

# Kenya: MPs Move to Ban Vernacular in Public Offices

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*By Alphonce Shiundu, 8 June 2011*

Nairobi — Parliament has approved a motion banning the use of vernacular in public offices. This means that if the government agrees with the House resolution, it will be illegal to speak mother-tongue in offices.

The motion survived a onslaught from the frontbench and backbenchers who had termed it as "unconstitutional" and "superfluous" because the Constitution has already directed that the official languages are English and Kiswahili.

As soon as the temporary deputy Speaker Gitobu Imanyara put the motion to a verbal vote, MPs hugged the motion sponsor Elias Mbau (Maragua, PNU), and raised their hands amid shouts of 'hooray!' and 'Yes', to celebrate the passage of the motion.

Though Mr Mbau had expected support for the motion after its constitutionality was approved by the Speaker's Office, he was shocked when the Public Service Ministry, through its assistant minister Aden Sugow, opposed the motion terming it as impractical.

"It is very difficult for the Ministry to infringe on the rights of civil servants. It is difficult to implement that. It is hard to punish workers for speaking vernacular," said Mr Sugow.

An angry Mr Mbau lashed out at the assistant minister and the others who opposed the motion like Dr Boni Khalwale (Ikolomani, New Ford Kenya), assistant ministers Peter Munya, Lee Kinyanjui and Aden Duale.

Mr Ntoitha M'mithiaru (Igembe North) noted that the Constitution had already labelled English and Kiswahili as official languages and there was no point for Parliament to debate a "superfluous motion".

Mr Mbau dismissed them as "villagers" with "shortage of ideas" and not fit to lead national discourse. He said their opposition to the motion was as a result of their obsession with "personalised, emotional, and short-term gains".

He called them the "real faces of ethnic chauvinism" in government, who keep on "preaching water and drinking wine".

"These people are making contributions to the national debate with their eyes focused on the next elections. They're forgetting, that they'll not always be leaders," said Mr Mbau.

He said that those opposed to his motion had a knack for organising their political supporters by whipping up ethnic emotions.

"I hate myself, to have to go to an office, including in my own district and meet people exchanging views in Kikuyu, while there's one person who doesn't speak that language, seated in that office," said Mr Mbau.

Mr Mohammed Affey (nominated, ODM-K) seconded the motion saying that use of vernacular was a threat to national unity and an impediment to patriotism. Mr Affey said the motion will be the first step towards ending tribalism.

Assistant minister Margaret Wanjiru urged the House to approve the motion, saying the use of vernacular oiled tribalism in the country.

"Tribalism is a cancer. If we do nothing, tribalism will destroy our country," said Ms Wanjiru, also the MP for Starehe, a cosmopolitan constituency in the heart of Nairobi.

"We have people in this House whose driver, secretary, security, friends and people who surround them and

even those they go to rallies with speak in vernacular. This is unacceptable," said Ms Wanjiru.

Assistant minister Wavinya Ndeti and Mr Jeremiah Kioni (Ndaragwa, PNU) backed the motion, with Ms Ndeti saying she found it "rude" for someone to address her in a language she doesn't understand, even if that language is indigenous in Kenya.

"We are not telling anyone to throw away their language. I am a mkamba and a very proud one. But when I leave ukambani, I come to Kenya. In your house, speak your mother tongue. When you get out, speak the two national languages," said Ms Ndeti.

Mr Kioni said that Parliament had already set a precedent in forcing MPs to speak either English or Kiswahili. Even so, he said, some of his colleagues spoke mother tongue "even when committees are on-going."

"If we have to foster economic growth in this country, we have to communicate faster. There are offices you get into, you find people communicating in their mother tongue.

"If you don't understand that, then you have to wait on the queue. If you can, then you can jump the queue. You can't get national unity when we're all talking in our own mother tongue," said Mr Kioni.

"The spirit of the drafters of the Constitution, in designating English and Kiswahili as official languages, is that they wanted to promote national unity."

He said he MPs who opposed the motion are the ones who "say one thing in vernacular and another thing when speaking in English or Kiswahili".

When the opposition came, it was fast and furious, with Dr Khalwale leading the pack. He termed the motion as unconstitutional because the law gave Kenyans the right to use any language.

"As noble as this motion is, we must oppose it because it is contrary to the provisions of the Constitution. We must acknowledge that this motion is aimed at fighting tribalism, we must ensure that we fight tribalism not fight culture," said Dr Khalwale.

He cited article 7(3) which requires the State to promote the diversity of languages of the people of Kenya and that it will be against the freedom of expression to curtail the speaking of vernacular in public offices.

The Ikolomani MP said the problem of tribalism had partly been sorted by the National Cohesion and Integration Commission Act which says that not more than 30 per cent of the people in any public office should be from the same tribe.

"We were told that a highest number of people working in the President's Office are from the President's community in Central Kenya. We're also told that the Prime Minister's Office has the bulk of the employees coming from the PM's backyard in Nyanza. If we politicians are employing people in our offices and giving an environment allowing people in our offices to speak vernacular, then we are the problem," said Dr Khalwale.

Mr Duale said the constitution was clear that everyone could use any language, and that a motion in the House won't negate that right.

"It is not a favour!" said Mr Duale.

Mr Kinyanjui said Kenya's Nobel Laureate Ngugi wa Thiong'o had respect for culture and that's why he wrote in Kikuyu and that people interested in his works were translating it. He said that disharmony, suspicion and discomfort in the community can't be cured by banning language.

"Love and hate exists and resides in the hearts of men. You can hate someone, even if you come from the same tribe," said Mr Kinyanjui.

Mr Munya said the motion was contrary to article 44(1) where "every person has the right to use the language and to participate in the cultural life, of the person's choice."

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