



Dynasties, Hustlers and Us: Towards a Politics of Revolutionary Change

By Miriam Abraham



Last week, we gathered for a drink to commiserate with a Brazilian friend and colleague following the declaration of the populist candidate, Mr. Jair Bolsonaro as their new president. As we do much too often lately, we bemoaned the rise of nationalism, populism and the erosion of the rule-based world order. We fancied re-writing Thomas Friedman's *The World is Flat* or Hilary French's *Vanishing Borders* to update them with the recent assault on globalization, anti-immigrant rhetoric, trade wars, Brexit and the even greater threats to our environment as governments abandon international agreements. And then as we often do, we gradually moved from the big picture global issues to the inevitable discussions of the politics in our countries.

Our Brazilian friend had earned the right to go first, given that the drinks were meant for him anyway. He expressed his frustration at Jair Bolsonaro taking office in the country beginning January next year, and in jest wondered if any of us could offer him citizenship. The options around our table were not palatable. An Italian, two Americans, a Brit, an Austrian, a South Sudanese and a Kenyan. He lamented about the incoming President's views on women, minorities and immigrants, his threat to use the army to quash urban crime and pull out of the Paris Agreement on climate change, among other grievances.

We asked our Brazilian friend what alternatives they had on the ballot and he readily admitted that

they really had none. As in Kenya, they seem to have been stuck choosing between the *Dynasty*, as exemplified by Mr. Fernando Haddad of the left-wing Workers Party, who was anointed by former President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva (he is serving a 12-year jail sentence for corruption), or the *Hustler* Jair Bolsonaro, who while running on an agenda to clean up Brasilia, appears to be just as corrupt, if not worse. In what may be perceived as a *quid pro quo*, Judge Sergio Moro, who convicted ex-president Lula, has been nominated by the new *Hustler* President to serve as minister of justice in the incoming administration.

Nevertheless, the wave of anti-establishment candidates seems to be spreading across the world, as citizens protest what they perceive as entrenched systems that do not seem to address their economic and social woes. My friends were perturbed when I told them that I wished that the same wind of change would sweep through my African continent and the Middle East. I argued that if Brazil's Bolsonaro was partly a product of social media, then my continent was more than ready to have their own version of this change. I admitted that I was disturbed by the dangerous rhetoric from their new anti-establishment leaders in their countries. But that in the absence of political leadership that attempts to root out corruption, deal with economic and social inequalities and protect our environment, then it is worth making a break with the past. This would potentially lead to setbacks, but it would re-set the political systems.

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While anti-establishment debates seem to dominate discussions in other places, in Kenya, the *Dynasties and Hustlers* seem to be shaping and controlling the political narrative of the country's future. The 2022 succession plans all seem to be focused on the same names that are responsible for our woes. It is as though the Kenyatta, Odinga and Moi families, which have dominated our politics and economic lives for the past six decades have earned the right to govern forever. Or that the so-called *Hustlers* who have looted this country broke, will suddenly be redeemed and focus on the problems of the common *mwana*. Even when we attempt to be innovative, our lists are composed of politicians who have been part and parcel of the establishment, as former ministers or current governors. The so-called collection of views from across the country by the "Bridges to Nowhere" team; the so-called national dialogue conferences under the auspices of religious leaders; the calls for a referendum ahead of the 2022 election to change the Constitution - all are disguised attempts by the *Dynasties or Hustlers* to maintain their control of our destiny.

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Some are even suggesting that the "young" president remains in office, in one form or another, beyond 2022. To be fair, Uhuru Kenyatta has denied attempts to remain in power and has promised to unveil his "surprise" anointed one at the appropriate time. Time will tell. We have numerous African leaders who make retirement commitments and then turn around and claim to have "given in" to the popular demand of their populace. President Paul Kagame of Rwanda is the reigning king of this narrative in East Africa. The nerve to think that after the country has been dominated by the

Kenyatta dynasty, Uhuru Kenyatta would offer to anoint a new leader, reflects a breathtaking sense of entitlement. If indeed our politics will continue to be controlled by a select set of families, then maybe we should consider formally switching from a democracy to a monarchy. It would save us a lot of lives and money, both of which are casualties of our electoral process.

In such a political climate, it is easy to give in to despondency and let the *Dynasties and Hustlers* battle it out themselves. But only if we would not end up as victims of their selfish adventures. Change does not come on its own. It needs people to organize and rally around a common cause. With the state of the economy, corruption, extra-judicial killings, inequalities and other ills, it should not be difficult to find consensus on a common cause. But the task of building a social and political movement is not easy. And the *Dynasties and Hustlers* will take every step to undermine such a movement. They will once more, re-invent themselves and present themselves as the messiahs we have been awaiting.

This is only possible if we collectively cave in to pessimism, apathy and our usual blind sycophancy to our versions of messiahs. Going back to Brazil. The military dictatorship that governed from 1964 to 1985 was opposed by academics, technocrats, reformists and many middle-class families. Although it took them time, these groups organized and formed the Party of Brazilian Social Democracy that rejected corrupt politicians, espoused free markets and respect for human rights and went on to govern between 1995 and 2003. During this period, Brazil's economy thrived, violent crimes reduced, primary healthcare and literacy programmes among other social reforms were put in place. It was only replaced from power by the Workers Party, with even more positive social reforms, of course until political and economic power got into their heads and they became part of a corrupt and oppressive establishment.

In Kenya, there are signs of a growing number of activists, artists, writers, thinkers and technocrats who seem tired of the zero-sum game of *Dynasties and Hustlers*. Like myself, they spend hours behind keyboards on columns such as this one, lamenting the political-economic situation. They grapple on a daily basis with the situation in the country, dazed by each revelation of corruption, its public relations game of smokes and mirrors, arrests and release of the culprits.

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Every society needs its share of the Naom Chomskys to serve as public intellectuals. But even more urgently, it needs men and women to organize themselves to rid the country of this breed of the political class. That is the reason that initiatives such as the *Kenya Tuitakayo Movement* (KTM) are commendable. There is clarity on the issues to be tackled. Clarity on the need to mobilize across the country. Clarity on the importance of developing leaders. But the movement must define itself as a political one and not fall prey of the typical civil society projects that rely of external funding for survival. The movement should be wary of becoming one of those that ticks the boxes on the number of 'capacity building' workshops it has held or protests it has organized. It should not shy away from defining itself as a movement seeking to bring political, social and economic changes rather than a lobby group that intends to merely reform the current system. Out of sheer personal interest, no politician will want to change a system which privileges them.

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It is unlikely that such a movement will make any significant inroads to have a direct impact on the 2022 elections. It must, as a matter of necessity, move away from the model of the current political coalitions and parties that only exist as vehicles for electoral processes. But it cannot shy away from defining itself as a movement whose objective is to wrest political and economic power from the establishment and shape a new social contract with Kenyans. As a long-time friend of mine recently asked, “are we building leaders to be priests or to take political power?”.

Each day, the *Dynasties and Hustlers* will distract us with one issue or another, but such a movement has to focus beyond these distractions. It also has to be wary of those who sit in the boardrooms with them to destroy the movement from inside in order to maintain their privileged positions with the *Dynasties and Hustlers*, in the hope of having crumbs thrown their way.

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As expected, the drinks with my friends, ended without us finding a solution to our disenchantment with the political leadership in our countries. But with the optimism that change is inevitable, regardless of how long it may take, or how difficult it will be.

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