



# The Rebels Within: The Politics of Kieleweke and Tanga Tanga in Central Kenya

By Dauti Kahura



The fracas that took place in Gitui Catholic Church in Murang'a County on September 8, 2019, is a harbinger of the political battles that are going to be fought in Central Kenya and the larger Mt Kenya region by the fractious Jubilee Party antagonists.

“The battle for the soul of the Kikuyu vote is on and what we witnessed in Murang'a was a proxy war being waged by two factional camps, split by succession politics that are intent on capturing the Kikuyu vote ahead of the 2022 general elections,” said a Central Kenya politician who requested for anonymity.

The camps are led by President Uhuru Kenyatta and his Deputy William Samoei Ruto. Fronted by their respective protégés, the factions are known by their signature monikers - *Kieleweke* (it shall [soon] be evident) and *Tanga Tanga* (the roving group). Although President Uhuru has not come out openly to associate with the @Kieleweke group, which is being fronted by one Ngunjiri Wambugu, the flip-flopping Nyeri Town MP, his deputy, no doubt, has made it known that he is the de facto *Tanga Tanga* leader, a label he proudly carries.

The church lent itself as a perfect scene on a Sunday afternoon for the antagonists to outdo each other as they sought to prove to their respective masters that were ready and willing to wage a

proxy battle on their behalf. As it will soon be evident, Murang'a County, sandwiched between Kiambu and Nyeri counties, is the very ground where the battle for the much-coveted Kikuyu electorate will be viciously fought.

If the *Kieleweke* group has smelt dissent and infiltration of enemies in what they consider to be their unrivalled turf, the *Tanga Tanga* group, in its roving mission, has stumbled upon a restless electorate, anxious and willing to be wooed by a ready suitor. The electorate has sniffed a one-time opportunity to prove (to its sister counties) that it too can also ascend to the highest echelons of political power and it should not be taken for granted.

The *Kieleweke* group, this time led by nominated MP Maina Kamanda - a man who now carries the label KYM (*kanda ya moko*, Kikuyu for a hatchet man) - "sneaked" into Kiharu constituency, an unacceptable political tourism into another MP's territory without his prior notice. As Uhuru's man on the ground, he had carried Sh1 million to be donated to the church on behalf of the president. Getting whiff of Kamanda's meandering into his constituency, Ndindi Nyoro, the greenhorn Kiharu MP, who today is described as the "Murkomen" of Central Kenya, burst into the church to let Kamanda know that he was the sheriff in town and that others could not appear in his turf without his prior knowledge and permission.

"The ensuing kerfuffle between Nyoro and the elderly Kamanda inside the church was, as unfortunate, the proxy battles being fought elsewhere in the country by the Jubilee factional wings," said a Mt Kenya politician who has known Kamanda for well over three decades. "We were with Kamanda in the opposition politics in the 1990s and one time I and another Central Kenya MP went to bail him out in Embu town after former President Daniel arap Moi ordered that he be locked in a police cell for his utterances."

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The politician told me he has been calling Kamanda's mobile phone number to no avail. "He has refused to pick my call...just as well...because I wanted to tell him that the September 8 ugly scene was beneath him. As a senior politician, he should have known better than to engage in such like shenanigans."

But the Mt Kenya politician reserved the harshest barbs for both the Catholic Church's leadership and the parish priest, Fr John Kibuuru. "That priest is a vagabond. For him to have allowed the politicians to desecrate the offertory was a cardinal sin to, especially us Catholics. The offertory is where we go to offer our supplications, it is a sacrosanct place - how dare he let vagabonds like him defile the holy sanctuary?"

The politician, a staunch Catholic known for his morning mass and an unfailing Sunday service attendance wherever he is, reminded me: "I have never conducted my politics inside the precincts of the church for all the 30-something years I have been in politics. The Church can bare me out...you can bare me out. If and when I want to meet the electorate, who form part of the congregation, I ask it we meet outside the church, after the priest is done with the mass. I've always respected the sanctity of the church."

It was useless for Bishop John (Maria) Wainaina, of Murang'a diocese who also oversees the Kirinyaga diocese to issue a belated decree the day after, ordering politicians to keep off the church's sanctum, said the politician. "The pulpit should not, at all times, be a place for politicians to

address the electorate - the politicians have their forums to do that - and the church's rostrum is not one of them." The politician accused Fr Kibuuru of being partisan on the current succession politics and for letting himself be dined and wined by politicians.

"For my church, I'm sorry to say it has lost its direction: the clergy is no longer the light of the laity. For that ugly scene to have taken place in a Catholic church shows you just how lowly the Catholic church leadership in Kenya has sunk. Priests nowadays do what they feel like doing. The bishops cannot reign in on the priests because they themselves are no better."

He added that the Catholic Church has been infiltrated by ethnic baronial politics, which has chosen to serve the interests of political power brokers. The politician said the church in general, in Kenya has ceded ground to the politician because of greed for money and power.

Gitui Catholic Church is on your way to Kangema and some of the congregants told me that Kamanda's coming to Kiharu without notifying Nyoro was disrespectful and uncalled for. "Kamanda should know we have an MP whom we elected ourselves, he shouldn't stomp here like it's his area, Nyoro is young, but he is ours." The Kiharu residents let it be known to me that "after all, Kamanda is not from here, he is from Nyandarua, if he wants to be elected, there is Nyandarua for him if Nairobi has become too hot for him to handle."

The 36-year-old excitable Ndindi Nyoro has been riding on the crest of a popular wave since that hullabaloo with Kamanda. His electorate right now think of him as a local hero for standing up to Kamanda and for expressing his political stand - which at the moment gels with the electorate: dissatisfaction with President Uhuru's disastrous politics.

Ndindi's Kiambu Mixed Secondary schoolmates remember him as a feisty young man who dreamt of one day being an important (wealthy) man. A relative of Ngenye Kariuki, Ngenye refers to Nyoro as his grandson. He campaigned for Ngenye in 1997 when he ran for the same Kiharu seat, as a student. "He was very active, organising for Ngenye's supporters to be ferried in trucks to his rallies and exclusive meetings," said one of his schoolmates. Ngenye won the seat on a Safina ticket and Ndindi four years later transitioned to Kenyatta University. Kiambu Mixed Secondary School later on was transformed into a boys' only high school.

Between 2013 and 2017, Ndindi Nyoro, served as the Constituency Development Fund (CDF) manager for Kiharu under Irungu Kangata. When Kangata decided to go for the senator seat, there was understandably a mutual agreement between them that Nyoro should "take over" from Kangata. Today, Nyoro has publicly identified his politics with those of Deputy President William Ruto, claiming that he is the best suited to "take over" from President Uhuru who is serving his last second term. His Kiharu constituents seem to largely agree with him...for now.

### **The Matiba factor**

Kiharu constituency is famous for being at one time represented by the irrepressible Kenneth Stanley Njindo Matiba, the rambunctious politician who was detained by President Moi in 1990 and never recovered from his stroke till his death in April 2018. Matiba still evokes nostalgic emotions from Murang'a residents, who still view him as the president they never had. It is a "grudge" they carry against their cousins from both Kiambu and Nyeri counties, albeit surreptitiously.

The general election of November, 1979 called by a new President Moi, who had taken over from Mzee Jomo Kenyatta, who had died on August 22, 1978, saw an energetic, bold and young Matiba enter the race for Kiharu, then known as Mbiri, armed to the teeth with the latest statistical data on the constituency. Fresh from being the managing director of East African Breweries Limited (EABL),

Matiba waged a political battle pitted against the “mighty” Gikonyo Kiano, which Kiano, until his death in April 2003, was never to recover from.

In an era when statistics as an effective campaign tool was unheard of, Matiba came to Mbiri with data that laid bare the geographical, socio-political and economic facts of the constituency: gender composition, household incomes, number of graduates, population density, the area’s topography, voting patterns, I mean...name it. With these facts, Matiba, with military precision, combed the length and breadth of Mbiri, and floored Gikonyo, the first post-independence Minister of Trade and Commerce, in a battle royal that is the stuff of political legends.

When the son of Njindo entered the presidential race in 1992, it was not the same Matiba who, more than a decade before, had entered constituency elective politics as a corporatist, dare-devil, intelligent and sharp man. Although the presidential race was won by the incumbent Moi, Murang’a people to date believe that Matiba won that election, in which he ran alongside Ford Kenya’s Jaramogi Oginga Odinga and the Democratic Party’s Mwai Kibaki.

However, it was Kibaki’s entering the presidential race in 1992 that still rankles the Murang’a folks: Had he not run, the Kikuyu vote would not have been split and, therefore, Matiba would easily have romped home, many of them believe. It is something they will not say loudly, but it is still a chip on their shoulder after all these years.

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“The people of Murang’a County break no bones when they insist they have supported both Kiambu and Nyeri people to ascend to the presidency. But those same people have yet to reciprocate the gesture,” said a former Nairobi city councillor from Dagoretti. “This feeling of ‘abandonment and betrayal’ by their cousins, was aggravated in 2017, when the Murang’a moguls ceded control of Nairobi to a ‘lay about and nonentity’ through Uhuru’s carelessness and cowardly politics.”

The former councillor, who keeps tabs with the Rwathia Group, the influential and richest group of Kikuyu men who since independence have controlled the business and politics of Nairobi city, said the moguls seethe with anger against President Uhuru for the loss of the Nairobi County governor’s seat to Mike Mbuvi Sonko in 2017. “That is all we had asked from Uhuru, to allow us to have Nairobi, but even that he could not deliver,” confided the moguls to my councillor friend.

“The Murang’a people have smelt an opportunity and they are ready to seize it,” said the former councillor. “Uhuru is not going to be a factor insofar as 2022 succession politics are concerned: no Kikuyu voter, much less the political elite, is going to listen to him – he has done his call of duty and as it is, they are not amused with his performance,” the former councillor said.

### **The Raila factor**

The anger against President Uhuru among the Kikuyu electorate makes Ruto seem like the only viable alternative. “It is going to take a near miracle for President Uhuru to persuade the Kikuyus to listen to him. The Kikuyu rebellion against the Kenyatta Family this time is real.”

The Kikuyus are plotting to vote for William Ruto as a protest vote and teach President Uhuru a

lesson, said one of the richest magnates in Murang'a. "Raila will never rule this country. If Uhuru thinks we will be swayed by his belated shaking of hands with that 'mad man', he has another thing coming. Uhuru has overseen the systematic destruction of the Kikuyu economy – he was supposed to protect it, instead, what has he done? He has presided over its deliberate collapse. Is that not why he is sending Kamanda to us? Because he cannot dare venture into Central Kenya or anywhere near Mt Kenya region?"

The Murangá magnate said, "The Kikuyu people will frustrate Raila's presidential efforts until he grows so old that he will not have the stamina to run. We are waiting for that Uhuru to come and tell us about the handshake. We will tell him our minds." If by supporting Ruto, the Murangá people can attempt a stab at the presidency so be it, said the tycoon. He said that President Uhuru spent half of his presidential campaigns demonising Raila, so much so that, to now point the Kikuyu people to his direction is to really mock them. "Has Uhuru come back to the Kikuyu people to undo the damage?" he asked.

The many forays by Deputy President Ruto's team into the heartland of the Kikuyu domain is because he has established that the people are divided and are not speaking in one voice, said a one-time senior civil servant from the Mt Kenya region. "He knows the President's core constituency is bitter with him and because he [Uhuru] is unsure of their retribution against him, he has dilly-dallied going home. So the DP has taken advantage of this lacuna to make inroads into the region and is consistently preaching a message that entrenches their hatred for Raila Odinga."

A poll survey conducted recently by a professional research group showed that if presidential elections were to be held today, William Ruto would win by 45 per cent countrywide, and in the Mt Kenya region, he would garner a very strong support. The poll's sample size, significantly larger than the usual 3000 people, was picked across the 47 counties. The somewhat surprising poll results dissuaded the firm from publishing its findings and making them public. Ruto is considered an incumbent, and therefore a frontrunner, and the only person who has explicitly said he would be gunning for the presidency come 2022. His is not only a brand name, but he has name recognition across the country.

To tame the deputy's presidential ambitions and to curtail his perceived inroads into Central Kenya and the larger Mt Kenya region, his political nemeses in the Jubilee Party have been making his interlocutors lives' in the region, difficult.

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"The hauling of the Kiambu governor to court and making him spend some days in police cells over corruption charges is part of the handshake's efforts to throttle the DP's penetration of the area," said the former senior civil servant. "When he was thrown into custody at the Industrial Police Station cells, Ferdinand Waititu (Kiambu Governor) was visited at night by a Jubilee Party mandarin allied to President Uhuru's wing who mocked him by telling him 'to now call the DP' to bail him out." The mandarin allegedly warned Waititu that he was going to pay for his cavorting with the Deputy President.

Governor Waititu apparently is not the first Central Kenya politician to be "punished" by the "handshake team" for not toeing the line: "The first to be tamed was the deleterious Gatundu South

MP Moses Kuria, who immediately after the swearing-in of President Uhuru Kenyatta for his second term in November 2017, was seen as Ruto's point man in Central Kenya. He was slapped with an unpaid tax accumulated over the years that effectively cooled his heels," said the former senior civil servant.

Yet, according to the senior civil servant, it was Governor Ann Mumbi Waiganjo, formerly known as Ann Waiguru, who had to be quickly nipped in the bud because she was thought to be running ahead of herself. Immediately after being confirmed as the Governor of Kirinyaga, after a protracted court battle filed by her opponent, former Gichugu MP and 2013 presidential contender, Martha Wangari Karua, it is alleged that Governor Ann Mumbi Waiganjo went around telling and whispering to anybody who cared to listen that she was primed to be Deputy President William Ruto's running mate come 2022.

"The Kirinyaga governor was therefore seen as a possible and viable teammate of Ruto in his search for a deputy from the all-important Mt Kenya region," said the former civil servant. "To stop forthwith that talk that apparently was interpreted as rallying the larger Mt Kenya region in the direction of the Deputy President's team 2022, the governor was aptly reminded of the National Youth Service (NYS) mega scandal that took place in 2016 when Ann Waiguru was the Cabinet Secretary for Devolution."

The sudden change of tune by the Kirinyaga governor is not out of step, said my source: "That today she is singing the 'handshake tune' is not as a result of a Damascus moment, the realisation that after all, it isn't a good idea to be a deputy president of Kenya. It is the flexing of power of the opposing sides within the Jubilee Party at play."

Since her change of tune regarding local and national politics, the governor has had to face the wrath of some of her constituents: Last month, when she went to open a market in Kagumo town, she was jeered by a mob that she claimed was paid to do so. Paid to do so, because it told her off over her support of "the handshake" and the Building Bridges Initiative (BBI).

Kagumo town in Kirinyaga Central constituency is the hotbed of Kirinyaga County politics. And this is not the first time the governor was being chased away from Kagumo: When she was campaigning for the governor's seat, she was also one time ferreted out of the town. It took the intervention of Purity Wangui Ngirici, then campaigning for the Women Representative seat, to help her navigate around Kirinyaga County.

"It is Ngirici who held Ann's hand in a manner of speaking and showed her the ropes in Kirinyaga," said one of Karua's chief campaigners. "Waiguru didn't know the nooks and crannies of the county - it was Ngirici who showed her around. Remember Ngirici was always a William Ruto person: the helicopter she was campaigning in - which was emblazoned with her name Wangui - was lent to her by Ruto." Purity Wangui Ngirici hails from one of the two most powerful families in Mwea: Mbari ya Douglas, (the clan of Douglas) and Mbari ya Mkombozi (the clan of the saviour). She is married to Ngirici, who is the son of the late spy master James Kanyotu.

Ngirici, who is in her late 40s, is the Women's Rep, but by and large she controls the politics of Kirinyaga: three-quarters of all the elected MCAs owe allegiance to her. To checkmate her, the governor equally nominated her loyalist MCAs to counterbalance Ngirici's force. Ngirici has trashed the handshake and has been telling the Kirinyaga electorate that the BBI's motive is to unload Raila onto them by creating additional executive positions.

In Ngirici, Ruto has a powerful ally in the county. It is, therefore, not improbable to imagine where Ngirici's politics are headed: in 2022 Ann Mumbi Waiganjo will have a worthy opponent for the

governor's seat. And if all factors remain the same, it is also not too difficult to imagine whose drumbeats she will be beating: William Ruto's.

On the peripheries of Mt Kenya region, other Ruto allies include the Kikuyu MP Kimani Ichungwá, Kandara MP Alice Wahome, Kiharu MP Ndindi Nyoro and Bahati MP Kimani Ngunjiri. "These are relatively young MPs (of course apart from Kimani) in age and politics. They are pragmatic enough to know where their political bread is buttered; not with Uhuru, but with Ruto...so it's nothing personal," said a Jubilee Party politician from Mt Kenya.

In an area where 70 per cent of the incumbent MPs are thrown out every five years, these MPs are closely reading the signs on the wall - and the signs on the wall currently in the Mt Kenya region are that William Ruto is the man to beat.

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