Mr President, it’s time to govern and win the hearts of all people

The galloping pace of the modern news cycle can sometimes distract us from paying due heed to consequential developments. This is certainly the case with the recent use of state resources to unsettle and harass former President Uhuru Kenyatta’s family.

Don’t get me wrong, plenty of cloak-and-dagger tactics are used in political circles. Politics is after all a contact sport. However, in my view, this is an unseen event and augurs ill for the health of our fledging democracy. Beyond that, it also gives us an unsettling window into the priorities (or lack thereof) of President William Ruto’s now almost one-year-old administration. Let me explain.

A quiet understanding

There are some things not cast in stone or codified in law but their value as accepted conventions in statecraft are so much they might well be holy writ. For example, on the matter of how current and immediate presidents relate with their predecessors, there seems to be a quiet understanding on three different fronts that have a sizable impact on the most sacred event at the tail end of every general election: the peaceful transfer of power.

One, a current president is expected to name a successor. Two, in many cases, the “chosen one” will end up being president because it is assumed if the current president supports him or her then they will use institutional levers to give them as much support. This general rule has however been deeply debunked in recent memory (President Hillary Clinton and Raila Odinga).

Thirdly, and most importantly, the understanding that, no matter how the election plays out, the former President can rely on the state’s protection. This protection in Kenya also arises from an understanding that in the service of the best interests of the nation, our Presidents may earn the ire of powerful people who may wish that those interests be otherwise. It’s therefore supremely important to have an incoming president who takes stock of our history and has an enlightened view on such matters.

The judgment of history

President Ruto takes a different and worryingly ahistorical view. His insistence on going after his predecessor (and one-time bosom buddy) is an unfortunate departure from a wise tradition that has served the nation well so far and helped keep constitutional term limits sacrosanct.

The reason for this act of sheer folly? I will hazard an educated guess. My view is the President can already hear the judgment of history on his presidency and he doesn’t like the sound. This is because this administration’s swipes at the former first family (the latest being the revealing leak of a flight manifest) seem to have less to do with Uhuru Kenyatta and more to do, in my mind, with this president’s apparent inability to actually run a government.

This realisation is coming against the backdrop of a different reality. The determination that seems to exist within the clique of people with whom Ruto is actually ruling the country as partners where everyone seems to have this great need to be a billionaire within the shortest time possible. This can only work if you plunder the state mercilessly (and mostly) through inflated tenders all the while promising to keep the insatiable wolf of graft at bay.

It’s all happening in the clear light of day if you know where to look. The Ruto administration borrowed Sh14.4 billion more than his predecessor just in the first six months of his term. Yet even as the government continues to court the IMF for more financial assistance, it is slow-walking the requirement to unmask the beneficiaries of firms winning state tenders. This suggests that the administration is more interested in lining its own pockets than in governing effectively.

Kenyans love to cast their minds back to the halcyon days of the Mwai Kibaki Presidency. Yet it’s easy to forget that one of the things that was a red line for Kibaki was putting Kenya on the debt treadmill. Kibaki’s approach to borrowing was, by all accounts, minimalist.

Yet, just a decade after the Kibaki Presidency, our circumstances are different. The prospect of ever living within our means seems a fanciful notion. Every time there is a shortfall we seem to borrow. Yet, that money is clearly not getting into the economy. If it was then a lot of things would be different. For one thing, the clamour by Kenyans for the government to address the cost of living crisis wouldn’t be as loud.

Personnel is policy

The issue then becomes what the current president is willing to do next as Kenyans demand performance over promises, well-thought-out policy interventions over roadside pronouncements, and a real, livable economic uprising to speeches declaring that the “economy is stable.” Words just won’t cut it anymore.

For the avoidance of doubt Mr President, there is no real fight here is not with the opposition (in Raila Odinga) or Uhuru Kenyatta but for the soul of the nation and the hearts of the people. The support of the people is at the heart of this particular fight and it appears this government, at least so far, is losing.

Don’t take my word for it. In rare a moment of candor, President Ruto this week upbraided his charges before the gaze of the nation. “The moment I know more than you in your ministry, then you must begin to understand that something is very wrong. Because you are supposed to advise. How are you going to advise me if you have less information than I do?” he asked.

Couldn’t agree more. Now do something about it Mr President. Personnel is policy. Or to paraphrase a great proverb, show me your Cabinet and I will tell you who you are.

The writer is a host on The Situation Room, Spice FM’s popular morning current affairs show.

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