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## Being Kenyan in the Times of a Crisis Conflicting National Narratives against COVID-19

Noé MICHALON

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**Abstract:** In the face of the deadly COVID-19 pandemic, the Kenyan government developed a national narrative aimed to empower its population and give it the responsibilities the public authorities could not fully handle. Being a Kenyan, officials said, was about being resilient and innovative, and entailed following on in the footsteps of the notorious examples of heroic figures that have been newly erected on that occasion. This ideal-type of the resilient and responsible Kenyan was story-told broadly through an assertive media strategy that President Uhuru Kenyatta and other influential political figures put forward. It was quickly confronted, however, by stark contestations and alternative narratives from civil society. Sometimes newcomers in the public debate, some social activists indeed defined their own heroes and martyrs and insisted on the state's responsibility to protect its population in times of crisis.

This paper is the result of a 9-month review of the Kenyan press and mainstream media during the Covid-19 pandemic in Kenya, enriched with informal interviews with health practitioners and political representatives. As a political analyst, the author of this research produced various briefs and analyses combining quantitative and qualitative data aimed to draw the lines of the new national narrative which this paper attempts to depict.

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## Introduction

On December 17, 2020, Lewis-Miller Kaphira, a second-year student of Economics and Statistics at Kenyatta University in Nairobi penned a vibrant message of hope on the *Daily*

*Nation's* website: “From the dark days of the ‘80’s and ‘90’s to the nightmarish days that followed the 2007 General Election, Kenyans have shown their stoicism and resilience to bounce back even stronger from the toughest of situations. Circumstances may be different, but it has happened before and it will happen again. Like a phoenix, Kenyans will rise from the ashes!” (Kaphira 2020)

This statement captures with accuracy the spirit of resilience that prevailed throughout what most would call an *annus horribilis*. Hit by two waves of COVID-19 that took more than 1,700 lives, Kenya was also affected by the collapse of its tourism sector and some of its most valuable exports, such as flowers and tea. Unrelated to COVID-19, the country also had to face an unprecedented invasion of locusts that ravaged significant chunks of its harvests in northern Kenya while dramatic floods left hundreds of Kenyans dead in various parts of the country throughout the year.

As a major global health crisis, most countries of the world declared states of emergency to slow down the progression of the virus. From the first COVID-19 case detected in Kenya in March 2020, the national government enforced strict measures to contain the pandemic. Restraining a significant part of individual freedoms, these decisions had to be tied to discursive strategies aimed at gaining public legitimacy. To promote national unity against the virus, President Uhuru Kenyatta and his allies developed a national narrative that brought forward resilience, but also innovation, defined as the “creation, development and implementation of a new product, process or service” to help combat the spread of the pandemic and its consequences. (I) This narrative, produced by an elected government and its allies, was not considered as neutral. It was made the subject of most political debates in the public sphere but also fostered the emergence of alternative figures and stories. The official “COVID-19 heroes” were challenged by less visible figures, such as nurses and doctors who died from COVID-19, or by some social activists who gathered strong popularity, sometimes in contradiction with the government’s narrative (II).

## COVID-19: Resilience and Adaptability

### Resilience and innovation, two new core values

As shown by political scientist Bob Jessop, “Crises disrupt accepted views of the world and how to ‘go on’ within it and also call established theoretical and policy paradigms into question. (...) Ideas and imaginaries shape the interpretation of crises and the responses thereto” (Jessop 2012: 2). While grounding his approach on Kenya’s history, President Kenyatta seized the opportunity of the crisis to define a national way to “go on.” It was funded on an alleged Kenyan capacity to resist and innovate, in other words, to be resilient. Resilience, also known as the ability for anyone to overcome a traumatic shock, was immediately put forward by the President who, in his March 15 speech, declared: “Let us remember that as Kenyans, we have been faced with other crisis in the past, and we have always triumphed by coming together in the spirit of national unity and cooperation.”

This call to resilience came with a request for individual accountability. Each Kenyan citizen was portrayed as being as responsible as the state for protecting the population, in a context where the government—like most governments across the world—did not succeed

in the fight against the fulgurant spread of the virus. “Every single Kenyan has a responsibility in ensuring they play their part in safeguarding Kenyan lives,” concluded Kenyatta in his speech. “If we pull together, and everybody does their part, we shall overcome its worst impacts.”

The resilience narrative was also cast as the ability to transform hardships into opportunities, as Kenyatta said himself in his 2021 New Year Message: “in the moment of adversity lay also the seeds of opportunity.” Opening a conference with governors dedicated to “building resilience to deal with future pandemics,” Kenyatta announced, in August 2020, that an analysis of the current crisis “should guide us on how to use the lessons learned from the COVID-19 experience in order to anchor the full national roll-out of the Universal Health Coverage.”<sup>1</sup> The Minister of Health tried to translate what such adaptability would mean in Kenyans daily lives. On July 28, while announcing a ban on alcohol-sale in bars and restaurants, he defined what he called a “new normal” as “*sausage mbili, soda moja*” in Swahili (two sausages, one soda), a new lifestyle that would supposedly limit the risks of contamination.

**2020 has been a bad year, but Kenyans will get through this**

Thursday December 17 2020

Kenyans have showed their stoicism and resilience to bounce back even stronger from the toughest of situations.





Dennis Onsongo | Nation Media Group

By Lewis-Miller Kaphira  
[More by this Author](#)

**IN SUMMARY**

The year 2021 has already been predicted to be grimmer.  
I choose to bank hope on the resilience of the Kenyan people.

“2020 has been a bad year, but Kenyans will get through this.” Source: *The Nation*.  
URL: <https://nation.africa/kenya/news/2020-has-been-a-bad-year-but-kenyans-will-get-through-this-3231426>

In his 2021 New Year Message, the Head of State insisted on Kenyans’ resilience, particularly from the youth: “[Children] have been trying hard to adapt to the restricted way of living; while many have been able to adapt, survive and some even thrive, some felt trapped and unfortunately buckled... To our teenagers, hold yourself together. Gather the

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<sup>1</sup> The UHC is one of Kenyatta’s Big Four pillars, alongside with the development of the manufacturing sector, food security and affordable housing

strength, the gifts, the talents, and the energy within yourself; and harness it. Do not throw away your youth, your potential to the harrowing the wind.”

### A ubiquitous media strategy

This narrative was firmly controlled by its promoters, the government and its political allies. On March 15, 2020, two days after the first COVID-19 case was detected in Kenya, President Kenyatta appeared on TV screens and radios to announce a string of radical measures to fight the pandemic: a nationwide curfew from 7 P.M., the closure of schools for an undetermined period, and the ban of mass gatherings, among others. Unseen since the country’s independence in 1963, these decisions were quickly followed by a National Day of Prayer the next weekend which most national media covered upon invitation by the Head of State. During his first speech as well as in his prayers, Kenyatta committed himself and his Cabinet Secretaries to keeping the population “regularly informed on developments” related to the pandemic.

One should not underestimate the power of media strategies on public health matters. According to Kimani Njogu, “media strategies linked to social systems have a direct effect on communities and their settings. They can contribute to behaviour modification at the individual and collective levels” (Njogu 2009: 127). This brought Kenya’s President to address the population nearly every month in order to announce the renewal, strengthening or lifting of some of these restrictions. In addition to these, the Cabinet Secretary for Health, Mutahi Kagwe, or his deputies, were holding an almost daily media brief at Afya House, the Ministry’s headquarters, to announce the latest figures pertaining to the pandemic. During these media events, one main narrative increasingly took centre stage, both in English and Swahili, as Kenyan officials insisted on the resilience of the Kenyan population in this crisis. Nation-wide ministerial tours spread this official voice upcountry and decentralised this narrative. Cabinet Secretary Mutahi Kagwe often gave long face-to-face interviews to mainstream media such as KTN or Citizen TV in which he would also discuss broader politics or his personal life, expanding his media footprint beyond the sole health sector, gaining in political clout and thus expanding the reach of his official narrative.

The use of this narrative went along with efforts to limit the expression of alternative viewpoints that might have undermined public health measures. From his very first speech, Kenyatta warned that “Kenyans must avoid misinformation that causes panic and anxiety.” A few days later, the popular blogger Robert Alai was arrested for publicly accusing the government to “hide information” related to COVID-19. The government and its allies also showed it was the only legitimate political actor to be seen conducting the fight against the pandemic. Efforts made by some political opponents such as then-Nairobi Governor Mike Sonko or former Kakamega Governor Boniface Khalwale were also impeded. As they personally decided to give out sanitizers and masks within their county, they were halted by law enforcement officers upon the motive that they were flouting the national COVID-19 rules.

The ubiquity of government officials on national media allowed the government to keep a firm grip on its media agenda and the narrative it had aimed to develop and spread.

## Making Heroes

### Doctors, and those they rescue

In order to have more resonance among the public, the resilience narrative rested on the promotion of heroic figures that could incarnate it and unite Kenyans through consensus. Since the 2000s, promoting national heroes has been a recurrent strategy in Kenya, particularly in times of crisis. Chloé Josse-Durand showed that after the 2007-2008 post-electoral crisis a national committee defined a list of national heroes from most Kenyan communities to federate the nation and lead to peace (Josse-Durand 2009). The 2010 constitution brought another layer to this strategy turned into a policy by adopting Mashujaa Day (Heroes' Day) on October 20.<sup>2</sup> On that day, various citizens are recognised as heroes for their commitment to the nation.

Throughout 2020, the government promoted different kinds of medical or business figures embodying the fight against COVID-19. As early as April 1st, barely less than three weeks after the first case in the country, Uhuru Kenyatta was filmed on TV having a videocall with Brenda Cherotich and Brian Orinda—respectively the first and third Kenyans to have recovered from the virus. He also promoted many youths who had created innovative ways to combat the pandemic. In May, Stephen Wamukota, for instance, 9-year-old young inventor of a handwashing machine (BBC 2020), was given the Mzalendo Award (the Patriot Award). Among the 68 awardees were also the Director General for Health, Patrick Amoth—regularly seen during the Afya House daily briefs and later named at the World Health Organization's Executive Committee—and dozens of medical workers. In his Mzalendo Award speech, Uhuru Kenyatta also congratulated 11-year-old Zawadi Mutua who had donated KSH 500 to the national emergency fund (Kihui 2020).

### Highlight on innovators and businesspeople

Numerous businesspeople also had their share of exposure: about 800 of them were invited at the presidential palace in October to display their innovations. Such promotions shed light on the responsibility of the private sector in the fight against the virus, in a context where government programs aimed to support the youth could not fully cushion the loss of more than 1.7 million jobs in six months (Munda 2020).

Most media houses, both Kenyan and international, covered enthusiastically the Kenyan innovators, who embodied hope in a grim socio-economic atmosphere. In May, the Business Daily published a feature on a Made-In-Kenya ventilator invented by University students (Rotich 2020). The newspaper also highlighted the production of locally made Personal Protective Equipment (PPEs) and their manufacturing potential (Wakiaga 2020). Overseas, the capacity of Kenyans to innovate in times of crisis was equally lauded by the media such as In Depth News, which in April listed various inventions by Kenyan citizens or institutions (Wanzala 2020). To quote only a few, South Africa's IOL described a "positive state of the tech industry" in Kenya "with a lot of innovation led by young people to drive

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<sup>2</sup> Formerly known as Kenyatta Day, this celebration used to be a tribute to the "Kapenguria Six," six prominent leaders who fought for independence.

valuable change” (IOL 2020), an observation also shared by pan-African hub AfriLabs (Afrilabs 2020).

In sum, the resilience narrative was not only well-planned through a carefully thought-out media strategy, but it also relied on identifiable heroes and heroines who could embody endurance and creativity.



Kenyan runners getting ready for a national competition in Nyayo Stadium, Nairobi, on October 3, 2020.

## Alternative Narratives in Times of COVID-19

### Fragile public legitimacy

In spite of the media hype about resilience, a wide range of critiques lambasted the official discourse, in part due to the existing gap between the political elite and Kenya citizens. Some officials were exposed flouting the rules they were supposed to enforce, such as the Cabinet Secretary for Health, Mutahi Kagwe: photos circulated showing him during a dinner without a mask nor maintaining social distance (Nyaguthie 2020). His son, the popular singer Kahush, had also be seen flouting COVID-19 restrictions, according to one newspaper. Uhuru Kenyatta himself was targeted in similar ways as his own son was accused of ignoring the rules. Newly popular, Kagwe also saw his speeches parodied, if not mocked, on social media, notably his sentence “if I can get it [COVID-19], you can get it.”<sup>3</sup> Even if such materials are not necessarily portraying him negatively, they obviously show a distance between the official speech and its reception by the population, who reappropriates it by transforming it.

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<sup>3</sup> Often written « *gerrit* » as a way to mimick his Kikuyu accent.



Motif Di Don with Hadas, Snaidah, Shanty, Doofy Jax, Swish, Kanairo: “Can Gerrit” (Screenshot).

Released June 25, 2020. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gzX-kFjcPTY>

Another undermining factor was the politicisation of the health discourse by Uhuru Kenyatta and his allies, who attempted to extend this supposedly uniting national narrative to other sectors. In July, after three months of lockdown, Uhuru Kenyatta started advocating again for a constitutional reform designed by the working group Building Bridges Initiative (BBI) which he had set up with his former rival turned ally Raila Odinga in 2018 to end their dispute. This reform, aimed among other things to create the positions of Prime Minister and vice-prime ministers, was often put forward in speeches during which Kenyatta would praise his government’s response to COVID-19. On October 20, during Mashujaa Day, Kenyatta mentioned health workers—“COVID-19 heroes”—to inspire the “courage” to “seize a constitutional moment” favourable to pass the BBI reform.

In several later speeches, Kenyatta also delved into the notion of adaptability to assert the idea that “Kenya is still a work in progress” whose constitution needed to be flexible and amended when necessary. By associating a supposedly consensual narrative of health unity with a political constitutional reform project, Kenyatta actually took the risk to politicise both and exposed himself and his government to more political critiques. As showed by Philip Onguny, the BBI process “caused major rifts within the ruling party” (Onguny 2020, 557). In October 2020, political rallies led to violence between the pros and cons of the reform. As these rallies broke most social distancing rules, they also undermined the government’s credibility.

### Heroes, villains and martyrs

The “heroes” policy implies its opposite: anti-heroes and villains. In August 2020, a documentary broadcasted on NTV opened a category of “villains” known as the “COVID-19 billionaires.” These were a group of businesspeople accused of setting up companies in a record time to sell overpriced PPEs allegedly stolen from donations. The feature mentioned firms owned by influent tycoons reputed to be close to the President’s entourage, among them Richard Ngatia, the boss of the Kenyan National Chamber of Commerce and

Industry. The documentary was watched nearly a million times on YouTube before it was removed upon a High Court order pointing a lack of proof in the theft allegations (Wambulwa 2020). It however contributed to mainstream the figure of the “COVID-19 billionaire” making profits out of a crisis thanks to his political connections.

In addition to this, the enforcement of the most stringent COVID-19 rules sometimes led to police brutality, which Human Rights Defenders associations and watchdogs such as Amnesty International or Haki (Amnesty International 2020) denounced. Studies showed that the inhabitants of poor neighbourhoods such as Mathare organised themselves to avoid police brutality (Mutahi & Wanjiru, 2020). Uhuru Kenyatta himself admitted and condemned such violence as early as April 2020. This happened in the aftermath of the killing of Yasin Moyo, a 13 years-old Kenyan boy who was shot by a police officer as he was playing on his balcony during curfew hours. The police officer, who first declined attending his trial pretending falsely he had contracted COVID-19 (Hassan 2020), was eventually condemned, undermining even more the legitimacy of already unpopular security forces.

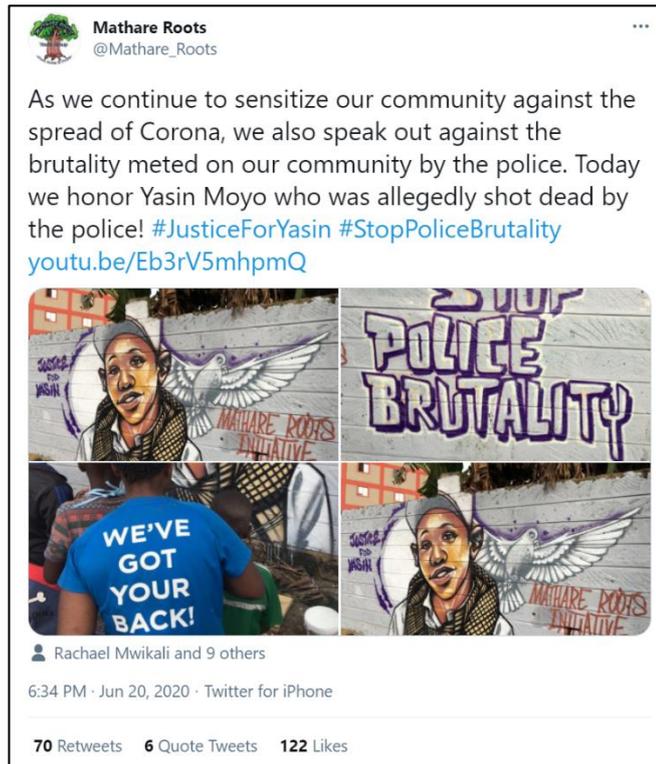
Yasin Moyo embodied the figure of a martyr, that is, an innocent person—even more, a child—subject to unjust brutality. For many Kenyans, his death sharply questioned the government’s monopoly on the legitimate use of violence; it also federated several groups of activists who paid him tributes through murals and other artworks.

The same could be said of Stephen Mogusu, a 28-years-old doctor who died of COVID-19 complications in December 2020 and had not been paid for five months. First mentioned on social media, where it created a significant public outrage, his death happened while thousands of medical workers were striking across the country to denounce lack of equipment and salary arrears.

Such movements of protests erected figures of alternative heroes as Juliet Wanjira Wanjiru, coordinator of the Mathare Social Justice Movement, who resisted her arrest while she was protesting against police brutality on July 7.<sup>4</sup> Her words to the police officers were also the object of artworks and quotes.

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<sup>4</sup> July 7, also known as “*Saba Saba*” (“Seven seven” in Swahili) is traditionally dedicated to demonstrations and social movements. In this year’s edition, the police forces dispersed the demonstrations saying they were enforcing the Covid-19 restrictions.



URL: [https://twitter.com/Mathare\\_Roots/status/1274380059667828739](https://twitter.com/Mathare_Roots/status/1274380059667828739) [archive]



URL: <https://twitter.com/alaminkimathi/status/1280632839537668097> [archive]

## Alternative medias, alternative narratives

Both the deconstruction of the official national narrative and the construction of figures of villains, martyrs and alternative heroes highlight the tremendous role of alternative medias and platforms in Kenya. Wambui Wamunyu underlined how COVID-19 contributed to the emergence of such media—which that enjoyed confidential audience—that oppose the official narrative with grassroots testimonies (Wamunyu 2020). Financially independent thanks to individual donations, they are laboratories for alternative narratives about what it means to be Kenyan in times of crisis.

In his study of two major independent Kenyan websites, Antoine Kauffer showed that the autonomy of these media allowed for innovative reflections. In *The Elephant*, for instance, “current subjects are observed together with proposals for action, in long and innovative formats (podcasts, infographics...), which clearly breaks with the classical journalism model in Kenya” (Kauffer 2020). Intellectuals and scholars invited to write in *The Elephant* develop terse critics towards the government. Take the example of Willy Mutunga: a former Chief Justice of Kenya (2011-2016), he took the opportunity of the celebration of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Kenya’s constitution to recommend its full implementation and castigate its reform through the BBI process. He also interestingly saw in the COVID-19 pandemic a make-or-break occasion to give a “breath of life” to the Kenyan constitution, embodying in his own way the government-praised resilience where crises offer opportunities (Mutunga 2020).

Such media offer a new kind of platform that questions Kenyan identity in new ways, departing from the more mainstream outlets focused on politics. Since COVID-19, a surge of articles has been notable in *The Elephant*. They aim to revisit identities and cultures, confirming Jessop’s assertion on the impact of crises. To quote only a few, the website published Kimani Wa Wanjiru’s “Kenyan’s Elusive Search for a Cultural Identity,” portraying the failed government attempts to define a Kenyan identity under Jomo Kenyatta’s rule and questioning the role of arts in the contemporary attempts of definition. Reginald Cline-Cole’s “African Economies, Societies and Natures in a Time of COVID-19” also explored the corporate-philanthropic response that prevailed in a set of African countries, and how it was revealing of the current state of most economies of the continent.

Following this pandemic, a growing number of Kenyan intellectuals initiated a deep reflection on national identity. Gideon Too, from the Busara Research Centre, asserted for instance that “COVID-19 is reshaping the social contract between Kenyans and their government.” While acknowledging a truly “heroic” figure in the person of Mutahi Kagwe, he also argued that “individual freedoms [...] are being superseded by considerations for the greater good of society,” hence paving the way towards new, more inclusive, democratic, and participative political models (Too 2020).

## Conclusion

COVID-19 undeniably opened spaces for new conversations in Kenya. Facing an unprecedented crisis that called for equally unprecedented measures, the Kenyan government took the lead in shaping a united Kenyan identity able to make Kenyans resist

the successive waves of the pandemic. Such a narrative of unity is embraced by many but it cannot rest in the government only, particularly in the country of East Africa having the highest press freedom index. This vision of identity, like any other official discourse, was not immune to politicisation. It gave way to public debates in which Kenya's vibrant civil society actively contributed by interpreting, re-appropriating, and redefining what Kenyan identity is and should be. By doing so, Kenyatta's view of his country as a "work in progress" was not only confirmed, in some cases, but also enriched and complexified. It shows, once again, that identity-building is both a continuous process and the result of collective work, in which the government is not the only voice to take part in.

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