



# Building Bridges to Nowhere: Notes From an Insider

By Miriam Abraham



It was January 2017, and instead of enduring another bitter winter in my adopted home, I was having *nyama choma* with friends in Nairobi. It was refreshing watching the children playing nearby, as adults indulged in our national hobby- politics. Although the setting made me miss my children terribly, I was full of optimism. I was back in my motherland to play my part in making my country better. The call to national duty after over 15 years abroad justified the family, financial and professional sacrifices I had decided to make.

A friend tapped me on my arm. I had temporarily forgotten that this was not just a *nyama choma* event but a crash course from my friends on “how to survive in Kenya”. I listened attentively as my friends gave me tips. One reminded me that this was my opportunity to pay any outstanding mortgages and debts and invest in choice property in Nairobi. Another reminded me that every time I raise my hand to vote during board meetings, there should be an amount equivalent to my five fingers, in millions, deposited to my account. Yet another told me of how I needed to ensure that I surrounded myself with “my people” to protect me. Not to be outdone, another reminded me that since I could never understand how to “make deals” as a “foreigner”, I needed to introduce him to the person in charge of procurement and the rest would be taken care of.

It was not clear to me how much of this was serious talk and how much of it was said in jest - the

sarcasm that those of my generation have resorted to in an attempt to escape the helplessness they face as the country careens into a pit. The advice nevertheless captured what I ended up experiencing throughout my time in Kenya. It is assumed that the only reason one takes up a public service position is to enrich themselves, their families and their cronies. And it is indeed not a far-fetched conclusion, in most cases.

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My conclusion at the end of my brief Kenya sojourn is that we, the professional elite, celebrate mediocrity, shun integrity and worship corruptly acquired wealth. The end justifies the means, even if this includes taking the lives of children, men and women. We easily forgive those that rob from public coffers and forget those that sacrifice their lives in the fight for justice and good governance.

Ours is a transactional country. It is therefore not a coincidence that Kenyans quickly satirised the 9 March 2018 “handshake” between President Uhuru Kenyatta and former Prime Minister Raila Odinga as a *handcheque*. Because how else could one explain the political convergence of views between those who disenfranchised millions of Kenyans by organizing violent protests against the sham October 2017 election and those that benefited from a circus of a presidential election? As a friend of mine reminded me in January, “it will be just a matter of time before the political elite sit around the table and share the loot”. I do not know whether there is any financial loot that has been shared. But certainly, we can all see the associated trappings of power being openly enjoyed by those who just two months ago were victims of State harassment.

Recent developments make it difficult to argue against those who have always held that politicians cultivate their ethnic bases to increase their political bargaining chips in preparation for the next ‘handcheque’. Even when the larger strategic interests of political parties and alliances are at stake, if there is an opportunity to make money, the financial imperative invariably wins the day. It reminds me of July last year when the lawyers of two opposing coalitions walked hand in hand to negotiate a procurement deal, which in the larger scheme of things would have negatively affected the chances of one of the coalitions “winning” the presidential election. But it appears that any opportunity to make money could not be left unattended.

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This partly explains why almost all the constitutional bodies, the media and even the legislature in the country are under State capture. At the moment, the Judiciary is the last bastion of hope. Now that President Kenyatta and his Deputy President have ‘apologized’ to Kenyans for unnamed

trespasses, we should expect these institutions to remain under the spell of the looters. They have free rein. The press has caved in, civil society is severely constrained, bloggers and activists are constantly harassed by the State and the majority of Kenyans remain silent, puzzled as they watch those on whom they had pinned their hopes to “save” the country make numerous “handshaking” tours.

We who easily forgive have “moved on” and are leaving it to a tiny political elite to implement its Putin-esque plan. Let me refresh your mind on this.: in what the Russians call ‘castling’, President Vladimir Putin, restricted from serving a third consecutive term as president in 2008, had Dmitry Medvedev run for President while he took over the Prime Ministerial position. Putin was still the *de facto* President. In 2012, he formally returned as President and then “overwhelmingly won” his “second” term in this year’s election, assuring him of power until 2024.

This appears to be the model the political establishment is using, if we are to take seriously what we are hearing from informal regime mouthpieces such as Tiaty Member of Parliament, William Kassait Kamket and COTU strongman, Francis Atwoli. Hon. Kamket has proposed the creation of a ceremonial presidency and a premier position, while Atwoli believes that President Uhuru Kenyatta is too young to retire and must continue in power. This is the *Ka-Putin* plan, articulated in Kenyanese. In their thinking, the Luo will be happy to finally achieve their long sought-after presidential dream while the Kikuyu will maintain their own “young man” in power. It gives the plotters plausible deniability for not “paying back the debt” to the Deputy President and thus protect the Kikuyus living in the Rift Valley. In their wisdom, there are only three ethnic groups in Kenya. Once their interests are taken care of, all other socio-economic and grievances of marginalisation are a non-issue.

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Constitutional changes to prolong terms of office or satisfy elite demands are the flavour *du jour*. Apart from the Russians, the Chinese have done it recently. Rwanda and Uganda have done it and the Burundians are set to give a soft landing to President Kenyatta’s agemate, Pierre Nkurunziza, when they change the Constitution on 17 May. It appears that our elite are itching to join the bandwagon. And as always happens with our national politics, there will be a bogeyman who has to be deterred by any means – the justification for the planned constitutional amendments. Kenyans will be reminded of the violence in the Rift Valley in 1992, 1997 and 2007 and be warned of Armageddon if the Constitution is not amended to deter the Deputy President from ascending to the presidency. *Operation Stop Ruto* is gaining steam and Kenyans will soon be convinced that this is the only way to save Kenya.

A friend I have known for many years recently wrote to me: “The goose is cooked. No way of stopping that train. I am just scared of that guy.” I did not respond to the message. I could not. Not because I did not share my fear for the guy he was talking about – our Deputy President. I have been a victim of his threats and I know that they are not empty.

I watched how he remotely controlled and manipulated a constitutional body for which I worked. I still wake up in the middle of the night with nightmares of the ordeals I was subjected to, carried out with express instructions from him.

I did not respond to the message because it hit me that even those that I thought to be “progressive” have bought into the bogeyman notion, a red herring to turn public attention to the urgency of removing an individual, like we did with the *Moi must go* slogans, without questioning the underlying system that has allowed such leaders to thrive. I did not respond because as I was reading his message, the *building bridges to nowhere* initiative was being launched. And once again, the political elite were gaming the system, as they always do.

Let me be clear, I am not against reconciliation. It is long overdue. But building lasting bridges needs to be anchored in more than declarations and photographs of handshakes. The central motivation cannot be an attempt by a government to buy legitimacy after what was largely a sham October 2017 presidential election. It cannot be about an opposition party attempting to join the “meat eating” team instead of “salivating from the outside”, to use President Kenyatta’s own words. It cannot be about an icon in the fight for democracy seeking relevance as he ponders his next step. Nor can it be just about stopping the Deputy President from inheriting the big seat.

Reconciliation, building bridges, requires difficult conversations and hard work. It requires us to ask tough questions about our national ethos. It requires the kind of concerted effort that we witnessed in the 1990s during the struggle for the Second Liberation, so called. The Young Turks who led that struggle are clearly now failing to practice what they previously espoused. When given the opportunity to govern after the controversial elections in 2007, they joined the looters, as narrated by John Githongo in his recent article, *The State of the Nation: Corruption: A brief history- 1997 to 2018*.

Back to the January 2017 *nyama choma* outing: I defied the advice on how to survive in Kenya. I chose not to join the looters. There are many Kenyans like myself. That is why, like Prof. Makau Mutua, I will still hold onto the naïve, childish optimism for a better Kenya. I still believe that there is a constituency of millennials ready to wrest the baton from the “Young Turks”. I still believe that millennials have a chance to fix the current crisis of leadership and develop an alternative leadership to the current elites that continue to divide the country rather than unite it.

The “Young Turks” have failed to deliver the vision they had in their heyday. They will resist change by any means necessary. They will conjure up the spectre of “Ruto bogeyman” to justify constitutional amendments precisely to entrench themselves in power or ‘return from the ‘cold’, as they are wont to put it. But the millennials have more going for them to deliver the change. History is on their side. The future of Kenya is in their hands, not in those busy building bridges to nowhere.

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