Kibra: The Face of Kenyan Politics to Come?

By Carl Odera

“The most painful state of being is remembering the future, particularly the one you’ll never have.”— Søren Kierkegaard
Located about 6.6 kilometres from Nairobi city centre, Kibra is a sprawling informal settlement with an estimated population of about 200,000 people. Majority of Kibra residents live in extreme poverty. Unemployment rates are high, persons living with HIV/AIDS are many, and cases of assault and rape common. Clean water is scarce. Diseases caused by this lack of water are common. The majority living in the informal settlement lack access to basic services including electricity, running water, and medical care.

But this photo essay is not about the peddled quintessential cliché narrative depiction of Kibra as Africa’s biggest slum’ – itself a false assertion. Rather, Kibra has historically been Nairobi’s most vibrant political constituency; its residents often at the forefront of agitation for expansion of political space in Kenya; and, the most enthusiastic demonstrators at political meetings where the opposition is pitched against an apparently recalcitrant ruling elite. The Kibra by-election is also the political backyard of Raila Odinga, leader of the Orange Democratic Movement and the most enduring fixture in opposition leadership since the early 1990s. Currently, in an alliance with the President Uhuru Kenyatta, the Kibra by-election was occasioned by the death on the 26th of July 2019 of Ken Okoth, 41, the area’s dynamic, popular and highly effective MP.

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The demise of Ken Okoth left the seat open for a contest directly between Raila Odinga, whose family has dominated the area for decades and the Deputy President William S. Ruto who is determined to entrench himself as the only viable successor to Kenyatta who is currently serving his last constitutionally mandated term. As such the Kibra by-election of November 7 marked the unofficial commencement of the 2022 campaign season in Kenya with Ruto’s aggressive raid into Odinga’s ‘political bedroom’.
Deputy President William Ruto and Jubilee candidate McDonald Mariga in Kibra’s DC Grounds on Sunday.

ODM leader Raila Odinga with party flag-bearer Bernard Imran Okoth (left) sings the national anthem at a rally on Kiambere Road.

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The by-election to fill the position left vacant following the death of the area MP, Okoth, attracted 24 candidates, ODM candidate Imran Okoth, Jubilee’s McDonald Mariga and Eliud Owalo of Amani National Congress, were the dominant players.
Endorsed football star McDonald Mariga

Rally to drum up support for Imran Okoth, ODM’s candidate for Kibra by-election.

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Days to the parliamentary by-election there were reports of fracas between warring factions. Rowdy
residents, for instance, kicked former Kakamega senator Boni Khawale out of Kibra upon his arrival in Laini Saba ward, claiming it was ODM’s bedroom.

Destruction of property was also reported.

Milly Achieng, a tailor-resident of Kibra told the Elephant that supporters of an opposing candidate recently went and attacked one of her friends and fellow party member and demolished her house. She was forced to flee Kibra with her children.

A family house demolished in a political violence encounter in Kibra.

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The Kibra by-election received wide support from leaders across the political divide. Governors Charity Ngilu, Alfred Mutua, Kivutha Kibwana and Anne Waiguru joined Raila Odinga and the ODM party in drumming up support for its candidate, Imran Okoth. The leaders announced that this by-election was the beginning of a new political movement that would drum up support for the Building Bridges Initiative (BBI) and ultimately forge an alliance for the 2022 General Election.
Charity Ngilu campaigning in Kibra to get the vote for ODM candidate Imran Okoth within the Kamba community
Governor Waiguru at Joseph Kangethe Grounds in Kibra on Sunday the 3rd of November to drum up support for the ODM candidate

Raila Odinga and Machakos Governor Alfred Mutua arriving for a rally organised to woo Kamba voters to rally behind ODM candidate for Kibra constituency.

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On November 7, 2019, the polling stations across the constituency were opened by 6 am to a smooth start of voting throughout the day amidst a reportedly low voter turnout. The voting stations were closed immediately after the voting exercise was concluded and voter tallying began thereafter. Residents stood in groups waiting for the results.
A man carries his disabled friend to a polling station in Kibra’s Laini Saba.

ODM leader Raila Odinga at Old Kibera Primary school polling station to cast his vote.
An election official marks an indelible ink stain on Amani Congress Party’s candidate Eliud Owalo at Old Kibera.

A man shows his finger marked with phosphorous ink after voting

As counting of votes for Kibra by-election continued on the night of November the 7, Jubilee candidate McDonald Mariga conceded defeat to Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) party
aspirant Imran Okoth.

In a Twitter post, Mariga called Okoth and congratulated him for his victory and promised to work together after the elections.

Earlier tonight I called @TheODMparty candidate @ImranOkoth and wished him well.Ahsante Kibra for the support. pic.twitter.com/s6ujwUPNEL

— Mariga Macdonald (@MarigaOfficial) November 7, 2019

According to the results announced by the Independent Electoral Boundaries Commission (IEBC) on Friday, November 8, Imran Okoth garnered 24,636 votes beating Mariga by over half the total number of counted votes standing at 11,230 votes. ANC’s Eliud Owalo was a distant third, managing to garner a paltry 5,275 votes out of the 41,984 votes cast.

A child in Kibra celebrating Imran Okoth’s victory

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Though the Kibra by-election has been deemed a win for Raila Odinga and the handshake and a loss for Ruto and the “tanga tanga” movement, these political battles have yet to translate into tangible benefits for the ordinary mwananchi whom they purport to fight for.
Nancy Akinyi, a resident of Sarang’ombe Ward, Kibra constituency

Written by Joe Kobuthi

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