PART V
INTELLECTUALS IN POLITICS

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Lessons from Chimwaga
Jesters, demagogues and ideologues

The Fourth Congress of the ruling party (Chama cha Mapinduzi) at Chimwaga had a lot to teach us. Chimwaga also had a lot to fascinate, to titillate, so to speak, our ideas.

One aspect of Chimwaga that fascinated me - pleasantly, I must admit, as opposed to political aspects, which were infuriating - was the role of mental workers at the Congress particularly, and in political parties generally. To facilitate my presentation, I will divide mental workers into three categories based on the role they play - jesters, demagogues and ideologues. All these three categories were present at Chimwaga. There is the fourth category of mental workers, though, which was conspicuous by its absence. We may call this category simply `intellectuals'. Their role requires a specific treatment and therefore a separate discussion. I will find occasion to do it later. For the time being let us limit our discussion to the first three groups.

There are two broad characteristics that are common to all the three groups. One, that all of them are mental or intellect workers, i.e., they work with their brains and use symbols - language, gestures, ideas, concepts, mental constructs, etc. Two, that all of them do so in the service, or interest, of those in power or those aspiring to get into power. At the risk of oversimplification, let us simply call these people in power or aspiring to get into power, politicians. These two features are then common to all the three groups, i.e. jesters, demagogues and ideologues. But they play different roles; each group has its own specific role and characteristics.

The role of jesters is to amuse and to cheer or charm up their masters. In the days of kings and nobles, jesters were actually employed for this purpose. In the modern days of political parties and republics, parties and states may not advertise posts with such a job-description. Nevertheless, jesters do exist and play a very similar role. Sometimes we identify them as cheerleaders, masters of ceremony or some more serious label. At political rallies and congresses, they not only try to amuse and cheer up the rulers but also help to trivialise and divert attention from major issues of the day. It would be an interesting study to trace the role of jesters in the development of CCM politics.

Demagogues, on the other hand, are intellect workers, who use all their mental capacity to cajole and bamboozle, very often working on the prejudices and stereotypes which exist in all societies. They are not interested in arguing and have no respect for logic or consistency, history or common human decency. They thrive on producing slogans, which are then propagated as absolute truths which should be worshipped and which cannot be challenged. These are the people who would brand any critic an enemy; who would not see any independent merit in a political opponent but rather try to denigrate him/her by harping on biological (race or gender, for example) or ideological or religious attributes.

Chimwaga had such persons and quite a bit of demagogic behaviour.

Ideologues, unlike demagogues, try to persuade by force of argument, consistency and coherence of their (world) views. Their role is to rationalise the changing policies, strategies, and even gimmicks of the rulers, who, as we know, change like chameleons to stay in power. Ideologues are the people who would try to convince us that the rulers (or potential) rulers have a consistent direction. And even when politicians and political parties change direction and turn 180 degrees, their ideologues would try to assure us that it was only a change of tactics to keep up with changing times while the goals remained the same.

Chimwaga saw all three groups - or their representatives - in action. The opposition parties have yet to produce their jesters, demagogues, and ideologues. They are probably still at an early stage of producing politicians, although some demagoguery is already evident in some of these proto-parties. There are some extreme cases of some of the opposition figures who, for example, define patriotism in terms of `common blood' (when their message is the pigment of the skin), shamelessly forgetting that the commonest feature of all human beings is the colour of their blood. Then consistency is not one of the attributes of demagogues!

My discussion so far is a little abstract. I could have concretized it by illustrations and examples. That would have required naming names. Regrettably, we have yet to cultivate a political culture where we can laugh at ourselves and at each other; where public figures can be ridiculed and caricatured without the persons concerned interpreting the same as a personal ridicule (`kejeli') or abuse (`matusi'). I will therefore have to leave my readers to guess at possible illustrations of at least the first two categories.

However, for the third category, i.e. that of `ideologues', I may take the risk (or utilise the poetic license of a writer and a publicist, as it were) to name names. This is particularly so because the person whom I am going to name to illustrate the category of `ideologues' is, I believe, intellectual enough to understand (without taking it as a personal insult) although probably sufficiently ideological to disagree with me (which is fine). And that person is Comrade Kingunge Ngombale-Mwiru, the former CCM Secretary for Ideological Propaganda and now the CCM Publicity Secretary.

In parenthesis I wonder if by the change of the departmental name from `ideological propaganda' to `publicity', CCM is trying to shed its ideological mantle while at the same time declaring that it has not given up its ideology. Be that as it may, there is little doubt that Comrade Ngombale played a prominent ideological role at the Congress. His speech introducing the `amended' party programme was admittedly the most articulate and fluent of all the main speeches that were made in the Chimwaga hall.

Here was a party ideologue employing all his mental prowess (and the intellectual sharpness of a marxist) to rationalise (justify) the new programme which, every one instinctively suspects, even if only a few might know, has little to do with either Ujamaa, Kujitegemea or Azimio la Arusha. Any intellectual with even a remote sympathy with the Arusha Declaration would have found it embarrassing - and probably difficult to square with the declared tenets of the party - to see leading compradors in the committee to set the direction of the party and among the invited guests of the Congress. But not so for Comrade Ngombale.

Comrade Kingunge's tongue did not twitch to cite the example of one of the founding fathers of socialism, Engels, who was an industrialist to rationalise and justify (or was it to `explain'?) the extension of membership of the party from `workers and peasants' to `workers, peasants and business persons'. It may be a bit of a mental acrobat for ordinary mortals to think of the Reginalds and the Rajanis as Engels but not so for a persistent ideologue, Ndugu Ngombale. That is exactly the role of an ideologue (as opposed to an intellectual) - to rationalise and justify even that which cannot be rationalised by ordinary thinking persons. Throughout Comrade Ngombale has played that role in the service of the rulers.

Under the first phase Government, Comrade Ngombale's role as a party ideologue was somewhat overshadowed - as indeed everyone else's in the party was - by the overbearing role of the then

Chairman, Mwalimu Nyerere, who combined in him the `philosopher' and the `king' (the philosopher-king). Wearing the cap of a philosopher, Mwalimu often borrowed (literally and figuratively without acknowledgment, of course) from Ngombale or used Ngombale to ideologise an unsavoury decision. At the same time, wearing the cap of a king, Mwalimu moved Ngombale around from post to post, horizontally, and vertically, to ensure that the (party) ideologue did not outshine the politician.

Whatever be the case, at the Fourth Congress Ngombale's role as an ideologue came into its own. He fully satisfied those two basic characteristics - (a) a mental worker who uses his mental capacities to rationalise and justify the current political rule (b) in the service or interest of the rulers. This time around, his role was even acknowledged by no less a person than the Chairman of the Congress. At the end of Ngombale's electrifying speech, the Chairman of the party summed up in a masterly fashion the role of an ideologue generally, and that of the Comrade particularly, in these three telling words – "umetufanyiya kazi nzuri ('you have done us a great job')". `Umetufanyiya kazi nzuri' was also the message conveyed to Comrade Ngombale as he was hugged and embraced by leading politicians on the podium.

Ironically, the zenith of the ideologue's role may also turn out to be its nadir as the party casts away its ideological mantle. Comrade Kingunge will now have to transform himself into a tie-wearing and visiting card-carrying publicity secretary, Mr Mwiru (better to drop Ngombale, too mouthful for our erstwhile foreign benefactors) selling his party to business persons and funding agencies to keep it, among other things, financially afloat.

What an end for an intellectually brilliant comrade! For my fellow intellectuals - whom we will define and discuss in the next essay - there is a lesson and a message in this story:- Think twice, nay many times, before you sprint from the perch of the intellectual tree onto the summit of a party ideologue for that summit is built on a mound of quick sand.

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