JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE, TECHNOLOGY & ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN AFRICA (JOLTE)
Volume 15 Number 3 2025

Multiple Raila And His Times: A Commentary

Macharia Munene
Email: gmmunene@usiu.ac.ke
United States International University-Africa

For most of his 80 years on earth, Raila Amolo Odinga, RAO, straddled the Kenyan political world like a colossus. He was a multiple man, a princeling, making waves that became news. Addicted to politics and to football, he had ability to disorganize things in ways, even in death, which few others could. When he died in India, for instance, he shattered expectations and elaborate government plans to accord him a state funeral although he never was president. His supposed wish to be buried within 72 hours of death disorganized ardent followers who expected a prolonged period of mourning. After a high powered delegation of ministers and relatives flew to India to bring his remains back to Kenya, followers surprisingly disrupted carefully planned airport reception. Thereafter, the funeral committee kept adjusting the program to fit new exigencies.

The public, constituting Raila's primary political base, had a different opinion on how to receive Raila. Officially, Prime Cabinet Secretary Musalia Mudavadi was to present the remains to President William Ruto, start the process of going to Lee Funeral Home for a rest, and then to go to Parliament for a few hours of public viewing. Instead, as dignitaries sped out of the airport, officials announced that the body would skip Lee and Parliament and head straight to Kasarani for public viewing. After the police threw tear gas and bullets to the crowd, three mourners reportedly died at Kasarani. The body was in Parliament on Friday morning for MPs to view before it ceremoniously entered Nyayo Stadium for the official state funeral.

The events at Nyayo displayed rushed event planning and thus missed critical opportunity to show Raila as a national and international player. On the domestic front, by failing to

accommodate other present national leaders, the organisers made the funeral to look like a Ruto-ODM political affair rather than a national one. In addition, they short changed Raila's Pan-Africanist credentials by not letting one of the few African heads of state in attendance to speak on behalf of Africa. Former Tanzanian President Jakaya Kikwete was present and highly qualified to speak on Raila's Pan-Africanism. In addition to missing a good opportunity at Nyayo stadium to show case Raila's national and continental credentials, five mourners reportedly died due to crowd stampede.

Despite the programming short comings, however, there were, entertaining moments. The ACK bishop of Bondo Diocese, in stressing that Raila was honest, condemned corruption in high offices. The crowd showed its admiration for Embakasi East MP Babu Owino by chanting his name, 'Babu', repeatedly. And there was Uhuru Kenyatta, also a princeling, warning about the dangers of Kenya returning to the days of oppression and also joking of how he and Raila used to 'piga gumzo' while drinking after work 'uji'. He thus introduced a new terminology for after work 'drinks', similar to what military generals call 'coffee'. Saying he was not in a hurry to join Raila in the afterlife, Uhuru still expects Raila to receive and show him the heavenly streets and 'uji joints'; when his time comes.

Various funeral events touched on different aspects of Raila's political life and reveal him to have been a complicated multiple man. His failure to groom a successor to his leadership created room for power contests. Still, two youngish people appear to be staking claims. First, there is Babu Owino who appears to be popular with the youth, repeatedly chanting his name in tense situations, in part because he is one of them. He was at Parliament cooling the temperatures of the unhappy crowd that wanted to see Raila's body. His quip that 'Babu' would replace 'Baba' was a declaration of leadership interest. Second, there is Raila Odinga Jr, simply called 'Junior', who has deliberately adopted some of his father's public manners. He wears a Jaramogi beaded cap, carries a flywhisk, tries to gesture and sound like his father, and reminded people that he is his father's son. He led the crowd repeatedly to chant 'Ahsante Baba' as he promised to continue with his father's struggles.

Raila was a man of privilege, a lake region local princeling, with a lot of inherited and acquired wealth. More than being a princeling, he wanted to be his own political man, not just the son of Jaramogi, and he therefore developed different political attire including the head gear. Ambitious for power, he clothed that ambition in the language of reforms and promotion of 'freedom'. He seemingly was a disciple of Uganda's Milton Obote who had started as an executive prime minister in 1962 and ended up as an executive president in 1966. This two-step Obote political strategy probably informed Raila's frequent calls for constitutional/political reforms that would include powerful unelected prime ministers. It also explains the Moi-Raila alliance after 1998 and the Yash Pal Ghai CKRC debates at Bomas that led to the 2005 referendum.

Raila loved history, music, and sports which he used to side-step touch issues. At one time, Nyeri Governor Mutahi Kahiga advised him to stop talking history and address the concerns of the citizens. When in the 2022 political campaign he was asked to address pestering political problems that could be traced to the 2007 election tensions, he cleverly side stepped the issue by giving a prolonged historical survey of aspects of European colonialism in Africa. In doing so, he showed two things, that he knew some history and that he was not interested in addressing issues that could create political problems in his main political base. Besides showing he liked history, he also enjoyed singing and localizing Caribbean reggae and calypso music. He particularly liked political activist Harry Belafonte's 'Jamaica Farewell' in which the word 'Bondo-town' was made to replace 'Kingston-Town'. Deep down, therefore, Raila was a Bondo man.

As a self-respecting Bondo man, Raila loved sports as a way of relaxing, entertainment and socio-political bonding and networking. With his sporting addiction being football, he ardently supported two teams, one local and, one English. He even managed to make political capital by turning football commentator/entertainer in order to illustrate how his football team, with himself as 'centre-forward' or the 'striker', would defeat a rival political

team. He used to play for Luo Football Club before it became Gor Mahia Football Club of which he promoted with enthusiasm as the 'patron', and also for Bunge FC. He was in his best sports element especially when Gor Mahia aka *K'Ogalo* confronted the AFC Leopards in what was termed the 'mashemeji derby' during which time he and National Assembly Speaker Moses Wetangula, an AFC Leopard supporter, would be opposite each other.

The two political power houses, however, were on the same side when it came to the English Premier League. It appears, however, that Raila was more Arsenal than Wetangula, "Weta". Having declared, "I am an Arsene Wenger Arsenalian," Raila did not simply watch Arsenal play on television. He sometimes travelled to London wearing Arsenal regalia in order to attend the matches at the Emirates Stadium. Still, there were times when Raila and Wetangula were together watching Arsenal play through television and silence was the order throughout the match. "When Arsenal was playing," Wetangula commented, "Hon. Raila would not talk to anybody until the match was over. He will pay military attention to the game, and will count all the players up to the substitutes. Arsenal was in his blood." On its part, Arsenal made a point of 'mourning' Raila. The addiction to English football is among the remnants of English socio-mental presence in Kenya despite over six decades of independence.

Football was one of Raila's two addictions. The other addiction was politics and pursuit of political power during which time he could be tough on those who dared to differ with him. When in 1997 James Orengo and Peter Anyang Nyong'o supported Charity Ngilu's presidential bid rather than that of Raila, they lost their seats. The two regained their 'electability' only after they stopped appearing like challengers to Raila; they thereafter became strong Raila compliant men. In addition, Raila also had what seemed like a compliance enforcement instrument known as 'Men in Black'. They showed their efficiency when Ababu Namwamba and Isaac Mwaura appeared to deviate from a presumed ODM line at Kasarani. The 'Men in Black' disorganized the entire meeting and both men stopped being ODM officials.

Although Raila was politically daring, he always knew where to stop and cut deals. He reportedly stressed pragmatism over idealism and was as such willing to compromise in order to reach certain objectives. It did not matter who the compromise hurt. He had ability to rally other key players for a specific task after which he had no problem abandoning them. When in 2018 he decided to swear himself as a 'People's President', for instance, he reportedly made his coalition colleagues wait for phone calls in hotels. He was careful not to swear himself as 'President of the Republic of Kenya' and did it only as a 'people's president.' While he technically broke no law, he made political capital with his unusual daring act.

Raila craved for continental and international recognition as a statesman and received some, but not all. Officials from the Conceptual West highly praised him and appeared to support his bids for the presidency. They entrusted him with settling the dispute in Ivory Coast and he commanded the friendship of Nigeria's Olesegun Obasanjo, another man that the Conceptual West values. His bid to be chair of the AU Commission, however, flopped mainly because not all African leaders thought of him positively. Two reasons for other African leaders to distrust Raila were the impression that he was a front for the imperial West and also due to his reputation as a political rubble rouser. His rubble rousing reputation arose first from his reported role in Kenya's failed 1982 coup. Second were the events surrounding the 2007 disputed Kenyan election in which he seemed like the Commander-In-Chief of a military like outfit called the PENTAGON that dominated news about election tensions. Subsequently, such African leaders as Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe claimed that Raila had blood on his hands. When he showed up in Ivory Coast as an AU endorsed mediator, President Laurent Gbagbo rejected him.

While Raila had a checkered record on the African continent, he did command deep loyalty in Kenya across the country that occasionally bordered on cult fanaticism. To the followers, Raila could do no wrong. He had captivating powers that made people to pack their

common sense into home boxes and to behave like what Junet Mohammed called 'cows'. His followers accepted to behave like cows in whatever Raila wanted was at times surprising. Whatever direction Raila wanted ODM to go, declared Homa Bay Governor Gladys Wanga; that would be the direction for everyone. People of the lake, asserted Opiyo Wandai, were to remain in Ruto's camp because that was what Raila had wanted them to do. Although not all people in ODM subscribes to the 'Cow Doctrine', such as Babu Owino, most of the prominent ones, especially those perceived to be 'eating' in Ruto's broad based government, did.

With such obedient following, Raila did not mind admirers uplifting him above other humans. He never reprimanded Junet Mohammed for declaring that his followers had accepted to behave like cows in whatever Raila wanted. He, in the 2022 presidential campaign, seemed to enjoy the support of the Mount Kenya elite, including President Uhuru Kenyatta and several serving County governors. Mount Kenya Foundation mandarins for instance decide to treat him like royalty when they dressed him and his wife Ida as 'king and queen' of the mountain region. Although the election was his to win, however, he side developed complacency with Raila's big brother, Oburu Oginga, declaring that Raila had already won, before the actual voting, because he had the 'system.' The election was Raila's to win but he still lost due to policy and logistical weaknesses in his camp. Complacency, partly arising out of flattering admirers, had blinded those in Raila's camp and he thus lost what he should have won.

After the death of his father in 1994, therefore, Raila emerged as his own political man and came out of the shadow of Jaramogi. He ignored Jaramogi's beaded cap and adopted his own political *kofia.* He made himself indispensable and became a permanent feature in Kenyan elections and constitutional turns. He repeatedly lost elections only to end up in the government. He joined President Daniel arap Moi in trying to manage the Kenyan constitution to their mutual advantage only to fail mainly because of internal KANU rebellion. He captured public attention by quitting KANU to endorse Mwai Kibaki in 2002.

Differing with Kibaki over appointments, they played those differences at Bomas which led to the 2005 Referendum that birthed ODM party. The confrontation between Raila's ODM and Kibaki's PNU in 2007 produced the *nusu-mkate* government that gave Raila some powers, led to the politically nuanced ICC indictments, and enabled the 2010 Constitution.

Despite having a constitution that appeared friendly to his interests, Raila continued to have problems winning. He lost the 2013 election to Uhuru and Ruto, mainly because he was portrayed as an imperialist puppet after which Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni thanked Kenyan voters for rejecting imperialism. He again lost to Uhuru in 2017 and made Uhuru's time so difficult that Uhuru went out looking for him in 2018. He became Uhuru's 'brother' in maintaining a Raila approved 'peace'.

That 'peace', however, appeared to sacrifice two forces that merged to give Ruto victory in the 2022 election. First were Uhuru's core bases in the Mountain which had started complaining of neglect and mistreatment in Uhuru's first term. Second was the then Deputy President Ruto who capitalized on the unhappiness in the Mountain. When, with Uhuru's support Raila mounted his last presidential bid in 2022, therefore, the Mountain gave most of its votes to Ruto. Although Raila lost, his political antennae enabled him to penetrate deep into Ruto's government.

Despite losing, Raila found his way into the government in 2024 by helping Ruto in two political ways. First was to help ditch Deputy President Rigathi Gachagua and second was to diffuse the GenZ uprising. While the GenZs felt that Raila had betrayed them, Ruto was so happy that when Raila died in October 2025, he gratefully ordered a state funeral for his newly acquired domestic political ally. Ruto gave Raila an elaborate state funeral because, he said, Raila was "the People's President". He also added a post death CGH award to Raila which implied that Raila had been Ruto's co-president.

For three decades, Raila became Kenya's indispensable political man. He was addicted to both football and to politics and at times he skillfully used football to advance his political agenda. Having come out of his father's political shadow, in attire and approach to politics, he made himself 'needed' by those who had defeated him in elections. He did it in 2008, in 2018, and in 2023/4. In death, he still disrupted such expectations as funeral 'traditions' and protocols. As a political addict, he applied and practiced political expediency or pragmatism clothed in such idealism that he appeared to win. No other Kenyan politician has displayed such political agility and vitality in making himself indispensable. He was unique as man and politician.