

KITOTO > This man just swept me off my feet, but I'm married!

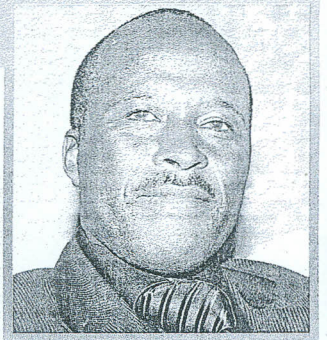
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MAN OF THE MOMENT

The Mike Sonko of university politics

Sonu's new chairman, Babu Owino, is more popular by his moniker than his actual name. He is a bit like the blinged Nairobi senator who, like a musician, is more known by the character he plays than the man he really is

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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 "is comfortable, as I have made sure of that by building a nice house for her in Kisumu."

Even though he has several cars and lives in one of the city's posh estates, Owino believes that he has only just begun. "I am not rich. No. I don't consider myself rich at all. In fact, the wealth is in my brain," he says.

And when he is done with student politics, he intends to get into national politics and gun for the presidency some day. Why?

"Because that is where I belong."

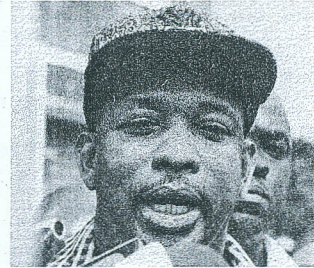
>> FOR YOUR INFORMATION



■ Babu is not married, but is the father of a two-year-old boy called Leslie.
■ The name "Babu" came from his mother, who used to call him that from a young age.
■ He was Sonu chairman between 2011 and 2012, and is now back for a second term that ends next year.

commentary

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



BY WAGA ODONGO
wodongo@ke.nationmedia.com

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 moniker, 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 gaudy and ostentatious, like Sonko. He walks around with more phones than a telephone exchange 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 grandiloquent (he would approve of the word) style at press conferences suggests that he secretly thinks that monks are at his side, taking down every word for holy writ. He loves English the way a man who discovered the language late in life and 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) prolix, loquacious, 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 piqued 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 Orengo has pulled off a re-election to the chairmanship.

Undoubtedly, his benefactors and associates are well heeled and allow him a choice of toys to prance around in. 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 Pattni, 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 communitarian and socialist, but the thing that really attracts the crowd is capitalism-in-excess.

The youth are the leaders of tomorrow. Except that they are not. The myth of power undergoing a generational change is usually accepted "hook, line, and stinker", yet the gravy train is never, ever handed over voluntarily. You do not cut the line in the leadership gap as those who get there first hang on for as long as possible. The youth grow into adults who, in the fullness of time, inherit the power — or what is left of it — when the older folks are done. Youth never really lead.

Except at university. Like gods, most student leaders' powers happen to be imaginary. You get to pose for posters, make speeches, and call poorly-attended press conferences... and that is about it, save for a little room to manoeuvre friends and allies into shops and canteens.

Sonu has a budget of about Sh50 million, which is about half what a constituency development fund has. But due to the particularly fractious nature of

resource allocation, a lot of the chairman's powers are curtailed. This illusion of power without any real ability to effect change is perhaps why chairmen often feel the need to posture so strongly about their position, importance, and ability.

The Sonu chairmanship, in particular, is a springboard to national recognition. Leading university students is the preferred orifice through which to enter the parliamentary canal. And so the chairmanship of the University of Nairobi's student body has become a timeshare between two major tribes, rotated between them like the presidency of Nigeria among the northerners and the southerners.

Babu is also hopelessly charming and affable, with a whiff of scandal about him. And there have been scandals; his name has been dragged by his opponents into forgery and assault cases. Throughout, though, nothing has stuck and he has come out looking better than a few other former heads of Sonu.

The Sonu chairmanship is useful in leveraging for positions at the table. 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 transient, particularly during elections, and can, therefore, not be leveraged into power.

His failure to 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 perhaps more expensive, to stand out. At university, in a particularly fractious year like this one is shaping up to be, there are 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 democratic space, it has been unable to accept a more shrunken role on the national stage, still maintaining an overblown sense of importance.

Universities affect too few of us for us to collectively care. Even when rioting, 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 inner 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 barons.

In Kenya, that is more than enough.