

# End of Empathy in Kenya

Presently, you can divide Kenyans into three groups.

There are those who are ambivalent, unsure of which political direction the country should take, trusting neither the Jubilee side nor the NASA side, even as the unity of the principal is under intense scrutiny following the no-show of the three other principals for the much-hyped 'swearing in' of Raila Odinga as the 'President of the People'.

Second, are the loyal supporters of the government, who despite any misgivings, have some hope, however forlorn that Uhuru Kenyatta will deliver on his promises, that he has christened "Four Pillars."

Third, are the implacable supporters of Raila Odinga, the thousands who filled Uhuru Park to witness his swearing-in, and the many who explicitly or implicitly support his disruptive antics as continues to fight electoral injustices.

The latter two categories of Kenyans hardly see each other eye to eye. The middle-class among them may be civilized and restrained, but their dinner table talks are frank and clear about their mutual distaste for each other's political choices. Outside the middle-class, it gets a bit cruder.

If you watched online activity during the charged swearing in, most Jubilee government supporters online dismissed Raila Odinga's supporters as Zombified, swum in schadenfreude when the three principals failed to show-up, effectively turning the ceremony into a 'Luo Affair' as a senior government official told me last November.

*"The game now is over, next is to make every demonstration look like a Luo affair and Kenyans will go back to their normal lives,"* he told me, in an informal set-up (Ruracio), obviously, tongue-in-cheek. But as a Jubilee supporter, he felt that they had outmanoeuvred, one last time, and hopefully one final time. It is common among Jubilee fans to gloat about their unbeatable numbers, unparalleled business acumen and everything to rend credence to elections that one-half of the country for the fourth time feels that are not fair.

So, you have gloating on one side and grumbling on the other. But the grumbling

has gotten louder and more militant, while the gloating cautious, made the more uncertain as Jubilee's dubious policies begin to ruin the country. It is a constitutional lawyer Wachira Maina who captured it best in an article in the [Daily Nation](#) when he said,

“Mr Odinga's problem is that his base is now more militant and intransigent than he himself ever was.”

The swearing in, even though deemed inconsequential, was cathartic, to his base, and a nuisance to the Jubilee side, that craves for sense of normalcy in the country often interpreted as no protests. Crime, deteriorating health sector, the ever-increasing cost of living, badly managed education system hardly concerns them.

The environment needed for a reasoned national conversation is now permanently fouled as no side will listen to the other. We are now so numbed, even something as humane as blood donation appeal provides a useful window into how Kenyans now look at each other.

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On September 2, 2017, a day after the shocking annulling of the 2017 presidential election, Carol Radull, the celebrated sports presenter, made an urgent blood donation appeal on Twitter for Grace Wangui Mwangi who was hospitalized at the Kikuyu Hospital.

*Urgent Blood Appeal: Kikuyu Hospital Patient Grace Wangui Mwangi needs O-blood urgently. Kindly assist if you can. Thank you*

— Carol Radull (@CarolRadull) [September 2, 2017](#)

In good times, many people would have volunteered to donate the blood, without questioning the tribe or the background of the patient. But September 2, 2017 was not a good time to make such an appeal. Reading the responses to her appeal was jarring.

*She can get blood from jubilee delivery portal??*

— Ashikoye Omune (@omune\_ashikoye) [September 3, 2017](#)

Ashikoye Omune responded.

*If she can give me original form 34A may be I can give her one drop. But now let her die abit. Si wakikuyu wao wako hapo.*

— Zab (@Zablon27) [September 11, 2017](#)

And Zablon though it was the best time to crack his sarcasm.

There were other many responses, so crude, so heartless, so crass, so bereft of any shred of human decency, it was galling. Most were jabs at the perennial obsession of Central Kenyan politicians with the subject of circumcision, which even the soberest politicians from GEMA hardly ever criticize.

*Willing to donate but I'm not circumcised. I fear it won't work well with her.*

— Otoyoy K'ondeng' (@kamtula) [September 3, 2017](#)

It was difficult to process the dumb and numb comments.

Yet, those responding with irony, cheap sarcasm to the appeal carried in their tweets certain undertones that if you stopped to think for a second, did not exist in a vacuum. They were a product of injustices and abuse, real and perceived. We all look for a chimney to vent our frustrations. And the appeal provided a channel for some frustrated NASA supporters to parade their frustrations.

Any sensible tweet, calling for restraint and common sense was drowned in the odious smoke of hatred from what were mostly NASA supporters from Luo Nyanza.

*It's funny we only talk about love Kikuyus are in need. When luos are being butchered you are all celebrating on the sidelines.*

— Ogolo (@IBRAHIMOGOLO) [September 3, 2017](#)

It is true when the state released the police on its citizenry, mostly of Luo extraction, comments by some people who support Jubilee approved the use of

whichever means to contain the protesters. While there were those who obviously opposed to the use of excessive force, most were ambivalent, and some preferring to keep quiet.

When Daily Nation reported the shooting of three protesters in Kisumu, Mbugus James wanted more:

And Bony Kamau was full of compliments.

And Macharia Mwangi knew who the protesters were.

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Political comments in the blogosphere and social media provide a useful window into the soul of the nation. If we can use our usual stupid marker of literacy-the ability to speak and write in correct English-you will notice most of the people commenting are learned, with university degrees, no less.

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The mutual disdain between Kenya's two most politically active communities, Luos and Agikuyus has deteriorated to such despicable levels, it is disgusting. Education in this case, hardly thaws prejudice, opening an avenue of tolerance and celebration of diversity. Learned people on either side of the politic divide are so prejudiced,

The most ironic thing is that when the two communities work together, they always lift Kenya to a higher ground; think of 1963, 2002, 2007/08 (the risky power-sharing deal) that gave us the new constitution.

Given other communities rally behind on either community depending on which side of the bread of their tribal chief is buttered, we end up with either pro-Luos tribes and pro-Kikuyus tribes.

There is a bigger picture, indeed, a political ideology behind the tribal arrangement. The two communities that have held power since independence are more conservative in their politics, keen for resources not to be redistributed. The rest usually are more liberal and socialist, advocating for a fair redistribution of

the country's resources. But all this is lost as tribal chiefs pursue their selfish interests instead of the larger good.

In such an environment, it is impossible to have a conversation about national values, and what makes us Kenya, the best country in Africa if you ask me.

Since 2007, our general elections have been flawed in the favour of one side and to the exclusion of the other. Whereas, in some cases it is purely a question of perception, the recalcitrant refusal of the ruling elite to address the root cause of the problem has made a bad situation worse. Every successive flawed election puts the country on the edge, and now we are hanging on a cliff so precipitously, just one nudge and the country will tumble down.

It is easy to dismiss the people who comment online as idlers whose thoughts and ideas have no real consequence. But as a fairly educated man, with a Masters, and middle-class (for argument sake), I have participated in conversations, online and offline that usually shock me. When I travel to the village and talk to the villagers, their comments about the Agikuyu community scare me. The comments belie a deep-seated antipathy towards Kikuyu that grows with every flawed election.

Back in Nairobi, when I have a candid talk with my Kikuyu friends, you know those dinner table conversations in safe spaces where people can afford to be painfully honest, it is always discomfiting when they lay down their fears and explain why they coalesce around their preferred candidate.

“When Kalonzo stands in front of a multitude and declares ‘we ask Mt Kenya people to lie low’ we are left with no choice but vote for someone we can trust,” a Douglas Kanguru, a Public Policy expert says, citing Raila Odinga's obsession with the land question in the country. As the people who received the largest brunt of the colonizer's brutality, displaced from their ‘ancestral land’ and even further dispersed after we became independent, and also the recipient of the worst brutality meted on a community in election-related violence since 1992, they have little choice but stick with what is convenient, Kanguru argues.

But this only tells half the story. The ugly truth that is hard to discuss, creatively blockaded by those in power until kingdom come is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that may address some of the historical injustices that are the root cause of our growing antipathy towards those of a different politic persuasion.

The land question is the thorniest.

In several WhatsApp groups that I belong to, especially those from college colleagues, the love is not lost between the members of the two political divides. Again all the members in all the groups are educated to university level. But the level of discussion reveals the pain and trauma that people carry with them. Virtually since August, most groups have banned political discussions. In most groups many people left, before group leaders decided to ban politics. Others maintaining a stony silence adopting the “Accept and Move on” philosophy, finding political conversations draining and becoming more and more numbed.

As a middle-class fellow, I may not pick a machete and hack someone of a different political persuasion to death. But if some ethnic chauvinist arranges a fundraising drive to donate money to empower an army of young men to protect my community’s interests, I will find myself obliged to pay, in the pretext of self-defence.

When the Nairobi Business Community came to prominence at the height of NASA’s call for demonstration, I accompanied my Kikuyu friend to a hotel in downtown Nairobi to meet another lady for some transaction. In the introductory small talk, of course the Nairobi Business Community featured prominently. Mistaking me for a Kikuyu, and feeling safer, she said, she was extremely happy that the Nairobi Business Community had flexed its muscle, scaring those (insert expletive) away. Business was now good. And she fully supported them.

Objectively, I held nothing against her. She did not know what she did not know. We all like expediency. I am sure if another vigilante group surfaced on the NASA side, it would receive implicit or even explicit support from the NASA supporters such what happened in Kawangware.

What most people, surprisingly even the most educated, hardly know is that the vigilante groups that communities and political parties turn to for protection when the police fail, share one trait: both are disenfranchised young men, with nothing to live for and they are all products of the bad politics played by both sides of the political divide. If indeed successive governments, were the governments of the people, by the people, you will not have millions of young men on either side of the political divide ready to pick a machete and descend on fellow countrymen.

The cowardice of the country's elite to confront these problems head-on, instead of using the problems to divide the country further has made us emotionless towards each other's plight.

Prof. Anyang Nyong'o wrote a powerful essay in *The Star* in the aftermath of the 2017 election arguing, that a poor woman in Limuru has the government to blame more than a Luo in Kisumu for her plight. Ditto a poor Luo man in Kisumu, his enemy is the government and not another community. Yet, not everyone can see these things this way.

When you have empty political heads with no better vision to sell, preaching ethnic prejudice and hatred all the time, the result is feelings of marginalization and entitlement, adding fuel to a state of permanent conflict. With agitation and aggression on one side, and the other side becomes defensive. This stretches emotions. And elections provide a chance to correct the notion of dominance and marginalization. When they are flawed, or perceived to be flawed, the agitation persists.

Now, we are all out of patience. Shortly after the Rwandese genocide, where nearly one million people were killed in 100 days, Gregory Stanton, then the head of Genocide Watch presented a briefing paper to the United State Department of State identifying the "8 Stages of Genocide". They include,

1. a) Classification: where people divide themselves in the narrative of US versus THEM. We already have the "42-against 1" and its many variants.
2. b) Symbolization: whereby people are labeled with lowly references. The competing communities have monikers to identify pariah groups in their eyes. Both political sides of the divide use certain references, often in derision, whether it is Moses Kuria's obsession with circumcision, or those in NASA who perceive Kikuyus as thieves, the labeling is getting stronger and stronger.
3. c) Dehumanization: When one group denies the humanity of the other group, equating the members of the other groups to animals, vermin, insects or diseases. Not to overemphasize, but increasingly seeing the humanity of others with a different political view is becoming impossible.
4. d) Organization: Stanton argued that genocide is always organized, using special army or militia, trained and armed. We may not yet have organized and trained militia, but militias are a part of political

organization. A friend from Central Kenya told me in 2013, “Never again shall we be caught unawares, like in 2007. We will permanently be ready and vigilant.”

5. e) Polarization: Polarizing propaganda, made the worse by the advent of fake news was evident in the 2017 election, another indicator of the dangerous road we are traveling down.
6. f) Preparation: At this stage victims are identified and separated out because of their ethnic and religious identity. In 2017, we saw the Luo community targeted both in Nairobi and Nyanza, with the state enjoying the monopoly of violence and no awards for guessing where the strings were being pulled from. Various vigilante groups like those that wreaked violence in Kawangware are a harbinger of how things can turn ugly at the snap of a finger.
7. g) Extermination: killers at this stage are so numbed out, they will not see the humanity of those being killed.
8. h) Denial: the perpetrators deny committing the crimes or underplay their role.

When you look at these stages, you can see we are at a stage where we have dehumanized our political rivals and refuse to see their humanity. Empathy only exists in a few rational voices.

For now, silence works. But deep within, people are demon-possessed, and soon or later, the true colours will surface. We may wish to ignore, maybe some of us are a bit melodramatic, but reality has a way of blindsiding one, before slapping the illusion out of folks. By then, it is usually too late.

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Featured response to this article by [Dorcas Sarkozy](#), a blogger.

**RE: The False Equivalence in the lack of empathy among Kenya’s many tribes.**

FALSE EQUIVALENCE: An argument that simultaneously condemns and excuses both sides in a dispute by claiming that both sides are (equally) guilty of inappropriate behavior or bad reasoning. While the argument appears to be



treating both sides equally, it is generally used to condemn an opponent or to excuse one's own position.

EMPATHY: the ability to understand and share the feelings of another; (1) the psychological identification with or vicarious experiencing of the feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of another, (2) the imaginative ascribing to an object, as a natural object or work of art, feelings or attitudes present in oneself:

There is a piece in the online publication "The Elephant" titled "End of Empathy in Kenya" by Silas Nyanchwani that on the surface reads like a thought-provoking and balanced analysis of a very worrisome trend (lack of empathy) currently pervading Kenya but upon further cogitation, IS part of the worrisome trend.

The writer cites several clips from social media - Facebook, Twitter and reader comments in a local daily (Daily Nation) as evidence of this lack of empathy some Kenyans have towards one another.

He does so via a 2400-worded piece that effectively rehashes some known/common stereotypes Kenya's various communities have of one another; that Luos have of Kikuyus and vice versa.

This he does without broaching head-on, the elephant in the room.

As a result of this crucial omission, deliberately or otherwise, the writer evenly apportions responsibility for the inability of Kenyans to empathize with one another, the glaring imbalance of power dynamics between the main antagonists, the Kikuyu and the Luo, notwithstanding.

For the record, the elephant in the room is the responsibility that comes with having power: political, economic AND military power.

I have previously alluded to a modicum of schadenfreude the writer is pointing out, but I would like to believe that I have usually done so as a cautionary tale of what happens when one refuses to assign responsibility where it most resides and chooses instead to tie themselves into a knot justifying or rationalizing why glaring obviosities are different depending on who is involved.

To illustrate the foregoing phenomenon, consider the differences in characterization and reactions when Uhuru Kenyatta cautioned Kenyans against "selling their land" and when Raila Odinga did the same thing.

Somehow the former's "advice" was seen as an illustration of his business acuity; his understanding that "land is a factor of production".

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uE3088jppqkE>

Conversely, RAO doing the same thing - to the Masaai in Kajiado - was seen as illustration of his "belligerence"; that he was "advocating 'violence' against persons not indigenous to the region i.e. Kikuyus".

[https://www.the-star.co.ke/.../2.../06/17/uhuru-tells-off-raila-over-talk-of-land-invasion\\_c1581163](https://www.the-star.co.ke/.../2.../06/17/uhuru-tells-off-raila-over-talk-of-land-invasion_c1581163)

Or when the 2017 Madaraka Day Celebration held in Nyeri degenerated into a celebration of the region's (and Uhuru's) culture replete with use of exclusionary language instead of the national celebration the day is meant to denote.

Readers will recall that attempts to call out the ethnicization of the national event (and snubbing of RAO) was characterized by commentators and supporters of Uhuru Kenyatta as the usual (and unfair) "demonization of the Kikuyu" by people "who are jealous of the tribe's many accomplishments and rich culture".

<https://www.nation.co.ke/.../440808-3954512-122fx9.../index.html>

Throughout Kenya's post-independence history, one side and one side alone has had all three permutations of power:

The Executive.

All four Kenya's presidents - from Jomo to Moi, Kibaki and now Uhuru - have controlled political power.

While military power is a function of the office of the president i.e. as the commander-in-chief, Kenyatta Pere & Son, Kibaki and Moi have also used their office i.e. political power to accumulate inordinate amounts of wealth i.e. economic power.

As famously offered by Mao Tse Tung, "power grows out of the barrel of a gun".

Abraham Lincoln, America's 16th and arguably its most famous president offered a different take on power. That, it, power, tested a man's true character.

Kenya's leaders have proceeded to use their monopoly of these variants of power, unfairly and with impunity, AGAINST those who dare challenge or stand up against their respective regime.

Mr. Nyanchwani knows only too well the outcome that overwhelming military might brings to bear in the fight for empathy or as Homer famously said, "woe to the vanquished".

Might makes right - even when the mighty is wrong!

You get a sense of the writer's bias - wittingly or unwittingly - in the second and third paragraph in his characterization of the role played by two of the three groups he identifies as being present in today's Kenya.

Kenyatta's supporters are seen as "loyal....who despite any misgivings, have some hope....(he) will deliver on his promises.....christened "Four Pillars."

Raila's supporters, true to form, are characterized more ominously as "implacable....who filled Uhuru Park to witness his swearing-in, and the many who explicitly or implicitly support his disruptive antics..."

(The third group consists of those who are ambivalent, unsure of which political direction the country is headed.)

Language is a powerful tool.

When well-used (or mis-used), it can create equally powerful imageries that add to, placate or challenge existing perspectives/paradigms or stereotypes people have of one another.

From the opening few paragraphs, not to mention the title of the piece, the writer chose/chooses to either add to or placate the stereotypes Kenyans have of the two antagonists - Luos and Kikuyus.

Kenyatta's supporters are "loyal", have "some hope", for "promises christened".

Conversely, Raila's supporters are "implacable", "explicitly or implicitly support" his "disruptive antics".

Disruptive antics?

Being at the vanguard of Kenya's fight for the very values that allows Mr. Nyanchwani to pen his views, however questionable some may feel said views are, may be "disruptive". However, the fight for a free, fair and transparent electoral process not to mention an end to corruption and impunity are not "antics".

Asking to verify the accuracy of the vote tallies inside the IEBC server is not "foolish".

Insisting to understand why corruption and impunity has been so rife in two Kenyatta governments - father and son - is not an "outrageous" request.

Standing up to a militarized law enforcement apparatus armed with the best-in-class riot suppression gear with nothing more than one's strength of conviction and stones is not "amusing behavior".

"Antics" is defined as "foolish, outrageous" and "amusing" behavior.

<https://www.google.com/search...>

While the article touches on a close relative of the elephant in the room, it does so almost as an afterthought; this without identifying, by name, those who are simultaneously responsible for creating the problems AND also able to fix what is at the core of the country's instability.

The writer points out that the oftentimes deadly struggle between Kenyans was precipitated, then exacerbated by the country's refusal to address its mélange of historical injustices that are the root cause of the growing antipathy they have towards one another; towards those who hold different political views.

He then offers that of all the historical injustices facing Kenya, "the land question is the thorniest".

Those who have acquired land, oftentimes through nefarious means, also control the levers of military/law enforcement power.

These are the same people who have benefited from pillaging resources from the various communities throughout the country - throughout Kenya's history. In so doing, these individuals have accumulated economic power while simultaneously angering those whose communities were pillaged.

It is the clamor for the “power” of self-actualization promised at/by independence; by the dangled but unfulfilled promises of “matunda ya uhuru” that have Kenyans angry; angry at one another and angry at their government.

Until those standing on the opposite end of the barrel of a gun can walk a mile in the shoes of those facing the barrel of the gun, they will not empathize one with another.

This is particularly true if those holding the trigger believe that their stations in life are a function, not of malevolent machinations, but of an abundance of benevolent (divine) happenstance.

The false equivalence is that both sides of the divide are culpable in the lack of empathy the article alludes to.

It is a false equivalence because with power comes responsibility and power comes from the barrel of a gun and one side has a monopoly on guns.

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## **To be or not to be, the question of Kenyan identity**

I was named after my great-grandfather, who by all accounts, was a big scoundrel with an even bigger heart. I hail from the land of the original ‘boda boda’, so styled during the days when black mamba bicycles were the preferred mode of transport from the Busia-Kenya border, across no-man’s land, to the Busia-Uganda border. As with most things, the truth is nuanced. While the blood of the renowned iron smelters of Samia and equally formidable rainmakers of Bunyore flows through my veins, I am a Nairobi bird, a native English speaker, born and bred in the green city in the sun. Most days, I bemoan the traffic and water shortages, fret about the cost of living, enjoy the vibrant intelligence and crazy humor of my fellow denizens, making a living, living life.

Living in a cosmopolitan city such as Nairobi, I have always taken for granted the

fact that I am a Kenyan. Like my name, the provenance of my 'Kenyaness' has never been in doubt. During the promulgation of the 2010 Constitution, I stood at attention in front of the TV screen, tunelessly belting out the national anthem, overcome with emotion that Kenyans had finally come together to declare their vision for a free, just and inclusive society. I love Kenya fiercely, our land, our diversity, our legendary ability to find humor in the silly and the sad, the ridiculous and the bad. Seriously, Kenyans will laugh at anything.

Then came the year of our Lord 2017; We heard that an infant had been bludgeoned to death in her mother's arms - at home, that a girl child had been shot in the heart while standing on a balcony - at home, that a boy child had been shot in the head also playing on another balcony - at home and that a grandmother had been raped in front of her grandchildren-at home.

In 2017, we watched crowds in informal settlements keening in collective agony, singing dirges for their loved ones whom death had taken suddenly, violently, and inexplicably. 2017 was the year when outpouring of unimaginable grief was met with a stony silence, when the most vulnerable - infants, children, and the aged were blamed for having had the temerity to have been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

I grieved deeply in 2017. It took me a while to recognize my grief, because it was not directly associated with the death of a loved one. I grieved because infants and children meeting violent deaths in their homes are catastrophic, unimaginable, events usually associated with conflict and war. I grieved because these events should have affronted our psyches and assaulted our sensibilities irrespective of our political, religious or other affiliations - but did not. I grieved most of all, because so many of the victims, some so very young, were perceived to have been completely unworthy of empathy.

The dictionary defines empathy as 'the capacity to understand or feel what another person is experiencing from within the other person's frame of reference, i.e., the capacity to place oneself in another's position'. Empathy requires us to first identify with another human, before we can relate to their experience. At a fundamental level, we must consider them to be part of some core subset or community to which we belong. If we cannot, or chose not to identify with them in any way, we become immune to their suffering. We dehumanize them. That is why we heard many opine that the victims of violence were responsible for what

happened to them because they were somehow involved in the protests, broke the law, or aided and abetted one crime or the other. What we were really hearing was that the victims did not belong to any core subset of those who dismissed their plight. Put simply, they were the 'other'. Alien.

2017 made me realize that, when many talk about being Kenyan, about being of 'the people', they subconsciously exclude individuals from large swathes of the country. Not because these individuals eat, live, vote or pray in any particular way, but because of the one thing they cannot change - their ancestry. It is ancestry, not age, religion, class or political affiliation, that permits or precludes admission to the sacred circle of belonging.

To be sure, there is nothing wrong with identifying with one's ancestors. Human beings are social animals with a fundamental desire to belong. Our primary identification of self is relational, grounded in family, and mostly correlated with ancestry. However, a huge problem occurs when groups conflate two identities such as nationality and ancestry, a common phenomenon experienced in many post-colonial countries like Kenya. In such circumstances, if one does not belong to a given ancestral group, they are not just the 'other'; they simply do not belong to that nation. Psychologically, they are rendered stateless and nationless, devoid of the rights conferred by citizenship.

In 2017, I found myself in the midst of an identity crisis as profound as any experienced as a teenager. Having been born and bred in Nairobi, having spent my entire life in multicultural and multiethnic communities, having always identified myself first and foremost as a Kenyan, I found myself struggling to understand how it was that *Kenyan* children could be bludgeoned and shot to death without so much as an acknowledgement from a good proportion of the population. Where was the universal outrage, the moments of silence, the soul searching? Where were the calls to put aside differences in the face of such tragedy? Where in our collective psyche had such a callous disregard of human suffering emanated from?

As I ruminated over these events, sometimes feverishly, sometimes with a deep sadness, it came to me that, for many of my fellow Kenyans, these were not tragedies at all. As a result of the conflation of national and ancestral identity, they perceived the protests to be attacks against the 'true' Kenyans - themselves. In this light, the protesters were not just alien, they were a threat! It mattered

little that suckling babies are a threat only in proportion to the height of their mothers' bust lines. What mattered was that the victims came from areas that did not belong in the sacred circle. They were the 'other'. Alien.

Perhaps the most serious consequence of the non-reaction to the violence of 2017 from so many quarters, was that many Kenyans feel that their fundamental Kenyanness, their right to be Kenyan, their very humanity has been questioned simply because of their ancestry. This poses a real and present danger to the fabric of our nation because the need to belong is instinctive and primal. Particularly so within the African context where one's social 'self' is just as important as one's individual 'self'. We associate belonging with identity, security and acceptance. Psychologically, we cannot tolerate alienation. It is why the threat of ostracism is such a powerful deterrent to inappropriate behavior. We will always seek to belong somewhere, and if we cannot move, we will strive to create a place of belonging where we are. It is not an exaggeration to say that 2017 has put Kenyans at the doorstep of an existential crisis.

There is however, a silver lining to this cloud. In 2008, during one of the darkest periods since independence, Kofi Annan told us that crisis presents both danger and opportunity. The 2007/8 crisis was the catalyst that produced the 2010 Constitution which was the first time all Kenyans had come together to create a truly progressive vision for our future. In a very real sense, it was true birth of our great republic, coming as it did after our conception in 1963 before most Kenyans were born. Today, we have the opportunity to re-imagine our psychological definition of what it means to be Kenyan, to inculcate in our children the truth that, of all our identities, the one called Kenyan is multiethnic, multicultural, multiracial, universal and inclusive. An identity that embraces rather than fears diversity, one that acknowledges the sanctity of life and honors the dignity of each and every Kenyan, regardless of the origin of their ancestors.

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# GRIM CITY IN THE SUN: Nairobi's uneasy peace

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 mnatungusha 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 26<sup>th</sup> 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.

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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 12<sup>th</sup>, 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 Nairobianians 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.

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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 12<sup>th</sup>, 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.

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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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# The Grief Of Freedom That Never Came

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 shambolic 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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## **You Were Only Seven**

Dear Geoffrey,

Your family picked a great photo of you that was used at your funeral. You were photogenic and I was impressed by how comfortable you were in front of the camera. It was a good shot and I remember, saying to myself, 'cool kid'. Your dad, Peter said that photo was taken on just a *kawa* day. An ordinary day in the sprawling, high-density, sprawling neighbourhood of Pipeline.

My name is Kevin. A *mwananchi* just like you but one who was touched by your death on the day of President Uhuru Kenyatta's inauguration. When I first heard the news that another kid had been shot, I must admit I was numbed. There was lots of anger, confusion and despair hurricaning inside me. I refused to go online to read what had happened and it took me a day to muster the strength to read about the events that led to your death. I did and didn't want to know.

I was like, another child? Have we stooped that low as a nation that our brutality and hatred does not even spare children during our fights? Something is wrong with us big people!!! You were only seven. Seven, my boy. I remember I liked being seven. It seemed like such a cool age. Unfortunately, you only got to know seven. It ended there for you and your legacy began. You will be remembered as the kid who was shot on inauguration day. Your family will remember you and you will be remembered for the injustice that your family will receive. Your family like the rest of Kenya will have to accept and move on. *Wenye nchi* would much rather prefer that. Our national rallying call should be, '*Harambee, Accept and Move, Harambee, Accept and Move On!*'

It is sad that our nation-building, Kenya -rising, fix the economy and peace mantras, will be built on the graves of individuals like you. The year, 2017, joins 2007, 1997 and 1992 as years scarred by PEV (Post Election Violence) and the death of innocents. People are scared to use that acronym these days. Maybe it helps us forget, and hide behind that accept and move on attitude that we as a nation have taken to heart. PEV for me is politically engineered violence. It has been in our past, post and present. It has become the reality of our democracy. The reality of Kenya, a country that is now uncomfortable with itself and fearful and untrusting of its children.

I was seven too, Geoffrey and I remember it was in 1980. My first recollection of the Olympic games was in that year, the games were in the USSR, now called Russia. President Moi, had been in power for two years. I had just joined Standard One or Class One, as it is referred to now. The thing I liked most about being in

Standard One was, that I was finally able to join my brother in the same school. You see, I had been in another school and didn't like it much. But that year, we were together with my big brother. Was it like that for you? Did you like being with your big sister in the same school?

You seem cheeky, Geoffrey? The description of you in the press barely scratched the surface. "*He was a good boy, mtoto mzuri.*" That is all. There was no story built around you, to tell us who you were. There was no interest in what you liked, what your teachers and classmates at Remedy Academy and your new school Uvania Primary thought of you? What did the relatives think of you? What was your home in Mwala like? Where in Machakos County is Mwala? It was reported that you were playing on the balcony? Why were you alone? Didn't you have other kids to play with?

I remember my younger brother, for many years was his own best company. He would get a couple of pens or pencils and conjure up images and stories in his mind that only he would enjoy. Was that you too? When I was seven, I was a soft and almost gentle. I make myself sound like an advert for Sta Soft! But I was seven too. I drank *maziwa ya nyayo* (President Moi's free milk) and VOK (Voice of Kenya) were our eyes and ears to the world. We only had one TV station/channel then and would you believe it, in black and white. I remember loving Fanta, like crazy! The Treetop bottles weren't big enough; the *Weekly Review* had too many words and hardly any pictures. I devoured *Rainbow*, a children's magazine, hated avocado and worshipped our loquat tree in August.

My best friend David Gitau who swam in the baby pool, was terrified of a teacher called Ms Kilonzo and Simba and Bingo were our dogs' names. I had my biggest birthday party when I was seven. It was awesome! I remember the cake had nice chocolate icing. We used to get homework only on Fridays and the big rubbish truck used to collect our *taka taka* fascinated me. Yes, back then Nairobi City Council did that. Ah, and Oven-door Bakery in my head was heaven. That was part of my seven.

He was only seven, I repeated that statement over and over in my head. Seven. Snuffed out at seven. Did you hear the *piki piki* that is said to have the guys who shot you? Did the bullet tear through the washing lines towards you? Was your bullet the first one that rung out or did you fall after the pregnant lady got shot in the thigh?

By the way, Mama Mtoto, as your dad called her is fine. Her name is Agnes and she gave birth to a baby girl. The media just described her as a pregnant woman. I kept on wondering why? She was a victim too, right? Doesn't she deserve to be named? I was told I ask too many questions. But, how else will we know the truth?

I saw pictures of your mother distraught. The media exposing her grief. It is sad that our appetite for news does not let one mourn in private. Maureen, your sister seemed stunned to silence. Your dad Peter's one roomed flat became Pipeline's Ground Zero. Mourners, onlookers, journalists and cops descended on the tiny balcony that was once your city home. We had landed like vultures onto your home. We wanted to know why another child was killed so soon. Why? Who donnit? The police denied it was them, but who believes the police these days? Who else has bullets, batons and boots that speak with authority? The memories of Baby Pendo and Stephanie Moraa were still fresh in our hearts. Then they killed you Geoffrey! No one has been brought to book and frankly; we don't expect anyone to be charged with your murder. This is Kenya, sadly. Two five four at fifty-four! Where our wounds are left open for time to heal. Don't even ask about justice. Haki, if I knew I'd tell you.

In a few months, Kenya will forget you that you were only seven. But your family won't. They have to live with the pain and our anger we will eventually turn to numbness, as we can't wait to put 2017 behind us. There will be no commission of inquiry to investigate why yet again another Kenyan election claimed the lives of very very young, youthful, some pregnant and some 'peace-loving' Kenyans.

We will not stop to question whether it is right for stones to battle with bullets. It will all be forgotten, if not all forgotten already. Would you believe Geoffrey, there is already talk of 2022 without even fixing the problems of this and other elections? Anyway, it's easier to fall on the comfort of our 'unsaid rallying call', *'Harambee! Accept and move on!'*

But we forget it will not be easy for your mum. She will miss your appetite for rice and cabbage, watermelon and oranges and smile at the way you hated pineapple. She says you were a critic in the kitchen and spoke your mind on the meals she prepared. I can see you were a foodie in the making. She will miss your, *'Mum, hiyo haifai,'* comments. She laughed as she told me about that, but that laugh tugged at her heart, rekindled her pain and opened the emptiness that has now replaced you in your home.

You are missed, Geoffrey. Maureen will reminisce sitting with you on the sofa and giggling at the Kirikou cartoons that you loved. You dad, remembers your gentleness, your love for cycling, football and play. The same play that came in the way of a stray bullet. Your folks remember that despite the difficult pregnancy, you came out a bouncing baby boy weighing 4kgs and were a most pleasant and easy child.

You were only seven, Geoff and on your way to Class Three next year at your new school, Uvaini Primary School in Machakos. You had just completed your first term there. Maths and Kiswahili classes that were your favourite, will be no more for you.

You've left us here as we are still trying to understand where we are as a nation. Fortunately, you won't be subjected to tribal profiling that is now prevalent. The other day, I was asked whether I was Kikuyu or Luo, it seems like they have become euphemisms for government and opposition. If that isn't enough, then your surname determines how you will be welcomed, celebrated or mourned. This saddens me. That's what you've left behind.

It also saddens me how bereft (forgive the big word) of kindness we are becoming even in death. I'm sorry to tell you that your body spent hours covered by a leso outside your home before it was taken to City Mortuary in the dead of the night. Your blood staining the same floor that you were playing on earlier. Those images of your corpse is how you were introduced to Kenya. The police had to be begged to take your body to the morgue and your family was reduced to cleaning the blood stains off the police car that ferried you there. Of course, *kitu kidogo* was also demanded off your family. To the officers present your death was an opportunity to oil their palms. This is our Kenya. We are the *watumishi* not the cops. Even dignity was denied to your family at this time.

Your dad is a strong man, like Pendo's dad and like him; he also experienced the lack of kindness from the system. He mentioned that he was unable to be in the room with the police when they began the post mortem examinations. It was too much for him. He walked out. I don't see why he even had to be there in the first place, when all this was so raw. Maybe, he didn't want to live you alone.

Rest, Geoffrey. Your family did what they could to make sure that you had a good send off, but unfortunately your burial became another rally. Politicians couldn't

resist their pride, politicking, and pawning your death. They ignored sympathy and empathy as they used your grave as a podium for their agenda. If you were shot on the streets, maybe you'd have been described as a looter. You are lucky you didn't get to see this charade. Even the media, managed to weave in politics into your funeral. Lots of politics. Sadly, that funeral was neither about you nor your family. There was an image of your father shielding his face with his *kofia* that made me wonder. Was he using his hat to protect his eye or hide his tears? He will miss you Geoffrey. They all will.

Rest, little boy. Keep watch over your family and when you can Kenya too. I hope that's not too much to ask? Maybe in heaven they have a special place for children who are only seven.

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## **So where do all the fallen leaves go: KCSE examinations in Kenya**

The Aberdare Mountain Ranges in Central Kenya is a string of forests, beautifully woven around the windward side of Mount Kenya. The Aberdare Forest Ranges is my favourite destination on any day, and this has little to do with its clear waters gushing down the ravines and valleys to make a spectacular drop at the Thompson Falls in Nyahururu.

In the lush woodland of Aberdares one encounters the heartbeat of nature, alive with life, greenery, chirping birds - steep picturesque ravines and sprawling moorland filled with animated silence and stillness that hides a history of battles untold. The Aberdares is the home to hundreds of different animal and plant species, interdependent on an entirely self-sustaining ecosystem that has thrived for eons. Every single element in a forest has a function and is co-dependent on another. In a way, nothing in nature goes to waste. The Aberdares and its breathtaking scenes came to mind as Kenya's education cabinet secretary, Fred Matiang'i read through results of the 2017 Kenya Certificate of Secondary School Examination (KCSE).

Thousands of parents are spending millions each year to put children through school in Kenya. Educating children holds weight that is second to none, in terms of priorities of parents and guardians across the country.

Leopold Obi, a friend and award-winning Nairobi-based journalist told me hours after the dismal national results were announced: *“ I’m pushed to think that joblessness in Kenya is a war well designed by the government to ‘zombify’ the youth, and the ministry of education is out there executing it in broad daylight. They first did away with tertiary colleges or turned a few of them into public universities and went on to “de-recognize” the rest”*.

The failure rate during the 2017 KSCE results was monumental. The number of candidates who obtained the minimum university mean grade of C+ and above was only 70,073, which was only 11.38 percent of the candidates

*“The remaining over 89% are left there frustrated in the hope that they become hawkers or loafers,”* he quipped. There was uproar in the dailies in reaction to the results. The results being released so soon after the volatile election season only raised the backlash after the results were released. One commentator remarked that churning out jobless young people primed for manipulation and exploitation with cash incentives might as well be an election strategy.

The consequences of the policy shifts in Kenya’s education system have come with deep ramifications for the students. Kenya is now in the pilot phase of the new 2-6-3-3-3 system to replace the 8-4-4 system of education. Presently, a worrying majority of young people who complete secondary school and do not make it to university are hung out to dry. The alternatives for pursuing further education with ‘poor grades’, are limited. The space for acquiring technical skills has diminished considerably and nearly all the previously technical colleges have been converted to universities. Those same universities have not only locked out students who make the competitive grade but they have also made post-secondary school education inaccessible to the vast majority of form four leavers.

After four years of gruelling sacrifice and study. After dealing with exorbitant levies that have made school fees prohibitive due to unchecked appetite from for-profit school heads that led to a national outcry from parents. After the toxic political climate and protracted teachers’ union strikes, after all this, over half a million of the 2017 candidates failed to attain the basic university entrance grade

currently placed at C+.

But perhaps the most traumatizing of the consequences emerging out of this determiner of destiny that has become the national examinations system in Kenya is the tragic end of one schoolgirl, Carren Onyango of Moi Nyabohanse Girls Secondary School in the County of Migori. She committed suicide by jumping into a borehole at midnight on the day when examination results were announced. Her rather tender conscience could not stomach the storms of a tumultuous evening spent with her parents scolding her for scoring a grade C-, hence failing to bring home the status gratifying university entry grade.

This is in complete disregard of the fact that she had opted to repeat Form Four class at a different school after scoring the very same grade C- in the previous year's KCSE, in the hope of improving to a better grade than she scored in 2016.

The case of Carren Anyango should disturb the conscience of society in Kenya in many ways. An absurd extremity yet perfect tragic example of the lengths children will go to get the coveted but elusive right grades. Carren's tragic end should be a call to action, specifically re-evaluation. A re-evaluation of how Kenya's examination system works.

Her death is an illustration of the far-reaching implications of a continually stringent system of testing dimming many promising lights. Carren's death has lent great credence to the pre-existing notion that national examinations in Kenya hold a condemnation of eternal poverty or riches. A do or die battle in its very application.

The fact that children grow up in diverse environments, with extreme socio-economical distinctions from one another alone is enough reason to reconsider the current evaluation system used in Kenya. When we treat a good and quality education as a privilege as opposed to a right, we lock out those who need it the most to change their life circumstances.

Just like in the Aberdares Forest Ranges where taller trees have greater access to sunlight and the added advantage of generating more food than the bottom feeders, so is the contrasting reality between a student whose poor parents struggle to raise fees at Shivaywa Secondary School hidden deep inside rural Kakamega County and a student from a privileged background at State House Girls at the doorstep of the Nairobi CBD. The infrastructure available in rural



public schools, the teaching facilities and teacher to student ratios for most of rural public schools in Kenya is alarming and disproportionate to those in prestige public and private schools.

That these two students would then be exposed to a similar fate in life is against the hidden meaning of natural justice displayed in forests, where every member of the ecosystem is incorporated and allowed to thrive at their level in the complex food chain. And to demonstrate just how entrenched this divide is, only one additional student moved up to the coveted grade A plain from 141 in 2016 to 142 in 2017, pointing to the fact that at the top of the education food chain is a closed place reserved for a select few.

Only a total of 70,073 students are guaranteed university places in Kenya from a total population of 611,952 candidature that sat the exam. Where do the rest who do not make it to university go? Will these fallen leaves ever have the power to touch great heights when the wind blows?

Even in the driest of months, when leaves fall in the Aberdares Forest Ranges, they are destined to serve a very vital function in the forest cycle. The dead leaves serve as mulch protecting the roots of the trees from excessive heat exposure. The leaves also decompose and enrich the soil that benefits the growth of trees. In a way, the trees have converted what may appear to human eyes as a liability, into an asset.

In the context of the Kenya's KCSE national examinations, one would then ask, where do the many fallen leaves go? Why are we so eager to sweep them up and burn them up in a dumpsite?

As it stands, the 70,000 qualifying for university admission will in 4 years, add to a long list of jobless graduates hitting the tarmac with their papers. An education system that condemns 89% of its candidates to the stigma of failure undermines the very purpose of education as a passport to a prosperous life in Kenya. Our education system is undermining character, stigmatizing millions and in many instances literally killing our young people.

In the Aberdare Forest Ranges, fallen leaves are swept away by the wind, drift off and end up on the leeward side of Mount Kenya, the drier landscapes of Nanyuki area that experiences scarce rainfall. Wherever they land, they serve a function and benefit the soils with organic matter after decomposition.

The Kenyan state, however, has not mimicked the Aberdare Forest Ranges. Over the years, Kenya has treated its national examination's fallen leaves as waste material, to be cleared from site and herded to the fringes of society.

Examination should not be a means to an end (happiness, wealth and prosperity). It should not even be an end in itself but the beginning of something broader, backed and funded by government for all children of the nation - green leaves and fallen leaves.

Looked at as a means to an end, students who fail exams are rendered fait accompli; they mostly end up bitter and frustrated, potent fuel that fires poverty and destitution in society. But even so, are parents who spend their working years toiling and paying education insurance covers only for a test conducted in a single month to shatter all dreams and hopes for future economic prosperity.

The system of examinations and college education alone cannot address joblessness nor can it help humanity to explore the full potential of every child. This is the fate of millions of children in Kenya over the years, with each examination cycle churned out by a system that simply rejects them all after they post undesirable grades.

Take the case of Eugene Mutai, the Kenyan software developer featured on cable news giant CNN on 18<sup>th</sup> December 2017. A once clueless odd-errands boy from rural Kenya who has never been through college learnt coding on a friend's mobile handset and now earns KSh80,000 (about 800 \$) a month from a crypto currency business otherwise known as bitcoin trade. Eugene Mutai belongs to the category of fallen leaves who had probably been dismissed by the country's system of education.

This is a young man who has been battered by the winds of life and weathered storms that no grade A or college education will ever teach you. In spite of the challenges, Mutai learned to run software codes on a friend's borrowed Nokia Symbian S40. With continuous practice, his skill level increased upwards until he won the 2016 Git Top Developer Award.

Mutai was one of the fallen leaves of the Aberdares that refused to bow to the pressures of the strong winds that continue to threaten many African children with obscurity. Instead he stood his ground, choosing to fight on his own terms.

The Aberdare Forest Range remains green for most of the year because it retains most of its fallen leaves and discarded parts of the canopy, and puts it all together into meaningful and functional use. Every forest thrives on the same principle, from the Amazon to the mangroves of South East Asia.

The label of failure in national examinations should not be a reason to saturate society with hopeless young lives wounded in ego and conscience. Education and examination should be a system of inculcating life skills and values of humanity and nationhood aimed at achieving civilization and cooperation among men and women. Talent and diversity of abilities should instead be the center of national focus to leave no one behind in efforts to develop and achieve national economic goals.

Even the forest uses its fallen leaves!

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## **REMEMBERING KOLBIYOW: A requiem service for a young Kenyan soldier**

*~In memory of Senior Private Antonio Centenio Kaseyani~*

*[In the previous instalment of [Remembering Kolbiyow: When a village loses a son](#), the funeral service of Senior Private Antonio Centenio Kaseyani begun early and the celebration of his last funeral rites and mass are about to be conducted by Father Makau, the Army Chaplain.]*

Unfortunately, the public address system started giving way. The electricity interruptions signalled an imminent power blackout, going by how the speakers were sputtering. However, the choir's singing, together with the congregation's clapping, saved the situation.

Father Makau, the army chaplain, had been walking about but I only realised who

he was when he donned his uniform. My initial impression was this was some top army brass here to ensure the send-off for this young man went according to script. I assumed he would probably be giving orders for crowd control if the villagers decided to riot.

My reading of him was partially right. Once mass began and the initial rituals were done, he demanded that the selfie types and photographers should stop taking pictures out of respect for the deceased.

*Leaders were urged to be responsible and to stop dividing people. Soldiers were presented as peacemakers, wapatanishi, and the young folk were being persuaded to join up.*

While it was peculiar in this village to see combat fatigues under those robes, it was that limp in the chaplain's stride that betrayed a story he soon revealed. He too had served in Somalia for six years and had been shot three times. He said he would go again if he was called to serve.

Father Makau spoke of how we are witnesses of our times; he tackled the fatalism of our ways; he humorously juggled the tribal questions we face. His Kamba accent allowed him to weave through these themes seamlessly with ethnic jokes.

"In Giriama land there is a story of two dogs that were given ugali dipped in soup but they decided to fight over it. Meanwhile a cockerel that passed by ate it all up as they scuffled." Being a soldier who was obviously politically neutral, I think that was the only way he could criticise the politicians and their provocative *fitina*, gossip.

Leaders were urged to be responsible and to stop dividing people. Soldiers were presented as peacemakers, *wapatanishi*, and the young folk were being persuaded to join up. Tony's sub-unit commander was asked to stand up for all to have a look at him in his khaki officers' uniform. There was something of a swashbuckler in him because of the way he carried the ceremonial sword appended to his waist.

*My thoughts had again drifted; I was thinking of the Daily Nation report of one soldier who had single-handedly shot at an oncoming vehicle filled with explosives driven by a suicide bomber, with an 84mm anti-tank gun...*

Throughout the ceremony, the crowds grew; some of the mourners kept trampling on the wires of the electrical system, which interrupted the priest's sermon. "People ask me, Father have you killed anyone in Somalia. I tell them I trained to use a gun and shoot but it's the bullets that kill not me."

We learned that Tony became Gunner class 3 following a course taken in the military and that he had served for three years and one month. From the corner of my eye, I noticed a soldier attending to the coffin, spraying on the wooden box and cautiously stamping his foot around it to make the ground flat. The soil had become a bit uneven following light showers and cows had left behind hoof prints as they plodded around the compound.

A wailing baby whipped emotions as the ceremony was coming to a conclusion. We were then warned by the priest that pregnant women, children or those with ailments like heart disease or high blood pressure should stand at a safe distance because the loud firing sound from the gun salute could affect them.

My thoughts had again drifted; I was thinking of the *Daily Nation* report of one soldier who had "single-handedly shot at an oncoming vehicle filled with explosives driven by a suicide bomber, with an 84mm anti-tank gun. According to survivors, the soldier risked his life as he shot at the driver of the vehicle with the bomb, which exploded after breaching the perimeter."

I wondered if this was Tony.

I walked towards two elderly gentlemen to avoid the surging crowds moving towards the grave to watch Tony lowered into his grave and witness the military razzmatazz. The old men were very clearly not from around here. I welcomed them and discovered that one of them was Rispah's father and the other an uncle.

*Trotting along the village road back to the bridge that I needed to cross to get back home, I met a Somali-looking fellow in army uniform walking up towards the family homestead.*

We mused over how the school children, who had come to console their teacher, would definitely fall off the rock where they were perched once the guns blasted. A bugle tune, followed by three shots. Suddenly a young man, who I later presumed was either Rispah's cousin or brother, rushed towards us saying she

was unconscious. She had fainted and they needed to rush her to the nearest health centre.

A lady offered to direct them as they bundled Rispah into a bus driven by her father. I prayed they wouldn't get the normal lethargic service offered at the health centre but the strike was still on so one would really know. I headed off home. Trotting along the village road back to the bridge that I needed to cross to get back home, I met a Somali-looking fellow in army uniform walking up towards the family homestead. I said hello, the normal *Karibu* greetings. He did the characteristic "Aye" Somali greetings and thanked us for the hospitality. At that moment I noted how far he was from his own home in Kenya's northeastern region.

I figured he had found a spot to say his Friday prayers. If someone had exercised some quick thinking, he would have been directed to our local mosque.

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## **REMEMBERING KOLBIYOW: A village loses a son**

*~In memory of Senior Private Antonio Centenio Kaseyani~*

News of Mwalimu Miriam's son's death spread in our little cosmopolitan village in Bungoma County late in the afternoon of the 28<sup>th</sup> of January 2017. I had arrived home the previous day to support my family in the burial preparations for my uncle who had passed away during the week as Kenya's doctors' strike persisted.

The immediate reaction of my aunt, as we digested the village's misfortune in having two funerals in one week, was that the young man's last sacrament had come too soon. She had attended the thanksgiving service when he had just joined the Kenya Defence Forces (KDF). I gathered that this must have been around 2014.

Soon after, word got around that there was a possibility that 14 men from our constituency could have died in the Kolbiyow attack. I had no way of verifying this. However, understanding the place of gossip in rural areas such as this, I took it to mean that the folks here must have equated this one death to the rumoured number.

I made a point to attend the funeral after we buried my uncle. This was the first time a man on active duty had been buried in this village. The spectacle of a twenty-one gun salute would surely attract many from far and wide.

As the day of the burial approached, I made small mental notes. Mwalimu Miriam is a fellow congregant of the budding Catholic community of which I am a member. I received my confirmation sacrament here. However, many years of travel - for study and work - have turned me into somewhat of a guest there.

*Soon after, word got around that there was a possibility that 14 men from our constituency could have died in the Kolbiyow attack.*

Mwalimu Miriam is member Saint Lwanga, a small Christian community that my family was once a part of. We are now members of Saint Kizito, following an administrative split due to growing numbers as the church transformed into a parish. I wondered if Lwanga, the Ugandan saint, would receive Mama Miriam's son in heaven as a fellow martyr.

Word was that Miriam was the last person to speak to her son. He told her they had been attacked. He asked her to pray for him and asked God to bless his family. Later I learned his phone went dead after this. Follow-up calls from his family went through but nobody answered.

Villagers were initially confused about which burial to attend but luckily our committee picked a day earlier for my uncle so that there would be no confusion that weekend. Ambrose had village elder status there but Senior Private Antonio Centenio Kaseyani would have the day on Friday 3<sup>rd</sup> of February 2017.

In the evening after my uncle's burial, the tents and plastic chairs borrowed from Saint Peter's Catholic Church were picked and moved onwards to our hero's home. I was told his body would be arriving that evening, the first day of the month.

From about 9 to 10:30 at night, loud hooting broke the silence of the evening. The vehicles' honking announced the hero's arrival and wailing began. I picked out, from a great distance, the shrieking of a woman shouting for her husband. Was he married?

On the slated day I arrived late for the funeral. My body was still aching from all the chores I had done over the past few days. The ceremony had begun uncharacteristically early. The army wanted to conduct the ceremony and be on their way in good time as well, since they had come all the way from Gilgil.

Various people were giving speeches, as per the programme. The gist was obviously to console the bereaved but I picked out that the community was also in awe of the servicemen. They knew that these young men and women worked under very difficult conditions. All they could do now was pray for the soldiers.

*Looking at the burial programme, I noticed it said very little: name; sunrise and sunset; 25 years old; a faded colour picture of the deceased sitting on top of an army truck wheel in combat fatigue trousers and a black Duracell T-shirt.*

The local Kenya National Union of Teachers (KNUT) officials came out in full force to support their colleague. Mama Miriam's son was their son. Solidarity between these public servants was palpable. Teachers and soldiers communed over what it meant to serve this country. It was the best public expression of familial bonds I had witnessed in a long time.

Looking at the burial programme, I noticed it said very little: name; sunrise and sunset; 25 years old; a faded colour picture of the deceased sitting on top of an army truck wheel in combat fatigue trousers and a black Duracell T-shirt.

The testimonies fit well because, according to the history provided, Tony came into manhood at 10 years of age, following his circumcision during *Riambuka*, the millennium year. It seems he then exhibited unprecedented responsibility in his behaviour from then onwards and took pride in being the disciplined son of a school teacher. Another visible sign of his responsibility was evident from the house he had helped build for his parents and other small improvements he had made on the property.

Family members and friends spoke of anxious moments: a cousin could not reach



him; the hope for his safe return; the dismay at his demise: questions to God and self-blame. A role model was lost that day, yet there was no anger expressed by the family. Maybe it's because they still have relatives who are still in the security forces. Their prayers turned to his surviving comrades.

Every community has its lingo and the word "protectors" emerged when describing the servicemen and women in attendance. Ezekiel, Tony's father, spoke to the growing numbers of fellow mourners. He thanked the military for their courteousness. The information they received as a family was clear and so his mind was at rest.

Tony had been supporting his father and his family in whatever way he could ever since the old man had a near fatal accident some years back. The father walked with a crutch but it was clear that the loss of his son was hurting him more than anything else.

*Family members and friends spoke of anxious moments: a cousin could not reach him; the hope for his safe return; the dismay at his demise: questions to God and self-blame.*

I had the opportunity to meet Lieutenant Colonel Paul Njuguna, the Kenya Military Spokesman, at a seminar on countering violent extremism. He is a tough intellectual cookie and knows how to handle information in the wake of a tragedy. At the service, he was adamant that the military's improved communication strategy was primarily to: maintain operational security during the occurrence of an event; to preserve the morale of troops since others would still be sent into dangerous theatres either to rescue or replace comrades, among other roles; and to show concern for affected families whose members have either been injured or killed in action. For him, no amount of social media white noise could derail this mission. He believes that soldiers are not politicians and they have work to do. It dawned on me that sometimes it is so easy to infuse our politics in all manner of events without any hint of compassion.

Mzee Ezekiel revealed the love of Tony's life. His relationship with Rispah had not been known to the family but as the old man got to Nairobi it came to light that his son even had a six-month-old child named after his mother. He had mixed emotions: the pain of losing a son and the joy of having a grandchild. He blessed the KDF soldiers and introduced Rispah.

Rispah's relatives had come to terms with the nature of their daughter's relationship and were patiently waiting for the young man's return from Somalia before formalities could be initiated. This loss was a shared pain with their daughter that obligated them to travel beyond all the ridges and rivers of Tetu in Nyeri to say farewell.

Elder uncle Maina introduced the family. A retired soldier with 15 years of experience under his belt, he spoke of the oath to defend Kenya's internal and external interests. He acknowledged the deceased as his son's age-mate. Rispah did not say a word but her sister spoke of phone conversations over two days before the Kolbiyow attack. It was heart-wrenching to fathom how this blossoming friendship would now be a sad memory. Tony's friends followed. Their youthfulness failed to disguise their hidden fury as they gave tributes. They wanted to go get back at "them". A younger cousin now wants to join the army.

A colleague, an instructor at the KDF Nairobi School of Transport, took the opportunity to urge others within the constituency to join a welfare group they had conceptualised with Tony for those under the age of 35 years. It was clear that mine was a war generation.

*The oath in defence of the country came up time and again. It was obvious that enlisting in the army for these people was more a duty than a burden.*

Tony's other cousin turned out to be the young man who came to pick the tents and chairs from our home. He mentioned how he encouraged Tony to join the military and how they subsequently became part of the same artillery unit 155. He is stationed in Garissa.

The oath in defence of the country came up time and again. It was obvious that enlisting in the army for these people was more a duty than a burden.

The village "headman" - who happened to be a woman -urged people to register as voters. I found it interesting that her speech followed the speech by Tony's friend who served with him in Mombasa and lived near his place in Nairobi. She wanted to kick ass too.

*To be continued....*

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# **VIOLENCE OF POWER: How reform failed to muzzle the political establishment**

At 10am last Friday, the sky above Kisumu shook with the sonic crack and roar of fighter jets circling overhead. There was no apparent reason for this military exercise—no national holiday or celebration—yet everyone below looking up knew exactly what was happening.

Ahead of a planned announcement from opposition party National Super Alliance (NASA) that day, the central state was sending a warning.

Its message in the sky was not a new one. In what is arguably the most iconic photograph of opposition protest from this year's election in Kenya, a single protester faces two military lorries, unfazed beneath arcs of water cannons and rising tear gas. In the foreground, as if a watermark of the moment: a Kenyan flag held high.

This image of defiance—one every-man against the violent, faceless state machine, came to define the antagonism with which the state has treated NASA supporters, led by longtime opposition leader and former Prime Minister Raila Odinga.

But it is also an image, of posturing in bad faith and intimidation, that has no place in a post-reform democracy, or so it would seem.

The events that have unfolded since August 8 suggest that the Kenyan state has regained a monopoly over instruments of political violence. The environment in which this year's election took place included the all-too-familiar "peace at all costs" narrative, as well as the decommissioning of ethnic militias that, for much of Kenya's history, were part and parcel of campaigning for office.

This year, in a manner much less contested than that of Kibaki, Uhuru's

immediate predecessor, state actors openly intimidated the opposition, civil society, and the judiciary and, above all, killed, [raped](#), and terrorized civilians.

According to the [Kenya National Human Rights Commission](#), seventy-six people, including ten children, had died from opposition protests and police backlash by the time Uhuru Kenyatta was sworn in for his second term as president on November 28. A [joint report](#) by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch submits that the police behaved appropriately in some instances but, in many others, [shot or beat protesters to death](#).

After a protracted election process, Uhuru Kenyatta and his deputy William Ruto were re-elected for a second term in office. Their victory from the original election on August 8 was [overturned](#) by the Supreme Court due to irregularities in results transmission. The re-run on October 26 was boycotted by NASA, resulting in a landslide victory for Uhuru.

Kenya, currently in its sixth electoral cycle since the return to multi-party politics in 1992, has undergone democratic reform for years, including the promulgation of a new constitution in 2010, which fundamentally altered the balance of power. One central promise of liberal democracy is that multi-party [elections](#) and [institutional reform](#) can cure political instability, encourage participation in public affairs, and increase responsiveness to popular demands.

So why does the political establishment seem more empowered now than ever? Kenya's 2017 electoral experience raises concern about the prospects for democratic consolidation for the rest of the continent.

## **Privatization of State Violence**

In the aftermath of the 2007 elections, Kibaki attempted to deploy the security machinery to quell opposition but did not succeed. Announced as the winner amidst extreme controversy about the veracity of results, Kibaki was sworn in for his second term in a covert, highly secured environment. Opposition protests erupted across the country, from the Coast region, across the Rift Valley, to Nyanza in western Kenya, as did retaliatory attacks on Kikuyus, especially those perceived to be "[settlers](#)" living on Kalenjin land in the Rift Valley.

The country came to a standstill, as over 1,100 Kenyans were killed—many brutally executed—while hundreds of thousands of internally displaced Kenyans

fled to their “ethnic homelands.” Left with a relatively divided police force and broad disapproval from the international community, the central state under Kibaki had little leverage to rein in an unprecedented collapse of public order.

Long before the 2007 election, there had been patterns of state-sanctioned electoral violence, notably in the Rift Valley massacres that took place in the 1990s. It was during that time, the dawn of political liberalization, that electoral violence actually became increasingly institutionalized. When multi-party elections were reintroduced for the 1992 election, the influx of new players and the “winner takes all” nature of elections heightened competition, incentivizing dependence on ethnic and clientelistic bases.

Trust among the political elite deteriorated, which led to the organization of various militia groups. These militia operated in the marketplace of political competition where elites acquired power by instrumentalizing violence and ethnicity.

With a police service that largely remained incompetent, corrupt and violent, the emergence of these ethnic militia [dissolved](#) the state’s monopoly over means of violence.

By the 2002 election, this pattern was amplified by the growing presence of criminal gangs in cities, who were deployed by political patrons. Many gangs, which did not have inherently ethno-political origins, emerged in the economic uncertainty of the 1990s and gained control over districts of Nairobi. They too became “available for hire.”

Mungiki, for example, originated in the rural areas of Kenya’s central highlands, a Kikuyu ethno-religious movement in its earliest form. But by the early 2000s it, like many other urban gangs, had staked an economic claim in Nairobi’s criminal underworld, with that influence, political patronage. The gang, among others, would gain notoriety for its contribution to massacres in 2007-08.

While police were responsible for about [a third](#) of the deaths during the 2007-08 post-election violence, the majority of killings were conducted by militias, armed and mobilized by politicians from both the party of Kibaki, the Party of National Unity (PNU) and that of Raila, the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM).

In the chaos that erupted after Kibaki’s swearing in, Kalenjin youths were said to

have killed scores of Kikuyus, women and children included, throughout the Rift Valley, according to the Kenyan [trial](#) of crimes against humanity at the International Criminal Court (ICC) and in [reports](#) of human rights abuses. In response, Mungiki was deployed to conduct retaliatory attacks on ethnic communities deemed to be supporting the opposition, such as the Kalenjin, Luo, and Luhya, who resided in the Rift Valley towns of Nakuru and Naivasha.

However, compared to Uhuru's experience since 2013, when he came into power, the physical appearance of the security apparatus during Kibaki's regime was not a true [reflection](#) of its ability to demobilize the political opposition. Though, institutionally, the police force was much the same as it was in previous regimes, under Kibaki in 2007-08, it could not guarantee the power that matched its appearance: powerful, violent, legitimate, forceful.

When Kikuyu militia were deployed into Kibera, a predominantly Luo and ODM-supporting area, armed civilians and Luo militia fought back. Perhaps what best exemplified the toothlessness of the formal security infrastructure in 2007-08 was the [murder](#) of the much-politicized Administration Police (AP) by civilians after the officers were caught in opposition strongholds masquerading as PNU agents observing in voting centres.

In the end, Kibaki's regime found it difficult to contain the centrifugal forces within Kenya's political system, where political liberalization since the 1990s had occasioned a [dissolution](#) of the state's monopoly over the means of violence, and declining trust amongst the political elite meant that excluded politicians were well capable of mobilizing their ethnic bases so as to put pressure for the center to accede to their demands.

## **Trends Since 2007**

After the atrocities of 2007-08 post-election violence—in which decades of tension and feelings of exclusion and marginalization converged—Kenya's political elites united briefly to install structural “guard-rails” for formal government conduct. The Constitution, which had been under debate for decades, was re-drafted.

While its promulgation in 2010 and its nationwide support were driven by the ghosts of the 2007-08 violence, the document also introduced reforms that would alter the nature of political competition, and thus political violence, in Kenya.

The document's provisions on political devolution, established 47 counties and, as a result, more sites of electoral competition and decision-making. This released some pressure from elite competition for the presidency and diminished the incentives for violent campaign strategies. The stakes were lowered; even if voters did not get their preferred presidential candidate at the national level, they could still vote for change at the [local level](#).

Of particular note, however, was the pervasive "peace narrative" which served to perpetuate the message of "peace at all costs." Many Kenyans, especially in the Rift Valley, the epicentre of violence in 2007-08, understandably feared a repeat and accepted the [notion](#) that stability must come before justice.

This is how two candidates who were indicted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for their roles in the 2007-08 post-election violence, Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto, were elected. Uhuru and Ruto had emerged from the 2007 elections as the most prominent Kikuyu and Kalenjin politicians respectively, and both faced separate charges for their alleged roles in organising violence against one other's communities.

In a careful reframing of overarching communal narratives at the time—that the Kikuyu and Kalenjin would never unite politically due to past injustices—the two joined forces to recast the ICC cases against them as [a performance of injustice, neo-colonialism, and a threat to Kenya's sovereignty, peace and stability](#). They named their new political alliance the 'Jubilee Alliance', a team of young politicians that could bring about peace and change.

The Jubilee alliance came to power under an American-style presidential system with complete separation of powers between Executive, Parliament, and Judiciary—as provided by the 2010 constitution—which effectively locked out Odinga from any formal political seat, and as a result, weakened the political opposition.

Unlike in 2007, where ODM's leadership was comprised of politicians, including Ruto, representing a wider base of ethnic constituencies, and as such, posed a more robust threat to Kibaki, the Jubilee Alliance's dominance was buttressed by the majoritarian presidential system it took over, albeit with only a slight vote margin.

As the legacy of the ICC cases meant that open instrumentalization of militia

violence would have to come to a stop, the “peace narrative” stigmatized political protest as incitement. Protest was looked down upon, cracked down on, and basically became less popular and less effective.

Even peaceful demonstrations that focused on electoral reform were not welcome. The [media](#) joined the peace bandwagon and begun self-censoring. In this way, the state regained its dominant position in directing political debate, and protesters would be [branded as criminals](#).

### **Political Violence in 2017**

On October 16 in Kisumu, eighteen-year-old Michael Okoth Okello was shot in the back of his shoulder as he fled from police in broad daylight.

That day began with a peaceful demonstration calling for electoral reforms in advance of the repeat presidential poll, but turned violent and, unlike normal riot control scenarios that go back and forth for hours, ended abruptly in a cold halt.

Okoth—who, according to friends and witnesses, was not even a demonstrator but had just gone to buy flavored ice—was suddenly caught among a panicked sea of people when police streamed from the station and pursued civilians. Within minutes, Okoth lay on the dirt, dead.

What fueled the rumours, however, was not his gunshot wound. It was the clean-edged slash wounds left on his neck: macabre, brutal, and crude. While the bullet represented a hated but tragically familiar story of police violence, the blade symbolized, for many, something much more chilling, from a dark chapter in Kenya’s history. Whispers of “Mungiki” kindled into a wildfire of widespread, public accusations.

Ethnic idioms like “Mungiki” carry a deep violence in Kenya’s political imagination, especially given the ethnically charged political discourse.

The chaos in Nyanza in the wake of these rumours, plus the very real evidence of killing, raping and plundering, left large gaps that were easily filled by the worst fears evoked by these familiar symbols of ethnic dominance, terror, and oppression.

The existence of such rumours—regardless of whether the Kikuyu militia was actually involved—are a powerful metaphor for a collective feeling of



powerlessness, of being on the wrong side of hegemonic imbalance, and of being targeted by what is perceived to be a fundamentally Kikuyu regime.

While the targeting of the Luo community—Odinga’s community and political base—is not new, the targeting this year was more efficient and brutal precisely because the establishment has been empowered by more recent political trends. As such, the heaviest forms of police crackdown—and the flagrant violation of human rights—were delivered to Luo Nyanza, even as the results of the 2017 elections angered people in other non-Luo opposition strongholds.

Upon the inauguration of Uhuru and Ruto, which marks the end of the formal election process as we know it, fundamental questions about exclusion and inclusion, those that drove political discourse during the electioneering period, are now meant to be forgotten, discharged in some way, but at least not publicly.

Once again, incessant calls for “national unity” seek to silence those for “justice.” The result is an acute sense of marginalization and exclusion among some communities, which raises prospects for unrest in the future.

Yet one of the central promise of liberal democracy is that multi-party [elections](#) and [institutional reform](#) can cure political instability, encourage participation in public affairs, and increase responsiveness to popular demands. The results, as the Kenyan example has shown, is that democratic transitions can be marked by unintended consequences, and can entrench, rather than curtail, the power of the political establishment.

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## **When the System is Unwell, Everyone Falls Sick**

Mwalimu Henry was a respected man of my little village of Genga stuck deep in the valleys of South Nyanza, where the rolling Gusii hills meet the plains that extend from Kanyada to the shores of Lake Victoria. Genga village folk still epitomize the traditional ideal of communality. You are the son of every granny in

Genga, each one insists on feeding you if you so much as stray into their homestead.

Mwalimu Henry was a wise fatherly figure with a missionary education teaching background. He was pious, disciplined and a bit of a colonial relic from the good old days when success in life was directly attributed to academic meritocracy. I knew Mwalimu Henry long after his retirement from the civil service back in the 90's. I literally grew up under his wings and patronage.

Mwalimu Henry earned a reputation as a vocal proponent of education as the primary means of uplifting a community. He was a constant fixture at fundraisers for students joining the university. It did not ever matter whose child it was that needed funding for higher education, or how many times a school was fundraising for one classroom. He believed in the principle of education as a human right for all.

For his zeal, Mwalimu got elected as chairman of the local secondary school, leading the Parents and Teachers' Association (PTA) and he championed the interests of poor parents of the village.

I remember a fundraising committee meeting I once attended. The child's mother was dirt poor and could not raise the mere basics for her boy's upkeep, leave alone school fees after admission into a university in western Kenya.

That afternoon, a huge rainstorm kept members of the committee marooned in their homes, except one. Mwalimu Andrew showed up, saddled up in gumboots and clutching a broken umbrella ravaged by the storm. The chilly conditions began taking a toll on him the very moment he arrived at the venue. His legs were swollen and he could not take the tea offered to wade off the cold. He did not look well.

For all his enthusiasm, the good teacher was just a stubborn invalid who had lived with diabetes since early the 1980s. His resilience had kept him going through the decades. Sometimes he would collapse while walking, fall ill and get bedridden for days but he always bounced back to his feet.

Mwalimu Henry was diagnosed as diabetic only a few years before retirement from the teaching service. I had been accustomed to seeing him on insulin medication literally my whole life. In his house, he maintained a mini-pharmacy of

bottles of medicine, tablets, needles, syringes and cotton wool.

Despite his diabetic condition, he always wore a brave face, with intermittent periods in between hospitals and doctors. His adherence to discipline extended to his diabetes medication regimen.

I had checked on him while home in the village in the month of October, 2016 to announce my upcoming graduation. He exuded his usual confidence and we reminisced how far we had come. It was a sunny afternoon and as we posed for pictures, he confided that his immobility was becoming a concern. He could no longer attend meetings and church on Sundays as he grew extremely tired and his legs would swell after a long walk.

*“I am not sure if this disease would be merciful enough to let me see you graduate.”* I dismissed his concerns.

In November, a month after our talk, I received information that he was not doing well. I was very worried since it coincided with a protracted doctor’s strike that had brought the public health sector down to its knees. This meant that Mwalimu faced the dire prospect of a daily commute to far-flung private hospitals for treatment.

As fate would have it, the medication he badly needed was suddenly unavailable. That meant he had to travel 20 kilometers to Kisii town to see a medic only to find long queues at the District hospital and empty doctor’s parlors. Then he would be forced to try his chances in different Kisii town pharmacies. Too many times, insulin supplements and complementary medication on which he had survived on over the years were not issued and there was no doctor at hand to write a prescription or conduct a clinical examination.

The irony was that a man who had spent his entire life trying to supplement the broken public education system had become a statistic of a dysfunctional public health system. Mwalimu was the unlikely victim of his own generosity.

The long trips and queues at public hospitals in Kisii town became unsustainable. Growing concerned, the community fundraised for Mwalimu Henry to relocate him for medical care in Kisumu in late December 2016, where it would be affordable.

His health deteriorated fast and the intervention to private hospitals was a little too late. The damage had been done in two straight months of a lapsed treatment regime. On January 29, 2017, I received the heartbreaking news of Mwalimu Henry's death and my disbelief quickly degenerated into bitterness.

A generous man, who spent his entire life mobilizing funds to educate young minds for a better society, had suffered at the hands of a broken system. A government on a warpath with its healthcare givers was taking casualties of its own in collateral damage. Mwalimu Henry died at the hands of a healthcare system defined by economic profiling, inequality, greed and prejudice.

Little did I know that I would become a victim of the same system preceding the birth of my son. I came to face to face with the viciousness of economic profiling and prejudice when two Eldoret private hospitals flatly refused to admit my heavily pregnant wife a couple of months after we laid Mwalimu Henry to rest. She was categorically denied outpatient examination twice on account that my health cover paid for by a private company was not of the public service category even though she had been allowed a choice of those hospitals for inpatient services.

Both of these hospital facilities did not even bother to inquire if we could settle the bill by other means, other than the insurance cover the moment we mentioned that we did not work in the public sector.

The said private facilities in Eldoret did not care that doctors in public hospitals were on strike. The need to grant a clinical check-up for my pregnant wife was secondary to financial guidelines that ensure non-public servants do not get outpatient services on the National Hospital Insurance Fund (NHIF).

Such a money-first-life-later approach to provision of healthcare services by private hospitals who are key players in provision of healthcare services in the country is clearly one of the reasons so many lives were lost during the doctor's strike. The 100-day nightmare came to bear on me the morning my son was born mid-April 2017.

On Easter Monday morning, I had travelled back to work in Nairobi and an emergency scenario was the last thing on my mind. My wife had slept very well, only reporting the usual occasional and slight abdominal contractions of pregnancy.

We had not anticipated she would go into labour so soon. The doctor's estimation had placed birth at three weeks ahead so when it happened unexpectedly at the height of the doctor's strike, our first instinct was private facilities, in event of any unfortunate birth-related complications.

This time we opted to try a different private facility. By the time my wife arrived via a taxi ride through bumpy and potholed roads of suburban Eldoret, her condition was aggravated, the waters broken and in no position to listen leave alone negotiate financial details and payment modes.

One private facility laid down multiple terms and conditions including down payments before admission that we did not object. They came up with loads of paperwork, to be signed, beforehand by the spouse. The papers contained financial agreement terms and conditions and medical consent forms running into tens of pages.

No amount of pleading would grant my wife the option of signing and filling in the details later since her husband was stuck in Nairobi trying to catch a flight. This point worked me up immensely. Fortunately, a relation in the medical industry suggested an alternative facility and we rushed her to the Moi Teaching and Referral Hospital (MTRH), well aware that it was a dicey prospect with the doctors on strike. The gods were kind and my wife delivered a healthy boy through normal birth in the MTRH maternity wing

Lady luck was clearly on our side for the conditions of the maternity ward left me bewildered when I finally arrived a few hours after the birth of my child. In the hallway comprised 8 beds, each shared by two new mothers, lying side by side, facing away from each other on a two by six inches bed.

The newly-borns were lying precariously on the edges of those beds either feeding or asleep, as their worn out mothers struggled to keep them from falling off the edges of the tiny beds.

The ward was congested. Imagine new mothers coughing right into the face of the other and trying to shield a newborn from any possible mishap. No doctor was on site. The only single nurse doing rounds kept reprimanding new mothers whose babies would not stop crying. I still recall what my wife said the moment she saw me: *"Am either coming home with you right now or if they won't release me, be sure to take us home first thing in the morning when it's daylight."*

Our healthcare system in Kenya is akin to a war-zone, where the sick pay the ultimate price in collateral damage due to government negligence, corruption and the greed of health profiteers. In our public healthcare system, to be poor is like a punishment for a crime you did not commit. Health care should not be a privilege enjoyed by the upper classes. It should be a right that is as fundamental as giving every child a chance to a good education. But what we have in Kenya is not even a system. It is a gamble with life.