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Ex-varsity dons tumble on the political platform

By Oduor Ouma and Simon Alubbe

The aspirations of nearly all Kenya's university dons turned politicians have been dashed as they are confronted by the reality that the stage belongs to the more politically sure-footed.

Attempts at political careers by eminent scholars including Professors Katama Mkangi, Ouma Muga, Wangari Maathai, Kivutha Kibwana and Maria Nzomo have not been very successful.

Whereas politics has been described as the art of the possible, the jolt to politicians with eminent academic credentials was further recently felt when Prof Saitoti's seemingly predestined route to the top was thwarted, at least for now.

The Vice-President of the Republic of Kenya never knew what hit him on March 18, at the Kasarani Gymna-



Prof. George Saitoti

sium. Otherwise he would not have campaigned until the wee hours of the morning for one of the four Vice Chairman's slots in the merged Kanu-NDP parties, New Kanu.

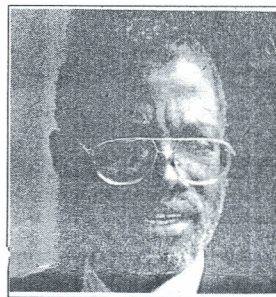
When the former mathematics lecturer realized that his name was not even featuring in the list of candidates released to the delegates of the two parties that morning, he com-



Prof. Wangari Maathai

mitted the indefensible: he reportedly argued with the President.

According to media reports, President Moi admonished his Vice-President telling him: "Professor shut up! If your name is not on the list, it is not on the list." (KANU leaders have since denied this version of the event.) Thereafter, a humbled V-P told delegates that he was not offering him-

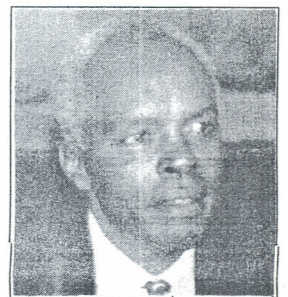


Prof. Anyang Nyong'o

self for any of the slots to be contested. But he did not stop there.

"I know there are many of you who wanted me to contest, is that not so?" he asked delegates. Then he waxed lyrical and pronounced, "There comes a time when the nation comes before the individual... but one day, I will be proved right."

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Prof. Kivutha Kibwana



An expressive Prof. Crispus Kiamba, the new Vice-Chancellor in his office last week.

New varsity fee structure coming

By Kakai Karani and Gloria Ndiritu

The University of Nairobi is set for a major review of the fees charged for all its programmes, says the newly appointed Vice-Chancellor, Professor Crispus Makau Kiamba.

The details of the new fees structure which have been approved by the government will be released soon.

In an exclusive interview with *The Anvil*, the Vice-Chancellor set out his agenda and vision for the UON. Speaking on a range of issues, Prof. Kiamba reiterated the central role played by parallel programmes also known as the module II programmes in the development of the University. Asked to comment on claims that module II programmes had lowered academic standards he was categorical in allaying such fears:

"Module II programmes are as important as module I. Module I programmes are as important as module II."

At the same time the VC noted that the parallel programmes had broadened the availability of higher education to Kenyans "who were not able to go through the very narrow gates of the regular programmes". He further noted that money generated from parallel programmes has helped in improving facilities for all students. "So long as they meet the minimum eligibility criteria", said he, "they qualify to study in this university".

The VC acknowledged that the parallel programmes posed problems of equity, but was quick to add that this was not unique to Kenya and was a universal problem. The Government therefore would continue to play a key role in ensuring that funding was available to meet part of the cost.

In a candid admission, the Vice-Chancellor acknowledged the poor facilities at the Jomo Kenyatta Memorial Library. He, however, said

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NEWS

Varsity dons tumble in politics

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An earlier indicator of Saitoti's political future came when the post of Vice-President remained vacant for 14 months. In dismissing the "power vacuum theory" that informed the subsequent clamour for the position of V-P to be filled, President Moi asserted: "I will soon name a Vice-President so that we can see if your grumbling and fear will cease." Then even more sarcastically, he added: "Even if I appoint a V-P, the number of *sufurias* of *ugali* you cook in your homes will not increase."

But the fate that befell Dr. Josephat Karanja and Prof. Philip Mbithi before him should have alarmed Prof. Saitoti about just how precarious his position could be made to look.

Indeed, few people can rival Dr. Karanja's record in public service. At the young age of 30, the man became Kenya's first High Commissioner to Britain. Two years later, he was accredited to the Vatican as well, until 1970. He then became the first indigenous principal of the Nairobi University College, then a constituent college of the University of East Africa. He held the position for two years before rising to be the first Vice-Chancellor of an autonomous University of Nairobi.

When President Moi announced his cabinet after the 1988 General Election, Dr. Karanja, who had only been in Parliament for three years, replaced Mr. Mwai Kibaki as Vice-President. In retrospect, this relative inexperience did not prepare Dr. Karanja well for the intrigues of the office.

Events moved fast. Political meetings countrywide condemned an unnamed politician whom they claimed demanded people to kneel before him. Amid all these, President Moi told a rally in Siaya that he was the head of state at all times, even when out of the country. He added that he had never found it necessary to appoint an acting president.

This further fuelled calls for the unnamed politician to resign. And although it was evident that fingers pointed at Dr. Karanja, the V-P maintained a studious silence. He ignored the issue until he was named at a rally in Kiambu, and the matter brought to Parliament.

Exit Dr. Karanja, enter Prof. Philip Mbithi. He was catapulted from the Vice-Chancellorship of the University of Nairobi to Harambee House to become the Head of the Civil Service and Secretary to the Cabinet. This was at a time when the country was going through the traumatic transition from single party politics to multi-partism.

The civil service needed to evolve into an impartial institution serving Kenyans at large, whether in opposition or in government. But a few months into his appointment, Prof. Mbithi dismissed the concept of impartiality as misplaced.

"How can one be neutral in implementing government policies, when it is those policies that differentiate the ideologies of different parties?" he asked a seminar for civil servants in May 1992.

Such policies were later to shock him in March 1996. The news of his



Prof. Philip Mbithi

removal was, as usual, announced over the KBC Radio Bulletin at 1 p.m.

Another example of the precarious nature of politics for dons is Prof. Ouma Muga. At the peak of his political career Muga, a professor in Fluvial Geomorphology (the study of the impact of water and rain on shaping the surface of the earth and its resource base), was the MP for Rangwe and an Assistant Minister.

In 1989, Prof Muga was expelled from KANU within a week of accompanying President Moi to the Ozone Layer Conference in London. It was claimed that the scholar had boasted of writing the President's speech which was well received at the conference. Prof Muga lost his parliamentary and government positions. Although he became an MP in the multi-party era, Prof Muga is today a shadow of his former self.

This jinx for university dons in politics apparently has no gender bias. Prof Wangari Maathai, has not been spared either. A professor of Veterinary Anatomy, Maathai has scored a long list of credits in the environmental conservation arena. On the political front though her 1997 presidential bid was nipped in the bud even before she was taken as a serious contender. Worse still, Prof Maathai could not even win the Mathira parliamentary seat. Her campaign to unite opposition political parties in 1992 didn't bear much either.

And so the story goes on. Prof Katama Mkangi, a sociologist, is yet to realise his goal of winning a parliamentary seat. Prof Maria Nzomo found politics a hostile neighbourhood where she is yet to make an impact.

While Prof Kivutha Kibwana and fellow academic Dr. Willy Mutunga have succeeded, to a certain degree, in the area of political activism none of them can claim significant political trophies. Prof Kibwana's National Convention Executive Council (NCEC) has run out of the steam that catapulted it to great heights in 1997.

Prof Kibwana, once touted as a possible compromise opposition presidential candidate, today seems undecided on how to create an impact on the political scene. At one time, he supported the Ufungamano led constitution review initiative. When a majority of the forum voted to join the parliamentary committee on constitution review, Prof Kibwana cried foul and opted out of the process. Recently, media reports have linked Prof Kibwana to various opposition alliances only for the professor to deny the links.