
Inequality and the Moral Crisis of the Elite*

WILLY MUNYOKI
MUTUNGA

ABSTRACT *The quality of a country's elite determines the quality of its governance and the level and character of its development. This preface article claims that the crisis facing Kenya, as well as many other African countries, in the governance and development agenda is the crisis of the elite, and its rather grotesque inversion of values.*

KEYWORDS *Kenya; governance; education; political economy; democracy*

The quality of a country's elite determines the quality of its governance and the level and character of its development. An elite whose philosophy is embedded in a materialistic arms race, driven by predominant Darwinian notions, and in total disregard of any moral sentiments, tends to create societies that are socially fragmented and politically unstable. The pursuit of inclusivity and equality is an important maker in the creation of successful and sustainable democratic states.

In this context, education is the greatest equalizer. It is the one instrument that rudely but happily interrupts the inter-generational transmission of poverty and inequality traps, and contributes to the dismantling of inherited class barriers. At the same time, the gift of giving, the duty of serving – living for a cause larger than self – are the true markers of achievement. Instructively, talent without ethics, skill without values and knowledge without conscience are the greatest curses that can ever befall an individual, society or a nation. Just as natural resources have wrought immense suffering to undemocratic societies, so have natural talents to unconscionable individuals and communities. The beginning of the true wealth of nations is in the quality of its thought and the elite are important carriers and purveyors.

The crisis facing Kenya, as well as many other African countries, in the governance and development agenda is the crisis of the elite, and the rather grotesque inversion of values: where truth is subverted, relative and even identity-driven; evidence is gutted at the slightest hint of inconvenience (observer have lately called this operating in an evidence-free zone); heroes and heroines become villains, with those who do right made to play defence rather than offence; and spies command a disproportionate voice and space.

An elite or a society that rises to its feet to applaud the disregard or dishonour of an agreement and praises it as strategy, instead of condemning it as betrayal, is both sick and bankrupt. This means there is an over-supply of the elite, and an undersupply of values, ethics or conscience. Whereas monetized measurements put 45 percent of

Kenyans below the poverty line, I would guess that ethical instruments would have well over 90 percent of Kenyans living below the poverty line of values, our renowned yet evidently suspect claim to religious piety as a nation notwithstanding. Our elite suffers from an anaemic inversion of values – constantly deploying their enormous talent, skill and knowledge to aid and abet national regression projects.

Our educational system continues to produce the country's political, economic, judicial, administrative elite, Kenya's figurative 'talented tenth'. This is the elite that runs the country and therefore must take responsibility for its not-too-impressive development and governance outlook that we see 50 years after independence. The quality of our development and governance, as with all other countries all over the world, is a direct reflection of the quality of our elite. Tribalism, corruption, underdevelopment – the main scourges that afflict our country, all products of institutional dysfunctionality – are not a creation of the masses. They are the political, economic and social toys invented by the elite for self-promotion and private gain. An unholy alliance between the two occasionally exists, but the architects, perpetrators and beneficiaries-in-chief are the elites.

If Karl Marx was alive today he would revisit his great observation that religion is the opium of the people that, indeed, drugs them, and perhaps relate this to Kenya. If he did so, he would, in my view, add ethnicity, race, class, clan, occupation, region, gender and generation as modern-day potent opium, crack and cocaine. They not only drug us, they divide us. They are collectively our national deadly virus that continues to eat the body and soul of our country. It is time we ask ourselves as members of the elite what role we continue to play in killing our Motherland.

We have an elite that 'speaks in tongues' – civil in the *formal* civic space, but quite native in motive, values, ambition and operation. An elite that is as vernacular as the next opportunity permits, but one that cloaks its irredeemable attraction to the 'natal centre' in sophisticated gadgetry and technology talk. Elitism that is ephemerally modern but innately nativist. In times of crisis, and in times of opportunity, when

principle is on trial or when opportunism is on offer, this elite always gravitates to the womb. You cannot build a modern, democratic society if this elite has not risen to its historical mission and realized that society's transformation is usually led by, figuratively speaking, a talented tenth – the elite. Thinking about our situation today, the immortal words of William Butler Yeats in the poem *The Second Coming* come to mind: 'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold ... the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity'.

We always argue that it is the masses that choose tribal and corrupt leaders. However, how can they choose differently when that is the only choice they are given? I see it in the judiciary where the ethnic leadership of a public or private institution is becoming a fairly accurate predictor of the ethnic identity of the lawyer who will be on record prosecuting the case. In most cases, these two would have attended some national school, and I am sure those were not the values that they were taught. Isn't it depressing? Shouldn't we be embarrassed? Aren't we naïve to expect our nation to progress when its leaders, the academic, economic, legal, business and political elite of this country, cannot trust anyone outside their tribes in the most sensitive of cases?

Peter Ekeh (1975), a Nigerian professor of Political Science, has described the problem as one of a crisis of two publics. The first public is that of family, clan and tribe; the second, the rest. We set different standards for different publics. Looking at the problem of corruption, how do we as the elite react? If it is someone from the first public, we look for all sorts of reasons why they should be excused. If it is the rest of the public, we rightly call upon them to carry their own crosses. Principle is variable and malleable, depending on the ethnic identity of the culprit. Identity has become the new penal code on the basis of which guilt and innocence is determined and pronounced.

I know most think this is only a vice in the public sector; it is not. The private sector is even worse in terms of employment, promotion and award of bonuses. Ethnic favouritism is rampant, ethnic concentration in recruitment prevalent, and we must own up and style up.

Development 57(3–4): Upfront

These inverted values play out even more when we look at how we treat whistleblowers in this country. David Sadera Munyakei, who exposed the country's largest corruption scandal, died destitute in 2006, after being fired from Central Bank of Kenya and remaining largely unemployed afterwards. Another whistleblower was hounded and subjected to investigations for buying cheaper cars. Yet another was exiled from both country and community for daring to raise corruption issues. Many in the private sector have been fired or denied promotion and bonuses for doing the right thing. Very close to home, we have seen a maddening rush to seek ethnic refuge whenever a corruption matter is raised. We cannot allow a country to have corruption as the fourth arm of government (society) – the most powerful and the one that controls all the other arms. The corrosive effects of corruption on democratic institutions and a country's development become even more vile and pronounced when they intersect with ethnicity.

The Constitution of 2010 created many institutions that are now fighting for space in the public sphere. The Salaries and Remuneration Commission has sparred with both the National Assembly and the County Assemblies; Parliament has fought itself and reportedly continues to do so with Senators and Members of the National Assembly openly differing on the importance of the two Houses. The judiciary has also not been spared and has seen its independence threatened by many forces.

All these institutional contestations may be a necessarily messy part of our democratic evolution as institutions attempt to establish the right constitutional equilibrium in their relationships under the new constitutional order. However, these contests must take place within and under the law, for we are a country that professes the rule of law. No institution, no individual and no agency is above the law, and as Montesquieu, the French philosopher, memorably proclaimed several centuries ago, 'Be ye ever so high, the law is above you'. We must choose whether we want to be a country governed by the rule of law as written in text and as pronounced by courts, or rule by man and might as is exercised by men. The former is what

342 I see in the Constitution, 2010 and in Vision 2030.

The elite must speak out when the rule of law is threatened and must not let ethnicity or private gain colour its principles, professional calling or values. Principles and values, on issues so central and so clear regarding humanity's historical advancement, have no vernacular editions. The judiciary learnt in 1988 that even after so many years of cultivating those in power, the gift was the removal of the tenure of judges and the Attorney General. The ethnic identity of those judges did not matter. And neither did their business relationships. So principle pays; the absence of it is costly to all.

What has the elite done? Those in the public sector have either shied away from the discussion or gone back to the two publics for answers. Others have dodged the public interest and policy questions and chosen to create private solutions for public problems. When the health sector fails, we go to private hospitals; when public education systems fail, our children attend private schools and universities. Remember always the engraving on the Assembly Hall door: To those to whom much is given, much will be required.??

The forces of social evil and inequality today are so strong that we need an equally strong voice in the opposite direction. That is what the masses need – a constant dissenting but progressive voice, a clarion call for greater social change and transformation. We need to join forces for good. This is why the focus of alumni organizations and other corporative interest groups must change. We must start banding together for public social change, not only for private endeavours such as exchanging business contacts. In recognizing this need, Edmund Burke wrote the following words:

'No man, who is not inflamed by vain-glory into enthusiasm, can flatter himself that his single, unsupported, desultory, unsystematic endeavours are of power to defeat the subtle designs and united cabals of ambitious citizens. When bad men combine, the good must associate; else they will fall, one by one, an unpitied sacrifice in a contemptible struggle'. (Burke, 1999)

Beyond attending sumptuous dinners and other official gatherings, it is time for the elite to raise its voice above the din and speak up against the

culture of crises that we have all become so accustomed to. Eliminate the poverty of ambition and values. Reframe the definition of achievement beyond self and personal to concern about your constituency, your country, your country's achievement. The 'talented tenth' should not offer ornaments for ethnic display and admiration in

exchange for ethnic legitimacy and ethnic patronage. Those in the talented tenth are not expected to navel gaze in self-satisfaction, but must see themselves as the instrument and force of good for social transformation. Reverse the inversion of elite values as a precondition for society's and personal development.

References

- Burke, Edmund (1999) 'Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents 82–83 (1770)', in Edward John Payne (ed.) *Select Works of Edmund Burke. Thoughts on the cause of the present discontents. The two speeches on America.* volume 1, 146. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.
- Ekeh, Peter P. (1975) 'Colonialism and the Two Publics in Africa: A theoretical statement', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 17(1): 91–112, New York: Cambridge University Press, <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0010-4175%28197501%2917%3A1%3C91%3ACATTPI%3E2.0.CO%3B2-%23>, accessed 23 September 2015.

*This preface is adapted from the remarks delivered by the Chief Justice at the Old Starehean Society Annual Dinner on 30 November 2013.