



Starin' At The World through My Rearview

By Joe Kobuthi



*Staring at the world through my rearview
Just looking back at the world from another level
Ya know what I mean? Starin'
~ Tupac Shakur*

I was born on the fourth of July in 1989; the same day America celebrated its two hundred and thirteenth year of independence from the British and arguably one of the best years in Pax Americana's global reign. On November 2nd of the same year the Berlin wall came down ending a 44-year protracted ideological war between the Soviet Union and America. The victory hailed the end of communism and the triumphant victory of Western liberal democracy. Francis Fukuyama, a neo-liberal intellectual opined in his *magnum opus* [The End of History](#) that the global war of ideas had now reached its final stage and with it man had reached his zenith of ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy was his final form of human government. It was the end of history and the last man -the neo liberal self-actualising automaton- had reigned supreme. The polarity of global power was now centred on America and its western allies.

For my Kenyan parents who lived in Nairobi, 1989 was also to be an instrumental year in their lives. Their small political unit was now complete and they had a duty of raising three children. Secondly, being the only superpower America could now exert its hegemonic power to the world. The social, political and economic ramifications were to shape the directions of the global architecture and all

actors, my parents included.

Economically, the dictatorial application of the infamous Bretton woods [Structural Adjustment Programmes](#) (SAPs,) that pushed for government cuts on spending, reduced borrowing, inflation and liberalisation of the economy had yielded poor returns for the Kenyan economy. Instead, they led to the closedown or privatisation of unprofitable state owned enterprises -the largest pool of employment to Kenyans-which rendered many people without sources of income. The shortcomings of SAPs, which had not factored that the Kenyan economy then couldn't support an aggressive increase of an indigenous privatisation programme led to a steep increase of unemployment in the country. This led to an outflux of people particularly to the global north in search of greener pastures. And for those who were not able to leave the country for better opportunities, they "limboed" through the system and later on found sources of income through the creation of the informal based "hustler economy" which spread throughout the 90's.

My parents were still fortunate to have steady sources of income but they instantly became the breadwinners not just for the nuclear family but also the wider extended family. Home became the launch pad for most of their siblings who were in their 20s. Without a proper political and economic programme at the state level, a form of egalitarianism, as was in my family, occupied that vacuum in many households and communities to withstand the failure of political imagination as espoused by the State and the western backed International Financial Institutions (IFIs)

[Politically](#), with the end of the Cold War the most radical changes in world politics were to take place. In Kenya, a bandwagon effect of protests, reform and subsequent multi-party elections escalated. Forced by the international community and growing internal dissent, the Nyayo regime implemented political reforms; key among them was the repeal of section 2A, which restored back multi-party democracy. Kenya had its first multiparty election in decades, in 1992.

For my parents voting meant more than just exercising their political freedoms, which had been curtailed by the heavy hand of the Nyayo regime. It was an act to reinstate their right to breathe. You see, ten years prior, my parents bore their first child in very ominous circumstances. My mother went into early labour on August 2nd 1982, because she got a panic attack after hearing the gunshots, screams, and police sirens the day before, the day of the failed coup attempt of 1982. The state had denied her her right to breathe. Casting a vote could hopefully atone for its sin.

The 90's also ushered in an expansion of the democratic space in Kenya as observed by the flowering of independent weekly magazines, the emergence of the first privately owned broadcast media outlet, Kenya Television Network in 1990, and the rise of Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) which attempted to execute collective political or economic activities outside the state. Moreover, the opposition was now publicly challenging state dominance.

In spite of all the political reforms and a growing opposition challenging the excesses of the Moi regime, my parents never engaged in any form of political discourse. It was an unwritten taboo. Somehow it was as if the idea of an omnipresent and omniscient regime that could hear and read your private thoughts was engrained in their psyches. Perhaps they had imbibed the ethos behind the statement of former Attorney General Charles Njonjo that it was treasonous to even imagine the president dead. Talking politics meant making life harder than it was already was. Besides, neo-liberal democracy had now schooled them that the market forces would solve everything.

Culturally, the broader availability of mass media, personal computers, the Internet had dramatic changes inside Kenya. For my generation, the aggressive uptake of western culture mores through music and movies would shape our worldviews as teenagers and into adulthood. But also, they provided for a great coping mechanism and escape from the hard political and economic conditions.

The Millennium (Y2K) like all new things was received with much euphoria. The Jubilee 2000 debt relief campaign had managed to push for the cancellation of foreign debt and countries, particularly in the developing world had their debts pardoned. Kenya was a beneficiary. It was also preparing for an election two years away, where Moi would finally leave office. More than two decades in.

The Election of 2002 shifted something albeit momentarily in Kenya. The National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) spearheaded by former President Mwai Kibaki promised to deliver a future for the prosperity of all Kenyans. We believed them. The excitement was palpable. Kenya had finally made it. Moi was gone. We were *unbwogable*. The competency and liberal stance of the regime struck a chord at home. For the first time my parents talked politics. My dad in his euphoria during the vote count leapt towards the television as they were showing the results for his constituency and said; "This vote is mine" The sense of pride was admirable.

After that, political conversations became a staple at the dinner table, it was acceptable to agree, it was fine to disagree, and it was also alright to be neutral. My intellectual journey commenced here. Henceforth, politics became just that, politics. It didn't rule our lives. Besides, the [economy](#) was doing well. A disappointing 2.9 per cent growth in GDP in 2003 became 7.1 per cent in 2007, the highest in 20 years. It was the strongest period of sustained growth for decades, and reflected improvements in virtually every sector of the economy. The government too delivered on its promise of free primary education, improved road and public works, transport, security and health services in the country. And despite the regimes failure to address the issues of ethnicity, land and corruption, for the most part Kenyans were content with their liberal and competency logic. Hence the [reason](#) most people view Kibaki's regime more favourably than any other of the three regimes despite his big failures that almost cost the country its life after the 2007 post election crisis.

Surprisingly, even after our darkest moment during the [Post Election Violence](#) (PEV) of 2007/2008, which caused the death of at least 1,133 people, the rape of 3,000 and the internal displacement of 500,000 people, Kenyans still found the resilience and hope that led to one of our finest moments in our history. Then, on August 27th2010, President Kibaki, promulgated a [new constitution](#) in a mass ceremony in Uhuru Park, in front of 10 other heads of state. It was hailed with hyperbole as the start of Kenya's "Second Republic" and a new era of freedom and opportunity.

It was in this liberal era that [civil liberties](#) could be exercised en masse. The arts and music scenes expanded. Freedom of worship and expression also became more widespread and it was in this era that Kenya saw the resurgence of numerous churches, mosques and other places of worship. It was also in this liberal era that I saw my dad weep in a church service for the first time. He could finally not only worship freely but also express his vulnerability as a man, which he had been denied in the last 24 years in an illiberal environment. His soul was free. Besides, his problems weren't of the "Siasa Mbaya Maisha Mbaya" kind (A phrase popularised by the Daniel Arap Moi, ironically, which translated to Bad politics, Bad Life). Like a good son, these made me want to express myself like my father. I finally did but in a much deeper way. I went into the clergy so that I could be vulnerable, I could worship but more importantly I could be free.

At the beginning it was fulfilling, lives were changed, people were hopeful for the future and importantly, they begun to dream. Then something happened along the way, a new political dispensation came to the fore. A mirror image to the previous one, but only in form. Its substance was different but at the time few saw through the emperors new dress. It was embroidered with a youthful face and a digital hue. Nevertheless, something about it was grim and familiar but like all horrific experiences, the Kenyan psyche had buried it deep within its subconscious.

At that time, still a budding clergyman in my early twenties I was in charge of the prayer team at my local church. I would often receive requests to pray for men and women for various issues. The

congregation members were predominantly from the class that Fanon called the [native intelligentsia](#). Their issues were mainly of the kind that gives them bargaining power and stability in their racketeering endeavours: It was a job they wanted, or a promotion, or a business deal, or that relationship which they hoped to take to the next level to earn their place as a married man/woman—the kind of social sanction that bestows honour, prestige and privilege in a colonial state.

With the new regime, their supplications changed as well. In their inner sanctums of their confessions and supplications they confided in me. They were deeply seeking to understand what had happened to the dream that they saw their parents lurch to in 2002 when NARC took power; they also wanted to understand how the silence that they were all too familiar with had cropped back to their social architecture. A wound they had inherited from their parents that they thought their university education, social media and being part of the global community would save them from was reeking pus of a past that reminded them of their present reality.

They were back to the future. And unfortunately for them, the self-censorship of the church “body politic” coupled with a lack of a model or ideal of political engagement—an organizing theory of social action, to address their existential concerns left them only the more helpless and hapless. Disillusioned, angry and unable to help my peers, I left the clergy.

The [millennial generation](#) (a term widely credited to authors William Strauss and Neil Howe to categories those people born between 1980 and early 2000’s) is perhaps the most slandered generation in our recent memory and in the same token, greatly misunderstood. [Mention](#) “millennial” to anyone over 40 and the words entitled, spoiled, lazy and indisciplined will come back at you within seconds as some of the choice clichés used to describe millennials. We’ve all heard the [statistics](#). We are delaying marriage and home ownership and having children for longer than any previous generation. And, according to The Olds, our problems are our entire fault. This is what it feels like to be a millennial. Not only are we screwed, but also we have to listen to lectures about our folly from the people who screwed us.

But generalizations about millennials, like those about any other arbitrarily defined group, fall apart under the slightest scrutiny. Contrary to the cliché, majority of millennials are not university graduates, can’t lean on their parents for help and they are not lazy or entitled. Every stereotype of our generation applies only to the tiniest, richest, Kenyan elite sliver of young people. And the circumstances we live in are more dreadful than most people realise.

For instance, after the 2007/ 2008 global economic collapse the impact of the financial crisis was transmitted to [African economies](#) not through the credit crunches and liquidity freezes that strangled advanced and emerging economies, but rather through the global recession that followed. Low commodity prices, depressed external demand, and declining remittances wreaked havoc. African economies suffered about \$578 billion in lost export earnings over the two years after the collapse, representing 18.4 percent of GDP and five times the aid to the region over the period. Oil exporters suffered the largest losses, with a shortfall of \$420 billion. Capital inflows, tourism receipts and remittances all declined in parallel, and trade financing plummeted significantly. The effect of that massive external shock on growth and poverty was severe. Kenya recorded its highest unemployment rate in 20 years as observed by the [Euromoney institutional investor report](#).

For millennials who were entering the workforce in a broken economic system, the economic recession had a profound effect on the development of their [careers](#). We have had to contend with competing for the extremely few entry, low paying slots and acquiring jobs outside of our areas of training as observed by a [study](#) conducted in 2014. The [study](#) titled *Universities, Employability and Inclusive Development* also revealed that it takes a university graduate an average of five years to secure a job in Kenya. And if this is the case for our Kenyan graduates, the special 1% of our

population then we can only attempt to imagine the grotesque realities for the rest 99%. And Like the “hustler economy” of the 1980’s and the 1990’s, today’s unemployed have taken to the “gig economy”- a term that refers to the increased tendency for businesses to hire independent contractors and short-term workers - to help them make ends meet. Its ethical concerns notwithstanding, [Academic writing](#), a new and quickly budding sector in which university assignments and projects by college students, particularly in the West are being outsourced to young Kenyan graduates at a fee, is a fitting example of an occupation within the “gig economy” that has provided for employment to many of the Kenyan unemployed youth.

The Western financial crisis of 2007-8 also challenged the foundation stones of the long-dominant neoliberal ideology. It failed the test of the real world, bequeathing the worst economic disaster in seven decades. Today politically and intellectually, it has become obsolete - and spasms of resurgent nationalism are a sign of its irreversible decline. This is why [energetic authoritarian](#) “solutions” are currently so popular: distraction by war, ethno-religious “purification” the magnification of presidential powers and the corresponding abandonment of civil rights and the rule of law.

In Kenya and Africa, the picture is different. Almost all nations were borne out of the Eurasian conquests. And upon the independence of these states the European elite undertook to manufacture a [native elite](#) that after their physical departure they could maintain economic control and extraction over the new-formed states. This *native elite* could never have held such incoherent [quasi states](#) together without tremendous reinforcement and legitimacy from outside, which was what sealed the lid on the pressure cooker. Today, with the collapse of the prevailing story of mankind -neo liberal democracy, the [west](#) has become weak and global powers like America and Britain have adopted a self-isolationist, *real politik* foreign policy posture. Without tremendous reinforcements and legitimacy from the mother countries, countries in Africa are now going through rapid convulsions, as their political elites are unable to control their populations. Most African states have taken to [palace coups](#) and [elite consolidations](#) to enforce a type of control within their *quasi states*, though without absolute economic and political sovereignty this can only be temporary.

The ramifications of this for the millennial generation in Kenya are grim. Foremost, with the increasing stringent [immigration laws](#) by countries in the global north to protect their borders and lock out immigrants, the route taken by the few privileged and educated Kenyans and Africans to migrate to the global North for better opportunities in the late 80’s and 90’s may prove more difficult for the millennial generation of the same cadre today. Most will have to stay in the country and deal with the internal convulsions.

The breakup of the [superpower system](#) has led to the implosion of state authority across the Kenyan landscape of economically and politically impoverished people - and the resulting eruptions cannot be contained at all. Destroyed political cultures have given rise to startling “post-national” forces such as Alshabaab, and the retreating west is creating a vacuum which if not managed properly can create fertile ground for entrenchment of such groups and their nefarious activities.

Today, the youth have to contend with dilapidating social services system, a [debt driven](#) economy, [an illiberal, incompetent and corrupt regime](#), and a collapsing global order -which has no signs of creating a compelling narrative to fashion a desirable future. Yet, with all this factors stacked against the millennial generation I still feel there is a silver lining in our story.

The Kenyan Millennial generation, like none before it is more tech savvy, digitally connected, politically and socially “woke”, and by far the most educated generation in postcolonial Kenya to say the least. With these tools at our disposal we have the potential to create a better world for ourselves and for future generations. But this will not come through the mundane economic calculations, the endless solving of technical problems and the satisfaction of consumer demands as

Fukuyama opined. The neo-liberal man that the Western capitalistic system created has only shown himself parsimonious and niggardly where men are concerned; it is only men that it has killed and devoured. Capitalism has finally collapsed and we must find something different. Africa is waiting in eager expectations from something from us rather than this Frankenstein of a man. We must now abandon his old dreams and beliefs and turn a new leaf; we must bring forth daring courage, imagination, idealism and work out [new concepts](#), and try to set afoot a [new man](#).

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