



The Grief Of Freedom That Never Came

By Julie Masiga



Human beings have a certain amount of emotional energy; you know, that psychic fuel that keeps your body, mind and spirit animated and engaged. Right up to August 8, 2017 my bank of energy was overflowing. Against all good judgement, my heart was full of hope.

See, at first I had been sceptical because the opposition alliance started off as a sack of dismembered limbs. A headless and tailless ensemble that seemed miserably directionless. But then, the limbs started to come together and a body of ideas began to form. At that point, it only vaguely resembled an actual ideology, but I saw potential.

As the winds of change began to gather pace, and the National Super Alliance began to look like a vessel strong enough to carry the weight of half the nation's dreams, I began to invest emotionally in the outcome of the General Election. Naively, I allowed my mind to conceive of what change would look like.

I became more and more invested in the power of the people. The potency of the ballot. Freedom? Freedom was coming tomorrow. I could taste it. If I squeezed my eyes tight enough, I could see it. I really began to dip into my energy reservoirs. I kept up with every new development on the political front, and filed every outcome and every setback into progressive versus retrogressive boxes. I continuously justified why 'we' were right, and they were 'wrong'.

I was convinced that the tide had turned and the last vestiges of a vile colonial system were going to

be swept away by the whirlwind of revolution. I could see the top of the mountain and I knew 'we' would get there. And then August 8 happened. My spirits plummeted to the bottom of the pit. Where I had been at the half-tank mark, I was now running on zero emotional energy.

My erstwhile billowing sails flagged. The dream was dead. And the silliest thing about this grief was that I knew it would happen. Somewhere deep in my gut, I knew that the forces that have held Kenya in their grip since the emergence of Vasco da Gama were not ready to pass on the mantle. But then Chief Justice David Maraga renewed my faith in the power of good. Adrenaline pushed my emotional energies through the roof. Alas, by the time we were done with the shamolic second election, I was a shell. A soulless automation, trying to move on with life, but lacking the psychic energy to soldier on with the heavy weight of the deepest sadness sitting on my head like a rock.

See, I was born a rebel. Conformity has never been my strong point. Injustice has always gotten my hackles up. So it's truly ironic that I was born one year before Daniel arap Moi became president. I grew up in a politically choked environment knowing that Moi was a man to be feared. My parents spoke in whispers. We rarely said the president's name aloud.

We were on the road when the 1982 coup happened, going to, or coming from somewhere, I don't quite remember. I was just five years old. That's the first time I heard the name Raila Odinga. At the time, it meant nothing to me. But much later in life, it became a representation of this force that had somehow added a fresh current to a sea of predictable waves. With little knowledge of who he was, or what he stood for, I began to see him as a Brave. A rebel.

After 1982 Raila dove head first into what has become a legacy of railing against the machine. His ability to re-invent himself, to hide countless cards up his sleeve, endeared him to those who wanted to see Moi toppled by whatever means necessary. His anti-establishment stance and uncanny ability to portray himself as a man of the people cemented his position as this country's most enduring opposition figurehead.

Raila's rebellious energy is appealing. His readiness to put a cause before his own life - just because such a thing is possible and right - is admirable.

It's no wonder that he has become the poster child for possibility. A symbol of hope. Which is not to say that the man is an angel. Not at all. In fact, his misdeeds are the stuff of urban legend. His flaws and failings are well-documented and are frequently the subject of national debate. Raila is unashamedly human, with all that that implies, and perhaps that's where the bulk of his appeal lies.

He has become the repository of the dreams and aspirations of a constituency that has been driven hard by the State machinery for decades. A constituency that longs to be soothed by the heart of government, after years of being poked and prodded by its long, cold arm. A constituency that has been forced to find comfort in subservience. To submerge in inequality and learn how to breathe underwater.

This constituency can be described in superficial tribal terms because it is easy to pinpoint its broad ethnic demographic. But it is truly defined as a group of people who refuse to be burdened by a mediocre, self-fulfilling and exclusionary system of government that cannibalises the weak to profit a ruling elite.

This constituency is in mourning for the fourth time in four elections, the first being the experiment that went horribly wrong post-2002. It has become a constituency of sorrows, well-acquainted with electoral grief. This time around, however, a threshold has been crossed. It might have been the fact that yet another election cycle ended in disrepute, with a president being sworn in abjectly joyless

circumstances. Or that the beast of our divisive ethnicity was awakened in all its dark glory and allowed to stride across the land, untethered and untamed. Whatever it was, the constituency that responds ideologically to Raila and his brand of progressive politics, drew a line in the sand.

It might have been the continuous ridicule from the other side of the electorate, the death of innocent children, or a head of state who commended rather than reprimanded a murderous police force. Whatever it was, one half of this country has awakened to the undeniable fact that real power rests with the people. With or without Raila, traditional opposition supporters have awakened to their own agency. It could have been the collective withholding of their vote on October 27, 2017, or the successful product boycott. Whatever it was, even as we are walking wounded, trying to come to terms with grief we have not been allowed to process, the journey to the mountaintop continues. And this time we've got our eyes firmly on the prize. Aluta Continua.

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