

‘Brown Envelope’ Journalism is killing democracy in Kenya – A Protest Article
By Miguna Miguna, April 30, 2017

Kenyan journalism is at the Intensive Care Unit. It is dying from an acute bout of discernible poor training, incompetence, ineffective self-regulation, unprofessionalism, infiltration by organised criminal enterprises and an inability or unwillingness to serve the public interests. If the “patient” is not cured soon, it will die.

The death of the Kenyan media will have a catastrophic effect on the quality of our democracy. An effective, professional and vigilant media protects innocent civilians from the vagaries and excesses of unprincipled and greedy politicians, criminal gangs and crooked “businesses.”

Yet, nowadays, many Kenyans find reading daily newspapers, listening to radio and watching television shows to be a very painful experience. News stories are poorly sourced and written. Readers are distracted by typographical and grammatical errors. Some stories are plainly manufactured. The quality and rigour of commentaries are so poor that many readers wonder how and for what reasons the writers or articles were chosen. The standard of media professionalism has deteriorated so much that there is hardly any residual gain the public gets from its products.

Biased, slanted and distorted stories are published daily. The wealthy, regardless of their sources of wealth, are glorified. Common hoodlums, thieves, drug dealers and criminals are hailed as “prominent businessmen” or simply called “tycoons.” They are routinely allocated acres of space. A Kenyan “tycoon” isn’t closely examined by the media; their obnoxious and ostentatious displays of primitive accumulation and consumption are excused as “cool.” Criminals are worshipped. Criminality is varnished and glorified.

When “prominent public figures” such as Mike Mbuvi Sonko, Evans Kidero, William Kabogo or Margaret Wanjiru are caught on camera behaving badly by swearing, publicly dishing out money to people on the street, physically assaulting each other, discharging their firearms, using heavily armed goons to harass civilians, driving on the wrong side of roads – or as in the case of Sonko – looking inebriated or intoxicated while seated in front of alcoholic beverages, hitting walls with his bare hands, lying and rolling on roads, abusing or threatening journalists (as he did to Caroline Mutoko) or calling mourners “Jinga Nyinyi”), or stage managing a purported attack on “land grabbers” or engaging in many other public displays of charlatanism – these primitive and illegal acts are either cleverly concealed, suppressed from wide circulation or are mischaracterised as “bona fide” signs of “flamboyance” or “charisma.”

The gullible public is bombarded with images of “leaders” wearing torn attire, ear studs and ‘bling’ associated with drug dealers while portraying them as chic. The media reports despicable voyeurism, opportunism and PR stunts as indicators of “popularity.” Noise pollution and lewd physical movements in colourful caravans are celebrated and called “voter mobilisation.”

Extra judicial killings and other human rights abuses are reported as if they are normal and acceptable daily occurrences. Massive looting of public resources and grabbing of public land

are either concealed or hidden in secluded sections of the newspapers and TV programs or excused as “errors.” To the Kenyan media, the crook has the final word and laughter.

There is zero interrogation of public officials, especially elected ones on how they have performed their functions in office. No journalist has audited Sonko’s performance in the Senate for the past five years. No media house has highlighted the fact that Sonko has been rated the worst performing senator in the last four years. Sonko has never contributed to a bill nor sponsored one. He doesn’t participate in parliamentary committees and has failed to provide oversight as he should on the horrendous failures of the Nairobi County Government headed by Kidero. In fact, Sonko has never uttered a coherent word in the Senate.

In other words, Sonko has been paid tens of millions of tax payers’ shillings for doing nothing as a senator the same way he was remunerated for years as a non-performing MP.

Instead of publishing investigative stories, the compromised media glorifies the “exploits of the Sonko Rescue Teams” without asking the following questions.

What are Sonko’s sources of wealth? Can they be ethically and forensically verified?

Why do people who have paid taxes and deserve basic health and emergency services require “rescues” based on pity? Does Sonko need to be a governor to run a rescue team?

Why couldn’t Sonko – as a senator – ensure that Nairobi County creates economic/financial empowerment through sustainable employment of the vulnerable to take care of themselves rather than begging for rescues?

Why haven’t Sonko and Kidero established functioning fire stations with adequate fire trucks and trained personnel, when these have been allocated for in successive budgets? Where did the money allocated for these amenities go? Who stole the money?

Why haven’t Sonko and Kidero established a modern emergency service department with enough ambulances and trained medical staff?

Why has Sonko been allowed to vie for and occupy public office while having a criminal record for fraud and after having escaped from prison - crimes he has publicly confessed to?

What have Sonko and Kidero done to ensure that Nairobi’s garbage, housing and transportation menace are addressed?

Does Sonko understand devolution and the functions of a county government leave alone the responsibilities of a governor?

Is it possible for a person without integrity, policies and programs to lead the capital city of Kenya and financial hub of East and Central Africa to prosperity?

The answer is a resounding “NO.” To suggest that Sonko can govern Nairobi is akin to saying that a functionally illiterate drug dealer and criminal can surgically remove a brain tumour from a patient. The patient would die. The man lacks basic training, discipline, experience and ability to comprehend the complexities of Nairobi’s problems, leave alone being able to solve them.

Sonko is just a cunning charlatan who - like members of organised criminal enterprises the world over - exploits the existing structural inequalities in society to perpetuate the culture of impunity. Like Sonko, Kidero and Kabogo are part and parcel of the rotten, unjust, unequal, and exploitative establishment that isn’t merit-based.

Sonko’s purported “anti-establishment” theatrics are nothing but transparent frauds and PR stunts. He represents the mainstreaming of organised criminal enterprises in political and economic leadership. The unemployed, exploited and poor youth in the slums follow him for handouts; not because he offers concrete plans for their economic empowerment and independence, which is what they need.

The Sonkonisation of politics doesn’t represent a class struggle between the working and jobless poor on the one hand and the dominant, ruthless, exploitative and rapacious oligarchs on the other because Sonko and his band of fraudulent thugs are part of the latter.

The unfortunate phenomenon of young, unemployed and hungry youth being taken advantage of and misused by a manipulative criminal demagogue should not be glorified. It’s a retrogression that conscious patriots must fight and defeat. Sonko – like Kidero and Kabogo - are part of the problems; not their solutions. Sonko is, after all, Kabogo’s best friend and “business partner.”

The Kenyan media has normalised and “laundered” white collar crimes, especially the theft of public resources by elected and appointive public officials, so much so that, they hardly allocate the Auditor General’s annual reports any space. Kidero’s well-documented exploits at the Mumias Sugar Company are hardly mentioned.

There has been zero spotlight on the 2,000 parcels of public land that have mysteriously disappeared in Nairobi; the tens of billions of public assets that are not accounted for; the arrest and charging of Kidero’s Chief Financial Officer and Chief of Staff for the theft of billions of public money while the latter hasn’t even been suspended; the deregistration of the Evans Kidero Foundation for money laundering and his alleged bribery of the Supreme Court Judges; and his physical assault of Rachel Shebesh on live TV.

Throughout history, professional journalists, progressive clergy, students, lawyers, organised labour and civil activists have fought against repressive regimes and protected public interests. In other words, when these traditional “defenders” of the vulnerable, the poor and the exploited are weakened or compromised, our democracy suffers a fatal blow and dies.

In consistent and prominent advertisements in its daily newspapers, the *Nation Media Group* proclaims that, “WE DO NOT CONDONE ‘BROWN ENVELOPE’ JOURNALISM.” It defines “Brown Envelope Journalism” as a situation in which “journalists, or people purporting to be

journalists, solicit or accept various forms of kickbacks, gifts or cash rewards in exchange for favourable press coverage.”

That’s a laudable message, except that I’ve encountered a *Nation Media Group* journalist who explicitly told me, with a winkle, that “paying for coverage is normal in Kenya” and strongly nudged me to pay her. I didn’t.

Evidently, the Kenyan media especially the print media has unfairly given me a blackout. I regularly hold, speak at or attend many functions in the presence of journalists. However, they either crop me out from images they publish about those events or muzzle me by reporting on my opponents but not on or about me.

No honest observer can claim that I lack content. Moreover, a fair, balanced and professional coverage of all candidates vying for public office is not just a global best practice principle; it is also entrenched in the *Media Council Act, 2013*.

Clearly, ‘Brown Envelope’ journalism violates the *Code of Conduct for the Practice of Journalism in Kenya*.

As I continue reading newspapers, listening to and watching coverage of the Nairobi gubernatorial race published daily without my name mentioned (and only Kidero, Sonko and those not even vying are consistently and prominently displayed), while every media house knows I’m a candidate, I’m now convinced beyond any reasonable doubt that brown envelope journalism is killing democracy in Kenya.

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