



GRIM CITY IN THE SUN: Nairobi's uneasy peace

By Magunga Williams



We are at the Modern Coast bus station, waiting for the night bus that goes to Kisumu to pull up. I have decided that perhaps it is a good idea to go back home to decompress after the profound mess that was the election(s). I am standing at the counter, asking the chap in uniform when we should expect to board because it is already 8.50 pm and the bus that is supposed to leave at 9 pm is nowhere in sight. *"Inakuja saa hii tu. Tulia tu kiasi."*

After engaging in exchanges about the political climate on social media, I am drained. I do not wish to prod any further, so I make way for the man behind me. He had not booked the bus earlier, but luckily, there are a few slots remaining. Not many people have been travelling because there are all these forwards coming in on WhatsApp that the Nairobi-Eldoret highway is not particularly safe for us Westerners. He removes his wallet and as he passes a couple of reds to the attendant, he turns and asks me, out of nowhere, *"Wewe ulilipa na nini, ndugu yangu?"*

From his thick accent, it is clear that he is a *lunje*. *Lakini* I do not understand what he is talking about. Not at first anyway. All I know is that I do not feel comfortable about strangers calling me brother because in the past couple of months, we have not been behaving like a family. Then I realise that he thinks that I have also just paid for my ride to Kisumu.

“No. Me I already booked *kitambo*. *Nililipa na Mpesa*.”

“Aaaah. *Ni nyinyi ndio mnatuangusha bwana!*” I know exactly what he is talking about, but I do not wish to continue this any further. “*Nyinyi ndio mtafanya hii resistance ianguke.*”

This is post-the second Maraga petition in which the bid to challenge the legitimacy of Uhuru’s re-election has been banned by the Supreme Court. NASA had, just before the October 26th repeat presidential election, launched a nationwide resistance movement that required every one of their supporters to boycott the repeat elections. In addition, they announced the establishment of a People’s Assembly, as well as a nationwide boycott of products from particular companies that, according to Raila Odinga’s wisdom, were complicit in the rigging in of President Uhuru Kenyatta. One of those companies is Safaricom, and because I am still using the company’s mobile money application MPesa, this man who I do not even know takes offence. From his tone I can sense a hurt from betrayal of a cause that he has not even checked whether I am a part of. Simply because I am travelling to Kisumu, it means that I am part of the “militias”.

I walk away from the counter without talking to this resistance enthusiast. I do not care what he thinks of me at the moment. The only thing I am concerned about is getting home. To finally breathe. To heal.

It has been about three months since President Kenyatta took the oath of office for the second time. Swearing the same pledge he swore in 2013 before man, God and country. However, in as much as we have a president whose position should be a symbol of national unity, it has become everything but. The country is still divided and there is nowhere else that this rift is felt more than in the capital Nairobi.

Just before and during the election period, Nairobi was the eye of the political storm. Due to the fact that it is a metropolis in which Kenyans of every shade, creed and tribe reside, it became the epicentre of violence the moment politics urged the monstrosity that rages inside mankind out.

It also does not help that Nairobi is the seat of political and economic power in Kenya (and I dare say East and Central Africa), thus the battle for its control was not going to be easy. Both Jubilee and NASA brought their big guns, sometimes literally. Every week, NASA went to the streets, and every week they lost people to both the police and this gang of deplorables that came to brand themselves as the “Nairobi Business Community”. It was rumoured that the Nairobi Business Community was the militia arm of the Jubilee government that was poured into the streets to protect the businesses of Nairobi people during the NASA riots (which, to be fair, were never exactly peaceful). But we all know what they stood for, or against.

The elections may be over now, but the stink that they left behind still lingers in Nairobi. The disdain for the current government (both national and county) keeps escalating. The first time it reared its head was on December 12th, on Jamhuri Day, a few weeks after the inauguration of Uhuru. Usually, this would be the day Kenyans flock to one of the national stadiums with their families and friends to marvel at the marching of the Kenya police and defence forces, to gape in amazement as fighter jets dancing in the skies, and then to brave long-winded speeches filled with promises of grandeur. But we did none of that this last time. Embarrassingly, the president was left with half an empty stadium, even after reports came around that the event was delayed so that people could make their way to the spacious bleachers.

This was not a function of the Raila-led National Resistance Movement (NRM). NRM claimed that if

they were responsible for convincing Nairobians not to attend the Jamhuri Day celebrations, it would be like a cock taking credit for the dawn. This was lethargy. We were tired. After two bloody elections, two emotionally exhausting Supreme Court petitions and an inauguration in which the president-elect's own supporters were attacked and brutalised by the police, very few Kenyans had the heart to even show up. We stayed behind in our houses and did what we Kenyans do on holidays; we drank and ate. And tweeted. Unlike the time we were motivated and turned up like bees to go cheer our countrymen during the IAAF junior championships at Kasarani.

The earth completed its sojourn around the sun, and as it did, we changed the calendars on our walls with that same sense of expectation that people tend to have when entering a new year. Somehow the political climate seemed to have calmed down. The National Resistance Movement had quieted down. The boycott on certain products became less urgent by the day, and Raila Odinga kept on losing momentum by postponing his swearing in as "The People's President".

We'd gotten distracted by other "lesser" troubles, like the national exam results, the Christmas holidays and rise of the death toll on our roads. It was a time of relative peace. That is how bad our politics are. They make you think that times when we have to worry about deteriorating education systems and consistent road carnage are peaceful times. Because then, we are not frothing at the mouth and holding each other by the throat. We enjoyed our moments in the sun. We had a short break of relative *peace*. But just like all good things, we know it will all go to shit.

The first thing that happened was our President Uhuru Kenyatta standing by himself while announcing cabinet positions. This was a far cry from what we had witnessed after he clinched the 2013 presidency. Back then, Kenyatta and his running mate William Ruto had a flowery romance going on, what with the public display of affection, wearing matching shirts and ties and generally painting the town red. This time, there was no honeymoon. And the change of mood reverberated like an African mother's slap in an empty room - the kind you don't see coming but which leaves your head ringing. There was a rift, clearly, in the national party. But we could not tell for certain why. All we saw were MPs fighting one another as to whether Ruto would gain full Jubilee support in 2022.

But if there was one thing that reminded us of just how weak political marriages are, it was the one incident that hit Nairobi County. It is incredible how whatever goes on at the national level is repeated at the county level.

On January 9th, Polycarp Igathe, the then Deputy Governor of Nairobi, was on Twitter defending the use of the Sonko Rescue Team in cleaning up the city. It was a silly argument, really, whose basis had no grounding in either logic, law or faith. He claimed that the use of the Sonko Rescue Team - an NGO founded by the Nairobi Governor, Mike Sonko - was legitimate because the Nairobi City Council workers were doing a terrible job at clearing waste. (Never mind that it was he and Sonko who were heading the Nairobi City Council itself.) The outrage of his boss using his NGO to do the work that their office is mandated (and financed by taxes) to do, was as lost to him as the possibility of Arsenal ever winning the UEFA Champions League.

Fast forward to three days later, January 12th, the very same Polycarp Igathe announces his resignation as Deputy Governor, stating that he has failed to earn the trust of his boss, Governor Mike Sonko.

It would have been funny if it was not so painful.

It would have been hilarious if it did not epitomise the kind of hopelessness that this city emboldens. I mean, ever since Mike Sonko took over from the deposed Evans Kidero, we have witnessed the drastic decline in the quality of Nairobi life. At first, we were treated to the flashy show of exuberance - constant tweets about how much revenue collection has skyrocketed under the new regime and endless posts of how the Sonko Rescue Team was cleaning up the streets.

Then the tweets stopped coming. We were told the county had no money. Then hawkers found themselves in the city and turned Nairobi into the shithole that we deserve to be called by President Donald Trump. Sonko had campaigned on a platform that he was an *Okonkwo*. *A mtu wa watu*. A man of the people, a common man. And the common wananchi worshipped him like a god until he became one.

The tumultuous month of January has now ended. On the national scene, whispers about the division between Number One and Number Two are getting so loud, they have become actual conversations. It also does not help that there has never been a Number Two in Kenyan history who has ever succeeded his boss and emerged as president through the ballot. We have never seen a president hand over power to his deputy. The reason is simple: political marriages in this country are never borne out of love or conviction. They are arranged. They are fixed for convenience. When the convenience disappears (and it does vanish rather quickly), so does the sham of a union it purported to hold.

The centre holding Nairobi together has already begun to waste away. We are being conned by Kenya Power and being made to pay exaggerated bills for electricity. The price of basic commodities like food is on the rise. An avocado that would go for 5 shillings just the other day is now being sold for as much as 80 shillings. Unga, our staple food, is slowly becoming an elitist commodity. While these have little to do with the city's management, we Nairobians are among the first to feel the bite.

Every waking day we are confronted with videos and images of gangs terrorising city dwellers. They snatch wigs off the heads of women in matatus. They hold men by the throat, squeeze tight until they cannot remember the taste of air, then rummage through their victims' pockets and bags and make away with whatever they can. They are drugging people and having their way with them. They are raping mothers fresh from childbirth in the halls of our national hospital.

To be fair, this vermin is not new to the city, but it has certainly become more confident under the leadership of Mike Sonko. These thugs do not care that there are people or cameras watching. Perhaps they are remnants of that godforsaken election period. What did we expect would happen to them? We empowered them when we needed them to brutalise people from a different political party just six months or so ago. Now that the beasts we created are hungry, we have become their meal. They will not stop and interview you, *sijui* ask for your ID, before they yank off that wig or earring or before they twist your neck and pour you out like a drink. They have come for us all.

And the sad thing about it all is that the Kenya Police simply does not give a fuck. Instead of dealing with the issue head on, the Nairobi Police Boss Japhet Koome is advising Nairobians to walk in groups, especially in the evening, and avoid looking "enticing" to criminal gangs by not carrying laptops, phones, expensive jewelry. And we must at all cost avoid using MPesa and ATMs in the central business district. Seriously?

The fact that the police can concentrate on teaching us how not to get attacked instead of handling the attackers indicates just how we live in a beautiful city in which ugly souls are allowed to push the buttons.

On 30 January, the National Resistance Movement “swore in” Raila Odinga as The People’s President. If the Jubilee government’s past reactions are anything to go by, then the worst is yet to hit Nairobi. When two egotistical parties decide to clash again, where do you think the most blood will be spilled?

I have had the privilege of walking around this continent and beyond. Yet every time I travel, I tend to miss Nairobi. I can never be away from her for too long without feeling like I am cheating. And I know I am not the only one. I know how we Nairobians love this place almost to a fault. We would do whatever we can to save her from falling into the precipice. God knows we have.

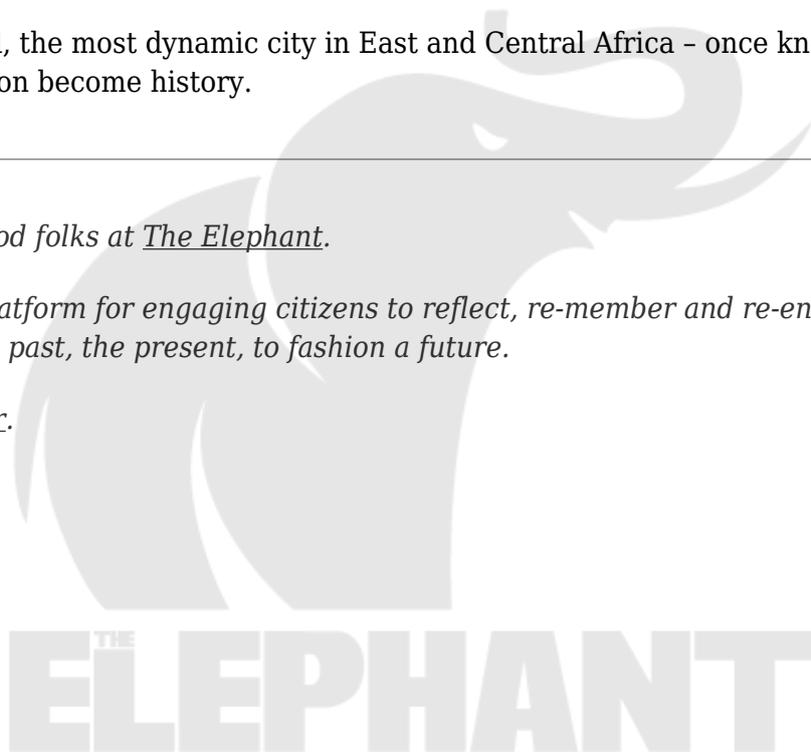
But now we are sailing in uncharted waters. We do not have the benefit of precedence. We have a one-handed, clueless clown at the helm of the county, a stubborn national government, and an even more unrelenting resistance movement. We do not know how to handle this because we have never been here before. We cannot tell whether these are teething problems of a new administration or red flags of high incompetence. We cannot tell whether the pains tearing through Nairobi’s bosom are a signal of impending birth or symptoms of death.

If we are not careful, the most dynamic city in East and Central Africa - once known as “Green City in the Sun” - will soon become history.

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