

Wetangula in stand off with relative in Sirisia

By SIMBI KUSIMBA, Bungoma August 4 2007

The creation of Bungoma West district seems to be changing Foreign Affairs assistant minister Moses Wetang'ula's political fortunes in this constituency by the day. He is preparing to defend the seat with the number of possible opponents already about 10.

Mr Wetang'ula's political future is under threat as a controversy rages over the new district headquarters. It is an extremely emotive issue as the location has annoyed the people of Sirisia and Malakisi, his strongholds.

They had preferred Sirisia market, arguing that it has the necessary infrastructure, and that even the district officer's lived there. But the MP sided with the people of Chwele and Nalondo divisions who previously did not support him, and backed Chwele. And now Mr Wetang'ula is walking a tightrope as he tries to strike a balance between his traditional backers and his previous detractors.

It is probably for this reason that the late entry of Imenti South district commissioner Joseph Satia, a close relative of Mr Wetang'ula's, into the race is raising eye-brows. Then there is businessman Emmanuel Tiboti who is shifting his base from Kanduyi whose seat he contested and lost in 2002.

Mr Satia's case is particularly critical for the MP as the two politicians are of the Babutu clan of Nalondo. They will then split the home votes and compete for the others in the rest of the constituency. Mr Satia recently went public to declare that his rise in the provincial administration was hindered by Mr Wetang'ula until Trade minister Mukhisa Kituyi intervened to have him appointed DC, sparking a clan row that is still raging.

Addressing a rally at Nalondo in the presence of Dr Kituyi, he fired salvos at the MP whom he termed elitist with no time for the poor, and urged the voters to bring about change. That is when he declared that he is in the race. It is probably for reason that the late entry of Imenti South DC Joseph Satia, a close relative of Mr Wetang'ula, into the race is raising eye-brows.

It has complicated matters for the MP, especially when it is considered that the two are from Babutu clan in Nalondo division. They will then split the home vote and compete to share the rest of the constituency.

Mr Satia recently went public claiming that his rise in the provincial administration was hindered by Mr Wetang'ula until Dr Kituyi intervened to have him appointed DC sparking off a clan row that is still raging to date. Addressing a rally at Nalondo in the presence of Dr Kituyi, Mr Satia fired salvos at the sitting MP whom he termed elitist with no time for the poor while urging voters to bring about change. That is when he stated he was in the race to succeed Mr Wetang'ula.

Mr Tiboti who is from Musese, near Chwele market, is running on a Kanu ticket and counting on the support of his Batukwika clan. He caused quite a stir last month when he donated money and materials to several schools in the division. But

although he is considered by the local political observers as a spoiler, he could help to deny Mr Wetang'ula the crucial votes.

Sirisia is made up of Chwele, Malakisi, Nalondo and Sirisia divisions, and has the largest number of poor people, estimated by the Central Bureau of Statistics at 114,470. Sirisia and Malakisi were once famous for tobacco, cotton and coffee growing, but the collapse of the cotton sub sector and low earnings from tobacco and coffee have largely contributed to poverty.

The failure by the political leadership to address the residents' agricultural predicament is a hot election issue. And although the local ginnery was expected to be operational by 2004 through the revival of the Malaba-Malakisi ginnery and cotton cooperative societies, this has yet to happen.

Even the much touted farm credit merchandise scheme as well as the small-scale processing and manufacturing plants projects have not taken off. Water supply projects, particularly at Old Kibichori, Chwele, Ng'oli, Namwela-Chesabiti and Lwandanyi, as well as the Namwela-Sirisia-Lwakhakha road are other issues the residents will be raising.

Mr Wetang'ula has held the seat for only a term, having beaten Mr John Barasa Munyasia for the Narc nomination in 2002. Mr Munyasia had beaten him in 1997 when he (Wetang'ula) stood on a Kanu ticket after serving one term in Parliament as a nominated MP. But at the last election, the assistant minister got the support of Vice-President Michael Wamalwa to win both the nomination and the election.

In 1997, he was appointed as chairman of the Electricity Board, but shifted loyalty to Ford Kenya ahead of 2002, and this enabled him to get the Narc nod. Another possible candidate, Mr John Waluke, has moved to exploit the headquarters issue to his advantage by mobilising against the MP residents Malakisi and Sirisia divisions who are opposed to Chwele. It is worth noting that Mr Waluke at one time served as the MP's campaign chief before they fell out.

On February 10, the hopeful led hundreds of former Ford Kenya supporters to defect to Narc Kenya at the Mayuba stadium, and they were received by the party's interim secretary-general, Dr Kituyi. He followed this by being elected Sirisia branch Narc-K chairman. Mr Wetang'ula who is expected to clinch the Ford Kenya ticket, is counting on support from Chwele and Nalondo residents to retain the seat, but he seems to have quite a battle on his hands.

The votes in two divisions could be split further by yet another candidate, Mr Peter Kokonya, who does not see eye to eye with Mr Wetang'ula. Although he is yet to state clearly on which party ticket he will run, Mr Kokonya has been on the ground canvassing for votes. Mr Eric Makokha and Mr Hudson Masambu are also in the race on the Narc Kenya ticket.

Even at the party level, Mr Wetang'ula is not likely to have smooth sailing following the entry into the fray of Mr Mark Wanjala Barasa. Mr Barasa, a Kenya Revenue Authority employee in Mombasa who is from Khachonge in Nalondo, says Sirisia needs a change of guard. "My party of choice is Ford Kenya, and I will be challenging Mr Wetang'ula for the ticket, but if rigged out I will consider other

options," he said when he declared his candidacy in March.

Slow implementation of the rural electrification programme, particularly in the border town of Lwakhakha, is likely to be another campaign issue. Poor sugarcane producer prices, especially in Nalondo where most farmers are contracted to the Nzoia Sugar Company, is another.

The growers have always demanded that the Government subsidise the cost of farm inputs, particularly seed cane and fertilizer, but their MPs have not raised the matter in Parliament. All in all, Mr Waluke will have to contend with opposition from only Mr Masambu for the Sirisia division bloc vote, while Mr Wetang'ula will split that of Nalondo and Chwele, with his many rivals seeking to make his re-election a close call indeed.

Source: Nation Media