

Book Review:

Munene, Macharia, *The Politics of Transition in Kenya, 1995–1998.*

Nairobi: Friends-of-the Book Foundation. 2001.pp. x1+107, paperback, ISBN: 9966 –925 – 14 –7.

To write a current history of Kenya from 1995 to 1998 requires judgement and maturity. In modern Kenya, writing especially current history, can be more than the pleasantly “subversive activity” advocated by post-modernists. The author has the necessary academic qualities and he has produced the kind of history which urgently needs writing – and reading – in Kenya. The author is a professor of history at the United States International University, Nairobi, Kenya.

Those familiar with contemporary Kenya will not find much here that is new. However, this little book is probably not intended to be pathbreaking. Instead the author has produced an authoritative and persuasive political history which underpins the challenge to build a strong and lasting democracy in Kenya. This was entirely a phenomenon of the events that occurred in Kenya between 1995 and 1998. These events culminated in the political crisis that virtually threatened to shake the edifice of genuine multipartism that had been ushered in 1991. This is solidly liberal historiography aimed at the middle ground, the kind of responsible opinion to which Jomo Kenyatta, the first president of Kenya, once appealed: but it is neither bland nor unengaged. It takes issues first with the circumstances that made the public to lose faith in the political class, whether within government or the opposition. These, the author traces to the first decade of the independence era, maintaining that the seeds of the present presidency wielding highly centralised powers were sown in 1964 when the minority opposition party (the Kenya African Democratic Union – KADU), voluntarily dissolved itself and joined the Kenya African National Union – KANU. The result was that Kenya became a defacto one-party state, thereby providing the occasion for the presidency to start amassing enormous powers and also creating a personality cult comparable only to that of a feudal monarch. This is the central thesis of the book.

Thus when in 1978 President Daniel arap Moi took over the reigns of power following the death of President Kenyatta, the former inherited a highly constructed authoritarian one-party state. The author contends that

Moi perfected the repressive style of leadership to the extent that in 1982, via parliament, he succeeded in having Kenya made a *de jure* one-party state. From then onwards, the author maintains, the Moi regime continued to demonstrate immense intolerance to dissent by detaining most of its critics who included academics, opposition politicians and other cadres of civil society. A pro-democracy movement ensued as the result of heightened intolerance and repression. It was championed by human rights lawyers, the clergy, the intelligentsia, popular musicians, and progressive politicians, among others.

The author's conclusion is that a major transition occurred in 1997 which completely transformed the Kenya political scene. The defiant spirit of the pro-democracy movement ensured that the political class did not monopolize decision making in the political arena. The masses established that they had the capability to delegitimize the political class and bestow authority on an alternative centre of power.

Despite the fact that the book is a bold attempt to shed light on some key events that occurred in Kenya during the stipulated period, it has its own flaws. First, the book suffers from the absence of theoretical rigour. In other words, the author makes no attempt to provide the theoretical parameters of transition upon which the central thesis of the book should have been constructed. Second, the author uses irritating terminology such as 'tribe' or 'tribal' as is evidenced on pages 5, 23, 35, and 42 without any qualification. It is obvious that such terminology has negative connotations the way it was used by colonial anthropologists and historians and their African disciples to imply the 'backwardness' of Africans. At the beginning of the twenty first century, such languages cannot be accepted; it ought to be decolonized.

Third, this little book could have been greatly expanded given the wealth of sources both written and oral. This seems to suggest that perhaps the author was in a hurry to publish what arguably is a very important theme in Kenya's contemporary political history-political transition. Of course the transition did not end in 1998; it continues to date with the events that have continued to occur especially in face of the impending general election which will also see Moi retire from the presidency. In others, Kenya has so far failed to make a successful transition and eventual consolidation. Thus, the phase of political or democratic transition is yet to take off. The drawing up and implementation of a new national constitution may well be at the centre of this process. Effectively then, the Yashpal Ghai Constitution Review Commission efforts to come up with a new national constitution may just be the panacea to Kenya's entrenched authoritarianism.

Nevertheless, *The Politics of Transition* is not the last word on contemporary Kenya; nor does it shift the ground of historical and political debates.

Instead it uses the survey to reaffirm "the Kenya we want", with the analytical balance and grasp of the essentials. If the author's historical vision is true, Kenya may yet witness better days again. Otherwise the book is a must reading for students of political history, political science, political sociology, the political class, journalists and even the *wanainchi* (ordinary people) since its presentation and illustrations of real live events are not complicated.

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