

Kenya: social movement history of Bunge la Mwananchi (The People's Parliament) Part One

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Bunge la Mwananchi has revolutionized grassroots politics in Kenya since the 1990s. Against the backdrop of elite politics and entrenched neo-liberalism, the movement has created a critical space for democratic participation from below and its impact has been far-reaching.

INTRODUCTION

Bunge La Mwananchi social movement emerged as critical grassroots social movement in the framing and agenda setting for national debate in Kenya. It emerged as an organic social movement in a historic moment when Kenya was creating a new democratic state through a new constitutional framework. The framework promises hope for social change and democratic liberation. Bunge la Mwananchi identifies with and builds on the struggle of many years of other social movements, which have shaped the struggle for social justice in Kenya and Africa. This article discusses the growth of Bunge La Mwananchi social movement from the seeds of earlier social movements. This can be traced back to the occupation by the British Imperial Company in East Africa in 1884 and subsequent resistance by Africa people against domination and occupation by colonial settlers that were advancing their capitalist-imperialist interests in Africa. The article examines the origin and evolution of Bunge La Mwananchi as an organic social movement during the era of neo-liberal globalization. It also examines the social base of the movement and its collective action that shapes the collective identity of the movement. The writer, a member Bunge la Mwananchi, discusses the movement's experience in relation to other human rights movements and political parties in Kenya in the process of building Bunge La Mwananchi as nationwide social movement that could help bring social transformation and build democratic state.

BUNGE LA MWANANCHI: BIRTH AND EVOLUTION

Bunge la Mwananchi is an organic grassroots social movement that started in the early 1990s as a reaction to continued economic plunder and misrule in Kenya. The movement serves as a platform for the common citizens to deliberate on socio-economic and political issues affecting their lives as well as general citizenry. It envisions a "Kenya where citizens enjoy unfettered sovereignty to organise to free themselves from all forms of oppression and domination." Bunge la Mwananchi emerged in the era of neo-liberal globalization in early 1990s after the apparent defeat of nationalist movements in Africa that arose out of the Pan-Africanist movement struggles of the early 1960s and 1970s when nationalist leaders were overthrown in military coups. Some were assassinated like Patrice Lumumba of Congo, Pio Gama Pinto of Kenya and Burkina Faso's Thomas Sankara in political conspiracies sponsored by Western Imperialism [1].

After three decades of despotic and paranoid political leadership of corruption, ethnic politics of

divide and rule, and of patronage, Kenya was ushered into the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) regime in early 1990s by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The SAPs led to the withdrawal of budget allocation to social services like healthcare, education and agriculture in the name of cost-sharing; retrenchment of public employees and privatization of public investments as Kenya Railway and Telkom were also features of the Western policy prescriptions.

Bunge movement was started and fronted by people who felt deprived of social justice and decent living conditions: the unemployed, petty traders, squatters, victims of ethnic clashes and low paid workers who through regular social interactions expressed resentment and resisted the adoption by former President Moi's government of the IMF and World Bank economic reforms. The so-called reforms emphasised de-regulation of the state, privatisation and liberalisation of the economy together with the adoption of managerial approaches to governance which deepened the crisis in Kenya's economy [2]. This fomented extreme social unrest and migration of young people from rural areas to the capital city Nairobi in search of employment due to minimal sources of income in the rural areas. Agricultural activities collapsed, including sugar factories in Nyanza and Western, textiles industries in the Rift Valley, and government-supported milk processing plants like the Kenya Cooperative Creameries (KCC). Many other small farming cooperative industries also shut down as agricultural extension services and farming subsidies were withdrawn.

In the end, due to pressure from progressive forces within Kenya as well as from outside forced the Moi regime to concede and amend the constitution, removing section 2A, and allowing the return of multi-party politics in Kenya in 1992. This opened a little democratic space giving room for many parties and urban proletariat grassroots movements to mushroom. It is during this time that some members of Bunge la Mwananchi who had created contact with underground political movements such as Mwakenya started organizing open political education on African liberation movements and debates around various themes such as religion, slave trade, reparations and social cultural economic rights. This took place over the lunch time hour under the banner of 'Kafiri Movement' [3] at Aga Khan Walk Street in the Nairobi City Centre in the early 1990s.

These debates became very popular with remnants of underground social movement and middle class within the environs of Nairobi city especially when the first and second multi-party elections failed to deliver on the liberation project. Afraid of the political and social mobilising power the debates wielded, the ruling regime infiltrated them, and sponsored inside rebellion which led to the movement splitting. Bunge members relocated to the Jeevanje Gardens, a park with a history in the Kenya democratic struggle. In 1990, the late Nobel Laureate Prof. Wangari Maathai and Friends of JeeVanjee Association had stopped the Park from being grabbed by the KANU regime which was planning to build a car park there. At that time, the park was home to many street families and was associated with criminal activities with many cases of mugging and rape reported. Islamic and Christian preachers also pitched tent in the park especially over the lunch hour. Over time Jeevanjee Gardens was transformed by Bunge la Mwananchi debates as members of Kafiri movement merged with other members of lumpen proletariats, street families, rehabilitated muggers and members of Jeshi la Mzee (a vigilante group) making a home in one corner of the park under a tree. This family was enriched by the presence of older generation liberators who had contact or participated in Mau Mau liberation movement. The participation of this group in the debates helped to shape the consciousness of the young generation to appreciate the historical struggle with colonialism. This gave a new social and political perspective to the movement which started to question and debate the historical betrayal of Kenyan independence movement.

During the embryonic stages of the movement, early 1990s and the 2000s, the discussions and arguments at the Jeevanjee were being called 'Kikao' (sitting). This is because of the nature of the debates and lectures in the park were conducted on two benches that were facing each other, under

a shade of tree giving it an organic feel. The speaker at the debates sat in the middle on a makeshift seat of stone bricks to navigate the debates and discussion in a model of Africa village parliaments. The arrangement of debates and their participatory nature from the worldview of the ordinary person gave birth to the name Bunge la Mwananchi (Swahili for People's Parliament), which challenges and contests the current dominant model of colonial and liberal individualized democracy form of representation in a bourgeoisie parliament. The People's Parliament in Jeevanjee inspired and created an alternative paradigm of social movement building and struggle from below in the grassroots politics in Kenya.

In a keynote address to the 5th Plenary Session of the National Convention Assembly in the year 2000 at Ufungamano House in Nairobi, Prof. Issa Shivji reinforced this idea by noting that the point of departure is the movement away from the neo-colonial state space as the site of politics to the village and neighbourhood assemblies as the political and economic sites. He argued that the village assembly should be the focal point of restructuring economic and political power in the struggle of democracy in Africa. This is further reinforced today by the Kenya Constitution, which creates 47 devolved county governments with people's assemblies at the grassroots level.

BUILDING THE SOCIAL MOVEMENT

The coming to power of the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) regime in the year 2003 and the opening of democratic freedoms helped BLM cadres to organize better and have quality debates. This attracted the attention of local media houses such as Citizen Television station and Radio Simba, which began covering topical debates from Jeevanjee Gardens. This helped popularize the movement as a new alternative from the mainstream civil society and political parties. Bunge La Mwananchi's platform was in touch with people's politics in a localized platform that was participatory and within reach of ordinary Mwananachi [citizen]. This differed from the corrupt and ideologically bankrupt political parties that were organized around tribal patronage, personality cult and distanced themselves from the masses. This distance was further pronounced by having most the political offices located within middle class areas which were not easily accessible to the masses. With the increase in media coverage of the debates at the Jeevanjee Gardens, the movement expanded organically by establishing Bunge La Mwananchi chapters within the Nairobi environs including Mathare, Kibera, Githurai in Kasarani constituency and Huruma Kiamiko village in Mathare Constituency. At the Huruma Kiamiko village, BLM social activists organized community based assemblies called Starehe Mwananchi Congress to open space for community participation in political, social and economic debates. This forum was particularly important in helping the community to discuss the challenges that members were confronted with after the 2008 post-election violence and their daily struggles to access livelihoods under difficult conditions of extreme poverty in slums.

The Mwananchi Congress in Kiamiko Ward created the seeds of formation of Bunge La Mwananchi in Kiamiko and a Women's Base and Ghetto Village where Kenya's current Chief Justice and President of the Supreme Court Dr. Willy Mutunga had the opportunity to visit and participate in one of the debates. This particular grouping with the assistance of key community organizers, young women, and youth in slums has advanced the struggle to build the movement for social justice to greater new heights. Apart from the formation of a formidable chapter, it has brought on board new skills in grassroots political and social mobilization; the ability to conduct social audits; and civic education to build the movement. [4]

BUNGE LA MWANANCHI LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE

The rules that govern the movement are organically developed and not imposed. Most of the campaigns and activities outlined above are driven by small and voluntary Bunge committees who

frequently meet over a cup of tea to develop particular ideas further after initial debates at the Bunge la Mwananchi base in the Jeevanjee Gardens. On top of this, the small team is charged with designing slogans, messages, songs and action plans which often involves working together with other Bunge chapters across the country. Key leaders have emerged from these chapters and elections are held every two years. These leaders are encouraged to integrate debates with direct political action.

With the collapse of the NARC dream in 2005, progressive intellectuals, human rights and political actors became regular speakers the Bunge la Mwananchi debates. Notable figures include the late Prof Katama Mkangi, a social justice activist who was detained by the Moi regime while fighting for social change. Prof Horace Campbell, a Pan Africanist, Prof. Maina Wa Kenyatti of the defunct Mwakenya December Twelve Movement and Prof. Yash Tandon, a public intellectual, all have featured in Bunge debates at which they introduced their latest publications and books.

HISTORY OF RESISTANCE IN KENYA - THE SEEDS OF BUNGE LA MWANANCHI

The Bunge la Mwananchi, established in the early 1990s as a contested social space for debates and discussion on social, political and economic issues by ordinary Kenyans, grew from the seeds of earlier resistance movements that shaped and organized social struggle in Kenya since the imperialist forces started establishing their colonial settlement and domination in Kenya between the year 1884 and 1905. Reminders of this imperialist domination include the statue of Her Majesty Queen Victoria which stands today at Jeevanjee Gardens. This statue was presented to the Town of Nairobi by A.M. Jeevanjee and unveiled in 1906 by the Duke of Connaught as symbol of British imperial expansion and occupation and a "goodwill statue" in East Africa. This imperial domination and exploitation was resisted in East Africa by historical social movements since 1913. To open this front was Mekatilili wa Menza's resistance movement organized by a peasant Giriama woman from the Kenyan coast [5]. This uprising has been billed as among the first social movements of resistance by the people of Kenya against the British occupation. In her anti-imperialist campaigns Mekatilili wa Menza urged the Giriama people not to cooperate with foreign occupiers and refuse to pay taxes or work in the colonial settlement plantations. While using the people's assembly, or Kaya, which is a Giriama African traditional village assembly, she mobilized and organized resistance against British occupation.

Kenyan historian Prof. Maina Wa Kinyatti has documented this in his book 'History of Resistance in Kenya 1884-2002'. He notes that in 1921, the first anti-imperialist political organization was formed and named the East Africa Association (EAA). This movement was organized in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania with the help of a nascent working class that was developing in East Africa during the construction of East African railway. While EAA advanced the social struggle in opposing colonial occupation, exploitative taxation and forced labour, it also formed political alliances with Indian Anti-imperialist Workers Front and the Young Baganda Association. The movement established an international constituency which led to the movement being invited to the 2nd Pan-African Congress that was held in London in 1921. During the congress, the EAA movement created political contact with Pan-Africanist leaders that were important in supporting the liberation movement in Africa as well in highlighting human rights violations in East Africa region.

Thus Bunge la Mwananchi social movement draws from a rich history of resistance lessons that have shaped Kenya from the time the British imperialists entered and settled in East Africa. These resistances were organised by peasants and workers whose land was being taken by force for colonial settlement. The peak of this resistance was the formation of an armed struggle by peasants and workers organized around the Kenya Land and Freedom Army, also called Mau Mau. The Mau Mau armed struggle was born around 1945 after the Second World War causing the British colonial government to declare a state of emergency in 1952. The British colonial security forces used the

state of emergency to crack down on any form of resistance, leading them to commit numerous crimes against humanity in Kenya.

The Mau Mau armed resistance resulted in negotiated independence in 1963 with Jomo Kenyatta as the Prime Minister. However, some accounts indicate that Kenyatta who was member of Kenya Africa National Union (KANU), a political party that merged with right wing reactionaries forces of Kenya Africa Democratic Union KADU supported by colonial settlers, betrayed the Mau Mau revolution, by isolating progressive forces in KANU that were organized around Jaramogi Odinga, Pio Gama Pinto and Bildad Kaggia. Pio Gama Pinto was assassinated in order to contain the progressive national democratic forces in Kenya and halt the struggle for social change. This undermined the progressive forces which arrested the struggle for building a democratic state in Kenya founded on social justice.

It came to pass that upon his death in 1978, Kenyatta was replaced by Daniel Moi who was his vice president. Through the support of key western allies Britain and USA, Moi became the second president with the assurance that he would follow the same neo-colonial footsteps of Kenyatta. This model ensured that imperial interests exploited natural resources, established foreign military bases in Kenya while dividing the country along tribal lines. At the same time, human rights violations intensified. Progressive intellectuals, students, peasants and workers who tried to organize against his dictatorship were repressed and detained. In the name of “peace love and unity” and stability under one-party system, many of those opposed to Moi’s regime would die in torture chambers.

Many victims who survived lived to tell of the cruel and horrible conditions they went through during dark days of the Moi dictatorship under ruthless security agencies, in police cells and prisons. The torture chambers today remain as monument of shame in memory of that hallmark dark history of Kenya. This will help future generations to know the oppression and torturous journey that our motherland Kenya has lived through and the price that was paid by patriotic Kenyans to create a democratic space. It is because of this democratic space that social movements like Bunge La Mwananchi are able to organize leading to the development of the constitutional reform movement and opposition political parties.

BUNGE LA MWANANCHI’S SOCIAL JUSTICE CAMPAIGNS

The coming to power of the National Rainbow Coalition Kenya (NARC) in 2003, a grouping of reformist parties with the support of the civil society and social movements, heralded a shift in the civil society as a number of its leadership joined the new regime. This left a gap that was filled by Bunge la Mwananchi, which upped its campaigns in trying to ensure the new regime fulfilled the promises upon which it was elected. In its 2002 manifesto, NARC had promised to bring radical social change through social-economic transformation by creating 500,000 a year, delivering a new constitution within a 100 days, zero tolerance to corruption, combating tribal patronage within the civil service and creating a people-centred economy. However, the NARC dream soon grew into disillusionment as the new regime was bedeviled by accusations of broken memoranda of agreements, mega-corruption scandals such as the Anglo Leasing scam, tribal patronage in the public service, among others. This scattered the social transformation project and with it hopes of millions of Kenyans who had voted overwhelmingly for the new regime.

With collapse of the National Rainbow coalition dream in 2005 many young people began looking for a new political dispensation to organize around and challenge the NARC regime under Mwai Kibaki. Bunge La Mwananchi became the movement and political instrument that gave them a new political home. This home allowed everyone to participate and engage in national debate with regard to many political, social economic issues that remained unsolved in the country. Thus with increase in membership and political consciousness around Jeevanjee, the movement started to organize direct

political action around the debates and campaigns discussed at the park and many other Bunge la Mwananchi chapters across the country.

DEMAND FOR BETTER MANAGEMENT OF RESOURCES CAMPAIGN

A key concern for Bunge la Mwananchi members related to the management of natural resources. The land question came out as key and was linked to historical injustices perpetuated by multinational companies such as Lake Magadi Soda Company. The company originally owned by the British Royal family together with the Kenyan political elite was sitting on vast pieces of land acquired at the signing of a 99-year-old lease in the 1904 Anglo-Maasai Agreement which should have expired in 2004. Bunge la Mwananchi agitated for local communities to be given the opportunity to develop the land through collective ownership in a cooperative movement. Bunge advanced this campaign around the policy of nationalization of land for effective and efficient management, sustainable food production and accountability of multinational companies that were involved in extractive industries without the benefit local communities and destruction of the environment. But the NARC government with its weak and compromised national parliament yielded to the interest of international capital and renewed all the colonial leases against the interest of the country and without consultation with people as demanded by members of Bunge la Mwananchi.

Another campaign and debate related to Lake Victoria, the second largest fresh water lake in the world. BLM organized a demonstration in Nairobi and issued an international press statement at Chester House on 23 January 2004 against the 1929 River Nile Treaty that governs how Kenya and other Eastern African countries in the Nile Basin use the Nile waters. This has had a negative impact on industrial development as well threatening food security among the nations concerned. Bunge La Mwananchi members demanded that the NARC government pulls out of the colonial treaty because it goes against the interests of people of East Africa countries by curtailing collective development. Countries in the Lake Victoria Basin are prohibited from engaging in extensive mechanized irrigation and generation of hydro-power electricity to improve the socio-economic wellbeing of the over 160 million people in the region. This together with other factors has contributed to the fact that food insecurity is now a perennial problem leading to various African states enduring food riots as has been witnessed in countries such as Kenya, Uganda. [6]

UNGA CAMPAIGN

Bunge la Mwananchi organised a campaign on access to food in what came to be known as Unga Revolution in 2011. [7] Bunge members demanded that the price of maize flour is set at Ksh.30 to be affordable to all Kenyans especially the poor. Prior to this campaign, in 2006 and 2008, Bunge ran similar campaigns for reduction of taxes, increased access to essential services such as health care, housing and education. Bunge believes that these efforts together with others from other actors contributed in ensuring that the 2010 Constitution has Article 43 on The Bill of Rights. [8] In addition to these campaigns, between 2003 and 2004, the movement initiated a campaign to increase salaries and improve the living conditions of the Kenya police service men and women. Working under the Governance, Justice and Law Order Sector (GJLOS) reform program umbrella, Bunge la Mwananchi hosted various forums at which reforming the Kenya Police was discussed and educational materials distributed. In the year 2003, the movement organized a demonstration to support this campaign.

Lastly, between 2004 and 2006, Bunge la Mwananchi set up 'Hema la Katiba' (Constitution Tent) at the popular Kencom Bus Stage in the Nairobi Central Business District (CBD). The outreach campaign mobilised and created awareness in advancing the right to organise, participate in the then going constitutional reform process as well as demand for political accountability from the government. The Kenyan taxpayer was overburdened by government excesses such as a bloated

cabinet moving around the country in fuel guzzling vehicles and increased public debt. This campaign was so successful that the Kenya National Commission on Human rights (KNCHR) offered to partner with Bunge to distribute human rights education materials. This evolved into political accountability forums that initiated formation for Movement for Political Accountability (MOPA) in the run-up to the 2007 general elections. This movement continues to this day.

SUSTAINING BUNGE LA MWANANCHI CHAPTERS

Sustaining Bunge la Mwananchi and its chapters, especially with regard to funding, is always a major challenge due to the movement's voluntary nature. Without consistent sources of funding, the movement relies on members' contributions to run its activities. For instance, the Kiamaiko group in Starehe initiated contributing Ksh.10 per person for a mug of tea that was taken during the debates and discussions focusing on social development issues affecting their community. During these discussions, members also strategized on how to improve their savings. Many of the young people were single mothers drawn from Huruma, Kiamaiko and Mathare who had to cater for their families as many of their husbands had been victims of crime related deaths mostly extra-judicial killings at the hands of the Kenya Police. These vanguard group together forged a spirited campaign for basic needs such as access to decent housing, sanitation, education and healthcare for all many of which were to be entrenched in the constitution under The Bill of Rights. This interaction with the youth and community based social groups in Mathare and Kamkunji created a paradigm shift in the Kenyan grassroots politics and the face of Bunge la Mwananchi from organic debates in Jeevanjee Gardens within the City Centre to an active grassroots social movement to be found in various parts of the country today. In Nairobi, there are Bunge La Mwananchi social political bases in Kawangware and Kayole. Apart from these, there are bases in Mombasa, Nakuru, Kisumu, and Limuru. Nevertheless, the bases found in Nairobi continue providing direction as they are the most established and are therefore able to provide the necessary socio-political consciousness to drive the agenda of the movement forward.

Gacheke Gachihi

END NOTES

1. See Shivji, I. G. (2007). Silences in NGO discourse: The role and future of NGOs in Africa. Fahamu/Pambazuka.
2. See <http://pambazuka.org/en/category/features/79603>
3. Interview Kafari David Marakaru
4. Interview and Ruth Mumbi, Emily Kwamboka Muchangi Nyanga Bunge Mashinani Kiamaiko
5. See <http://www.africareview.com/Special-Reports/The--mad-Kenyan-woman-who-rattled-the-British/-/979182/1876464/-/x2seyf/-/index.html>
6. <http://www.economist.com/node/18745313> Food in Africa - A recipe for riots
7. In 1978 when Kenya's first President Mzee Kenyatta died, the cost of a 2 kg packet of maize flour was Kshs 2.80. On December 27, 2002 maize flour cost was Kshs 27. During the 24 years of Kenya's Second President Moi's rule, the price of Unga had increased by Kshs 24, an average of 1 shilling per year. In 2003 the cost of Unga increased to Kshs 54; it doubled. In only 1 year the NARC government had increased the price of Unga by Kshs 27, more than Moi's government had increased in 24 years. See <http://www.network54.com/Forum/204096/message/1173300704/Unga+Campaign>

8. Article 43 of the Constitution of Kenya, 2010. 43. (1) Every person has the right—

(a) to the highest attainable standard of health, which includes the right to health care services, including reproductive health care;

(b) to accessible and adequate housing, and to reasonable standards of sanitation;

(c) to be free from hunger, and to have adequate food of acceptable quality;

(d) to clean and safe water in adequate quantities;

(e) to social security; and

(f) to education.

(2) A person shall not be denied emergency medical treatment.

(3) The State shall provide appropriate social security to persons who are unable to support themselves and their dependants.

P.S.

* Pambazuka 2014-12-03, Issue 705:

<http://www.pambazuka.net/en/category/features/93544/>

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