

Leaders must, at least, have an ideology

By Irungu Kang'ata

Many of us Christians strongly believe that Jesus is the son of God. As a devout Catholic, the Church's spiritual dogma is highly ingrained among us. But for a minute, let us set aside the metaphysical (spiritual) angle of Jesus and look at him from a secular point.

How come Jesus's teachings have inspired billions of people for centuries? Why is it that many have fought and lost their lives in the name of spreading the teachings? Think of missionaries and his disciples who were persecuted. The book of Acts speaks of Stephen, who was stoned to death by Jews for the sake of Jesus. Christianity was a fringe religion with very few followers until one Roman Emperor converted. It became a state religion and spread. The same case applies to some secular and materialistic persons.

Karl Marx was a mere scholar in Europe with no name recognition. Until he wrote the seminal *Das Kapital* in the 1800s, which sought to explain economic inequality and how it had evolved historically. He then proposed some political remedies, including political revolutions. Millions rallied behind his thoughts zealously. At one moment in history, half of the world's population was in countries governed by a philosophy inspired by Marxist ideology. Millions died while trying to implement his thoughts.

In Russia, according to scholar Roy Medvedev, Stalin sacrificed at least 20 million people in the 1930s in efforts to attain Marxist utopia.

In China, Mao is said to have caused the deaths of between 15 million people and 40 million people from 1958 to 1962 in his 'great leap forward', which, too, was inspired by Marxist ideology.

The irony is that Marxism did not believe in 'life after death', but that did not extinguish its philosophical allure. Despite fewer countries being socialist, Marxism remains a huge influence across various disciplines, including law, economics and sociology.

The above are just examples of the importance of philosophy in political activities. They are important because they appeal to higher moral goals, beyond merely seeking to win elections.

That philosophy can be social or political or economic or encompass all that. It is the glue and inspiration that binds supporters into a state of political action and sacrifice. Some philosophies are clearly nefarious but nonetheless they can inspire political action. An example is the ever enduring 'philosophy of tribe or ethnic superiority'.

It is nefarious because it is discriminatory in a modern 'all encompassing society' as it pits 'us versus them' and never advances its adherents materially. It connotes superiority of some ethnic groups over others. It is the philosophy of ethnicity that underpinned Kenya's 2007 post-election violence, the collapse of Yugoslavia and the 'troubles' violence in Northern Ireland and the constitutional (dis)order in Belgium and Switzerland. Ethnic philosophy has inspired Russia to invade Ukraine ostensibly to help Russian-speaking minority in the East. The Rwanda genocide drew inspiration from ethnic philosophy.

There are many conflicting ideologies and philosophies on any matter. 'Democracy', as an ideology, in direct conflict with 'autocracy'. 'Communism' is in direct conflict with the philosophy of 'free market'.

In developed democracies, left-wing politics connotes a bias towards socialism (a milder version of communism), state control of the economy and liberal social values like support for gay rights. Right-wing politics is the opposite and connotes a belief in free markets and conservative social agenda such as opposition to abortion.

Within the Kenyan context, a right-wing politician would support privatization of loss-making state entities like Kenya Airways, while a left-wing would oppose it. A right-wing would lean more towards churches. A leftist would insist on the secular separation of state and religion. A left wing would support more regulation of the economy while a right – wing would argue that jobs need to be created.

Leaders must, therefore, at the basic, believe in some form of ideology or philosophy to guide their thoughts and agenda for the public. There are some who have no ideology, which is also a form of philosophy. It is called ‘nihilism’. It is a dangerous ideology that connotes a ‘don’t care’ standpoint that justifies everything under the sun, including corruption and other public malfeasance.

To others, political success, not philosophy, is what matters. To them, politics is all about winning. Maybe their philosophy is Machiavellian. This philosophy was put forth in *The Prince*. It championed amoral philosophies like use of force to extinguish political opponents; where the end justifies the means. This philosophy is viewed negatively by many as it champions greed for power.

Leaders can also change their political leanings. Some even say that if you are in your 20s and you are not a socialist, you have no heart. If you are in your 40s and you are not a conservative, you have no mind.

When I was younger, I used to be enthralled by Ngugi wa Thiong’o books, such as ‘*Detained*, *Petals of Blood* and *I’ll Marry When I Want*’, which had socialist themes. It was all about railing against economic inequality.

But after the decay of socialism, I got interested in learning the mechanics of capitalism and books like *Wealth of Nations* by Adam Smith became captivating. I learnt about how capitalism incentivizes competition and innovation, and about the inefficiencies of the state.

A comparative analysis seems to suggest capitalist countries fare better than socialist ones. That explains the collapse of Eastern European economies in the 1980s and obvious repudiation of communism by China.

Of course, there are Scandinavian countries that have taken the best of both worlds and seem to be doing well. Their philosophy seems to be ‘realism’ – that is, whatever works. This is the philosophy that inspired Deng Xiaoping when he pushed China in the 1980s to embrace capitalism and leave communism. He stated; ‘It does not matter if the cat is black or white. As long as it catches the mouse’. Whatever the case might be, leaders need to choose their ideological standpoints. They must learn and understand how societies work and progress.

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