

Gatekeepers' Obligations: Agencies charged with vetting public office-seekers must be beyond reproach

Posted on Dec 19, Posted by [Mwathane](#) Category [Land Peace and Elections](#)

By IBRAHIM MWATHANE

Daily Nation: Posted Monday, December 17 2012 at 20:00

In Summary

- We must ask whether the officers entrusted with this responsibility understand the full import of their duties
- The gatekeepers of our vetting agencies have immense discretionary powers which, if well used, will greatly improve Kenya, but can undermine the provisions of Chapter Six if abused
- There are allegations that KRA and Helb slap applicants with “incorrect” payment statements but, owing to the tight deadlines, one feels obliged to pay
- It is imperative that chief officers in each of the vetting agencies understand the challenges facing them

Kenya has changed. Those now seeking public office have to contend with awesome new requirements. But this is good for the country.

Having earlier watched our country's governance degenerate to unacceptable lows, it was only right to resort to constitutional protection for the officers in whom we entrust our country's future.

It was right to require that public officers demonstrate commitment to the basic values of patriotism, honesty, integrity, and accountability. These values were scripted into Chapter Six of our new Constitution.

Subsequently, the values have been enforced through public agencies such as the police department, which provides certificates of good conduct, and the Kenya Revenue Authority, which ensures tax compliance.

The Higher Education Loans Board (Helb) and the National Credit Reference Bureau have their roles too.

Helb ensures that beneficiaries of education loans adhere to stipulated repayment terms while the credit bureau sees to it that those offering themselves for public office have observed financial fidelity in business.

The Kenya Anti-Corruption Commission also vets applicants to public office for compliance with the provisions of the Anti-Corruption and Economic Crimes Act.

Members of professional associations are required to provide evidence that they are professionals of good standing.

Fulfilling these requirements calls for determination and diligent management.

But having listened to some people who have “walked” through these multiple requirements, I am convinced that we need to raise the red flag. We must ask whether the officers entrusted with this responsibility understand the full import of their duties.

These officers hold the future of our country in their hands. Are they, therefore, efficient, diligent, and above reproach?

By their very offices, they are the gatekeepers of processes that define career entry or mobility in public office. This calls for profound professional depth, independence, and accountability.

In my view, all such officers should themselves be thoroughly vetted first. Why do I say this?

The omissions or commissions of such officers will have great implications for our national and county governance.

From experience, many of us soon get “drunk” when we understand the extent of the power and authority we wield.

The gatekeepers of our vetting agencies have immense discretionary powers which, if well used, will greatly improve Kenya, but can undermine the provisions of Chapter Six if abused.

The reports they give us will lead to the appointment or election of officers who will either enhance or undermine our governance processes.

Among the observations some of the people I spoke to made include outright nepotism and blackmail. Friends sort out friends expeditiously.

There are allegations that KRA and Helb slap applicants with “incorrect” payment statements but, owing to the tight deadlines, one feels obliged to pay.

This is tantamount to blackmail. Mundane issues like lost national ID cards should not lead to one failing to obtain a statement of good conduct from police.

KACC, the National Credit Reference Bureau, and professional associations so far appear to have had a fairly clear methodology.

But their honeymoon could be short-lived, given that politicians will soon be seeking clearance.

Given their influence and the economic activities associated with their previous offices, these actors call for more intense vetting.

And this is where danger lurks. Some of them will not hesitate to push their influence or make attempts to “purchase” a clearance. Others may use their cronies to eliminate their competitors technically. If such actors succeed, public leadership will be undermined.

It is, therefore, imperative that chief officers in each of the vetting agencies understand the challenges facing them. They must satisfy themselves that the desk officers are capable of independent and judicious decisions.

Those likely to capitalise on the windfall bestowed upon them by their privileged duties must be weeded out. All applicants, including those seeking political office, must receive fair treatment and evaluation.

*Mr Mwathane is chairman, Land Development and Governance Institute.
(mwathane@landsca.co.ke)*

Tags: