Want to get creative? First, take a brief walk

The Mike Sonko of university politics

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commentary

Babu is Mike Sonko with less funds, better diction, and a fantastic choice of clothing

BY WAGA ODONGO
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BABU OWINO is better known by his nickname than his actual one. The university notice announcing his election to the Sonu chairmanship refers to him by his nickname, not his real name. He is a bit like Mike Sonko, who, like a musician, is better known by the character he plays than the man he is. He also has a taste for the pacy and ostentatious, like Sonko. He walks around with more phones than a slice of cake and talks for the youth, just like... well, you get the picture.

However, unlike Sonko, he is actually youthful with better diction, a better hairstyle, less funds, and a more appealing choice of clothing.

His predecessor (he would approve of the word) style at press conferences suggests that he secretly thinks that month one is at his side, taking every word for holy writ. He loves English, the way a man who discovered the language late in life is trying to make up for this fact does. In fact, one of his speeches was lampooned by Emmanuel Juma in NTV's Bulls Eye segment for his (again, he would approve) profuse, locuacious, and circumlocutory way of delivering his message.

As soon as I heard that he had returned to campus, I knew he would run for chairman again. Naturally, his vanity and competitiveness would be played up and he would try to get in the saddle again. He ran. And won. He will probably run again. And win. Again, more importantly, he has been elected, for the second time, to the helm of Sonu. No one since James Owino has pulled off a re-election to the chairmanship.

Undoubtedly, his benefactors and associates are well pleased and allow him a choice of toys to play in politics.

He says he is a businessman, and like all good ones, he is a none-of-your-business man. He will not say a word about his sources of money aside from generalities. His vigorous support for Kamlesh Patni, however, provides an interesting clue.

At the university, you are inclined to follow the tradition of spewing leftist opinions, which he does. His politics is that of the man on the street, but his instincts are suit-and-tie. University politics is an exercise in contradiction: the rhetoric is very left-wing, but the thing that really appeals to the crowd is capitalism-in-freedom. The youth are the leaders of tomorrow. Except that they are not. The myth of power underlying a generational change is usually accepted "hook, line, and stirrer", yet the grizzled truth is never, ever handed over voluntarily. You do not cut the line in the leadership, you go by those who get there first.

The youth grow into adults and stinker, yet the gravy train is never, ever handed over to them. The myth of power undergoing a change is one of the most appealing choices of clothing.

The Sonu chairmanship is useful in leveraging positions for the future. It is usually assumed that whoever occupies it has the ear of the over 55,000 members. However, the truth is that this population is fractured across several campuses, and in particular the parallel students hardly ever bother with campus politics. The truth of this little gem of information is emphasised by the fact that Babu was unable to secure nomination for Westland's constituency despite it being close to three University of Nairobi campuses. Also worrying is the fact that the constituency is translated, particularly during elections, and can, therefore, not be leveraged into power.

James Owino's win in the parliamentary stakes is actually a good thing. It is better, I think, to reign in the "hell of university" than serve in the "purgatory of Parliament", where it would be harder, and more options to appear in the limelight.

The problem with Sonu is that it has never come to terms with the idea that its usefulness in the country has been somewhat reduced. Sonu handles just about as much money as a small SME, it was once Kenya's de facto opposition party, and its leaders were regularly VIP guests of the state. One even died in custody, one was said to be a Libyan spy, and one was the brilliant James Orengo.

It was banned for periods that can be described as geological for its perceived anti-government stance by the Moi regime, but with the expansion of democracy in space. It has been unable to accept a more shrunk role on the national stage, still maintains an overblown sense of importance. Universities affect too few of us for us to collectively care. Even when riots, it is nearly impossible to get the news editor particularly interested in university politics.

However, the recent decision to raise university fees will undoubtedly give second wind to the organisation. What Sonu needs is a cause. Education Cabinet secretary Jacob Kaimenyi has thrown them the gauntlet, and they will run with it. Expect to soon start seeing Babu in the pages of newspapers protesting at the fee increase. And I would not bet against him making it to Parliament, for he has that common touch and the ear of a few wealthy benefactors in Kenya, that is more than enough.

His immediate concerns, he says, are to ensure that the government increases student loans, to link students to the corporate world, and act as "a check to the government".

The last of three children, Owino says he has an elder brother, who is a Coast-based lawyer, and an older sister, who is an economist. His mother says he has an elder brother, who is a comfortable, as I have made sure of.

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