

Do you want a Kenyan Magufuli?

By Ken Nyaundi¹

In the week preceding the Tanzania General Election, I spent time in the country as part of the African Union Election Observer Mission team. As the campaigns came to a close, it was evident that for the first time since independence, the ruling party, Chama Cha Mapenduzi (CCM) was facing a real challenge to its 54-year-old hold on power. The opposition coalition, Ukawa, kept up the heat on the government by pointing out the many failures attributed to CCM. However what was obvious, also, was that the CCM candidate, now president Magufuli campaigned as though he was running as an independent candidate. CCM campaign posters bore a prominent picture of Magafuli and his eye catching and conspicuous messages, making only a fleeting reference to the party. That was an astute and shrewd strategy by CCM as it helped to ward off direct criticism and front the strong personal credentials of their candidate. Sometimes one got the feeling that Magufuli was more popular than CCM.

On Wednesday 28th October 2015, the Electoral Commission declared John Magufuli nicknamed 'the bulldozer' for his track record as works minister, president elect with 58.46% of the vote, against 39.97% for his main rival, Edward Lowassa.

Having been elected president of Tanzania, Magufuli has launched a literal and figurative clean up of the country. He has embarked on cleaning the filthy neighborhoods in Dar es Salaam; cutting government expenditure and waste, gluttony and avarice as well as impunity and vileness. He has banned all foreign travel, except for essential causes, and even then for a limited number of personnel. He has dismissed indolent and lackluster government officers. His hand has visited the lunch boxes in government departments, dictating the menu, time and type of cuisine. He has become for Tanzania what Kagame is for Rwanda; a commander in chief of everything. Magufuli's fight against corruption has quickly become legend on the continent.

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But why is president Magufuli able to do all these things in one stroke? Because of his personality and the law. The Tanzania constitution preserves the president as the overall authority in all executive functions. All tasks of the Government are discharged on behalf of the President. The President has the power to constitute and to abolish any office in the service of the government. He has the authority to appoint persons to various offices and to promote, remove, dismiss and discipline such officers. In other words he can hire and fire at whim. The Service Commissions established under the constitution are accountable to him. Where the constitution requires the president to act on the advice of any person or authority, he is not obliged to take that advice. This is what it means to be Magufuli.

In his First 100 days Magufuli has accomplished, arguably, more for Tanzania than Mwinyi, Mkapa and Kikwete achieved in all their combined time as presidents. He has pressed the reset knob for Tanzania, returning the country to the independence CCM settings.

Why didn't all these former presidents utilize the vast presidential powers to do what Magufuli is now doing? Here is the variance. Magufuli, a teacher by training who, while serving as a minister in government obtained a PhD in chemistry, was a surprise candidate chosen by CCM against all the odds. He was not an insider within the party. He does not, therefor feel indebted to the purveyors of corruption within the corridors of power. He is free to act as his own person.

Magufuli campaigned on a clear platform of hard work and change. He took over power with a strong manifesto, which he has sworn to implement. He has shown that the manifesto was not a campaign tool but a work schedule. Unfortunately Magufuli risks a rapid burnout. A president cannot oversee government operations like a high school head master.

Yet, undoubtedly, it is because African states operate on weak and fragile systems and structures that Magufuli must now function as a one-man government. Luckily for Tanzanians, the law and the personality of Magafuli have fused to produce a reformist whirlwind that has a positive touch on every aspect of their lives. But should a president apply his

energies on such mundane duties as inspecting hospital wards and pronouncing himself on provisions in government offices? Is there not another formula for achieving the same results? Micro managing a country has its benefits but it eventually leads to dependence on personalities, hero worship and establishment of imperial powers. Signs of this are already evident. Returning from Rwanda last week, I sat next to a Tanzanian who told me that the feeling in the country is that Tanzania should not hold a general election in 2020 but by acclamation extend Magufuli's term by another five years. Here is a Kagame in the making.

If Magafuli were to emulate South Korea's reformist Kim Young-Sam and Iran's Mohamed Khatami, Tanzania will in the next few years become an economic giant in the region.