

Grief to Justice – The journey Kenya must take.

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Psychiatrists tell us that there are five stages of grief referred to as the grief cycle. These stages of grief, like our right to participate in elections, are universal and are experienced by people from all walks of life. In Kenya we mourn not a person we hold in high value but rather we sit at the wake of a shattered ideal, an ideal which states that each person shall have a vote, that vote shall be counted, and that each vote shall be equal.

The first stage of grief is denial. The refusal to accept what has happened. The death of an ideal is harder to measure than the mortality of man. Ideals are built over time, nurtured and shaped by the society in which they are initially sown. For the Kenyan youth the ideal we mourn is that the will of the people as expressed through the ballot box is always respected. Some commentators, driven by chronic intellectual laziness, thrive on the opportunity to declare The Theft of the Kenya election from the Kenya electorate as just the latest example of business as normal on a continent where the will of the electorate is routinely ignored. The reality of the situation is the complete opposite. I have never had an election I participated in stolen from me before. In fact any Kenyan born after the mid 1970's has never had an election they participated in stolen from them, even when we voted against the incumbents and their state machinery. In 2002, the Kenyan electorate swept Kibaki to power against a campaign ran by former president Moi and his chosen successor, Uhuru Kenyatta. A couple of years later it was Kibaki's turn to feel the rejection of the electorate as the people of Kenya voted to reject the constitution Kibaki's government wanted us to adopt in a referendum. The Kenyan youth have developed a habit of voting and have developed the expectation that those votes will be respected, when this ideal is shattered the experts tell us denial will follow.

The second stage of the grief cycle is anger. The anger, experts say, may be aimed at inanimate objects, complete strangers, friends, family or even towards oneself. This stage is the one that has captured all the attention of the media thus far. It is the most visual dramatic. The looting, the riots, the burning, the murder, the forced evictions and the helpless victims. Property damaged, relationship severed, lives lost. What is hidden from view, largely because it is an internal process, is the anger directed towards oneself. The feeling of stupidity for having woken up at 4am, to be in the queue at 6am, to vote at noon; religiously and enthusiastically taking part in a process that would later be tossed away as easily as we tossed away the blankets at 4am. The anger at feeling majestic and powerful as we marked the tick on the paper, the anger at wallowing in the praise at the end of the voting process as countries and international observers lined up to congratulate Kenyans for their passion for democracy. The violence is dying down, the unrest quietening. But the internal battle, how will this resolve itself? How do you speak up to reassure yourself that you were not an idiot, that you were taken in by an elaborate con, when your voice has been stolen?

The third and fourth stages of grief are bargaining and depression. The former is a futile attempt to regain control of the situation, the latter the reaction to not being able to regain that control. We walk to banks we frequented before The Theft, withdraw the same currency we did before The Theft, attempt to purchase the same goods we did before The Theft and put that process down on the poker table of our country's destiny and challenge fate to show her hand. "Surely", we plead, "if I can do all these things I could do before The Theft the things will be as they were?" It will take a while for Kenyans to realise that Kenya will never be the same again. The Kenya we used to know has passed. The Kenya we loved has gone. This will inevitably be followed by depression that comes with loosing something precious. However, this process also presents us with our biggest opportunity as a nation since independence to deal with underlying issues that have so far been swept under our collective carpet in the interests of national stability. In the language of 2008 instead of mourning Kenya 1.0 let us concentrate on building Kenya 2.0. As we remember Kenya 1.0, she was good to us, but she had several underlying problems.

Income inequalities in Kenya are among the highest in the world. The 2007 UNDP Human Development Report informs us that the richest 10% of Kenyans earn 33.9% of the country's total income while the richest 20% earn 49.1%. This contrasts with the poorest 10% who earn 2.5% while the poorest 20% earn 6% of the country's income. It is not surprising that the epicentre of the post-electoral violence has been in the desperation of urban slums and in poor rural communities living on the edge, for whom radical change not continuity was not a merely a political option but a move towards survival in the next five years. One-third of Kenya's population is aged between 10 and 25. Many of those who have participated in the post-electoral violence are within this age-group. Having one-third of your population facing the constant threat of unemployment is a canister that can explode at any moment as it did in Kenya. This will need to be addressed.

Another problem that Kenya now has the opportunity to deal with is the almost complete absence of women in areas of political influence. Kenya's record as regards women's participation in political leadership is pathetic with just 16 women parliamentarians out of 219 in the recent 9th parliament. This contrasts with other countries in the region. By October 2007, Rwanda ranked first globally in women's representation in parliament with 49% of seats in the Lower house and 35% in the Upper House; Burundi is 15th globally with 30% and 34.7% in the Lower and Upper house, respectively. Tanzania and Uganda ranked 16th and 17th with 30% women in parliament. Kenya's position, in contrast, is 115th globally, the 4th worst in Africa. All the other countries named above, with the exception of Tanzania, have gone through periods of intense conflict. In the post-conflict era, they have recognized the important role of women in conflict prevention and resolution and, have passed legislation to ensure women's greater role in influencing the affairs of the nation. Kenya now has an opportunity to increase the participation of women in political leadership without having to go through the baptism of severe conflict our neighbours went through.

The final stage of grief is acceptance. The experts tell us that many who grieve never have the pleasure of reaching this stage. Kenyans do not have to and will not accept having an election stolen from them. Kenyans will not accept that a political elite to mock their democracy in a desperate bid to hang on to power. Kenyans will not accept that their country is destined to go down the drain. We will accept however that changes in our society, such as those discussed above, are absolutely necessary for our country to establish true stability. We will accept that in our interaction as a people personal responsibility is ultimately the lowest common denominator. It is personal responsibility for our actions that will keep us from attacking each other again.

Those erecting glass towers rooted in electoral fraud from which they intend to rule the country will soon come to accept, as the vast majority of Kenyans have, that power held illegitimately will not and can not be allowed to prevail.