



The Pain of Losing an Election

By Robert Aseda



The 2017 elections remain one of the most contested, memorable and divisive elections in the history of Kenya. The second elections under the 2010 constitution, it witnessed staggering 15,082 aspirants for just 1,882 elective positions. These were just the ones who actually barely survived the revolving knives of the shambolic party primaries. From the very start, it seemed that the sheer interest was already going to be a recipe for high stakes cut throat mud fight politics of winner takes all, losers accept and move on; or maybe not. Whereas there has been focus on the presidential race, rightfully so, the lower cadres explored the finer *isms* as well; nepotism, clannism, tribalism, classism, among others.

When Raila Odinga and Uhuru Kenyatta recently appeared jointly to address the nation, it appeared as if the beginning of the end of one of the longest electioneering periods. It seems *the Lord of Accept and Move On*, had once again visited Kenya. Well, not for most. For starters, the 13,200. The 13,200 looks like the title of a classical movie produced by Marvel about the fight for freedom and self-determination. It would probably have a main character called *John Duke* who would be fearless, determined and have unwavering belief in their course. This 13,200, however, is the story of those who did not make it. Those Kenyans who offered themselves for election and did not get the seat. I deliberately did not use the word lost. There is a Kenyan proverb that says nobody loses the elections fairly, they were rigged out.

Two of my favourite billboards used to be on Ngong Road near Junction Mall, on your way to town.

They were on either side of the road, staring at each other as if waiting to see which will blink fast. One was for Johnson Sakaja and the other one for *omwami* Edwin Sifuna, both accomplished young men in their own right, both far from 'home', and both vying to be the Senator of the Green City in the Sun on the tickets of Kenya's largest political parties. I liked the billboards, not just for their visual appeals and the messages and slogans they displayed, but for their deeper meaning. They say meaning is derived majorly from the audience. For me, what excited my brains the most was the realization that after all the staring, one would eventually, succumb, literally. A few days after the August elections, I passed by the billboards again, before they were brought down. Edwin Sifuna was still smiling in that billboard, but it was as if something had changed in that smile, like it had lost its warmth, like he was using every ounce of effort to hold the smile in place. That kind of smile made famous by the Kenyan phrase "*Hata sija skia vibaya*". Of course, the billboard hadn't changed, it had always been like that. Maybe I was empathizing with the young lawyer because I could relate to his loss. I could see my father in him.

Have you ever wondered what happened to the Kenyans who lost seats that they had vigorously campaigned for? Have you ever wondered what happens to those who resign their plum positions to serve their country on a different basis? More importantly, how does it start? Maybe you post a photo on social media and a friend quips that you should vie for a public office. You laugh and joke along but deep down; a seed has been planted in your heart. Or does it begin when you are having *two for the road* with your friends, and you are extremely generous that day and they pat you on the back and casually say, "*Buda, si usimame. Umeweza. Sisi tuko nawe all the way*". Or is it a deep unignorable conviction from your heart that won't go away, gnawing until you softly shout, "*I yield. I will be vying. Leave me alone now.*"

My father vied in the August 2017 elections as well. Unfortunately, he did not even get to the final cast of the 13,200. We were having family conversations late at night after dinner like we normally do during the holidays when my brother asked him if the rumours were true; if he would really be vying for a seat in the Homa Bay County Assembly. He complained about the state of infrastructure, the blatant misuse of county resources by the former member of county assembly among other ills bedevilling the people. He talked about how, if properly managed, devolution could be an important bridge for development. He said the people had asked him to serve them. He did not directly answer us whether he would be vying or not. A politician was coming to birth. He had listened keenly, or seemed to, when we told him how expensive it would be to run for a seat at the assembly, the pressure on family and the emotional and physical wear it would have on him. We were looking out for him, we had thought so. When he announced the following day at church that he indeed he would be vying, we looked at each other, not really surprised, but with the look you have when you get that news that you had been expecting all along but nevertheless, had hoped would have miraculously passed.

My dad is one of those 'true' African men who have a hard time expressing their feelings. This is not to say that he doesn't talk much. He talks. Just about the weather, politics, and other critical issues of national importance. He is those parents who used to come to school during visiting days swinging his hands; a phone on one hand and *Nation* Newspaper on the other. We would talk briefly about my grades and how the people at home were doing and whatever *big* project was happening; a school *harambee* back at home, the dilapidation of the road back home; the proposed revival of Miwani Sugar Company. He would invite me to help him fill the *Codeword* puzzle, an exercise more for my benefit than his, and patiently watch me struggle to get the lead word. We would shake hands and he would be on his way, an arm lighter as he would leave me with his favourite newspaper. Leaving his ubiquitous companion behind would be the closest he would come to say, *I love you son*.

Of course, there was no way he was going to ask us to support him. I don't ever remember the old man asking for anything. He had this guise of '*I got it covered*', a ruse we had bought hook, line and

sinker, in our younger years. We were wiser now.

We mobilized ourselves, helped set up a committee, mobilized additional resources and helped with ideas whenever we could. We even joined him in a few rallies and strategy meetings whenever, we could. We attempted to be there while taking precaution not to dominate. The committee had experienced politicians, local technocrats and a youth wing that was passionate, strong and believed in their general. They were motivated not by what they were receiving, but how they would get opportunities from being '*close to power*'. From their conversations, projections and action plans, it seemed that they had it all covered.

I must confess I have always been wary of politics; Kenyan politics. They say it is a dirty game where the 'dirtiest' thrive. I have always envisioned it as the theatre of the absurd, where issues and ideas are peripheral to comedy, rhetoric and self-aggrandizement. It hurts me when I see public intellectuals engage in debates over non-issues. Maybe, I had been too harsh. Maybe politics could be different.

After traversing all areas, campaigning, selling his vision, it was nomination day. From the initial projections and counted votes we were doing well. We had every reason to believe that victory was in sight. In this area, they could as well cancel the General Elections, party nominations got you two feet in. When we reported to the constituency tallying centre, we had the summaries of the announced results and thought it was given. I stood directly behind my father on the dais where the results were to be announced from. It was more of an instinctive reaction to protect him, I don't know from what.

When the returning officer made a contrary announcement, we were stunned. The old man was immobile for a while. It was difficult to know what he was thinking. Was he surprised? Angry? Disappointed? Anxious? His face remained expressionless, calm, as if he knew something we didn't. I requested for the forms to see what would have gone wrong. It was a charade at the very least. The numbers that were used were written on a piece of paper, plucked from an exercise book and collated using a phone calculator, with little attempt to involve the candidates in the tallying. There were no signed forms at all as should have been.

Meanwhile the rival supporters had broken into ululations and dance. They had begun to throw obscenities at the old man. They said that he should know people. They hurled a few unprintable things. It was the first time it hit me that he was a politician. That he had to accept that this was part of the game that he had signed up for, that he was not immune to slander. That clarity in thought hadn't stopped me from feeling angry for him. How could they?

"Nyakawalulochwa," (We must follow up on our victory) they had insisted. Trust me it's deeper in Dholuo.

After an eternity of shuttling between home, Homa Bay and Nairobi, sleep deprived, the appeal was successful. My father was handed an interim certificate from NASA, but another counter-appeal against him was successful, before we had even started celebrating. It was a story that would intrigue political analysts and make a great plot for a skit at Kenya National Theatre.

Meanwhile he kept receiving calls from curious supporters and friends who wanted to know what was happening. Each was recommending a different course of action. It is at this time that you realize everybody knows everybody. *"Call the Governor, I know this party official, stop wasting time with the party appeal, go to the parties' tribunal. Talk to IEBC. Explain what happened. Tell them this was a robbery"*. Pursuing each recommendation had its own cost implications. We however followed most of the logical recommendations. At least we owed them that. From their tone, you

could feel the disappointment, impatience, frustrations, like the oldman wasn't doing enough to protect their victory; *luwolochgi*. He didn't say it, but you could feel the strain of having to relay the same message to different people was taking a toll on him. I think, by repeating the message, it was also starting to dawn on him that options were fast closing, and that maybe the illustrious run was coming to an end, after all.

A million assurances later, late night strategy meetings with advisors and political 'bigwigs' and wheeler-dealers, unintentional camping at the party headquarters, the provisional party list was released, his name conspicuously missing. That's just the provisional list, relax, they assured him. We will still fix it, when it matters the most. Meanwhile the gnawing feeling that we were postponing the inevitable was beginning to grow. It was increasingly feeling like a case of throwing good money after bad. When it was apparent that the provisional certificate and the assurances they had given him had the weight of a sack of cotton, his committee insisted he vie on an independent ticket, an idea that would not see the light of the day.

When he decided to pull the plug, we heaved a sigh of relief. Were we bad children for getting relieved that this phase was coming to an end? We felt so.

Shouldn't we have urged him more to '*luwolochwa?*'.

The pain of losing is however not just on the loser, it's on the family. It is in knowing that he says he is okay but he is not. It is knowing that he didn't want it, but when he wanted it, he wanted it with all his being. It is in knowing that it is not his pain alone that he carries, that of his people too. Their frustrations. Their anger at the system; at him; at us. Why couldn't he be stronger? Why couldn't we have been stronger for him?

And it is in knowing that you can't get mad at them, they are hurting too, in their own way, even more than the bereaved can admit. Sometimes I imagine all the rollercoaster of emotions I had; have. The joys, the anger, the surprises, the betrayals, the hopes and wonder how father's must be heightened.

It is in knowing that there is nothing you can do for him, other than being there.

To a large extent we are victims of the facade of stoicism so commonly displayed by African men; strong, all-knowing and always in control. Mental health and stress are rarely spoken about in our cultures, often seen as either a white man's problem or at the very least, a rich man's problem. There is indeed a majority of Kenyan politicians who deal with their stress like the proverbial ostrich, hiding their head in the sand, and hoping the danger will go away, until it doesn't. Maybe my father's ability to accept and move on is what sand is to an ostrich.

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