Four years ago, David Njenga graduated from University of Nairobi (UoN) with an upper second-class honour’s degree in biochemistry. A year to the August 2018 presidential elections, his mother reminded him that electing Uhuru Kenyatta for a second term represented his best chance of getting a job. Apolitical and not one to argue with his mother, he cast his vote for President Uhuru. Four years on, he has yet to find employment.

Ambitious, intelligent and optimistic, Njenga’s hopes of getting a job, any job, are fading fast. From his class of 103 students, only five have found steady work, and many of his former classmates are engaged all manner of hustles – the latest politically twisted jargon for one’s means of eking out a living. Njenga told me that the five that had found work had powerful connections in President Uhuru’s Jubilee government.

“One of them is a pastor’s daughter whose father is one of the evangelical pastors who attends the national annual prayer breakfast with President Uhuru,” said Njenga. “The pastor’s daughter is my friend. I used to help her with her class assignments and writing term papers, so occasionally she will call me to have lunch.”

Njenga’s background is a world apart from that of his friend, the pastor’s daughter, but she befriended him at Chiromo campus because of his big brains; symbiotic relationship is the best way to describe their platonic friendship - he wrote her schoolwork and she regularly bailed him out.
financially. “C’est la vie,” said the 25-year-old Njenga. “She’s the one who got a job and I’m still writing assignments and term papers for rich students.”

I asked Njenga about the Building Bridges Initiative (BBI), a document that, if implemented, is supposed to ameliorate the lives and prospects of his peers. “Have you read the report?” He gave me a blank stare, the kind of stare that says, “You even have the temerity to ask me that question?” “Should I be reading a political document or researching about my students’ homework? If my parents had powerful connections, I’d not be suffering like this. That’s all what matters in today’s Kenya. My degree counts for nothing, I might as well have ended up being a plumber.”

Njenga was among the students who graduated top of their class, but even hoping to get a job in the corporate sector has become a flight of fancy. “It is the same as in the government - you must know people.” Njenga said the situation got worse with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. “Many companies have used coronavirus as an excuse to sack their employees. How then do you go to ask for a job when people are being laid off? We’re on our own and all what Uhuru is interested in, is how to succeed himself and safeguard his family’s empire and political interests post-2022.”

He gave me a blank stare, the kind of stare that says, “You even have the temerity to ask me that question?”

Still living in his mother’s house — “I never imagined I’d still be staying with my mother, four years after campus.” — Njenga said none of his former campus mates cared about BBI: “They’ve not read it, some really don’t know what it’s all about, I mean even as students, we couldn’t find time to read stuff on our degrees. Can you imagine me finding time to read an obsequious document? For what?” But the real issue, I gathered from Njenga, wasn’t even finding time to read the BBI; it was the disdain that he and his former campus mates had for President Uhuru and his government, their disconnect with the political processes in the country, their lack of interest in how government is run or ought to be run.

“What can Uhuru claim to have done for the country, for the young people in the eight years he has been president?” posed Njenga. “I’m worse off than when I entered campus, the country is reeling in utter corruption, the economy is tumbling down, people now steal openly from the government and he has no idea how to fix anything. The youth’s biggest problem is the economy. We don’t care about anything else. The president said he knows how much is stolen from the state coffers every day, yet he doesn’t know what to do about it. Why is he the president then?”

Njenga said he voted for Uhuru because his mother asked him to. “I was just doing my duty and of course, it was a tribal thing.” The biggest problem with the youth, reckoned Njenga, is that they will vote for you tribally, if they have to, but if you won’t fix the economy, they will have no time for you. “This is where the Kenyan youth is right now with Uhuru’s incompetent government. Many of them contemplate migrating daily, to seek greener pastures wherever they will find them.”

Mwangi Waithera, 29, is just like Njenga — he voted for Uhuru because his beloved mother told him to. “I don’t care about politics, I wasn’t going to vote because politics is not my thing, but my mother repeatedly reminded me, even on the material day, that I should vote for the president.” A mitumba (second-hand clothes) seller with assorted customers — civil servants, lawyers, college students, among others — he has seen his business dwindle since 2017 when President Uhuru was voted in for a second term. He has listened to his customers, usually men of his generation, come to grumble in his tiny downtown shop.

“Do you know our salaries now come late?” laments one of Mwangi’s client, a civil servant. “Nobody
cares about this BBI nonsense in the ministry offices,” he said. “Uhuru can afford to pay hundreds of millions of shillings to some so-called consultants to write a useless document called BBI, but our meagre salaries are being delayed up to the 10th of the following month?” The civil servant told Mwangi that his colleagues scoff at the report and have no time for President Uhuru. “He is the most colourless president Kenya has ever had. He is not respected among the younger cadre of the public officers, even worse among the older civil servants.”

Njenga said he voted for Uhuru because his mother asked him to.

One of Mwangi’s customers, a lawyer, showed up one evening as we were talking in his small shop. Barely 30, Denis voted for President Uhuru twice. “That’s how much I believed in him. I couldn’t stand anybody criticising him. I couldn’t countenance Raila being the President, so I made sure I voted again on October 26. I wasn’t going to let down my parents on this. They had warned us children on how we should vote.” said Denis, adding, “My parents told all four of us children that the greatest disaster that would ever befall this country was allowing Raila to be president. I know some of you have liberal ideas’ said my father. The liberal ideas remark was a stab at my brother, who had voiced his disenchantment with President Uhuru’s first term performance.”

Then the “handshake” happened and his parents baulked. The children often meet for dinner at their parents’ home, a middle-class couple from Kiambu County. “During one of those dinner meetings, my ‘dissenting’ brother asked my parents, ‘so what is going on?’” The bubble had bust — the economy was tanking and the handshake with the devil had taken place. “For once my parents didn’t seem so sure and my younger brother looked like he could have been right after all,” said Denis.

But Denis’s parents knew things were going south when their firstborn lawyer son started struggling. He postponed his wedding. He was increasingly going back to his parents to borrow money. “I’d so much expectations, I did a few ‘stupid’ things with some of my cash. I knew good times were coming, so I didn’t worry, we’d re-elected Uhuru and I believed big legal work was beckoning.” Denis said that today some of his lawyer colleagues are doing so badly they literally chase for work that pays as little as KSh3000.

Denis is so angry with President Uhuru, he told me, that he “is done with voting. It’s a complete waste of time and energy. I’m also very angry with my parents for misleading us, only that I can’t pick it up with them. But my bold brother did, especially on their berating of Raila. ‘Please dad, explain to us why Raila is suddenly now a darling of Uhuru?’ My parents looked abashed. ‘Uhuru has been such a huge disappointment’ is all they could muster to tell us over dinner.”

As a lawyer, Denis told me he had taken the trouble to read the BBI document. “It is a document meant to entrench President Uhuru’s powers. Some of my colleagues and I easily saw through it. By the way, I know some of the lawyers who participated in its writing. For them, it’s all about making hay while the sun shines. They were paid handsomely – any lawyer likes to make real good money quickly.”

Denis’s declaration that he will never voting again has become a standard response among the youth I interviewed; they vowed that they would not expend their energies engaging in a predetermined outcome again. “I voted for the first and possibly the last time,” said Nzenga. “Everybody knows what happened during the elections, the refusal to open the servers, even my mother knows the games that were played, but we can’t discuss that. Her vote has since shifted to Ruto.”

I asked Mwangi whether he had read the BBI document. “I’m a busy person and my work doesn’t allow me to engage in meaningless ventures,” he said dismissively. “I hear we may have to vote for it
in a referendum. On that day, I'll stay at home if I can’t open my shop, and that’s what I’ll do in 2022, during the elections.” Mwangi said he would never again wake up early to please both his mother and Uhuru. “I’ve learned my lesson, I’ve no time for politics, let me concentrate on my life and business.”

Denis told me President Uhuru was keen on a referendum “so that he can extend his term. I’ve become the wiser. At the dinner meetings, I’ve become bold like my brother. My parents are no longer as enthusiastic about Uhuru as they were before. They are completely miffed with him. They cannot explain, leave alone understand, how Raila is now supposed to be the darling of the Kikuyu people. My parents form part of the generation that took the Gatundu oath of never ceding state power to Luos.”

The graduate touts

Allan Kinuthia is, just like Njenga, a UoN graduate. Kinuthia graduated from Kabete campus in 2019 with an agricultural economics degree but he is a matatu tout. He started touting when he was a student “because I needed to raise some money for myself. Then it was a hobby and a hustle.” He voted for Uhuru and Jubilee in 2017. “I did it because that’s how my family voted. I voted on tribal basis, I couldn’t care less. If it worked for my family, why couldn’t it work for me?” Three and half years later, the truth of the matter is that it isn’t working for the family, much less for him. “There was this expectation by my family that, by the time I was graduating, I’d get a job - what with having voted for Uhuru and I having an economics degree,” said Kinuthia. “So even as I touted, I knew it was just a matter of time. I looked forward to a salaried job.”

“I’ve written countless job applications and I’ve given up,” said Kinuthia. “Jobs are there for those who are well-connected, not for people like me.” So far, none of those who were in his class has found a job. “As people trained to be professionals, it is important to get a job, practice what you learned in college, even as Kenyans keep on telling us students that we should think outside the box, meaning we shouldn’t always think of getting a salaried job.”

A happy-go-lucky, jolly fellow, Kinuthia tells me that the other touts are always taunting him; here’s a university graduate who is facing the reality of life outside the cosy world of college. “What do you think of BBI?” I asked him. Have you read the report? “No and I don’t have the time to,” he replied. So, how will you know whether it’s good for you or not? “You think I’m touting because I’m having fun? Uhuru is a failure. I studied economics; we’re where we are because of his incompetence. After taking the country down, Uhuru is busy crafting how to remain in power. That’s what BBI is all about.”

When not touting, Kinuthia is an online writer. “One time, I met a fellow student at UoN, who saw me touting in Kikuyu town. He asked me, ‘do you tout all the time? I can open an online writing account for you. Would you like to write and earn some decent cash?’ I took the deep end, learned the ropes and I’m doing it. My friends I was with in college don’t know or care about BBI, just like I don’t want to know about it. To many young people, Kenyan politics is h***s*** Instead of addressing the massive theft, BBI document is apparently advocating for more executive seats.”

Noisy and every inch the tout, Jimmy Kanogo is actually an entrepreneurship graduate from Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture & Technology (JKUAT). Until you engage him, it is impossible to tell he has ever stepped inside a lecture hall. “But it is what it is”, said Jimmy. After graduating in 2018, he quickly realised there were no jobs for graduates. “Those days are long gone, even medical students are nowadays not assured of getting a job.”
“Jobs are there for those who are well-connected, not for people like me.”

“Have you acquainted yourself with the BBI report,” I asked him. “Don’t get me started,” Jimmy said. “What is BBI? My elder brother graduated from university in 2016, he has yet to get a job. How does BBI contribute to the GDP in our house? My parents thought that once they sent us to university and we graduated, we’d be a relief to them. We thought so too, but look at where we are,” moaned Jimmy.

It was the same story repeated in many Kikuyu homesteads: vote for Uhuru, he will straighten the path for you young guys, their parents told them. “And of course, we listened,” said Jimmy. “He lied to our parents, he lied to all of us, they are so angry they keep on cursing and vowing revenge. My mother can’t believe I’m indeed a tout, that after going to university I’ve been reduced to the level of the ne’er-do-wells, whom she always sees hanging around matatu stops and who she has utter disdain for.”

Jimmy said he struggled to read long essays throughout his university studies, “so you’ve to be nuts to expect me to read a document that has no relevance to my life. To fix the economy, you need a report? To curb massive looting, you need a report? To provide youths with jobs, you write a report? What is it that Uhuru wants?” His questions are rhetorical questions but it is obvious that the drafters of the BBI document have lost Jimmy and his peers.

“It’s been a long time since I saw my parents quarrelling, now they seem to quarrel so often,” said Jimmy. “My father cannot believe the money he leaves weekly for my mother is finished so quickly. ‘What’s these you are buying?’ he angrily asks her. Life has become triple difficult and it’s not a pleasant thing to see your folks quarrelling over cash. It isn’t that my mother is overspending or buying things she has not been asked to. But I also understand where my father is coming from.”

Jimmy isn’t interested in BBI, in Kenyan politics, in elections, in referendums. “My survival is my utmost interest. Let Uhuru do whatever he wants to do with power, but one thing is guaranteed – I’m never trooping to a voting booth again.” Jimmy said he wasn’t even really expecting to be employed per se, “but I’d hoped that by the time I was leaving university, the country’s economic climate would be such that it would allow for creativity and imagination for some of us to set up shop.”

Peter Chege is the opposite of Jimmy: slight of build, quiet, reflective, speaking only when spoken to. A UoN graduate, it is difficult to believe he touts, yet he does. “What options did I have?” he asks. Peter graduated in 2019 with a degree in sociology. The following year COVID-19 struck. Peter is from a poor peasant background and this meant that he had to quickly decide what to do with his life post-university. “My parents had struggled to put me through university; they were, in a manner of speaking, through with me.”

So he came down to Limuru, where he had friends among the manambas (conductors) and matatu drivers. They took him under their wing and taught him the ropes. “Can you imagine the people who inducted me into the industry are guys who left school either at primary level or at most secondary school?” When I asked him what BBI means to him, he said, “It means nothing, I don’t know what it is. I hear people talk about it. I keep away from such discussions. I don’t want to be upset and left with a foul taste in my mouth.”

Until you engage him, it is impossible to tell he has ever stepped inside a lecture hall.
Peter told me that his friends at the *matatu* stop taunt him: “Peter, please tell us, what’s the use of a university education? The drivers, *manambas* and fellow touts are the ones who like discussing BBI. So they ask me, ‘Peter, you’re the one who’s educated amongst us here; can you explain this document for us? If Peter is the most educated among us, and he isn’t interested in the report, why should we be interested?’” Peter and his *matatu* friends are agreed on one thing: none has read the report, and they will never read it, but they know one thing for sure: “BBI is about power arrangements and dynamics by the political elites that want to hold onto it, even as they organise us for 2022. It has got nothing to do with us. It is a route being mapped by Uhuru and his cabal to retain power.”

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**Apologists for Uhuru**

“Raila has been played,” said Victor Oluoch, “but you know what? We can’t say it loud; this is supposed to be an ethnic project, so no Luo should be heard badmouthing it. But there’s a discomfiting disquiet around the issue; all’s not well on the home front. We welcomed the handshake and its appendage the BBI in 2018, but three years down the line, we are not sure any more.” Victor, a 33-year-old IT specialist, said the handshake had stopped the killing of Luo youth by the state security apparatus and rescued the community from being used by all and sundry as the boogeyman of opposition politics.

“Opposition politics in this country [is] anathema: you’re anti-development, anti-state, anti-communal cohesion. The Luo community were branded all these and it reaches a point where you say, ‘Ok guys, somebody else can carry the cross,’” said Victor. “So we welcomed the handshake and its relative the BBI. We were also quietly told that BBI would bring development to Luoland and we said hoorah, why not? The many years of fighting the state had denied the region development.”

Development is a loaded word; it can mean many things. “But whatever it meant, we the Luo people needed it,” pointed out Victor. “Therefore, it was very odious to hear Raila say the other day that the developments that have apparently been taking place in Nyanza counties, courtesy of the handshake, were after all not meant to be a favour, but a countrywide thing. I didn’t understand where that came from, but certainly, it is not the only misgiving that some of us now have with BBI.”

On 7 June 2021, Raila was quoted as having said, “None of the projects launched or mentioned during the Madaraka period are owned by or meant to serve Kisumu alone. They are meant to, and will serve the entire Kenya.”

The ongoing development projects in the Nyanza region are something that BBI supporters in the region are pointing to as a positive. Ojijo Orido said to me that, over and above everything else, BBI was good because it had brought development to Nyanza. “Factories are being opened up, roads are being built, the port is being resuscitated, the railway line is alive once again, the airport is being expanded . . . development is now being shipped to Nyanza more than everywhere else in the country. We Luos have benefited from BBI and that’s why we support it.”

“But was that the real agenda of the handshake and its aftermath the BBI?” asks Victor. “I’ve taken the trouble to read the document. Nothing could be further from this proposition. Instead, the report, which has mutated a couple of times, proposes other things.” The issue of an additional 70 constituencies, for example, is very troubling, said Victor. “How is it that Nairobi and Mt Kenya region end up with more than 33 new constituencies, while the entire Nyanza region gets less than 4 extra seats? Is this not gerrymandering?”
Victor said the handshake had stopped the killing of Luo youth by the state security apparatus.

According to the BBI proposal, the extra constituencies will be distributed as follows: Nairobi 16, Kiambu 6, Nakuru 5, Meru 2, Embu 1, Kirinyaga 1, Murang’a 1 and Laikipia 1. In contrast, Homa Bay has been allocated 2 seats, Siaya 1 and Kisumu 1. The rest of the new seats are to be distributed across the rest of the country.

Yet Victor told me that among the Luo people this disturbing question is not supposed to be raised. Why? “Oh, you know, I’ve heard it being whispered in Raila’s inner sanctum that mzee has been promised the big one, so it’s imprudent to bring up the offending question. So, what’s BBI really about? Is it about “favoured” development, which Raila is now denying? Was it about ensuring the Luo youth are not gunned down? Is it about being promised the ‘big one’?”

Woe unto the Luo people if BBI doesn’t succeed, warns Victor. “Because it will mean the Luo youth could again be fodder for the police, development will be stopped forthwith and the promise of the ‘big one’ will vanish just like that. Is that how we should be conducting our national politics?”

“It is unfortunate the Luo people have become the biggest apologists for President Uhuru’s incompetent government,” said Ken Owiti. “We behave as if the indiscriminate killings of our people didn’t occur in 2017. We’ve forgotten all the violence that was visited upon the Luo people, prior to the repeat presidential elections on October 26, 2017. We have all forgotten the Baby Pendo incident. We can’t continue to live in the past, some of my folks say, but what does the future hold? The future of the Luo people is pegged on Raila cosying up to the system and being promised the presidency. That’s all.”

Ken showed me a video clip of Orido, a journalist, waxing poetic about President Uhuru’s development record. In the clip, Orido cites Outer Ring Road as an example of the strides President Uhuru has made in developing Kenya. “Is that all what Orido can talk about? Outer Ring Road is a project started under President Kibaki. Development is not a favour to Kenyans; it’s their right because the money borrowed to build and expand these roads is used in their name. But anything to prove you’re a BBI and a Raila cohort.”

The self-flagellation of the Luo people during President Uhuru’s visits to Kisumu has been a trifle embarrassing, said two Boda Boda riders. “What point have we been trying to convey? That we’ve forgotten the brutal violence that took place in Kibera and Kondele not too long ago? That we’re now loyal followers of President Uhuru and his inept government? That we’re a pragmatic, forward-looking people? That we should forgive and forget? Just like that? No questions asked?” The boda boda riders said that among a section of the Luo people, the force of reason seems to have been trumped by reason by force. “If you raise these critical questions, Raila’s adamant followers threaten you with violence, ‘you must be a Ruto supporter – are you a Luo? Who are you to question Raila? BBI is Raila and Raila is ours’.”

Raila’s magnetism among the Luo people is waning, especially among the younger generation, said Otieno Magak. “His politics has ceased to be spellbinding and the handshake didn’t help matters. You can’t question BBI. To question BBI is to question Raila. You can’t ask how supporting BBI, wholly, unquestioningly, will translate into determining the price of sugar in your house. You must support it because Raila has said so. If you prod, nasty epithets are thrown at you. You’re deemed a traitor to the cause, you can be physically attacked.”

Woe unto the Luo people if BBI doesn’t succeed.
The Luo people are being corralled into supporting BBI because this could be the “bullet”, pointed out Magak. “How many ‘one bullets’ can one possibly have? How many times can you promise a political tsunami? The younger generation of Raila supporters are saying ‘we’ve done our civic duty. We’ve lent our unwavering loyalty to him and his political cause, but there comes a time when we must think about our own future and our own future cannot be tied to an aging opposition doyen.’”

Magak said to me that indeed there is a quiet movement sweeping across the Luo nation, of the millennial and generation Z that is keen on charting their own political path away from BBI, away from Raila’s stranglehold, away from the politics of patronage. “Raila has really fought hard, no one can take that away from him, even his greatest detractors concede the man has been resilient, even as he has been cheated out of victory several times. But BBI is a con game which, if it backfires, will have much wider ramifications on a community that has never sat well with status quo politics.”

As BBI proponents and antagonists square it up in court, engaging in legalese and subterfuge, Kenya’s largest voting constituency, the youth — disillusioned, dispossessed, disaffected — have given the report a wide berth.

Postscript

The 2 June 2021 decision of the seven-judge bench to issue their ruling on 20 August 2021 doesn’t augur well for BBI said Magak. “Whichever way you may want to look at it, at the end of the day, one party seems to have been lied to all throughout. It is significant to note that immediately after the judges gave their date, after the final submissions, the IEBC chair reiterated, soon after, that the general elections will be held on 9 August 2021. It is not for nothing that Wafula Chebukati found it prudent to remind Kenyans at this juncture that the election calendar is on course. But don’t take my word for it.”

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