



# Moi's Theatre of the Absurd: Reflections on My Generation's President

By Dauti Kahura



On a sunny Saturday afternoon, sometime in 1987, I was taking a stroll from Section 19 into Kitale town, then an agricultural, sleepy, settler town. I did not pay much attention to the beige VW Kombi that passed by me until after it had gone like 20 metres before it started reversing. I kept walking, and the Kombi reversed past me to stop near some school girls who were walking behind me. I had not noticed the girls either. They were in green uniforms and were from Kitale Girls, the school that was later to be renamed St Monica.

I stopped to watch as the passenger in the Kombi van rolled down the window and started talking to the girls. As he talked to them, his right hand reached to the glove compartment and removed a wad of neat Kenya currency notes, which he gave to one of the girls. No sooner had he given the money to the girls, who were by then giggling with excitement, the van zoomed past me, the passenger rolling up the window. I had heard that President Daniel Toroitich arap Moi was a man who was besotted with school girls, but until then, I had never taken it seriously.

I will always remember this act of spontaneous magnanimity - of a president going about his business in an unmarked nondescript van (the Kombi became associated with Moi's tours across the country) and stopping to chat up some students and hand them some cash. I went away thinking, what a kind man, a president who stops to engage with students along a road. That scene stayed in

mind for a very long time.

But as I was to learn later, Moi was a man with many faces, someone who could evince deep feelings of empathy as he simultaneously schemed to inflict deep pain on his adversaries – real or imagined. He transitioned effortlessly from one face to the other, leaving many people aghast and confused.

Three years after my close encounter with Moi, in 1990, I was a barman in Ukunda, which lies along Kenya's south coast, five kilometres from the famous Diani beach. I had some special clients who worked at the Kwale Law Courts who patronised the club nearly every day. They were clerks, lawyers, magistrates and civil servants. I liked discussing politics with them. Many of them were from the Luo community.

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On February 12, 1990, the daily newspapers reported that Dr Robert Ouko, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, had gone missing. That evening, when the patrons came for their drinks, the point of discussion was the missing minister. I remember telling them that there was no way a minister could go missing, I do not know where I had gotten that information, but I recall telling them a president must always know where his cabinet ministers are on a daily basis. A minister must report to the president wherever he is, more so a foreign affairs minister. I told them the minister was long dead.

"Young man," shot back one of the Luo civil servants, "what are you talking about? You are too young to know these things." We left it at that. The following day, the papers reported that the minister's body had been found at Got Alila village in Koru in Kisumu by a herdsboy. That day, my Luo patrons did not work, so they came straight to the bar at about 10.00am, carrying their newspapers. They ordered for their drinks, but could not drink them. They were very distraught. Conversing in Dholuo, one of them, overcome by emotions, broke down and wept. It was my first time ever to see a man weep uncontrollably.

"Oh God", mourned the man, "they have done it again. Kenyatta killed [Tom] Mboya and now Moi has killed Ouko. Why, why, why, nobody likes us...we'll always be on our own." One could feel the indescribable pain the man was undergoing. As writer James Baldwin would write, my dungeons shook. Mboya was the mercurial Minister of Economic Planning and Development when on July 5, 1969, he was shot by an assailant, Isaac Njenga, at around 1.00pm as he stepped out of Chhani's Pharmacy on Government Road (today's Moi Avenue).

### **Close encounters**

In 1991, I was back in Kitale. My friend, an architect, asked me to accompany him to go and see his client. His client was a well-heeled politician, as connected as they come. He owned a merchandise shop on Kenyatta St. On the day we went to see him at the shop, he was in a foul mood.

*"Hawa waKikuyu wanafikiri hao ndio akina nani? Sisi tulialika hawa hapa Rift Valley tukawapatia mashamba ya kulima...sasa wanasema wanataka multiparty politics. Juzi mimi nilikua na mzee na amekasirika sana...ametuambia lazima tuonyeshe hawa waKikuyu Rift Valley ni ya kina nani. Wewe ngoja tu, baada ya miezi sita utasikia maneno - tutachoma na kufukuza hao kabisa."* Who do these Kikuyus think they are? We gave them farms to till here in Rift Valley...now they are saying they want multiparty politics. You know the other day I was with President Moi and he was very

angry...he has said we must show these Kikuyus who owns Rift Valley. Just wait, in six months time, you'll hear for yourself - we'll burn their properties and chase them out of Rift Valley.

The politician assumed that I was a Bukusu from Trans Nzoia.

As sure as night follows day, six months after, ethnic violence - sometimes referred to as ethnic cleansing - started sporadically all over the Rift Valley. Moi and his cohorts called them tribal clashes.

I had gone to school in Kitale, so I had made many friends across the ethnic divide. One of them was from a Kikuyu family that lived up in the Cherangani hills scheme, where his parents were crop and livestock farmers on a 10-acre piece of land. As "ethnic cleansing" sprouted all over Kitale and other places, my friend narrated to me how one night his family was attacked by Kalenjin warriors armed with bows and arrows. My friend said that that night, the family thought they would meet their maker. But when morning came, they emerged from their hiding places alive. But their livestock was gone - their cows were doused in petrol and burned alive. "We could smell the burning of raw meat...you can imagine the torture the poor animals underwent," he told me.

Moi had instigated the ethnic cleansing of the Kikuyus in the greater Rift Valley province because he had been forced by the West to reintroduce multiparty politics. In 1989, the Berlin Wall had collapsed and two years later *glasnost* and *perestroika* had set in in the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) as nation-states broke away to claim independence. Kenya had been a darling of the US and UK - barely four years before, in 1987, Margaret Thatcher had praised Moi as an African statesman when he went calling at Downing St. The West had turned its back on Moi by tightening the purse and asking him to conform to the new political dispensation. The Cold War had come to end and the US was now the unchallenged superpower.

"Moi's double-faced beguiling character is something many Kenyans did not know," said journalist Ken Opala. "Moi was a master manipulator of emotions, he could charm you out of your socks." Sometime in 1996, Opala had an encounter with Moi at the Jomo Kenyatta International Airport (JKIA)'s state pavilion. Opala, then reporting for the *Daily Nation* newspaper, had gone to cover the state visit of Jiang Zemin, the President of the Communist Republic of China.

As he, Kipkoech Tanui (today the group executive editor at the Standard Group but then a rookie reporter, also working for the *Daily Nation*) and Manoah Esipisu (now Kenya's High Commissioner in the UK but then working for Reuters), stood metres away from the state pavilion, President Moi leisurely walked towards them, his left hand in his pocket. When he approached Opala, he asked him:

*"Eehe na wewe ni nani?"* What's your name?

"Ken Opala wa Nation"

*"Juzi mlikuwa na pullout, mbona hamukutaja Moi na kazi ile serikali inafanya?"* Moi queried Opala.

It was just after May 1st that Zemin was visiting and President Moi remembered that the *Daily Nation* had carried a pullout on Labour Day and apparently he was not happy with it.

*"Nyinyi ni watu wabaya sana, munaandika tu mambo yenu...si ya kutengeneza nchi...kama vile serikali yangu inafanya,"* Moi lamented.

*"Lakini siyo hivyo mzee,"* It isn't that way sir, Opala interjected.

*"Lakini nini?"* Moi turned on the hapless Opala.

*"Wacha flattery."* Stop the flattery retorted a stern Moi, poking Opala on the chest with his index finger.

Taken aback by Moi's brash harshness, Opala knew he had annoyed the president by defending his employer. But Moi suddenly changed tact and moved closer to him:

*"Opala wewe ni mzuri, Kwendo Opango ndio mbaya."* Opala you're the good one, Kwendo Opanga is the bad one, said a demure Moi, almost cooing into the journalist's ear. (Kwendo Opanga used to write a hard-hitting *Sunday Nation* column, which Moi disliked.)

As the Zemin's plane taxied closer to the apron, where Moi was waiting to receive his guest, his security inched closer to him, signalling him to move away from the journalist.

*"Wewe wacha, mimi na ongea na mtu yangu,"* You stop, can't you see I'm talking to my friend, said Moi to the security men. Vice President George Saitoti, who died in a helicopter crash in June 2012 in Kibiko, off Ngong town, seemed uneasy as Moi insisted on talking to the journalist.

*Sisi ni wazuri, hao ndio wabaya, twende, twende tukapokee mgeni. Huyu rais ni mzuri anatuletea pesa, wachana na watu ambao wanaadika mambo ya fitina tu."* We are the good people, let's go and receive the president, he's a good man, he's bringing goodies for us. Leave those people whose only work is to pen malicious stories.

Much later, Opala, humbled by the fact that the most powerful man in the country had taken time to engage with him, marvelled at the simplicity of Moi. He believed that the president was a good man who was misunderstood by people who did not know him well. The journalist began doubting whether all those bad stories about Moi were true after all.

Several weeks later, Opala had another chance encounter with the president. Thinking that they were already friends, and that Moi would remember him (apparently, Moi's memory was legendary), Opala was surprised when the president ignored him and behaved as if he had never met him. "I couldn't believe Moi, who had talked to me like his son, sharing with me some juicy anecdotes, would behave so coldly towards me like that: I almost wondered what I had done this time," said Opala. That little experience nearly traumatised the journalist.

### **Kabarak School: Moi's backyard**

A master of the game, Moi political life enacted such plays all the time in his political life. He conjured up schemes to keep his political friends and foes alike busy fighting each other as he continually plotted to antagonise them by creating mutual suspicions among them. "Sometimes we think that's why he built Kabarak School," said a top notch medical doctor, who is an alumni of the school Moi built.

Kabarak received its first Kenya Advanced Certificate of Education (KACE) "A" level students in 1979, four months after Moi ascended to the presidency. "That's how powerful a Kenyan president is," said my medic friend. The medic was in the second lot of the 1980/1981 "A" level lot. "I'd been called to Mangu High School to pursue Maths, Chemistry and Biology, but I got a letter from Kabarak and my father, looking at the fee structure, said the school had been built to save his meagre savings... the fees were rock bottom."

Although the school was built with taxpayers' money, Moi privatised it, as he would Sacho High School in Baringo County, which is 25km from Kabarak and which is in his ancestral village of Sacho

and Sunshine School, which is in Nairobi West, Nairobi County. All three schools enjoy exceptional facilities and the teachers from the Teachers Service Commission (TSC) are all funded by the public. Yet it was Moi who decided who would attend them. Sunshine School was even built on grabbed land - the land on which Sunshine School sits once belonged to the Prisons Department.

Kabarak began by poaching all the best students from other schools around the country. To start off "A" level class, it poached Kenya Certificate of Education "O" level students who had been called to both Alliance High Schools (Boys and Girls), Highlands Girls, (today Moi Girls Eldoret), Kagumo High School, Kangaru High school, Kenya High, Lenana School, Limuru Girls, Loreto Girls, Nairobi School, Nyeri High, Thika High, Maseno School - basically the top schools in the country then, as now. Moi also did the same with teachers. He picked the best teachers from these schools, and populated Kabarak with them.

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Esther Koimett was among the first students of the "A" level class of 1979/1980. She is the daughter of Nicholas Biwott, one of Moi's most powerful henchmen who later acquired the nickname "The Bull of Auckland". Koimett is now the Principal Secretary in the Ministry of Transport, Infrastructure, Urban Development and Public Works.

Other better known Kenyans who passed through Kabarak include Mary Ijaya Mudavadi, sister to Musalia, Chepchumba Kandie, the daughter of Aaron Kandie, the former solicitor general, Sam Mwamburi Mwale, the former Permanent Secretary in Mwai Kibaki's government, Orlando Lyomu, the Chief Executive Officer at the Standard Group, and Samson Chepkairor, aka Sam Shollei, also a former Standard Group CEO. (Chepkairor's classmates of the 1980/1981 "A" level class cannot remember when he changed his name to Shollei.) Others were Robert Matano's two daughters, Nick Salat's two sisters and Margaret Nderi, the daughter of Ignatius Nderi, the powerful boss at the Criminal Investigations Department (CID) during Mzee Jomo Kenyatta's rule.

Sometime in January 2005, I went to talk to Geoffrey Griffins, the Director of Starehe Boys Centre and School. Over and above everything else we talked about that afternoon, I remember him telling me about Moi, which he told me in strict confidence. When Moi became president, he approached Griffins and asked him to accept Kalenjin students. The director said that was not a problem, as long as they met the minimum qualifications. "This apparently did not please Moi because he expected me to say 'yes, yes, Mr President'," recalled Griffins.

Moi also wondered loudly why Mwai Kibaki remained the patron of Starehe Boys Centre, while Moi was now the president. "I told Moi, Kibaki remained the patron because the school's management board, which included members of the British royalty, had settled on the former Minister of Finance and it was for them to decide who was to be the patron." Soon after, Moi started Kabarak, where he became his own patron, and where one class each out of the four streams from Form I to Form IV was reserved solely for Kalenjin kids.

At Kabarak School, which was just a few metres from Moi's house, he would invite Kanu political honchos and pit them against each other, right there in the school. "We witnessed many such incidents in which Moi would host two sets of warring Kanu factions and make them believe that each had his ear and exclusivity. One time, on a Saturday, he invited both Matu Wamae and

Davidson Ngibuini Kuguru, the Mathira constituency (in Nyeri) titans, each not knowing that the other was also present,” said the ex-Kabarak medic. “Kabarak had many holding rooms where visitors to Moi’s house would be entertained. As Moi entertained Ngibuini in the house, Matu was kept busy at the school by Henry Cheboiwo, the first Baringo North MP and Moi’s confidant, Abraham Kiptanui, a former State House Comptroller and Aaron Kandie.”

Those who have been to Kabarak know that the home and school have two entrances on the Nakuru-Elgeyo Marakwet Road. Both entrances are guarded by the General Service Unit (GSU) Recce squad. Inside the school there is also a tarmacked road connecting the school to Moi’s house. As Ngibuini was being seen off by Moi’s handlers inside the house through the road leading directly from Moi’s house to the main road, Wamae was being ushered in through the link road between the school and the house.

Later both groups, Ngibuini’s and Wamae’s, would congregate at Stagshead Hotel (today known as Merica and owned by the Moi family) in Nakuru town. “Each confidant that they had Moi’s ear and each having been given money to run the affairs of the Nyeri Kanu branch, they would begin their quarrels right there and Moi and his henchmen would be left in the house laughing their heads off,” opined the medical doctor. “We also witnessed Moi playing James Njiru against his perennial foe, Nahason Njunu from Kirinyaga.”

The semi-illiterate Njiru was the MP for Ndia, while Njunu was the MP for Gichugu. Njiru imagined himself to be very close to Moi, to the extent that when the president made him the Minister of National Guidance and Political Affairs, he knew he had the upper hand over Njunu. Njiru thought that he was so powerful that he could summon “errant” Kanu members and question them, which led the Anglican archbishop David Gitari, who hailed from Kirinyaga, to describe his ministry as the “Ministry of Misguidance and Political Thuggery”. The tall and slender Njiru and the short and stocky Njunu’s rivalry culminated in them once squaring it out in the precincts of Parliament in 1988.

Divide and rule: that is how Moi governed Kenya and that is how he managed to stay afloat for 24 years as he turned Kabarak into a theatre of the absurd. “One Friday morning, Moi came to the school (he was always hovering around it), when we were on parade and raising the flag. His Kombi van stood some distance away and Moi disembarked. He walked briskly past the principal, Mr Joseph Kimetto, straight to his office. When Kimetto saw that Moi did not stop to talk to him, he abandoned the parade and ran after Moi. He found Moi in his office. The next thing we saw was Mr Kimetto running fast towards his house,” narrated the doctor.

“Mr Githongo, you’re now the principal and you Mr Kajwang, you’re the deputy principal,” announced Moi. Githongo was an elderly teacher who had been poached from Kagumo High School in Nyeri and taught Biology, while Kajwang was from Maseno, and taught Chemistry. “Moi made the prompt appointments just like that,” recalled the doctor.

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Kabarak was also a place that helped Moi avert loneliness, said the Kabarak alumni. “We’d see Moi in the dining hall, around the swimming area, in the playing field, walking past the classrooms, oftentimes stopping to listen to and watch momentarily as teachers went about their teaching. He was always at the school. He would order the school to pay school fees for respective classes. ‘This year Form I B, Form II D, Form III A and Form IV C will not pay school fees,’ it would be announced

in the parade, courtesy of Moi, but of course this was taxpayers money.” He would do the same for Form V and Form VI.

### **The lonely kingmaker**

Many years later, John Keen, his former Assistant Minister in the Office of the President, talked to me about Moi’s loneliness. In 2015, I was invited to his Karen home to attend a naming ceremony, an important occasion in the Maasai culture and tradition. One of his many grandsons was being named after him. I had gone to school with one of his sons and therefore I had known the senior Keen from the late 1980s. On that day, I spent the entire day talking to John Keen, until late into the night.

He narrated to me how some months before, Moi had sent an emissary to him: “*Nimetumwa na Mzee Moi, anataka kukuona.*” I’ve been sent by Moi, he would like to see you, said the envoy.

“I wondered what Moi would be summoning me for. I had not seen or talked to him for many years,” recounted Keen. Moi has asked that he go and see him at his home in Kabarnet Gardens, in the Kibera area. “When I reached there, I was ushered in to where he was. It was going to 2.00 pm and the hot sun was up, but guess what? I found Moi huddled next to the fireplace, warming himself next to the low-burning log fire.”

“I presumed he had an agenda for me, that there was something he wanted us to discuss...*wapi*, Moi couldn’t even recognise me, he didn’t even know that he had asked for me. He ordered that I be given some tea and then on and off, he would doze off. After three hours I left.”

After that visit, Keen concluded that Moi had been terribly lonely, especially after he left office in 2002. “He doesn’t have any grandchildren with him to keep him busy,” observed the one time Secretary-General of the Democratic Party of Kenya (DP), an opposition outfit that was once led by his long time friend Mwai Kibaki in the 1990s. “But also, when you grow old, you need a young wife to keep your fire burning and keep you warm too,” said Keen cheekily.

Folklore has it that Moi kept *The Prince*, Nicolo Machiavelli’s little bible of political brutality, by his bedside. “Moi was brutal,” some of the people who suffered his wrath told me. Mirugi Kariuki, the Nakuru lawyer who later became the MP for Nakuru town in the Narc government of President Kibaki, told me that Moi was “a brutal incarnate”. He was detained alongside his longtime friend Koigi wa Wamwere during Moi’s regime. Moi ordered that he be tortured by the prison warders at Naivasha Maximum Prison because “I was recalcitrant and unrepentant”.

When Moi released him in 1991, “he found me to be even more unrepentant. He was furious with me because I refused to beg for mercy from him. He wanted me acknowledge the detention without trial and be grateful to him that he had released me - for that I was supposed to go and genuflect before him. My answer to him was: he hadn’t done me any favours.”

Moi suffered from acute paranoia, said Mirugi, who died in a plane crash in April 2006, “and an inferiority complex, especially from people who stood up to him. But over and above he covered his brutality with his supposed love for children.”

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After the 1997 general elections, Moi started scheming about how to bring the neophyte Uhuru Kenyatta into the political fold. When Moi, in the presence of Peter Mboya (the late son of Tom Mboya who died in a motorcycle crash in 2004) told Uhuru Kenyatta “*nataka ungie siasa,*” (I want you to get into politics proper), “Uhuru almost jumped out of his skin,” said a Moi relative who was present at the scene. “*Hapana, hapana mzee,*” No, no, protested Uhuru.

In 1998, after Uhuru was thrashed by a nondescript greenhorn, one Moses Mwhia, Moi asked some Kanu hawks to persuade him to vacate the seat for Uhuru. Mwhia refused. “So they turned to Mark Too, who was a nominated MP. After haggling for several weeks, Too acquiesced,” a Moi relative said to me. “Immediately Too agreed, they went straight to Kabarnet Gardens at 10.30pm. Moi came out from the bedroom in his pyjamas.”

“*Mumekubaliana?*” Have you agreed? Moi asked.

“*Ndio mzee.*” Yes sir.

“*Haya sign hiyo makaratasi mara moja, hakuna mambo ya kungojea kesho.*” OK, then sign those papers at once, there’s no need to wait until tomorrow. And that is how Uhuru become a nominated MP. The rest is history as they say.

When in 2006 William Ruto announced for the first time that he would run for the presidency, Moi was livid: “*Ambia hiyo kijana awaje mbio,*” Tell the young man to be patient, Moi told a close Ruto confidant. “*Yeye bado kijana mdogo sana, kwa nini anakimbia namna hiyo? Mimi niko na mpango yake ya huko mbele.*” He still very young, why is he in a hurry? I’ve got some plans for him for the future.

The truth was that Moi could not believe that Ruto had the audacity to declare an interest in the presidency. That was supposed to be the preserve of his favourite child, Gideon Moi.

Moi’s contradictions went beyond raw politics. When in 1989, he famously, alongside Richard Leakey, the then head of Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS), lit the “ivory fire” at the Nairobi National Park, he sent a powerful message to the conservation world that Kenya was not going to tolerate the selling of contraband ivory. Ironically, he lit the mountain of 12 tonnes of ivory while holding his signature *fimbo ya Nyayo* rungu, his symbol of authority, which was made of pure ivory.

In December 2002, I went to vote at Uhuru Primary School in Uhuru estate. The person in front of me was humming, “*yote yawezekana bila Moi*” lyrics. All is possible without Moi.

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