



How Moi Manipulated Luo Politics to Entrench His Authoritarian Rule

By Akoko Akech



Daniel arap Moi, Kenya's second and longest-serving post-independence president, was buried at his Kabarak home on February 12th. His death, eulogy and press coverage by the big commercial media outlets have stoked divisive debates and ambivalent recollections of the past, which recall Fyodor Dostoevsky's observations that "while nothing is easier to denounce than an evildoer, nothing is more difficult than to understand him."

How does one understand the evils of the Nyayo government if Moi was solely responsible for some of the evils of his government, but not all the evils were exclusively his? And what if some of the evils Moi is rightly condemned for, such as crony capitalism, sabotaging democracy, resisting political reforms, political murders and corruption, are also the evils that were perpetuated by his predecessors, Jomo Kenyatta and Mwai Kibaki, and even his successor, Uhuru Kenyatta?

Perhaps one way is not to see Moi as the African Big Man, which Moi's death has brought back into circulation. Though convenient, the Big Man or strongman reference conceals rather than reveals the kind of state power an authoritarian ruler wields, and the internal and external political forces that also shape the politics of authoritarian regimes. It conceals the wellspring of crimes committed by an evil leader in charge of a highly centralised and unitary state, one where the executive's power has been concentrated in the presidency in particular, without the mitigating effect of the counter-

balancing powers of an independent Parliament and judiciary.

Moi's evil rule dominated every aspect of Kenya's political life because his rule, like Jomo Kenyatta's, was absolute state power, which post-independent statecraft has often wrapped in the rhetoric of sovereignty, patriotism, discipline, order, and development.

Moi's authoritarian rule wasn't solely a product of a unique character trait in him as an individual; rather, it was a handmaiden of the statecraft of an unreformed highly centralised and unitary state. By using this form of state power to reward and punish, he adroitly exploited the national or regional political needs of Kenyans and the political schemes and rivalries among his political rivals, and astutely manipulated the greed and the cravings of the clergy, the intelligentsia, and bureaucrats.

Moi's evil government also had the support of the West during the Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher eras, which kept his repressive, corrupt and incompetent government going. Britain and the United States were clear about who the enemies of the West were during the Cold War: communism and radical nationalisms in Africa. They wanted to reconfigure African economies through neoliberalism. So his was hardly a one-man show.

Perhaps the politics of the South Nyanza district in the 1980s, which resonated with the politics of the other marginalised regions of Kenya, offers some answers. At that time, Kenyan elites were jostling for positions in the new political order under Moi, and the Nyanza elite were no exception. Signaling a political truce and an intention to bring back the ostracised Kenya People's Union politicians back into the fold, Moi appointed Jaramogi Oginga Odinga as the Chairman of the Cotton Lint and Seed Marketing in 1980.

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But, as Anyang' Nyong'o regretfully explained in the *Star*, despite their concerted efforts to keep Jaramogi Oginga Odinga out of the limelight, Jaramogi granted Hillary Ng'weno of the *Weekly Review* an ill-timed interview. Moreover, in Mombasa, Jaramogi "denounced Kenyatta as a land grabber". These successive events, as Nyong'o notes, torpedoed what would have been the Moi-Odinga rapport because Moi was beholden to the very Jomo Kenyatta era forces that had forced Jaramogi Oginga Odinga out of government and that had jailed him.

After the Jaramogi Oginga Odinga debacle, Moi looked to South Nyanza for new leaders who did not have autonomous political constituencies such as Odinga's, and leaders who would owe him their allegiance. Moi found willing accomplices in some South Nyanza elite with whom he could fend off political enemies, run a brutal and repressive state security apparatus, and build an alternative political base to Jaramogi Oginga Odinga's. It was a move that stirred the undercurrents of the intra-Luo and inter-district elite competition, resentment, and envy.

Moi understood the Luo intra-ethnic political undercurrents, its elites' vanities, greed, and opportunism and their region's developmental challenges. He played one individual's ambitions against another individual's ambitions, or one district's elite faction against another faction, thus keeping his would-be enemies busy and preoccupied with *siasa ya kuchimbana*.

Legacy of the Seventh Day Adventists

For years, the South Nyanza elite had felt that the district had lagged behind Kisumu and Siaya

districts in terms of social and economic development. The area was beleaguered with a huge disease burden and high mortality rates. *In Freedom and After*, Tom Mboya, suggested that this had partly been the social cost of the Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) mission's anti-educated African attitude and miniscule investment in the education sector.

Referring to a time when the education of the Africans was mainly left to Christian missionaries, Mboya lamented:

"There were also churches—for instance, the Seventh Day Adventists—which thought it immoral to give Africans any academic education, and believed all they should learn was the Bible from the first page to the end, and perhaps how to do some woodwork and manual labour. Until a few years ago the Seventh Day Adventists thought it un-Christian for an African to want to go to high school and university. I know of many cases of Africans who were openly condemned in church for trying to get further academic education. In some cases Africans who defied the church on these matters lost their teaching jobs or the employment. As a result, you have today very few highly educated Africans among the Seventh Day Adventists."

Mboya's beef with the SDA mission, the dominant Christian mission in South Nyanza and the islands of Lake Victoria (locally known as Lolwe), can't be dismissed as the coloured view of a Roman Catholic; missionary education was racially-biased across denominations. But the SDA church of the colonial times, with its Kenyan headquarters at Gendia mission in Kendu-Bay, and its roots in the millennial religions of white North Americans, seemed to have exported America's virulent racist attitudes towards "free" black people. The SDA church of colonial times seemed to have resolved that the type of education the "natives" needed was apolitical education - the teaching of "technical" or functional education, the kind that would not stir political agitation, but would be good enough for the immediate needs of the white-dominated colonial economy.

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In an era when the colonial government assigned various Christian missions particular geographical locations - ostensibly to forestall religious conflicts - only the Anglicans (the Queen's church) could establish a mission anywhere they fancied. Thus a Christian mission's formal or informal policy could have a great impact on a region's socio-economic (mis)fortunes. The white missionaries' preference for high altitudes and cooler climates meant that there were very few missions and missionary schools in South Nyanza's mostly hot, mosquito- and tsetse fly-infested areas.

The rise and rise of Hezekiah Oyugi

Tom Mboya's rise as the ultimate champion of post-independence modernity held great hopes for South Nyanza. But his assassination on July 5, 1969 robbed the region of a grand patron and an impatient moderniser who felt that the colonial government had dealt the region an unfair card. Orphaned by Tom Mboya's murder, South Nyanza, more than any other district, was a region yearning for a patron and inclusion in government.

But South Nyanza elites' ambitions and popular needs, a laggard elite formation, poor social and economic welfare, especially when compared with the other Luo-dominated districts of Kisumu and Siaya, played into Daniel Moi's Machiavellian hands. The failed Oginga Odinga and Moi rapport paved the way for Moi to shift the centre of gravity of Nyanza's Luo community politics.

No one personified Daniel arap Moi's attempt to shift the centre of gravity of Nyanza politics and to control it more than the late Hezekiah Nelson Oyugi Ogango, aka "Kalam Maduong" or the Big Pen. Oyugi's nickname attested to the might of Oyugi's powers, which he derived from his lofty position in the Provincial Administration, and later as Permanent Secretary in charge of internal security, an office he held at the pleasure of President Moi.

Hezekiah Oyugi's meteoric rise in Moi's government came as a big surprise, especially after another Hezekiah, and a Luo to boot, Hezekiah Ochuka Rabala, a senior private in the Kenya Air Force, was named as being at the centre of the 1982 abortive coup that was said to have had the blessing of Jaramogi Oginga Odinga. No one expected another Luo to come close to state power, and certainly not close to a national security organ.

A Homa Bay legend has it that in the 1980s, a goat had spoken to Hezekiah Oyugi when he was serving as a Provincial Administrator in the Rift Valley. The goat had told him to warn the Kenyan government or the president of an impending drought or famine and request them to build a buffer against such an eventuality. Oyugi promptly relayed the message. President Moi heeded the prophetic warning by building a grain reserve, thus averting a famine. The legend's Old Testament undertones cast Oyugi as Joseph, the interpreter of dreams in the Pharaoh's court.

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Oyugi, like Simeon Nyachae, was an ambitious workaholic and a stickler for rules who zealously served the Moi government while pursuing his own regional political ambitions and development agenda, especially in South Nyanza. Tired of the streetwise, honey-tongued and rib-tickling political orators with dismal "development" records, such as Olouch Kanindo, Oyugi attempted to remake South Nyanza's politics in the 1980s.

The Moi-Oyugi line-up of the favoured Members of Parliament included politicians such as Peter Nyakiamo, Dalmas Otieno and one maverick - if ever there was one - Professor Ouma Muga, and other loud and loudish Nyayo loyalist types. The new crop of leaders had expansive worldviews, were educated and experienced as administrators of big corporate or academic institutions, and were above all Nyayo loyalists.

In the mid-1980s, Moi came calling at Homa Bay. The KANU's brass band was bigger and better than St John Seminary Rakwaro's, which often graced Homa Bay town's national day celebrations. South Nyanza, it was said, had topped the list of the districts with the highest number of registered KANU supporters for the two consecutive years preceding the presidential visit. This wasn't entirely voluntary. During those years, KANU youth wingers forcibly recruited party members. They had laid siege at the entrances and exits of the town's markets and the main bus park, letting in only those who had a KANU membership card and the annual KANU membership stamp (worth five or ten shillings) affixed to it. In addition, the KANU Maendeleo Ya Wanawake women, the party stalwarts who could secure more than five kilos of pishori rice or unga ngano, went door to door, making sure that every adult was a registered and duly paid card-carrying member of the ruling party.

With the rise and rise of Hezekiah Oyugi as the PS in charge of internal security, the fortunes of other Luo leaders, such as David Okiki Amayo (KANU's national chairman), ministers Dalmas Otieno, James Okwanyo, and Peter Nyakiamo, and several assistant ministers, such as Professor Ouma Muga

and Ochola Mak'Anyengo, appeared to be on the rise too. But were they?

When the tide of Nyayoism receded from the shores of South Nyanza in the early 1990s, a mixed bag of harvest was revealed. Some educational institutions, notably Kanga High School and the Migori Institute of Science and Technology, were established. There was employment in the Provincial Administration and the Administration Police. There were other goodies, such as a school bus and a few church buildings.

However, the region faced deepening economic decline: bad roads, collapsed marine transport, beleaguered cotton, sugarcane and fisheries sectors, declining public sector employment or retrenchment (popularly known as “the golden handshake”), and an increasing disease and healthcare burden. Moi's government was also balkanising the old South Nyanza district, dividing it along its dominant language and clan cleavages, namely, Rachuonyo, Migori, Suba, and Kuria districts.

Around that time, Hezekiah Oyugi had also died mysteriously, which was quite common during the Nyayo era. And Moi was openly and widely resented.

Representation without development

In 1993, the MP for Kasipul Kabondo, Otieno K'Opiyo, asked the Minister of Health why there were no Nyayo wards built in the former South Nyanza district. Yet, in his words, “if you consider the proximity of the previous leaders of South Nyanza, all of them were in cabinet and were very, very close to and were co-operating with the KANU government, but in spite of all this cooperation by nine ministers, nothing was done...why did they not consider South Nyanza where they had the heartbeat of KANU throbbing day in day out?”

Although many Nyayo wards were never completed in several parts of the country, and the Moi government later said that the wards were supposedly mainly a self-help and a partially government-sponsored project, South Nyanza did not get a Nyayo ward despite the fact that Peter Nyakiamo, the MP for Mbita, was the Minister of Health when the Nyayo ward project was initiated.

How could this happen? Can this paradox of good cabinet representation without local development explain the kinds of tweets posted on the debate on Moi's legacy, but informed by the former North Eastern Province's harsher experiences? Rashid Abdi stated on Twitter:

“He [Moi] kept North under emergency law, deepened hatred of the ethnic Somalis, forced discriminatory pink card on them, looked on as his troops massacred civilians in Wagalla, ran a prosperous country aground, disappeared & killed ForMin [foreign minister]. Whose legacy history will look to kindly it is Raila Odinga. Raila made his mark in the struggle for democracy, new constitution and devolution (notwithstanding qualms about BBI), on the one hand.”

And then there was Ahmednasir Abdullahi SC's ambivalent reaction:

Despite the history of NFD, the Independence Referendum of 1963, the war of independence (the shifta wars) and Section 124? Of the constitution that imposed state of emergency on NFD from 1963 to 1992, BABA Moi made Somalis, Borana, Gabra, Rendille et al to part of Kenya.”

Dr Sally Kosgei, Nyayo's last Head of Civil Service and Secretary to the Cabinet, in her eulogy at Kabakak during Moi's funeral, put her finger on this paradox of cabinet representation without development when she noted without any sense of irony that Moi “managed the affairs of the state with his civil servants”. (Note: *Moi's civil servants*, not *Kenya's civil service*.)

It was clear to all that in Moi's government, cabinet positions were largely symbolic and ministers were dispensable. The KBC 1 o'clock news bulletin announcing the sacking of ministers hung over the cabinet ministers' heads like a guillotine.

In nearly all-key institutions of Kenya's highly centralised state power, the locus of power was not the elected public face of any particular institution. Rather, Kenya's state power was deliberately designed to subvert its citizens' democratic will and aspiration. In some instances, the bureaucrats and henchmen who wielded the most power were invisible or largely unknown beyond their private spheres of influence.

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The locus of power lay in the office of a bureaucrat appointed directly or indirectly by the president, often without security of tenure or with superficial security of tenure. ("His civil servants.") So it was the Treasury, not the National Assembly, that allocated national resources. Within the National Assembly, the clerk had more authority than the speaker. In the justice sector, it was the Attorney General, not the Chief Justice, who was the ultimate legal authority. In any given ministry, it was the Permanent Secretary, not the minister, who made the important decisions. In local governments, it was the various clerks who wielded power. In the districts, the District Commissioners called the shots as chairmen of the District Development Committees and the District Security Committees. In the villages, it was the chiefs, not the elected councillors, who were the kingpins. Nearly all the elected leaders were subservient to the president's appointed bureaucrats who had the "Authority to Incur Expenditure" behind the scenes.

An assessment of South Nyanza's politics in the first decade of Moi's presidency suggests that the former Kenyan president owed his long rule partly to the Luo elite's internal divisions and rivalries - often ignited by none other than Moi himself. Moi adroitly and carefully co-opted the regional elite from marginalised ethnic groups, cynically exploiting their yearning for "development", and keeping them happy and slavish. However, their appointment to key positions did little to bring "development" to their regions.

South Nyanza's experience also suggests that Moi stayed in power for long because of his brutal repression of the opposition, because of the atomising fear and despondency that his regime of terror induced in the population, as well as because of the international financial support his government received from or through the West, especially Britain and the United States. Kenya under Moi's authoritarian rule was the proverbial crocodile's lair where no freedom fighter or radical nationalist sought refuge.

Daniel arap Moi may have fancied himself as an African statesman - and was even eulogised as one by many - but his reign is a study on how authoritarian leaders sustained their grip on power during the Cold War. The evils of the Nyayo era recall Lord Acton's maxim: *absolute power corrupts absolutely*.

To think of Moi as either a "Big Man" or a "strongman" is to ignore the institutional distortions that enabled him to rule over Kenya with an iron fist, and the domestic and international support that sustained his presidency.

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