downtown Nairobi. Defiant opposition supporters pushed against police guns, tear gas and water cannons, insisting that Raila had to enter Nairobi in triumphant fashion with supporters in tow. The windscreen of Raila's bulletproof Range Rover was shot at and there were reports of several deaths and widespread injuries. The confrontation between the supporters and the police lasted throughout the day, a day that the Kenyan masses declared, like Winnie Mandela, that there was no more fear left.

Forming a human ring around Raila's vehicle and those of his opposition colleagues, protesters pushed against charging anti-riot police for kilometres, scenes that had not been witnessed in Kenya since the mass protest "Second Liberation" rallies of the 1990s. The penultimate push was at the roundabout joining Haile Selassie Avenue and Uhuru Highway, where police unleashed the most lethal force - high-pressure water cannon sprays, unrelenting tear gas, bullet shots in the air, all of which the crowd pushed back against, refusing to

yield. Upon overpowering the police once more, and emboldened by the mantra that the state can kill some of them but not all of them, the protestors proceeded towards the Uhuru Park entrance, shielding Raila's SUV using their tired, scarred, beaten down and sweaty bodies.

Speaking emotionally atop his SUV about two hundred metres from Uhuru Park, where a portion of protestors had gathered, Raila announced Kenya's "Third Liberation", reiterating that the country had reached a point of no return, and repeating three times that Canaan, the metaphoric political Promised Land, was near. He castigated Uhuru Kenyatta, calling him a delinquent who had resorted to unleashing state terror on civilians.

As if entering Uhuru Park signaled the ultimate collapse of Uhuru Kenyatta's government, the police rallied in desperation - shooting, throwing stones, deploying tear gas in a series of extrajudicial tactics that saw them succeed in dispersing the protestors. Vehicles were stoned and shot at, with tear gas canisters lobbed into some of the crowd. As Raila and his colleagues sped past, the message was clear to Kenyans watching the protest on live TV that Kenya had turned a corner. Never in the history of Kenyan resistance had the masses offered their fragile, hungry bodies as human shields in a day-long protest, walking right into imminent danger and refusing to budge. That day more than any other, Raila, who had earned a reputation for his tenacity in the liberation trenches for decades, earned the highest honour as the ultimate symbol of Kenyan resistance, a coronation of sorts as the Supreme Leader. There had been many protests before, but none resembled those that took place on that day. Protestors were willing to lay down their lives for Raila Odinga.

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"Today I have a lot of anger," Raila said, speaking in Kiswahili. "But first I want to thank you for coming to receive me at the airport...I am angry because of that boy called Uhuru Kenyatta. I have come back home but instead of a proper reception

he is lobbing tear gas at me. Shooting at my people. Isn't this barbaric?...Today is an important day in the political calendar of Kenya because we are announcing the Third Republic. I shall elaborate later. But today you have seen the signs, the signs of a collapsing government. Tell Uhuru goodbye."

The anger and disappointment in Raila's voice was palpable, making it clear that the man shared in the pain of the protestors who were desperate to reclaim their country and dignity. After the events of 17 November, everyone expected Raila to up the ante and exert more pressure on the state through the electoral justice movement, seeing that he had witnessed the sort of hardball Uhuru Kenyatta was willing to play. The masses, in standing in resolute solidarity with him, believed that Raila had the blueprint of what was shaping up into a people's uprising against electoral authoritarianism, hoping and trusting that Raila was going to lead them towards complete liberation.

Was it naïve to have so much faith in a single individual?

On 30 January 2018, after weeks of hesitations and postponements, Raila was dramatically sworn in at Uhuru Park as the "People's President" in a direct challenge to Uhuru Kenyatta's government. Once again, thousands of wananchi threw caution to the wind and attended the event that had earlier been declared treasonous by the regime's Attorney General. The event resulted in an anti-climax of sorts. Raila took the oath hurriedly before vanishing from the dais, after giving an equally rushed speech. His supposed equals within the opposition ranks were absent, possibly another red flag.

The swearing-in ceremony was followed by a crackdown on Raila's lieutenants, which climaxed in the violent deportation of Miguna Miguna to Canada, where the lawyer had fled to in the late 1980s. Miguna, a Raila ally-turned-foe-turned-ally, bore the greatest brunt from the state response to the swearing-in.

Then all of a sudden, in the middle of the chaos, Raila appeared on the steps of Harambee House on 9 March 2018 accompanied by Uhuru Kenyatta. They shook hands, announcing what they christened as Kenya's rebirth, as originally envisioned by their fathers. It was as if Khomeini had arrived in Tehran and in the midst of the chaos, gone forth to cut a backroom deal with the Shah in the name of giving Iran a rebirth.

One of the watershed moments of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, barely a year after the Shah's overthrow, was when university students sympathetic to Khomeini's Islamic Revolution cordoned off the American embassy in Tehran, taking 52 U.S. diplomats hostage. It is widely reported that among the students was the future Iranian president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. On hearing about the siege, which apparently was planned and executed without his knowledge, Khomeini instructed the students to step down. But before the message was publicised, Khomeini was advised that the majority of Iranians supported the siege, and so for the sake of courting public opinion and consolidating the revolution, Khomeini was asked to reconsider his stand against the students, and instead support them.

In that decisive moment, Khomeini listened to the people's voice and quickly retracted his earlier rebuke. The siege lasted 444 days, ruining U.S-Iran relations to date. In retrospect, the siege became one of the factors that consolidated the Islamic Revolution and Khomeini's grip on power, against U.S. imperialistic adventures and asserting Iran's sovereignty.

Apart from the imminent need to consolidate the revolution, Khomeini understood that as the de facto leader of a people, there comes a time when one stops making decisions based on self-interest, but instead surrenders to the people's aspirations, despite the high stakes and risks involved. Khomeini was taking his leadership of the revolution seriously, a measure of a man who had been preparing for that moment for ages while exiled.

To his credit, much as he had his own ideas of what he wanted Iran to look like, Khomeini withheld them until such a time when the Shah was completely out of the picture, understanding that securing the revolution from counter-revolutionaries was as significant as the revolution itself. He had revolutionary discipline, and even though he became the most powerful individual in Iran, a near deity, Khomeini maintained an austere aura, living in a modest, barely furnished apartment and refusing to take office as either President or Prime Minister. Khomeini played a religious role, despite being the man wielding ultimate state power. In that sense, he managed to secure the Islamic Revolution as its chief vanguard, opting to stay in the shadows, which made him appear disinterested in the trappings of power in the eyes of Iranians, in a sense rising above everyday politics.

By no means did anyone expect Raila Odinga to become Khomeini, even though he had his many Khomeini-esque moments. The issue at hand is how Raila unceremoniously deserted the electoral justice movement, which raises the question of whether he fully understood the amount of trust and weight of expectations opposition supporters had placed on his shoulders. One wonders whether for Raila, it was politics as usual - looking to get ahead of the pack in complete disregard for the electoral justice brigade.

Yet, whatever the spin in Raila's favour, there is no denying that millions of Kenyans who coalesced around the electoral justice movement - on the streets, on social media or by donating money to the cause - felt a heavy sense of personal and collective loss when Raila, without the benefit of an open and transparent negotiation process, embraced Uhuru, who Raila had described as the embodiment of the problem with Kenya's electoral justice system.

There is debate among his supporters as to whether Raila betrayed the people who were killed and injured during the protests, despite the counter-argument that everyone who showed up to the protests did so on their own volition, with a clear understanding of the attendant risks. There are those who say Raila betrayed the people's movement. The counter-argument is that nothing was set in stone other than the swearing in, which Raila fulfilled, and the Third Liberation, which he may be pursuing in ways only he knows best.

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It was, of course, within Raila's right to decide whichever way he wanted to play his politics. At the end of the day, he is just a politician with personal interests and shortcomings just like any other, despite his struggle credentials. In fact, history is replete with tens of liberation struggle heroes who turned out to be huge disappointments once they assumed power, or in their pursuit of power.

Raila, therefore, in his pursuit of power, has more than once made political deals whose actual benefit to the people of Kenya and their desire for a fully democratic

state remains debatable. In a sense, throughout his political career, Kenyans have placed “Baba” Raila on a pedestal as a radical ideologue, and sometimes revolutionary, but time and again, Raila has chosen to play the moderate card. There is a school of thought that believes that Raila Odinga has been nothing but a political deal maker, a political entrepreneur of sorts. Even though Raila’s history is populated with a culture of perpetual deal-making, it can be argued that none of his previous deals have proven as politically monumental as his latest one.

In 1996, when he opted out of his late father’s FORD-Kenya after failing to wrestle the party from an almost subdued Michael Kijana Wamalwa, the party shrunk, but it didn’t die. The grand march to State House, as Wamalwa liked to put it, continued until his ascendancy to the Vice Presidency in 2003. Raila shifted to the National Development Party (NDP), under which he cut a deal with President Daniel arap Moi in 1998, merging his party with Moi’s KANU in 2002 to form New KANU. Again this time round there were no major casualties since Raila’s NDP family migrated with him wholesale.

Then in 2002, at Uhuru Park, despite having made separate deals with the likes of Simeon Nyachae, Raila held Mwai Kibaki’s hand and unilaterally said “*Kibaki tosha*”, making the opposition’s quest for a joint presidential candidate a fait accompli. Raila was later to become a Cabinet minister, after failing to secure a proposed role of Prime Minister. Raila’s lieutenant, James Orengo, had warned against supporting Mwai Kibaki, who he considered unprincipled. It did not take long before Raila got the short end of the stick, resulting in rising political temperatures that culminated in the 2007 post-election violence after a hotly contested 2005 referendum, which saw Raila and company exit government.

It has been argued that the hurried *Kibaki tosha* declaration fueled ethnic strife in Kenya. Kibaki’s 2003 presidency fermented the 2007/2008 post-election violence, after which Raila entered into possibly his only structured deal as Prime Minister.

The 2007/2008 post-election violence was the genesis of the Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto solidarity that assumed power in 2013 supported by Kibaki’s men. Raila described their victory as an electoral coup. The duo controversially retained power in 2017, and despite the controversies, Raila has made a deal with Uhuru Kenyatta. Looking at all this deal-making, conclusions can be drawn about

whether these deals serve a bigger purpose other than seeing Raila's personal and political star rise. In fact, an argument is made that Raila has become an eternal prisoner to these deals, since one deal heralds the next. The merger with Moi led Raila into a deal with Kibaki later in 2002, which led into a second deal with Kibaki in 2007, which then resulted in the new deal with Uhuru Kenyatta. Will there be more deals?

Ordinarily, the relationship between fathers and sons is complex. Therefore, one can only imagine the sort of predicament which befalls sons like Uhuru and Raila, whose fathers were political colossi in their own right. Pressure persists for them to either protect their fathers' legacies or to carve out their own fresh ones. Alternatively, there may arise a need for the son to make peace with the father's enemies, for the sake of perpetuating the family name, or protecting family wealth. In this highly patriarchal world of fathers and sons, it is said that the sins of the father belong to the son, suggesting that sons cannot escape their father's shadows.

When Raila and Uhuru made peace, the one thing that was apparent as the overarching theme in their joint sparsely-worded communique was that they were deeply convinced of the need to invoke the spirits of their fathers as a way of addressing Kenya's perennial challenges. The two sons, therefore, revisited the ghosts of rivalry between Kenya's first president, Jomo Kenyatta, and the country's first vice president, Jaramogi Oginga Odinga. Their fathers started out as friends before becoming adversaries. The sons started out as rivals, and were now seeking to become allies.

Is the fulfillment of a long-standing obligation from a son who seeks to complete his father's original journey pushing Raila to make compromises in his quest to lead Kenya? Conversely, Raila could be his own man with his own sense of purpose; his aim could be to cast a shadow larger than his father's by succeeding where Jaramogi couldn't. It may also be a concoction of the two, where the son's ambition meets his father's unfinished business, what some may find to be an even more blinding sense of mission. On his part, Raila always insists that he is his own man, best illustrated whenever he attempts to debunk the view that he and Uhuru are products of Kenya's political dynasties. In the end, it may not matter whether Jaramogi is an influencing factor, since Raila will be judged by his

actions.

Raila Odinga has always fashioned himself as a visionary. This idea that he is driven by a larger common good, like Mbeki and Nkrumah, is what has earned Raila a following, especially within the intelligentsia, including at times when he hasn't been able to articulate his ideas and ideological standpoints with coherence. But what Raila must not have been aware of as he went about his politics of deal-making is that others even greater than him have fallen because of the bad choices they made at critical moments.

In his book, *Thabo Mbeki: The Rise and Fall of Africa's Philosopher King*, the Nigerian academic, Professor Adekeye Adebajo, examines what he calls the contradictions and paradoxes of Thabo Mbeki, considered one of his generation's most important intellectual leaders in Africa. Adebajo contrasts the village boy who grew into a somewhat Black European in mannerisms with the radical Marxist who adopted conservative economic policies as South Africa's president, and the intellectual giant who went against science in his HIV/AIDs denialism, which resulted in the premature deaths of an estimated over 350,000 South Africans. In Mbeki, Adebajo sees a young Kwame Nkrumah, a man with a vision for an Africa that holds its head high, yet who is flawed in terms of the faulty policy interventions and methods he deployed in governing his country. Quoting Kenyan scholar Professor Ali Mazrui, who famously remarked that "Nkrumah was a great Pan-Africanist but not a great Ghanaian", Adebajo wonders whether Mbeki will be remembered as a great Pan-Africanist but not as a great South African.

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tougher legacy predicament at home and across Africa.

Almost no one had the intellectual firepower to rival Mbeki's within the African National Congress (ANC), and within Nelson Mandela's and later Mbeki's own government, where it is reported that cabinet ministers were intimidated by his brilliance. Yet, as Adebajo argues, despite his exceptionalism, Mbeki failed in many areas, including in making a connection with the South African masses who he wanted to serve. He was accused of being aloof, arrogant, and of operating within the proverbial ivory tower where he pontificated about his lofty "Africa Renaissance" aspirations.

It is under these circumstances that Mbeki committed some of his worst blunders, including creating a small group of ANC-affiliated black bourgeoisie businessmen (whom he later grew to despise) instead of adopting a broader economic intervention for the benefit of the majority black population. In the end, Mbeki was replaced by an intellectual underachiever, Jacob Zuma, who became a costly mistake for the ANC.

Raila Odinga had the masses on his side but instead he chose to cross over to Uhuru. Like Mbeki at the time of his unexpected removal from power, Raila is currently in a vulnerable position, left at the mercy of Uhuru Kenyatta's fidelity to their deal, whose enforcement remains secret. In case something happened and Uhuru was to vacate the deal, leaving Raila exposed, it may result in the unceremonious end for Raila Odinga. Whatever the eventuality, whether he becomes President or Prime Minister or not, and whether he outperforms himself once he assumes any of these positions or not, history may remember "the handshake" on 9 March 2018 as a selfish short cut to power in exchange for forgiveness for merchants of electoral injustice against Kenyans.

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There are those who may argue that a lot was expected of Raila, and unfairly so. Yet there are many who for a long time believed that it was Raila's personal responsibility - on his own behalf and on behalf of ordinary Kenyans - to ensure

fundamental change happened in Kenya's governance. The man was viewed as a messiah of sorts. Therefore, by choosing to become an everyday politician and seeking a backroom deal for himself - seeing that he went out alone in cutting a deal with Uhuru, devoid of any political structures - Raila was possibly reminding everyone, including those he may have deliberately or unintentionally led on, that he held brief for no one. People needed to stop projecting their political aspirations on him, and to allow him to be an everyday individual just like everyone else, with the leverage of making choices, including bad ones.

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