



Fear and Loathing: Why Kikuyus May End Up Voting for Ruto in 2022

By Dauti Kahura



The two-week break in the month of December afforded me some time to travel around the Kikuyu populated peri-urban areas bordering Nairobi in Central Kenya (also known as Uthamakistan in today's political parlance) and in the greater Rift Valley - a segment of Kenyan society that has strong views on the succession politics of 2022.

For the very first time, the ethnic community's elites who have dictated the pace and rhythm of the country's politics since 1963 are at a crossroads: they do not have a horse to back. Conditioned and socialised to believe they cannot back someone outside their ethnic cocoon, they are at a loss, mainly because President Uhuru Kenyatta is serving his last term and has not pointed to anybody who could possibly succeed him. In a country where presidential campaigns begin two years before the actual election date, the uncertainty that President Uhuru has created among the Kikuyu rank and file is palpable.

This uncertainty has been exacerbated by the fact that Uhuru is viewed as the most underperforming president since independence; he is now loathed and lampooned in equal measure by his core constituency - the Kikuyu underclass and pretenders to the middle class. Why? "Because after voting for him three times - in 2013 and twice in 2017 - it is very painful to see that we the Kikuyus suffer unmitigated economic disaster, courtesy of his gross incompetence and cluelessness,"

said Peterson Gakuo from Ihwagi location, Mathira constituency, Nyeri County.

“We have now come to the realization that the man was all form and no substance. We thrust the presidency onto him because he was supposedly one of us. I can tell you there was no other criterion...we were told he is our leader by the late John Njoroge Michuki. If anybody wanted to negotiate with the Kikuyu vote, he had to talk to Uhuru. And so we were stuck with a man whose only claim to any ‘political fame’ is that he has pedigree. It is the greatest mistake the Kikuyus have ever made.”

The Kikuyu rank and file, suffering from the vicissitudes of President Uhuru’s intemperate economic policies and callousness, have in recent years been showing him the middle finger. They are revolting. Like they say where I come from, “*vitu kwa ground ni different.*” Things on the ground are different. In Kikuyuland, the name Uhuru is slowly becoming anathema. “*Please, please ndukagwetere ritwa riu haha, ndugathokie ngoro, ndakare.*” Kindly avoid mentioning that name [Uhuru] here, I don’t want my mood spoilt.

The second reason why this uncertainty is driving the Kikuyus crazy and is taking on a dangerous trajectory is that “Uhuru is carelessly endangering the lives of the Kikuyus of the greater Rift Valley,” said Beth Wairimu from Zambezi trading centre along the Nairobi-Nakuru highway in Kikuyu, Kiambu County, which is some 20 kilometres from Nairobi.

“In 2013, we Kikuyus voted for both Uhuru and William Ruto as a team. There was an understanding that after Uhuru’s 10-year two terms, he would support Ruto. This is publicly acknowledged within the community. This meant the Kikuyu people would equally throw their lot behind Ruto in order to ensure the security of the Kikuyus in the Rift Valley diaspora and to honour his part of the bargain. Now to turn around and betray him is really jeopardising the safety of our people in the Rift. We owe him [Ruto] our trust.”

I shall return to this theme of betrayal, and security, survival and trust issues of a politically-jaded community later. But first, let me begin my story with a meeting that took place exactly two years ago.

Politics of betrayal

In December 2017, just about a month after Uhuru was sworn in after the controversial repeat presidential election of October 26, I sat with two Uthamaki fundamentalists, one a Nairobi city Jubilee Party politician and the other a nouveau riche city of Nairobi real estate businessman. We were at the Sagret Hotel in the Milimani area, a popular *nyama choma* joint. Although patronised mainly by Kikuyu old money for many years, it has in recent years been attracting a coterie of new money, mostly made in the Mwai Kibaki era between 2003 and 2013. The businessman I was meeting was one of the fellows who made his millions during that time.

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The middle-aged businessman, after soaking in *thufu wa thenge* (he-goat’s soup), *mutura* (traditionally-made sausages) and *ndudero* (stuffed intestines), turned to me and said straight to my face: “*Ni ithue twathanaga guku...Kahura ni waigwa? Uthie ukandekke uguo niguu ndaiga nii ndurika ya wa Susana.*” It is we [presuming himself to be part of the Uthamaki cabal] who rule this country. Kahura have you heard? You can write that’s what I’ve said, me, a braggart and son of Susan.

"Nitwarekania na Ruto...Ruto no riu? Ndagecirie tutioe uria ekire...MoU ya Raila twameikirie kioro, ona ya Ruto noguo tukumeka." We are finished with Ruto...who is Ruto by the way? He shouldn't for a moment think we've forgotten what he did [referring to the 2007/2008 post-election violence in the Rift Valley region]...we threw Raila's MoU into the toilet...that's what we are going to do with Ruto's.

In December 2002, the National Rainbow Coalition (Narc), fronted by Mwai Kibaki, defeated Kanu, whose flag bearer was the neophyte Uhuru Kenyatta. Narc comprised Kibaki's Democratic Party (DP), Charity Ngilu (today the governor of Kitui County)'s Social Democratic Party (SDP), Michael Kijana Wamalwa's Ford Kenya and the breakaway Kanu group that was led by Raila Odinga and consisted of, among others, George Saitoti, Joseph Kamotho and William Ntimama. This Raila group morphed into the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). (Saitoti, Ntimama, Kamotho and Wamalwa are no longer with us; they all died under different circumstances and are therefore not part of any current coalition.)

In an MoU that is presumed to have been agreed upon by Raila and his LDP group and Kibaki and his DP brigade, in the event that they took power, each group would equitably share cabinet positions. More significantly, there was an understanding that once Kibaki took on the presidency, he would appoint Raila as the prime minister. The long and short of that MoU is that it was never honoured. Five years later, in 2007 (an election year), Raila cobbled up another political party, the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM), that took on Kibaki's Party of National Unity (PNU), which had also ditched Narc.

Ruto: The key to peace in the Rift Valley?

The disputed presidential vote count in December 2007 led to the massacre of more than 1,000 people, and the displacement of more than 500,000 others, the majority of whom were Kikuyus from the Rift Valley. To cut a long story short, the businessman told me: *"Twamurutire nyama ee kanua...eke uria ekaga aria samaki na atofoke rui, kai Ruto ariwe wena ny...e cigana?"* We snatched the victory from the lion's mouth, (basically to mean), we grabbed back power from Raila, who had won it and we told him to go jump into Lake Victoria and do his worst...we were ready to deal with him. So this Ruto, how many b....s does he have?

The duo boasted that if Ruto lives up to January 2020 to be in government or indeed even anywhere, *"niukumenya ndiaruire rui Ruaka."* You'll know I wasn't circumcised by the Ruaka River, said the braggadocio. "We tamed this Raila man who has given us enough headaches, put him in his place...save for Ruto who entered politics just the other day. I say yet again, we govern this country, we decide among ourselves who will rule the country. The other communities must wait for us to dish out positions to them, and they must be satisfied with what we give them. It is not for nothing that our political and business elites are the most powerful in the country."

Fast forward to January 2020 and it is the Kikuyu electorate that finds itself torn between the devil and the deep blue sea: it must choose what should "devour" it. Whatever option it takes, it will not be an easy choice because Ruto has presented the Kikuyus with the greatest dilemma. If they do not support Ruto, is there a risk that the violence of 2007/8 will be repeated? As a food seller from Banana in Kiambu County told me, "It is true, the memories of 2007 are vivid, yet were it not for Ruto, Uhuru would not be president and our people in the Rift would not be living in peace and harmony."

I met the feisty food seller who runs a *kibanda* (foodshed) 150 metres from the gates of the United Nations complex and US Embassy in Gigiri in December 2019. Serving me chapati and coco beans, she confessed that it had been a most difficult year. "People don't have as much money in their

pockets as they used to do, but God is great, we are alive.” I asked her why the Kikuyus, who had willingly chosen President Uhuru, were now complaining. She said, “We don’t want to hear that name – he has really annoyed us, it is unbelievable what he has done to us and now to make it worse, he wants to impose Raila on us.”

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The lady, who looked to be in her mid-40s, told me she would be voting for Ruto come 2022. “At least the man is firm, focused and resolute.” The food peddler said that deep in their hearts, Kikuyus know they owe Ruto a political debt: “We entered into a pact with the Kalenjin people, that they would help our son capture power and protect our people in the Rift. In return, we would lend our support also to their son after Uhuru’s terms ended. It would now be disingenuous for the Kikuyu people to renege on that promise...it actually would be dangerous. I have relatives in the Rift and I can tell you, they are not sitting pretty.”

“So you are alive to the post-election violence of 2007?” I asked her.

“Oh very much so.”

“How then do you explain the violent backlash from the same people you claim to have been protecting your relatives?”

“We forgave Ruto,” the lady said to me. “As Christians, we are called to forgive our transgressors...but we’ll never forget, no, we cannot forget. It was very painful. But remember also, Ruto was working under the command of Raila. He takes the bigger blame. Raila is very wicked, absolutely wicked – he will never be king in this country. Look now at what he has done after realising he cannot win through the front door. He has gone ahead to confuse Uhuru so that he can capture power through the back door.”

The woman claimed that Uhuru is a victim of Raila’s charms, machinations and political whims. I asked her what she meant. “Can’t you see how he crafted the handshake – Raila is the architect of the handshake and BBI and Uhuru fell for the ploy. “*Uhuru ni kirimu gitu.*” Uhuru is our stupid son. President Uhuru has thoroughly let down the community...“*No ona kuri uguo, mwana muciare ndateagwo.*” You do not throw away a baby you have given birth to. Even though President Uhuru has wasted the aspirations of the Kikuyu people, he still remains painfully one of our own.

Raila: The central hate figure

I learnt that the Kikuyu people were back to stereotyping Raila, and by extension, the Luo community: the insults and innuendoes have been revived. “We will never let the country be ruled by an uncircumcised man. Let me ask you, why is Raila so eager to rule Kenya? The day the Luos take power in this country we’re finished, so that will never happen. That’s why we’ll reject anything to do with Raila and Uhuru together...so take it from me, we’ll shoot down that BBI of theirs.”

Once again, Raila is the central hate figure of the Kikuyu people. “It is this handshake that worsened our economic plight,” said a straight-faced Peter Macharia, a businessman who runs a tours and travel company. “Raila should have stayed in the opposition because he is best at checking the

government, but not as a president, because anyway, he'll never be." According to Macharia, Raila was born to dabble in opposition politics and not the politics of leading the country as its head of state.

"Uhuru, during the presidential campaigns, reminded us - for the umpteenth time - that Raila was uncircumcised, and was therefore a boy and that national leadership was not for boys. Now we see them holding hands. Did Uhuru circumcise Raila?" asked a woman from Kagio Market, in Kirinyaga County. "Uhuru should stop joking with us; if he has circumcised him, he should come back here and tell us so."

A lady pastor who runs an evangelical church in Githurai, Nairobi County, said that she would vote for Ruto. "There's a way he connects with the people of God. The good Lord could be using him to pass a special message to us Kikuyus. I don't trust Raila - why does he exhibit an unbridled thirst for power? I've always doubted whether he's Godly.

"Have you ever heard of the dog whistle theory?" asked a mzee from Kiambu. The Kikuyu people had been conditioned to be wary of Raila's movements, utterances and whatever else he did, the old man said. "When Raila opens his mouth to speak, they automatically interpret their own things, totally different from what other communities have heard him say. *Lazima tupambane na hii ufisadi vilivyo*. (We must slay the dragon of corruption relentlessly.) The Kikuyu interpret the statement to mean: We must deal with these Kikuyus firmly wherever they are." The mzee said right now to sell Raila and anything associated with him in central Kenya is like pounding water in a mortar with a pestle.

"Kikuyus are waiting for Uhuru to tell them this is the direction we the Kikuyu community will be taking," said the old man. "If he says we're going west, they will take the opposite direction. That's what they plan to do because they want to teach him a lesson by acting contrary to his wishes."

Anger begets anger. "Kikuyus plan to vote for Ruto to punish Uhuru. Absurd as it may sound, Kikuyus have resolved to give President Uhuru the contempt card because he has already shown he doesn't want Ruto to succeed him. After re-electing him for a difficult second time, the Kikuyus are bitter with President Uhuru for exposing them by not grooming a fellow Kikuyu to succeed him. Instead he looks like he's rooting for Raila." In the logic of the Kikuyu people, said the mzee, it is akin to a man who, hoping to evade stepping onto urine, jumps straight into faeces.

The Kikuyu people's political wisdom can be puzzling, said mzee Kimiti from Gikambura in Kikuyu constituency, Kiambu County. "I describe them as *oogi aa jata aria matoi kendu*, the wise men who know nothing."

"In 2002," recalled Kimiti, "the Kiambu people went against the grain and voted for Uhuru Kenyatta to a man when practically every other Kikuyu was rooting for Mwai Kibaki. In their strange logic, Kibaki wasn't one of their own - even though he spoke the Gikuyu language, hailed from central Kenya and had served in prominent positions, including as an influential finance minister and vice president. These were not enough to qualify him to be called a son of the soil."

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But in 2007, the people of Kiambu turned around and voted for Kibaki. "Do you know why?" posed the mzee. "Because Uhuru had joined Kibaki's PNU bandwagon. Had he not, they would have followed him to wherever he would have taken them, abstained, or thrown their votes to the dogs.

Now they are rallying against President Uhuru but still waiting for him to show them a sign. Brainwashed into believing that voting for Raila as president would be the beginning of their end, they are currently confused with the newly found bromance between their son and Raila. [Kiambu] Kikuyus can kill you with their wisdom: their very own Uhuru is finishing them from within, yet they firmly believe that Raila, who has never done any harm to them, will actually finish them.”

Gakuo said the only option Kikuyus currently have is to hedge their bets on Ruto. “President Uhuru has been waging war on Ruto... for what? When we voted for them for the first time in 2013, we knew both were running away from the ICC [International Court of Justice]. Uhuru therefore knew Ruto’s character. Why is he now turning around, telling us Ruto is the most corrupt state officer in his government? *Uhuru arenda gutukuwa urimu niki?* Why is Uhuru taking us for fools? That narrative of Ruto being the greatest thief is neither here nor there and in any case it’s already late in the day. *Muceera na mukundu akundukaga taguo.* He who is in the company of a thief is also a thief. They [the Kenyattas] have stolen from their very own Kikuyu people. What have they done for the people?”

Collective guilt

Amid the confusion and paradoxes reigning in Uthamakistan, an urgent need for the Kikuyu people to assuage their collective guilt is also quietly at play. Businessman Ndiritu Kanyoni told me that Kikuyus want to vote for Ruto because it would ostensibly “right” the “wrong” of being the only community that doesn’t vote for those who are not from their own ethnic group. “They want, for the first time, to prove to the other ethnic communities that they indeed can vote for a non-Kikuyu,” said Kanyoni. “The guilt of being seen as the most tribalistic people when it comes to voting for the president has been gnawing at them. Voting for Ruto will, in their view, assuage that guilt.”

The businessman said in 2003 the Kikuyu political elite shafted Raila (read Luos) and the result was the post-election violence of 2007/2008. In 2013, the same elite shafted Musalia Mudavadi (read Luhyas) when Uhuru Kenyatta claimed demons had visited him and caused him to change, a presumed pact between him and the son of Moses Substone Mudavadi. The result, pointed out the businessman, was creating an unnecessary mistrust among a community that today the Kikuyu people would be counting as its political ally. After 2017, the elite has unashamedly shafted the Kalenjin by labelling Ruto as the most corrupt man in this part of the world and therefore unfit to be president. “We cannot be the tribe that shafts every other ethnic community.”

Musalia was “a safe pair of hands,” opined Kanyoni: “innocuous, malleable, stands for nothing...the Kikuyu political elite would have easily controlled him...But the elite is know-it-all, tactless and full of hubris.”

The “other” Kikuyus

Wairimu from Zambezi reminded me this was not the time to “annoy” Ruto by reneging on a deal that every Kikuyu knows about. “For the sake of the Kikuyus living in the North and South Rift - Ainabkoi, Burnt Forest, Eldoret, Endebess, Kericho, Kitale, Londiani, Moi’s Bridge, Matunda, Molo, Mt Elgon, Njoro, Soy, Timboroa, Turbo and others places - we Kikuyus will vote for Ruto. Call it political insurance, safety and security and survival for our people.”

“The only person who can ensure the protection of Kikuyus in the Rift is William Ruto - not Uhuru Kenyatta, not Raila Odinga,” said Wainaina, one of the wealthier Kikuyu businessmen in Eldoret town. Wainaina said that the notion that the state can protect Kikuyus who live away from the motherland was false and misleading: “Mwai Kibaki was the president when violence was visited upon the Kikuyus in the Rift Valley. Why didn’t he protect us? Since then, we’ve been sitting ducks

and we're on our own and we know it. If violence were to erupt in the Rift Valley, it's us Kikuyus who'd suffer the brunt and Uhuru would be nowhere - he's been unable to protect our businesses, what about our lives? We're not gambling. *Ruto ndio kusema hapa Rift Valley,*" Ruto's the final word in the Rift Valley...that's it."

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After the post-election violence, the Kikuyus from the Rift Valley region came to the conclusion that their aspirations and those of the Kikuyus from the motherland were incongruent: "They consider us collateral damage, a political expediency to be toyed around with. They don't care if we're killed in huge numbers," said Wainaina. "When some of our people retraced our ancestry back in central Kenya, they were not welcome. They told us to go back to where we belonged, that there was no space for us...that we'd left many years ago. It was as shocking as it was painful."

In his machismo style, the businessman at Sagret Hotel said: "It's we, the Kikuyus from central Kenya, who tell the Kikuyus in the Rift what to do politically and they follow. What have been their options? If some of them are caught in the political melee, well, it's because we'll not cede ultimate power just because some of them will be slaughtered."

"Hustler" and "dynasty" are two narratives that have entered into the Kenyan political lexicon. It appears that the hustler narrative has been accepted by the Kikuyus' wretched of the earth. It implies "emancipation from the predatory Kenyatta family", said a politician from central Kenya.

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