

The Making of a Kenyan Cynic

“Every ounce of my cynicism is supported by historical precedent” ~ Glen Cook

Before the Friday, March 9, 2018 famous handshake between President Uhuru Kenyatta and NASA presidential candidate Raila Odinga, Kenyans in opposition were swimming in schadenfreude as the government declared that it was broke.

Prior to the nearly comical announcement, the Auditor General declared that the government could not account for Ksh 40 billion, for the financial year 2015/16.

Most of the monies that could not be accounted for belonged to the most critical ministries: Devolution and Agriculture. The person in charge of the Department of Devolution under whose tenure we witnessed the most insulting heist is now a Governor that a leading woman magazine called her a trailblazer and a survivor in the month we celebrate women.

The headlines since President Kenyatta resumed his second and last term (hopefully) have been depressing. The unaccounted for monies, the unemployment rates at a stratospheric high, the collapse of the ecological towers (made the worse over the denial of the obvious by the Deputy President less than a decade ago), the looming drought and famine, the appointments by the president public service that are not representative of the country's diversity, the ballooning debt (Sh 4.58 trillion as of November 2017) are some of the headlines Kenyans have woken up the first 100 days of the second term. We will not mention the inflation and the runaway fuel prices and the scandalous cost of electricity.

Euphoric Nasa Supporters

Gore Vidal, that finest American essayist once said, “The four most beautiful words in our common language are: I told you so.”

NASA supporters have been reminding those who voted for the government that the party has just begun.

Nobody captured the NASA zeitgeist than Gabriel Oguda on a February 26, [Facebook post](#),

“Check on your friends. Check on your friends who were noisily vocal on their support for this government before the elections, but are now tone-quiet and suffering in silence after realizing the stinking mess they put us in. Let them know that we are suffering because of their collective herd mentality, but we are philanthropic enough to ask God to let them continue breathing the same air we breathe hoping they learn a thing or two about eating humble pies...”

The post garnered over 1,000 reactions, 300 shares and several comments. The mirth in the comments, as those in opposition chided their friends is understandable.

One can surmise the reaction of those who voted for Jubilee as:

“The opposition is not any better, as they have served in the government before, and we know their record. Everything you can accuse the government off, you can accuse the opposition of presiding over the same or complicit.”

They admit that voting for Jubilee was a mistake, but the opposition was not an alternative.

Benumbed

Have Kenyans become devoid of any physical or emotions feelings because of politics?

Dr Sam Kamau, lecturer at the Aga Khan University Graduate School of Media and Communication, says that Kenyans have been fed so much negative news by the media, they are so desensitized.

“People have seen everything. Like the corruption scandals in the news, nothing shocks them anymore.”

Politicians too have taken us in circles for far too long.

“We always have so much promise, fresh starts, but somehow everything tends to collapse, sooner or later, people have learnt to manage their expectations,” he says.

Back in 2002, after President Daniel Arap Moi was voted out, there was so much promise, and the first two years of Mwai Kibaki’s presidency, Kenyans overly

optimistic. But the fresh start was curtailed, when Kibaki famously failed to honour the Memorandum of Understanding with other members of the Rainbow Alliance.

This was a catalyst for the events that will shape the destiny of Kenya for the next 20 years.

A constitution plebiscite in 2005 and the ensuing fall-out was a perfect primer for the 2007 election that ended up badly, with over 1,200 people dead and more than 600,000 displaced. Then there was the National Accord, a coalition government that delivered the new constitution that we all hoped would be a panacea for the problems that have bedeviled the country since its inception.

It proved a dumb expectation, despite how progressive the constitution turned out. The 2007 Post-Election Violence did not occur in a vacuum. It was more than 40 years in the making. Forty years of sweeping our dirt under the carpet of forgetfulness.

On February 1, 2008 till the National Dialogue and Reconciliation Agreement was signed in Nairobi creating a coalition government. The Agreement ensured that violence stopped, fundamental rights and liberties were restored, and the escalating humanitarian crisis was restored and some semblance of reconciliation took place.

But importantly, the Accord's Agenda 4 wanted long term measures and solutions: a new constitution to engineer institutional and legal reforms (Which we achieved in 2010), land reforms (still a thorny issue that no one can touch), addressing poverty and inequity (never a priority for the ruling elite), unemployment particularly among the youth (latest figure indicate more than 40 percent of the youth are unemployed), consolidating national cohesion and unity (as of 2017, talk about secession was rife among the disgruntled members of opposition), accountability and addressing impunity (the first term of Uhuru Kenyatta's regime saw him throw the towel in on corruption, nobody expects much on the second term, despite tough talk).

Despite the slight progress, institutional reforms have stagnated. Some institutions like the police force, sections of our judiciary and the executive (read Matiang'i) are reminiscent of the darkest days of the Moi and Kenyatta regime.

The more things change...

With Jubilee adamantly rebuffing any attempts at national dialogue and denying and divisions in the country, those in opposition have been banking on the Opposition to push for change through the People's Assembly and even calling for cessation, if the push comes to shove. Even a gesture like the mock swearing of Raila Odinga raised hopes, however forlorn, that he can push for real change and at best achieve the quest for electoral justice.

Then a handshake throws a spanner in the works

It is safe to say that those in Jubilee would have wished to see Uhuru Kenyatta steer his last term on his own terms and secure his legacy without the involving opposition leaders.

It is also safe to assume that those in opposition would have wished those who supported the government to be let to fry in their own fat.

But nobody saw the handshake coming and indeed the Friday presser which seemed contrived in every way and certainly influenced by the soon to be sacked American Secretary of State Rex Tillerson who was on his way to the country.

Raila Odinga's supporters were angry.

Kalonzo Musyoka's supporters and other neutral and moderate NASA supporters wondered loudly the kind of vitriol Kalonzo Musyoka would have received, had he been the one who made the move.

"Goes to show how shaky Kenyan political marriages can be. NASA as a marriage is shaky and one move by Raila can destabilize it. There is no guarantee similarly that his truce with Uhuru can last," says Dr Kamau.

Other Kenyans opted for comic relief bemoaning the predictable nature of our politics.

"Kumbe Caanan was right around Harambee House, na nimekuwa nikipita hapo kila siku (So Caanan was right here at Harambee House, and I have been passing there every day)." Someone wrote on Facebook.

Another one "You can all unblock each other..." was the other typical joke since

the two political sides argued *ad nauseam* ahead of the election to a point of blocking each other.

In a sense, the handshake was a mockery on the feelings of Kenyans who felt that they had been taken for granted, for far too long.

“What of Baby Pendo, those who died for the cause!” many in the ODM party wondered, especially, given the Raila Odinga did not mention them in his rather long but superfluous speech.

“What was so difficult to have this dialogue before the election and save the many lives we lost to police brutality?” was a collective gasp.

54 years after independence...

“Fifty-five years into independence, we are challenged to audit our progress towards the ideals for which our fathers fought to establish a free and independent country and for which many of our compatriots died,” Raila Odinga said to a stupefied country, after a meeting with President Kenyatta at Harambee House.

Many Kenyans felt that they had heard that line before. In fact, in 2013, many people gave President Kenyatta a benefit of doubt, that being young and rich, he will be more liberal and more progressive, and will not tolerate corruption.

Another dumb, if misplaced expectation.

In five years he gave up on the fight against corruption, we saw school children being teargassed as they defended their school playground from being grabbed by a developer who serves the top echelons of his government. He not only attacked the media, but withdrew the government support in terms of advertising, after dangling it as a carrot failed to work. He went ahead and cracked on the media, twice suspending TV stations and cracking down on independent-minded journalists. Extra-judicial killings and gangland assassinations were witnessed as a member of parliament was ganged down in a busy avenue, a businessman cruelly executed and an IEBC official brutally murdered. Nobody was brought to account. Needless to mention the state-sponsored terror in the between August 2017 to January 2018 when the temperatures started to cool down.

That does not sound like someone the opposition voters would love to work with.

Yet, here we are.

The journey to skepticism

Dr Sam Kamau, says that the politicians must take the biggest portion of the blame in the malaise we are in,

“They overpromise and underdeliver. Look at Raila, with the promise of Canaan, and the outcome, you can understand the frustration. Because he packaged his campaign in such way that his victory was going to correct every historical wrong.”

On the other hand, the Jubilee politicians used Raila Odinga as a bait to charge their voters,

“Jubilee voters were shown a doomsday scenario, a Raila Odinga’s victory mean the end of everything they have ever known and stood for,” hence the voting pattern.

Therefore, those in opposition are justifiably skeptical about the promised cooperation to end the bad blood between the two political sides, considering they believe their victory was stolen, some say, for the third time.

Desperation is the obvious outcome. Ditto Jubilee supporters who are presently suffering from an acute bout of buyer’s remorse. To them, Raila working with Uhuru is a bad move because it can get acrimonious if there is anything we learnt from the coalition government.

When you combine the desperation on both sides of the political divide, you get a deeply cynical crowd.

“No two Kenyans agree on the origins of the differences and what they portend...” read part of Raila Odinga’s speech. I find this part to be rather hollow, for a man who presided over the signing of the national accord and who has told us continuously that we must implement the Truth Justice and Reconciliation Commission Report. He knows that President Kenyatta has not been keen on implementing the report and there are no awards for guessing why he lacks the urgency.

For failing to address the deeper issues, in 2017, we nearly returned to where we

were in 2007/08. And now few people expect much from the Uhuru-Raila truce.

Yet, confronting the TJRC can be a useful step. Mukurima Muriuki, a Conflict and Resolution expert based in Los Angeles avers,

“Raila ought to push for a resolution. Then we move to conflict transformation. This is where many do not go. A no-man’s land, because it involves some tough decisions like implementing the TJRC.

In the absence of that, politicians have the same fodder for campaign come 2022. Jackson Omondi, the Atlanta based political commentator blames the Kenyans for being too gullible:

Dies the institutions, dies the hope

Dr Godwin Murunga, the Executive Secretary of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) fears for the rollback of the progress the 2010 constitution heralded.

“All independent constitutional offices are either under attack or have been taken over by conservative people whose interest is job security rather than advancing the mandate of the institutions,” he says, adding, “The CIC’s term came to an end. The Ombudsman Office is quite ineffective. EACC is silenced. JSC is under venomous attack. IEBC is useless. Parliament is now overwhelmingly Jubilee. Parliamentary committees are therefore controlled by Jubilee.”

He advises the country should retrace backwards in order to go forward.

“The silver lining in all these is that the agenda for change is not with Raila or Uhuru, it has begun to slip away from them and into a more radicalized masses of people supporting the People’s Assembly process.”

He suggests the People’s Assembly is a good idea; it was only unpalatable because Odinga led it. It should be enlarged beyond opposition areas and make it larger, stronger and more encompassing, and it can spur renewal that can go beyond the Raila-Uhuru truce.

And the ‘new’ truce, which is similar to the Koffi Annan Accord, can be the core of the next level of struggle. And the People’s Assembly is the first line of defense.

“But it can only be useful if we shift the goal from achieving electoral justice to that of securing the survival of institutions that are relevant to the sustaining of our constitutionalism.”

Way forward

Dr Murunga, also a historian, suggests three options of leadership for greater freedom with the possible exit of Raila Odinga as the doyen of opposition politics: The Civil Society Organizations, the Opposition and the autonomous institutions of the government that safeguard freedom.

But the political opposition normally has a short-term goal of winning and taking power, but Civil Society Organisations can have a longer-term agenda.

However, both rely on independent government institutions like courts to win and advance the struggle. But courts are now being assailed and other institutions are rudderless.

“Therefore, new leadership should be birthed as a deliberate process. It does not have to be one single individual. It could be a set of institutions with a common agenda of addressing Annan’s agenda,” Dr Murunga explains.

He further suggests that one of the ways is to engineer a new cohort within the Civil Society.

“But they are under the overwhelming control of traditional CSO’s with its luminaries who still control and determine the agenda:”

He opines that serious work has to be done to ‘radicalise’ young pastors as the engine of the People’s Assembly idea. Additionally, we need to reinvent the role of professional associations like the media, lawyers, doctors and nurses, lecturers, and the rest. While the situation with the group looks bad, they are easier to organize.

Finally, we can support and safeguard courts by reinforcing the role of the JSC.

The new truce must not be treated as a short-term solution. If we do that, we would have lost the struggle, and many will wish for Raila Odinga to stay around long enough.

It is not his battle alone. All must fight. And skepticism is not an option.