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# The influence of information technology on the socio-political song in Kenya

Susan Kilonzo, Kitche Magak and Bryson Omwalo

## Abstract

This article examines how the growth of socio-political songs in Kenya reflects the effect of the evolution of information technology (IT). The unprecedented proliferation of IT – especially mobile telephony, the Internet and frequency modulation (FM) radio – has played havoc with authoritarian control of information, especially by governments. The speed and modes through which information and song are transferred have diversified, making it possible to send, receive and access both quite easily. Using three epochs of leadership in Kenya, we show how the dynamics of the socio-political song have transformed from an authoritarian regime, when the state muzzled freedom of expression, to a more democratic era of IT, where artists can more easily reach their audience. By analysing music with lyrics and secondary data, we show that freedom of speech is as important as the proliferation of IT. Both are necessary conditions for the growth of socio-political song.

**Keywords:** democratising, information, socio-political song, technology

## Introduction

The role of song in Africa's politics has received considerable attention. A fair amount of scholarly research focuses on diverse aspects of song in politics, especially popular music (Allan and Gagliardone 2013; Englert 2008; Marsh and Petty 2008; Nyairo 2004; Nyairo and Ogude 2005; Nyamnjuh and Fokwang 2005; Wekesa 2006). This literature shows that song is a key vehicle through which artists communicate with both rulers and the ruled. Through song, either by design or default, artists entertain, sensitise, educate and mobilise the citizenry and its leadership. Scholarly research

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also demonstrates the relevance of socio-political music as a way of challenging and neutralising authoritarian regimes (Chirambo 2002; Nyamnjoh and Fokwang 2005). Throughout history, song and dance have been used to support or oppose the status quo. This is particularly true of Africa, where song and dance are still heavily used to buttress the status quo and even cover up the terrible conditions suffered by the masses. In outlining the history of popular music in Malawi, Chirambo (2002: 104) shows how popular musicians have challenged the political elite's dominant ideology. A study of the existing literature, however, reveals gaps on the role of information technology (IT) in the appropriation of socio-political song.

A unique example of song being used to popularise politics, is the griot tradition of West Africa: these traditional court poets were trailblazers in maintaining their oral history (especially the political history of their rulers) through poetry, storytelling and music with lyrics (Hale 1998). The griot tradition has transmuted into rich music with lyrics, especially socio-political song, spearheaded by international megastars such as Youssou N'Dour, Baaba Maal, Toumani Diabaté and Selif Keita. Kenya is a typical example of a country where politicians and their supporters sing and dance to music on political platforms, regardless of whether that music has a political message. That notwithstanding, the socio-political song has been used to either praise or castigate the political leadership, as Nyamnjoh and Fokwang (2005: 251) note, 'music becomes inseparable from power relations: political, cultural, economic and gendered'. However, history and bitter experience, which included incarceration, torture, exile or even death, taught most artists to be wary of overt political songs that appear to oppose or openly criticise the excesses of the regimes in power. Two tragic examples of musicians who lost their lives for opposing the injustices of their sitting governments through their socio-political songs are Lounes Matoub of Algeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo's Franklin Boukaka. In Somalia, Mariam Mursal was forced into exile after recording and performing the song *The Professor*, which was critical of President Siad Barre. Malouma El Mint of Mauritania suffered a similar fate for protesting against his country's dictatorial regime. A landmark case in Africa was that of Cameroonian artist, Lapiro de Mbanga, who was jailed for his song *Constitution Constipée*, which criticised the government for rising food prices in that country.<sup>1</sup>

Kenya has been in the hands of four presidents since the country attained independence in 1963. These four leaders, as in any other African country, have had different kinds of relationships with the citizenry, depending on their styles of leadership and the politics of the time. The advancement of IT has had a notable influence on the way the leaders relate to the citizenry, because IT has completely changed the dynamics of information flow. Besides the speed of information transfer, the modes through which information (including socio-political song) is exchanged, have also diversified. Prior to the explosion of IT, Kenyan authorities easily muzzled

virtually all forms of cultural production, including music which was perceived to be critical of the state leadership. Conversely, the same authorities encouraged (even funded) the (often mediocre) cultural productions that supported the status quo. Oriare, Orlale and Ogangu (2010: 14) aver that

[L]iberalisation of the airwaves in the early 1990s created opportunities for a more diverse media playing field ... Prior to this, many Kenyans could only tune into the sole, government-owned radio and television station. The Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC) was a government mouthpiece rather than a public space.

It is against this backdrop that the present article seeks to provide an exposé of socio-political song throughout the epochs of presidents Daniel arap Moi, Mwai Kibaki and Uhuru Kenyatta – epochs characterised by different leadership styles. The article shows how the evolution of IT (including the Internet, radio, television, mobile phones, computers and other audiovisual devices) has mediated the evolution of the socio-political song in Kenya throughout the three successive governments. The first theoretical premise of the article is that democracy translates into freedom of speech, which in turn allows citizens to use the available means of communication (song) to communicate to the government and the nation at large. The second premise is that technology translates into freedom of communication. It offers a wide range of choices through which people can pass on their ideas and messages. For socio-political song to thrive, this technology remains key. The present authors rely heavily on secondary data – books, journal articles and newspapers – in their analysis and interpretation of the role of IT in socio-political song. We also analyse the messages of the selected songs in the three epochs, to interrogate 1) how the analogue era spawned the patriotic songs of the Kenyatta government and the sycophantic praise songs of the Moi government, and 2) how the period of analogue–digital transition gave birth to the optimistic campaign songs of the Kibaki government, and how the digital age exploded with social consciousness songs under the Uhuru government.

The article is divided into four sections: the first offers a brief background on the role and use of song in the colonial period and during Jomo Kenyatta's regime. This is useful because it helps transition to the second section, Moi's regime, which exemplifies how tyrannical leadership exploited socio-political song for the benefit of the government. The third section highlights the move from an analogue to a digital era, with Kibaki taking over. This period saw tremendous change with the 'death' of the political praise songs that dominated Moi's rule. The new constitution, promulgated in 2010 during Kibaki's rule, has created a much-needed environment for freedom of technology and speech, which has directly affected both the kind of lyrics and the avenues through which song is distributed. The fruits of the new constitution can be seen in the fourth section of the article, where the lyrics of the

music produced – despite criticising the state – can easily find their way, thanks to the technological boom, to the majority of the Kenyan population.

### **The colonial period and Kenyatta's regime: setting the scene**

In Kenya's struggle for independence, songs as a medium of communication were very important among the Mau Mau freedom fighters, because most of them could not read or write. The fighters used songs to record their experiences in the course of the war for independence in the 1950s and as emancipatory tools with which to communicate their agenda. Though not played on any technological platform, the songs were passed on through word of mouth and used to mobilize support for the freedom course. Songs also educated the people on the Mau Mau's political advancement using coded language (Wa Mutonya 2010: 50). A selection of the versions of these songs are already in the public domain, as recorded by Joseph Kamaru, a popular Kenyan musician, on his series titled *Nyimbo Cia Mau Mau* [songs of the Mau Mau] and another by Mzee Young, both issued in the late 1980s.

After Kenya gained independence in 1963, the era under Jomo Kenyatta (Kenya's first president) can be described as a time when song and dance were very supportive of the government, since the country was just emerging from colonialism. The advent of independence in Kenya was therefore marked by jubilation. Songs that had been sung by the Mau Mau freedom fighters were turned into songs of celebration. With the advent of independence, these songs were sung at all political rallies and official government meetings. Wa Mutonya (ibid: 52) and Ogude (2003: 277–278) aver that Kenyatta later turned these songs into praise songs honouring him. They were sung at meetings and were broadcast by the only radio station at the time, Voice of Kenya (VOK).<sup>2</sup> Kenyatta's rule later hardened its stance against political opposition, especially after he fell out with his Vice-President, Oginga Odinga. Kenyatta began to co-opt and control the media for propaganda purposes (Mshindi and Mbeke 2008): some of the songs that opposed or criticised his leadership were banned and the artists arrested. Daniel Toroitich arap Moi, Kenya's second president, also followed this approach during his rule.

### **Socio-political song under the Moi regime**

Arap Moi ruled Kenya between 1978 and 2002. By the time he came to power in 1978, Kenyans were already splitting along ethnic lines, following the ethnic favouritism instituted by Kenyatta. With Moi as president, the elite, who had been loyal to the Kenyatta government, began to fragment (Branch and Cheeseman 2009). Certain ethnic communities (and leaders) began demanding a fair share of the nation's resources and political positions. Those who did not receive such favours formed ethnic associations (see Kamungi 2009: 349 ff.). Significant opposition came from

disgruntled citizens whose demands were aggravated by the freedom that came with independence. Due to their increasing demands, threats from larger communities<sup>3</sup> and a failed *coup d'état* in 1982, Moi amended Act No. 7 of the Kenyan constitution and introduced section 2(A) – a one-party state. Moi's regime criminalised opposition politics and used the security forces to crack down on its critics. The regime also banned all welfare associations with links to specific ethnic group(s). Moi extended his control mechanisms to elections: the infamous *mlolongo* (queue voting) system replaced the secret ballot, with voters feeling too intimidated to line up behind those candidates perceived as opposing the regime (Branch and Cheeseman 2009; Klopp 2002; Lonsdale 1994; Lynch 2006, 2008; Omollo 2002; Steeves 2006).

As one might expect, a fearful atmosphere was created by the excesses of Moi's style of leadership: detention of people in prisons for a long time, without fair trials in court; muzzling of the media, dishing out jobs by playing the ethnicity card (among other favours). All of this bred widespread sycophancy, which was reflected in the plethora of Moi praise songs that dominated the airwaves. In 1979, prior to the events of the 1982 attempted *coup*, these sycophants, with Moi's support, had already founded the Muungano (unity) National Choir, a mass choir under the directorship of Boniface Mganga. Moi's argument was that the choir would create and promote Kenyan culture around the world. Ironically, the choir mainly specialised in praise songs honouring Moi. This was the era of radio cassette players, so the regime produced hundreds of thousands of audiocassettes of these songs. The VoK, as the sole radio station in existence at the time, was inundated with 'patriotic' songs. The choir, funded by the Moi government, travelled to different countries to perform. Its a capella style had a choral sound characterised by a combination of rhythmic and melodic traditional and neo-traditional African tunes and quasi-Western harmonic styles.

Moi's *Nyayo* (footsteps) political philosophy, which he initially used to imply that he wanted to walk in the footsteps of Jomo Kenyatta, mutated into the demand that all Kenyans should walk in his footsteps (Gifford 2009: 35). His obsession with power cowed most leaders – especially those he appointed to various government positions, as they were constrained to follow in his *nyayo*. State corporations formed their own choirs, all of which sang the praises of the ruling Kenya African National Union (KANU) party and President Moi (Wa Mutonya 2010: 53). Those who, through song, were opposed to Moi's leadership risked their careers and businesses. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Moi regime used the police to regularly raid music shops and studios to confiscate anything considered anti-government. Extreme instances of harassment include the persecution of J.J. Muoria over his song *Thina Wa Muoroto* [the problem of leadership] and the arrest of Sammy Muraya following his visit to Molo (in Rift Valley Province) during the ethnic violence of the 1990s. At the time, the only way musicians could receive exposure was by airing their

songs over the national radio and the television stations of the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC). Oriare, Orlale and Ogangu (2010: 18) indicate that ‘KBC was mainly a government mouthpiece. Dissenting voices were shut out while those in power got time on national radio and television to talk to *wananchi* [citizens]’.

Moi’s visits to schools, hospitals and other public institutions were always acclaimed through songs of praise. He provided free education and milk to all public primary school pupils. The gratitude of the pupils, teachers and even parents was expressed in song. A number of primary and secondary schools were named after Moi and still bear his name. Moi’s government used music as an effective tool of mass indoctrination. Schools, colleges, churches, community groups, public and private corporations and government ministries churned out songs in praise of Moi. One classic example of such songs is called *Tawala Kenya* [Reign over Kenya], composed by Paul Wasonga, a primary school teacher from Western Kenya and sung by the Muungano choir:

<i>Tuna imani na uongozi wako</i>	We have faith in your leadership
<i>Dunia yote yapongeza</i>	The whole world applauds
<i>Eh baba tawala</i>	Eh father reign
<i>Dunia yote yapongeza</i>	The whole world applauds
<i>Eh baba tawala</i>	Eh father reign
Chorus:	Chorus:
Tawala Kenya tawala x2	Reign over Kenya reign
Rais Moi tawawala Kenya Tawala	President Moi, reign over Kenya reign.

The political language of song employs hyperbole. No amount of exaggeration is too bizarre, as is evident in *Tawala Kenya*: ‘*Dunia yote yapongeza*’ [The whole world applauds your leadership]. Ironically, this inflated claim was made at a time when the international community was putting pressure on the Moi regime to create space for democracy to thrive, having entrenched a single-party dictatorship in the Kenyan constitution. The entire corpus of these patriotic songs is exceptional in the sense that they specifically inflated the Moi cult. *Tawala Kenya* starts by urging Moi to reign over Kenya as a right. Implicit in the word *tawala* [reign over] is the acknowledgement that reigning is more important than the methods employed. Absurdly, as implied in the song, Moi was widely accepted as father of the nation, thereby having a paternal right to reign over Kenya as his household.

Through song, the Moi regime consistently attempted to explain and promote the controversial *Nyayo* philosophy of peace, love and unity. This philosophy did achieve some semblance of peace through the regime’s reign of terror, but love and unity proved quite elusive. Socio-political song was used to camouflage the

dictatorial tendencies of the president. Songs depicted Moi as the good shepherd, teacher number one, farmer number one, always a leader. By the time he declared himself a ‘Professor of Politics’, song and dance had prepared the nation to nod its agreement in solemn acceptance. The patriotic songs played what Wekesa (2006) describes as a hegemonic role associated with social, political and bureaucratic control, seeking to maintain the political status quo.

With the coming of multiparty politics in 1992, media freedom was expected. The advent of multipartyism liberalised the media and IT services. However, the government still marshalled not just state resources, but also the media, to ensure that no one reported the wrongs of the regime. The first independent media house, Kenya Television Network (KTN), was established in 1990, but KANU officials frequently called the station’s newsroom and editors on behalf of the president to demand a censoring of news stories and ‘defamatory’ political music (Mbeke and Mshindi 2008). The state, according to Allen and Gagliardone (2011: 9), muzzled freedom of expression through the *Criminal Laws and Secrets Act*. Moi also tried to establish business relationships with media stakeholders, and is said to still hold shares in KTN.

Media independence in Kenya can be traced to the *Communications Act*, 1998, which acted as a legal anchor that media owners could legally invoke. In February 1999, the Communication Commission of Kenya (CCK)<sup>4</sup> was established and mandated to license and regulate telecommunications, radio communications and postal services in Kenya (Kendagor 2008). These services initially resorted under a monopoly parastatal called Kenya Posts and Telecommunication Corporation (KPTC). The *Communications Act*, 1998, broke up the KPTC into three entities – Telecom Kenya, Postal Corporation of Kenya and CCK – the regulatory body (Nyabuga and Booker 2013). Up until this time, the media remained gagged by the state and socio-political song had rarely found a place in the media.

The artists who composed songs in the late 1990s, despite fairly liberalised politics, were careful with the lyrics. Eric Wainaina’s song *Daima Kenya*<sup>5</sup> (1998) was composed at a time when Kenya was in great turmoil, with a terrorist bombing of the US Embassy in Nairobi killing over 200 people and ethnic clashes, especially in Rift Valley Province, following the reintroduction of multiparty politics in 1992. *Daima Kenya*’s lyrics urge Kenyans in general to unite and avoid tribalism. The song did not face censure because of the patriotic lyrics:

Verse 1

*Ummoja ni fahari yetu, Undugu ndio nguvu*

*Chuki na ukabila, Hatutaki hata kamwe*

Unity is our pride, Brotherliness is  
the strength

Hatred and ethnicity, we do not  
want



The influence of information technology on the socio-political song in Kenya

<i>Lazima tuungane, tuijenge nchi yetu</i>	We must unite and build our country
<i>Pasiwe hata mmoja, anayetenganisha</i>	There should be no one to divide [us]
Chorus:	
<i>Naishi, natumaini, najitolea daima Kenya</i>	I live, I hope, I give myself always to Kenya
<i>Hakika ya bendera, ni uthabiti wangu</i>	The truthfulness of the flag, is my stability
<i>Nyeusi ya mwananchi na nyekundu ni ya damu</i>	Black is for citizen and red is for blood
<i>Kijani nni ya ardhi, nyeupe ya amani</i>	Green is for land and white is for peace
<i>Daima mimi mkenya, mwananchi mzalendo</i>	I am always a Kenyan, a patriotic citizen

From 2000, the IT sector rapidly grew to outperform other sectors. The World Bank (2012) put the growth rate of the IT sector in Kenya at an average of 20 per cent per annum. Anti-Moi songs emerged around this time. Eric Wainaina's *Nchi ya Kitu Kidogo*<sup>6</sup> ['A Country of Something Small' (bribes)] was released in 2001. At this time, the country was gearing up for general elections but Moi was not running for office, having already served beyond the terms allowed by the constitution. Moi supported Uhuru Kenyatta, whom he had handpicked to succeed him. Kenyatta lost colossally, mainly because Kenyans, who were tired of the excesses of Moi's regime, saw Kenyatta as Moi's protégé. Many songs released prior to Moi's dethronement condemned bad governance and corruption, as is evident in Wainaina's *Nchi ya Kitu Kidogo*:

Verse 2

<i>Hata nyumbani ukipatwa na majambazi</i>	In the house when thugs strike
<i>Kupiga 999 wasema</i>	You call 999 they say
<i>'Sisi hatuna gari, leta elfu tano ya petrol</i>	'We do not have a vehicle, bring 5000 for petrol
<i>saidia utumishi'</i>	Help the police force'
<i>Mahakamani hela ndio haki</i>	In the courts money is the justice
<i>Kwa elfu chache mshatakiwa ndiwe mshtaki</i>	For a few thousands the criminal becomes the complainant
<i>Ushahidi kwa utajiri</i>	Witness through riches

*Twarudisha jamhuri yetu nyuma*

We are taking our country  
backwards

Chorus

*Nchi ya kitu kidogo ni nchi ya watu wadogo*

A country of something small is a  
country of small people

*Ukitaka chai ewe ndugu nenda Limuru*

If you want tea brother, go to  
Limuru<sup>7</sup>

Wainaina's song received great support from Transparency International (Kenya) and the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights. The two organisations appointed Wainaina as anti-corruption ambassador, and he also won the 2002 Kora African musical awards in South Africa for best male artist in the East African region (Ntarangwi 2003). Although the state tried to muzzle the song by not airing it on the state-owned KBC and barring Wainaina's live performances, other stations played it. The song also found an audience in other East African countries where Moi could not clamp down on broadcasts.

### **Socio-political song in the Kibaki era**

Mwai Kibaki, Kenya's third president, came to power thanks to opposition to Moi's rule which united under the one-party National Rainbow Coalition (NARC). A major focus of their campaign agenda was the elimination of *kitu kidogo* [something small] – a euphemism for the corruption that had infiltrated virtually all sectors of the economy. As Branch and Cheeseman (2008: 17) argue, '(Mwai Kibaki) inherited a precarious state'. Kenya's economy was weak. The judiciary was riddled with corruption and the use of security forces had turned Kenya into a police state.<sup>8</sup> In response, NARC was determined to terminate the 39-year rule of KANU.

Who Can Bwogo Me?,<sup>9</sup> or simply 'Unbwogable', which became the political mantra of NARC, was a praise song released by hip-hop duo Gidi Gidi (Joseph Ogidi) and Maji Maji (Julius Owino). *Unbwogable* combined Luo *Sheng*<sup>10</sup> and English lyrics with a catchy, danceable beat to dominate the socio-political space just before the 2002 general elections, and during the first few months following NARC's victory.

*Unbwogable* is what some would call linguistic corruption – an Anglisation of the Luo<sup>11</sup> word *bwogo* which, depending on the context, means to intimidate, shake, scare or browbeat. With the addition of the English prefix *un-* and suffix *-able*, the word captured the imagination of the Kenyan nation. The political impact of *Unbwogable* is a clear case of what this article would call message superimposition – giving a deliberate contextual meaning to a product of art, in order to serve a specific purpose.

The popularity of the song was, to a great extent, thanks to the rise of IT – the rapid expansion of FM radio, independent TV stations and the burgeoning mobile telephony industry. In this instance, NARC appropriated, interpreted and became the transient custodians of the spirit of the meaning of *Unbwogable*.

Verse 1:

What the hell is you looking for?  
Can't a young Luo make money anymore?  
Shake your feet baby girl *en ang'o?* ('what is it?')  
But who are you? What are you?  
Who the hell do you think you are?  
Do you know me?  
Do I know you?

Get the hell out of ma face because hey,  
I am unbwogable  
I am unbeatable, I am unsueable  
So if you like ma song  
Sing it for me and say

Chorus:

Who can bwogo me (x 3)  
I am unbwogable

By the time this song was released, the Inter-Party Parliamentary Group (IPPG) Accord had clearly stated that all parties in Kenya would be given fair media coverage by KBC (as a media house funded by the taxpayers), yet the KBC and channels affiliated to it avoided playing the *Unbwogable* song. For supporters of the system, the song was a pervasive, unrelenting death-knell foretelling the end of an era. KANU not only banned the song from being played on KBC, but also indicated that it was politically sensitive material. Nyairo and Ogunde (2005: 232) argue that 'the act of banning a song from the airwaves amounts to denying it and the artists the exposure they require to ensure both sales and performance contracts'. Fortunately, for *Unbwogable*, the Kenyan airwaves had been liberated from government control and the song could therefore be played by the numerous private radio stations. Nyairo and Ogude (2005) point out that censorship can be interpreted as a signal to raise the alarm, and in a country where citizens were emerging from dictatorial leadership into alternative politics, curiosity would be created about whatever the state attacked. With the easily accessible technological services offered by independent FM radio

stations, public service vehicles and video shows, *Unbwogable* truly became '*unbwogable*'.

The reign of so-called 'patriotic songs' came to an abrupt end with the defeat of Moi's hand-picked candidate, Uhuru Kenyatta, in the 2002 general election. The Kibaki era significantly changed the nature of song in political discourse. While the political songs of the Moi era concentrated on building a cult of praise songs, those of the Kibaki era served a purely electoral purpose. Kibaki did not seem to care much about political praise songs, therefore his regime withdrew the support that his predecessor, Moi, had institutionalised.

The Kibaki era revolutionised media and IT in the country. The revolution can be pegged to the advent of the new constitution during Kibaki's reign. First, in his campaigns, Kibaki and the NARC team had promised to deliver a revised constitution within 100 days. Of course this did not happen (following leadership wrangles)<sup>12</sup> until eight years later (2010) when the new constitution was promulgated, giving the Kenyan information and communication technology (ICT) environment a high degree of independence. Under the former constitution, section 79(1) provided limited freedom of expression, whereas the new constitution provides for freedom of expression, association and access to information as well as media freedom (NCLR 2010). The constitutional provisions, complemented by the ICT policy ratified in 2006, committed the government to support and encourage pluralism and diversity (Nyabuga and Booker 2013: 24). The constitution also strengthened donor support for ICTs and media in Kenya (Allen and Gagliardone 2011). In addition, the growth of ICTs has been facilitated by advances in infrastructure and an innovative private sector (World Bank 2012).

According to Ibelema and Bosch (2007), the growth rate of the Internet in Africa was estimated at 87.47 per cent between 2000 and 2007. Allen and Gagliardone (2011) show that in 2010, Internet penetration in Kenya was at 9.7 per cent, compared to a global average of 30 per cent. Mobile phones are now considered a necessity in Kenya. A study by the World Bank (2012) shows that over 60 per cent of those at the base of the economic pyramid (living on less than 2.5 dollars a day) own mobile phones. In 2011, the introduction of an innovation hub for Eastern Africa by the then permanent secretary for ICT, Bitange Ndemo, further strengthened ICT services in Kenya. The service provision from IT business owners is diverse and affordable, with Kenya Telecom able to provide quick and low-cost broadband access. Indeed, Kenya is the only African partner in the Open Data Initiative, which has enhanced opportunities for accessing Internet and other ICT services for most Kenyans (Allen and Gagliardone 2011: 22). With the rapid technological advancement in ICTs during the Kibaki era, the music industry was quick to transform itself in every sense, including the political.

## **Socio-political song during Uhuru Kenyatta's regime**

Allen and Gagliardone (2011: 23) rightly argue that there is intense competition for advertising revenue and audience share in Kenya. This has created significant price reductions and increased use of ICT services. Kenya has also witnessed massive growth in the number of ICT professionals, entrepreneurs and operators. The result is that within Africa, Kenya is becoming an ICT innovation hub. Achievements in the ICT sector are greatly attributed to the democratisation process of Kenya's politics and political leadership, which is also influencing the music industry. The use of musical tunes in phones is a recent phenomenon. Artists market their songs not just on Internet-based platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter, but also via traditional channels such as radio and television stations. Their music is marketed using codes and abbreviations for specific songs, and mobile subscribers can purchase as well as share ringtones. Mobile subscribers are also able to include the tunes in their telephone-based music library to play at their leisure. Moreover, musicians are able to upload the lyrics of their songs in their fun pages on Facebook and/or Twitter. It is this vibrant digital era that President Uhuru Kenyatta and his Vice-President, William Ruto,<sup>13</sup> inherited when they came to power in March 2013.

As the campaigns leading up to the March 2013 general elections intensified, ethnic alignments to political parties and leaders became evident. Musicians seized the opportunity to use song in praise of leaders and presidential candidates from their ethnic groupings. In this charged electoral process, ICT-mediated political song was king once again. The Commission of Inquiry on Post-Election violence (CIPEV), popularly known as the WAKI commission (Waki was the chairperson), that had been formed to investigate the causes and effects of Kenya's 2007/8 post-election violence had been given evidence of media involvement, and especially the vernacular language FM stations.<sup>14</sup> The commission therefore proposed the formation of the Kenya National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC). The NCIC was established after the 2008 post-poll violence with the mandate of promoting lasting peace and harmonious coexistence among Kenya's diverse ethnic communities.

As the country geared up for the 2013 elections, the NCIC warned media houses not to play songs that incited Kenyans or overtly praised certain political candidates – in doing so they risked a fine of US\$ 12,000. The warning was issued after complaints that certain song lyrics incited ethnic-based political hatred. These songs included *Uhuru ni witû* [Uhuru is Ours] by Kamande wa Kioi, 'Hague Bound' by Muigai wa Njoroge and *Mwaka wa Hiti* [The Year of the Hyena] by DeMathew. The songs had been playing on three vernacular FM stations, namely Kameme FM, Inooro FM and Coro FM. The chair of the commission found that the songs praised Uhuru Kenyatta

and therefore violated section 4 of 12 (2008) of the Commission's Act. For instance, the lyrics to *Uhuru is Ours* were said to incite hatred between not only Kikuyu and Luo, but also between the supporters of the two presidential candidates, Uhuru Kenyatta (a Kikuyu) and Raila Odinga (a Luo).

*Uhuru is Ours* by Kamande wa Kioi

Greetings people of the house of Gikuyu and Mumbi  
I bring you a message from all Kikuyu musicians  
This is a message from God  
Uhuru is the Moses of the Kikuyu nation.  
He is meant to move Kikuyus from Egypt to Canaan.  
Do not agree to be divided.  
Let all votes go to him. He is ours  
He is anointed by God, and poured oil on.  
Raila [the opposition candidate] there is a call  
Go to Mama Ngina's [Uhuru's mother] house  
A king has been born there  
Once there, ask where Uhuru is seated and anoint him with oil  
Just like Samuel did for David in the Bible...  
You thumb your chest about Hague, is Hague your mother's?  
There is a curse from God  
Philistines who do not circumcise cannot lead Israel  
When Abraham stressed God, he was told go get cut  
Even you, General of Misingo, your knife is being sharpened.

The song is particularly insulting to the Luo people who culturally do not circumcise. In the Kikuyu culture, anybody who is not circumcised is a boy (rather than a man) and boys cannot lead. The song basically states that the Luo nation is made up of boys, including Raila, who cannot be allowed to lead Kenyans. This insult traversed the country through various IT platforms, especially vernacular FM stations, YouTube and mobile phones.

Though Kenyatta's campaign team used Facebook to distance itself from the musicians, the songs elicited fury on social media websites. Heated arguments, insults and debates ensued on Facebook, Twitter and blogs. For instance, 'Fans of Crazy Monday Face-off on Facebook' posted:

## The influence of information technology on the socio-political song in Kenya

... The National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC) flagged the songs: 'Mwaka wa Hiti' by DeMathew, 'Hague Bound' and 'Uhuru ni Witu' by Kamande wa Kioi. What is your view on this development: ...

What followed this posting was a vitriolic debate on the role of songs spreading messages of political and ethnic hatred. In less than an hour there were over 300 comments about the posting (see <https://facebook.com/krazy.monday?ref=streams&fref=nf>, 26 June 2012). Below are a few of the comments that were not extremely vulgar:<sup>15</sup>

*De fact dat we r al kenyans n wat apens in dis cntry affct evry1 weda quk ama any tribe so t's de hghst tym we shld be united n stp de krap  
June 26, 2012 at 11:31am*

*I even don't listen to such silly songs ..ati 'uhuru ni wetu' wenu na nani amewahi nilipia rent? [they say 'Uhuru is ours' yours and whose? Has he ever paid my rent? cheap ethnic politics / songs ..some of these guys r mungikis.<sup>16</sup>  
June 26, 2012 at 11:47am*

*Those songs are rudimentary, demeaning n unfit for mature human consumption. If they r wrong they r wrong! I DONT care if its my brother spewing it. Ethnic jingoism wont take you or me far.  
June 26, 2012 at 11:49am*

This case exemplifies the fact that the number of Kenyans using new forms of IT has increased significantly. In 2000 there were only 180 000 mobile users in the country, and by June 2013 there were over 30.5 million mobile phone subscribers – up from 29.8 million recorded at the end of June 2012 (Ooko, Nzomoi and Mumo 2014: 82). The integration of the Internet and the mobile phone in Kenya has also helped to deliver political song content. Since most mobiles in Kenya can access the Internet at affordable rates, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, WhatsApp and numerous blog sites are accessed easily. This kind of technology has changed campaign dynamics in the country, with many politicians creating official sites to communicate their political agendas. Uhuru's campaign for the presidency was therefore no different.

The Uhuru and Ruto (dubbed Uhuruto) victory in the March 2013 general elections came as a surprise to the international community. A number of foreign donors threatened to withhold aid since the two were facing charges of crimes against humanity at the ICC. As a way of ensuring that the economy did not collapse, Uhuru's government introduced more taxes in a country already heavily taxed. A number of socioeconomic challenges remain: high commodity prices, rising accommodation and transport costs. Artists now use popular music to express the need for change,

not just in politics but also in social issues. This is based on the notion that it takes the citizenry to bring positive change in all spheres of the socio-political landscape.

In the Uhuru presidency, social consciousness songs that would be proscribed during Moi's analogue era are easily and widely accessed via the Internet and mobile phones. Once a song is on the Internet it acquires a life of its own that includes and transcends the original 'author'. Audience members write numerous 'scripts' based on the original 'text' using Twitter, Facebook, email and LinkedIn, among others. The message of a song can be scripted and applied to different contextual activities. This scenario of information 'anarchy' obviously falls outside the tight censorship which Moi's analogue era enforced. Currently, there are 120 radio stations in Kenya (Nyabuga and Booker 2013: 18), most of which are privately owned. There is also a proliferation of radio, television and Internet advertisements that enlighten citizens about new songs which can be shared through audio and visual gadgets such as iPods, computers, tablets and mobile phones.

In April 2013, almost immediately after Kenyatta's election to office, Julius Owino (known by his stage name, Juliani) released a hit called *Utawala*<sup>17</sup> [Leadership] on audio and video. The song found its way onto the Internet (YouTube) almost instantly. Juliani's song was a reflection of the challenges facing low and middle-income earners, popularly known as 'hustlers' in Kenya. Rising economic challenges amidst corruption on the part of government officials were the talk of the media and Kenyan citizens in general. Juliani's song captured this scenario and therefore found quick recognition and acceptance. The song, sung in both Swahili and *Sheng*, found an audience especially among the youth in both rural and urban areas. As is the trend, they downloaded it onto their mobile phones and used it as call tunes.

Chorus:

Niko njaaa hata siezi karanga	I am hungry but I cannot fry
Hoe hae shaghala bhaghala	(Swahili expression of extreme poverty)
Niko tayari kulipa gharama	I am ready to pay the price
Sitasimamaa maovu yakitawala (x2)	I will not stand [watch] as upheavals lead
Ufisadi, ubinafsi ukabila	Corruption, egocentrism and tribalism
Kuuza sura wataki kuuza sera	Displaying themselves and not their manifestos
Undugu nikufaana	Brothers help each other
Sitasimama maovu yakitawala (x2)	I will not stand [watch] as upheavals lead

In the chorus Juliani reflects the emotions that represent many of those suffering in Kenya. He passionately castigates the sorry state of an economy riddled with corruption, tribalism and selfish politicians. In the video of the YouTube song, a young boy dressed in the Kenyan flag observes the crimes of politicians as well as



the daily struggles of Kenyans trying to make ends meet. He employs images of the Kenyan flag, Wangari Maathai's torture by Moi's government and her final triumph when she won the Nobel Prize. He also captures images of the arrest and harassment of Steve Mwangi, journalist turned activist. Frequent highlights in the video are of young Kenyans struggling to make ends meet, women cutting kale for sale, artisans working, shoe-cleaners working in the streets, street vendors and starving Kenyans. He also shows images of Kibaki and Raila Odinga, the former President and Prime Minister respectively, signing the power-sharing accord, and Kibaki's epitome of leadership – the promulgation of Kenya's constitution in 2010.

President Uhuru Kenyatta, the leader at the time this video was released, is not featured. Instead, the song lyrics highlight the power of the ballot box and urge Kenyans, who have the energy to pull down railway lines, to use some of that energy/power to change the leadership of their country which is wasting away, by voting for the right people: '*Nikiwa na nguvu ya kungoa reli definitely kuinua kura si nzito ukiingiza kwa ballot box, chagua kiongozi wa kweli*' [If I have the energy to damage a railway line, definitely it is not hard to lift a ballot, choose the right leader]. He praises the role of journalists like Mohamed Ali and John Allan Namu for exposing bad governance.

## Conclusion

Kenya's new constitution guarantees freedom of information and expression as citizens' fundamental freedoms. Although this freedom does not allow the use of propaganda for war, incitements to violence, hate speech or the advocacy of hatred, section 34 guarantees the independence of the electronic, print, and all other types of media. Artists therefore use this freedom (as they did in the Kibaki and Uhuru eras) not only to gain fame and promote their music, but also (importantly) to communicate a message. The government is working on creating 'digital villages' by laying fibre-optic cables in most parts of the country, including rural villages. This undertaking will allow more people to access ICT services which they could not use during Moi's reign. Such developments will concomitantly increase the audience base for socio-political songs.

This article has demonstrated how the new constitution has emancipated the use of ICTs and facilitated independent political debate. This scenario has allowed artists to express themselves and to disseminate socio-political songs that speak to political leaders' grasp on power. The advent of ICTs in Kenya, coupled with new innovations, has influenced the pace at which music is composed, produced, marketed and popularised. The use of new technologies like the BRCK (a gadget that switches between Ethernet, Wi-Fi, 3G or 4G mobile phone networks with a smart battery that can last up to eight hours, if the power is interrupted) by innovative Kenyans, with

support from around the globe, will take socio-political song in particular, and music in general, to new heights.

## Notes

1 <http://starreport.co.ke/news/article-153048/role-music-kenyas-liberation#sthash.iNC7liYf.dpuf> (accessed 19 July 2014).

2 VOK later changed into the present national broadcasting television channel, Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC).

3 Moi comes from the Kalenjin community, which then had small numbers compared to tribes like the Kikuyu, Luhya, Luo and Kamba.

4 This commission has since July 2014 changed its name to Communications Authority of Kenya (CAK). However, in this article the commission is referred to as the CCK.

5 *Daima Kenya* was written and sung by Eric Wainaina (1998). It was produced by Christian Kaufmann and directed by Prince Makava.

6 This song was written and sung by Eric Wainaina (2001). It was produced by Christian Kaufmann.

7 Limuru is one of the leading tea-growing areas of Kenya.

8 Moi, since the re-introduction of multiparty politics in 1992, mainstreamed the use of militia gangs to hold onto power (see Katumanga [2005]; Anderson [2002] and Branch and Cheeseman [2008]).

9 The song was written and sung by Gidi Gidi and Maji Maji (2002). It was produced by Wawesh and DJ Nruff.

10 *Sheng* is an urban slum language that uses Kiswahili and English as the base to incorporate local Kenyan languages.

11 The Luo are a Nilotic group found along Lake Victoria in the western part of Kenya and northern Tanzania. The community has been government's political opposition since Kenya's independence.

12 For more on the constitutional referendum see Lynch, G. 2008. The fruits of perception.

13 The two were facing (are still facing) charges of crimes against humanity at the International Criminal Court in The Hague for allegedly instigating the 2007/8 post-election violence in Kenya.

14 One of the four suspects facing trial at the ICC at The Hague in connection with the 2008 violence is journalist Joshua Sang, who worked for the popular vernacular radio station KASS FM as a DJ. Sang is accused of using his radio show in 2007 both to gain support and to communicate by code to others interested in committing crimes.

15 The names and pictures of those commenting have been omitted to conceal their identity.

16 Mungiki is an outlawed militia gang/sect. The group is said to have been used by Uhuru to perpetrate violence after the December 2007 general elections. There are accounts of this claim in the case facing Uhuru at the ICC.

17 The song was written by Juliani (2013). It was directed by Babbi Dop and produced by Jim Bishop.

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