

Can citizens reclaim the soul of its politics? From “personalities” to “values” political leadership in Kenya

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In this I argued that Kenya’s political future depends on shifting from personality-driven politics to values-based leadership. I highlight the growing disconnect between political rhetoric and action, where leaders frequently invoke integrity, accountability, and unity but often abandon these principles when political interests change. Such inconsistencies erode public trust, weaken democratic institutions, and normalize opportunism. I call on citizens to become active custodians of democratic values by critically evaluating leaders based on character, consistency, and commitment to the public good. Ultimately, sustainable political transformation will emerge when citizens prioritize values over personalities.

Civic Engagement, Democratic Accountability, Values-Based Leadership

1. Introduction

Kenya stands, once again, at a familiar yet consequential crossroads. The political temperature is rising, alliances are shifting with unsettling speed, and public discourse is increasingly dominated by names, faces, and personalities rather than ideas, values, and national vision. In such moments, a society must ask itself not just who should lead, but more importantly, *what kind of leadership* it seeks to institutionalize.

The [recent event of innocent lady](#) who expressed her personal views on a political candidate only later to be attacked and almost torched to death is an example of how our hearts as citizens are being shaped. This is not a new dilemma in our country. It is a [recurring pattern](#), one that has defined much of Kenya’s political evolution. Yet, once again, the urgency today feels sharper. The contradictions are very loud. The dissonance between what is said and what is done by our [political leaders](#) has become almost impossible to ignore.

Earlier in the year, [public utterances by some political actors](#) had invoked the language of [values, integrity, and national unity](#). These are noble aspirations. However, the unfolding political scene a few months later tells a different story, one where expediency is now over-riding values and principles, and where former adversaries are suddenly recast as allies without any demonstrable shift in the values that once defined their opposition.

This raises a fundamental question: *Are values in Kenya’s politics truly foundational, or are they just rhetorical tools deployed for convenience?*

2. Can values prevail in a personality-driven political system?

At the heart of Kenya’s political challenge is a persistent over-reliance on [personality politics](#). Elections are framed as contests between individuals and [ethnicity](#) rather than choices between competing visions, ideologies, or value systems. The consequence is predictable, loyalty becomes personalized, accountability becomes diluted, and public trust becomes fragile.

Considering the current political landscape in Kenya where leaders who once mobilized citizens to reject certain individuals on the basis of alleged [governance failures](#), corruption, and lack of integrity are now, [willing to collaborate](#) with those very individuals. The justification offered is often framed in terms of “national unity” and “strategic alignment.” Yet, these explanations rarely address the core issue: *What has fundamentally changed?*

Have the values of those previously rejected improved? Or have the values of those who led the rejection shifted? Or, more troublingly, were values never the real issue to begin with? This is not a matter of political inconsistency; it is a structural problem in our politics. When political alignments can shift without corresponding shifts in values, it signals that values are not the primary principle of political engagement. Instead, power becomes the central currency, and values become negotiable.

Trends on political behavior in emerging democracies and [studies](#) in political science point to the dangers of “[clientelism](#)” and “[personalistic politics](#),” where political loyalty is tied to individuals rather than institutions or ideologies. In such systems, voters are often mobilized through identity, patronage, or [short-term incentives](#) rather than long-term vision and commitments. What we have seen in our country for a long time.

Kenya is not immune to this dynamic. [Afrobarometer surveys](#) over the years have shown fluctuating levels of [trust in political institutions](#), often correlating with perceptions of corruption and lack of accountability. When citizens perceive that leaders can easily shift alliances without clear value-based justification, it erodes confidence not just in individuals, but in the political system as a whole.

3. Has the language of values mask the quest for power in Kenya?

One of the most striking features of the current moment is the gap between [rhetoric and reality](#). Political leaders frequently speak about integrity, accountability, and the need for value-based leadership. Yet, their actions often suggest a different set of priorities. This contradiction is not accidental; it is their strategic

language or could be the language as citizens we like to hear. Could it be true that the language of values resonates less with citizens? Do we as citizens really appeal to deep-seated desire for ethical leaders and national transformation? I leave that question to be answered by you and me individually. However, it's good to know that without our consistent application of values as citizens, we risk falling into performative ethical political leaders' baits. For sure, this is what we have fallen into for many years in Kenya.

The danger here is twofold. First, it creates confusion among citizens. When leaders invoke values but act contrary to them, it becomes difficult for the public to discern what is genuine. This ambiguity weakens the ability of citizens to make informed choices. Second, it normalizes inconsistency. Over time, citizens may begin to accept that politics is inherently opportunistic and that values are secondary. This normalization has perhaps become the greatest threat to our democratic consolidation in Kenya because it has lowered expectations of citizens and reduced our demand for accountability.

The question then becomes: *If leaders are inconsistent in their values, who becomes the custodian of those values?*

4. Who Speaks for the Citizen?

[Trust is the currency of political leadership](#). Without it, even the most well-crafted policies struggle to gain traction. [In Kenya today, trust is under strain](#). When citizens observe leaders shifting positions without clear justification, it raises legitimate concerns about credibility. If a leader's stance can change based on political convenience, can their commitments be relied upon? If alliances are not based on values, what anchors decision-making? This leads to an existential question for the electorate: *Who truly represents the interests and values of the citizen?*

In a system dominated by personalities, the answer is for sure unclear. Citizens may find themselves choosing between individuals ("the better devil") rather than evaluating their values. This has created a cycle in Kenya where elections become referendums on personalities rather than opportunities to advance national priorities. Yet, this is precisely where the opportunity lies.

5. Is there is hope?

Despite the challenges, all is not lost. In fact, the current contradictions present a unique opportunity for civic awakening in Kenya. But, only if we act wisely as citizens. History demonstrates that sustainable political transformation rarely originates from within political elites alone. It is often driven by an informed and engaged citizenry that demands better. Kenya has seen glimpses of this potential. From the push for constitutional reform that culminated in the 2010 Constitution, to civic mobilization around governance issues, citizens have repeatedly shown their capacity to influence the national politics.

The critical shift required now is from passive observation to active discernment. Citizens must begin to interrogate political narratives more rigorously. This means asking difficult questions:

- What values does this leader consistently demonstrate, not just articulate?
- How have their past actions aligned with their stated values?
- What institutional reforms are they proposing to embed these values beyond their individual tenure?

This is not about cynicism but accountability. It is about recognizing political leadership beyond charisma, but character, consistency, and commitment to the public good. For Kenya to transition from personality politics to values-based politics, the national conversation must fundamentally shift.

Instead of asking, *"Who should lead?"* the more critical question becomes, *"What values should define our leadership?"*

This reframing has profound implications. It moves the focus from individuals to systems. It encourages the development of policy platforms grounded in national values. It creates space for evaluating leaders based on their adherence to these national values and integrity rather than their personal appeal. When citizens prioritize these values, political incentives will begin to change. Leaders will be compelled to align their behavior with national values expectations, not just during campaigns, but throughout their tenure.

6. The Choice Before Us

As Kenya approaches its next electoral cycle, the responsibility for transformation does not rest with political leaders. It rests, fundamentally, with the citizens. First, we need to reject the politics of personalities. Charisma, popularity, and rhetoric are not substitutes for integrity, competence, and consistency. We have to demand more. Second, we need to interrogate alliances and shifts in political positions as we see now. When leaders change course, ask why. Insist on explanations that go beyond vague appeals to unity or strategy. Third, we must prioritize values in our decision-making. Whether at the ballot box or in public political discussions and rallies, elevate conversations around values, policies, and long-term national interest.

Fourth, we must engage actively in civic processes. Democracy is not a spectator sport. Participation through voting, public dialogue, and accountability structures created are essential. Finally, we must hold our leaders accountable beyond elections. Values-based politics is not achieved in a single electoral cycle. It requires sustained vigilance and engagement.

Kenya's political future is not predetermined. It will be shaped by the choices made in this moment by leaders, yes, but more importantly, by citizens. The tension between personality and values is not unique to Kenya, but the resolution of that tension will define our country's trajectory. If personalities continue to dominate, inconsistency and disillusionment will persist. If values take precedence, a more stable, accountable, and transformative political culture can emerge. The question before us is not whether our leaders will change, but rather, whether we as citizens will demand that change. Because ultimately, the most powerful force in a democracy is not the politician, it is the people. And when the people choose values over personalities, the entire system begins to realign. I trust we will begin to choose values moving forward.

Author

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