

Kenya's Top Judge: Consult With Witchdoctor Before Coming to Court

A frustrated chief justice told Kenyans on Tuesday that even witchdoctors could help them resolve their disputes without taking each other to the overburdened courts.

Willy Mutunga, a respected lawyer, was appointed in 2011 to reform a judiciary widely seen as in the pay of the political elite and to cut red tape, at a time when many Kenyans had lost confidence in the courts.

Opening a new court building in Kiambu county near Nairobi, Mutunga said he was concerned that the growing demand for court services was adding to a backlog of thousands of lawsuits.

He said people should stop saying, "I'll see you in court," and entering a long and costly process, when they could first seek help from churches, mosques, elders or neighbors.

"Even in Kutui, where I come from, I have told people they can go to the witchdoctors to solve issues," he said, to laughter from people at the ceremony.

The remarks prompted a flurry of bemused or irritated messages to television stations and tweets and, even if meant light-heartedly, are likely to raise eyebrows in a largely conservative and religious nation.

Mutunga has won praise for his reforms of the court system, but critics say he needs to do more to combat perceptions of corruption, make the legal system more accessible to those who are less well-off, and tackle the backlog of cases.

Many suspects have to wait for years in police custody for

their cases to be heard.

Many Kenyans also complain of having to bribe court officials to release documents that are otherwise declared “lost”.

Mutunga last year chaired the Supreme Court panel that upheld Uhuru Kenyatta’s victory in the presidential election, dismissing a petition by his rival Raila Odinga.

Reporting by James Macharia; Editing by Kevin Liffey

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