



API Research Note

Issue No. 9, March 2016

Incessant Politicking to Revamp Jubilee's Communication Towards 2017

PETER KAGWANJA

In the 21st century world of information and communication technology, liberal democracies are under constant perpetual campaign mode due to pressure mounted on political parties to 'win' the daily news cycle or to control the news. Hence, governing requires a continuing political campaign. With this in mind President Uhuru has decided to revive the Government Spokesman's office and appointed Eric Kiraithe, the former police spokesman to realign Jubilee's strategy on the reality of technology-driven and media- led perpetual campaign. This, will ensure that public announcements are made in the most appropriate fashion and through the most appropriate channel.

"Governing with public approval requires a continuing political campaign," wrote Patrick Caddell, then a young pollster for President Jimmy Carter.

Caddell's famous memo of December 10, 1976 titled "Initial Working Paper on Political Strategy" has given rise to one of the most influential theories in modern times—the Permanent Campaign or perpetual campaign model.

However, it was the journalist and later Clinton's presidential senior adviser, Sidney Blumenthal who clearly defined the new theory in his book, *The Permanent Campaign* (1980), highlighting the seismic shift in American democracy from old-style patronage politics to one driven by modern technology, polling and media.

In the age of information and communication technology, liberal democracies became stuck in the perpetual campaign mode as pressure mounted on political parties to 'win' the daily news cycle or to control the news—and by extension, to dominate debates in the public sphere on key issues such as corruption.

In this context, the revival of the Government Spokesman's Office and the appointment of Eric Kiraithe, the former police spokesman, to the refurbished docket must be seen as Jubilee effort to realign its strategy to the reality the technology-driven and media-led perpetual campaign.

Because of this, Kenya's social media is awash with speculations that the office has been revived to brunt ODM's media-led and technologically-based perpetual campaign that has enabled Raila Odinga to run rings around the government, slow down or derail its development efforts.

However, the reasons for the rise of the office of Government Spokesman is more nuanced than this view. It is at the heart of the liberal democratic order, especially in the age of globalization.

Charged with ensuring that public announcements are made in the most appropriate fashion and through the most appropriate channels, this office has become critical to the success—and even survival—of regimes particularly in our media-sensitive 21st century world.

Governments have bolstered the office not only to enhance the image of public accountability, but also as a counter-strategy to the challenge of perpetual campaigns by opposition parties and non-state actors.

In this regard, faced with the political headwinds of the multiple protests organized by the Tea Party movement, the twin offices of the Government Spokesperson of the U.S. Department of State and the White House Press Secretary became the beachheads in President Barack Obama's media-led counter-offensive.

Similarly, faced with a rogue opposition, President Mwai Kibaki's NARC government established the Office of Public Secretary and Government Spokesperson based in the Office of the President in Harambee House and appointed Dr. Alfred Mutua, currently the Machakos Governor, to head the office in June 2004.

The Government Spokesman operated alongside the office of the Secretary for communication and Head of the Presidential Press Service (PPS) headed by Isiaya Kabira, now Kenya's ambassador to Australia. These two offices were supported by other spokespersons based in government departments such as Kiraithe who cut his teeth in the publicity business as spokesman to the police.

By reviving the office, the Jubilee administration is bringing back politics back in after a spell where it drew a sharp divide between ‘politics’ as bad and ‘development’ as good. It also aims at consolidating its developmental state, engage the public more robustly, rollback ODM’s permanent campaign, and stay at the top of public debates on major issues ahead of 2017.

The return of the office brings to a sharp close three years of experiment with a more centralized system of communication system. On July 20, 2013, the Jubilee administration overhauled the communication structure it inherited from the Kibaki era and introduced the Presidential Strategic Communications Unit (PSCU) to replace the Presidential Press Service (PPS).

The new unit’s role was ambitious. It was tasked with covering the President and the First Lady, research on policy, communication of government policy, digitization of Government communications, and branding of state events and functions.

On August 8, 2013, the government abolished the office of the Government Spokesman and redeployed its head, Muthui Kariuki, to the civil service.

A statement from the State House was categorical that: “The office of Public Communications Secretary and Government Spokesman does not fit within the new structure of President Uhuru Kenyatta’s administration and has consequently been shut”.

This marked a radical departure from the traditional bi-polar communication structure based on State House and Harambee House to a unipolar system headed and managed by a Secretary of Communications who was also the State House Spokesman, Manoah Esipisu, as the first holder of the new office.

The reorganization process was rationalized as part of the effort to maintain coherence, clarity and consistency within the government’s communication strategy.

“The new thinking on communications represents the promise of Jubilee government to demystify State House”, said President Uhuru Kenyatta, “and crucially to keep in touch with its people through engaging them through feedback and direct involvement”.

The head of state urged the team to “move with speed to ensure that State House sets the pace for government communications.”

But the new Unit came unstuck. A classic case of ‘too many chiefs and no Indians’ or the proverbial night of the long knives, the unit was bogged down by turf wars, unable to counter the opposition’s perpetual campaign waged on multiple fronts and issues.

Kiraithe’s new outfit, based in the Ministry of Interior and Coordination of the National Government, has a tall order to “ensure timely, consistent, coherent, and coordinated communication to the public on all matters relating to the national government agenda.”

Undoubtedly, his new Job will be a precarious walk across a high wire. Internally, he will have to balance between tapping into the experience and capacity of the Presidential Strategic Communications Unit to boost the revived office while steering clear of the supremacy battles that have pushed the unit to the ropes.

At the national level, Kiraithe has to put the revived office on an even professional keel to assure social media critics that the office is not designed for “anti-Odinga propaganda.” He may not be a trained communication expert, but over the years he has demonstrated immense ability to communicate firmly and with confidence. In the run up to 2017, he has to be as above suspicion as the Caesar’s wife, but as firm as a rock.

Peter Kagwanja is the Chief Executive of the Africa Policy Institute