

COMMENTARY

Why some aren't ministerial material

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Last week, I went to the launch of Shiraz Durrani's new book, *Never Be Silent: Publishing & Imperialism in Kenya (1884-1963)* and arrived just in time to hear the evening's guest speaker, Dr Kilemi Mwiria, begin his address.

He spoke passionately about the importance of reading for culture and development, and about the place of the book and new ideas in the struggle to free humanity and better its condition.

More importantly, he dwelt on the theme of speaking up in the face of oppression, ignorance and impunity, adding that the voices of liberation could only be heard if more Kenyans did not leave everything to politicians; if more of them were involved in what was happening, if more of them were offering criticism and praise, if more of them were running for political office in order to contribute directly to creating policies – such as a national book policy.

When he stepped away from the microphone, the clapping was not the polite one-two-three Kenyans reserve for their leaders. The little crowd's applause sounded genuine and was almost bursting with relief that a member of the Government could speak with such honesty at such a tricky engagement.

The minister carried the day

At that moment, it struck me why Dr Mwiria is still an assistant minister for higher education – more than three years after President Kibaki first named his Cabinet.

Just before Prof George Saitoti agreed to "step aside" as Education minister, he and Dr Mwiria had had an intellectual parting of ways over the admission of

students from private primary schools (academies) into public secondary schools. Of course, the minister carried the day.

Dr Mwiria has also been vocal about other matters. He had wanted all high school headmasters to resign and reapply for their jobs, he had wanted the school management system to be changed, and the university admission policy improved. Basically he wanted everything changed.

In short, Dr Mwiria fits the aphorism from Nikolai Gogol's character in *The Government Inspector*: clever men are never quite sane.

Since Education is a big docket and cannot be run by ghosts, an acting minister had to be appointed to represent the ministry at Cabinet level. Dr Mwiria might be the only MP to have studied the country's education system to doctoral level, but what use are his ideas in the real world? He now reports to a specialist of no mean feat: a veterinary doctor.

It is not that Dr Noah Wekesa does not understand education. No. He is an educated man, and he has demonstrated just what he can do by suggesting that headteachers whose schools do not perform – especially in his Kwanza constituency, be transferred to – well, perhaps Armenia – but nowhere near Kwanza.

So besides holding the Science and Technology docket, Dr Wekesa now worries about Education because of the severe lack of talent in the Ministry of Education particularly, and Parliament generally.

And then, of course, Dr Mwiria is man of humble stock. He was born in a detention camp during the State of Emergency in Kenya.

Those are very difficult people to have a conversation with. They keep going back to stories about Mau Mau, the Johnnies and home guards long after the world has moved on. That is why, despite the President's commitment to ethnically balance his Cabinet by having a member of every major community represented, he would rather leave the Meru quota of Cabinet positions vacant until two ministers from the community who voluntarily stepped aside in the heat of corruption allegations are cleared, or there is some new talent – whichever occurs first.

(Considering the manner in which they left office, they should have been put on half-pay pending investigations, but that is a matter for another day).

The same can be said of the Ministry of Energy, where Planning and National Development minister Henry Obwocha is holding brief; and the Ministry of Lands and Housing where Prof Kivutha Kibwana of Environment is in charge.

Prof Kibwana was himself saved from having to serve as an assistant minister in the Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs – in spite of his training, knowledge, experience and connection with Kenya's constitution review.

Why would anyone want to pursue long-forgotten issues like the challenge by Mr Kiraitu Murungi when he was in Energy that he required the Kenya Power and Lighting Company to spend the money it collects for rural electrification instead of banking it?

Who would want to pursue mundane issues at Lands like the Report of the Commission on Illegally/Irregularly Allocated Land?

Complications for Government

The matters that come up in the ministries where there are acting ministers can be competently handled by civil servants, and the minister only needs their advice on how to answer questions in Parliament.

Although Kenya's MPs may have 29 degrees combined – and there is night school raising the number all the time – these are totally useless when it comes to running ministries, creating policies, debating ideas and implementing action plans at Government level.

People who are too educated, too honest, too young, and too well-meaning and too accommodating of the opposing view cannot be useful in driving the agenda of a progressive government like ours. They just aren't ministerial material.

Including people like Dr Mwiria in the Cabinet can create complications for Government. You can just imagine what he would require before a Ministry of Education limousine can be parked at the house of Mr Artur Margaryan and Mr Artur Sargasyan for lack of secure parking at Jogoo House. Perhaps he would

insist on some impractical requirement like writing a dissertation on the subject first. It is better to cram them in the ranks as assistant ministers where they can make lots of speeches and do nothing more about it.

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