

# The terrain of alternative leadership in Kenya

Tuesday 13 March 2018, by [Bunge la Mwananchi](#) (Date first published: 12 February 2009).

**cc. Developed as a participatory platform in sharp contrast to the general absence of space for political representation in the Kenyan nation, this article traces the history of the Bunge La Mwananchi (Parliament of the People) social movement through its members' own voice. Set against the backdrop of the intolerant Moi government, Bunge offered a viable alternative to the corruption-riddled and ethno-factional nature of official party politics, and has continued to challenge the excesses of the country's political class. With a view to further advancing the success of the movement, Bunge calls upon fellow Kenyans to open new chapters around the country and make their voices heard.**

'Hide nothing from our people

Tell no lies...claim no easy victories, but all

The time explain, discuss, debate, argue, learn and above all

Lead and organise Bunge La Mwananchi in every village'

(Adapted from Amílcar Cabral)

Established in the early 1990s, [Bunge La Mwananchi](#) (Parliament of the People) has seeds in Kenya's earliest resistance movements.

## HISTORY

Colonial settlement began in Kenya between 1895 and 1905. In 1906, a statue of Queen Victoria was unveiled by the Duke of Connaught in Jeevanjee Gardens, a public park presented to the town of Nairobi by A.M. Jeevanjee. The statue stands to this day, and Jeevanjee Gardens has become the open-air 'office' and meeting place of Bunge La Mwananchi. Grassroots chapters in several wards of Nairobi and its environs, and other major towns in Kenya, form a widespread organic social movement.

We draw on the rich historical resistance forged from the time the East African Railway line entered the heartland of Kenya. Land was taken by force from local communities for the railway line and British settlers. Armed struggle by peasants and workers, organised around the Kenya Land and Freedom Army (Mau Mau), began in 1945, after the Second World War. In 1952, the British declared a state of emergency. The bitter struggle of the next 10 years brought Kenya to 'flag independence' in 1963, under the first prime minister Jomo Kenyatta. Kenyatta's KANU (Kenya Africa National Union) party merged with right-wing forces of KADU (Kenya African Democratic Union), supported by colonial settlers. This culminated in the betrayal of the Mau Mau revolution, by isolating progressive forces in KANU that were organised around Jaramogi Odinga, Pio Gama Pinto and Bildad Kaggia.

Kenyatta died in 1978. He was succeeded by Daniel arap Moi, his vice president, who assured his

imperialist ally, the British government, that he would follow in Kenyatta's neocolonial footsteps. Moi's regime was ruthless in its repression and detention of progressive intellectuals, students, peasants and workers who tried to organise against the dictatorship of his one-party system. Many died in torture chambers during his era. Those who survived tell the cruel and horrible conditions they endured, in police cells and prisons. The torture chambers today remain a monument of shame to that dark time of Kenya's history.

Not until the end of the 1990s did the regime begin to lose the grip of power. Moi conceded to international and internal pressure by opening a tiny democratic space for the return of multi-party politics. Bunge members who had been in contact with underground resistance movements like Mwakenya, and other reform movements, began to organise open political discussions. Held on Aga Khan Street in Nairobi city centre during lunch hour, under the banner of the Kafari Movement, the debates became very popular.

After the first and second multi-party elections failed to deliver on the liberation project, the Kafari debates attracted Moi's security agents. They infiltrated the group and caused disruption. The Kafari Movement relocated to Jeevanjee Gardens. In this park, the members of Kafari Movement merged with street families who made their home in one tree-shaded corner of the park. The older generation of the Mau Mau liberation movement raised the consciousness of the younger urban generation on Kenya's historical struggle with colonialisms.

In 2000, the discussion and arguments in Jeevanjee Gardens were being called Kikao (sittings). They were conducted on two benches facing each other, while the chairperson sat in the middle, on a makeshift seat of stone bricks. This gave birth to the name Bunge La Mwananchi (people's parliament).

## EVOLUTION

The quality of debate began to attract local media houses. Citizen TV and the Kiswahili Radio Samba aired the debates from Jeevanjee Gardens. Mwananchi came to know Bunge as a local participatory platform, an alternative to the corrupt and ideologically bankrupt political parties that were organised through tribal patronage, corruption, and distance from the masses.

As media coverage grew, Bunge continued to expand organically. Bases were established within Nairobi environs in Huruma, Limuru, Kamkunji, and in other major towns: Mombasa, Nakuru, Kisumu, Eldoret and Homabay, although with less political consciousness than the base at Jeevanjee gardens. Despite crackdowns from security agencies, the vanguard in Jeevanjee Gardens kept this national network alive by organising political activities together. Bunge included leaders of the chapters in consultative forums, community development fund (CDF) monitoring training programmes and constitutional reform discussions.

In 2003, the Moi regime was voted out by a coalition of reform parties, supported by civil society and social movements. The National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) promised to bring radical socio-economic transformation through:

- creating 500,000 jobs per year for the youth
- a new constitutional framework within 100 days
- zero tolerance for corruption
- combating tribal patronage within civil service
- creating a people-centred economy.

The Coalition itself was a mixed political bag of former KANU members who had served in the Moi

regime, and elements of right-wing reactionary forces from the opposition. They did not have any united national agenda, or coherent ideological theory to unite the country that was tribally divided since colonial administration. In the first years of the NARC administration, new mega-corruption scandals appeared in the government, relating to security agencies, procurement tenders, and tribal patronage in civil service. The hopes of Kenyans, who had voted overwhelmingly for the new regime, were scattered.

With the collapse of the National Rainbow coalition dream, many young people started to look for a new political alternative. Bunge La Mwananchi offered them a political home that allowed everyone to engage in national debate. With the increase in membership and political consciousness, Bunge began to organise direct political action around the issues discussed at Jeevanjee Gardens.

## CAMPAIGNS

One debate was on the management of land linked to Lake Magadi Soda Company, which at that time was jointly owned by a British family and a prominent local politician. Another addressed the ending of the 99-year tenures, granted by the British colonial government in 1904, on land in Central province, Coast province and the Rift Valley of Kenya. Local communities demanded the opportunity to develop the land through cooperatives.

Bunge La Mwananchi called for land nationalisation for effective and efficient management, sustainable food production and accountability to local communities. Against the national interests of the country, and without consultation of the Kenyan people, the weak and compromised NARC government renewed all the colonial leases with extractive multinational companies.

Another campaign related to Lake Victoria, the second largest freshwater lake in the world. In 1929, a River Nile treaty was signed between two British colonies, Kenya and Egypt, on the control and allocation of the Nile and Lake Victoria waters. In 2004, Bunge organised a demonstration in Nairobi and issued an international press statement demanding that Kenya's government void the 1929 treaty.

Bunge argued that the treaty curtailed collective development around the Lake Victoria basin, as it prohibited mechanised irrigation and hydro-power generation by East African states. While the lake supplies KSh6 billion worth of protein-rich Tilapia fish to EU markets each year, the communities of the river catchment areas that feed into the lake still live in chronic poverty and hunger.

Yet another campaign, in 2003, agitated for better housing and wages for Kenyan police officers, who were earning only KSh3,000 (about US\$50) per month. At the same time, Bunge pursued the Ole sisina campaign to protest extrajudicial killings by the police, and a decision by the attorney general not to charge a rich farmer who shot a poor Kenya Wildlife Service officer in cold blood.

## BUILD-UP TO 2007 ELECTIONS

From 2004–2006, Bunge sustained a political education campaign around the Kencom bus stage within the city centre. Under the banner of Hema la katiba, the goal was to mobilise a critical mass of Kenyans to demand political accountability. The campaign was so successful that Kenya National Commission on Human rights (KNCHR) offered to partner with Bunge La Mwananchi to distribute human rights educational materials. From this partnership came the Movement For Political Accountability (MOPA) in 2007.

The Right To Food campaign, named Unga KSh30, started in February 2006. At that time, 2kg of maize flour (Unga) cost KSh47. Bunge members demanded the reduction of taxes on essential commodities and access to healthcare, education and housing for all.

An active Bunge leadership harnessed slogans and songs to protest the failures of the NARC administration. It was clear to Bunge that Kenya had been mortgaged to the World Bank and IMF, leaving workers and youth in extreme poverty. This fuelled the rise of violent organised youth movements. Mungiki, Jeshi la Kingola, Musumbiji Boys, Taliban, Chinkororo, Kamjeshi, and other 'militia' became, effectively, a shadow government. They filled the vacuum left by the state, to provide security, water and the illegal connection of electricity to slum areas of Nairobi and other parts of the country.

Bunge continuously defended Jeevanjee Gardens as a space for public debate. Invited speakers included public intellectuals, political actors, human rights lawyers, civil society organisers and activists. During the 2007 World Social Forum in Nairobi, Bunge organised an alternative social forum in Jeevanjee Gardens to protest the high entry fee charged for the WSF at Kasarani stadium. The WSF was a great opportunity for Bunge members to connect to their fellows in similar social movements across the world. Since that time, Bunge members have been invited to participate in WSF meetings, anti-globalisation campaigns, and international social transformation courses in south-east Asia.

Five Bunge members ran for local government elections in 2007, with support from the African Research Forum (ARF), a progressive think tank. A former speaker of Bunge debates, Leonard Otieno Oriaro, was elected to the Siaya County Council. This willingness to seek state power sets Bunge apart from anti-globalisation movements in Europe and North America, and some popular movements in Latin America, who are anti-political parties and detest the struggle for state power.

## BUNGE DURING THE POST-ELECTION VIOLENCE

Violence has been a part of the Kenyan electoral process since 1992. But the post-election violence that followed the 2007 general election was systematic, terrible, and ethnically and fanatically charged. In areas like Huruma, Kibera and Mathare in Nairobi, and rural towns like Naivasha and Eldoret, women were brutally raped. Workers, peasants and petty traders were killed, and property was destroyed on a large scale.

The damage on the social infrastructure created by Bunge was considerable. However, Jeevanjee Gardens, the national headquarters of Bunge, remained a melting pot for peace and a source of hope. Large numbers left their homes in Huruma, Kibera and Mathare to seek peace within the park. Bunge members also worked tirelessly to bring slum dwellers and the urban poor together at the height of the violence. Some Bunge members were forced into hiding from threats they received for being the voice of reasons where ethnic violence and tension was extreme.

## AFTER THE MEDIATION AGREEMENT: BUNGE LA MWANANCHI IN 2008

Equality among human beings can be guaranteed only when the right to food, education and healthcare is adequately met for all. On 2 April 2008, Bunge La Mwananchi and Starehe Social Movement notified officers at Central Police Station, Pangani Police Station and Huruma Police Station of their intention to hold a peaceful procession on 31 May, 2008, to protest the unchecked escalating food prices.

The procession was disrupted violently by the Kenyan police. Six members of the movement were arrested and detained in Central Police Station for four days, before being charged with organising an illegal procession. This malicious prosecution was intended to intimidate the members of the movement to stop organising the Kenyan masses to demand accountability from the political class, and access to basic needs. The case was dismissed by the court.

Issa G. Shivji, in his book [Silences in NGO Discourse](#), argues that we must understand the present as history in order to change for the better. Five hundred years of slavery, colonial and imperial history is at the heart Africa's present condition. With this understanding, on 9 August 2008, Bunge La Mwananchi, in partnership with Watoto wa Anastasia, Otabenga, the Nigeria high commission, and Kenya Venezuela friendship society, organised a forum in Huruma: Kuwakumba na kuwasikiliza. The purpose was to reconnect Kenyans to African descendants in Latin America, to understand that millions were taken from Africa as slaves, who died in the slave journey of Atlantic ocean, and worked in horrible conditions on sugar plantations, and to link the social struggles arising from the legacy that resulted, of poverty and underdevelopment, in both Africa and Latin America.

On 10 December 2008, Bunge La Mwananchi, Amnesty International Kenya chapter, Ongoza Njia community centre and Mama Mwiki networks organised a food and cultural festival in Huruma sports ground to commemorate International Human Rights Day. At this event, grassroots movements resolved to advance the 'Unga for 30 Shillings' campaign, and to demand that Kenyan MPs pay taxes on their hefty allowances.

This direct political action was planned for 12 December – Jamhuri (Republic) Day – to deliver a strong message to the political class. The public Jamhuri Day celebrations were successfully thwarted by protests from Bunge and civil society.

On 19 December 2008, Bunge La Mwananchi organised the annual Bunge La Mwananchi grassroots leaders congress at the YMCA in Shauri Moyo, Kamkunji. The goals were to make a social audit on the movement's many battles waged with the neocolonial state Kenya, and to deepen understanding around how to organise our communities successfully. Attended by members of Bunge chapters from Nakuru, Mombasa, and Kisumu, the gathering was facilitated by Onyango Oloo, director of Sankara Centre for Social Movements, and Kawive Wambua of Creco. The meeting helped members acquire and deepen skills and tools to advance community organising as the base of a social movement in Kenya.

## HOW TO BUILD A BUNGE LA MWANANCHI BASE IN YOUR COMMUNITY

- Make friends
- Invite friends to informal discussions and debates about local and national issues at your home or community venues
- Agree on an action plan around local issues such as crime and security, environment, community development funds (CDFs), local political leadership, drug abuse or pollution
- Recruit members to activities that advance social change and link your local struggles to national and international levels.

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## **Bunge La Mwananchi social movement**

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