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THE FIRE THIS TIME

I have just walked through the lobby of the Serena Hotel in Nairobi. Packs of politicians and their entourages hurry past. Most have mobile phones into which they whisper urgently pressed to their ears. They brush shoulders with white men and women lagging large cameras trying to arrange for taxis that will carry them to the nearest scene of carnage and bloodletting. I get the impression that the more the politicians whisper into their phones, the more images the international press will capture. Kenya at the moment must look to those watching CNN or BBC like Zimbabwe or Nepal has looked to me in the past. But then I know that the country is not in the grip of atavistic hatreds, images of machete-wielding, church burning men notwithstanding. This is a political crisis fuelled by ethnic differences which in Kenya are now, as never before, political differences.

Growing up, the various tribal stereotypes were the source of much shared humour among friends and family. Difference was funny. But underneath the jokes, in the same way that we say that there is no smoke without fire was recognition that our differences no matter the friendly way we tossed them out were actual and lasting. In the 2007 campaign season for parliamentary and presidential seats, what had previously been jokes morphed into paranoid and even hateful mobile text messages. The intention was to drive the country into tribal camps from which votes for the particular candidates would issue.

I am a Gikuyu like President Kibaki and therefore expected by the political opinion of those like us to automatically be ready to vote along these lines. In many political conversations that I had with relatives, the opponent increasingly was not only the Orange Democratic Movement as a political party but rather the Luo tribe of Raila Odinga. The opposition's intention (many Gikuyus believed) was not only to win the election and lead with different ideas and policies but rather its aim was to destroy the country and us along with it. I was told that we were in a fight to the last, that the winner would take all and damn the loser. The opposition too was driven by similar ethnic mathematics even though the trend – which was confirmed in the 2005 constitutional referendum – was of the rest of the tribes aligning themselves against a perceived Gikuyu determination to hold onto power at all costs.

Last year I received this mobile text message: "Nari Koruo Kibaki arendia nyamu ici cia ruguru (meera) nakuu Thailand. Tutiguo tutari ona imwe. kana tugiciheane ouguo tuhu? Ukuuga atia weemundu wa Mumbi?" (If only Kibaki was selling these Luo animals to Thailand (like the elephants that the Kenya Wildlife Service controversially wanted to sell to zoos abroad) Or should we just give them away for free? What do you say child of Mumbi?)

Delivered with a laugh and a wink just as it was when I was a child.

Three years ago, I interviewed a woman who was imprisoned in Rwanda for participating in the 1994 genocide. She has remained vivid in my memory for a curious remark she made when I asked her how far back the genocide's planning started. "The war," she said, "started when I was a little girl in the 1970s and other children would tease me for having Tutsi legs…" Two decades later, the length and thickness of your legs marked who died at many a roadblock. Imagine for an instant one of those children that did the jeering and teasing, now an adult with machete in hand faced by an ID-less girl with long, thin legs.

To the men huddled around tables poolside at the Serena Hotel, political parties are not expressions of ideological or policy differences. Instead, political leaders are in a fight to *our* death for a politics they envision as a system of spoils. This fight to get a larger slice of the 'cake' has been growing in divisiveness and hateful rhetoric. We are like infants drawn to touch a flame or driven by a horrid fascination with what lies beyond the cliff's edge, curious perhaps to test the limits of our peace after decades of tut-tutting at the many wars in our neighbourhood.

Kenyans for the past few years have worn tribal lens when looking at the political landscape. In this decoding by many of my fellow Gikuyus, ODM is perceived as an existential foe, not just an electoral one. To be anti-Kibaki, or at least opposed to him, as was the case with a majority of the country's provinces and at least forty five percent of the voters, was going to be regarded by many PNU supporters, particularly those from the Mount Kenya communities as inimical to their existence and survival as a collective. A similar sense of drastic opposition applied to many of ODM supporters. The stage was set for the violence seen across the country during the past week.

In politics perception is reality. And the reality of politics, its fundamental meaning, at those rare moments when it enjoys the greatest clarity to the greatest numbers, is that it is a pitched contest between friends and enemies. Many Kenyans have chosen their friends and enemies on the basis of tribal loyalty and identification. Beyond the much repeated admonitions against such politics, let me suggest that we have dipped our toes into dangerous waters. That politics will fundamentally continue to be the struggle between friend and enemies will not cease.

This is a struggle which is subject to the principle of escalation. One side's paranoia is matched by that of the other side, one rumour with another, and text messages are sent out which appear to mirror each other in the claims of victim-hood and outrage. This escalation which is already much in evidence holds out the frightening possibility of a 'war of all against all.' If indeed politics is friends versus foes, then how we define who are our friends and who our enemies is of the essence. This is the abyss into which the country is staring.

The campaign period turned the ethnic map into a political one. The individual Kenyan despite his membership of and loyalty to different identities is now more strictly enfolded

(perhaps imprisoned is a better word) in a single tribal collective that owes loyalty to those within – no matter their crimes or failings. Its character is oppositional, its language that of the victim. Societies that have become engulfed in political violence rarely get much warning. The lead-up to conflagration is characterized by the political rhetoric of reasonableness on all sides when they speak into the larger public space. But in their asides and coded messages to 'their side,' foaming-in-the-mouth, hateful messages are uttered to secure the vote. Suspicion and rumours of fantastical conspiracies have been all the rage in the past year of campaigning. A pamphlet that was found in Rwanda immediately after the 1994 genocide had this to say about how to motivate Hutus to loath their Tutsi neighbours and countrymen:

Never underestimate the strength of the enemy, and never overestimate the intelligence of the target audience. Strive in your language to identify the enemy with everything feared and loathed. Lies, exaggeration, ridicule, innuendo—all ably serve the ultimate aim of winning over the undecided, sowing confusion and division among the opposed. And this freedom from the confines of truth opens up a powerful technique for sowing fear and hatred: 'accusation in a mirror.'

Accusation in a mirror. This is Kenya's leading political tactic. Accuse the other side of rigging the vote while you do just that. Accuse the other of intending to rob the treasury while you do just that or prepare to have that very privilege on ascending to office. Both sides pronounce themselves victim and the cynical acts of manipulation they utilise are framed to seem as reactions to the 'enemy.' Across the Rift Valley, in Kisumu and Nairobi, young men are roaming machete in hand to finally destroy the enemy.

What many of these young men do not know is that the Serena Hotel and similar founts of privilege and wealth are the home of the very political class that has defined the friend and the enemy in Rift Valley and Central Kenya. Yesterday as people who had tried to assemble for the opposition rally in Uhuru Park were chased back and fro by the police, just beyond the Serena's fence, I was seated next to groups of politicians who were certainly not ethnically cleansing each other off their sodas and croissants. They were muttering into their mobile phones the messages that were driving those young men across the country to violence on behalf of a political class that is willing to sacrifice our lives and limbs on the alter of their lust for power and privilege.

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