

BATTLE LOOMS IN SHIKUKU'S FORMER TURF

By JOHN SHILITSA Nairobi, Jun 9 2007

The constituency, made famous during the tenure of "people's watchman" Martin Shikuku, once again comes into focus. But Mr Shikuku whose name was synonymous with the area for four decades, is said to be shifting base to Nairobi's Kamukunji.

If this happens, he will leave the battlefield to incumbent Wycliffe Oparanya, his predecessor Amukowa Anangwe, nominated MP Ruth Oniang'o and newcomer Shabanji Opukah.

The others are Ms Elizabeth Efiketi and an architect, Mr Muhammed Munyanya, an affiliate of Labour Party of Kenya.

Except for Dr Anangwe, who is in New Kanu, which is associated with Keiyo South MP Nicholas Biwott, the rest are in ODM Kenya affiliate parties.

The crunch will, therefore, come during ODM-K nominations if the party survives the picking of its presidential flag-bearer.

Before the advent of Mumias Sugar Company that changed the complexion of Mumias Town, Butere was the richer of the two, and its people seemed to be more enterprising, given that the railway line reached the area in 1931.

The line was the heart-throb of Butere as it enabled the residents to ferry maize, bananas and vegetables to Nairobi. Not any more, with only passenger trains plying the Kisumu-Butere three days a week.

Early missionaries settled in Butere, giving rise to Butere High, one of the oldest girls schools in the country. Some of the prominent women in Kenya today, including Prof Miriam Were of the National Aids council, and Mrs Mary Okello, Kenya's first woman banker, went to the school.

Missionaries also built a cathedral, a teachers college and a health centre.

Younger politicians will be asking why Butere is now lagging behind Mumias in development. The shops are dilapidated and there is no bank or tarmac road.

Lack of banking facilities has led to what could be termed capital flight as teachers and other civil servants have to travel to either Mumias or Kakamega for their salaries, most of it spent there.

Although Mr Shikuku was interrupted three times — by Mr Richard Litunya (1975), Mr Eshikhati Opembe (1988) and Mr John Okwara (1990) — every politician tends to blame "the people's watchman" for the area's retarded growth, claiming his opposition politics was the problem.

Until Dr Anangwe defeated him in 1997, this was the popular opinion among the Butere elite, who sought a leadership that would resonate with the Government of

the day.

But Mr Oparanya and Dr Anangwe as well as three earlier MPs who have since died, have nothing to show for their representation of the area.

Hunger, poverty, crime and falling standards of education are persistent and will be the biggest campaign issues. The 35km Buyangu–Ekeru road that goes through the constituency, is yet to be tarmacked, and successive governments have used it as the carrot to get a more friendly person elected.

The district hospital has an acute shortage of basic supplies and equipment, forcing the people to travel long distances to seek medical services.

The name of Prof Oniang'o has been on the residents' lips for some time. She went to Parliament through nomination by Kanu after the 2002 elections.

The former university teacher has an impressive development track record in which mostly women's groups have benefited.

Her organisation, Rural Outreach Programme (ROP), nicknamed the Ruth Oniang'o Programme, has distributed dairy cows to poor families.

However, she is yet to come out clearly on which party ticket she will run. She poses a great threat to Dr Anangwe and Mr Oparanya as she will split their votes.

Mr Oparanya comes from the large Abamarama clan, while Dr Anangwe belongs to a minority one that was brought into the constituency when Khwisero was hived off the bigger Butere.

Minority clans have tended to gang up against the Abamarama by backing their candidate, a fact that helped Dr Anangwe win in 1997, albeit with a small margin.

Prof Oniang'o comes from the same locality as Dr Anangwe. Mr Oparanya may have done well to sack the local CDF committee comprising close allies who were instrumental in his 2002 victory.

Some of them such as Mr Jimmy Owandati and Harrison Omumia have since been warming up to Dr Anangwe's New Kanu. But the MP has a clean CDF management record, which even opponents appreciate.

Mr Opukah, an accomplished public speaker, formerly worked with BAT in London as head of Corporate Social Responsibility. He is a fellow of the Public Relations Society of Kenya.

The founder chair of ODM-UK chapter, Mr Opukah was prominent as master of ceremonies when ODM-K presidential hopeful Raila Odinga launched his vision at Kenyatta International Conference Centre, Nairobi, last month.

This was interpreted by many as a sign his closeness to Mr Odinga, which rivals in the party see as a threat during ODM-K party nomination.

The newcomer is said to be keen on bringing to Butere a new leadership style that seeks to bring people to the centre of decision-making for their economic empowerment.

Mr Opukah, who comes from the minority Aberechea clan of Mr Shikuku, wants voters to do a thorough audit of CDF and bursary funds use.

Mr Munyanya, an architect, stole the show recently when he was "cleared" by elders, including Mr Shikuku, to vie for the seat.

He is the chairman of the East African Institute of Architects president.

He is campaigning on the platform of better fortunes for Butere, and believes he is the man to bring about the needed change.

He posed a threat to Mr Oparanya when he campaigned successfully for a New-Kanu civic candidate, Mr Christopher Obulemile, for the Butere township.

Mr Munyanya is also remembered for having campaigned for the Butere district headquarters despite strong protests from MPs Wycliffe Osundwa (Mumias), David Were (Matungu) and Julius Arunga (Khwisero) who had backed the more developed Mumias. Butere-Mumias has since been split into two districts.

Source: NATION MEDIA