



Uhuru and the Kikuyu Question: What Can We Expect in 2022?

By Dauti Kahura



On Sunday June 16, 2019, President Uhuru Kenyatta woke up to a bad day. While attending a public meeting called by the Akurinu, a religious denomination, at Moi International Sports Centre in Kasarani, he let down his guard, lost his cool and went ethnic on an event beamed live on a nationwide television channel.

To be fair, this was not the first time the president was exposing his soft underbelly; he has been angry before, railing against his real and perceived enemies, swearing and threatening to deal with them at an appropriate time. But on this day, unable to contain himself, he went ballistic, switched to his vernacular Kikuyu language, shouted and presumably talked down to the people he was addressing. He was visibly piqued, a sign that the president has of late been increasingly irritable, a veritable shortcoming for a leader who holds the highest office in the land.

So what provoked this outburst? Let us briefly recap the events of the day. The Akurinu, a Kikuyu religious entity (the Akurinus are not a homogenous group) were holding their annual general conference. President Uhuru honoured their invitation and attended. In 2018, he did not attend; Deputy President William Ruto presided over the event. President Uhuru arrived before his deputy and was warmly received by the Akurinu leaders. Whatever his reason, or reasons, for arriving after the president, Ruto, when he showed up, received a warmer reception than the president.

Two things stand out. One, by arriving after the president, the deputy president had obviously stood up to Uhuru. The louder applause he got from the delegates upstaged the president's own lukewarm reception. Two, and more fundamentally, the powerful yet subtle message from the Akurinu was that they held the deputy president in higher esteem than the president. Could this have been the trigger for President Uhuru's fulmination in the Kikuyu language?

It is claimed that in 2018, when Deputy President William Ruto attended the Akurinu meeting, he gave them Sh10 million and a six-acre piece of land. As he is wont to do to buy loyalty and votes, he allegedly promised them more cash and more land. For the longest time, the Akurinu have been looking for suitable land to build a college to train their own clerics.

The Akurinu are a conservative, traditional Kikuyu sect whose religious faith is a fusion of Kikuyu cultural norms and Christian beliefs. They are often referred to as African Sikhs because of the white turbans they wear. The first Akurinu church was started in 1922, ostensibly after Mwene Nyaga (God) spoke to the first Mkurinu and asked him to pray for his land. The "apparition" led to the formation of a religious movement, the Akurinu Church. Since then, the Akurinu believe it is their prayers that have been holding this country together.

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"Apparently, when the president failed to attend their meeting last year, his deputy seized the moment and rose up to the occasion," said a Jubilee Party politician and former MP from Central Kenya, who did not want to be named because he is not authorised to speak on behalf of the party. "This has been the crux of the matter: the president has always seemed to take a back seat on some of the more important duties and obligations. Every time we had an audience with him, throughout his first term, we reminded him of his obligations to the nation and his Kikuyu people in particular. We told him he had a deputy who was very proactive and politically agile. He therefore needed to be on top of his game and firmly in control, but he always brushed aside our concerns...now he is reaping the fruits."

The politician said that instead of President Uhuru scaring away the rebels in the Jubilee Party, he had emboldened them. "What was all that anger the president exhibited at Kasarani about? Who was it directed at? Why had the president used a public podium to address intra-party squabbles?" The ground had shifted, or was shifting. The president's centre seemed not to hold right before his own eyes and the clock was ticking away, added the politician.

Thiong'o Gichuhi, a Mkurinu friend, told me that the Akurinu have not been happy with President Uhuru's leadership. "Since 2017, the Akurinu leadership had been trying to reach President Uhuru and Mama Ngina Kenyatta to tell them that God is not happy with the Kenyatta rulership and all not well in the House of Mumbi," said Thiongó.

"The Akurinu worship and believe in the God of the Agikuyu, even though they regard themselves as Christians," said Thiongó. "You may not know this, all Akurinu churches are built in a way that if you are kneeling down to pray, you face Mt Kenya."

The Akurinu have been "revolting" against President Uhuru's rule, even though they have not been public about it, said Thiongó. "Although the Akurinu at Kasarani praised President Uhuru publicly, I can tell you they have been seething with anger for apparently assuming and neglecting their entreaties." Was President Uhuru then, also projecting his anger at the Akurinu for "disrespecting"

him, by “stomping their feet,” when the Ruto arrived, well after the president?

“All that diatribe by President Uhuru at Kasarani was directed at the Central Kenya (rebel) MPs, who have refused to kowtow to his plethora of demands, among them, to stop hanging out with the DP,” said one of the rebel MPs, who spoke in strict confidence and who sought anonymity because of fear of a backlash from Jubilee Party mandarins allied to the president. Among the MPs from Central Kenya considered to be “rebellious” include Kimani Ichungwa, the MP for Kikuyu constituency in Kiambu County, Ndindi Nyoro, the MP for Kiharu constituency in Murang’a County, and Alice Wahome, the MP for Kandara constituency, also in Murang’a County.

On July 23, Ndindi Nyoro posted the following on his Facebook timeline: “In their desperate machinations to silence all perceived DP William Ruto’s supporters, they are arranging to ‘deal’ with some of us using all manner of issues. It has dawned on Uhuru that he is an outgoing president...an outgoing president has no stranglehold on MPs whose fates are clearly no longer tied to his ending presidential favours. His fury and veiled threats against Central Kenya MPs are neither here nor there...any sensible politician from Mt Kenya knows that his 2022 fortunes are not with President Uhuru, but with the next probable leader, whose chances of ascending to the presidential seat are practical and predictable.” (That probable leader to them is Deputy President Ruto, who they have openly backed.)

It is a paradox that President Uhuru now does not want Jubilee MPs from Central Kenya to associate with Deputy President Ruto, said the MP, “yet in his first term, he encouraged the opposite thing. That is the person we were asked to work with, it is the person we have worked with since 2013. We know him, we understand him, but above all, he has also worked with us. It is rather a bit late to introduce a new person to us. In any case we have not found any fault with him.”

In a surprise twist, the Central Kenya MPs in Ruto’s camp are now castigating President Uhuru’s rule and finding fault with his current political modus operandi. “I will tell you this, and this is a fact - Uhuru today would not be president were it not for Ruto - it is just as straight forward as that and it is something we want to drum into our people,” the MP said. “It is also a fact, the president, also, several times in his first term reiterated to us that he would be succeeded by Ruto once he finishes his tenure. He would not only be succeeded by Ruto, he told us, he would publicly campaign for him. If there is anything that has changed, he should explicitly communicate it to us.”

The handshake

President Uhuru, in an abrupt deft manoeuvre, made peace with his chief opponent, Raila Odinga, on March 9, 2018. Prior to the political handshake, the president had hurled tongue-biting insults at Raila during the campaign period.

“President Uhuru did not tell us about the handshake, but we took it in our stride,” said the MP. “To date, many of us do not understand that handshake, shrouded in secrecy as it is, but then, why is the president unhappy with our association with Ruto. Is the DP not a member of the Jubilee Party, unlike Raila? When did associating with a fellow party member be considered a crime and doubling in oppositional politics?”

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The MP said the president did not tell the truth when he pointed out that were not for his help, some

of the Central Kenya MPs would not have won their parliamentary seats. “That is not true at all: The president did not help any Central Kenya MP get to his current position – not in 2017. In 2013, it is true, any politician who wanted to win a seat in Central Kenya had to align himself with Uhuru Kenyatta. But it is a fact in 2017, some former MPs, governors and senators lost their seats because of his apparent lackadaisical attitude during the Jubilee Party nominations.”

It is now patently evident that President Uhuru’s tenure has been defined by incompetence – some structural, but many self-inflicted, observed the MP. “The self-inflicted exceed the structural difficulties. President Uhuru was negligent about his social habits. He let those habits interfere with his presidential responsibilities. He assumed a hands-off policy and became nonchalant while the deputy president has always remained politically active and pointed to his ambitions.”

No less than politicians such as Onesmus Kimani Ngunjiri and Moses Kuria have publicly pointed out President Uhuru’s shortcomings and his apparent and sudden about-turn on his deputy. In a video clip that went viral in June, 2019, Ngunjiri, the Jubilee MP for Bahati constituency in Nakuru County, rails against the president for his seemingly laissez-faire attitude towards presidential politics. “If it were not for Ruto, let me tell you before my God in heaven Uhuru would not be president today...he has no time for campaigning...Ruto is sober.”

On January 10, 2019, Ngunjiri was recorded telling the president that if he was tired of ruling, he should give way to his deputy, or call a presidential election so that the people could vote for William Ruto. He accused the president of worsening the economic wherewithal of the Kikuyu lot by his retroactive policies.

Kuria, the MP for Gatundu South, President Uhuru’s rural constituency, equally, in a video clip shot in July, 2019 states categorically that it is because of Ruto standing firmly by Uhuru’s side – both in 2013 and 2017 – that Uhuru defeated his chief enemy to become the president. Everything else, said Kuria, is a sideshow.

Hostile territory

A former MCA from Nyeri County observed that as it is right now, the president is not sure of venturing into Central Kenya. “The ground is hostile and the electorate is currently not feeling him. They feel hugely disappointed by him, mainly because of the economic downturn and the political uncertainties that go with the economic slump.”

According to the politician, the Central Kenya people feel they have not been sufficiently told what the March 2018 handshake is really all about. “I am always on the ground, and all I hear about from the people is, if the handshake is about creating extra political seats, they will not support a referendum that is being ostensibly pushed by the Building the Bridges [an initiative that came out after the rapprochement between President Uhuru and opposition leader Raila Odinga].”

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The politician opined that on four occasions, the president had planned to visit Central Kenya, and all four times he has deferred the visits since being re-elected on October 26, 2017. On July 11, Nyeri Governor Mutahi Kahiga, on Inooro Radio, said that the president had three weeks before a planned visit to his county, but postponed it at the last hour: “I want to tell the president that he is

most welcome to visit my county, any time he is ready and we will heartily welcome him.”

The president has been itching to address the Kikuyu populace as he dresses down some of the Central Kenya MPs who have not been towing his political line, said a Jubilee Party politician from Kiambu County. So, the Akurinu meeting at Kasarani provided a perfect platform for President Uhuru to admonish the rebel MPs, as he sought to reassure the electorate that he still their president and has their interests at heart, from a controlled crowd and safe grounds as it were.

“With an electorate that feels thoroughly let down by his politics, and unsure of where he may be leading them, the president at Kasarani turned to the time-tested ploy of ethnicising national politics,” said the politician. “The president, by seeking to reassure his base, through speaking to them in vernacular, was implicitly reminding them to be cognizant of their (privileged) ethnicity, to dissuade them from questioning his nothing-to-report-home-about performance.”

The pleasure and pain of Uthamaki

The last seven years of President Uhuru’s reign have brought both pleasure and pain to Uthamaki followers: Pleasure when they elected him in 2013 - and even in 2017 - but pain in between the two terms. In Uhuru’s second and last term, the pain in the Uthamaki kingdom has been deep and severe. Across Uthamaki land, the people have been hurting and they have come to the realisation that the politics of pleasure go side by side with pain.

If President Uhuru can cause them so much grief, they rationalise, then no politician is good - they are all bad. President Uhuru is bad because Raila is worse and Ruto has never been any good, so he is no better than either of them. But, because the deputy president has worked with President Uhuru, he can be tolerated. For the Kikuyu people, if Uhuru has failed to make a good president, no Kenyan politician can. Therefore, because all politicians are bad, let us just stick with Uhuru.

I have been repeatedly told by Kikuyus across the spectrum that they are done with voting - that voting for Uhuru in the second fresh presidential election held on October 26, 2017, was their last. Why is this so? Why did they not stop at the first presidential election that took place on August 8, 2017? It is because when they look ahead to 2022, instead of seeing light at the end of the tunnel (to use a cliché), they only see darkness. Darkness to them means they do not have a dependable and probable Kikuyu (male) politician that they can confidently bank on and vote for come 2022.

For now, they must perpetuate the political fiction that they are not looking to voting in the next general election because President Uhuru, their Muthamaki, has let them down terribly. If President Uhuru can let them down, then which president won’t let them down? In the logic of the Kikuyus, the failures of President Uhuru sum up the imagined failures of all the forthcoming presidential candidates. Hence, they will not waste their time again by waking up at 2am to line up for a non-Kikuyu.

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“Just the other day in 2017, when Uhuru was campaigning, he went round Kikuyuland telling us the voters that we should not vote for Raila because he was a *‘kimundu kiu...mundu muguruki... an ogre...a mad man*. Now he is full of praise of a *‘mad man’*, parading him now as the best alternative for the Kikuyus. Has he stopped being an ogre, has he been cured of his madness?” asked a Central Kenya MP aligned to Ruto’s Tangatanga camp.

The politician told me that for the better part of the last 50 years, the Kikuyu political elite drummed into the Kikuyu voter to never forget that the Luo was his greatest enemy. That the Odinga family had a hideous agenda not only against the Kikuyu people, but against the country. The Luo and the Odinga family combined were a deadly threat to the existence of the Kikuyu. The cabal told the Kikuyu voter that Raila Odinga wants to be president so that he can “avenge” the mistreatment of his father Jaramogi, who was detained and harassed by Uhuru’s father Jomo Kenyatta.

“Ostensibly, that revenge the Kikuyu voter has been impressed upon is to be visited on him...it’s therefore incumbent upon him to jealously protect his survival by stopping his presidential ambitions,” said the MP from Central Kenya. “Now, in an about-turn, President Uhuru is asking Kikuyus very subtly that they cast their political net with the son of Jaramogi, Fifty years of socialising the people to view a particular family with political suspicion cannot be overturned overnight through political gamesmanship. Jomo Kenyatta’s quarrels with Jaramogi were nationalised by Jomo to draw in the entire Kikuyu community, in which, he persuaded them through secret oath-taking that the presidency was theirs and they should do everything in their power to protect it.”

At the height of the 2017 general elections’ heated campaigns, a diehard Uhuru supporter from Kiambu County told me unabashedly and matter of factly that Raila needed to be taken out for Muthamaki to rule effectively without hindrances. She outlined the hindrances as unnecessary oppositional politics, which always pushed back Uhuru’s efforts to develop the country.

As Kikuyus go through the politics of pain, they have been asking themselves conspiratorially and in hush-hush tones why Raila opted to shake Muthamaki’s hand, and hence joined the government. “Look now what is happening to politics and the government - it is because Raila is not in the opposition. There isn’t anyone to check the excesses of the government. They would not be as much theft as we are witnessing now because he would be calling out President Uhuru and his cohorts and shouting for all to hear about the runaway corruption.”

It is a twisted logic difficult to discern if you are not a typical Kikuyu: here are a people, schooled and socialised to embrace the politics of suffering (even with bitterness), yet to never ever think of imagining a president from outside of their ethnic circle. The logic goes something like this: If our own person can cause us all this suffering, what about a person from a different ethnic group? We will all be finished. So let’s stick with our own, who God will prevail upon to have mercy on us.

Inevitably, Raila Odinga, for all the time he has been in active and elective politics, was the political bogeyman of the Kikuyus. If Muthamaki was not performing, it was because of the oppositional noises generated by Raila and his group. When he helped form the Government of National Unity and became a non-executive Prime Minister in 2008, all the blame of President Mwai Kibaki’s failings were shifted to him. Then in March 2018, Raila recalibrated his politics and accepted to work with his political nemesis in the name of uniting a country that was on the brink of fracturing.

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Not accustomed to political truths, Raila’s move confused the Kikuyus, who were denied a punching bag and smokescreen. They had no one who they could channel their political frustrations through and blame.

Now with the prospect of a Ruto (or Raila?) presidency in 2022, they have no one left to blame but

themselves for believing the Uthamaki myth and betting on a horse that had a short shelf life, and which was not particularly interested in their plight. The chickens, it seems, are coming home to roost.

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