



The Battle Within: Uhuru's War Against His Deputy

By Dauti Kahura



"Lord, protect me from my friends; I can take care of my enemies."

The above quote by Voltaire is one that Deputy President William Ruto could well be spending lots of time brooding over, especially in these times of coronavirus. Since official recognition of the pandemic's arrival in Kenya over just three months ago, Ruto's political battles - not with his enemies, but with people he had counted as friends - have intensified. The battles that are being fought in the Jubilee Party, the party of President Uhuru Muigai Kenyatta, are internal and among erstwhile friends.

Coming barely 30 months after the forceful UhuRuto duo won a controversial fresh presidential election on October 26, 2017, the two political brothers looked set to finish their second term the way they started the first: as a formidable team of like-minded captains, with the lead captain passing the baton to his comrade once his term expires. But that today is a dream: the waters have been poisoned and the former buddies are no longer swimming in the same direction, leave alone swimming in the same waters. The breakdown of the alliance has all the hallmarks of betrayal, brinkmanship, deception, fraud and subterfuge.

Jubilee Party mandarins did not see the break-up coming; if they did, they all pretended they were

not aware of the imploding scenario. The ruling party is now a house of two diametrically opposed camps led by their respective protagonists: President Uhuru Kenyatta, who coalesces around the *Kieleweke* (it shall soon be evident) camp and William Ruto, who is spearheading the *Tanga Tanga* (roaming) team.

“We can no longer pretend that the current war being waged against William Ruto is not from within and therefore not from friends, or people he had presumed were his political friends,” said a Ruto confidante I spoke to. “To think otherwise now would, like the proverbial ostrich, be burying our heads in the sand. It is better to be fought by your enemies, who you have fought several times before and therefore you already know to deal with them, rather than be fought by friends, who have turned the tables against you, all the while posing as your compatriots.”

“Uhuru is employing political terrorism against his number two and to be honest, it is something we had not anticipated,” said Ruto’s friend of many years. “Yes, it has taken us by surprise, the intensity and all, but we must stay and fight back, even as we devise a strategy to stem the political bloodbath. It is all about the politics of succession in 2022 and there is no hiding the fact that Ruto obviously wants the seat. If you have been a deputy president for seven years, what else would you want as a politician in that position? It is also true that once Uhuru and Ruto were sworn in for the second and final term, we started popularising our candidate immediately – it was the natural thing to do – hitting the ground running. This was misconstrued to be a campaign, but even if it were, we weren’t doing anything outside of the constitution.”

Ruto’s loyal friend said that the popularisation strategy had a context: “Prior to the presidential election in December 2002, we all were in Kanu – Uhuru, Ruto and me. We would go to [President] Moi and tell him, ‘Mzee tell us who will be our candidate so that we can start preparing the grounds early.’ And he countered by saying: ‘*Nyinyi vijana wacheni mbio, siku ikifika nitawambia. Mimi nimekuwa kwa siasa miaka mingi...nataka mwendeleo kuwa wafuasi kamili wa Kanu.*’ (You young men, why are you in a hurry? When the day comes, I’ll let you know. I’ve been in politics for many years, I know what I’m doing. For now I want you to be steadfast in your support for Kanu.) By the time he was proposing Uhuru as the party’s candidate, it was already too late and there wasn’t enough time to campaign for our candidate.”

The Ruto ally, who also counts President Uhuru as a first-name-basis friend, believes Uhuru lost the election in 2002 to Mwai Kibaki and the opposition, because Moi took too long to name the party’s flagbearer. “We could have won that election but for Moi’s delaying tactics, which backfired and we lived to regret that bad decision. Eighteen years later, with lessons learned, we’re not about to repeat the same mistake. You cannot win a presidential election if you start campaigning six months to the election date. That is what Uhuru is doing with our candidate and in Jubilee, and we won’t let him do that.”

The coronavirus appeared just in time to help President Uhuru fight his political battles, reasoned the DP’s bosom buddy. “He is now using the pandemic to wage war against his deputy. The semi-lockdown and the curfew are strictly not about COVID-19, but about clamping down on Ruto’s forces in the party and in government.” The pandemic, he observed, has acted like godsend: It has given Uhuru space to mount a sustained onslaught on Ruto, but it has also helped the DP to ward off (at least for the time being), the “nobody-can-stop-the-reggae” force, which was also threatening to overwhelm him.

“Uhuru is maximising on the COVID-19 pandemic as much as possible because he knows his antagonist, the DP, cannot organise and mobilise for his counter-attack, which he is good at. The people have been locked down, they are restricted, they cannot move, they are scared and are caught up with survival. President Uhuru can therefore wreak havoc in Ruto’s camp with as little

distraction as possible," he added.

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Uhuru is not alone; since the onset of COVID-19, some world leaders have been using the pandemic as an excuse to amass more presidential powers, extend their presidential terms indefinitely, resort to dictatorial tendencies, and quash opponents.

But unlike the last election, the president does not have the unflinching support of his own people. "Uhuru's biggest problem is that the Kikuyus have turned their back on him," said a friend of Uhuru who also counts Ruto as his friend. "He thought he owned them and he could do whatever he wanted with them. He also thought they would always go back to him and do his bidding. Now, they seem dead set in ignoring him completely and the fact of the matter is, as a political leader, you can do little if you cannot galvanise the support of your people. You cannot claim legitimacy, you can only impose yourself on them and that is always counter-productive."

Because of this, said the Jubilee Party mandarin, President Uhuru's current headache is how to de-Rutoise central Kenya and the larger Mt Kenya region. "He's been trying to tell the Kikuyus that Ruto has been disloyal to him, that he wants to grab their power, that he's not fit to ascend to the presidential seat because he's corrupt and power hungry. But they have refused to listen to him. With each passing day, he's getting furious with the Kikuyus' recalcitrant stand against him. Now, he has turned to appointing Kikuyus in prominent positions, including the recent reshuffles in Parliament to appease his Kikuyu base."

The duo's friend told me that President Uhuru's allegations about his deputy's insubordination was a red herring. "What disloyalty is Uhuru is talking about? When he was busy drinking, we held fort by taking care of government business, even as we covered his social vices. Now he has the temerity to talk about disloyalty. We're not afraid of him. The Jubilee Party/Kanu coalition agreement is illegal as per our Jubilee Party constitution and it was cobbled up to stop Ruto from vying for the presidency".

All the president's men

To fight Ruto, President Uhuru Kenyatta formed an advisory team that meets at State House. Part of the team comprises David Murathe, Kinuthia Mbugua, Mutahi Ngunyi and Nancy Gitau.

Murathe has for the longest time been President Uhuru's sidekick. His father, William Gatuhi Murathe, was one of the wealthiest Kikuyus, courtesy of Uhuru's father and the country's first president, Jomo Kenyatta. During Jomo's time, the senior Murathe was the sole distributor of wines and spirits countrywide.

When David Murathe was routed out as the MP for Gatanga constituency by Peter Kenneth in 2002, his fortunes dwindled and he was even declared bankrupt at one stage. From that time, he has not left Uhuru's side. The *Tanga Tanga* team describes Murathe as "Uhuru's attack dog". They believe that when Uhuru wants to communicate an important message, he uses Murathe. And they've learned to decipher his messages. Murathe is the man who has been put in charge of the advisory team's budget.

On 6 January 2019, Murathe suddenly resigned from his post as the Jubilee Party's vice chairman, citing conflict of interest. He said he wanted to fight Ruto and stop him from being the Jubilee Party's sole candidate for the 2022 presidential election. On 2 March 2020, Murathe recollected his thoughts on his supposed resignation and claimed he had not really resigned because his resignation had not been accepted by President Uhuru Kenyatta, who is the chairman of the party.

Kinuthia Mbugua is the State House Comptroller; he keeps President Uhuru's diary. He served as Nakuru County governor for one term. Eagerly looking to serve for a second term, he nonetheless lost the Jubilee Party nomination to Lee Kinyanjui. He was furious, and even looked to run as an independent, but was persuaded by Uhuru to join the presidential campaign team, with a promise of a bountiful reward once the campaign was over.

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Mbugua, a career civil servant, hails from Nyandarua. When he was the commandant of the Administration Police (AP), he employed many youth from Nyandarua and the adjoining areas. He equipped the force with personnel and machinery and soon there were murmurs from the regular police service, which felt that the AP was being favoured and was becoming extra powerful. After the 2007/2008 post-election violence, President Mwai Kibaki and his cohorts did not trust the regular police. Mbugua's not-so-loudly spoken brief was to reorganise a force that had always played second fiddle to the boys in blue.

Mbugua to date believes William Ruto rigged him out of a nomination when he was left to man the Jubilee Party headquarters at Pangani during the chaotic and hectic nominations. He carries the grudge like an ace up his sleeve.

Mutahi Ngunyi is a private citizen who has immersed himself in state (house) politics and has distinguished himself as a maverick, a person who can swing like a pendulum and still remain standing, without falling. In the lead-up to the 2017 election, he made Raila Odinga, the opposition coalition leader of the National Super Alliance (NASA), his punching bag, terming him a "punctured politician", an epithet that his detractors used to describe Raila's father Jaramogi Oginga Odinga in the 1970s.

After Uhuru and Ruto romped back to State House, Mutahi quickly (perhaps too quickly) identified with Ruto's camp and decreed that Ruto will be the next president come 2022. A crafty mythmaker, he even came up with the Hustler vs Dynasty narrative to define the rivalry between Ruto and the sons of prominent Kenyan leaders, including Uhuru Kenyatta, Raila Odinga and Gideon Moi. He wildly claimed in a May 2019 tweet that the only person who could liberate Kikuyus was Ruto. (Mutahi has since deleted all his tweets that were singing Ruto's praises.) Then, beginning this year, Mutahi flipped, disavowed his hustler narrative and claimed that Uhuru Kenyatta was ordained to rule Kenya.

"Mutahi Ngunyi is a gun for hire," said a Ruto aide. "For nearly two years he worked for us. He's a mercenary, he's a fugitive of justice." When I contacted Mutahi and asked him if what was being said about him was true, he responded: "Tell them it is true, whatever that means. Tell them they can also hire me!"

The aide claimed that Mutahi was presented with the National Youth Service (NYS) file by the National Intelligence Service and was asked to cooperate...or else.

The NYS file he was referring to contains details of a huge scam that was perpetrated between 2014 and 2016 when Anne Waiguru Kamotho, the current governor of Kirinyaga County, was the powerful Devolution and Planning Cabinet Secretary. Mutahi was one of her advisers on the youth programme that was being implemented by NYS. The scam involved the misappropriation of billions of shillings of taxpayers' money in which Mutahi was heavily implicated. At one time, he even purported to clear his name by claiming to have returned Sh12 million to the government coffers. Appearing before the Parliamentary Accounts Committee on September 20, 2016, Mutahi said he had rewired the money back to the Central Bank of Kenya. He said that the money had been "wrongly" credited to his company, The Consulting House. He further stated that he believed the money had come from an organisation that he had consulted for, not the Devolution Ministry.

Mutahi is now operating from State House and The Chancery building on Valley Road in Nairobi. The Chancery is owned by the Kenyatta family. Part of his brief is to spin favourable *Kieleweke* group narratives while conjuring up propaganda and disinformation on his former employer, William Ruto.

Nancy Gitau has been the resident State House adviser from the time of Mwai Kibaki. Before becoming a state aficionado, she worked for the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). While at USAID in the 1990s, she was involved in the democracy and governance sector, which was being heavily funded by the United States and other donors. The last big project that she oversaw was a partnership between Kenya's Parliament and the State University of New York (SUNY, Albany)'s Centre for International Development (CID), which Sam Mwale and Fred Matiangi managed. Both Mwale and Matiangi would later become civil servant bureaucrats, serving as Permanent Secretary and Cabinet Secretary, respectively.

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Gitau was very well-known within the civil society and the NGO sector and interacted with many of them. "Gitau was one of the architects of a report implicating Ruto in the post-election violence and so there is no love lost between her and Ruto," said Ruto's aide. The deputy president is still upset about Gitau singling him out. During the days when Ruto and Uhuru were facing charges related to the post-election violence of 2007/2008 at the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague, one of Ruto's team members said to me: "Ruto never forgives and never forgets a wrong done to him."

Expunging Ruto's men

The Gitau-led advisory team ostensibly meets every Sunday morning at State House and during weekdays at La Mada Hotel located in the New Muthaiga residential area in Nairobi. La Mada is the hotel that Ruto claimed in 2019 where a plot to assassinate him was being hatched by people known to President Uhuru.

One of the team's main jobs is the expunging of Ruto's men in the Senate, with Kithure Kindiki, the Senator of Tharaka Nithi County, being the latest casualty. Until 22 May 2020, Kindiki was the Senate's Deputy Speaker. The first two casualties were Kipchumba Murkomen and Susan Kihika, the former Majority Leader and Chief Whip, respectively. Murkomen's job was given to Samuel Poghio, a politician from West Pokot, while Kihika's went to Irungu Kangata, the Senator of Murang'a County.

“The two were removed because the president and his men didn’t have the majority in the Jubilee Party’s National Executive Committee (NEC),” said a “renegade” senator, who accused President Uhuru of “using strong-arm tactics to coerce senators to vote according to his whims”.

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The senator said that the Speaker of the Senate, Ken Lusaka, was allegedly approached and reminded of the “small matter” of the wheelbarrows when he was the Governor of Bungoma County.

When Lusaka was the governor of Bungoma County between 2013 and 2017, the county bought 10 wheelbarrows worth Sh1.09 million (approximately \$10,000 or \$1,000 per wheelbarrow) – the most expensive wheelbarrows ever sold in Kenya, where an ordinary wheelbarrow goes for around Sh5,000 (\$50). When he was asked by the Parliamentary Accounts Committee what was so special about the wheelbarrows, he claimed that they were made from “stainless, non-carcinogenic material”. Some of the county officials were jailed for the scam.

Everybody knows it was illegal for the speaker to acquiesce to President Uhuru’s demand that the Senate Parliament Group meet at State House, said the senator. “The reason why nominated senators are being intimidated and threatened is simply because Uhuru doesn’t have enough senators on his side to fight his deputy.”

Senators were allegedly paid Sh2 million to vote to remove Murkomen and Kihika. “On the day the senators were summoned to State House, President Uhuru didn’t have enough senators to push his motion,” said the senator. “The Jubilee Party had only 11 senators, Kanu, three and one independently-elected senator, Charles Kibiru. If you count Raphael Tuju and President Uhuru they made 17 votes. Tuju is the secretary general of Jubilee Party. So, they were way short of the required majority of 20 votes.” The senator claimed that the president had to send helicopters to pick senators from their far-flung regions.

“Uhuru can send choppers to senators who are supposed to be in lockdown and in quarantine, but he will not send planes to rescue and send food to flood victims. That’s how much he cares for the unity of this nation,” complained the senator.

It is just a matter of time before these elite squabbles are replicated on the ground. On 20 May 2020, two charged groups in Kikuyu town faced each other: one group supported President Uhuru Kenyatta and the other supported Deputy President Ruto along with the area MP Kimani Ichung’wa. So far Kimani has been an unswerving supporter of Ruto. They yelled and shouted at each other and exchanged invectives. It was a prelude to Ruto’s visit to the constituency on that day.

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It is hard to tell whether the two groups had been paid by their masters to grandstand. But that is neither here nor there. The Jubilee Party honchos have indicated that Ruto’s presence in the Mt Kenya region cannot just be wished away – hence the *Kieleweke* group’s project to defang Ruto.

I asked a Ruto confidante why his boss had gone quiet. Was the heat becoming unbearable? “This is not the time to speak. We actually advised him not to open his mouth. There’s a time that he will speak, but not now.”

The confidante also reminded me of another saying: *The man who speaks little makes mistakes, but what about the man who talks a lot? He makes big mistakes.*

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