



The Ruto Roadshow: A Radical Attempt to Transform Kenyan Politics?

By Karuti Kanyinga, Nic Cheeseman and Justin Willis



Deputy President William Ruto is making waves in Kenya. His partnership with President Uhuru Kenyatta for the 2013 and 2017 elections rested on the understanding that Kenyatta would back him for the top post in 2022. During the 2017 election campaign, Kenyatta had publicly stated that he and Ruto would rule for a total 20 years.

Yet despite this, in March 2018 the president established a new partnership with his long-standing rival, Raila Odinga. The precise details of the agreement are unclear, but essentially the two leaders agreed to work together to end political instability and further their political interests. This new partnership confirmed widely held suspicions that Kenyatta might not live up to his end of the bargain to facilitate Ruto's rise to the presidency. The Deputy President's response was vigorous and revulsive: he began what is in effect his own presidential election campaign, and has been running it - complete with almost daily events at which he offers cutting critiques of his rivals - for the last two years.

Ruto himself is anxious to emphasise the novelty of his political offering. His pitch rests on a narrative about what he and his supporters call the "hustler"- that he himself began poor, and worked his way to wealth and status through determination, and that everybody should have that opportunity. This approach is often explicitly depicted as being, if not revolutionary, then

transformative at the very least. In contrast to “old school” Kenyan politics that was based on ethnicity and clientelism, Ruto is speaking a more [populist language](#) that explicitly critiques political dynasties and promotes the idea of a more meritocratic model that would both respect and lift up the country’s toiling hustlers. In his speeches, he denounces the *wadosi* – the rich – who make deals in hotels and boardrooms and despise the poor.

Yet, in some ways, the Deputy President’s message may be less significant than the structure of his campaign.

Probing the populism

Those of a sceptical and/or historical inclination might question how novel Ruto’s narrative really is. The idea that self-advancement comes through hard work and that the task of government is to enable this, was a fairly strong motif in post-independence Kenya, when Uhuru’s father, Jomo Kenyatta, was president. Indeed, it was the concept at the heart of Kenyatta’s call to [Harambee](#), a development policy in which it was made clear to citizens that they would only benefit from state support if they first pulled together to do something for themselves. Kenyatta was not the only one to inject an element of meritocracy into Kenya’s highly elitist and unequal political system. In the 1970s, [JM Kariuki](#) built on this appeal while explicitly critiquing the growing inequality that flourished after independence, famously arguing, “We do not want a Kenya of ten millionaires and ten million beggars.”

It is partly because it draws on this deeper history of politics that the language of the “hustle” has allowed Ruto to successfully recast himself as the foremost critic of inequality in Kenya. By adopting this language, the Deputy President hopes to present himself as the advocate of those excluded by a wealthy establishment that is out of touch. When Ruto works up the crowd with chants of *Harambee*, the deep roots of the “hustler” rhetoric are very apparent.

Nor is Ruto’s campaign blind to identity politics. His campaign itinerary suggests a belief that his best chance of winning the election is to swing the vote in the populous former Rift Valley and Central provinces.

Even some of the disingenuity and contradictions of Ruto’s campaign reflect long-standing patterns. His critics point out that he is part of the very establishment that he denounces – having come into politics in the 1990s as part of a movement that supported the then-incumbent president, Daniel arap Moi, support that involved both violence against the opposition and flagrant vote buying. Ruto has been prominent ever since, and has held the office of Deputy President since 2013. His wealth has grown remarkably through these years in politics, and he has never distanced himself from this past.

But personal wealth, however acquired, has never been a bar to populist politicking in Kenya – JM was also personally wealthy and well-connected, as were some of the leaders of the “second liberation” of the early 1990s. Being rich in Kenyan politics has never been perceived as bad – to be inaccessible or unresponsive to the ordinary person is the real offence. Ruto has not broken the mould in terms of political rhetoric – instead, he has drawn on a deeper history of Kenyan politics to achieve the remarkable feat of casting himself as the outsider. Against a backdrop of public anger at the combination of an economic downturn and government ineffectiveness, this has allowed him to emerge as a strong frontrunner.

The real transformation?

While the “hustler” narrative has attracted much comment, rather less has been said about the

structure of Ruto's campaign. Yet this is arguably more significant - both in terms of what it reveals about his overall strategy and aims, and what it may portend for the viability of his ambitions.

Since the 1990s, Kenyan electoral politics have come to revolve around the building of coalitions among groups of gatekeepers - "big men" (or, occasionally, women), each of whom claims to speak for a region of the country and promises to deliver the support of voters from that region. A classic example was the "pentagon" of five major regional leaders - including Ruto - that backed Raila Odinga's presidential campaign in 2007.

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The 2010 constitution, with its requirement for an absolute majority in presidential elections, entrenched this pattern. Presidential campaigns have become bargaining processes amongst a relatively small number of leaders; the precise cast has changed a little from one poll to the next, but the assumption that support must be built through prominent gatekeepers has driven the behaviour of politicians, and the analyses of observers. But not in Ruto's case.

Ruto has worked hard to build a network, of course, but it does not include any of the most prominent "big men". There is no Moi, Musyoka or Mudavadi. His team is put together from politicians at a slightly lower level - mostly members of the National Assembly, with a few county governors. He is the centrepiece of his many public appearances. In other words, Ruto is not aiming for a coalition of distinct leaders each with their own group of voters to deliver, each bargaining for a place for themselves and a slice of the resources for "their" people.

This is the Ruto show.

From coalitions to parties

The absence of regional gatekeepers is partly a personal strategy to ensure his dominance - he is, incontrovertibly, the leader here. There is no other prominent leader - below him is a plateau of multiple local figures - each influential in a local area, but none with regional reach. That makes Ruto safe from challenge from within, and means that he is less vulnerable to late defections, something that has often characterised Kenyan elections.

This also fits well with the hustler narrative - one reason Ruto's rhetoric plays well is that he has been consistent in the way he presents himself. By shunning the most obvious members of the country's dynasties, he sustains the idea that he is an outsider and that he is eschewing Big Man politics: he is not making deals with *wadosi* in hotels. It also protects Ruto from embarrassment should he fail to persuade many big hitters to join his team - a real possibility given the likelihood that his allies and financiers will be targeted by the government with court cases and tax audits in the run-up to 2022.

This is opportunistic, of course. But it is not just opportunistic. Ruto's approach represents a genuine attempt to transform electoral competition and create a new kind of party. Kenya's political parties are notoriously ephemeral, put together from multiple local networks in a chain of articulations - from national leader to regional big shots, and so on down to the local level. Ruto is one of a very small number of politicians to show an interest in attempting to change this.

A few years ago, Ruto tried to turn the Jubilee Alliance that had brought him and President Kenyatta to power in 2013 into a political party with an actual presence and an organization of its

own. He was motivated partly by the desire to strengthen Jubilee's hold on power, but also by the recognition that his rivals within the alliance might seek to block his presidential ambitions, and a desire to build an institution that would protect his interests when the time came.

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That fizzled out, but Ruto is now making another attempt with his United Democratic Alliance (UDA). In contrast to the politics of past elections, Ruto wants one party that he controls, not a coalition of gatekeepers.

In many ways, this is a more radical ambition than the talk of hustlers. Coalition politics has been part and parcel of the claims-making that drives Kenyan politics: those elected are delegates, sent to ensure that those who voted for them receive a fair share of state resources. That is why parties have struggled - because since the end of one-party rule, no party has been able to establish itself as a mechanism for this politics of accountability, which has instead always relied on networks of individuals that tend to draw their moral force from shared ideas of ethnic or regional belonging.

Ruto wants to tame those networks and channel them into his party. It is a bold idea; apart from anything else, it threatens to cut the ground from under a cohort of "national" politicians whose status rests on their personal role as regional big shots. But because many commentators dislike and distrust Ruto - for good reason - they have not seen how potentially radical this is.

Can parties beat coalitions?

Will Ruto's gambit work? The answer is probably not - at least when it comes to resisting coalition politics.

The Deputy President is already running into trouble with his attempts to establish a party structure. If producing a line-up of officials that doesn't fracture the campaign is proving tricky, the task of nominating candidates in a few months will be a massive test. And when Ruto chooses his running mate he will come under intense pressure to pick a well-known figure that can be relied upon to deliver a good number of votes.

There are also likely to be challenges at other levels of political mobilization. To start with, some of the people he is trying to recast as party members are not necessarily content or comfortable in that role - partly because it diminishes their independence, but also because it pushes them into a different style of politics that foregrounds the party, not the personal role of the politician as an individual. That may not work.

Ruto has already been forced to make concessions, agreeing to [grant smaller parties autonomy](#) in local races rather than forcing them to disband and join UDA. He still maintains, however, that he will make no alliances or coalitions that include promises to other candidates and organizations ahead of the polls. According to UDA General Secretary [Veronica Maina](#), "Our position has not changed as UDA. We are busy building our party and it's still new. So the pressure for us to think about coalition partners [is not that strong] for now. We are looking at a national party where everyone feels they belong."

Even this modified political model may be a hard sell to the many political intermediaries who do the crucial work of election winning - encouraging people to register, turning out the vote, serving as agents at polling stations. Nor will it necessarily persuade voters, who may ultimately care less

about the party and more about whether “their” person is in an obviously powerful position that might guarantee them rewards. If this happens, the claim to be pursuing meritocracy as opposed to ethnic clientelism could backfire.

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Ruto has so far been the one making the running in campaigning. But in the months to come, the “establishment candidate” – most likely Raila Odinga – will start to deploy regional Big Men to key voting grounds. It remains to be seen whether the less prominent figures that Ruto has recruited will be able to sustain his local presence and popularity when faced with the tidal wave of new projects and patronage that the government may unleash.

Ruto’s rivals will use every strategy at their disposal to prevent him from gaining power. His record gives ample reason for fear and distrust, of course, but this is also precisely because he is challenging an established model of politics and calling into question the position of a whole cohort of would-be gatekeepers. If momentum starts to move against him, the allure of boosting his chances by co-opting more prominent leaders may become too powerful to resist. And with it, the real radicalism of Ruto’s campaign would begin to fade.

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