

Uhuru at UNGA: Mortgaging the Anti-Corruption War?

I rarely watch television. But I could not help following President Uhuru Kenyatta's address at the United Nations General Assembly in New York, and the Finance Bill 2018/19 proceedings at the National Assembly. At the world stage, I expected the bravado of a President with 98% "votes" under his belt. After all, had President Trump not taken to the same podium earlier to brag about leading the most successful administration in US history, provoking laughter at his own expense? Had King Mswati III, he with the fifteen wives and counting, not used the stage to brag about steps taken by his government to empower women? Instead, there stood a subdued leader, lamenting an enlightened citizenry that has lost trust in corrupted institutions corrupt that do not deliver for them.

It would have seemed a bit outrageous to play up the development record, as he has done in past meetings, when gains made in the past decades have been rolled back. Unemployment, especially among the youth, stands at about 47% of the population. The debt levels are now unsustainable with the country on the brink of mortgage to our Chinese benefactors. Crime rates are on the rise: young women are now being murdered without respite, young men victims of extra-judicial murders in the cities' sprawling informal settlements. During the long flight to New York, Mr Kenyatta's aides had probably checked his Facebook and Twitter accounts, where furious citizens, unhappy with the economic and social situation, were unleashing their anger.

As I listened to the President's words, "... people observe the impunity of the corrupt, they increasingly feel that the economic systems are rigged against their hopes", I was transported back to the events of the previous week. The well-

orchestrated theatrics at the National Assembly with members of parliament playing to the gallery by claiming to oppose the Finance Bill, while allowing it to sail through, further burdening Kenyans with more taxes. (Director Wanuri Kahiu should consider auditioning from the National Assembly. The *Bunge* movie surely join *Rafiki*, in the list of Oscar nominees, without the complication of our holier-than-thou, Ezekiel Mutua, banning it. But then again, with the pace of repression, who knows, it may also be banned for 'endangering national security'.)

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If Kenyans ever doubted that we are living in a period of complete State capture, the parliamentary charade and President Kenyatta's speech confirmed it. In his own words, "when networks and cartels in government capture the state for their own selfish gain, and represent themselves as champions of an ethnic or religious group, the result is all too often civil strife and civil war". This is not the first time that President Kenyatta has blamed cartels for controlling the State and sounding exasperated by his inability to deal with the cartels. But to take it to the global stage was a profound capitulation. To admit before the world that he was a leader whose government had been captured by cartels is a preserve of a few countries, mostly classified as failed states. Predictably, he tried to link state capture to broader international corporate and criminal networks.

The facts do not support the narrative he seems to be peddling, especially as we saw him whip the Jubilee MPs to impose more taxes on an already over-burdened population. He

surely cannot dupe us into believing that his government has the goodwill to serve its people but is the victim of international networks beyond its reach. The political and economic situation that Kenya finds itself in is largely the result of the actions of President Kenyatta and his Jubilee regime. This fourth iteration of state capture follows in the footsteps of his father, Jomo Kenyatta, his mentor Daniel Arap Moi, and his former boss, Mwai Kibaki. The mismanagement of the economy, control of state institutions, corruption, tribalism, just to name a few, is of his own making, with the support of his cronies, national and international.

In the President's speech, he mentioned that state capture could result in "civil strife and civil war". There is vast empirical evidence to support his claim. A recently issued report jointly drafted by the United Nations and the World Bank, *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict*, provides numerous examples of how grievances around state capture and exclusion, among other injustices, would lead to violence. In the current situation, where there is barely any independent institution, where members of the National Assembly have completely forgotten that the Constitution bestows sovereign power to the people and only delegated it to him, to act on their behalf; where members of parliament take voting instructions from the Presidency or Rt. Hon. Raila Odinga and other opposition leaders, whose surrender and capitulation to the Jubilee regime, is complete; where there is no channel to air the grievances amassing from a high-tax regime, corruption and tough economic conditions. In short, Mr Kenyatta's predictions of "civil strife and civil war" are not far-fetched.

But we also know that "civil strife and civil war" could be prevented by addressing the grievances so eloquently articulated by the President in New York. The same grievances that now dominate the social media platforms of the presidency. They are aired openly in beauty salons, social

gatherings and pubs. They were passionately echoed at the recent Senate sitting in Eldoret with sentiments such as “*heri kifo, kuliko kuishi Kenya*” (it is better to die than live in Kenya). These are not things that should be taken lightly – the cameras in Eldoret showed some of the Senators chuckling. There needs to be much more serious thought placed on saving the country from the situation it finds itself. Dismantling the opposition coalition as a strategy has its limits. It may have been successful in legitimizing the Jubilee regime after the 26 October sham election last year, but on its own, it cannot solve the economic and social grievances raging across the country.

In many forums, whether online or in our local pubs, the question that lingers is: what next? In the absence of a credible opposition, how do we change our current situation? With a compromised media and retreating civil society, how do we organize ourselves? With a government, which is willing to use violence to suppress protests, what is left for us to do? There are no easy answers, but I believe that collectively, we can forge a path out of our current situation. It appears that we have four possible options, that we should seriously consider, in no specific order of preference.

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There is an option for Uhuru Kenyatta and his Deputy to acknowledge that they have failed to show leadership in their five years in power and honourably resign from office. The President said as much in his speech in New York and he has previously thrown his hands in the air in frustration at the runaway levels of corruption. The honourable step, when one is

unable or unwilling to do his job, is to step aside and pass the baton to others. The resignation of Ethiopia's former Prime Minister, Hailemariam Desalegn, in February this year set an example in our region.

There is a second option: civil strife triggering a social revolution that topples the regime and replaces it with a transitional authority that abides by the current constitutional arrangements. Africa has numerous examples of these revolutions, with Burkina Faso and The Gambia as recent notable cases, albeit with specificities unique to Kenya.

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There is yet another option: to conduct a transparent and inclusive national dialogue to chart a way forward. To be clear, this is not the 'Bridges to Nowhere' initiative, nor the so-called National Dialogue Conference launched recently by a section of the religious community. Nor is it about the imprudent and selfish interests of the political elite demanding cosmetic constitutional changes to install their camp in power in the name of a parliamentary system of government. It is not the diversionary tactics of Jubilee regime puppets with the calls for a referendum (#WanjikuReferendum) that will probably roll back devolution in the guise of budgetary discipline.

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And in parallel, begin building a movement that is based on our core values and aspirations, with a new crop of leaders to participate in elective positions in 2022. This is of course based on the wrong premise that we ever conduct elections in Kenya, rather than the reality of rampant electoral injustice. In democracies where elections actually take place, when out of power, political parties and social movements renew their focus and organize to win the next election. In the United States, this is the high-stakes game going on ahead of the midterm elections with the Democratic Party hoping to wrest control of the Senate and the House from the Republican Party. But again, they don't have a nefarious IEBC overseeing their election under the tight control of the State.

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Neither of these four options is without risks. Neither of them is easy and nor are the options mutually exclusive. The only option that we should not contemplate is that of sitting in our comfort zones and hoping and praying that our situation will change by itself. It will not. We have a civic responsibility to pick any of the four options above and run with them. When your President stands before the world and declares that cartels have taken over government, apathy cannot be an option. Hopelessness cannot be a choice. Fear cannot be an excuse. History has shown that it is the small acts of a few people that lead to real change. It is the courage of a few that would lead to the renewal we need and deserve as a country. Let's arise from our slumber and do the right thing before we witness the total mortgaging of the country.