

This Is What It's Cost Us

It was an extraordinary [set of photographs](#).

Gideon Moi leading Raila Odinga in and out. Odinga leaning over to shake Daniel arap Moi's hand. Odinga sitting next to two generations of the Moi family. In the background, over the mantle, a photograph that wasn't what used to be the mandatory photograph of every public establishment (a portrait of the current President). But was instead a portrait of Moi Senior looking considerably younger than the Moi senior that was the focus of the rapprochement on display in the foreground.

All theatre?

No doubt.

But, like all theatre, replete with symbolism. Like all theatre, leaving much open for crystal balls to be consulted, tea leaves to be read, conclusions to be drawn. Like all theatre, meaning-making. Before our very eyes.

But truth seeps out from beyond the literal. Balloons are floated to test our responses. To be alluded to and deduced from. To be (vociferously) pondered and pontificated on. Until reality proves our allusions and deductions to be true (or untrue as the case may be). Sometimes balloons floated deflate and ignominiously drift away with the winds. Sometimes, however, they prove flightworthy.

Odinga – with his opposition coalition half-hearted about continued agitation around the elections, with a region and other external actors hell-bent on securing their version of 'stability' over accountability – having drastically-narrowed means to assert his own legitimacy. His support-base was intact but Kenya's middle-class and private sector were just exhausted by the drawn-out uncertainty

These photographs. Like the now infamous 'handshake' between Uhuru Kenyatta and Odinga, we are left to decipher their meaning. Anybody who remembers how Odinga put paid – decisively – to Moi Senior's ambitions for his succession can barely believe these photographs record something that happened this very week. Then again, anybody who remembers just how Odinga put paid to those ambitions, wouldn't be surprised.

Politics as the art of the possible. Politics as the sole terrain of human ambition and experience in which there truly are no permanent enemies. Politics as whatever it is that our elites decide it should be. Politics as elastic, ever-shifting elite consensus, elite pacting. Politics as permanent interests. Politics as manoeuvring.

Politics as nothing more than the search to capture and maintain power.

Politics as nothing to do with how best to use power.

Politics as nothing to do with us.

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Much has been said already about why Kenyatta and Odinga would have found it necessary to have such a thin display – equally symbolic, equally theatre – of elite consensus and pacting as they've recently had. Kenyatta – in power on the basis of voter turnout of only about a third of the electorate – needing legitimacy. Odinga – with his opposition coalition half-hearted about continued agitation around the elections, with a region and other external actors hell-bent on securing

their version of 'stability' over accountability – having drastically-narrowed means to assert his own legitimacy. His support-base was intact but Kenya's middle-class and private sector were just exhausted by the drawn-out uncertainty.

And so on. The reasoning – on both sides – has already been well-ventilated.

Also well-ventilated is the anger, confusion – almost bereftness – of his support base now.

What's not been well-ventilated are two things.

The reasons for that deep sense of anger and confusion – and its possible costs.

There is not a person alive who saw what elite consensus and pacting cost us – in 1997, 2002, 2007 – who wouldn't admit that political settlements in Kenya are containment strategies, not resolution strategies.

Just as there is not a person alive who saw the size of the crowds at Odinga's mock swearing-in who could possibly not be unsure now that the ability of elite consensus and pacting for containment is still assured.

Also well-ventilated is the anger, confusion – almost bereftness – of (Odinga's) support base now

Yes, Odinga's erstwhile opposition colleagues have kept the deaths at the hands of the security services during this electoral process on the table. The absolute failure of security sector reform was on full display. The partisanship of the security services deployed (in the interest of the incumbent). Their casual brutality. Their impunity. Uta-do?

Ditto the Executive's absolute contempt for rule of law. The court orders ignored. The veiled (and not-so-veiled) attacks on the judicial members responsible for issuing those orders

in the first place. The Executive's impunity and – ultimately – the judiciary's inability, despite its best efforts, to address that impunity. Uta-do?

But what hasn't been kept on the table – perplexingly – is every single concrete issue on which the Executive's, the incumbent's, behaviour was based. It is this that is the tragedy of the latest handshake and photographs. The tragedy of this latest round of elite consensus and pacting.

To reiterate those specifics – our unfinished business from 2017.

The contracting by the electoral management body. Including the contracting of the parallel, short message servicing results transmission system to Attain Enterprise Solutions – an entity allegedly associated with family members of top Jubilee party officials. The ownership questions around the same. The IEBC's contracting of the battery of advocates and lawyers on which it has relied in all electoral disputes arising. What all that contracting has cost us. What the elections themselves have cost us.

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The pending court orders (ha!) from the first presidential poll petition as concerns the IEBC's information technology platforms and storage systems. The infamous servers. The absolutely shocking content of the two judicially-ordered scrutiny reports – content which didn't, finally, find full reflection in the judgement arising.

The revelations coming out now as concerns the incumbent's contracting of external public relations firms and their utter lack of concern as to how they messaged internally – fanning

the fires on social media with untrue assertions, defamatory and libellous claims and (frankly) incendiary use of ethnic prejudice and stereotyping.

The pathetic capitulation of western external actors to hollow rule-by-law claims of the incumbent – their flipping of the script and contributions to narrowed understandings of the rights to assembly, association and expression.

In the end, the emptying-out of our right to vote, our right to have our vote count.

This is what elite consensus and pacting has cost us before. This is what it's costing us today. This is the handshake. These are the photographs. Look for the portrait in the background. Understand that we've been here before.