

# Stalinist leader hails Raila Odinga's role in "Kenya's bourgeois democratic struggle"

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On October 15, Booker Omole, the general secretary of the Communist Party Marxist–Kenya (CPM-K), published a brief but revealing statement on Twitter following the death of veteran bourgeois opposition leader and former prime minister, Raila Odinga:

“Raila Odinga is dead. We honour his courage against dictatorship and his role in Kenya's bourgeois democratic struggle. Yet his politics never broke with imperialism. His end reminds us: reforms die, revolutions live.”

In the weeks since Odinga's death, his passing has dominated headlines across Kenya, the region, and the world. Virtually every major international outlet has published at least one tribute. The entire political and media establishment, from President William Ruto and the official opposition to former US President Barack Obama and the *New York Times*, has hailed Odinga as a “champion of democracy.” Kenya's leading news organizations, including the *Standard*, *Daily Nation*, *Citizen TV*, and the *Kenya Broadcasting Corporation*, have devoted continuous coverage to every facet of his life and career.

Amid this chorus of praise, the Kenyan Stalinists have remained almost entirely silent, only broken by Omole's brief tweet. The tweet stands out for what it reveals about the CPMK and the wider decay of Stalinist politics in Africa. A political current that still claims to represent socialism has proven incapable of even writing an article or statement offering an analysis of a man who shaped Kenya's bourgeois order for four decades. Instead, it has issued a carefully worded tweet that simultaneously distances itself from and pays homage to a leading representative of the Kenyan ruling class.

Odinga's political career had nothing to do with the struggle for democracy. From the outset, his central concern was to maintain bourgeois rule which rested on imperialist domination and preserve the capitalist exploitation of the Kenyan, African, and international working class.

From the late 1980s through his tenure as prime minister between 2008 and 2013, Odinga served as a political fixer specializing in policing popular anger. Each time mass opposition emerged against the Kenyan elite, whether under Western-backed dictator Daniel arap Moi in the 1990s, or later Mwai Kibaki and Uhuru Kenyatta and today William Ruto, his main task was to channel it into demands for constitutional reforms and national unity governments. A more detailed exposure of Odinga's role can be found in “Former Kenyan prime minister Raila Odinga dies aged 80”.

It is not surprising that Omole rushes to defend Odinga's political record. His reaction underscores the historical role Stalinism has played in propping up and legitimising bourgeois figures, portraying them as progressive actors in a supposed democratic struggle.

Odinga was a central architect of the 2010 constitution, a document crafted to contain mass discontent after the 2007 and 2008 crisis when President Mwai Kibaki stole the election from him. The eruption of opposition, largely drawn from Kenya's working class and impoverished

layers in the slums and rural areas, was met with brutal state repression. Ethnic violence, inflamed by both ruling factions, engulfed the country, leaving more than 1,300 people dead and over 650,000 displaced.

The 2010 constitution was a mechanism to safeguard property relations, Western investment and Kenya's role as an outpost of imperialist control of the Horn of Africa. In this process, the predecessor of the CPM-K, the Social Democratic Party, played a direct role. The CPM-K proudly acknowledges its participation in drafting this capitalist framework, boasting on its website that it “participated actively in the capitalist struggle for the progressive reforms that are summarised in the national Constitution of Kenya 2010. We were involved in the debates of the Constitution-making conference at Bomas of Kenya in Nairobi between 2003 to 2005 and fought for the inclusion of the progressive articles in the Constitution that included Article 10 on national values and principles of governance that also form the summary of the minimum program of the CPK.”

Fifteen years later, what can be said about Kenya's democracy? A third of the population, about 20 million people, are undernourished; 67 percent of youth are unemployed or underemployed; 60 percent of the country's annual revenue is used for debt servicing to international finance; and fewer than 0.1 percent of Kenyans (about 8,300 people)—including the Odinga, Kenyatta and Ruto families—own more wealth than the bottom 99.9 percent (over 44 million people). The country remains in the boots of the International Monetary Fund, with its elite imposing savage austerity in health, education and privatisations.

As for democratic rights guaranteed in the Constitution, the Ruto government that Odinga supported to the end routinely suppresses peaceful protests with live ammunition, teargas, and abductions. Hundreds have been killed by police and military units, thousands maimed for life and thousands of others arrested, with dozens abducted to never be seen again by their families. Kenya is sliding back into the darkest days of Moi's dictatorship, the authoritarian rule that the 2010 Constitution was meant to end.

To say Odinga's “politics never broke with imperialism” as Omole does, prettifies his role as an imperialist stooge who maintained close relations with every US and British ambassador since the 1990s.

During the 2007–2008 post-election violence, when the country was plunged into near civil war, US and European imperialism intervened to protect their geostrategic and economic interests. Recognising that the path to stabilisation between the corrupt and tribal factions of the Kenyan elite was the formation of a government of national unity, Odinga was tasked with striking a deal with President Mwai Kibaki. Under this Western-brokered arrangement, Kibaki retained the presidency while Odinga was installed in a newly created position of prime minister.

Odinga went on to fully back imperialism across Africa. He endorsed France's 2011 imperialist intervention in Ivory Coast and backed Kenya's illegal US-supported invasion of Somalia that same year. Later given a fig leaf of legality through the United Nations, the invasion of Somalia was

justified under the pretext of fighting Al-Shabaab but in reality served Washington's objective of consolidating control over the Horn of Africa.

Omole openly supported this operation. As he admitted, "Regarding the issue of Somalia, we had a different policy. [...] the Kenyan government was helpless to control the terrorists killing in our country. That is why, for a moment, we supported the military offensive against Al-Shabaab organisations in Somalia." Ever since, thousands of Somalis have died at the hands of Kenyan troops and US-led drone operations launched from Kenyan soil.

Amid the 2024 Gen-Z protests that confronted the whole post-independence Kenyan elite, Odinga manoeuvred to suppress social opposition. He joined Ruto in his "broad-based" government to enable him to continue imposing IMF austerity and consolidate police state rule. Odinga urged youth to seek "dialogue" with Ruto. For this, the Kenyan elite and Western governments reward him with praise as a "statesman."

The CPM-K played a role in paving the way to the Ruto-Odinga government. During the Gen Z protests this meant vacillating between timid appeals for Ruto to reverse his austerity measures and calls for his resignation in favour of an ill-defined "pro-poor" government or "people's democracy." Central to this chimera was the claims that 2010 Constitution is "site of class struggle", arguing that the bourgeoisie's failure to implement its provisions is the main obstacle to progress, and that enforcing them will "inevitably" lead to socialism.

Omole's claim that Odinga played a role in Kenya's "bourgeois democratic struggle" expresses a distinctly Stalinist counter-revolutionary conception to block the revolutionary struggles of the working class. The two-stage theory developed by the Stalinist faction in the 1920s against Leon Trotsky and the Left Opposition states insists that first there must be a national democratic revolution led by "progressive" bourgeois forces to achieve full independence and democracy. Only later, in an indefinite future is a socialist transformation possible.

This perspective has served, historically, to subordinate the working class to bourgeois nationalism across the former colonies—from China to Egypt to South Africa. It functions to justify alliances with sections of the capitalist class under the banner of "national development."

Today CPM-K presents itself as the tribune of the "national democratic revolution," advocating for the preservation of the profit system and a supposed national, state-led, path to developing Kenyan capitalism, as a first step to socialism. The CPM-K calls for a "mixed economic system where the state, private sector, and cooperative sector coexist".

The two-stage perspective is bankrupt. In the epoch of imperialism, democratic and national tasks—land reform, economic sovereignty, and popular rule—cannot be separated from socialist ones. Only the independent mobilisation of the working class, in alliance with oppressed layers across Africa and the world, can achieve these aims.

Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution begins from the recognition that in countries of belated capitalist development like Kenya, the capitalist class can no longer lead the struggles for democracy as it did in the bourgeois revolutions of the eighteenth century in the United States and France. Fearful of the proletariat and, in ex-colonial countries like Kenya, bound by a thousand threads to imperialist finance, the capitalists necessarily oppose democratic rule. Democracy can be established only by the working class seizing state power and placing all the resources of the economy under the control of the workers and oppressed masses.

To grasp why the Kenyan Stalinists would praise Odinga even while admitting his ties to imperialism, it is necessary to recall their historical lineage. The Communist Party Marxist–Kenya descends politically from the Mwakenya group of the 1980s and 1990s.

Mwakenya was an underground Maoist party that became the main "left" opposition to the Moi dictatorship, advocating for democracy, human rights, and national development, as opposed to the struggle for socialism. Its social base lay largely in the urban petty bourgeoisie,

including students, professors, and sections of the professional class, whose grievances with Moi centred on exclusion from the state pie rather than on class exploitation. Mwakenya oriented itself to figures like Oginga Odinga and later his son Raila during the 1990s, seeing them as vehicles for a "progressive" national front.

When the multi-party elections were introduced in 1992 and the 24-year-old regime of Moi ended in 2002, many of Mwakenya members adapted to the new bourgeois order and rebranded themselves as reformists and democrats.

Oduor Ong'wen, once a leading student radical, became Odinga's long-time campaign strategist and is today the executive director of the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM), the party founded by Odinga in 2005. Willy Mutunga rose to become Chief Justice under the 2010 constitution between 2011 and 2016, with the public support of Odinga. Wanyiri Kihoro, once a political detainee, became a Member of Parliament in Odinga's camp. Makau Mutua, a self-described "progressive" law professor, became one of Odinga's international spokespersons. Miguna Miguna, who once claimed exile as a radical student, returned to Kenya to serve as Odinga's senior adviser. James Orengo, detained alongside other left-leaning activists in the 1980s, evolved into one of Odinga's closest allies, serving as senator and later as governor of Siaya County. Today, still an ODM leader, Orengo has become a supporter of Ruto's government.

A particularly revealing case is that of Mwandawiro Mghanga. As chairman of the University of Nairobi Students' Organisation (SONU) in the early 1980s, Mghanga was among the most prominent student leaders of Mwakenya. Arrested and brutally tortured at the Nyayo House chambers, he spent months in detention before being released and fleeing into exile in Sweden. There, he presented himself as a Marxist-Leninist revolutionary, building contacts with international Stalinist networks. Upon returning to Kenya in the 1990s, he entered parliamentary politics, winning the Wundanyi seat in 2002 under Odinga-backed National Rainbow Coalition (NARC). After the NARC victory, Mghanga was appointed Assistant Minister for Foreign Affairs in President Mwai Kibaki's first Cabinet.

Mghanga lost his parliamentary seat in the 2007 elections and subsequently became Chairman of the Communist Party of Kenya (CPK), the renamed successor of the Social Democratic Party (SDP). In 2022, a split happened within the CPK between Mghanga and Booker Omole, when Mghanga joined Ruto in his electoral front and then joined his government.

Mghanga's trajectory, like that of Omole today, vindicates the *World Socialist Web Site's* analysis that Stalinist and Maoist currents in Kenya have functioned as political instruments of the national bourgeoisie, obstructing the independent mobilisation of the working class.

This independence can only be secured through Trotskyism. This is why Omole, echoing generations of Stalinists before him, identifies Trotskyism as the chief threat to the CPM-K's pro-capitalist, nationalist programme. Earlier this year, in an international conference of Stalinists in Nairobi he called for "a fierce ideological struggle against all erroneous ideas," specifically naming "Trotskyist and ultra-leftist deviations" that "must be defeated."

This follows Omole's hysterical diatribe against the WWSWS, denouncing Trotskyism, praising Stalin's purges of old Bolsheviks during the 1930s, and vowing to crush "Trotskyist deviations" with "iron discipline."

Odinga's legacy demonstrates that no amount of constitutional reform or national rhetoric can resolve the fundamental contradictions of Kenyan society. The same petty-bourgeois layers that once rallied behind Mwakenya now serve as the ideological cover for a new generation of "lefts" who fear revolutionary change more than they oppose imperialism.

The central task before Kenyan workers and youth is to break decisively from this heritage—to reject both the ruling elite and its Stalinist

shadow—and to build a Marxist movement grounded in the international unity of the working class. Only through such a perspective can the promise contained in Omole’s own closing words, “reforms die, revolutions live,” acquire genuine revolutionary meaning.



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