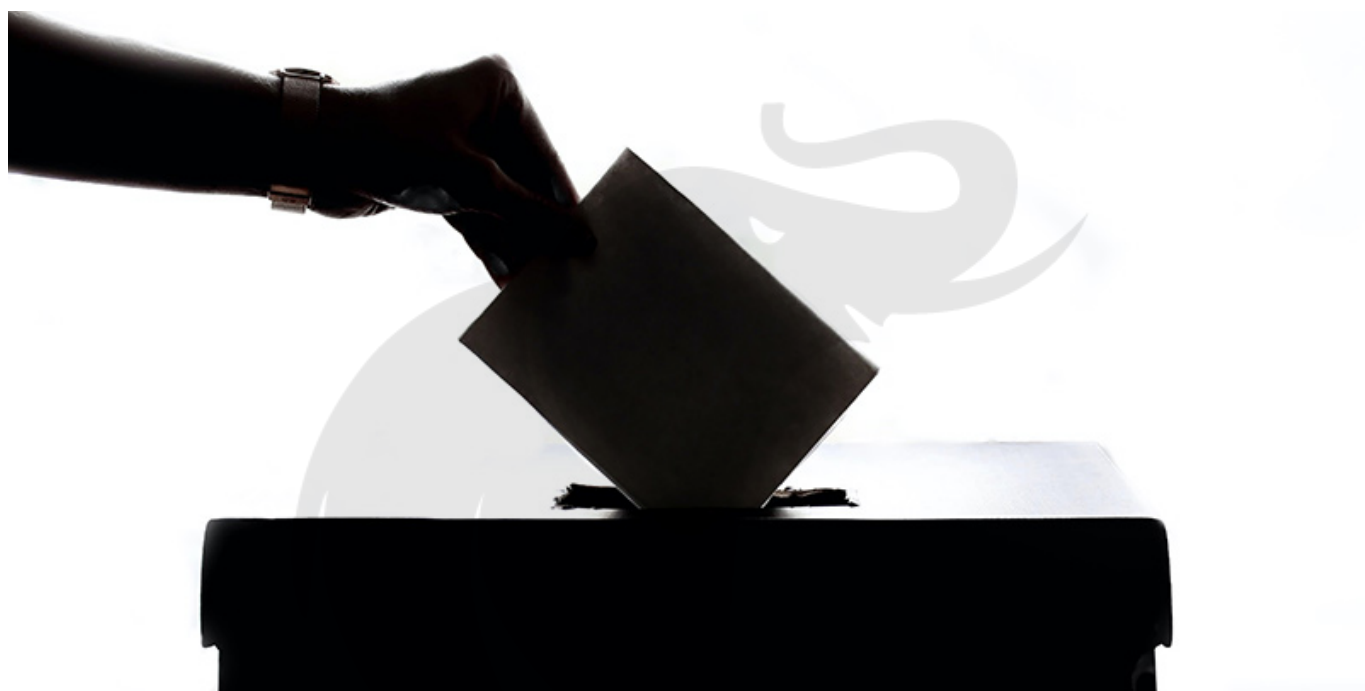




Elections: Empire's Sponge for Absorbing and Neutralizing People's Struggles

By Wandia Njoya



Yesterday, Kenyans went to the polls to choose the next cohort of regional and national leaders. Naturally, the focus has been on the presidency, where the mockery of what we are calling a choice is most evident. Kenyans have been cornered into choosing between an outgoing deputy president who was rejected by his presidential boss, and an opposition leader whose family was vilified since the 1960s by the president's family, up until the previous election. The relationship between the two front runners is one man - Uhuru Kenyatta, for whom the presidency has been his only achievement and who seems unable to let go of the presidency. The other two options are a barely known evangelical preacher and a weed-smoking professor with roots in the torture machine of the Moi regime.

The options which Kenyans are going to pick from are so absurd, that the mainstream media's attempt to professionalize politics through American-style debates degenerated into a spectacular farce. The most telling moment was when the leading policy thinkers of the Azimio and Kenya Kwanza, Oduor Ong'wen and David Ndii, were debating on Citizen TV. The two men occasionally took jabs at one another for their respective candidates' association with the Uhuru presidency, yet ironically, both candidates were equally associated with Uhuru. One candidate is Uhuru's past, the other is Uhuru's future. What the media called a debate was more like a spat between a jilted lover and his replacement.

How did a country so proud of her history of struggle get to be choosing between these non-options dominated by what is arguably Kenya's most mediocre president? Are there no leaders in Kenya that these are the options we have to choose from?

The real story is in the selections that were done before the elections. This election is not even who wins the ballot, but who got to it and on what platform.

The way to begin this story is with the attempts by Kenyans to build an additional flank in politics where politics covers actual ideas and lives of Kenyans, rather than their personality and profile. In 2017, a party called Ukweli Party, which was the promise of a new way of doing politics. The founders of the party were leading lights of Kenya's new generation of political thinkers: Boniface Mwangi, Schaeffer Okore and Ory Okollo Mwangi.

The party was as professional as they come: a clear way of picking out candidates, and candidates who were committed to engaging with voters. The most prominent political campaign was, of course, that of Boniface Mwangi. Boni ran a secretariat, had volunteers campaigning on the ground with him, and a number of us changed our voting constituency and contributed regularly to his campaign fund. An award winning movie, *Softie*, told Boni's story. In fact, the photos of candidates going from door to door, market to market, talking with voters may not be new, but it gained prominence thanks to Ukweli party. After Boni lost the election, he followed up his campaign with doing a clean up of his campaign material. As a regular financial contributor to his campaign, I even received a call from his secretariat thanking me for my support. That call was very touching.

Boni did not just lose the election. He lost to a colorless musician who was struggling with criminal suspicion following his involvement in the car accident that led to the loss of life. For a man who had suffered abuse and violence for speaking for the downtrodden, Boni's loss made no sense, especially because the same downtrodden who rejected him at the ballot would call for his intervention after the elections. But voters had not been weaned off the tribal ideology of voting not on political issues but on identitarian solidarity. The loss was brutal.

Five years later, where is Ukweli party? First, their party colors of green and yellow became those of the UDA party. By the time parties were handing in their list of candidates, none of the founding members were in office, with Boni dramatically announcing his exit. As of now, the party has only 10 candidates seeking election. It should have had more this year.

What happened? From an outsider's perspective, given what we have seen happening in the tech sector where venture capitalists absorb and evacuate nascent ideas from the Kenyan population, one can spot a similar trend. Between 2017 and today, some of the leaders have received international fellowships, to the extent of being flown on private jets to give speeches to billionaires pretending to listen, but silently relieved that we don't hate them.

But this is not a new story. As I've already mentioned in reference to the tech sector, Kenya is a country where global capital swoops in like vultures to absorb and neutralize nascent movements among the youth, before they become full blown ideas and political movements. From the literary movement Kwani?, to tech hubs, to Ukweli party, to even the academy, the story is the same. New movements of thinking are quickly absorbed by foreign political interests through NGO appointments, fellowships, invitations to international forums and buy outs, all of which deny the new initiatives their life source in Kenyan realities.

Basically, empire roams around Kenya like a sponge of death, soaking up the energy, vitality and ideas budding in Kenya, to go squeeze out those elements in the west or simply throw away the sponge altogether. Their work is facilitated by the mediocrity of the Kenyan political class, civil

service and colonial institutions which punish thinking and initiative, leaving Kenyans with no choice but to accept these foreign based offers if they are to pay their bills and put children through school.

The same dynamics happened in the 2022 elections. Since 2010, the question of political classes being made up of political families chosen by colonialism, in the classic logic of the British monarchy and its paramount chief policy, has been in Kenyan conversation. There was already an awareness that working hard in Kenya attracts little else but punishment from the government and colonial institutions. Consciousness grew that the Kenya economy was engineered to suit the Kenyatta family empire and crush or buy out any Kenyan innovation.

In other words, Kenya was ripe for a political conversation about the structure of the economy which favors a few at the expense of the rest of Kenyans. Kenya's first Chief Justice, Willy Mutunga, picked the mantle of promoting this line of conversation by convening parties outside of the big machinery together, under the banner of the United Political Front. The UPF included the Communist Party of Kenya, Ukweli Party and the United Green Movement, all parties which do not follow the typical route of being anchored in a prominent politician and a tribal lord.

By this election, the alliance had all but crumbled under internal contradictions which, following the history of alternative political spaces, is all too familiar. The prominent candidate of CPK, Booker Ngesa Omole, who is the party vice-chair and was running for Member of Parliament for Gem constituency, was denied access to the ballot by party officials who decided to join the Kenya Kwanza coalition. A court order compelled CPK officials to submit his name to the IEBC, but the party officials let the order lapse and Omole was time barred.

Another time-barred suppression of the national conversation came through the plight of Reuben Kigame. Going by the logic of suppressing political alternatives in Kenya, it was clear that Kigame was a threat to the two-horse system for two major reasons. His career in gospel music and apologetics means he is well known in Christian circles, and unfortunately, Christianity is a major rallying political element in Kenya. Second, Kigame is intelligent and articulate, a trained historian and a political philosopher. On an anti-corruption platform, Kigame would have been the most credible given that he had no history of government office. From the tribal mindset of empire, Kigame would also have thrown a spanner in the works for the scramble for the vote in Western Kenya.

To the extent that the presidential candidates were able to articulate the political issues, Kigame would have outshone the other candidates hands down and muddied the waters. He too was blocked from the ballot on bureaucratic grounds, and by the time the court ordered that his application be considered, IEBC released a statement arguing that it was too late to change the ballot.

In addition to the crushing of alternative platforms for political discussion, another insidious element of Kenyan elections was the absorption and rebranding of Kenyan conversations. For the last five years, the budding feminist movement made its voice known by stamping its position against the battery and murder of women. Another agenda that was quite strong was the pressure to implement the two thirds gender clause of the constitution. As such, by the time Kenyatta and Raila were proposing to make feudalist changes to the 2010 constitution, the most prominent faces of opposition were women, namely Jerotich Seii, Daisy Amdani and Martha Karua.

That energy and momentum was subsequently defused by the appointment of Martha Karua as Raila's running mate, and it was effective in silencing any voice - especially of women - who persisted that the struggle for women's genuine participation in elections, on their own merit, had not been resolved. We, the few women who persist, are constantly thrown at the sexist stereotypes of women being their own worst enemy and the classic "surely, what do you women want?" Worse,

women are subtly being pressured to ignore the complexity of politics for a single conversation about patriarchy. This election system, I have ignored many invitations to local and international media interviews because of restricting me to a conversation about women in politics. It's an insult to me as a woman yet I'm expected to participate in it as a sign of empowerment.

While Azimio deflated the women's struggle, Kenya Kwanza diffused the class conversation. The Ruto campaign profited from the years of work Kenyans had spent articulating the problems with the suppression of work by the Kenyan bourgeoisie, the unemployment and the toxic tax regimes that are designed to crush innovation. The Kenya Kwanza manifesto does a splendid job of diagnosing the political problem that makes the cost of living sky rocket in Kenya, but it has only one solution: to throw money and more policy at the problem. A promise to redress the colonial logic of the Kenya civil service, which was in the 2017 NASA manifesto which also involved Ndi's brilliant work, was conspicuously absent from the 2022 Kenya Kwanza one. Now it has become convenient for Ruto's detractors to scuttle the class conversation by accusing us of supporting corruption.

The net effect of this political environment is that after the elections, we will have to put more effort in gaining the ground we have lost in the struggles of women and the Kenyan underclass which comprises the overwhelming majority of Kenyans. Essentially, elections have proved to be the reset button, where empire and the Kenyan comprador class collaborate to absorb and disempower fundamental political conversations in Kenya.

This suffocation of democratic thinking would explain the apathy and disinterest of Kenyan youth in voting. Apart from being blocked from major party tickets, the public political conversations over the last five years have become so bureaucratized, hollow and toxic, thanks to the Kenya civil service and the insipidly sterile mainstream media. With Uhuru capturing public history and fashioning it in his own image, young Kenyans have no historical anchor with which to launch themselves into public political conversation. This decadence of our political life is evident in the grotesque public infliction of gender based violence, the rise in suicide and in mental health problems. And unfortunately, Frantz Fanon is virtually unknown in Kenya, so even that conversation is now being effortlessly absorbed by the pharma discourse of disorders and access to medical treatment.

As [John Githongo](#) wrote a few months ago, this is essentially an election about nothing. But this decadence is to be expected after ten years of rule under a family whose only qualification for power was tribe and bloodlines, and whose only political tool was to pollute conversation and control stories, while the economy and social fabric crumbled. The only good thing about the Uhuru presidency is that it has exposed the decay of the political dynasties appointed during colonial rule, which has left many Kenyans and western ambassadors, who were previously addicted to the tribal narrative of Kikuyu supremacy, going through agonizing withdrawal symptoms.

No matter who wins, however, we must resist the absorption of our struggles by the imperial sponge and pick up where we left off before the campaigns heated up. We must fight for the right to memory and to interpret our politics over the long term history, not over 5-year electoral cycles. For the politicians and their imperial backers, they are in a fight for Eurocentric power and money. For the many of us, nothing has changed with this election. We still have to fight for our sanity, our soul, our future and our humanity.

Amandla!

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