



# The Real Story Behind the Hustler Narrative

By Dauti Kahura and Akoko Akech



Deputy President William Samoei Ruto has hit the campaign trail hard. He has provocatively billed the next presidential election the “hustlers versus dynasties” duel, which broadcast journalist Joe Ageyo thinks is new to Kenya’s politics.

In a Citizen TV talk show, Ageyo suggested that Ruto might be doing politics differently, mobilising and organising his political base along the dominant social-economic cleavages, and not the usual ethnic-regional conundrum – often presented as transient ethnic kingpin coalitions during general elections.

Certainly, Ruto’s invocation of an existing socio-economic cleavage between those in power and unemployed youth lends Kenya’s notoriously ethnicised politics a class overtone. Has William Ruto, a wealthy, self-styled born-again Christian politician, whose long political journey that began earnestly as the organising secretary of the surreptitious Youth for Kanu 92 (YK’92), undergone a Road-to-Damascus-like political conversion? Or is this vintage Ruto, grabbing any opportunity he can find to ruthlessly pursue his interests to achieve his lifelong dream of becoming president?

## Hustler nation

Speaking in Nyamira County recently, Ruto said, “Some people are telling us sons of hustlers cannot be president. That your father must be known. That he must be rich for you to become the president. We are telling them that even a child of a boda boda or a kiosk operator or *mtoto wa anayevuta*

*mkokoteni* (child of a cart pusher) can lead this country.” In a country that is tottering on the brink of economic meltdown, a youth budge and political despair, this is music to the ears of a desperate youthful population.

The deputy president’s chief critics remind him that surnames have hardly ever handicapped one’s presidential ambitions. Jomo Kenyatta, Daniel arap Moi, and Mwai Kibaki’s became president, and their fathers’ names were totally unknown to Kenyans. Only Uhuru Kenyatta, who Ruto ably assisted to win the presidency in the last two presidential elections, has a father who is known to Kenyans because he was the country’s first president.

Ruto, the self-styled spokesman of “the hustler nation,” also stated, “On dealing with hustlers, Raila should leave that to me. He does not understand the plight of hustlers. He is the son of a vice president and he was born being driven around.”

So why does Ruto proudly claim to be the “hustler-in-chief”? Hustler means different things to different people, but for many Kenyan youth, it signifies humble beginnings or means of eking out a living – respectable or otherwise. Being a hustler means one has found a way to stay afloat, particularly in hard economic times. The ambivalent feelings this word evokes match the legal and moral ambiguities that Ruto has built around his political career.

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### **Wheelbarrownomics**

But more than assuming their identity, what the deputy president has ably done is to locate the youths’ anxiety: their discontentment and deep frustration with the government. Frederick Kariuki, 29, a qualified accountant and a budding entrepreneur in Nairobi, is the latest convert to the political movement that is seemingly sweeping the country: The Hustlers. He told us that Ruto’s “wheelbarrownomics” (a word coined by Kenyan economist David Ndi) has struck the right note with the youth who believe Ruto could be their saviour.

“Those talking ill of the wheelbarrow gifts are pretenders to middle class, pedantic mandarins associated with President Uhuru’s wing of the Jubilee Party that is fighting Ruto. After lying to youth during the 2017 presidential campaigns, afraid and embarrassed by the swelling hordes of youth without work who are threatening to explode, the government belatedly came up with *kazi mtaani* (casual wage labour). What is the difference between *kazi mtaani*, where college graduates are being supplied with slashers for cutting grass and paid 400 shillings (which is still stolen from them) and Ruto’s dishing of wheelbarrows and push carts?” posed Kariuki.

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“Ruto has correctly seized the moment to sell his hustler narrative, which has caught on like bush fire, even if it means bringing down a government he helped install in power. And why not? He has outwitted his nemesis through his tactical political manoeuvres and that’s what realpolitik is all about.

“A wheelbarrow costs 4,000 shillings and a pushcart 20,000 shillings. A cursory visit to Nairobi markets - Gikomba, Githurai and Marigiti - will show you what difference a wheelbarrow can make to a fruits’ hawker. The wheelbarrow is what many youth are using to hawk their wares. Many a youth in the ghetto, hoping to enter into the business of selling water, cannot because they simply can’t raise 20,000 shillings. Ruto then comes along and gives you a push cart. Between *kazi mtaani* and wage labour of unguaranteed 400 shillings, which would you rather have? What has President Uhuru’s government and those politicians criticising Ruto offered the youth? Nothing. They should keep quiet. I’ll be voting Ruto very early in the morning and pushing his agenda between now and 2022.”

Muigai, a friend from Fly Over, which is 50 kilometres from Nairobi and on the Nairobi-Nakuru highway, returned to the country just after the 2017 double presidential elections. Despite being armed with a college degree from a prestigious university, he has yet to find work. He was full of expectations; at 24 years of age, he believed the world was his oyster. But every single day, he sees his word crumbling before him.

His relatives encouraged him to come back home because they believed that Uhuru Kenyatta would create jobs for the youth, especially Kikuyu youth. “Since returning home, I’ve seen my family’s increasing disenchantment with President Uhuru Kenyatta,” said Muigai.

“At Soko Mjinga Market, the wheelbarrow is king, and they dare criticise Ruto? What has Uhuru himself offered other than destroying our businesses?” asked Muigai’s angry maternal uncle. “The Building the Bridges Initiative? They may say all they want about Ruto, that’s the person we’ll be voting for and we cannot wait to do it. The Kenyatta family will know we’re no longer their slaves.”

### **The underdog narrative**

When Ruto teamed up with Uhuru in 2013 to form the Jubilee coalition, he wore shirts emblazoned with the president’s name. In April 2011, Mama Ngina Kenyatta, at Gatundu Grounds at the Kenyatta family’s ancestral home in Kiambu County, lay hands on her son Uhuru and his International Criminal Court (ICC) co-accused William Ruto after stating: “I’m sure Uhuru and Ruto will go to The Hague and come back so that we can proceed with nation building.”

Ruto had already set his eyes on the prize: the presidency. He was supposedly the smarter one of Jubilee’s so-called “dynamic duo” who reeled off “facts and figures” at political rallies as he rode on Uhuru’s back, family name, and deep-state connections to the State House. For a man who was tried at the ICC for crimes against humanity, allegedly for his role in the 2007/8 post-election violence against the Gikuyu *walala hoi* of Rift Valley region, he has successfully circumvented the established Gikuyu elite gatekeepers since 2013, and won the hearts and minds of a significant cross-section of the Gikuyu rank and file.

“I’m from Ishaweri, in Gatundu and I can tell you, there’s nothing to report home about the president coming from our midst,” said Peterson Njuguna. “The Gatundu youth spend their time drinking illicit liquor, loitering and engaging in petty crime. In Gatundu, poverty glares you in the face. Why? The president cares less about them. He doesn’t know who they are, he’s least bothered whether they drink themselves to death or not, and here he and his minions are criticising Ruto who dares to give the youth some equipment.

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“The Kenyatta family is so mean, they never mix with anyone, leave alone offering any kind of help or hope. But they will be quick to rubbish anyone who seemingly steps in to do something. So what if Ruto is doing it for politics? What has Uhuru himself done for politics? I’ve heard some Kenyans ask: how many wheelbarrows can you give people? Here is a government that promised the youth jobs and more jobs under their watch. Instead what happened? They have systematically presided over the destruction of the economy, so that they can offer slashers to graduates and President Uhuru loyalists have the temerity to talk about Ruto’s symbolism. Uhuru should just go home and leave us alone. We can’t wait for him to bring along the BBI, that’s the day he’ll know the fury of an awakened lot.”

Ruto’s love for his hustler tag dovetails with his “chicken-seller-who-became-president” fib. With every media appearance featuring a jua kali artisan, a wheelbarrow, or an evangelical clergyman, his public image is that of a God-chosen wretched of the earth’s presidential candidate in 2022.

An evangelical group of Christians in Nairobi who have already aligned themselves with Ruto’s campaign told us that the deputy president is indeed “a fearful man of God and God is prepping him to take over the reins of power after Uhuru Kenyatta. His wife (Rachel) is a prayerful woman and they have even erected an altar of the Lord in their house, so they wake up at night to fervently pray and commune with God”.

The group reminded us that Ruto has been very helpful to churches, contributing to their expansion and growth. The group did not seem to be bothered by the source of the money: “It is not for us to judge, the temple of the Lord is for all of us – the righteous and the wicked. At the end of the day, it’s God to judge. There are people who talk a lot, yet we’ve never seen what they have done for the house of God.”

The deputy president casts himself as the rich and powerful politician who rose from selling chicken to the dizzy heights of the presidency. His grass-to-grace underdog narrative, his “humble” birth vis-à-vis his rivals’ “privilege”, and his difficult childhood encapsulate the identity, dreams and aspirations of millions of unemployed youth. Like Donald Trump in 2016, he is using the rhetoric of the “outsider” who has come to save an underclass trampled on by the undeserving upper class.

Ruto has set the political tone of the 2022 presidential election; the rest are merely reacting to it. Ruto’s presidential campaign has seized on something that resonates with many, especially the have-nots in difficult economic times. The “hustler’s narrative” serves Ruto’s campaign as a moral allegory for anyone who loves a good underdog story.

The narrative has also cast Ruto as the would-be saviour of the Kenyan have-nots, someone who feels and knows their suffering. He is the God-fearing, battle-ready general, leading the war against the Raila Odinga-aided Kenyatta family political gimmicks. It sets the hungry underclass against the Uhuru-Raila attempts to monopolise Kenya’s state power and economy through the Building Bridges Initiative (BBI).

No one exemplifies the success of this hustler narrative than the Ngara Market traders, who specialise in second-hand (mitumba) clothes in downtown Nairobi. When we paid them a visit on one sunny Saturday afternoon, we found them in the middle of a heated argument about Ruto’s brand of politics.

“My wife was teacher in a private school until a few weeks ago,” said one trader. “Then one morning, the school proprietor sent her an email telling her he had converted the school premises

into exhibition stalls. That was it. My wife was reduced to a hawker, peddling avocados on a wheelbarrow.

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“We cannot wait for Uhuru and Baba (Raila Odinga) to bring on the BBI referendum. They’ve been telling us Ruto is the government thief. Is he the one who stole COVID-19 money?” asked one of the traders. “If Ruto is a thief, it is because they have been stealing together with Uhuru.”

Said Kipkemei Bunei, “Ruto is a thief who has been giving back (to the society). What have the other thieves been doing?”

Ruto’s campaign infantilises the 2022 presidential debate by deflecting adult conversations that would scrutinise his long political career since he burst into the national limelight in 1990s. He tells the rags-to-riches chicken seller-hustler story to stoke the youth’s anger against the very government he is still a part of, but which is now being propped up by Raila Odinga and his ODM party. The narrative flattens the complex histories of political families and individuals – an erasure ably aided by Raila’s support of the incompetent Jubilee government. The hustlers’ rallying call rattles his competitors and rouses his supporters. He only needs to mention the word “dynasty” to communicate who his political enemies are.

“Ruto has won the war of narratives,” said Gakuo Munene, who has openly stated he will support the deputy president in his presidential bid for 2022.

The electoral strategy is clear: set the majority without known surnames against the minority who have widely recognised surnames because their fathers were cabinet ministers, vice presidents, or even president. And the “hustlers” are spoilt for choice.

Ruto might have belatedly discovered the great socio-economic divide between the *walala-hoi* and the *walala-hai* in Kenya. However, to merely acknowledge that such a deep rift exists, to crudely name it as “hustler versus dynasties”, and to constantly remind the *walala-hoi* of their suffering is not to wage a class struggle. As Thandika Mkandawire, citing Karl Marx, observed, “The existence of class may portend class struggles, but it does not automatically trigger them. It is not enough that classes exist in themselves, they must also be for themselves.”

Ruto’s political campaign is not a class struggle; it is a struggle for power – for himself. He is organising and mobilising his political base the same way the political sons of the late Daniel arap Moi organised their politics – through transactional methods that exploited human need, greed, ambitions for power. Despite its class warfare undertones, Ruto’s acerbic political rhetoric is not a rallying call to the wretched of the earth to take on their oppressors or to organise for such a war.

### **Baronial politics**

Like Francis Atwoli, the bejewelled trade unionist-turned-political kingmaker, who has taken to summoning the rich and powerful to his Kitengela home, Ruto also summons a few hand-picked hoi polloi to his palatial homes in Karen and Sugoi. Both Ruto and Atwoli perform acts that clearly show what power asymmetry is all about, who is the host and who is the guest, who pays the piper and who calls the tune, even though they have divergent political projects.

So, the jua kali artisans or the delegation of Christian clergy troop to Ruto's official residence in Karen or Sugoi not as the deputy president's equals, but as carefully selected guests with a prescribed role to play in Ruto's political script. It has the hallmarks of what former Chief Justice Willy Mutunga calls "baronial politics". Ruto has yet to discover progressive democratic politics. His "hustlers" are guests, not equals, who are summoned for PR stunts. Their images are exploited for whatever legitimacy a paid-for and stage-managed association with a jua kali artisan or a Christian pastor can lend his presidential bid.

True to script, the guests or delegates are paraded for the cameras next to wheelbarrows or beauty salon equipment as any lucky winner of a sports betting lottery would be. It sends a message to the *walala-hoi* to keep betting on Ruto's leadership because that holds a lottery ticket that might just win big in the next grand draw if they elect him.

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Ruto seeks to distinguish himself from his nemeses by performing and publicising such acts. As the Elgeyo Marakwet Senator, Kipchumba Murkomen's tweets suggest, such events show that Ruto, unlike Raila and Uhuru, is both rich and generous, a politician who gives motorcycles and car-washing machines to unemployed youth. However, his tweets say little about why thousands of hard working youth who desire to own small or medium-sized businesses cannot afford the start-up capital needed for such items, or why so many small and medium enterprises (SMEs) have shut down since the Jubilee Party took control of the government.

Ruto's hustler narrative may tug at the heartstrings of the millions who are poor and unemployed, but it's simply a pithy campaign phrase that is ideologically as empty as the Building Bridges Initiative - a promise of a qualitative change in living conditions that will not materialise because there is no qualitative change in the political leadership.

Ruto may now be viewed as being against the Kenyatta family's political and financial interests, but he's not yet a pro-democracy and pro-suffering citizens' politician. He may successfully stoke and channel the anger of hungry citizens against the political elites, but there is no evidence yet that he's organising along existing class cleavages, awakening the consciousness of the exploited about the nature and identity of their exploiters, or forming alliances with autonomous organisations of exploited classes.

For the first time in decades, Kenya's middle class progressives - the numerically small and tenacious civil society groups, which have always punched above their weight - seem to have been totally eclipsed by Ruto's middle class rabble-rousers. Kenya's progressive middle class may still have a credible story to tell on democracy, constitutionalism, and the strengthening of devolution, but it seemingly has no candidate to stand with in the 2022 presidential election.

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