

BOOK REVIEWS

Kiraitu Murungi. *In the Mud of Politics*. Nairobi. Acacia Stantex Publishers. 2000. xvii+208pp.

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In a newspaper article in August 2000, I dismissed Kiraitu Murungi, the author of the text under review, as one of the most nuisance politicians to appear recently in Kenya. Reading through this book, which is his autobiographical reflection on recent democratisation trends in Kenya, I notice just how hasty my dismissal was. The text is rich in detail about the internal dynamics of opposition politics in Kenya, details that could never be gleaned from the newspaper reports I used to pen the dismissal. However, there is no reason to recant my summary dismissal of Murungi and his recent politics. Rather, the text makes it clearer that opposition politics in particular and Kenyan politics in general has moved into greater morasses of nuisance and selective blame, a direction that makes the struggle to institute fairness, justice and reasoned dialogue at the national level more difficult.

In the Mud of Politics is divided into eight chapters plus a preface authored by Prof. Peter Anyang Nyong'o. The book tackles the problems of Kenyan politics as seen by Kiraitu Murungi. Given that Murungi has been an able, active and formidable participant in the democratic struggles in Kenya, the text is written from an informed perspective and speaks to many of the problems Kenyans experienced and continue to experience. This review interpretes Murungi's perspective as stemming from political society, albeit an opposition one. It recognises differences within political society; those in and those out of government and the nature of their struggles for power. It also recognises the differences between the political society in general and civil society. By adopting this interpretation, the review raises the questions of how these various realms operate, speak to and against each other in their struggle to connect with and win the support of a wider public that bears diverse ethnic, religious, racial, and, more importantly, political orientations and persuasions.

The orientations and persuasions of the wider public are crucial to the politics of democratic transition in Kenya and need to be used to critique the process and participants in the struggles. Ultimately, it is this public that installs members of the political society in power. They therefore form a crucial reference point for understanding the trials, travails and tribulations of democratisation in Kenya. The notion of the 'politics of selective blame' is deployed to identify one reason why the Kenyan democratisation process stalled as the opposing groups and factions degenerated into reactive rather than proactive politics. The story Kiraitu Murungi tells approvingly speaks to such a politics of selective blame, this being a politics of vilification and unbridled regime demonisation, a politics of a particular instance in the changing global geopolitics that criminalises one regime or practice and vindicates the other. This politics is particularly biased and discriminatory. It expediently employs selected factors to push for the democratic agenda in Kenya, thereby driving invidious wedges between people and groups.¹

Murungi sets out his study with a one-chapter background of how he became involved in Kenyan politics. In very broad strokes, he jumps from Meru North where he was born in the heat of the colonial state of emergency and repression of Mau Mau to the authoritarian politics of the Moi regime. Though he inadequately tries to make up in very few concluding pages (see pages 196-198), the unexplored gloss here is the connection between colonial autocracy, presidential authoritarianism in the Kenyatta era and worse forms of repression under the Moi regime. The authoritarianism of the Moi regime did not drop like manna from heaven, rather it was carefully created and nurtured through the post-independence construction of Kenyatta's presidential authoritarianism. This gloss is both telling and politically expedient. It is also a common strategy of writing among some recent analysts of the democratisation process in Kenya² Many of these analysts are closely associated with the battery of non-government organisations working to reform the state and achieve a society that respects human rights, allows for freedom of speech, press and movement. The contradiction lies in the need to achieve democracy, fairness and justice based on an intellectual and political tradition of selective blame.

Having glossed over a whole history of presidential authoritarianism before 1978, Murungi details in chapter two how arbitrary detentions and torture under Moi led him into self-imposed exile in the USA. This is followed with his involvement in the struggle for political pluralism and entry into parliament in chapters three to five. These chapters engage his experience as the Member of Parliament for South Imenti, the struggle for constitutional reform in 1997 and work as a parliamentarian. Murungi states his position as a fighter against rural poverty and the rights of the rural folk in Imenti through a critical review of the agricultural and human rights policies that have worked to further entrench poverty and maintain conditions inimical to the total human development of Kenyans.

In part II of the text, the author revisits the question of human rights arguing that it involves a total focus on the economic and social being of citizens. His focus is on the grassroots, seen largely as rural Kenya, a grassroots constituted largely by peasants, a nebulous category that Murungi fails adequately to characterise. With a specific focus on agricultural policy, the author articulates the plight of rural people in relation to state policies on coffee and tea marketing. The analysis of the plight of farmers is closely related to the question of participation in decision-making, freedom of expression and participation in electing their leaders at various levels. Again, Murungi is keen to blame colonial policies for initiating such unresponsive policies and the Moi regime for perpetuating them. In chapter seven, Murungi discusses his views on the contentious issues of ethnicity and multi-party politics; land and ethnicity; on lawyers and politics, political defections in Kenya's politics of pluralism and the role of women in Kenyan politics. This is a highly opinionated chapter and likely to provoke some reasoned debate with the author.

Certainly, Murungi has a right to dismiss ethnic clashes as 'artificial creations' by a few self-centred politicians (p. 161), but this does not address the instances of historical injustice and poor social relations among communities living in the areas where such clashes were engineered and evidenced. And though Murungi discusses ethnicity in relation to the land question (pp. 166-70), a more candid interpretation must analyse the way communities in Rift Valley and related areas co-exist. This will establish other sources of conflict apart from the economic one that Murungi succinctly describes. As David Ndii has correctly cautioned, pinpointing specific politicians as the inciters of ethnic violence 'does not explain why, in the absence of a perceived historical injustice for the politicians to exploit, the hordes of young men who perpetrate these heinous crimes are so readily gullible to every other opportunistic politician's ploys'.³

Generally, the text is refreshingly frank and candid on many issues. Murungi's focus on agriculture clearly bears out his contribution as a fighter for the thousands of Kenyans who have bore the brunt of bad politics, mismanagement and authoritarianism under the Moi regime. Murungi articulates his arguments against Kenyan politics designed around *harambees*, dismissing this approach as promoting a culture of dependency and handouts. He shows how parliamentarians have become crudely involved in this culture, parading as democrats while remaining crude power brokers, political entrepreneurs and turncoats who believe in nothing but their personal egos. For Murungi, hard work and just returns are prerequisites if rural constituencies are to be developed. He argues that development should be a holistic initiative from bottom-up, not top-to-bottom. Murungi derides parliament as a 'house of shame' where rubber-stamping is rampant because the ruling party remains in control. He reproduces sections of his contributions in parliament on various issues in pages 97-128. He dismisses both fellow politicians and political parties as inept, mediocre and visionless in his conclusion. Murungi maintains that the nature of the work of a parliamentarian does not allow him to remain steadfast as a critique of government. Overall, Murungi paints a pessimistic picture of Kenyan politics which raises a question of what options Kenyans have.

Murungi gives scant attention to the challenges and failures of the democratisation process in Kenya as stemming from a combination of causes within and beyond the Moi/KANU government. Where he does, these factors are hardly explored in detail. Most of the text blames the stalled democratic initiatives on KANU's intransigence and Moi's authoritarianism. However, one would wish broadly to include the inherent unfairness, inequality and inequity of the global system, internal ethno-regional socio-economic differences, the obstinacy of the sitting KANU government, plus the dishonesty, greed and lack of vision and strategy in the opposition as an alternative government. Murungi is more interested in blaming KANU for all the democratic ills, economic problems and social upheavals bedeviling Kenya. This marks out his perspective as stemming from an opposition political society that has adopted a political and intellectual strategy of 'selective blame' to unseat the Moi regime. Clearly, this strategy has not worked over the years. This raises questions about the appeal opposition political society commands among the wider voting public.

What crops up when Murungi's perspective is identified with selective blame is the opposition's fixation on raw power, a fixation recently articulated by Murungi through the GEMA ethnic caucus, a grouping of ethnic bossmen/women from the related Kikuyu, Embu and Meru ethnic communities. Those involved believe that the only way to halt the problems afflicting Kenya is to get rid of Moi. Indeed, such fixation on raw power led opposition politicians to degenerate into 'Moi Must Go' sloganeering. Backed by no concrete strategy for power takeover, this sloganeering has convinced Murungi and others of the need to form ethnic forums and use ethnicity to get rid of Moi from power. Recently Murungi articulated this ridiculous thinking in both electronic and print media, the same ethnic canvassing that opposition politicians continually accuse Moi/KANU of adopting.

It must be remembered that political society depends for its success in assuming power on marshalling the support of the generality of citizens to whom they articulate an alternative and better program of human betterment than the incumbent. However, due to the abnormal fixation on raw power and sloganeering, all opposition groups in Kenya have not produced any better democratic and developmental program than the sitting KANU government. For a while, during the early multi-party days in 1990, the opposition groups rode on the wave of public hate for

KANU. They squandered their chances by reproducing within their microcosms divisive and overtly undemocratic tendencies. Such tendencies have not marked them out as any different from the KANU government. Indeed, though the opposition parties have benefitted from the positive presence of articulate and better minded politicians like Peter Anyang Nyong'o and Katama Mwangi, others still hang onto the illusory thinking that the hate Kenyans nurture against KANU must remain the only reason for a power transfer in their favour. The nuisance of such thinking is that gone are the days when something became bad simply because it was owned, aligned or associated with KANU or Moi. The days of 'Moi Must Go' sloganeering are over and every party must distinguish itself through its vision, national agenda and pragmatic strategy for national betterment. Ironically, as is evident in this book, Murungi does not even attempt to put his vision for Imenti in the context of the national policies of his sponsoring party.

Nowhere is the assumption that KANU is bad and the opposition good better illustrated than in Murungi's discussion of political defections in chapter seven. Apart from erroneously assuming that defections only occur from the opposition to KANU, the author also suggests that these occur only after inducement by KANU. Murungi derides those who defect as weak and unprincipled politicians who, for one reason or another, are easily swayed by such inducement because 'they were committed to themselves, and their personal advancement' (p. 179). While many of the defections in Kenya are clearly motivated by personal gains and inducements, there are certainly many exceptions. For instance, the changing nature of Raila Odinga's politics does not cohere to the conjectural pattern of inducement Murungi pens. A contributory factor to political defection in Kenya is the nature of opposition politics that rotates around sloganeering, the big man who bank rolls the party and ethnicity. The ethnic card was better illustrated by the 1997 Ngilu wave. It entailed a strategy of fielding ethnic bossmen/women in every province to deter Moi from gaining the mandatory 25% of the votes in at least five provinces. Apparently, there was a perceived calculation to catapult Mwai Kibaki into a run-off with Moi, a calculation that hinged on the demographic strength of Kibaki's ethnicity, the Kikuyu. Other than hoping to get rid of Moi, this calculation lacked any other legitimate vision for the betterment of Kenya. Thus, even if Raila Odinga defected for personal gain, numerous other precipitating factors can be observed.

Further, it ought to be pointed out that the political opposition in Kenya today is a product of defections from KANU. Even if there are numerous well-meaning politicians within the contemporary opposition, it is also true that many like Mwai Kibaki are relics of KANU in the opposition diaspora. Some of them have reproduced within the opposition tendencies that they carried from KANU. Apart from Odinga's National Development Party, for instance, all the other opposition parties have been unwilling to hold internal elections for their top offices periodically and remain extremely intolerant of internal debate and dissent. Further, the same parties have treated with alacrity attempts by some politicians to defect from KANU. In so doing, these parties have demonstrated a willingness to overlook the corruption records of potential defectors. Thus, some allegedly corrupt politicians like Cyrus Jirongo have been openly welcomed into the opposition fold while allegedly corrupt opposition politicians like Paul Muite continue to occupy important positions without recourse to the same rules applied to admonish the sitting government. Consequently, the main problem for the voting Kenyan public is that this very political opposition continues to accuse the sitting government of corruption without distinguishing itself as a viable and credible alternative worth their trust.

That the political opposition in Kenya hopes to unseat a regime associated with numerous ills

against the wider society is beyond doubt. But so far, they have been unable to effectively connect with the wider public whose vote they need to unseat KANU's monopoly of power. To connect with the wider voting public, a strategy of convincing Kenyans to vote out KANU needs to be adopted and it must transcend the kind of selective blame dotted in the text under review. This alternative needs more rigorous attention than can be seen in this text. It must not only promise a better future, it must also identify the possible means of attaining this future. The challenge is evidently enormous, but anything other than a hypocritical mandate is a welcome start. The current opposition has been unable to produce such a winning strategy. It has allowed itself to become a reactive rather than proactive alternative. Murungi's text illustrates clearly the nature of opposition politics in Kenya whose basic principle is unbridled regime demonisation and a narrow focus on raw power. With these as the baseline focus of political opposition, the wider voting public does not feature in the immediate vision of this political society. For Murungi, the focus is Imenti South while for the various parties, including KANU, it is their respective ethno-regional bases. What is needed is a wider cross-ethnic appeal for the opposition through a well-articulated program of reform. As things stand now, Murungi's autobiography will remain a litany of complaints against KANU. Since KANU has a penchant for thoroughly letting Kenyans down, this autobiography will in the future contain encyclopedic data on the pitfalls of a KANU government. It does not have prospects for a chapter on an opposition government. Finally, a methodological point. If Murungi can afford to extensively read and quote texts he used in writing this book, he must certainly include endnotes and page numbers. This is basic enough and the editors should have insisted on proper footnotes and a bibliography. Footnotes and bibliographies are not a preserve of academics.

Notes

1. See Godwin R. Murunga, 'Globalization and the Politics of Selective Blame in Kenya, 1963-1990'. Paper Presented during the International Conference on Mainstreaming Democratic Governance in the Social Sciences, Humanities and Universities for the 21st Century between 29th September to 1st October 1999 organised by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences of the University of Dar es Salaam..
2. See for instance, Willy Mutunga, *Constitution-Making from the Middle: Civil Society and Transition Politics in Kenya, 1992-1997.*, Nairobi and Harare: Sareat and Mwengo, 1999).
3. See *Sunday Nation*, July 23 1995, p. 7.