



Bridge Over Troubled Water: Unexpected Reactions to the BBI Report

By Dauti Kahura



On November 27, 2019, the day the Building Bridges Initiative (BBI) document was being publicly launched at the Bomas of Kenya off Langata Road in Nairobi, I hopped into an Ongata Rongai-bound matatu from the Railway Station in central Nairobi. The talk of the town on that day was the much-hyped BBI report, so I knew the chatter in the matatu would be about the BBI.

When I told the tout that I was dropping off at the Galleria Mall because I was headed to Bomas, he said, “What a waste of public funds...what a useless report.” By his looks and demeanour, I could tell he was in his mid-20s, well-socialised, if not well-educated. “I’ve read parts of the report and to me that document is just about one thing: It is a ploy by Uhuru Kenyatta to self-preserve himself, as he also preserves his Kenyatta family dynasty. Everything else in that document is a fair game.”

“How will introducing new seats in the executive, solve our economic problems? Will the introduction of the position of Prime Minister solve the problem of electoral theft? Because that has been the problem since 2007. Let’s not beat about the bush: Three times the presidential elections have been stolen and three times, the defeated have overturned the victor’s win to rule Kenya by force of law and ethnic superiority. President Uhuru Kenyatta is looking for a back door to re-enter the executive so that he can continue protecting his family’s immense wealth.”

The conductor told me of how the report talked of uplifting the youth so that they can be self-sufficient and get gainful employment...“this is B...S... and a very tired cliché. The youth have become every politician’s moral guilt-trip: ‘We need to find our youth jobs or else we shall not have peace.’ So to have peace in the country, you create the position of the PM and his deputies and office of the Leader of Opposition.” In just about one and half years, said the tout, the BBI team had splashed the equivalent of Sh11billion to produce an uninspiring, not well-written small document that says nothing about everything that has not been said before.

“If the government was interested in improving the lives of the miserable youth, it would have disbursed that kind of money to the youths themselves. But this government cares so much about the youth, it spent all that money to write about how, if the youth are not catered for, Kenya will not have peace. They can do whatever it is they want to do with the report, I’m least interested in its shenanigans.” I did not ask the tout his name, but I had no doubt he knew his politics well.

The conductor reminded me of my friend Allan Mbuthia, a graduating agricultural economics student at the University of Nairobi (UoN). Mbuthia will be graduating this month with an upper second Bachelor’s degree. During most part of his student life, he worked on and off as a conductor on route 105 that plies the Kikuyu town route. The work has enabled him to pay his university fees. Brilliant and charming, I asked him whether he had read the BBI report. “Which report,” he retorted in his characteristic witticism. “I will be graduating in a few and I still got arrears I need to clear, I ain’t got time to waste on a useless report. Uhuru Kenyatta has no intentions of going anywhere...that’s what that report is about.”

The Bomas jamboree

At Bomas, the crowd inside the conference hall was controlled and carefully picked by the BBI mandarins to shore up support and shout down anybody whose views were contrary to the BBI cabal’s wishes. The crowd outside was not so orderly, so I opted to spend most of my time outside, where the erected white mega dome tents held close to 3,000 people.

Inside the hall, there was a carnival mood around the “BBI team”. The terrace corner was occupied by the “Embrace Team” - the “women’s league” of the BBI. Formed just after the BBI was constituted, it consists of female Jubilee Party politicians - current and former MPs and senators. It is ostensibly led by Ann Mumbi Waiguru, the governor of Kirinyaga County, and some of its leading lights include the Nairobi County speaker, the troubled Beatrice Elachi, who returned to her office two months ago after being impeached last September by a coterie of hostile MCAs.

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The event’s master of ceremony was Junet Mohammed, the Suna East MP and Raila Odinga’s political son. The crescendo of his emceeing reached its zenith when, just before he invited Onesmus Kipchuma Murkomen to the stage, he took a jibe at the Jubilee Party’s internal squabbles, which I paraphrase: “Today’s a national event and therefore Jubilee Party members should put aside their differences and talk about what’s in front of us. They can resume their quarrels afterwards when we are done.”

The 42-year-old Suna East MP is a confidante of Raila: When Raila went to shake the hand of President Uhuru Kenyatta on March 9, 2018, he took Junet with him. “Raila trusts Junet like his

son,” opined another equally trusted aide to Raila. “If Raila wants to send a special message to Uhuru, he gets hold of Junet. Likewise, if Uhuru wants to reach Raila confidentially and fast he looks for Junet.”

Junet’s jibe upset the Tanga Tanga wing of the Jubilee Party that was also inside the hall. So much so that when Murkomen stood to speak, he could hardly contain himself: he was boiling with rage and it had to take the intervention of Senator Yusuf Haji, the chairman of BBI, to calm him down and to ask the crowd to stop heckling him. When he spoke, he was shaking with anger, Murkomen said that it was unfortunate that the event had been turned into a partisan occasion. “We cannot have a master of ceremony who is biased and does not respect our party leaders,” he said.

Murkomen was probably upset because his boss William Ruto, the Deputy President, was being embarrassed and humiliated by none other than President Uhuru, who would laugh uproariously every time a snide remark was made about the Deputy President and/or his Tanga Tanga brigade. As Murkomen spewed his diatribe, Rachel Wambui Shebesh, the former Nairobi County Jubilee Party Women Rep, who was seated among the Embrace Team, stood to boo the senator. Acting as heckler-in-chief, Shebesh invited other members of the team and their sympathisers to jeer Murkomen. But as he was being booed inside the hall, Murkomen was being applauded outside by scores of wananchi sitting in the shade.

Junet’s closeness to Raila is such that he has the luxury of reading “The Enigma’s” mind: “In our culture [referring to Luo not Somali culture], if a mzee tells you he’ll get back to you on an issue, you surely know, as day follows night, that he will. So you don’t rush him – you wait patiently. I’ve looked at Baba and I can tell he has yet to immerse himself with the document. I’ll give two weeks, after which he’ll relay to us his followers his findings. And his findings will be our findings too.”

Seated in the BBI corner was the freedom fighter and nationalist. the nonagenarian Gitu wa Kahengeri. He sat next to Esther Passaris, the Nairobi County Women’s Rep. My friend John Maina, who is a confidante of Raila, had driven Gitu to Bomas. When he went to look for him for the ride back home, he found him gone: “I asked him to leave early to avoid the melee and push and shove of the people,” explained the Nairobi Women’s Rep.

“We’re not boarding”

Most of the people milling outside, I gathered, were Raila Odinga’s most loyal followers. As Raila himself quipped, “If Kibra is the bedroom...Langata, where Bomas is located, is the sitting room.” Many of his followers had walked to Bomas. Those that did not find a place to sit milled around and formed disparate discussion groups that dissected the BBI document.

Edging closer to one of these groups, I listened as they tore the document into pieces. “This document is meant to manage our angry stance – what new thing does it propose? They are once again baiting the youth with this talk of bettering their lives – that is utter nonsense. We’re not boarding that ship. The chief problem of this country is vote stealing. We popularly elect our leader, but they always steal our votes...how, you tell me...will the position of a prime minister stop this wanton theft?”

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It was obvious the group was unimpressed by the report: “There is a certain clique of people in this country that have decreed that no matter what, they will not let any other person rule the country. Now they have roped in Baba to help them retain that power...sometimes, it is very difficult to understand Raila.”

Their animated discussion was interrupted by the appearance of Deputy President William Ruto, on the giant plasma TV screens that were placed in strategic corners. They wanted to hear what he had to say and when he said it, they all applauded. The gist of the DP’s speech was that the document was not bad but that it should not be about creating [executive] positions for certain individuals.

I called one of the group’s discussants aside, a lady from Kibra called Nyasembo, and asked her to break down for me Baba’s most loyal lieutenants’ true feelings. “Some are confused and tired...but really more fatigued than confused. Many are just indifferent. They know BBI is just a circus, a merry-go-round meant to create a happy feeling and calm down Baba’s angry supporters. Yet, the crux of the matters is we cannot continue this way for long...Baba’s presence still towers over us. It is very difficult to disengage just like that from him. To be honest, with the release of the report, we sincerely don’t know his game plan. We’ll have to wait for him to make his move.”

Still, she was of the view that the Luo community generally supported the BBI. “It is not difficult to see why,” mused the talkative lady. “The killing of Luo youth by the state’s instruments of violence has stopped. They are now not being profiled or targeted – whether here in Nairobi or back at home in Kisumu. The police and the paramilitary had express permission to mow down any Luo youth in the ghettos of Kibra, Kondele, Manyatta, Nyalenda, Nyamasaria, and Obunga.”

Kondele, Manyatta, Nyalenda, Nyamasaria, and Obunga are slums in Kisumu where some of the fiercest battles between the state security apparatus and recalcitrant youth took place after the nullification of the August 8, 2017 presidential elections by the Supreme Court of Kenya. One time the battle-hardened Kondele youth engaged the paramilitary General Service Unit (GSU) for 14 hours, driving out the combined force of the regular police and GSU out of town...but not without live bullets being used on them.

Early this year, down in Kondele, some youth had told me that driving out the humiliated GSU from the newly built thoroughfare that passes through the settlement had turned them into marked men. Kondele, they said, is the nerve centre that organises counter-attacks against the state security forces. “We only need to send word that our formation is ready and the rest follow suit. The first to respond is Manyatta, because it borders us, then Obunga, Nyalenda and Nyamasaria, which border each other.”

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According to Nyasembo, in Kibra, Raila’s political turf in Nairobi, police were expressly ordered to shoot to kill. “Some of our youth fell from the police’s bullets. But you know our youth, they don’t fear the police, so anytime they would be spotted in Kibra, the youth would interpret they are looking for a fight...To date, there are areas in Kibra the police cannot venture into. They very much know what would be awaiting them.”

A temporary truce

BBI has apparently come with some goodies. “They have just finished the road from Kisumu to

Kakamega. The road from Kisumu to Isebania - on the border of Kenya and Tanzania - is also being worked on, although we hear the contractor could have left the site," said Nyasembo. "Kisumu city centre beautification is ongoing...although it preceded the handshake and is a project of the Kenya Urban Project and World Bank. There has also been some hubbub activities at the port - Wagni beach was cleared without resistance to give Baba's port project a chance."

The lack of hostility among the Luo community towards BBI is a relief, said my friend John Okoth from Kisumu: "There is a feeling the handshake took off the heavy burden of political fights - of the Luos always being pitted against the state." He said the community no longer felt the urge to be the "vanguard of Kenya's political reform struggle".

Okoth was dismissive of those who question Raila's motives. "Raila did his part. He didn't make it because they stole his votes. We understand. Now let those who may feel aggrieved carry on with the struggle. If he has joined the other side so what...let him be."

He said there was a lot of cynicism about the BBI politics. "The feeling is whatever Baba does is okay. If he gets something out of it cool, if he doesn't...it's still cool. There are no grand expectations. It is that feeling more than material rewards that drives the indifference to BBI."

A political party leader who hails from Kisumu County said to me that the BBI's true purpose was to form a pact between the Kikuyu and Luo elites - a *détente* that was supposed to stop the massacre of Luo youth by a state perceived to be controlled by the Kikuyu. "And that has largely been achieved. But beyond the declaration that 'Luo Lives Matter', BBI was supposed to have come up with Big Bold Ideas - BBI - that charted a way forward on the future of Kenyan politics: a clean break from the politics of vote stealing, because that has been at the core of the Luo community's profiling and the unleashing of violence against its people."

Instead, said the party leader, "what came out of the BBI report was many underwhelming and irrelevant stories that have nothing to do with a reorganisation of electoral justice, but everything to do with the re-establishment of the current political order."

The party leader claimed that the BBI report was not the original document envisaged by the team. "This report is a variant of many reports that were trashed to accommodate William Ruto and the *Punguza Mzigo* [lighten the load] initiative." According to the party leader, all that the BBI has done is to create more confusion and to a temporary truce. "The Kisumu youth are not amused - yet they have nowhere to go - maybe for now. I foresee political turbulence in the coming days."

One of the biggest reasons why the Luo community is in support of BBI is the unspoken yet widespread feeling among its people that the Kikuyu are in a bind and are facing an economic meltdown. And so because they created this mess, they must be allowed to "finish the journey". As Uhuru's supporters say, "I'm completing the journey with Uhuru Kenyatta - what about you?"

Nyasembo said Kikuyus mocked the Luo during the repeat election in 2017. They said that they would elect Uhuru for a second time even without Luos' support - which they did on October 26.

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A more fundamental reason, closer to home, why the Luos are supporting the BBI is William Ruto.

“Ruto’s rabid hatred of Baba, his incessant insults and innuendoes towards Raila have driven many of Raila’s supporters to rally behind him,” said Nyasembo. “Ruto, in his differences with Baba, had become personal, too personal. Even Raila’s lukewarm supporters cannot stomach this. Differ with Baba, for all we his supporters care, but don’t demean him on a public rostrum.” Because of the DP’s unceasing jibes against Raila, his support base has decided they must stand behind him. “We can discuss the merits and demerits of Baba’s supporting BBI in-house.”

Raila’s bedrock support is largely intact, Nyasembo pointed out to me: “He confused us with the handshake move...Some of us became very angry and hugely disappointed, but he is still the enigma...If tomorrow he tells us that he will be having a public rally at Uhuru Park in the morning, trust me, we will all would troop there by 6 a.m. What am I saying? Baba’s followers will go wherever he is... he is now with BBI, that’s where we shall be...until further notice.”

As Raila’s foot soldiers and loyal supporters seek to situate BBI within the body politic of the Luo community, even as they keenly watch Baba’s body language for any signals, the Kikuyus – whose *muthamaki* has been praising the handshake and supporting the BBI – have been rejecting the document.

Recently, in a series of tweets, former Mukurwe-ini MP Kabando wa Kabando, a former diehard supporter of President Uhuru, acknowledged that Kikuyus were very angry with *muthamaki* [Uhuru]. He said if the president does not move quickly to assuage their anger, BBI will be in trouble among the Mt Kenya people. The truth of the matter is that Kikuyus in general view the BBI as a short cut that will impose Raila Odinga (the community’s political nemesis) on them.

Mad man versus saviour

Already facing economic hard times, Kikuyus have turned their anger on President Uhuru and his lacklustre performance. And unless things change now and before 2022, they have vowed to teach him a lesson by rejecting any of his political advances towards them. His six years of underperformance has made it apparent that he has no clear successor. This, coupled with post-2022 uncertainties, have made Kikuyus seriously contemplate embracing William Ruto as their saviour. Ruto, realising the dilemma in which the Kikuyus are, has been sending all the right signals to them as he plots to lock them on his side for the 2022 showdown.

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Two separate incidents captured in central Kenya serve as a prescient warning to President Uhuru. The first one is a video clip shot in Kiharu constituency of Murang’a County showing some constituents expressing their huge disaffection with President Uhuru to their self-effacing MP Ndindi Nyoro. “Uhuru came here and told us Raila is a mad man,” says an agitated woman. “We now hear he has been trolling around with the mad man. When did he befriend him?” Pointing to a specific place, the woman remembers President Uhuru’s very own words: “Woooi please don’t let me be devoured by this ogre [Raila].”

“They will bring this BBI to us, tell us it’s good, but afterwards, if we are not careful, it’ll be a burden to us,” says the woman. “We must have a baraza over this document to learn more about it – if there isn’t anything beneficial for us, we’ll defeat it.”

A second video clip shows a Mukurino mzee, Michael Ndungú, speaking to a journalist in Nyeri County. This is what he says: “Our leader is Ruto – whatever he says is what we’ll follow – he’s the

one leading us in Mt Kenya: Nyeri, Murang'a and Kiambu.”

It seems BBI has become the albatross that the people have to carry around their necks even as they contemplate how best to cross the bridge without being washed away.

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