

CHRIS MSANDO – Year 53 in the History of State Assassinations

It is hard to believe that it is a year since Christopher Msando, the ICT manager at Kenya's Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) was brutally tortured and murdered. I can still hear his confident voice as he explained in layman's language how the gadgets to be used for the 2017 General Election (KIEMS kits) would work. I can still hear his reassuring voice that the gadgets would not follow the footsteps of the spectacular failure of 2013.

I can see him working with KPMG, the company hired to audit the register of voters, meticulously identifying some of the problems with the register including multiple persons sharing the same national identification number and suggesting solutions. I can see him in the boardroom expressing alarm that the data center was heating up again and urging for a secondary data center to be put in place immediately. Somberly explaining some loopholes in the technology and how to fix them.

I can hear his booming voice, his laughter in the corridors as he joked with his colleagues. I can see his face brighten whenever he found a solution to a nagging technology-related problem. I recall the meticulousness with which he handled all tasks assigned to him. The dedication to his job that led him to spend long days and nights at work.

I can vividly see Chris standing at Safari Park before 800 staff from across the country, responding to their questions, allaying their fears and assuring them that technology would not be the weak-link during the 2017 election. I can hear him explaining to the media and civil society the various measures

in place to avert deceased voters from showing up at polling stations on 8 August. I can see him on television assuring Kenyans that the election would not be manipulated under his watch.

I did not expect that his words would be taken literally. That he would be among the deceased voters deliberately eliminated from participating in the electoral process. That indeed the alleged manipulation of technology on 8th August would not take place under his watch. That he would be silenced forever in the most cowardly, callous and brutal manner. And that his killers would never be brought to book. That he who fervently believed in justice and honesty would not benefit from the same.

You see, Chris belongs to a small cadre of professional public servants fully committed to their work. Those few men and women whom politicians would not bat an eyelid to sacrifice for their own political interests. He is not the first nor the last public servant in Kenya to pay the ultimate price. On February 12th 1990 Kenya's Foreign Minister, Dr. Robert Ouko was kidnapped and murdered by individuals around the presidency in a manner not too dissimilar to the way Chris was brutally dispatched. Pio Pinto, Tom Mboya, J.M. Kariuki and many other less notable public figures have been murdered by the elite since independence. Indeed the extrajudicial assassination of senior figures is an enduring characteristic of Kenyan elite political competition.

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Every few years we have these public officials who are sacrificed in the interest of the political class. The politicians view everything from the short-term gains of acquiring power. And when public officials get into their cross-hairs, they do not hesitate to eliminate them. The same fate befalls those who fall during the electioneering period. [Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International found in a joint report in October](#) that at least 67 people were killed countrywide during the first round of voting in August, most of them either shot or beaten to death by police. During the second election, Human Rights Watch documented 37 more killings, most by police, in Nairobi's Embakasi, Kawangware, Dandora, Mathare, Kibera, Kangemi, Kariobangi, and Riverside neighborhoods.

Any life lost is one too many, but what is baffling is how quickly we move on and hope that these horrors will not be repeated. We fail to make changes to the systemic structures that allow these murders to continue. We protect the political structure that has no respect for lives or even professionalism. We do not push for accountability mechanisms that at least could serve as a deterrent for future targeting of public officials like Chris. We 'move on' very quickly and await the next tragedy.

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By not pushing hard to increase the political cost of these murders, we lay the ground for those behind these actions not to think twice before they pounce on their next victim. The political elite in power know that there would be no political

cost to their actions. They know that as Kenyans we are divided along the so-called peace and justice paradigm. Our logic as a country appears to be to place a high premium on 'peace' and stability and let those whose family members are murdered mourn quietly without rocking the boat.

This certainly appears to be the case for Chris Msando and the [at least 67 people who were killed by police during the 2017 election period](#). Last week, we watched as Mama Chris narrated her elusive search for justice with tears in her eyes. It is scandalous that she is alone, with her family, in seeking answers to her son's brutal murder. It is scandalous that the national assembly – lame as it may be perceived- has not sought to have a public inquest into Chris' murder and that of Jacob Juma, [Kabete MP George Muchai](#), [Baby Samantha Pendo](#), [Stephanie Moraa Nyarangi](#), [Jeremiah Maranga](#), [Thomas Odhiambo Okul](#), [Bernard Okoth Odoyo](#), [Raphael Ayieko](#), [Victor Okoth Obondo](#), [Privel Ochieng Ameso](#), [Shady Omondi Juma](#). Even the traditional human rights organizations in Kenya have maintained a deafening silence on these cases.

It is unacceptable to let these atrocities remain uninvestigated even in our current political context of handshakes and building bridges to nowhere. As President Barack Obama recently said in his speech in South Africa: "It is tempting to give in to cynicism: to believe that recent shifts in global politics are too powerful to push back; that the pendulum has swung permanently...We have to resist that cynicism." Change may take time but it certainly eventually comes.

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History tells us that this change does not come on its own. It has to start by creating a critical mass of leaders that are willing to ask the tough questions, even in the political context of our time. Our own history in Kenya is replete with leaders who stood up against the political system at the risk of their lives. In the 1970s we had the likes of Jean Marie Seroney, J.M. Kariuki, Martin Shikuku, A.R. Kapila among others.

The striking commonality in all of [the assassinations] was that they were all young men and women. Yet today, it is the young people who are looking up to veteran opposition leaders – some who paid their dues during their youth – for leadership. But there are signs that nascent steps towards this may just be emerging.

The striking commonality in all of them was that they were all young men and women. Yet today, it is the young people who are looking up to veteran opposition leaders – some who paid their dues during their youth – for leadership. But there are signs that nascent steps towards this may just be emerging. As the great American anthropologist Margaret Mead said: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” As Yash Pal Ghai recently wrote in the eReview “the youth of Kenya who suffer the most of all the inhabitants of the city’s informal settlements are organizing themselves around social justice, focusing on protecting their rights”. It appears that unlike many of us who keep whining about the handshake and other ills facing the country, they are indeed putting their energies to good use. The youth, whether during the Arab Spring in Tunisia and Egypt or in Burkina Faso, have often led the change movement. Our hope in saving us the agony of burying and mourning the brutal murder of another brilliant young man like Chris Msando lies with the youth, the millennials.

(Research by Juliet Atallah)