



In the ensuing scramble for Mount Kenya, Dr Ruto is a clear front runner. File / Getty

## WHITHER GOEST THOU, MOUNT KENYA, WITHOUT AN EXIT STRATEGY?

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*Ahead of the release of the Building Bridges Initiative (BBI) report, the Mount Kenya region has emerged as a free-for-all theatre of a new scramble and at the same time holding the risk of marginalization by rival power elites. Yet still, the region has not generated a clear exit strategy to enable it define its own future, harness its political competitiveness, unity and resilience.*

Kenya awaits with bated breath the unveiling of the Building Bridges Initiative (BBI) Report, expected to redefine the future of power. Divisions over the Report are likely to turn an already divided Mount Kenya Region into a perfect storm, the proverbial Tower of Babel.

But the power elite of the country's most populous region are dithering as Rome burns. Without an agreed-upon exit strategy ahead of the 2022 political transition, the region finds itself in a profound political quagmire.

To be sure, a candidate from the region can vie for the throne of power in 2022. But chances are extremely high that the region, for the first time since 2002, is destined to exit the helm of state power, and to choose between presidential candidates who are not its own scions.

Inescapably, exiting power carries the risk of marginalization by rival power elites. Yet, the region has not generated a clear exit strategy to enable it define its own future, avoid marginalization and irrelevance and harness its political competitiveness, unity and resilience either as a prime mover in the coming government or as an alternative government at the helm of a refurbished opposition.

The region will not be the first to formulate an exit strategy and accompanying structures. In the late 1980s, the Kalenjin formed the Myot Council of Elders as a soft front for an iron-clad social formation of elders, clergy, professionals, business persons and the deep state. After the exit of President Daniel Moi, this power juggernaut has enabled the Kalenjin to consolidate unity, continue to call shots in Kenya's political marketplace, and to plan a political comeback in 2022. Ahead of the release of the BBI report, this elder-based political machine has declared that the unity of the Kalenjin community is paramount and a decision on how the community will move politically in future will come from the elders.

On a different trajectory, since 1992 the eminence grises of Luo Nyanza have united around Kenya's most sophisticated, intellectualized and powerful modern campaign machine weaved around think tanks and the Odinga dynasty, now shaping the future of power in Kenya.

Without a coherent exit strategy and power structure, the Mount Kenya region is a free-for-all theater of a new scramble for votes. No doubt, the coming Kibra by-election in November 2019

is a dry-run for a likely electoral face-off between William Ruto and Raila Odinga in 2022.

Mount Kenya has a stark choice between the two. However, without a clear exit strategy, this choice is no less than a reckless air-dive without a safety-net. Notably, it comes after decades of

Viewed through the rear mirror, both Ruto and Odinga have in the past pitched for power on an anti-Kikuyu platform as part of Kenya's us-versus-them politics. Slightly over a decade ago, the two political maestros hoisted the 2007 elections on the ethnic pedestal of "41-Against-one" campaign mantra, a resistance against the so-called "Mount Kenya Mafia". As such, the region's choices boil down to the "devil-you-know" versus the "devil-you-don't-know" scenarios.

In the ensuing scramble for Mount Kenya, Ruto is a clear front-runner. According to a recent in-house poll by the East African Index (2019), if the elections were held today over 60 percent of Mount Kenya voters would go for Ruto, low voter turn-out aside.

Ruto is riding on the Jubilee strategy that enabled him and Kenyatta to defeat Odinga in the 2013 election. His allies vehemently oppose the March 2018 handshake between President Kenyatta and Odinga as a threat to his power ambitions. Ruto is appealing directly to the Mount Kenya voter. He has revamped the KANU-era patron-client political formation, underwriting parliamentarians, Members of County Assembly (MCAs) and opinion leaders into a powerful regional lobby known pejoratively as *Tanga Tanga*.

Ideologically and politically, this strategy rests on three planks. First is the argument that the region owes Ruto a triple-debt arising from his support to Uhuru (2013; August 2017; and October 2017).

Second, the region is cast as being rocked in a fierce class struggle between "dynasties" and

“hustlers”. Giving legs to the class struggle thesis is an economic woes and serious cash crunch facing this largely trading community. Only those with a large war chest will win. And Ruto is the only man readily opening his coffers to the region! Finally, Ruto’s strategists are dangling the carrot of a deputy coming from the region.

But in this power matrix, the region is a means to power not a partner in power. Unlike in 2013, when Ruto painstakingly negotiated a power-sharing deal with Kenyatta, in a post- 2022 Ruto Government the region will be a perfect client!

Odinga is also making serious inroads into the region. His campaign is hoisted on two pillars. It is time for a non-Kikuyu and a non-Kalenjin to ascend to the power to foster the idea that Kenya belongs to all. Second is the idea that the region owes the Odingas a triple political debt: the elder Odinga’s “Uhuru na Kenyatta” campaign in the 1950s and early 1960s; Raila’s “Kibaki Tasha” in 2002; and his handshake with Uhuru.

Besides the two titans, a middle-of-the-road idea that an alternative neutral candidate will help reduce polarization in 2022 is yet to gain traction. But all the scenarios point to the inescapable fact that the Mount Kenya region is exiting the presidency.

The BBI report is unlikely to propose a repeal of the constitution to give Uhuru a third or fourth term. It is also unlikely to re-engineer power in Kenya along the lines of Vladimir Putin- Dmitry Medvedev model in Russia that has enabled Putin to remain in power as a President, a Prime Minister and as president.

Without a clear exit strategy, the region’s future looks Hobbesian: solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short

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