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Governance and Transition Politics in Kenya

A review of the book edited by Peter Wanyande, Mary Omosa, Ludeki Chweya
Nairobi, University of Nairobi Press, 2007

Speaking freely about politics in Kenya is no longer the gamble that it was in the recent 1990s, where the slightest public deviance within the civil society could have disastrous consequences for those that held such contentious or 'dissident' views. Although the current situation cannot be termed as totally open, it should be noted that there exists a real spread of freedom of expression in the media, among the blossoming non-governmental organisations (on human rights, conflict management, risk control etc), as much as in academic circles. In the latter, lecturers/researchers, be they in Kenya or abroad, no longer hesitate to offer strong, hard-hitting views on the political situation. This has been going on for several years now. *Governance and Transition Politics in Kenya* belongs to the body of published works whose resolute and well-argued views provides a framework for critical examination of the political regime, despite the self-same regime being the one that made this freedom possible. It just goes to show that the desire for democracy within civil society can only go unresolved in view of the mimicry which is often denied by the highest level of the state organs.

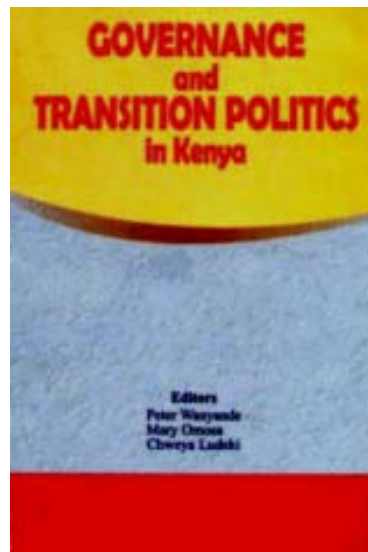
This book aims at explaining why the smooth transition from the Moi era—who only accepted multipartyism and pluralist elections under the combined pressure of an angered society and incensed donors—to the Kibaki

regime delayed in delivering the promised results. It refers to a "delayed, frustrated, indirect" transition and an almost complete failure. Admittedly, in reading Peter Anyang' Nyong'o's interpretations in the introductory pages, one could ask if drawing such conclusions for so short a period is not going too far. Nevertheless, the arguments given by

the different contributors have the merit of a constant to and fro between the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods, thus giving a historical context. This is possible due to the abundant and critical historiography available on Kenya.

The reasons for the expectations of the most informed electorate and observers were numerous and corresponded to promises brandished by Mwai Kibaki—eradication of poverty, formalization of economic liberalization (notably by creating thousands of jobs) and the delivery of a new Constitution. On these three points, the authors of this publication deem the government a failure.

In the first place, far from eliminating corruption in the public service, inherited from a long post-colonial tradition, the same corruption led to the downfall of the National Rainbow Coalition, NARC. Secondly, governmental practices in post-colonial Kenya (Kenyatta, Moi and Kibaki regimes combined) reveal a capitalist ideology disguised as African socialism (G.R. Njeru and



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J.M. Njoka, 'Political Ideology in Kenya'). The dominant rhetoric of these two authors demands an admission that a minority of the population developed accumulation conditions through exploitation and pauperization of the majority. Based on this, the two writers affirm that the *Nyayoism* of the Moi era was no more than a project of "political manipulation" through a psychological conditioning of a mostly illiterate and gullible population. The *nyayo* philosophy made them believe that they had to endure the innate suffering of the modernization process. It is mainly under Moi that the political classes considerably enriched themselves. There was fierce in-fighting for allocation of resources. This led to huge regional disparities by dint of the 'grabbing' capability of the local administration.

Thirdly, the project of getting a new Constitution failed. Surprisingly, though, the book has no article specifically covering the development of the constitution review process. It is however possible to understand this choice, as the subject of the book is to mainly delve into the reasons for the government's failure to act. These reasons are numerous and easily identifiable. Borrowing an expression from Njeru and Njoka, there is a lot of KANU blood in the veins of NARC. This creates the problem of non-renewal of the élite and of the subsequent ossification. From the very beginning, some promises seemed unrealistic (how, for example, could 500 000 jobs be created at a time when international donors and financial institutions recommended restructuring as well as a freezing of salaries and expenditure in the public service?) More generally, the short-circuiting of political parties, improbable alliances between leaders

and previously antagonistic political parties, and the casual manner in which partisan systems are used by their directors (these practices have been analysed by Karuti Kanyinga in 'Political Change in Kenya') clearly show to what extent the system appeared to be eroded from within by routine habits. It is indeed possible to analyse these confused movements relying on the example of the coalition, as Peter Wanyande does in his paper 'The Politics of Coalition Government'. However, this latter reveals that NARC, the obvious symbol of the desire for a coalition, was nothing more than a conglomeration of already existing fragile coalitions. In a context where citizens have indicated a great need to regain faith in their institutions after the Moi era—marked by the subservience of an enslaved justice system, the rot in the public services as a result of corruption, police brutality among others—NARC appears to be a web too complex to be efficient.

On a more positive note, the book retains other trains of thought that are very interesting and which show that research in political sociology in Kenya is particularly stimulating and enterprising. These include the question of the participation of women in politics, which is broached by Winnie Mitullah and Lilian Owiti through statistics; the issue of minorities (women, the handicapped, youth, religious, linguistic and ethnic minorities) is discussed by Adams Oloo, who introduces positive discrimination into the debate; the media question is examined by Polycarp Ochillo and Peter Wanyande, where the authors evoke the increase and independence of sources of information as well as the increase of journalistic training, an indispensable prelude to the creation of an independent body.

One can only regret some theoretical positions taken (or their absence). Thus, apart from in the article by Mwakimu Mwangi and Pius Mutie, 'Governance and Conflict Management', there is no, strictly speaking, theoretical reflection on the notion of transition, while this issue has been considerably discussed and criticized under the framework of the path to democracy, both in Europe and in Africa. There is excessive repetition that becomes quite tedious, where some contributors return to historical facts that have earlier been discussed. This is one of the shortfalls of the chronological approach in a collective publication.

The closing statement of the book warns that "*the Kenyan state has never been structured in the interest of the Kenyan masses and for the public good. Instead, it remains an instrument of coercion, enforcement and maintenance of the oppressive regime of the politico-economic élite in collaboration with foreign interests.*" (Octavian Gakuru, Ezekiel Mwenza and Kennedy Bikuri, 'Hope, Disillusion and Reconciliation'). If we recall the disenchanted tone in the introduction, we can say that we've come full circle.

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