What if Kijana Wamalwa had lived? Leaders give views

In Summary

- Mr Wamalwa had been Mr Mwai Kibaki’s running mate and their team represented the hopes and aspirations of an expectant populace.
- Barely five days after the presidential vote, Mr Wamalwa was confronted with one of the biggest dilemmas of his political career – to confront the newly sworn in President or eat humble pie and work with him.
- Mr Kombo, then a close ally of the VP, observes that Mr Wamalwa was very

Thirteen years ago, this week, Kenya’s eighth vice-president, Michael Kijana Wamalwa, died at a London hospital less than a year after assuming office under the Narc administration.

The fall of the 40-year Kanu rule on December 29, 2002, had been greeted with excitement by a majority of Kenyans who had voted for a new political outfit – the National Rainbow Coalition.

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In naming his 22-member Cabinet, President Kibaki appointed Mr Wamalwa Vice-President but without a ministerial docket.

Unknown to most Kenyans though, fissures within the new government were emerging even before the new team assumed office.

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PRE-ELECTION PACT

The development was received with mixed reactions by Wamalwa’s backers – happiness because Mr Kibaki had honoured part of the pre-election pact by naming their man as VP, and anger because he had handed Mr Wamalwa what they regarded as an empty shell.

Friday, January 3, 2003 saw a flurry of activity in Nairobi after the unveiling of the new Cabinet. Politicians from Mr Wamalwa’s Luhya community gathered at his Nairobi house to congratulate him and at the same time protest over the “empty office”.

The disquiet stretched the entire weekend with some politicians threatening unspecified action.

On Tuesday the following week, Westlands MP Fred Gumo went public, blasting the President for giving the VP an “empty plate” and questioning whether he had deliberately designed to have Mr Wamalwa as a passenger in his government.

"Although Mr Wamalwa was unhappy with Kibaki’s move, he was calm and did not throw tantrums. "Had he done so and acted violently, I can assure you the Narc government would have had major problems right from day one,” observes former Cabinet minister Musikari Kombo.

Multiple sources have confided in the Nation that Mr Wamalwa advised the irritated legislators from his backyard against confronting President Kibaki who was at the time confined to a wheelchair following a freak road accident on December 3, 2002 as he returned to Nairobi from presidential campaigns in Kitui.

According to Mr Matere Keriri, the State House Comptroller at the time, it was not by default that Mr Wamalwa was given an “empty” post.

According to Mr Keriri, Mr Kibaki regarded Mr Wamalwa more as his principal adviser and not just any other minister to be bogged down by government matters.

ADDITIONAL PORTFOLIO

Mr Wamalwa’s non-combative approach seemed to pay off 13 days later on January 16, 2002, when President Kibaki eventually assigned him an additional portfolio as Minister for National Reconstruction.

The key functions of the ministry cobbled together for the VP included revival of collapsed projects under the Kanu regime such as Nyayo Tea Zones, Nyayo Bus Corporation and development of a reconstruction policy.
On paper this looked like a really paper-weight ministry. In fact MPs from Ford-Kenya party were openly apprehensive. Ordinarily the VP should have protested or quietly lobbied the President for a more powerful docket. But he did not.

Mr Kombo, then a close ally of the VP, observes that Mr Wamalwa was very disarming in his approach: “He was the gentleman of Kenyan politics at the time. He never played hardball, meaning he never accorded opponents opportunity to engage him in violent political battles.”

Mr Kombo, who succeeded Mr Wamalwa as Ford-Kenya chairman, doubts the VP was ever going to allow differences between him and Mr Kibaki to escalate to poisonous levels. In fact, the former minister believes that had Mr Wamalwa lived, some of the ugly political developments witnessed in the last 10 years, including the bloody post-election violence of 2007/8, would not have occurred.

This and other questions, such as whether Mr Wamalwa would have become Kenya’s fourth President, the political fortunes of President Uhuru Kenyatta and former Prime Minister Raila Odinga had Mr Wamalwa lived, are among those that come to the fore as Kenyans mark the 13th anniversary of his death on August 23, 2003.

VOLATILE POLITICAL SCENE

Indeed so much has happened since Kenya’s eighth vice-president left the scene after serving for less than a year.

It’s probably impossible to give an apt answer to these questions including predicting how Kenya’s volatile political scene would have changed.

Would he have remained loyal to Mr Kibaki to be his running mate for the second time in 2007?

Would the 2005 fallout in government, in the run-up to the constitutional review process, have been averted? Would the post-election violence have erupted in 2007?

What about the political fortunes of key political figures at the time? Would Uhuru Kenyatta have become President? Would Moody Awori and Kalonzo Musyoka have become VP? And what would be Deputy President William Ruto’s position in Kenya’s politics today?

From left: Mrs Charity Ngilu, Mr Kijana Wamalwa, Mwai Kibaki, Raila Odinga, Kalonzo Musyoka and Prof George Saitoti hold hands when they came together under the National Rainbow Coalition in 2002. FILE PHOTO | NATION MEDIA GROUP

According to Mr Keriri, had Mr Wamalwa lived, the Banana campaign team during the 2005 referendum on the Bomas draft constitution would have won “comfortably” against the Orange side spearheaded by Mr Odinga.

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The post-election violence would also not have occurred as the Kibaki-Wamalwa team would have comfortably won the 2007 election, he believes.

He argues that having managed to bring the Luhya vote to the Narc basket in the 2002 elections, Mr Wamalwa would have delivered the Western region for Banana in the 2005 referendum and also in the 2007 elections.

Mr Keriri maintains that the Kibaki-Wamalwa-Ngilu axis was destined to win the 2002 general elections, contrary to popular opinion that Kibaki was literally handed the prize by Mr Odinga through his famous “Kibaki Tosha” declaration.

“Raila and his LDP brigade did not have the money nor the time to organise a successful campaign; they joined the winning team. They knew it and had in discussions we had with them acknowledged as much. “Kibaki Tosha” was not necessary to make NAK win,” he says.

A GREAT MAN

Former West Mugirango MP Henry Obwocha, who was among the famous grouping of youthful politicians who spearheaded the multi-party crusade, concurs: “As a person who knew and worked closely with him, Mr Wamalwa was a great man.

"He was affable, amiable and easily approachable. Many people sought him out whenever they needed help, and Mr Wamalwa did not hesitate to help them.

"He was an extremely social person and easy to work with and that is why Mr Kibaki and Mrs Ngilu found it easy to work with him to form the original NAK,” he says.

“Had he lived, his chances of succeeding were extremely high. This is because he was well liked and had no enemies and history has shown us that such people always stand great chances of ascending to high office.”

According to Mr Keriri, there was no chance that the Kibaki-Wamalwa bond would have been broken. “When Mr Kibaki, Mr Wamalwa and Mrs Ngilu united in 2002 to form a united front to face Kanu, Mr Kibaki went out of his way to ensure that Mr Wamalwa retained his Saboti parliamentary seat by helping him to campaign and giving him financial resources”, says Mr Keriri.

“Mr Kibaki always inquired from me whether we had availed Mr Wamalwa enough resources for his campaign in Saboti even as we concentrated on national campaigns,” he said in an interview with the Nation.

POST-WAMALWA SCENARIOS

Political commentator Dr Adams Oloo ruled out an apt analysis of the post-Wamalwa scenarios: “These questions are exciting. However, I cannot comment on hypothetical situations that cannot be tested.

"The questions you raise can only draw speculative assumptions,” said Dr Oloo, who heads the Political Science and Public Administration department at the University of Nairobi.

Although historian and International Relations expert, Prof Macharia Munene, concurs with Dr Oloo, he argues that it is still possible to deduce some scenarios going by Mr Wamalwa’s political history.

“Judging from his mien, it is almost certain that Mr Wamalwa would have stuck with Mr Kibaki and could have been his running mate in 2007. And contrary to what he did to his former VP (Kalonzo), I bet he would have supported Mr Wamalwa’s candidature as his successor, because the two shared a history,” observes Prof Munene.

Mr Kibaki and Mr Wamalwa schooled at the prestigious London School of Economics, albeit a decade apart.

The former President graduated with a Masters in Economics and Public Finance in 1957 while Mr Wamalwa got his Masters of Law degree in 1969.

Known for their low voltage type of politics, the two belonged to the National Alliance of Kenya (NAK) wing of NARC.
BE PRESIDENT
Seasoned journalist George Munji, who covered Mr Wamalwa for years and later served as the VP’s head of press, opines that had he lived, Mr Wamalwa would be president today. He says Central and Rift Valley regions had warmed up to Mr Wamalwa and with additional support from his populous Luhya community, “the guy would have been in State House”.

Mr Kombo is in agreement, although he is cagey on whether that would have been now or later: “Mike was charismatic and he would have definitely charmed his way into that big office. When? – I do not know”.

Prof Munene is more guarded. He says President Kibaki would have passed on the baton to Mr Wamalwa. But whether that would have made him president is another matter, because he would still have faced challenge from possible contenders such as Mr Odinga and Mr Kenyatta.

According to Mr Keriri, Mr Kibaki would have supported his VP to succeed him.

When Mr Wamalwa died it was clear that the next VP would come from western Kenya despite LDP luminaries such as Mr Musyoka lobbying for the position, says the former State House Comptroller. “Mr Moody Awori was chosen because he was a decent and an amiable man.

He was also a member of the Summit. Dr Mukhisa Kituyi, who Mr Kibaki had a soft spot for, could also have made it were it not for his relatively young age and the fact that he had been at loggerheads with Mr Wamalwa.

GENTLEMANLY APPROACH
It was not wise to have someone who was fighting Mr Wamalwa take his seat, that would have been bad politics,” he says.

Yet, still, Mr Wamalwa’s critics think he may have bungled his chances – thanks to his gentlemanly approach to politics.

Alternatively, Mr Kibaki could have adopted an attitude of indifference over his successor as he did with Mr Musyoka, thereby giving Mr Kenyatta a fighting chance.

“This gentleman was not a fighter and you tell this from the way he nearly let Mr Kibaki get away with not allocating him a ministerial docket. He was just happy to be VP and anything extra was the business of his friends to fight for him,” observes Prof Munene.

But this assertion is not entirely true. The chairman of the lion party had his moments when he showed his claws. The most memorable battle was when he faced Mr Odinga in 1995 for the seat of chairman of Ford-Kenya. Mr Wamalwa fought off a strong challenge from the Lang’ata MP – then younger and combative – at a chaotic exercise at Thika stadium.

And even when retired Anglican Bishop Manasses Kuria (now deceased), who presided over the function, postponed the exercise to the following day, Mr Wamalwa manoeuvred his way to the leadership of the party, after organising his troops back to Thika for the “elections” where he was declared winner.

Mr Odinga quit FORD-K to form the National Development Party (NDP).

Mr Odinga went on to beat Mr Wamalwa in the subsequent 1997 presidential elections, finishing third behind incumbent President Daniel arap Moi and Mr Kibaki. Mr Wamalwa was fourth in the race.

But five years later, they teamed up in NARC and Mr Wamalwa was the boss as VP and Mr Odinga, a key minister in the new government.

CRACKS IN NARC
It is difficult to tell who would have been boss today. But with Mr Wamalwa’s death, cracks in NARC escalated.

It is as if Mr Wamalwa was the glue that held NARC together, because two years later President Kibaki
Many are in agreement that the fallout in Narc might probably never have happened in Mr Wamalwa’s presence. Four months after assuming power, hostilities between LDP and NAK wings had peaked.

The LDP wing, largely made up of Kanu defectors and former NDP legislators, accused President Kibaki of failing to honour a pre-election Memorandum of Understanding. According to the pact, Mr Odinga was to be appointed prime minister, with Prof Saitoti (also LDP) as his deputy. Mr Musyoka was designated to serve as second VP.

Once safely in office, however, President Kibaki is accused of failing to initiate the necessary constitutional amendments to accommodate his LDP counterparts.

**CREATED TWO CENTRES OF POWER**

Mr Keriri maintains that both Mr Kibaki and Mr Wamalwa were inclined not to honour the MoU because it was not anchored in the Constitution.

“I am glad President Kibaki listened to advice to trash that MoU. It created two centres of power that would have seen Mr Odinga appoint his own ministers who owed allegiance to him. Imagine power sharing through an MoU that was not entrenched in the Constitution.

That was creating Zaire’s Lumumba and Kasavubu fiasco of 1960 all over again,” says Mr Keriri.

He claims that Mr Wamalwa was not keen to have the MoU honoured because “he understood Raila more than anyone else since their days in Ford Kenya.”

“When LDP started arguments on the MoU, Mr Wamalwa was firmly with Mr Kibaki. He warned Kibaki that Raila was up to no good,” he says.

Before his death, Mr Wamalwa had kicked off efforts to reconcile the two sides.

At a Cabinet retreat in Sagana he eloquently stated that there were colleagues who were playing cards across the table but hiding dangerous ones under the table.

**EVENTS AFTER HIS DEATH**

After his death, certain events including the fallout within Narc and the post-election violence which had a profound impact on Kenya’s history, happened.

Although triggered by disputed presidential polls, the 2007-2008 violence was premised on a revenge battle between NAK and LDP.

The Kanu party, which split its vote on either side, was only a pawn in the game.

In the opinion of Mr Kombo, the Narc government would have stayed together had Mr Wamalwa lived.

“The spirit and aspirations of uniting all Kenyans would have been realised. Kenyans would not be split as they are today along tribal and regional lines.”

The former Cabinet minister also believes the post-election violence would not have happened, a view shared by Mr Munji.

But Prof Munene thinks all this would have depended on Mr Wamalwa’s understanding with Mr Odinga.

If the two would have teamed up, he predicts, violence might not have happened: “But if Mr Wamalwa would have stood in the way of Mr Odinga, the 2017 polls would still have turned out chaotic.”

**ELUSIVE LUHYA UNITY**

With regard to the elusive Luhya unity, Mr Munji observes that under Mr Wamalwa, the Luhya united politically for the first time in 2002. Seasoned politician, Prof Julia Ojiambo, who knew Mr Wamalwa well and monitored his political journey right from 1974, concurs. According to Prof Ojiambo, leader of the Labour Party of Kenya, Mr Wamalwa grew gradually in politics with the community.

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“Mr Wamalwa was acceptable to us more than any other leader. He was largely home-grown. We struggled together, flopped in elections with him and re-emerged victors with him,” says Prof Ojiambo, who alongside Mr Wamalwa made their debut in elective politics in 1974.

Prof Ojiambo captured the Funyula parliamentary seat while Mr Wamalwa failed in Kitale East but captured it in the next polls in 1979.

Unlike the “home groomed” Wamalwa, other political leaders who have assumed top positions in government, including former VPs Musalia Mudavadi and Moody Awori, were appointed or imposed on the locals by “outsiders”.

Former minister Noah Wekesa predicts that a Luhya leader will emerge naturally, “in the same way Wamalwa did, or the late Masinde Muliro and Moses Mudavadi. None of them campaigned to be a Luhya leader.”

Additional reporting: Wanjoji Githae and Peter Leftie


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