

ATTACK ON NGOs | Mutuma Mathiu

The Jubilee government's 'infantry thinking' is leading it to intolerance

I think the government of President Kenyatta is guilty of what I call infantry thinking — the unsophisticated deployment of blunt power.

The best example: If you have been called to a rescue situation (where there is the added bonus of bottles of mineral water in shopping bags and the repatriation of significant wads), but then you encounter a pesky terrorist and a strategically located machinegun nest, what do you do?

In infantry thinking, you bring anti-tank guns, take out the columns and bring the building down together with the terrorist.

The government has targeted for attack the media, civil society and now the Judiciary. It is NGOs that I want to comment on.

Kenya has a massive civil society sector. There are more than 6,000 NGOs, which operate under a loose, largely self-regulatory regime.

The NGO Coordination Act of 1990 is a generous law: The NGO Board registers NGOs and generally attempts to guide them to ensure their operations are compatible with the development ambitions of the government.

If you look at the Sessional Paper No 1 of 2006 on non-governmental organisations, you will see a gulf in thinking between the Kibaki and Kenyatta

governments. The Kibaki government embraced NGOs as partners in development; it primarily sought to co-opt NGOs and their piles of money to achieve economic growth.

On the other hand, the Kenyatta government sees NGOs as political enemies and a security risk. And there is a reason for that. Many civil society figures, some with quite radical backgrounds, were central to the Kibaki government.

I don't know for a fact, but it seems the structure of decision-making in the Executive has changed. Mr Kibaki chaired a Cabinet of experienced politicians and thinkers in their own right.

President Kenyatta chairs a Cabinet of mainly technocrats who owe their positions of eminence either to him, his deputy Mr William Ruto, or his aides.

There was a greater likelihood for a more diverse array of ideas informing policy-making in the Kibaki government because around that table, there probably was more eloquence, more

varied backgrounds and more experience at selling ideas. Around the Kenyatta table are four hardened politicians, a couple of mandarins, and a large bevy of curvaceous neophytes.

I am willing to bet that the ideas that carry the day in Cabinet decisions are President Kenyatta's or Mr Ruto's, and perhaps those of a few trusted protégés.

I do not know the two personally, but I can say with little risk of contradiction that theirs is not a civil society or intellectual background; they are children of autocracy and authoritarian traditions of Kanu.

All of us Kenyans would love to have a strongly governed country, where the needs of national security are duly considered and people are measured and responsible in their utterances and actions.

But there is a difference between having a strongly governed country — where people are held to account for their actions — and an authoritarian system, where the government infringes on the rights of the people, often using the excuse of national security.

There is no doubt, in my mind, that many NGOs are up to no good. It would not be surprising at all if you found a few run by the CIA or some other foreign interests.

At the same time, however, the tremendous

impact civil society has had in incubating reform ideas, transforming government, mobilising resources and bringing development, cannot be denied.

You do not regulate from the fringes, assuming that everyone will emulate the behaviour of a few deviants. You must take into consideration the typical case, the one, statistically speaking, that clusters around the mean, and make sure that you don't cripple the good ones as you go after the bad ones.

Kenyans are not interested in living in an authoritarian society where the government, through some quango, runs the media and pokes its nose in the affairs of civil society.

The Kenyatta government is bleeding goodwill. If its core is autocratically inflexible and impervious to other points of view, well it's going to be an interesting ride... because the average Kenyan is not going back where we are coming from.

Confronted with infantry thinking, I think we'll take the advice of one of my favourite movie characters, Col Miles Quaritch in *Avatar*: "You are not in Kansas any more. You are on Pandora, ladies and gentlemen. Respect that fact every second of every day... If you wish to survive, you need to cultivate a strong, mental aptitude."

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