Lessons from the campaigns on Strategy

By Auscar Odhiambo Wambiya

The just ended political campaigns and the continuing political processes to form a new government has taught us major lessons on strategy. Having a strategy suggests an ability to look up from the short term and the trivial to view the long term and the essential, to address causes and symptoms, to see woods rather than trees according to Lawrence Freedman in his book titled "*Strategy; A History".* Strategy is not a lengthy action plan. It is an evolution of a central idea through continually changing circumstances. Any cookbook approach is powerless to cope with the independent will, or with the unfolding situations of the real world. One does not need a rigid plan but instead a central idea that could be adapted to circumstances.

Everyone has a strategy until they are punched in the mouth according to Mike Tyson, the re-known heavyweight boxing campion. All the political parties had strategies to win in the recent elections. Some of the lessons from the various experiences and outcomes we can learn from both sides of the main antagonists in the elections include the fact that strategy is not so much a means of asserting control over situations but a way of coping with situations in which nobody is in total control. Warning against the belief that history is full of lessons, Gordon Wood argues that there is but one big lesson being that 'nothing ever works out quite the way its managers intended or expected'.

Secondly and as a practical matter, strategy is best understood modestly, as moving to the "next stage" rather than to a definitive and permanent conclusion. The next stage is a place that can be realistically reached from the current stage. That place may not be necessarily better, but it will still be an improvement upon what could have been achieved with a lesser strategy or no strategy at all. Even when what had been assumed to be the ultimate goal is reached, strategy will not stop. Victory in a climactic event such as an election or a business acquisition will mean a move to a new and more satisfactory state but not the end of the struggle. A crushed rebellion may add to the resentment of the defeated, a bruising election campaign can hamper coalition formation but what has gone before will set the terms for the next set of encounters.

The third lesson is that in political practice, the choice may well be between degrees of conciliation or coercion. As the best way of coping with superior strength is often to put together a coalition or break up that of the opponent, strategy is apt to involve compromises and negotiations. The pursuit of relative power is as much about subtracting and dividing as about adding and multiplying. The emerging political alliances and counter alliances are available for all to see about this lesson.

In the realm of political action, laws are far and few in-deed; skills are everything according to Isaiah Berlin. This fourth lesson teaches us that the key skill is the ability to grasp what made a situation unique. Great political figures are able to understand the character of a particular movement, of a particular individual, of a unique state of affairs, of a unique atmosphere, of some particular combination of economic, political and personal factors. This grasp of the interplay of human beings and impersonal forces, sense of the specific over the general, and capacity to anticipate the consequential tremors of actions involves a special sort of judgement which one of the players in the Presidential contest had, judging from the results.

The fifth point is the reality that strategy is always about persuasion, whether convincing others to work with you or explaining to adversaries the consequences if they do not. Not only does strategy need to be put into words so that others can follow, but it works through affecting the behavior of others. In ancient history, Pericles gained authority for his ability to make a reasoned case in a democratic setting; Machiavelli urged princes to develop compelling arguments; Churchill's speeches gave the British people a sense of purpose in war. Brute force or economic inducements may play their part, but their impact may be lost without clarity about what must be done to avoid punishment or gain reward. "Power is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company," observed Hannah Arendt, "where words are not empty and deeds not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities."

Finally, the strategist has to accept that even when there is an obvious climax in a battle or an election, the story line will still be open – ended, a mini-plot, leaving a number of issues to be resolved later. The enemy may have surrendered, the election won, the target company taken over, the revolutionary opportunity seized, but that just means that there is now an occupied country to run, a new government to be formed, a whole new revolutionary order to be established, or distinctive sets of cooperate activities to be merged. Indeed, strategy is much about getting to the next stage rather than some ultimate destination.

Ultimately, victory in battle does not necessarily lead to victory in war.

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