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MOUNT KENYA REGION IN THE KENYAN STATE
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These are troubled times, and they are more troubled for the people in the Mount Kenya area than in any other region. The region is literary central, with Nyeri County at the centre, going around the Mountain through Kiambu, Nyandarua, Nakuru, Laikipia, Meru, Tharaka Nithi, Embu, Kirinyaga, Murang’a and back to Kiambu. It is socio-economically productive and occasionally politically troublesome. It was troublesome in the colonial times when its people lost a lot of land to white settlers, they have yet to recover those lands, and continued to experience problems in the postcolonial times. It has a large but dwindling population that was the focus of colonial schemes on how to control “natives”. Its share on national activities is declining due to internal and external forces.

As a result, the people have developed anxiety that appears to generate collective self-doubt and to drown perceived accomplishments. There is concern about the future of the region and its people in times of growing hostility, from within the country and from extra-continental powers. When the two sources of hostility combine, the concern intensifies and makes the region appear rudderless and unprotected.

The feeling of being unprotected exists despite the presence of several high ranking state officials in government, whether appointive or elective. People generally work hard, tend to be “nationalistic” and believe in proportional and fair distribution. This means that the presence of people in high places is no guarantee that the interests of the Mountain people would be looked into. Those who might be inclined to act appear to squirm from doing the right thing. They tend to be scared of being identified with their region for fear of being labeled “tribalist”, a negative label that seems to be reserved for people in the Mountain region. It is a
brilliant strategy for holding people back while others partake of state resources, reportedly designed to hold back the horses so as to enable donkeys to catch up.

The rationale for holding back the horses (Mount Kenya people) argument relied on Euro orchestrated narratives of how people of Mount Kenya are threats to everyone else. It was part of the colonial scheme to turn everyone else against the Mountain by depicting the people as inherently bad, as the ones who inflict pain on others but hardly receive any, and as having acquired wealth illegitimately. In the process heho (fear) was instilled on the people during the Mau Mau War and then intensified in the post-colonial periods. This colonially concocted myth then made it “just” to deprive the people of the Mountain of wealth or deny them access to resources supposedly in order to allow donkeys to catch up with horses.

Depriving people of the Mountain was official colonial policy and fear, or heho, was one of the tools of pauperization. This fear, the heho, was instilled in the people during the Mau Mau War and then intensified in the post-colonial periods. Although the people generally work hard, tend to be “nationalistic,” believe in proportional and fair distribution, they are scared of being identified with their region for fear of being labelled “tribalist.” Some leaders from other areas developed ability to identify Mountain people either through “stained teeth” or through names that “betrayed”. This ability enabled such leaders to warn of cutting “Ibos” to size and forcing them to be flat like envelops or to lie low like antelopes. This way, heho succeeded in making people accept awkward things and to be agreeable in order to avoid unknown repercussions at the socio-economic and political levels.

As a result, acceptance of unreasonable losses and victimization in the country and in various counties from almost every corner of the republic appears to be the norm or the new normal for people of the Mountain. Just visit a few counties and
listen to what people say they experience, simply because they are associated with the Mountain. There was even the destruction of industries that were perceived to be associated with the peoples of Mountain. The destruction of the coffee industry in the 1980s, short sighted as it was, for instance, was essentially implementation of the philosophy of holding back horses; the long term damage to the country was irrelevant. A myth was then created to imply that holding back horses was *maendeleo*. And some Mountain people bought the strange narrative.

They have also largely bought other myths. Among them is that Mount Kenya people do not vote for members of any other community. The record is different for people vote for the best possible candidate, not always from their ethnic group. The same applies to people in other regions, they vote the perceived best candidate. Mwai Kibaki won twice in 2002 and 2007 and Uhuru Kenyatta won three times in 2013 and 2017 because Kenyans preferred them to other candidates, not because they were Mountain people. Yet the myth, based on misreading of the 1992, 1997, 2013, and 2017 elections persist.

Some of those Mountain people also bought and repeated other Euro, mainly British, sponsored narratives regarding two interlinked 21st Century events. The first relates to the 2007 election and the subsequent terminological cover-up presented as “post-election violence” or “PEV.” This narrative pretends that electoral violence was “post-election” and ignores the fact that war mongers had turned people into IDPs before the voting day, thereby necessitating creation of special voting stations. Arising out of the first is the second narrative found in the Truth and Justice Reconciliation Report, TJRC, which was carefully calibrated to start in 1963. Both were heavily influenced by Euro forces that were external to Kenya.
The effect of the two Euro orchestrated narratives was to portray the people of Mount Kenya as horrible in every conceivable way. Although the surface of the truth of what happened in the 2007 election is hardly scratched, the Euro engineered PEV narrative was stressed long enough for it to gain traction. Within a few days of Kibaki narrowly winning the election, British Foreign Secretary David Miliband peculiarly called for “the sharing of political power”. The emerging narrative claimed that war mongers launched their violence because, and after, the Electoral Commission of Kenya stole votes at the Kenyatta International Conference Centre, KICC.

The reality was different. Johann Kriegler Commission, the only one that investigated claims of electoral fraud at KICC, examined all the claims and concluded that there was no electoral theft at KICC. Instead, Krigler said, bad arithmetic had deprived Mwai Kibaki more votes than either Kalonzo Musyoka or Raila Odinga. That debunked the myth of vote theft at KICC and yet, the misrepresentation of theft at KICC continued to be hammered so much that some people in Mount Kenya came to believe it and even started repeating the same self-destructing narrative. Despite the “PEV” logic being flawed, it was good enough to lead to the next narrative that appeared designed to vilify Mount Kenya people, the TJRC. It was peculiar that no Kenyan historian was involved in that project whose supposed purpose was to search for “historical” truth.

The two destructive narratives were launched and virtually succeeded, in part, because the people of Mount Kenya are complacent and generally guilty of ignoring the creation of narratives. They have been lured and fallen into the trap of believing that history is not important, that they can profitably outsource their narratives, and that they therefore do not have to support or be concerned with historical studies. They instead live in a world of make believe, that they are big in numbers and think that they will remain so, and that they are doing well and are
the pillars of the national economy. When such delusions are over stretched, they miss the telltale signs of being “fixed” and losing out.

Mount Kenya people, therefore, have been losing on virtually everything, are socio-economically dislocated, and still imagine they are doing well. They are losing on such critical areas as children production, shares in allocation of job opportunities and resources, and educational institutions. Young men are so disoriented that many have become dysfunctional and deny young women opportunity to become mothers. It was amusing when Sabina Chege, Maitu of County Number 21, Murang’a, went around rewarding pregnant women with a thousand shillings just for being pregnant. And Gathoni wa Mucomba, MP for Kiambu, suggested that able men be like their great grandfathers and have additional wives. The message the two women legislators were passing was that there is a social and demographic crisis when lack of children leads to school closures and economic and socio-cultural activities go down. As a result, shopping centres have become stagnant even as others that are strategically located evolve into multi-community urban centres.

The magnitude of the decline is best understood in the context of comparison with other areas. As primary schools close for lack of pupils in the Mountain, eager children crowd primary schools in previously “remote” zones. This simply means that people in those zones work hard to increase their population and their ability to make demands on the country. The Mountain people lose ability to make demands in proportion to their decline in population. Another indicator is the population in secondary schools and colleges/universities in the Mountain region. Although officially located in the Mountain region, the people tend to be minorities in terms of student bodies. Mountain people are generally absent, and heho makes it acceptable, in the top management of universities and colleges in
the region. The result is people feel detached from those institutions even if they are located in their midst.

People compare state effort to revive collapsed economic institutions and note that they do not get the same attention as producers of sugar cane, cotton, *karafiuu*, or fishing. They would not mind if a few billions, just as in other regions, could be available for coffee, tea, and the industry for perishable farm products that feed urban areas. They also observe anomalies in the allowance for resource control at the local level and wonder. If Turkana, Narok, Kitui, and Kwale can have big say in the control of natural wealth in those counties, why should it not be the case with counties in the Mountain?

The feeling of being shortchanged and being fair game for others to shoot at erodes sense of confidence, is widespread in the Mountain region, and calls for deep thought. It calls for admission that people are collectively not doing well, internally and externally. From within, there is social dislocation. Displays of extremes of wealth side by side with abject poverty make regional unity difficult due to class difference. Ordinarily, the rich of the Mountain are closer to the rich of the Lake, the Valley, the Wilderness, the Sea, and the Semi Desert than they are to the poor in the Mountain zone. And the poor, especially in urban areas, are class conscious and closer to the other poor than to their ethnic rich. The task in front, therefore, is to ensure that class differences within the Mountain do not explode and add to the challenge of confronting regional identity hostility.

There often is a lot of talk about leadership and unity, an ephemeral concept in that each potential “leader” wants unity in which others follow him/her. Often, situations provide the leadership of the moment but at present there is no consensus on what that leadership would entail. There are so many competing leadership factions, some of them in this room, that their rivalry creates more
confusion than solutions. The desire to be the ONE undermines the desired Mountain dream. Situations produced giants of their time: Thuku, Kang’ethe, Kenyatta, Koinange, Angaine, Nyaga. Have the Mountain people reached such a point of desperation that a natural leader will emerge, capture the moment, address the concerns in a mature way, and be accepted as such? Who among the current “leadership” aspirants shows quality and fits the Bill?

In the meanwhile, there are some realities to confront. First 2007/08 was a turning point not only in Kenya but among the people of the mountain. The people got beat for voting and they were beaten when they thought they were safe. They were whipped physically, psychologically, and in media or public relations. They had problems believing that the beating could take place in the presence of security apparatus. Although the state security machinery was not hostile, that did not stop influential people from scheming violence against them in effort to nullify votes. They were also blamed, in strange Euro concocted narratives reminiscent of colonial days, for the violence that was visited on them. There subsequently were two contradictory reactions to the beating.

First was the relegating of the Mau Mau experience, the one responsible for heho, to the background. That experience had instilled a sense of collective cowardice for fear of reliving those nasty times. There had also developed inordinate faith in the state ability to “protect”. That faith was destroyed in the events of 2007/08 and, as a result, there developed a general determination not to get beat again. The message was clear. Since the fact of a few people holding high office was no guarantee for security, there was need for self-defense readiness. To do that, irrespective of the circumstances, they would rely on themselves rather than on the state. Relying on state apparatus for security became collectively suspect and the 2007/08 events became constant reference point.
The second reaction was one of surrender and increased self-doubt, self-blame, and virtual self-hatred. It was a survival instinct to avoid trouble. It was to give in to demands even if they were unreasonable as long as they are left alone to thrive individually. This implied accepting carefully crafted hostile Euro narratives in books and media reports. As Africanists and related Euro scholars flooded the country and the world with skewed explanations that always pointed at Mount Kenya as the permanent source of trouble, some Mountain related people repeated the narrative as if it was gospel. A few declared that they were ashamed of their ancestry. These would then struggle to be accepted by other peoples, as being different from their bad kinsmen. They would accept discrimination, exonerate others, and heap senses of guilt on themselves.

It is difficult to tell which of the two reactions to the 2007/08 trauma is dominant. There appears to be confusion, anxiety, and distrust within the community. This suspicion and distrust is growing at a time when the proportion of national resources available for the people of the Mountain is shrinking. Demographically, the Mountain is changing in that the entire peoples of Kenya live in the areas. In that sense, the Mountain has been “nationalized” to the extent that no people can claim exclusive ownership. This trend is not likely to change any time, especially with rapid urbanization of the area.

The implication is that the Mountain people, no longer claiming exclusive ownership, become conceptually homeless and can therefore move to any corner of the republic and East Africa to settle and create homes. Their sense of identity, therefore, has ceased to be geographical and stresses cultural-linguistic remnants in new geographical settings. It is common to hear people at the Coast, near national border zones, or desert areas loudly declare in times of crises: “We are not moving out of Here”. The implication is that their attachment to the Mountain
is at best nostalgic, probably emotional, and historical. It is increasingly not geographical.

Given that the Mountain is becoming demographically “international” as its people become “international” in places of settlement, what is it about the people that need to be preserved and perpetuated? Whatever it is, it will have to be in the realm of concept as to the identity of those people. The defining uniqueness, if any, that separates them from other people would have to be made clear to all in such a way that they all will say “Yes” to that particular identity. And it will not be geographical.

There currently appears to be a yearning for acceptable leadership that would help to define this identity that is not geographically confined. It is therefore a mind exercise of trying to fuse together the two post-2007/08 conflicting trauma reactions. These are readiness to fight for one’s rights, on one side, and the surrender/submission to concocted narratives of Mountain victimization, on the other. That leadership would have to reduce distrust and suspicion and be acceptable to both camps as a unifying force which gives hope and identity to divided people. There is, therefore, need for a “David” equivalent. It is, at present, hard to tell who is likely to be the “David” of the Mountain until he shows his slingshot.