



The Chink in Raila's Armour: Why ODM Is Losing Ground in Its Strongholds

By Akoko Akech



To some observers, it was a victory that recalls the Biblical David versus Goliath encounter, which will be told long after the “stone” that fell the giant Orange Democratic Party’s political machinery and its candidate in the 5 April Ugenya by-election has been buried deep in the fecund soils of Ugenya. For others, it was the epic duel, which Senator James Orengo – a living legend in Kenya and in Ugenya’s opposition politics – like Hamlet without the Prince, lost spectacularly to David Ochieng, a political neophyte.

In the 5 April Ugenya constituency by-election, a parliamentary candidate called David Ochieng’ of the little-known Movement for Democracy and Growth (MDG) took on a giant, the Orange Democratic Party (ODM), and floored its candidate, Chris Karan. This was not a first in the colorful history of Ugenya, a constituency whose politics has partly been defined by the political rivalries between in-laws James Orengo and his brother-in-law, Stephen Ondiek, who between them, represented Ugenya constituency for 33 years between 1980 to 2013.

Although there is no love lost between Orengo and Ochieng, Ochieng’s victory recalls James Orengo’s *Nyatieng’s*’ (the grinding-stone) victory in the 1980 Ugenya constituency by-election against Mathews Ogutu, a pro-establishment and a Jomo Kenyatta era minister for local government. Just like Orengo’s victory in 1980 as a Jaramogi Odinga colyte was a slap in the face of pro-

establishment politics of acquiescence in the face of betrayals of independence ideals and KANU's suffocating post-independence one-party state, Ochieng's, too, is a rejection of Raila Odinga's pro-status quo politics, which in the face of suffocating party politics demands acquiescence with politics of incompetence or ineptitude at the local level.

The victory was too sweet to be savoured only by Ochieng' and his constituents. By saying that the by-election was a Raila versus Ruto contest and casting it as a proxy battle for Kenya's soul...the ODM party barons had invited the dissident United Republican Party (URP) wing of the ruling Jubilee Party to the Ugenya party. Or so, it seems.

Ochieng's was a sweet victory, a crowning of a successful and drawn out election petition against the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC)'s declaration of Chris Karan as the victor of the 2017 Ugenya parliamentary election, in which he handed ODM, especially his Ugenya nemesis, Senator James Orengo, a humiliating defeat.

The victory was too sweet to be savoured only by Ochieng' and his constituents. By saying that the by-election was a Raila versus Ruto contest and casting it as a proxy battle for Kenya's soul - where a vote cast for Chris Karan is a vote for Raila Odinga, and a vote cast for David is a vote for William Ruto - the ODM party barons had invited the dissident United Republican Party (URP) wing of the ruling Jubilee Party to the Ugenya party. Or so, it seems.

As if on cue, the "hustler's" nation, for whom everything *ni kujipanga* without compunction, showed up for the party, honouring ODM's ill-thought, and perhaps proxy invitation, to a propaganda-fest. William Ruto, Kenya's Deputy President, who craves an earthly kingdom, took a celestial leap for it, and tweeted, "Jameni wacheni MUNGU aitwe MUNGU. The hustler nation has spoken, the people have decided", thereby quickly claiming David's victory for the "hustler" Christian nation and milking it for its propaganda value: Odinga's loss is a Ruto's or self-declared hustler-in-chief's gain.

Ostensibly, Ochieng's victory now symbolised the miraculous ways of God, foretelling the coming victory of the kingdom of the hustler-in-chief over his nemesis Raila Odinga, the longed-for Godless earthly kingdom of Kenyans who seldom give a damn about justice or ethics in pursuit of power or wealth.

Ochieng's MGD victory was a godsend. Irresistible. And they grabbed it, perhaps with the ease with which billions of shillings in dollar denominations is nowadays spirited out of Kenya's public coffers to a few individual's secret accounts abroad or safe boxes in local banks under the Jubilee government's watch.

Senator Susan Kihika, a Ruto disciple, took a less optimistic but a more earthly view of Ochieng's victory. She tweeted, "Is ODM's loss in Ugenya & Embakasi South an indication of changing times? Ugenya being ODM stronghold begs the question, is the electorate finally ready to defy dictatorship vote & independently? Perhaps. Interesting times ahead. Kitaeleweka sooner than later!"

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“Not a big deal,” Raila Odinga said repeatedly, and rather strenuously, for the “just a drop in the ocean” loss of two parliamentary seats in a week when the twin ODM loss, especially the Ugenya by-election, was trending in the major call-ins in Dholuo breakfast and late night radio broadcasts.

For some of the diehard ODM supporters, the twin parliamentary electoral loss is symptomatic of ODM’s diseased body politic. “It’s suffering a T.B. Not the dreadful respiratory disease, tuberculosis, but the equally devastating *“Tugni gi Bagni,”* or “conflict and confusion,” for a party that has had a relative clear political vision,” said a disillusioned ODM supporter in a call-in breakfast radio show.

Still, others opined, the victory of these candidates raises several questions that the party ought to answer: why do sitting ODM MPs, who ably discharge their parliamentary responsibilities or good candidates seeking an ODM ticket lose to those said to be the party-anointed but lacklustre performers? Is it the region’s six-piece voting pattern or how the six-pieces of the ODM leaders is put together? Is it because, as some callers opined, *“party ni gi wegi”* (the party has its owners)? And therefore, have the party nominations, not just the ODM’s, but also other Raila Odinga-led parties’ nominations, been a charade? Does the party respect the wishes and interests of the majority? *“Certificate e omo malo.”* (Has the party been imposing candidates on the voters?) Is it because we’ve been electing charlatans who claim *“wadhi konyo Jakom goyo lweny?”* (Is it those who claim they are going to help Raila Odinga fight a war?)

Beyond the biblical analogies, evangelical Christian rhetoric, and the denials of ODM party barons, what does Ochieng’s victory mean? What does it tell us about Luo politics? What hopes does it hold, especially for those from the counties of Siaya, Homa Bay, Migori and Kisumu, who are disgruntled with ODM, especially the party nominations, and increasingly see Raila Odinga’s dominance in Luo politics as a stranglehold on regional democracy? What about those who yearn either for a change or a revolution in the ODM strongholds?

Unlike ODM power barons’ denials, the candid and passionate debates on Ochieng’s victory and ODM’s poor performance in the two by-elections throws up more than Ochieng’s winning formula or ODM’s ways of losing an election, which, for some rank and file members of the party, shouldn’t be waved aside.

Many ODM supporters who called various Dholuo radio stations last week blamed Senator James Orengo for the loss of the Ugenya seat to the MDG party. They put it down to the rivalry between Orengo and Opiyo Wandayi, said to be driven by competing ambitions for the Siaya County’s 2022 gubernatorial election. ODM had wrongly pitched the contest as a national issue, with little local touch, and favoured big roadshow events – which entertain the youth, but which scarcely educate the electorate – and counterproductive threats by Siaya governor, Amoth Rasanga, to punish his Ugenya constituents if they voted for Ochieng’. Yet Ochieng’ has a better development record in Ugenya than the Siaya County government, and carried out a more effective door-to-door campaign attuned to the hopes of Ugenya voters, especially women.

Ochieng is a young and ambitious politician who first came to parliament as an ODM Member of Parliament. His victory points to a deeper crisis gnawing at the heart of the Orange Democratic Movement. ODM not only failed to live up to its name and to its political ideals, but is suffered from a crisis of vision, as some callers pointed out. It also stalled intra-party, inter-generational succession, which is now simmering and might come to the boil before or by 2022.

Ochieng’s victory, like that of the other “independents”, suggests that ODM or Raila Odinga are not invincible. However, winning an election is still an uphill task. You’ve got to factor Raila Odinga into your winning formula or circumvent it in your campaigns.

However, listening to ODM supporters who are still smarting from the party's loss of Ugenya constituency does suggest that Ochieng's victory is significant but that it is no more significant than the past victories of "independents" in the current Luo politics. Ochieng joins the league of politicians, such as Olago Aluoch, the MP for Kisumu West on a Ford Kenya ticket, Shakeel Shabbir of Kisumu Town East, who ran as independent in the 2017 general election, and even of the disgraced Okoth Obado, now an ODM governor, who was elected on a PDP ticket in 2013.

Ochieng's victory, like that of the other "independents", suggests that ODM or Raila Odinga are not invincible. However, winning an election is still an uphill task. You've got to factor Raila Odinga into your winning formula or circumvent it in your campaigns. Strategically, you must be an ally or be seen to be an ally of Raila Odinga's cause. And as some callers said, those who have successfully run against the ODM wave, such as Olago Aluoch of Kisumu Town West or Shakeel Shabbir, have simultaneously avoided casting their quest for elective office as contests between them and Raila Odinga. They ran on a Raila-zone friendly party or no political party, and thoroughly localised the parliamentary contest while pledging loyalty to Raila's cause or claiming him as their undisputed leader or leader of the Luo community.

Shakeel Shabbir, popularly known as "*Onyango woun Mogo*" (Onyango, the owner of maize flour), like Ochieng, bolted out of the ODM in 2017, but ran successfully as an independent. Upon winning, he said, "I still share ODM ideals and want to assure my people that I will stand with the party and leader Raila Odinga."

Similarly, speaking to the *Star* after winning, Ochieng' said, "I avoided the media like the plague since they were going to hype it as a war between me and Raila," and added, "I have no issue with Raila. In fact, we kept talking when I was in court. There is no bad blood between him and myself. I respect him. I support the handshake, which is the best thing ever to happen to this country."

Salim Odeny, a suave and eloquent ODM ideologue with a priestly mastery of the Bible, an ecumenical mastery of many Christian denominational hymns, liturgy, and rituals, and a mastery of dead-pan Dholuo put-downs or sexist insults, said that the ODM bigwigs in charge of the Chris Karan campaigns didn't set the Raila trap well. He says that ODM lost the Ugenya seat, not only because the infighting within the Senator James Orengo-led campaign team, but also because they didn't frame the contest in terms that resonates with the Ugenya electorate. "They should have asked, who does Uhuru Kenyatta deal with when he wants to deal with a Luo leader, a party leader called Raila Odinga of ODM or a party leader called David Ochieng' of MDG?" said Odeny. The contest should have been framed as the battle between Raila and Ochieng' for the leadership of the Luos - who of the two embodies the community's fears and hopes? - not as a Raila versus Ruto contest.

Ochieng' saw the trap and lifted the safety hatch. He simply asked his constituents, "*Ka udhi ma ok uneno Raila e debe, gone David Ochieng'*," (If you go to the polling booth, and you don't find Raila's name on the ballot, then vote for David Ochieng), some callers pointed out. Raila's absences, literary and figuratively, also worked in Ochieng's favour.

Citing African Union engagements, Raila made only a single appearance at a funeral in Ugenya during the campaign period. Since the handshake, what he embodies or stands for, the larger-than-life cause cryptically referred to as "*lweny*" (the war), and the political cause that he has embodied in Luo politics (which gives him a free hand to choose who's a loyal lieutenant and who's not) has become foggy at best.

What's more, "the handshake" has blunted the sharp edge of the "mole" label, the traitor charge, which can cut down one's political career short, especially for Luo politicians who work with the establishment, either in times of opposition or outside the Raila Odinga umbrella, in times of co-

optation.

Tactically, by framing the by-election as a local contest and conducting a door-to-door campaign, Ochieng' outflanked the ODM bigwigs who mounted colourful roadshows and pitched the battle as a national contest between Raila Odinga and William Ruto.

In 2017, David Ochieng', who had been dubbed a mole, bore this burden. In 2019, after the handshake, the sharp opposition-establishment distinction is blurred, and the burden has lifted off a little bit. Moreover, unlike James Orengo, who was once a cabinet minister (a minister for lands), Ochieng' seems to have leveraged his first term pro-establishment connections and delivered collective material goods to his Ugenya constituents better than both James Orengo and the County of Government of Siaya: a medical training centre, a teachers' training college, a technical institute, subsidised fertilizer to farmers, and a forestry school in the making.

Tactically, by framing the by-election as a local contest and conducting a door-to-door campaign, Ochieng' outflanked the ODM bigwigs who mounted colourful roadshows and pitched the battle as a national contest between Raila Odinga and William Ruto. Backed by Ugenya professionals, he turned his first term development record as an ODM MP into an asset and bait: "I have built a TTC, and a MTC here, but the MTC College could collapse, because it offers only one course. Give me a chance to complete this project," Ochieng, reportedly pitched.

But David Ochieng', the ambitious rebel politician who says he eschews "politics of lies, personality cult, where you identify a figure of hate", derides and is disdainful of Orengo's brand of politics - what he dismissively calls "university type of politics, which no longer works for the masses" - as the kind of politics that has long reached its sell-by date and is a product the fallout that followed the ODM's post-2013 generational succession politics in Luo politics.

Ochieng told the *Star* that he left ODM because "the party machinery was not taking my views. There is a lot of suspicion about me and how I work. At some point, I felt I didn't want to go to parliament." Moreover, "My party did not like people who can innovate or those giving views. I thought I did not want to go through that, hence, the birth of MDG," Ochieng' added, without mentioning the source of this suspicion.

That suspicion was borne out at the Sega Declaration in 2014. David Ochieng', together with some youthful and freshly elected first-term members of parliament, such as Jared K'Opiyo, Silvanus Osele, Agostino Neto, Junet Mohamed, Millie Odhiambo, Ken Obura, and John Mbadi, sought to reform and re-energise the party after the loss of the 2013 presidential election and to change its leadership. But the doyens of opposition politics, such as Raila Odinga, Anyang' Nyong'o, and Otieno Ka'jwang', read mischief in this move. The ODM MPs, who were party to the Sega Declaration, were viewed with suspicion as fifth columnists.

ODM power barons scattered this group, but didn't adequately address the discontent, the injustice of the party nomination process, and the feeling of being left out of both the national party power structures and in the ODM county governments, which many youthful members of the party, including the rank and file, feel to date. Dubbed "moles," the unrepentant signatories to the Sega Declaration faced a stiff challenge for the ODM ticket or opted for alternative political parties. Some, like John Mbadi and Junet Mohamed, beat a retreat and were rewarded with high party positions. Others, like Ken Obura and Silvanus Osele, fell by the wayside. A few, like David Ochieng, and Millie Odhiambo, retreated to their constituencies and worked hard to fortify their hold on them.

Labeled a Jubilee mole, David Ochieng' felt it doubly, in 2017 and 2019. "There were days we could

spend up to shillings 1 million in a day," Ochieng' told the *Star*, without disclosing either what he spent the money on or the total amount of money he spent to secure the seat. Clearly, one million shillings a day, even for a few days of campaigning in a rural constituency, is a little over the top, particularly, for a candidate who says his popularity rests solidly on his unmatched development record.

Ochieng's victory reminds the ODM party, and Raila Odinga, in particular, that that until ODM embraces internal party democracy, addresses the generational succession question, and Raila unequivocally states what the party stands for, the independents...will always eat Baba's lunch in a free and fair election.

Ochieng's triumph over the ODM was sweet, hard-won, and crowning, but still an expensive victory. It reeks of a BUY-election. Although Ochieng says that his solid development record as an ODM member of parliament put him in good stead, he spent heavily to secure the seat, even when he avoided a "big entourage" and occasionally rode a bicycle while looking for votes.

Ochieng's victory reminds the ODM party, and Raila Odinga, in particular, that that until ODM embraces internal party democracy, addresses the generational succession question, and Raila unequivocally states what the party stands for, the independents (who voters say are good leaders, but often fall out of favour with the ODM party barons) will always eat Baba's lunch in a free and fair election - especially when the voters can't tell what Raila Odinga stands for or what the political vision of ODM is since he signed a truce with the Jubilee government.

Questions arise: Is Raila still hunting, holding the leopard by the tail or has he domesticated the beast? Or is he stroking its fur, cleaning its bloodstained paws and its incisors while his core constituency, clawed or killed by the beast in the last electoral encounters, cries for justice? Does ODM fight for democracy and good government only at the national level? What about the ODM-led constituencies and the counties?

Ochieng's victory too, is just an exception that proves the rule: the common sense that binds Raila Odinga and his die-hard political base still holds a contested sway. However, the yawning democratic deficits of the ODM party, which the ODM rank and file complain about on radio, and the ineptitudes of Raila's lieutenants in local politics and in organising a smooth ODM generational succession, coupled with the incompetence, corruption, and nepotism of county governments, especially in Siaya, Homa Bay, and Migori counties, will ultimately claim ODM's dominance in Luo politics.

Ochieng's victory is good news, especially to those who find Raila's two-decade long dominance in Luo politics too suffocating and too stifling for democratic aspirations. It reveals a chink in Raila's amour. However, those yearning for a change or revolution in ODM have a tough task ahead. Electoral defeats, like Ugenya's, though highly embarrassing, hardly chip at the Odingas' dominance in Luo politics.

The twin electoral defeats, a recoil from a third, and the Wajir senatorial election reminds ODM that a coalition of widely different political dynasties, united only by a common fear of the prospects of a Ruto presidency, is unlikely to energise the ODM support base. ODM could suffer humiliating defeats in the hands of a wily, tenacious, and daredevil opponent bound by no compunction.

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