YOUTH & DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

Youth in nation-building & community leadership; youth role in electoral process; youth & national leadership; youth & governance

I bring you greetings from Canada and the Kenyan Diaspora. Our people in the Diaspora are elated with the impending constitutional order with the YES vote in the recent referendum. As with the rest of Kenyans, we MUST pat ourselves on our backs for a job well done! Please stand up and shake hands with your neighbour and say: pongezi! We made it!

The debate on reforms has been ongoing for many years; almost 30 of them! It that process it claimed victims that were branded system enemies who were locked away, tortured and jailed. We must treasure what we have earned and the point we have reached; if well-nurtured, the new constitution would midwife the prosperity that the country so badly needs.

The debate on reforms also underlined a major issue: disagreeing on opinion but agreeing on co-existence; and deferring to the democratic will of the people.

I know that some have branded those that voted NO as “enemies”, even suggesting that those holding NO side ministerial position holders be removed from cabinet or be forced to resign. This is a sentiment with which I disagree. All of us have a democratic right to choose; those that chose to vote NO exercised this democratic right. In any case, this was a constitutional question and can be seen as a “free vote” unencumbered with party loyalties. It wasn’t a policy matter as such.

The NO campaign also played another major role in the democratic process: they helped Kenyans clarify many issues and positions taken in the constitution. Whether it was the matter of Kadhi courts, the issue of land or the question of abortion and right to life, the points made by the NO side allowed reflection and hence clarification on what is stated in the constitution.

Tolerance is a major attribute of democratic society and Kenyans demonstrated this spirit in the recent referendum; we can have different opinions and live together harmoniously. Our prayers are that the spirit demonstrated by both the NO and YES sides after the referendum will last into the future; and we all have a duty to sustain this spirit. And, as President Obama would say: YES WE CAN!

Ama?

Passing the constitution is a first step towards a new order in Kenya. The way we manage the transition and implement the letter and spirit of the document will determine the path ahead for us all Kenyans.

It is a call to us all to make it happen! We must make it happen.

My topic today is on youth and democratic governance. It touches on youth leadership within local and national leadership. It also focuses on what role we as citizens should play to ensure effective governance in our country for the benefit of our people.

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Matunda Nyanchama is an ICT Professional & a past president of the Kenyan Community Abroad.
Like earlier speakers and those that will follow, my discussion is part of information-sharing and I am hoping that it will enrich us all, especially if we find value in its application. It is George Bernard Shaw who said that "If you have an apple and I have an apple and we exchange these apples then you and I will still each have one apple. But if you have an idea and I have an idea and we exchange these ideas, then each of us will have two ideas."

In general,

"Democratic governance refers to the management of societal affairs in accordance with the universal principles of democracy as a system of rule that maximizes popular consent and participation, the legitimacy and accountability of rulers, and the responsiveness of the latter to the expressed interests and needs of the public."

As we know, governance establishes the manner in which people are governed and how matters of state are administered; and how all this is regulated, especially for common good. Democracy thrives in systems where governance is participatory and accountable.

Question: is a Kenya a democratic state? If so, to what degree is it democratic? And if not, to what degree is it not democratic?

The idea is to participate in affairs of society; identify priorities, elect leaders to carry the will of the people and hold those leaders to account.

Let me ask how many of us are active in identifying priorities of our communities? For instance, how many effectively participate in determining where money from the Constituency Development Fund (CDF) is spent? How many ask whether the way CDF money is disbursed is the most effective way to spend it for the common good? How many follow up to make sure that yes, the money was spent as planned and for the priorities established and agreed upon; and in a transparent manner?

How many of you young people participate in ongoing community and state matters?

When I was growing up (I am still growing up) the mantra was that "work hard in school for you are leaders of tomorrow"; and a lot of people that preached this are still around, working hard to hang on to their leadership positions. They don't want to give way; many see these positions as a right rather than a privilege to serve.

Now let's get back to the issue of "tomorrow". There is a saying that tomorrow never comes! So, I take the position that, if tomorrow never comes, we must not wait to be leaders of tomorrow; we must lead today. Indeed, we are leaders of today and must demonstrate so.

"The mantra should be: work hard and lead today! And no, don’t wait for leadership to be handed to you. Work for it! Seek it! And take it, democratically of course.” – see www.matunda.org.

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With the new dispensation, all of us Kenyans have an opportunity to change the mindset that says that youth wait for tomorrow and their turn to lead. Youth must lead now; you must lead today; it is upon us to change the old thinking that condemns youth to inexperience and lack of foresight; old thinking is hard-placed take us forward for, as it is said, you cannot bend an old tree! And old dogs can't learn new tricks.

Youth have a relative advantage over old folks in many ways. This is especially so with respect to their energy and fresh perspectives that they can bring forth.

As a society, we would be making a mistake when we fail to tap into the tremendous energies of our young people.

"When youth energy is harnessed for common good, it can move mountains! American upheavals of the 1950s and 1960s that rocked the American social order were largely advanced by the young people many that rejected the old order! Through protest (e.g. against the Vietnam War, racial discrimination, etc.), music (rock and roll), clothing, and many other ways, they were able to create a "new order"! The US president Barack Obama makes that point: being a beneficiary of an order driven largely by youthful energy of leaders like Martin Luther King Jr.” – www.matunda.org.

Young people also have self-interest to ensure that there is good social order and governance, if only because they have more time ahead of them compared to older folks. On average, a person of 20 years is expected to live longer than a person of 50 years.

... In my view, there are many reasons why we don’t get as many young people in leadership as would be desirable, some of which are cultural. For instance, in African culture, we are supposed to defer to our elders. This deference to elders, in the past, created orderly society in which older, experienced people made decisions on behalf of the young.

Times have changed though. Today’s young people are likely to have more world knowledge than our old folks, knowledge which can be used to informed decisions.

As well, in the old days, elders were true to the societies and communities in which they lived. In modern days, however, some of the elders are the most corrupt that society has ever seen. They are selfish and pursue own interests at the expense of the people and yet seek privileged position of yore.

"It is better to have a young man with a grand, achievable vision for Kenya than an elder who perpetuates tribalism, takes and gives bribes, causes ethnic clashes, facilitates corruption scandals and more! Conversely, I had rather have an elder with democratic values, works for the common good and is committed to a prosperous Kenya.” – check my blog: www.matunda.org

Youth, though, is not a panacea to our problems; some of the most corrupt people are relatively young. Just check who was in YK’92 that helped Moi win the 1992 elections; or the most recent post-election violence. Some of the worst perpetrators of evil (corruption, tribalism and similar ills) are young people.

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So what are some of the practical ways that you can get involved in making our society better?

1. **Audit government performance and service delivery**: remember we elect the people that run the government; in the process we delegate power to them to act in our interests. We must constantly seek that government delivers according to promise. Examples: education (what quality of education are we providing our children?); health (are we getting services that allow optimal production of our population); infrastructure – roads, telecoms, etc. (is enough being spent on infrastructure to aid economic activity?); security (is enough being done to protect us from criminals); justice (is the legal process just and fair for all); … how are CDF funds spent? Do they reflect our priorities? Are they fairly distributed based on needs? Is the process transparent? … Remember: it is OK to be that whistle-blower where you see things going wrong.

2. **Propose constructive approaches to the management of public affairs**: examples: how often do you interact with elected representatives (MPs, councillors, etc.) and offer suggestions? For instance we could propose that elected committees run CDF funds; and that all spending be based on priorities identified collectively; and that we involve experts in the establishment of these priorities.

3. **Participating in the electoral process**: how many of you participate in elections? How many of you voted in the most recent one: the referendum? How many of you engage in real issues, rather than clan and the like, in choosing leaders?

4. **Community Service**: how many of you volunteer in the community? For example, more and more old people are finding themselves alone, as their offspring live in far-flung areas across the country or even across the globe. How many of us drop in to see such old people to help with their needs? Or don’t we care at all?

5. **Being whistle blowers**: this is especially where there is corruption. (by the way, I support whistle blower reward and protection, i.e. if you save the public from the misuse of funds, you are entitled to be rewarded and protected from harm; in many developed countries such protection could even encompass relocation and/or change of identity.)

It is estimated that Kenyans under 30 years of age constitute are close to 65% of the voters roll! Now there it is: one needs these numbers to make real change happen, i.e. if the numbers are harnessed properly. As such, even if youth may not have power individually, they can be very powerful with unity of purpose; and as the Ethiopian proverb says: “when spider webs unite, they can stop a lion.”

Our youth need confidence that they can make the necessary difference for a better future for our country and people. Often, as has been seen, youth follow, get used and get dumped for selfish gain. In the process they would have learnt and internalized the retrogressive practices that are the cause of our problems; and hence merely become conduits for past failed practices.
Empowered youth would enable them to critically examine what they engage in and question those things not in line with values of democracy, justice, fairness, etc. US president Barack Obama knew this and with resonance (mainly) youth responded that “yes we can”!

Kenyan youth should internalize the message that: they have bigger stakes in the nation’s future. And for that future to be different, they MUST get engaged. They MUST help seek ways of building a democratic society and reject the tried, tested and failed ways of corruption, nepotism, ethnic discrimination, and clanism. They must vote for interests such as a just society of fairness, equity, accountability, and true democratic governance.

I would urge you not to fear to get started or due to fear of failure, for as former US president Franklin Delano Roosevelt once said, the only thing to fear is fear itself.

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Change doesn’t come easy though for, as it is said, nothing is ever given on a silver plate. Jomo Kenyatta used to make the same point, arguing that hatukupewa uhuru! Tuliunyakwa! (Kenya wasn’t given independence; it snatched the independence from the departing colonialist!)

We must NOT kid ourselves that things will be easy. Take the recent referendum on the constitution. It took close to 30 years to reach that major milestone; and many that started the journey of reforms many be gone or many never live long enough to fully enjoy the fruits of the coming changes.

That said, society is that much better off with the changes; and those that started these changes will forever remain heroes in our minds.

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Let’s now reflect on the upcoming reforms and your role in change. A few people have asked for my perspective on how we should, both as a community and country, position ourselves to take full advantage of the impending changes.

My answer: leadership is all that matters. Our choice of leaders needs to reflect our needs. We need to elect people that understand our problems, demonstrate integrity and capacity to help us solve our problems.

Remember, a leader really is a facilitator, a person that helps organize society so that it can more effectively address the challenges it faces.

To be effective, such a leader needs to understand the problems of the people s/he proposes to lead, be it a constituency, a county or community. That person should also have perspectives that are broad and which can help address those problems. These are (a) local (constituency and country); (b) community/regional; (c) national and; (d) global. And for good reasons:

a. **Local**: All politics is local, as one US Speaker, Tip O’Neil, once said. If you don’t understand local needs, then you would be ill-prepared to address those needs. For example, if you don’t know that there is no path to Nyabite for people of from Nyangoso, you cannot seek a solution for that.
b. **Community/Regional:** We live in a region and community varying differences and approaches from other communities and regions; these variations, in part, dictate many outcomes with respect to developments. In the 2008 post-election violence, we in Gusii were impacted badly because of who we are and the way our voting outcomes were perceived. A good leader needs to understand these salient issues and how they affect the people s/he leads in order to effectively address them.

c. **National:** The leader needs to know the country well and the issues that confront the nation; this would ensure that s/he can appreciate perspectives brought by leaders from other regions and also ensure that s/he can contribute to solving national problems.

d. **Global:** The person needs to have understanding of global issues, because we now live in a global village. Today, children going to school in Kenya would likely compete for work opportunities with kids in India, China, South Africa ... because of global mobility of jobs. Companies today relocate factories and outsource work to any part of the world almost at will. A leader needs to have this international dimension as well, even as s/he seeks solutions for problems facing his/her people.

The person also needs to be a team player who can work with other elected representatives from within and outside the community. In a word, the person needs more than just an education but also be a leader in the true meaning of leadership.

For the youth, and especially those like you with an education, you are best-placed to assess leaders and choose them for what they are or their potential, rather than use such things like clan and lineage.

... I would like to conclude by urging young people to get involved in day to day issues of society and in the process play their rightful role in advancing our country. It is their democratic right. As well, young people have perspectives that can enrich our solutions; you have a large stake in the future of this nation and have the numbers that can cause real change.

You need to be engaged but also realize that change doesn’t come easily. It is a constant struggle to advance progress. You must choose leaders that have good understanding of local, community, national and global issues. These leaders need to be men and women of integrity and be team players, locally, regionally and nationally.

And as we work for change, let’s assure our elders that we are NOT overthrowing them; let’s emphasize that we recognize them; and that we respect their age and role in society and that if we challenge what they say, it is NOT because of disrespect. What they must understand is that all of us have a role to play and that when their time for exit comes, they should make way amicably. Indeed as Mogusii says: *ebinto n’ebiontigeire, n’ontigeire agatigere onde:* literary saying that things, including leadership are passed down generations.

... Signed

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Bibliography