

● ANALYSIS

Lessons for Cord and Jubilee from the Malindi, Kericho by-elections

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The by-elections in Kericho and Malindi held on March 7 were of great national public interest. Both counties received unusual attention in the hope of luring voters to become followers of certain leaders.

The by-elections were occasioned by the appointment of ODM MP from Malindi Dan Kazungu and URP Kericho Senator Charles Keter to the Cabinet.

The two by-elections, although held on the same day with equal political drama, did not have the same political weight. Both were turned into a contest between Jubilee and Cord, presumably in preparation for 2017.

In each case, victory meant different things. For Jubilee, the sense of victory in Malindi was relative to the expected performance. The party had a realistic assessment of the likely outcome -- that Cord would retain the seat. This probably explains why Jubilee's participation appeared as an afterthought rather than a serious show of interest. The party had virtually conceded the seat to ODM until it presumably was prodded to wake up and at least show the Jubilee flag by giving Cord some political hard time.

In showing the flag, its operatives went in with enthusiasm and the objective was to register a respectable political presence rather than to capture the seat.

Jubilee's candidate Philip Charo captured more than 9,000 votes, at least one third of those cast. Since this was a respectable showing, the party achieved its objective.

The objective in Kericho, however, was an outright victory. The campaign was an intramural dogfight for supremacy in Kalenjinland, pitting Deputy President William Ruto against Bomet Governor Isaac Rutto and Baringo Senator Gideon Moi.

In terms of social 'class' and political 'pedigree', the Deputy President is a 'new man' with new money who has been upsetting the Kalenjin establishment. To their chagrin he was quick to fill the leadership vacuum left by the exit of former President Daniel arap Moi.

Among those amused by that quickness was Isaac Rutto, who is older than the DP in age and politics. Rutto was in university student politics in 1982 and became a guest of the State after the attempted coup.

Elected to Parliament in 1997, he served as assistant minister and minister in Moi's government.

Ruto was also elected to Parliament in 1997, having entered politics in 1992 as a Youth for Kanu operator. He served as an assistant minister.

When Moi left office, it was William rather than Isaac who captured national attention, ruffling political feathers within Kanu by declaring his presidential ambitions in 2006. That way, William



stole the political match from his 'elders' and they were not amused.

The events of the 2007 elections made William the unquestioned leader of the Kalenjin Rift, but they also made him vulnerable, particularly after he became an ICC-accused at The Hague, along with President Uhuru Kenyatta.

But Uhuru and Ruto were elected to the presidency, which simply added to the brewing intrigues. The Hague vulnerability implied possible political absence of William and the subsequent need to fill the shoes. It appeared as if Isaac was

preparing to fill those shoes, and as the governor of Bomet and chairman of the Council of Governors, he had opportunity to build his political portfolio. This would explain his visible effort to embarrass the Jubilee government and thus emerge as a credible alternative to William, just in case.

The by-election in Kericho, therefore, emerged as the right opportunity for several political intrigues. First, it was a chance for Isaac to establish his credentials as the alternative to William by defeating Jubilee. Second, since Isaac collaborates

closely with Cord leader Raila Odinga, it was an opportunity for Raila to put a dent into William's political armour and to erode the Jubilee national appeal.

Third, a Jubilee defeat in Kericho would have been a signal to other 'rebels' within the Jubilee household that they could actually succeed in rejecting the party leader. Such a scenario would appeal to Governor Peter Munya of Meru who succeeded Isaac as the chairman of the Council of Governors. Munya enjoys defying party leader Kiraitu Murungi who is deep in Jubilee.

The political stakes in the Kericho senatorial contest, therefore, were nationally higher than those in the Malindi parliamentary seat. As expected, ODM retained the Malindi seat but Jubilee achieved its objective of showing the political flag.

The hype in Kericho was different and it had multiple angles. First, it was a fight for the political soul of the Kalenjin people on whether to dump William Ruto and his 'hustler' image and embrace the alternative represented by establishment 'elders', Moi and Isaac. Second, it was a fight to erode Jubilee's national prominence and encourage defections from within the party.

Kanu's man Paul Sang was essentially a Cord proxy given Isaac Ruto's political closeness to Raila.

Third, the contest also appeared to be a generational one between the old guard -- represented by Sang with roots in the 1990s as a Moi minister -- and a youthful recent university graduate with hardly any recollection of the Moi days. The youth factor won.

After the Malindi and Kericho experience, all sides in the political field will need to go back to the drawing field.

In Malindi, the results show that Uhuru and his Jubilee team can increase their presence at the Coast and even capture more seats than they did in 2013.

In Kericho, the Jubilee win emphasized Ruto's dominance and sent a warning to Raila that it would not be easy to make political inroads outside the lakeside. The implied warning was also to others, like Munya, challenging Jubilee kingpins.

How well each side reassesses its fortunes remains to be seen and manifested before 2017.

