

Political Campaigns in the Era of Pandemics: William Ruto and Franklin Roosevelt Compared

Introduction

S ometime in January 1930, President Herbert Hoover found himself in an unfamiliar position: he was about to lose his job. He realised this in the middle of desperate times – the Great Depression (Schlesinger 1957). The New York Stock Exchange bubble had burst violently on 24 October 1929, a day that came to be known as Black Thursday (Allen 1934). The stock market would eventually fall almost 90 per cent from its 1929 peak. The crash wiped out nominal wealth, both corporate and private, sending the US economy into a tailspin. Ripples from the crash spread across the Atlantic Ocean to Europe triggering wider financial crises. In 1931, the economic calamity hit all continents with full force (Fisher 1934).

When it reached Kenya, it caused a sudden fall in the value of commodities. Within ten hours after the collapse on Wall Street the price of export articles such as hides, skins and ghee products fell overnight in Karachuonyo, at the southern tip of Kenya (Lonsdale 1977). It has been said that ‘when the U.S. sneezes, the global economy has a cold, and ... some countries get pneumonia’ (Collins 2020). Confirming this credo, Kenya’s economy plunged

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into a depression. Settlers moved from the highlands, where farming was becoming less profitable, to Sotik, Kehancha and Kamagambo to prospect for gold (Ndege 1987). In Bungoma, desperate cultivators would exhibit a recalcitrance towards soil conservation measures as a result of the influence of anticolonial sentiments propagated by *Dini Ya Musambwa*, thus worsening the effects of the depression (Stichter 1984).

While paying attention to the most recent political, economic and ecological crises Kenya has been facing, we are reminded of past personalities who used crisis as a springboard for their political success. One is Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR), and the crisis was the Great Depression, which had only deepened during Hoover’s presidency (Chapa 1934). Unemployment had increased from 1.6 million to 14 million. Wages in many industries had fallen far below the poverty level. Crops

rotted in the ground while people starved (Ibid.).

Hoover’s election campaign and speeches increased his unpopularity. People did not believe him when he claimed, ‘Prosperity is just around the corner’. He offered no new policies, which made him seem heartless. One protester’s banner summed up public opinion: ‘In Hoover we trusted and now we are busted’. Another commentator said, ‘If you put a rose in Hoover’s hand it would wilt’. Hoover certainly had none of the warmth and charm of his presidential opponent, Franklin Roosevelt, who took advantage of the American crisis and campaigned on the failures of the Hoover Administration. He promised economic recovery with a ‘New Deal’ for the American people (Gallup 1972), which was a series of programmes that would support farmers, the unemployed, youth and the elderly during the crisis (Ibid.). He promised to uplift ‘the forgotten man at the bottom of the pyramid’ via legislative initiatives as part of the New Deal (Recchiuti n.d.). His message was well received by hard-hit and fed-up Americans. FDR defeated Herbert Hoover and went on to be elected president for a record four terms (Ibid.). Thus, he was able to successfully lead the nation through some of the most difficult and unstable circumstances in years.

Like Herbert Hoover, President Uhuru Kenyatta found himself locked in the overpowering grip of legal tyranny and party mutiny. Tamed by the judiciary and frustrated by his frenzied and overly ambitious deputy, his power diminished. In the COVID-19 era, like the American era of Depression, Kenya slid into a surprising, erratic phase marked by foreboding and fear caused by the economic slump. These combined factors had a disastrous effect on Kenyatta's already shaky administration.

And like Roosevelt, William Ruto knowingly or unknowingly took advantage of the COVID-19 crisis and economic despondency. He used it as political capital to launch a campaign credo that went down well with most ordinary people who found themselves mired in the depressed economy. Like Roosevelt, Ruto promised a deal and the hope that it would emancipate the likes of *mama mboga* (female hawkers) from the future effects of these pangs. Thus, the crisis was a springboard for Ruto's political success.

Politics and COVID-19

The imposition of lockdowns globally, designed to restrict movement and slow down the spread of the virus, affected jobs and livelihoods, especially for the poor. The measures also created opportunities for authoritarian regimes to contain people's ability to engage in civic and political processes, such as elections, and limit the space for political discontent. It was not just the election campaign period that was affected, prohibitions on public gatherings impacted on voter education efforts and wider demands for greater transparency and accountability in how governments operate. This is not

to say that the measures to limit the spread of the deadly disease did not protect voters and candidates alike from the virus during elections, but they had to be balanced carefully with commitments to a fair and equitable process. Chidi Anselm Odinkalu, Professor of International Human Rights Law at the Fletcher School, contends that:

The combination of a pandemic and emergencies is lethal to both campaigning and competitive politics. Pandemic memories are jarringly malleable political weapons for the public memory of the COVID-19 pandemic ... why does the pandemic have to be so political? The answer is that politics always permeates public health. What we need to brace for now is the politics of historical memory. How will the first three years of the pandemic be remembered? How will they be forgotten? (Odinkalu 2021)

William Ruto struck a chord that many Kenyans wanted to hear, campaigning on freedom, resiliency and, above all, normalcy. Many Kenyans were marked by the collective trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic of the previous three years, and so both sides of the political aisle campaigned under the banner of freedom from the vagaries of COVID-19. The campaign promises resonated with everyone but, like Roosevelt's victory in 1929, the deeper battle of the 2022 election cycle was over pandemic memory.

Emancipating Ideologies: A 'New Deal' and the 'Hustler's State'

The New Deal was an ideological effort by Roosevelt to respond to the calamity of the Great Depression and alleviate the despair besetting Americans. In his campaign, he said, 'I pledge you, I pledge myself, to a new deal for the American people'. He described it as a 'use

of the authority of government as an organised form of self-help for all classes and groups and sections of our country ...'. As president, he launched scores of new programmes to respond to a wide range of problems facing the US: stabilising the banks and stimulating the economy; creating jobs and raising wages; investing in public works; modernising lagging regions; and giving ordinary Americans a new sense of security and hope.

Similarly, William Ruto used his rhetoric to champion the revival of a post-COVID economy where ordinary people would have a voice. Ruto must have heeded E. P. Thompson's call in the preface of *The Making of the English Working Class* ([1963] 1980: 958) – 'I am seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the obsolete hand-loom weaver, the "utopian" artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity' – when he claimed in his campaign that he would change 'the Conversation' to be about 'the hustlers – the ordinary people'. In historians' terms, the history of the ordinary people is 'history from below'. Trevelyan defined it as 'the history of the people with the politics left out' (Trevelyan 1942: vii). Samuel (1985) notes that 'history prides itself on being concerned with "real life" rather than abstractions, with "ordinary" people rather than privileged elites, with everyday things rather than sensational events'. Martin Luther King called the 'ordinary people' 'those that have been left out of the sunlight of opportunity' (Ayres 1993).

'Subaltern', like 'hustler', denotes a person of inferior rank and is a term used in postcolonial studies to refer to those who lack agency

in society and have limited access to social power – the marginalised, the lower working classes, the poor, the exploited, the minority, the neglected and the voiceless. Guha (1997: 16, 19) and Chakrabarty (1989) locate peasant identity and consciousness within the conditions of rural India in terms of the relationship of the peasantry to dominant economic and political groups. The biblical Jesus was a penniless preacher, a son of a carpenter, a Galilean peasant, who would today be considered a ‘hustler’. He sought tirelessly to end poverty, to feed and house the needy and to heal those in need, and he attempted to lead a peasant revolt. Though he refrained from armed, political opposition to Roman authority, he was indeed a revolutionary in another sense. He proclaimed that the Kingdom of God belonged to the poor, the oppressed and those who laboured hard. He said repeatedly that he had come ... to proclaim good news to the poor ... proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind ... to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour. Such a credo demonstrates that Jesus saw the world in terms of class struggle. In the end, Jesus was crucified and a ‘thief’ was preferred.

In a nation that was struggling to respond to the bitter challenges of depression, political instability and the COVID pandemic, and in a society marred by deepening divisions between rich and poor, most Kenyans in 2022 were in a state of despondency, apathy, helplessness and confusion. Anyone who could take advantage of this context to offer promising hopes and ideas, such as the triumph of the poor in the class struggle, would be highly likely to draw a mass following. The crisis,

therefore, was a *deus ex machina* for William Ruto. He campaigned under the rhetorical glint of freedom, upheld by his version of the history of the pandemic. He, too, had his own struggles stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic fear was such that whereas other political elites were vaccinated with conventional vaccines, William Ruto received a Russian jab.

The president whose name rhymes with the first half of Roosevelt had an equally remarkable opportunity thrown his way by COVID-19 and its economic repercussions. Ultimately, like Roosevelt, he was able to leverage the rampant economic difficulties and weave an emancipatory narrative convincing enough to steal the thunder from his boss, Uhuru Kenyatta.

Conclusion

Although the eras and contexts in which William Ruto and Franklin D. Roosevelt became leaders are vastly different, their leadership styles during times of crisis exhibit striking resemblances. Both leaders demonstrated empathy, effective communication and decisiveness. They implemented wide-ranging policies to address the immediate needs of their populations and recognised the importance of economic stimulation and international collaboration. However, it is crucial to acknowledge the unique challenges and circumstances each leader faced, which influenced their responses.

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