

State of the Kenya Nation¹

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I. Preliminary Remarks

Exploring the current state of the Kenya nation is a thought-provoking challenge. Indeed, while I might say disagreeable things about some people, those who disagree will at least give it some thought. Kenya's interests require that the people in it engage themselves in robust discussions about their country.

Since discussing the 'State of the Kenya Nation' is a challenging task, I can only and will try to share my perspectives. There are two interlinked factors to consider, the external and the domestic, that influence and affect each other so much that together they affect the state of the nation. Both factors show that Kenya is currently a troubled state, full of encouraging positives and disturbing negatives. These give hope on one side and are also sources of concern. The ability to balance hope and concern is particularly critical to the long term well-being of the Kenyan state especially in an election year, which 2022 is.

II. The External Factors

Kenya's geographical location, with the Equator cutting it into virtual halves, is of strategic value to many countries in and out of Africa. They often compete to influence whatever happens in the country and this competition is particularly visible in voting times. With a scheduled election in August 2022, external factors manifest themselves in open and subtle ways. They either favour one candidate over the others or aim at blocking a particular candidate. They show it by the way they treat or receive potential candidates.

¹ Presentation prepared for
PCEA Kahawa Sukari Virtual Engagement
Tuesday, February 15, 2022.

There are also forces that are beyond any country's ability to control; those that de-border states and Kenya is a victim. Among them are epidemics/diseases like coronavirus, international terrorism, cyber threats, and weather related calamities. Coronavirus globally disrupted societies, economies, educational and health systems, the way countries related to each other, and even the ways of governance. Since few countries knew what to do, lockdowns became routine. In Kenya, disparities in the administration of the lockdowns made it seem like middle/working class targeting while creating socio-economic chaos and a few billionaires/millionaires. The country has yet to recover from the attendant dislocation.

Kenya is a product of European imperial competition for colonies in Africa late in the 19th Century. In a series of agreements in Europe with Germany and Italy, Britain determined Kenya's borders and then shaped its character and subsequent identity or identities in the form of ethnic groupings. Britain continues to express interests in how Kenyans vote, as was evident in 2005, 2007, 2012/13, and 2017. It does this by funding projects, media projections, and making openly partisan comments. It behaves like a political weathervane for other Western powers to follow. It currently avoids overt display of preference and has already donated Ksh. 1.2 billion worth of 'technical' support for the August 2022 elections. The United States and Germany often follow the British lead where Kenya is concerned. Other Western powers then tag along.

Within the African continent, Kenya is so pivotal that others often look up to it. Its colonial past is one of extremes either as white man's country or as a 'revolutionary' Mau Mau country that spurred global anti-colonialism. The Mau Mau War gave Kenya Pan Africanist credentials which President Uhuru Kenyatta tries hard to advance in the continent and in the Diaspora. While the Pan Africanist appeal enabled Kenya to clinch the UNSC two year rotating seat, it still has to contend with anti-Kenya counter forces at times instigated by powers outside the continent.

The extra-continental agency in Kenya's woes is vividly demonstrated in Somalia's hostility towards Kenya as source of terror activities, and as a proxy for external forces. Somalia had experienced British and Italian multiple colonialism. In the 1960s and 1970s, Somalia created the notion of one expanding Somalia as nationalistic glue to hold different colonial identities into a mythical one. When the experiment flopped and the glue melted, Somalia fragmented into mini-states largely based on colonial identities. It also generated many refugees who became 'citizens' of extra-continental powers. Such 'citizens', having

returned to Somalia as officials and proxies, were used to induce Somalia to adopt maritime irredentism at Kenya's expense. This explains the attempt to grab Kenyan waters through the ICJ. The effect is to portray Kenya as very weak and thereby question existing leadership.

While Somali instigates instability through Al Shabaab attacks on Kenyan soil, countries in the East African Community and beyond tend to follow Kenya closely because disruptions in Nairobi affect them directly. Those that are land locked use Kenya as their outlet to the sea, and their biggest trade by value and volume is with Kenya. There is relative stability in the Community and the expectation is that Kenya's election dynamics will not disrupt that sense of stability.

Concern also arises out of the national debt implications in large scale 'investors'. China often comes to mind when it comes to infrastructure partly because China gives loans and does the actual construction and also because of global geopolitical implications. The loans could be predatory if they do not accomplish the intended purposes which then focus attention on, and questions, the competence of who on the Kenyan side would have negotiated the said loan. If corruption was the driving motive behind the loan, this acquires political dimensions in domestic power competition. Thus the various accusations that have been hurled about such mega projects as the SGR have elements of geopolitical envy and domestic political rivalry. Irrespective of how external factors manifest themselves, they have a bearing on Kenya's wellbeing.

III. The Domestic Factors

In many instances, the external factors are intertwined with the domestic ones in determining the state of the nation. In the process, it appears, the country is good at balancing its positives attributes to outdo its negative proclivities. This makes Kenya appear to be in flux, gyrating from the good ups to disconcerting downs on matters religious, pandemic effect on such social services as education, economic, or political. All are interlinked to give mixtures of national thrills at one time followed by deep disappointments partly due to the perceived failure of those entrusted with responsibility to live up to expectation.

In part, Kenya and Kenyans have unlimited amount of resilience that enables their positives ultimately to outbalance the negatives in such ways as to come out intact. The country is

intact. That resilience is present in religions as social agents in a country that is multi-religious. Although the Kenya constitution and national anthem place God at the top of everything, they do not give preference to any religion or form of worship. There are times, therefore, when religious sense of exclusivity would appear to be contrary to the spirit of national inclusivity.

With each of the main religions, whether Christianity, Islam, or Hinduism split along doctrinal or/and fiduciary lines, religious conflicts within and outside particular religions are disturbingly common. As a result, there is a lot of abuse of faith which include leadership that condones often externally driven dangerous anti-social cults that teach hatred. The seeming reluctance of state and religious leadership to handle cultic extremism adds to growing fabric of societal dislocations. In turn, societal dislocations lead to additional religious splits as adventurous individuals found new establishments and then declare themselves to be prophets, apostles, bishops, or reverends. What is more, religions appear like proxies for political power brokers, especially during election times when religious leaders emerge to ‘anoint’ favourite politicians, some of questionable spiritual standing, or to anoint themselves.

Not all is lost with religions. Although religious leaders, in taking political sides by anointing questionable personalities, contribute to national tensions rather than in promoting sense of harmony, there are positive developments that give hope and might help to redeem religions in the eyes of the public. The various inter-faith councils and movements that downplay exclusivity and promote inclusivity have sobering effects. This happens at the religious and denominational levels as Christians, Muslims, and Hindus increase inter-faith consultations. At times, within the Christian religion, the Presbyterians, Anglicans, Catholics, Methodists, Adventists, Baptists, and various “Evangelicals” come together through umbrella organs to have common stands on disturbing issues. This trend, that would help to rehabilitate religions, might increase as the country approaches August 2022. It is evidence of resilience that keeps the country together.

The Coronavirus pandemic hit religions and other organised institutions hard and tested the country’s resilience. As a disease, Coronavirus appeared to have its own social discrimination pattern in that it affected the rich and powerful countries and peoples more than the poor. There had been concern that the disease would destroy the poor in rural Africa and slums because they had no protection in the form of masks, had no water, and had no social distancing ability. Although the opposite turned out to be the case,

Coronavirus still disorganised the health and educational systems so badly that it will take time to recover. The educational systems everywhere, from baby schools to universities are in disarray. Kenyan universities are in big messes partly because of Coronavirus.

Kenya seemed slow to accept the reality of the pandemic and its initial reaction was wanting, confused, and helped to increase social economic disruptions. When it announced protocols including lockdowns, it inadvertently seemed to target the productive middle class because the influential at the top openly flouted the protocols and were exempt from enforcement. On the other side, the protocols had little effect on those in slum areas because they could not follow them even if they wanted. And the administration of the protocols seemed draconian as a few people died in the enforcement while a few privileged others found extra sources of income. The phenomenon of COVID billionaires, as such, cast doubts on the seriousness of the pandemic. To a large extent, the change of official tactics on enforcement and the supply of vaccines to places of worship and public gatherings helped the public to cope with the pandemic. Kenyan resilience has once again taken over and helped to restore hope in what had appeared to be a disease ridden helpless situation.

The Kenyan economy, on its part, is in national confusion mode because there is both a lot of money in the country in the midst of massive poverty where millions can hardly make ends meet. There are two ways of looking at the seeming economic confusion; the role of government and the role of citizens. The government, as the mandated organ in administering and managing the national wellbeing, has had mixed fortunes. At the macro, or big thinking, level the government has done well with visible massive infrastructure everywhere, opening up the country by undertaking construction of highways, airports and water-ports and provision of electricity. While these have an empowering effect on enterprising individuals, and actually do stimulate scattered micro economic activities, the benefits are not as visible to millions who battle rising cost of living and fall prey to the culture of dependency. They still remain hopeful that things will turn out better than before.

While millions do not have it, the money is visible in the hands of a few people. How they get it is not the issue but they do display it in conspicuous ways. Stuck in between the two socio-economic extremes are the working middle class, the real producers of wealth who often suffer most in times of crises; they suffered in the Coronavirus and natural calamity crises and the effect is countrywide. The money is, however, visible in mushrooming high rises, petrol stations on highways next to each other, and mega malls in cities and related urban areas. The massive poverty is evident in the growing slums, often next to posh

residential areas, that act as service providers. A symbiotic relationship, therefore, exists between extreme wealth and extreme poverty. That symbiosis is also political since poverty is often political capital.

As political capital, poverty is often created and perpetuated because poverty is not natural. In an election year like 2022, therefore, poverty is very attractive for it gives bonga points to would be ‘leaders’ that want to govern the rest of us. Those competing to be president or governors, whether in or out of government, therefore have one common running theme. The economy is in a mess, they all say, and then purport to offer solutions variously labelled ‘bottom up’, six thousand shilling social safety nets, or pesa mfukoni. Each then claims to have good plans to create jobs, revive moribund industries, and guarantee such essential social services as free education and free medical care. They thus all engage in using ‘poverty’ as a vehicle for advancement to high office where they can control public resources.

Personal political interests, presented as concern for public interest, always prevail in political happenings; the same is taking place. Personal interests had informed Daniel Moi’s 1992 constitution amendment imposing presidential two term limit and were clear in the 2010 Constitution that tried to limit presidential ability to hire and fire deputy presidents. In part, this explains the current confusion in the presidency. Could this limitation on presidential powers be behind the seeming public discord between the president and the deputy president? Is it a clash of ambitions, discarding previous political friendships, and played in public spaces?

While President Uhuru Kenyatta is not a candidate, he makes his interest in playing a role in his own presidential succession well known. This, however, does not undercut the fact that although there are many presidential candidates, two of them stand out and make the others pale out in the far political distance. The two are Deputy President William Ruto and former Prime Minister Raila Odinga and both are seasoned and crafty politicians; they know each other. Of the two, Ruto is a student of both President Daniel arap Moi and of Raila in terms of political scheming and ability to create political uncertainty.

There is something discomfoting in that the leading presidential candidates, Ruto and Raila Odinga, arouse the ‘ghosts’ of the 2007 election disturbances. Silencing the ‘ghosts’ is a constant problem. Both men were ‘Pentagon’ commanders that were associated with people being dispossessed in rural and urban areas. Fifteen year later, the dispossessed are

still waiting despite all the promises that politicians made and make. It might also explain prevailing general apathy in the country, especially among the youth.

The possibility of apathy spreading to the older generations would be due to decreased levels of trust culminating in general disillusionment. Of the roughly 22 million registered voters, the proportionate turn out might be lower than what it was in 2017 when the emotional attachment to candidates was high. That leaders who should be respectable grownups and people of honour could publicly declare themselves to be liars, cheats, and possible vote thieves had chilling and disillusioning effect. It increased distrust of themselves as individuals and of the IEBC as the institution responsible for elections. Since the Mountain was the target of such declarations, Mount Kenya people then seemed gullible. In their perceived gullibility, they are flattered to indulge in self-deception that they have power to determine who should deputise, and probably control, either 'President Ruto' or 'President Raila' after August 2022. This self-delusion has apathy generating consequences. They should have learned from the fiasco in the Sonko-Igathe deal for Nairobi's governor position. Once a person takes the oath of office, it is clear, he tolerates no real or implied controls. He might even begin by fixing those who imagine they put him in office; the way Daniel arap Moi, after being declared the winner of the 1992 presidential election and immediately sworn in fixed those who organised YK 92.

Regional 'leaders', those of Mount Kenya included, compete in scheming for potential positions or to safeguard political seats through temporary alliances in either Raila's Azimio or Ruto's Kwanza. Many are likely to be disappointed and the resulting national challenge is in managing the expected fallout through such appropriate organs of state as Sam Kobia's NCIC or Wafula Chebukati's IEBC. The problem is that the two organs do not seem to have adequate resources to do their jobs, and the adequacy is not properly explained. This reality, as well as the perceived existence of the 'untouchables', is likely to affect their effectiveness. It is worth watching in the next six months.

Besides the presidential competitions with their entertaining dances and razzmatazz, there are activities concerning other elective offices as well as the number of political parties. There are roughly 82 registered parties and many hope to get cash from aspirants who cannot get nominations in the parties of their choice. Although the law tries to discourage party hopping, politicians will find ways of getting party tickets. The various coalitions in the formation will last only for as long as they have value to individual politicians. It should

not, therefore, come as surprising to see previously purported unity disintegrate. The disintegration and new formations are part of Kenya's resilience that keeps it going.

IV. Conclusion: The State Of The Kenyan Nation

This brief survey of the state of the Kenyan nation shows that there are times when the country has reason to be apprehensive but rarely is there reason to be desperate. It has ability to balance the positive and the negatives in such a way that the positives outweigh the negatives. The sources of apprehension are both external and internal to the country and when the two are combined, confusion and the level of concern increases. At times, that combination exposes the country's weaknesses and inability to anticipate crises. Its people, however, are so resilient that they have internalised overcoming obstacles, natural or manmade.

There are disturbing happenings, the hard realities of socio-economic dislocations made worse by failures on the part of responsible people. While the religious leadership had appeared to lose touch with the ground thereby leading to additional splits and erosion of public trust, there is an aspect of rehabilitation as they come together to give hope to the seeming hopeless. While such activities as the 'Abrahamic Talks' have their attractions and roles in reducing inter-faith tensions, religions and denominations still need to confront cult extremism in their midst. On their part, the politicians are naturally cagy, lack dependability, and are often deceptive. Since Kenyans have learned not to expect much from politicians, they have adapted to that reality and they move on.

Although Kenya is currently in a peculiar and unusual situation where the president and his deputy are publicly at loggerheads over who should inherit the presidency come August 2022, it is not as bad as it might look. After all, the three key players, Uhuru, Raila, and Ruto are all crafty political wizards who have previously worked together. They did it in KANU before 2002 and the three were together in the 2005 Referendum. All the contestants are Kenyan and whether they achieve or miss their political individual objective, none is capable of snatching resilience from the Kenyan people.

There is, therefore, nothing for Kenyans to worry about. Despite the hardships, the country is safe. The state of the nation is good.

