

WEBUYE CONSTITUENCY PROFILE

Cane growing main issue as Kombo seeks another term

Story by SIMBI KUSIMBA, Webuye 10 August 2007

Campaigns in the constituency are intensifying as the incumbent, Local Government minister Musikari Kombo, contemplates joining the presidential race. And violence has set in as his possible rivals' supporters clash. Mr Kombo, the Ford Kenya chairman, has often said he in the presidential race, although his actions of late do not show it.

And the fact that he, unlike politicians in other parties, is yet to launch his vision for the top job further strengthens the people's doubts about his intentions. Kenyans in general and the people of Webuye in particular are waiting anxiously for the minister to state categorically that, indeed, he will go for the top seat.

Curiously, his close confidants in Ford Kenya such as Cabinet minister Noah Wekesa, Foreign Affairs assistant minister Moses Wetang'ula and Kanduyi MP Wafula Wamunyinyi have lately been busy trying to cobble together a grand coalition to eventually spearhead President Kibaki's re-election bid. This development has left Mr Kombo's supporters confused over whether or not he will go for the presidency.

In his Webuye home turf, the minister's campaign ship is cruising in turbulent waters, with nine possible candidates — eight men and a woman — lined up to try to oust him. Some 7,177 voters were added to the roll to bring the tally to 82,621 that are expected to participate in the election.

Mr Kombo is assured of the Ford-K ticket since none of his rivals has expressed interest to challenge him from within the party he chairs. Perhaps they have silently acknowledged a remark he is said to have made some time ago to the effect that he could not sign his own way out of Parliament by missing the party ticket. As chairman, Mr Kombo is the man who clears party candidates.

In Webuye and indeed the entire Bungoma district, the minister has won praise for fighting hard to create new districts.

His Bungoma East district is made up of Webuye and Ndivisi divisions with, headquarters at the town.

Another feather in his cap is having presided over the recarpetting last year of roads in Webuye town at a cost of Sh125 million. He was also instrumental in the establishment of a medical training centre in the town with money from the Constituency Development Fund.

But his critics accuse him of having, in his capacity as Cabinet minister, failed to generate resources to develop infrastructure in Western province and to have local people appointed to plum jobs in the public service.

Mr Kombo has been MP since 1992, except for a brief period between 1995 and 1997

after being found guilty of an election offence for oathing known as *khulia silulu*.

In 2002, he trounced arch-rivals Alfred Wekesa Sambu and Joash Wamang'oli. Mr Sambu, who claims to have been rigged out at the Narc nomination stage in favour of Mr Kombo, is back in the race, having been elected the local Narc Kenya chairman. He vows to eclipse his long-time nemesis this time round.

Mr Sambu has been contesting the seat and losing to either Mr Wamang'oli, Mr Kombo or Mr Saulo Busolo since 1988.

To confirm his candidacy, Mr Wamang'oli, who has been out of Parliament since 1992, says: "I am running but I have yet to make up my mind on which party ticket although I am still technically in Kanu. "In fact, it is only I and Mr Kombo who are serious contenders."

But Mr Sambu, a former Kenya Football Federation chairman, is expected to pose quite a formidable challenge for Mr Kombo. His supporters, the Tachoni of Ndivisi location, have joined Narc-K in droves.

Mr Sambu is widely expected to outshine Mr Mike Chetekei who will be challenging him for the Narc-K ticket. Mr Busolo, the Kenya Sugar Board chairman who served as MP between 1995 and 1997, is said to be also in the race.

He has the support of elders and academics in the Nzoia sugar belt that he represents, especially after the management changes at Nzoia Sugar Company early this month. Mr Busolo has yet to declare his party of choice, although he has been a regular visitor to cane growers' meetings in the area since early this year. So he is likely to garner quite a chunk of the vote in Bokoli where Mr Kombo also expects support.

This bloc and that of youths may also be eaten into by Mr Dan Wanyama who has also thrown his hat into the ring, and this may not be healthy for the minister. Mr Wanyama, a key personality in the Kenya Volleyball Federation circles who is from Miendo told the *Saturday Nation* that he is definitely running on a Kaddu ticket.

Signs that Mr Kombo could face a difficult campaign began to manifest themselves last weekend when Mr Juma Remi was stabbed with a knife in a clash between his supporters and a group who shouted anti-Kombo slogans near Chebosi secondary school as his entourage headed for Bokoli. Mr Remi was admitted to the Webuye district hospital, but the doctors said he was out of danger.

Violence also reared its ugly head a fortnight ago when Dr Kibanane Ngome, a Kenyatta University lecturer who is also a possible candidate, was attacked by youths outside a Webuye hotel.

The incident happened shortly after he dismissed the minister's bid for another term during a funeral at Nabuyole. Dr Ngome, a fiery public speaker, was injured and treated at the provincial general hospital in Kakamega town. He has since been discharged, but still moves about on crutches. He is yet to make public the party whose ticket he is seeking, but he says he is definitely in the race despite the setback.

Those battling for the ODM Kenya ticket are Ms Roselinda Simiyu, the Kenya Union of

Sugar Plantation Workers, and Mr Leonard Wakoli.

Bishop Peter Murunga of the Grace Community Church says he is in Nairobi businessman Kamlesh Pattni's Kenda party as the vehicle on which to champion his bid for election after losing out to Mr Sambu during the Narc-Kenya grassroots elections.

A week ago, the Rev Murunga hosted Mr Pattni in Webuye for a prayer session at Muliro Gardens and held two fund-raising meetings to start his campaign. He accuses the incumbent of failing to offer what he terms focused leadership. Mr Wafula Wanasi is another possible candidate on a Republican Party of Kenya ticket.

During the 2005 referendum campaigns, Mr Kombo helped to mobilise voters for the pro-government Banana side that enabled Webuye to get 22,231 votes against 6,068 for Orange. Then, there was talk that he would be appointed Vice-President if the residents supported the constitution draft. Critics are now wondering why this did not happen.

When he temporarily rejected re-appointment to the reconstituted Cabinet after the referendum his star rose overnight. But when he accepted it after his allies — Mr John Munyes, Mr Soita Shitanda, Dr Noah Wekesa and Mr Moses Akaranga — were made ministers, many people changed their minds almost as fast.

Grassroots polls

Then came the Ford Kenya grassroots elections at which most aspiring parliamentary candidates were locked out, further denting Mr Kombo's image. The party was labelled as a closed shop in which the sitting MPs already had nominations.

In Webuye, for instance, Mr Kombo's cronies swept the board in the controversial elections, sparking defections to other parties, key among them Narc Kenya, ODM Kenya and Mr Cyrus Jirongo's Kaddu. It is highly likely that Ms Simiyu will take away most of the ODM Kenya support in Webuye Town, which has been Mr Kombo's stronghold.

A planned retrenchment of workers at Nzoia Sugar Company, outsourcing and lack of job security there are also being blamed on the current political leadership of which the incumbent is part, as is the award of lucrative supply contracts.

Failure by the leaders to lobby for higher cane prices is also now in sharp focus as the farmers gripe that they are being exploited by the millers. Promises made in 2002 to improve the marketing of agricultural produce, particularly potatoes and bananas, to eliminate exploitation by middlemen have yet to be fulfilled and the voters are waiting to pass their verdict.

Webuye hosts the Pan Africa Paper Mills factory set up in the early 1970s whose management is accused of environmental degradation through the pollution of air and water systems.

And the residents claim their MP has never strongly fought the menace. Poor working conditions is another issue. When he took over Ford Kenya in 2003 following the death of Vice-President Michael Wamalwa, the party had more than 22 MPs firmly in its ranks.

The number has since dwindled, with other MPs joining ranks with Mr Shitanda's New Ford

Kenya party.

Source: NATION MEDIA