



# A Class That Dare Not Speak Its Name: BBI and the Tyranny of the New Kenyan Middle Class

By Wandia Njoya



Despite many Kenyans' opposition to the Building Bridges Initiative there is a sense that politicians are moving with the project full steam ahead and there is nothing the people can do about it. More perplexing is the fact that with elections just over a year away, the fear of what supporting BBI could do to their political careers does not seem to faze the politicians. What explains this powerful force against democracy?

I argue here that the aspect of the BBI — and its charade of public participation — that most passes under silence is the role of the civil service and the intelligentsia. Behind the spectacle of [car grants](#) to members of the County Assemblies is an elite that is growing in influence and power, and is pulling the puppet strings of the political class. The bribery of MCAs would have been impossible without the civil service remitting public funds into their accounts. The president would not succeed in intimidating politicians if there were no civil servants — in the form of the police and prosecutors — to arrest politicians and charge them with corruption.

The academy's contribution to the BBI has been in controlling the social discourse. The mere fact that it was written by PhD holders brought to the BBI an aura of technical expertise with its implied

neutrality. Using this aspect of BBI, the media and academics tried to tone down the political agenda of the document. They demanded that discussion of the BBI remain within the parameters of academic discourse, bombarding opponents with demands of proof that they had read the document and exact quotations, refusing to accept arguments that went beyond the text to the politics and actors surrounding the initiative. Discussing the politics of BBI was dismissed as “irrelevant”.

Two cases, both pitting male academics against women citizens, illustrate this tyranny of technocracy and academics. In both cases, the professors implicitly appealed to sexist stereotypes by suggesting that the women were irrational or uninformed. In one debate in February last year, political science professor and vice-chair of the BBI task force, Adams Oloo, [singled out Jerotich Seii](#) as one of the many Kenyans who had “fallen into a trap” of restricting her reading of the document to only the two pages discussing the proposed prime minister’s post, while leaving out all the goodies promised in the rest of the document. Jerotich was compelled to reply, “I have actually read the entire document, 156 pages.”

Likewise, [earlier this month](#), Ben Sihanya sat at a desk strewn with paper (to suggest an erudite demeanour) and spoke in condescending tones about [Linda Katiba](#), which was being represented by Daisy Amdany. He harangued Linda Katiba as “cry babies”, demanded discussions based on constitutional sociology and political economy, and declared that no research and no citation of authorities meant “no right to speak”. He flaunted his credentials as a constitutional lawyer with twenty years’ teaching experience and often made gestures like turning pages, writing or flipping through papers as Amdany spoke.

The conversation deteriorated at different moments when the professor accused Linda Katiba of presenting “rumors, rhetoric and propaganda”. When Amdany protested, Sihanya called for the submission of citations rather than “marketplace altercations”. The professor referred to the marketplace more than once, which was quite insensitive, given that the market is the quintessential African democratic space. That’s where ordinary Africans meet, trade and discuss. And women are often active citizens and traders at the market.

Meanwhile, anchor Waihiga Mwaura did too little too late to reign in the professor’s tantrums, having already taken the position that the media is promoting, which is that every opposition to BBI is a “No” campaign, essentially removing the opposition from the picture on the principle of a referendum taking precedence.

Both cases reveal a condescending and elitist attitude towards ordinary Kenyans expressing opinions that run counter to the *status quo*. The media and academy have joined forces in squeezing out ordinary voices from the public sphere through demands for academic-style discussions of BBI. When discussions of BBI first began in 2020, these two institutions bullied opponents of the process by imposing conditions for speaking. For instance, in the days before the document was released, opponents were told that it was premature to speak without the document in hand. In the days following the release of the document, demands were made of Kenyans to read the document, followed by comments that [Kenyans generally do not read](#). The contradiction literally sounded like the media did not want Kenyans to read the BBI proposals. Now it has become typical practice for anchors and the supporters of BBI to challenge BBI opponents with obnoxious questions such as “You have talked of the problems with BBI, but what are its positive aspects?” essentially denying the political nature of BBI, and reducing the process to the cliché classroom discussion along the lines of “advantages and disadvantages of ...”

Basically, what we are witnessing is autocracy by the media, the academy and the bureaucracy, where media and the academy exert symbolic power by denying alternative voices access to public speech, while the civil service intervenes in the material lives of politicians and ordinary people to

coerce or bribe them into supporting BBI. Other forms of material coercion that have been reported include chiefs forcing people to give their signatures in support of the BBI.

In both these domains of speech and interactions in daily life, it is those with institutional power who are employing micro-aggression to coerce Kenyans to support BBI. This “low quality oppression”, which contrasts with the use of overt force, leaves Kenyans feeling helpless because, as [Christine Mungai and Dan Aceda](#) observe, low-quality oppression “clouds your mind and robs you of language, precision and analytical power. And it keeps you busy dealing with it so that you cannot even properly engage with more systemic problems.” In the end, despite the fact that there is no gun held to their heads, Kenyans face BBI with literally no voice.

But beyond the silencing of Kenyans, this convergence of the media, the academy and the civil service suggests that there is a class of Kenyans who are not only interested in BBI, but are also driven by a belief in white supremacy and an anti-democratic spirit against the people. I want to suggest that this group is symptomatic of “a new middle class”, or what Barbara Ehrenreich and John Ehrenreich have referred to as the [“professional managerial class”](#), which is emerging in Kenya.

For the purposes of this article, I would define this class as one composed of people whose managerial positions within institutions give them low-grade coercive power to impose the will of the hegemony on citizens. The ideology of this class sees its members as having risen to their positions through merit (even when they are appointed through familial connections), and holds that the best way to address problems is through efficient adherence to law and technology, which are necessarily neutral and apolitical. This class also believes that its actions are necessary because citizens do not know better, and that by virtue of their appointment or their training, the members of this class have the right to direct the behaviour of ordinary citizens. Basically, this class is anti-political.

The worst part about this class is that it is a group of people who cannot recognise themselves as such. As [Amber A’Lee Frost](#) puts it, it is “a class that dare not speak its name.” This means that even as they exert coercive power in Kenya, members of this class remain largely unrecognised or discussed as a class with its own economic interests.

Even worse, this is a class that holds contemptuous - and ultimately racist - views of Africans despite being made up of Africans. For example, Mohammed Hersi, chair of the Kenya Tourism Federation, has been at the forefront of [proposing the obnoxious idea](#) that Kenya should export her labour abroad, the history of the Middle Passage notwithstanding. Despite a history of resistance to the idea that Africans should not receive any education beyond technical training, from the days of WEB Dubois to those of Harry Thuku, the Ministry of Education has introduced the Competency Based Curriculum (CBC), a new education system affirming that ideology. A few months ago, Fred Matiang’i waxed lyrical about the [importance of prisons](#) with these words which I must repeat here:

“To Mandela, prison was a school; to Malcolm X, a place of meditation; and to Kenya’s founding fathers, a place where visions of this country were crystallised. We’re reforming our prisons to be places people re-engineer their future regardless of the circumstances they come in.”

How is it possible for educated Africans to talk in public like this?

One factor is historical legacy. The civil service and institutions such as the mainstream media houses were established during colonial rule and were later Africanised with no change in institutional logic. This factor is very disturbing given that the media and the civil service in Kenya opposed nationalist struggles. During colonialism, it was the civil service, its African employees in the tribal police and the local administrations (such as chiefs and home guards), who crushed

African revolt against oppression. This means that the Africans who were in the civil service were necessarily pro-colonial reactionaries with no interest in the people's freedom.

Essentially, Kenyan independence started with a state staffed with people with no economic or political allegiance to the freedom and autonomy of Africans in Kenya. The better-known evidence of this dynamic is the independence government's suppression of nationalist memories through, for instance, the assassination of General Baimungi Marete in 1965. What remains unspoken is the fact that the colonial institutions and ideologies remained intact after independence. Indeed, certain laws still refer to Kenya as a colony [to this day](#).

It is also important to note that colonial era civil servants were not even European settlers, but British nationals sent in from London. This meant that the primary goal of the civil service was to protect not the settlers' interests both those of London. Upon the handover of the state to Africans, therefore, this focus on London's interests remained paramount, and remains so to this day, as we can see from the involvement of the British government in education reforms, from TPAD (Teacher Performance Appraisal and Development) to the curriculum itself. This dynamic is most overt in the tourism and conservation sector, where tourism is marketed by the government using openly racist and colonial tropes, including promises to tourists that in Kenya, "[the colonial legacy lives on](#)".

There was also a practical aspect to the dominance of these kinds of Africans in the civil service. As Gideon Mutiso tells us in his book *Kenya: Politics, Policy and Society*, the Africans who were appointed to the civil service had more education than the politicians, because as other Africans were engaged in the nationalist struggles, these people advanced in their studies. Upon independence, Mutiso says, the educated Kenyans began to lord it over politicians as being less educated than they were.

Mutiso's analysis also points us to the fact that colonial control remained in Kenya through the management of the state by people whose credentials and appointments were based on western education. The insidious role of western education became that of hiding the ideology of white supremacy behind the mask of "qualifications". As such, Africans who had a western education considered themselves superior to fellow Africans, and worse, British nationals remained civil servants in major positions even a decade into independence, under the pretext that they were technically more qualified.

Less known, and even less talked about, is the virulent anti-African dispensation in the post-independence government. The new government not only had within its ranks Africans who had fought against African self-determination during colonial rule, but also British nationals who remained in charge of key sectors after independence, among them the first minister of Agriculture Bruce McKenzie. Similarly, the only university in Kenya was staffed mainly by foreigners, a situation which students complained about during a protest in 1972.

The continuity of colonial control meant that civil servants were committed to limiting the space for democratic participation. Veteran politicians like Martin Shikuku and Jean-Marie Seroney complained that the civil service was muzzling the voice of the people which was, ideally, supposed to have an impact through their elected representatives. In 1971, for instance, Shikuku complained that the government was no longer a political organ, because "Administrative officers from PCs have assumed the role of party officials [and] civil servants have interfered so much with the party work." Shikuku inevitably arrived at the conclusion that "the foremost enemies of the wananchi are the country's senior civil servants." For his part, Seroney lamented that parliament had become toothless, because "the government has silently taken the powers of the National Assembly and given them to the civil service," reducing parliament to "a mere rubber stamp of some unseen authority." Both men were eventually detained without trial by Jomo Kenyatta.

However, the scenario was no different in the education sector. As [Mwenda Kithinji notes](#), major decisions in education were made by bureaucrats rather than by academics. It was for this reason, for example, that Dr Josephat Karanja was recalled from his post as the High Commissioner to the United Kingdom to succeed Prof. Arthur Porter as the first principal of the University of Nairobi, going over the head of Prof. Porter's deputy, Prof. Bethwell Ogot, who was the most seasoned academic in Kenya with a more visionary idea of education.

Unfortunately, because the appointment went to a fellow Kikuyu, reactions were directed at Dr Karanja's ethnicity, rather than his social status as a bureaucrat. Ethnicity was a convenient card with which to downplay the reality that decisions about education were being removed from the hands of academics and experts and placed in the hands of bureaucrats.

And so began the long road towards an increasingly stifling, extremely controlled administrative education system whose struggles we witness today in the CBC. As Kithinji observes, government bureaucrats regularly interfered in the academic and management affairs of the university, to the point of demanding that the introduction of new programmes receive approval from the Ministry of Education. Other measures for coercing academics to do the bidding of civil servants included imposing bonding policies and reducing budgetary allocations.

In the neoliberal era, however, this ideology of bureaucracy expanded and coopted professionals through managerial and administrative appointments. For instance, the practice of controlling academic life was now extended to academics themselves. Academics appointed as university managers began to behave like CEOs, complete with public relations officers, personal assistants and bodyguards. The role of regulating academic life in Kenya has now been turned over to the Commission for University Education whose headquarters are in the plush residential suburb of Gigiri. CUE regularly contracts its inspection work to academics who then exercise power over curriculum and accreditation under the banner of the commission.

With neoliberalism, therefore, bureaucrats and technocrats enjoy an increase in coercive power, hiding behind the anonymity provided by technology, the audit culture and its reliance on numbers, and concepts such as "quality" to justify their power as neutral, necessary and legitimate. However, the one space they now need to crack is the political space, and by coincidence, Kenya is cursed with an incompetent and incoherent political class. Life could not get better for this class than with the BBI handshake.

BBI therefore provided an ideal opportunity for an onslaught of the managerial class against the Kenyan people. The document under debate was written by PhD-holders, and initial attempts by professors and bureaucrats to defend the document in townhall debates hosted by the mainstream media backfired spectacularly. These technocrats were not convincing because they adamantly refused to answer the political questions raised around BBI, so they have taken a back seat and sent politicians off to the public to give BBI an air of legitimacy. Behind the scenes, however, support for BBI brings together the bureaucrats and the foot soldiers who are behind Uhuru, and the educated intelligentsia that is behind Raila.

And as if things could not get more stifling, Kenyans are looking favourably at the declared candidacies of Kivutha Kibwana, a former law academic, and Mukhisa Kituyi, a former United Nations bureaucrat, in the next presidential election. The point here is not their winning prospects, but the belief that maybe people with better paper credentials and institutional careers might do better than the rambling politicians. However, this idea is dangerous, because it places inordinate faith in western-educated Africans who have not articulated their political positions about African self-determination in an age when black people worldwide are engaged in decolonisation and the Black Lives Matter movement.

Basically, BBI is camouflaging the attack on politics and democracy in Kenya by a new managerial class. We are paying a heavy price for not decolonising our institutions at independence. Since independence, bureaucrats have whittled away at our cultural and institutional independence through police harassment, underfunding, the tyranny of inspections and regulatory control, and through constriction of the Kenyan public and cultural space. Even the arts and culture are tightly regulated these days, with the Ministry of Education providing themes for schools' drama festivals and the government censoring artists in the name of morality. Worse, this new managerial class collaborates with foreign interests in a shared contempt for African self-determination.

Kenyans must be wary of academics and bureaucrats who use their credentials, acquired in colonial institutions, to bully Kenyans into silence. We must not allow bureaucrats and technocrats to make decisions that affect our lives without subjecting those decisions [to public debate](#). We must recognise and reproach the media for legitimising the bullying from this new managerial class. And we must continue to recognise the Kenyan government as fundamentally colonial in its logic and practice and pick up the failed [promise of the NASA](#) manifesto to replace the master-slave logic of the Kenyan civil service. Most of all, we must learn to demystify education, credentials and institutional positions. Kenya is for everybody, and we all have a right to discuss and participate in what happens in our country.

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