



What COVID-19 Has Revealed About Our Callous and Clueless Leaders

By Rasna Warah



If Kenyans had any doubt that the government is oblivious to their worries and concerns, the COVID-19 pandemic has confirmed their worst fears: the Kenyan government is not only ignorant about how the majority of the country's citizens live, but it also simply doesn't care. The level of insensitivity displayed by the president and his cabinet has stunned even those who would normally sing the government's praises.

A few examples:

1. Bludgeoning citizens during a curfew

When the government imposed a dusk-to-dawn curfew and a partial lockdown at the end of March, images of police officers brutally beating up people waiting for ferries and other forms of public transport filled social media. There have been at least three reported deaths as a result of the violence inflicted on ordinary citizens by the police. No public apology by the police has been forthcoming, nor has there been any statement on who died and in what circumstances. The cruelty with which the curfew was enforced shocked even the international media, prompting the president to urge the police to use restraint. Yet, the beatings continue to this day. One recent video on social media showed police officers dragging a person from his house for not wearing a face mask - in his

own house!

The new Cabinet Secretary for Health, Mutahi Kagwe, has adopted a similar “disciplinarian” approach to the pandemic, which has instilled more fear than confidence in the government. Instead of reassuring Kenyans, he has resorted to scolding them, even admonishing those who dare to eat “only one sausage” with their beer at restaurants (Restaurants have been asked to only serve alcoholic drinks to patrons who order food as well.)

2. No safety net for the poor and vulnerable

Meanwhile, President Uhuru Kenyatta, begging bowl in hand, has been imploring donors/lenders to give money to Kenya to allow the country to effectively handle the coronavirus crisis. (It must be noted that the president belongs to among the wealthiest families in the country, running a large monopolistic and highly profitable milk processing enterprise. Yet, there has been no talk of reducing milk prices during this current crisis, nor has the president or his family donated money or milk to charities helping the jobless and the vulnerable.)

Promises of cash transfers and food to those who are suffering extreme hardship as a result of the curfew and lockdown don't seem to have materialised. A cynical citizenry is already wondering if the funds raised will go towards the intended beneficiaries or will simply line some politically-connected pockets. Anecdotal evidence and other reports indicate that the Sh2,000 (about \$20) monthly stipend that was promised to the most vulnerable people has still not been disbursed to them despite assurances by various government officials that cash transfers started in April. A quick, highly unscientific survey I conducted on people living in Kawangware, a large informal settlement in Nairobi, showed that none of the people, who have either been laid off or have had to close down their small businesses, have seen a cent of the stipend.

As Mercy Mwenda, a columnist with the *Daily Nation* lamented, “Given the current government’s treatment of poor Kenyans, one would be mistaken to assume that one of the key strategies of fighting poverty by this government is by creating more poor . . . It is now that we realise that our interaction with the government, as poor people, starts and ends with elections. In between, only the tragedies affecting the rich and brought by the rich will be focused on”.

3. Flowers for UK medics but no rewards for Kenyan doctors and nurses

Cowed by the state, and with no support system to see them through the crisis, Kenyans had to endure another slap in the face when it was announced that the Kenyan government had sent flowers grown in Kenya to National Health Service (NHS) workers in the United Kingdom in appreciation of their efforts in treating COVID-19 patients. This public relations stunt (probably a misguided attempt by Kenya’s once thriving flower-exporting industry to ensure future exports) backfired. Disgusted Kenyans – who have witnessed a deterioration in their public healthcare system, where doctors and nurses barely have the tools to treat any patient, let alone one suffering from COVID-19, were aghast that the president saw it fit to reward healthcare workers abroad when doctors and nurses in local hospitals have been complaining of lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) and poor wages.

Uhuru responded to his social media critics by admitting that sending flowers to people in a rich country was not just a kind gesture by a poor country; it was a marketing strategy. He told Kenyans that the 300 bouquets of flowers were sent to the UK “to show the world our product” and to protect the country’s flower industry. Kenyans on social media were told to “think before you talk nonsense”.

4. Making people homeless in the middle of a lockdown

There were more shocking events to follow. About three weeks into the lockdown and curfew, some 5,000 people were forcibly evicted from a low-income neighbourhood in Nairobi and left homeless. Images of houses being demolished and women and children pleading for mercy did not move the government or the security personnel sent to the scene to halt the eviction.

The eviction happened during a time when no one could leave Nairobi due to containment measures, which meant that the evicted people could not even seek refuge in their rural homes. The 7 p.m. curfew also made it difficult for the evictees to find alternative accommodation at short notice. No one in government wondered how these people would enforce “social distancing” in their homeless state or where they would sleep during a night curfew.

The details about why this eviction was ordered at this time are scanty, but there is speculation that the order was made to pave way for a large development scheme nearby. Even if this is the case, why were the residents not given enough notice? More importantly, why was the eviction exercise (overseen by the police) ordered during a lockdown and curfew?

The international media and social media picked up the story and aired it for the world to see, but there was no apology or explanation from the state, nor any stated plans for resettling, housing or compensating those whose houses were torn down. John Githongo, the publisher of *The Elephant*, commented on Twitter: “That the demolition of houses of over 5,000 residents of Kariobangi North Ward can take place in the middle of an unprecedented pandemic lockdown demonstrates an official callousness and disregard for the lives and basic dignity of Kenyans that is staggering”.

Jubilee’s poor scorecard

What these tragic events have demonstrated is not just the government’s callousness in the midst of an extremely difficult period, but also its cluelessness, accompanied by extreme greed and an anti-intellectual posture, which has raised levels of mediocrity and incompetence in government not witnessed under Daniel arap Moi’s highly repressive regime. (Even the former president knew that you need intelligent people in government.)

State capture of media organisations has also made a disturbing comeback, with stories of editors taking instructions from State House, and with corporate interests aligning with state interests. (Uhuru’s contempt for the media – and for reading in general – was evident after he assumed the presidency when he stated that newspapers were only good for “wrapping meat”.)

When the coalition Jubilee government of Uhuru Kenyatta and his deputy William Ruto first took over in 2013, I thought it merely incompetent. But as the years passed, and as one corruption scandal after another threatened to taint the government’s legacy, it dawned on me that something more sinister was afoot. The corruption scandals were of such huge magnitude that Kenyans stopped counting the zeros in the amounts that were looted. Shady “tenderpreneurs” were blamed, but many Kenyans wondered how such large amounts could pass through important ministries without ministers or permanent secretaries noticing.

Belated attempts to curtail corruption in government have led to the sacking of a Treasury Cabinet Secretary, but this anti-corruption campaign appears to be targeting one side of the coalition government, which has raised questions about its impartiality.

It has also become apparent that the people running the show haven’t a clue about the challenges facing ordinary Kenyans. Election promises – such as the laptop for every Standard One pupil made by Uhuru during his 2013 election campaign – failed to consider that large numbers of Kenyan

students go to schools that have no running water or electricity. Some schools, especially in remote areas, don't even have roofs. One school board member told me of a case where tablets (and not the promised laptops) were delivered but they lie unused because they are not sufficient in number and, in any case, the teachers have not received training.

During the current crisis, government honchos encouraged school children to embrace e-learning at home, not realising that a personal computer is a luxury even for many university students, let alone primary school students.

Despite attempts to paint Uhuru's "legacy" as one that has delivered tangible benefits to Kenyans, citizens now know that promises made by him and his deputy (like the stadiums that were to be built in various towns across the country) have not materialised. On the contrary, Kenyans have suffered a steep decline in their standard of living, thanks to high rates of inflation and a declining shilling.

And as if Kenyans are not already suffering financially on account of the current lockdown and curfew, the Treasury Secretary, Ukur Yatani, recently proposed a raft of additional taxes, which will make life for poor and middle class Kenyans and those who have lost their jobs or businesses even harder. He wants to impose 14 per cent VAT on liquefied petroleum gas (which was previously exempt from tax); he wants to tax pensions paid to people over the age of 65; he even wants to impose a 14 per cent tax on machinery and equipment used in plastic recycling plants (a real disincentive to those who recycle waste and care for the environment).

These and other new taxes are no doubt a response to the ballooning debt now standing at Sh6.29 trillion (about \$60 billion or around 60 per cent of the country's GDP) that the Jubilee government has inflicted on the country, and which it appears unable to repay. Early this month, Moody's, the international credit rating agency, downgraded Kenya's credit rating from "stable" to "negative" owing to the country's huge repayments on external debt, heavy local debt obligations with less tax income (thanks to a mismanaged economy that saw several small and medium enterprises fold up due to high energy and other costs, including high taxation) and dollar loans that could see repayments rise if the shilling declines sharply. Given that Kenyans are also suffering - and will continue to suffer - from the effects of the COVID-19-related lockdown for several months, if not years, it is deeply insensitive to increase their suffering through punitive taxation.

The Jubilee government's extortionate methods of taxation remind me of the notorious "hut tax" imposed by the British colonial administration which, having forcibly alienated the indigenous peoples from their land, then proceeded to impose a tax on them as a means of coercing them into paid employment on white settler farms, a form of extortion that eventually led to the anti-colonial Mau Mau rebellion.

An unholy alliance

Part of the problem is that the ruling elite in Kenya, particularly Uhuru Kenyatta, have never experienced real poverty. Uhuru's father, Jomo Kenyatta, Kenya's first president, came from a humble peasant background, but within a decade of his rule after independence, he had become one of the wealthiest people in the country, with landholdings all across the country, some acquired through coercion.

Deputy President William Ruto has never hidden the fact that he comes from a poor family and even sold chickens by the roadside to earn a living when he was a young man. But it is not lost on Kenyans that the vast fortune he has today is the result of crooked deals he made when he was close to Moi, who groomed him to be a campaigner for his KANU party when it appeared that he might be losing his grip on power. Ruto has since been named in various land-related scandals, allegations he

continues to deny.

The unholy alliance between these former International Criminal Court (ICC) indictees opened the floodgates of impunity. When Uhuru and Ruto joined hands to form the Jubilee Party in the run-up to the 2013 election - which they dubbed "a referendum against the ICC" - they were essentially telling Kenyans that any crime - even one against humanity - can be overlooked as long as the people vote overwhelmingly for those accused of that crime. Their election campaign encouraged a wave of known criminals to vie for political office, contrary to Chapter Six of the 2010 Constitution that demands that leaders in government be people of integrity.

However, now, seven years after that marriage of convenience, Uhuru seems to have switched sides. A clear example of the dishonesty that has pervaded his administration is the sidelining of allies of the deputy president, who in 2013 was paraded as the president's best friend, ally and fellow indictee wrongfully charged by an international court. Both men often appeared in public holding hands and dressed in similar attire (another publicity stunt no doubt concocted by the various PR companies that the president hired to whitewash and shore up his image).

Now that Uhuru has joined hands with his former foe and leader of the now defunct opposition, Raila Odinga, he thinks nothing of dumping his deputy. Ruto is not known to be a man of integrity or honesty either, but when a man he helped to win an election dumps him like an old wet sock, it says a lot about the man doing the dumping. And given that Uhuru is capable of throwing people who helped him win an election under the bus, what guarantee is there he won't do the same to Raila?

A bumpy ride and possible rebirth

Kenyans are in for a bumpy ride in the months leading up to the 2022 election, what with an ailing economy, thanks to mismanagement and now COVID-19, and a highly charged political environment where friends and foes have become highly interchangeable. In other countries, the mismanagement of the economy and the callous treatment of citizens would normally lead to a change of guard during elections. But this being Kenya - where loyalty to one's tribe trumps qualifications - all we can expect is more of the same. Or perhaps COVID-19 may have finally helped to unmask our leaders to show their true colours, which could alter the way Kenyans view leadership.

Going forward, I envision a "lost development decade" for Kenya, much like the one that African countries experienced in the 1990s during the implementation of the World Bank-IMF Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) that led to withdrawal of essential services by the state and huge job cuts in the public sector, increasing the levels of hardship across the continent. The repayment of unsustainable and reckless loans will no doubt leave Kenya economically much weaker, and halt progress in key sectors. COVID-19 has only served to hasten the country's inevitable economic decline.

However, we must also remember that the 1990s also gave birth to pro-democracy movements in Kenya and in many other African countries. As then, an angry, disillusioned and impoverished citizenry may now finally say, "Enough is enough!" This could give rise to a progressive alternative leadership that actually cares about the country and its citizens, and which has the vision and capacity to unleash Kenya's unlimited potential.

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