

Ethnic barons, handshake politics and Raila's accidental legacy

The handshake between President Uhuru and Raila Odinga on March 09, 2018 was not the first of baronial handshakes we have seen nor will it be the last. But the last of them will be when an alternative political leadership that can imagine our freedom and emancipation takes the reins of political power in our country.

“When Baba told us he was leading us to Canaan we did not know he meant the Office of the President!” one Kenyan tweeted, expressing the views held by many including public intellectuals who did not see this turn of events coming.

Hitherto, the narrative had been that the National Super Alliance (NASA) was the lesser of the two political evils, but the truth is they are both pawns in the hands of the imperialisms of the West and East. Indeed, their shared vision of looting the country can never set them apart.

However, I believe the swearing-in of Raila Odinga as the People's President on January 30, 2018, is the straw that broke the camel's back.

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The ceremony confirmed Odinga as a leader of the new national opposition with a following to be reckoned with. Proving he had the capacity to mobilise millions could not be taken

lightly or ignored.

I saw a clear parallel from the past when Jaramogi Odinga resurrected our hopes of fighting the Moi-KANU dictatorship and the heralding of the so-called second liberation. Speaking in Bondo in his trademark shrill voice he warned Moi: "Moi-i-i-i, you do not have the title deeds to Kenya."

I believe the current Jubilee dictatorship saw this too and negotiations started soon after with meetings booked in order to "maintain the peace". Apparently, the staff at the Office of the President who saw Odinga walk in feared he had decided to physically evict President Uhuru from his official seat!

My issue is how often we get bamboozled by day-to-day political distractions by the Kenyan elite!. Succession, political gossip and alliances for the 2022 elections are classic political diversions to distract the majority of Kenyans from demands of their basic necessities and material needs.

With blessings bestowed by the British Empire to subvert the nationalist movement led by the Kenya African National Union (KANU) there were handshakes between British settlers and the Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU). One could argue these early political gestures were the alliance between the British Empire, the British settlers in Kenya, and the Kenyan Homeguards (those Kenyans with vested interests in the Empire and favoured its continuation) to subvert our freedom and independence.

Clearly, the celebrated handshake was when the conservative KADU joined KANU within a year of our 1963 independence. Ngugi wa Thiong'o is right in arguing that the effect of that handshake was to strengthen the conservative forces in KANU while isolating the nationalist forces in KANU. Two publications during this period tell this story: William

Hollingworth Attwood's, *The Reds and the Blacks: A Personal Adventure* and Jaramogi Oginga Odinga's *Not Yet Uhuru*.

Attwood was the first American ambassador to Kenya. Odinga was the first Vice-President of the Kenyan Republic. The KANU-KADU handshake took place in the backdrop of the Cold War reflecting the truism that elite conflicts reflect foreign interests which these days is euphemistically called the "international community." One can only imagine the role the international community played in forcing the March 9th handshake in the interests of "peace, stability and democracy"!

The KANU-KADU handshake clearly strengthened the KANU-Kenyatta dictatorship. As Attwood narrates that alliance weakened the Kenya People's Union (KPU) led by Jaramogi Odinga, Bildad Kagia and other nationalists. Attwood in that book more or less celebrates the assassination of Pinto on February 24, 1965.

That handshake after independence was the political trajectory that led KANU to become a one-party dictatorship. In 1969 the Kenyatta-KANU dictatorship banned KPU and detained its leaders (except Kaggia). Kenya became a *de facto* one-party state becoming a *de jure* one through a constitutional amendment in 1982. The KANU-Kenyatta-Moi dictatorships had strong support from the West until the collapse of the Soviet Empire and of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The ethnic barons excluded from political participation by the KANU dictatorships were the force behind the so-called second liberation.

Forces from the international community supported the new political movement and in the case of Kenya, Smith Hempstone's book, *The Rogue Ambassador: An African Memoir* gives a glimpse of the role played by them in support of multi-partyism. "The international community" has enhanced the stability of its interests by supporting the political narrative through baronial alliances they believe can keep Kenya stable, even

supporting dictatorships in Kenya since independence.

The Forum for the Restoration of Democracy (FORD) movement as the political initiative that sparked agitation for multi-partyism, was merely a baronial alliance between the excluded elites from the Moi-KANU dictatorship. The FORD Party could have brought down that dictatorship in the 1992 elections if it were not for the divisions between the various barons. Odinga, Matiba, and Kibaki were at the centre of these divisions. Those divisions persisted and Moi won the 1997 elections yet again.

In 1997 there was yet another handshake, nay a stump shake, between the Social Democratic Party (SDP) led by the late Apollo Njonjo and now Governor Peter Anyang Nyong'o and Hon Charity Kaluki Ngilu who became the party's presidential candidate. Ngilu lost the election, but SDP won some parliamentary seats. SDP, with some German support, mainly from the German Social Democratic Party, was successful in the creation of a baroness in the Kamba community setting up intra-baronial conflicts that continue in Ukambani until today.

By far the biggest handshake was in 1997 called the Inter-Parties Parliamentary Group (IPPG), between Moi's KANU dictatorship and opposition political parties. Before this happened there was an alliance between civil society groups and the opposition political parties that had given birth to the National Convention Executive Council (NCEC) which pushed for a new constitution to reflect the democratic ideals of multi-partyism. The opposition found it difficult to organize and mobilize resistance because Moi/KANU refused a level playing field. However, the mass action in 1997 became a genuine threat to the dictatorship. When NCEC declared the formation of a constituent assembly in August 1997, the dictatorship quickly conceded some minimal electoral reforms to the opposition through the IPPG. Moi thereafter called an election that he won.

I tell this story in my book *Constitution-Making from the Middle: Civil Society and Politics of Transition, 1992-1997*. It is worth noting that IPPG was supported by foreign interests in Kenya. Grouped under Development Governance Group (DGG) these interests made it clear to the civil society leadership in NCEC that the IPPG reforms were adequate. They opposed further mass action. I remember I wrote an article in the Daily Nation describing the DGG position as racist, perfidious, and hypocritical. I was naive to expect the DGG's position to be different. The DGG supported baronial alliances of the Kenyan elite and not the promise of democracy that the civil society advocated.

Grand handshakes necessarily involve political chicanery: betrayals and behind-the-scenes strategising, which should never be underestimated. Indeed, those who talk of alternative political leaderships must study these baronial alliances, conflicts, and the elite imperial masters behind them. For example, it is widely believed that Kibaki's Democratic Party (DP) was Moi's "project" in 1992 and in 2002 Kibaki once again was a continuation of that project. Kalonzo, it is believed, was Kibaki's project in 2002 and the March 9th handshake must also be about the 2022 elections.

The drama of baronial handshakes and betrayals in 2002 was without parallel. The National Alliance for Change (NAC) was a coalition of civil society groups and three opposition political parties led by Mwai Kibaki, Charity Ngilu, and the late Michael Wamalwa Kijana. Out of this coalition the National Alliance Party of Kenya (NAK) was born in July 2002 that claimed Mwai Kibaki as its presidential party candidate in the 2002 elections. Meanwhile, what the late William Ole Ntimama called "Kisirani Kasarani" happened.

Raila's National Development Party had merged with KANU forming New KANU. New KANU met at Kasarani Stadium to pick its presidential candidate for the 2002 presidential elections. Moi picked Uhuru as the candidate and New KANU imploded. Raila

led the political orphans of Old KANU and New KANU to NAK and a new party, the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC), was born. The famous handshake then was “*Kibaki Tosha*”. These were Odinga’s words at Uhuru Park, and they gave rise to the first united opposition front in Kenya.

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NARC won the 2002 elections and Mwai Kibaki became president. Conflicts within NARC did not end and a clear split between Odinga and Kibaki was reflected in the 2005 referendum over the draft constitution. Kibaki lost that referendum, a political curtain raiser for the 2007 elections and its murderous aftermath, followed by a bloody handshake that gave birth to the Grand Coalition. One can trace the invisible hand of interests, national and foreign, in these alliances and stabbings.

The 2013 and 2017 elections had two baronial alliances coalescing in the Coalition on Reform and Democracy (CORD that became NASA in 2017), and Jubilee. Jubilee won both elections. CORD and NASA “won” both elections. The barons won! Whatever political party is in power is a baronial alliance and that’s the extent of our democratic choices. That narrative as this article shows, has been in play for over five decades. That narrative has kept Kenya recolonized, dominated, oppressed and exploited by the baronial elites and their imperialist foreign masters. Everything is for sale in Kenya as long as the price is right!

But let us not forget that there has always been a cadre of authentic liberation forces in Kenya, primarily in the opposition, that has resisted this status quo from the underground and from the margins above ground.

KPU can be said to have been part of this opposition in the sense of its vision of reimagining freedom and emancipation. KPU opposed what Odinga in his book, *Not Yet Uhuru*, called the “invisible government”. He was referring to the foreign interests that rule Kenya. The British never left, and to reinforce our recolonization other interests, American, Japanese and European came in. And now of course, we have the Chinese.

KPU opposed the land policies of KANU, and its political blueprint contained in Sessional Paper number 10 – ‘African Socialism and its Application to Kenya’. KPU was not socialist, but could be described as a liberal democratic party with some deep social democratic concerns. KPU was definitely the home of the Kenyan Left at that moment.

Upon KPU’s banning, other radical formations emerged: first, The December Twelfth Movement, later Mwakenya; and during the 1980s as leftist forces went into exile, other movements based abroad. In 1997, NCEC had some significant leftist thinkers. Some of them would unfortunately abandon those credentials in NARC and other political formations. In 1997, when the IPPG deal was underway, there was a serious discussion to completely delink leftist formations from opposition political parties. It was felt that such alliances would only be useful if there were alternative political movements and parties. Indeed, after the IPPG, there was a serious debate within the NCEC about starting an alternative movement that would nurture a radical political leadership that transcended baronial politics. Of course those who were behind that thinking lost out, but the idea did not die.

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I hope history will record that the fundamental political importance of the March 9th handshake marked the end of this politically naive position by the Kenyan left that radical political ideas can find a home in baronial opposition parties.

Raila has vacated his space in the national political opposition that he has occupied for decades. I believe the narrative of the “lesser of the two evils” is dead. I believe the imagination of alternative politics transcending baronial politics of division and polarization has deepened. I believe the decadence of baronial politics is now exposed. I believe baronial politics cannot claim to lead Kenya to a national, just, equitable, free, and prosperous society. I believe we have a great political opportunity to envision a new Kenya. The progressive pillars of our 2010 Constitution can be a great mobilisation force while rescuing it of its fundamental weakness: an inbuilt narrative that legitimises the status quo.

The material that will dismantle our dirty politics is within our grasp: corruption, looting, escalating national debt, poverty and stark inequalities, the destruction of public goods (education, health, housing, food, environment, the rights and freedoms, clothing etc). All that seems to be missing is a political home for an authentic opposition in Kenya. That home can never be in the houses of baronial political parties. After five decades the falseness of this

narrative has been ruthlessly exposed.

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The unintended result of the March 9th handshake might be that it has at last given birth to the consolidation of alternative politics in Kenya. Ironically, Raila's legacy may end up being that, having played a major role in more political handshakes than any other Kenyan politician, he is the one who has now inadvertently bequeathed the mother of all handshakes – the one that signalled the end of baronial politics in Kenya – and birthed the dawn of alternative politics in Kenya that concretely imagines our freedom and emancipation.

What is to be done? Let us continue building patriotic, alternative politics for a free, just, equitable, democratic, united, and prosperous Kenya. We have nothing to lose but our oppression, poverty and exploitation at the hands of a baronial dominant elite. The handshake has given us a great political opportunity to build on this patriotic vision.

*** The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author.*