

HOW THE NEWSPAPERS PREPARED BEN MKAPA FOR THE PRESIDENCY

By Prof NGILA MWASE*

I first communicated with Ben Mkapa, then Managing Editor of the TANU Party newspapers- the Nationalist and Uhuru in 1969. I started working with him in 1970 in both the Party newspapers on part-time basis and later full-time in the government English daily, the Daily News. The editorial staff were few and so I got to know him very well.

I did not know at the time that he would one day ascend to the Presidency. Mwalimu was young and the idea of political succession had not crossed peoples' minds. However when he became President after years in the media, on senior diplomatic appointments and later in the Cabinet I traced this success from his newspaper days.

The newspapers were not only the main mouthpiece of government but they were major centres of political and development discourse. Its corridors were full of visitors from Cabinet Ministers, Party stalwarts, leaders of liberation movements pushing their stories, etc. It is in these offices that I first met the future Presidents Hifikepunge Pohamba (Namibia), Joaquim Chissano (Mozambique) and Yoweri Museveni (Uganda) as well as prominent women leaders including Janet Mondlane and Graca Machel of Mozambique and Angela Davies of the USA.

Other than the Party's Kivukoni College and Dar University there was no other influential policy centre than Mkapa's newspapers. So influential were the Tanganyika Standard Newspaper (the Daily News and Sunday News) that the coup plotters of 1969 had planned to close it fearing that it would be a centre of opposition to the coup. Most of its staff including Mkapa and myself had gone through military training. On days of potential dangers to the country such as during Idi Amin's threats and attacks Mkapa came to the office in full JKT military attire.

As Editor he was able to talk with Vice President Rashidi Kawawa, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Party newspapers and later with President Nyerere who was Editor-in-Chief of the Tanganyika Standard Newspapers, the Daily News and Sunday News, to clarify stories or to seek advice on reporting of major developments almost on a daily basis. This endured him well to the national political leadership making it easier for him to climb the political ladder.

Mkapa had a very sharp mind, extremely hard working and with a great command of the English language. Having started his career at the Foreign Ministry he was very diplomatic and non-confrontational. He fitted very well Nyerere axiom – “don’t shout but argue”. Although somewhat elitist he was well mannered and unassuming. I could judge this from the daily hourly morning staff meetings to review the day’s newspaper and plan for the next and afternoon senior management meetings to review incoming stories and decide on the newspaper layout. He never missed these meetings which he chaired.

Mkapa always backstopped reporters on hard assignments. I was working on the implications for Mozambique’s liberation of the April 1974 Portuguese coup d’état when his Deputy Costa Kumalija alias Chenge wa Chenge told me it was not being handled at the Foreign Ministry whose Director of Information Ambassador Msolomi I was chasing, but at the level of Presidents Nyerere, Kaunda and the FRELIMO leader Samora Machel and that Mkapa was working on it. On another occasion I was covering the somewhat controversial visit of one of apartheid South African Bantustan leaders, Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi. Mkapa himself drove Senior Sub-Editor Reginald Mhango and myself to the University of Dar-Es-Salaam to cover an address by the Zulu leader and later wrote the story himself underlining that Tanzania was not abandoning the freedom fighters who were nervous about the visit or seeking an internal solution to the white minority regimes advocated in some quarters in Africa and beyond.

TANU and later the CCM was very much against political or ideological factions in the party and its organs. Mkapa was a Nyerereist deploying a pragmatic approach to the issues at hand. He kept off from the sharp political divide between

“ujamaa” and scientific socialists; although his newspapers particularly the Nationalist fostered all sheds of political opinion.

Although we were in a one party setting the newspapers were, save for the core political foundations of the United Republic such as national unity, the Union, the one-party system, a secular state with no state religion, the newspapers were free to publish critique of policy evolution and roll-out, implementation of development programmes and the shortcomings of individual leaders. They exposed corruption and malpractices in the parastatals allowing government to take corrective measures.

It was pleasant working with Ben Mkapa as he was fondly called. He always defended his staff when he felt they were being unfairly treated or attacked by politicians and bureaucrats especially those pretending to have been misquoted. On one occasion I had a problem with Party Headquarters. I had been assigned to interview the Party National Executive Secretary. I phoned to try to make an appointment with his Secretary but the CEO received the phone himself fuming that I should have gone rather than phoning. I tried to explain that I was making an appointment but he was not satisfied. I reported this to Mkapa who told me to ignore him, although on further reflection Mkapa’s Deputy advised I should go and interview him since the paper will continue to need his cooperation, which I did.

One of the things that disturbed Mkapa was failure by the newspapers to break even leading to reliance on state subsidies. He was worried that this would give the holding corporation, the National Development Corporation (NDC) some say on the running of the Daily News. However, given his closeness to President Nyerere this did not happen. The time had not come when we could publish sensational news that would raise newspaper sells.

Mkapa was the founding Director of the Tanzania News Agency (SHIHATA) before he moved to State House as Press Secretary to the President. In both positions he continued to have a leading role in the management of the mass media in Tanzania. He then served as High Commissioner and Ambassador in key stations- Nigeria, Canada and the USA; became a Minister in various dockets before being

sworn in as President in 1995. The newspapers had been a launching pad for the highest office in the land.

***Prof NGILA MWASE worked with President Mkapa in the newspapers particularly the Nationalist and the Daily News. (ngila.mwase@yahoo.com).**