

Electoral Competition and Politicised Ethnicity in Kenya

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Abstract:

Based on the instrumentalist theory of ethnic conflict, the paper examines into the theoretical understanding of how the electoral competition triggers the politicisation of ethnicity and ethnicised conflict in Kenya. The paper critically interrogates how the Kenyan political elites have used ethnicity as a tool to mobilise their ethnic groups promising to create political and socio-economic opportunities for them at the expense of neglecting the other tribes. Furthermore, the paper scrutinises the trajectory of politics since 1963 up until 2007 post-election crisis and how the politicisation of ethnicity created a sense of mistrust and national division among the diverse ethnic communities in Kenya.

Keyword: Electoral Competition, Politicisation of Ethnicity, Kenya

Introduction

Recent studies on Africa's politics suggest that ethnicity play an imperative role in the behaviour of the politicians as well as electorates in Africa. To many Africans voters, their ethnic identities become a powerful motivator at the time of competitive elections to support the political elites in their pursuit of power (Eifert, 2010). Butale (2015) holds the view that "ethnic politics continue to pose a security threat to many African countries and has had adverse effects on prospects of promoting good governance or democracy".

In this paper , it is necessary here to explain what is meant by 'ethnicity' which has multiple meanings in the African context. Brown (2000) describes an ethnic group as "those people who have the similar ancestral roots who share distinctive features relating to language, religion and homeland origin". The meaning of ethnicity, according to Young (2002), is being grounded as "shared cultural attributes, consciousness, and boundaries".

Having such similarities have not, historically, been related with a negative connotation. But Gulliver (1969) is cautious and defines the concept of ethnicity as "the loyalties and identification of people engaged in conflict". The implied meaning is that ethnicity relates to divisiveness, greed and disloyal relationship (Oyugi, 2002). And in this paper, I will use the term 'political ethnicity' which means the frequent use of ethnicity by politicians as a tool to mobilise their supporters to attain political and socio-economic objectives (Ajulu, 2002).

African politics literature highlight that the political elites play a central role in promoting ethnicity during their struggle for political power. The presidential candidates find it helpful to "play the ethnic card" in the aim of mobilising voters to attain or sustain in political power (Young, 2002). Nevertheless, the central argument of this paper lies with the view that the politicisation of ethnicity is always high during electoral competitions than at other times since the elections are the turning points for political changes to take place. With this in mind, I will explore the case of Kenya which I strongly believe that it is better suited to explain this claim.

A few academic literature is available to explain the main reasons of politicisation of ethnicity in Kenya during the electoral competition and the evidence available primarily focus upon the

ethnic configurations such as their number and size (Webera, 2009). However, there is substantial empirical evidence which supports the view that Africa's voting behaviour is primarily determined by the ethnic-related factor (Gutiérrez-Romero, 2007).

In Kenya, like most of the African states, voters use ethnicity as the means to get a significant share of the 'national cake' particularly once they elect politicians who happen to be part of their ethnic group (Gutiérrez-Romero, 2007). Therefore, political ethnicity critically determines of whoever becomes a president in Kenya.

"I'm Uhuru. He is the only one I trust. To me, he is the only candidate I feel safe with...It is not tribalism. It is just preferring your own people." (Mohamed, 2017)

The primary concern regarding the above example is that the electoral processes are always competitive by nature and thereby acts as destabilising factors for an ethnically divided community like Kenya. Such electoral competition further widens the existing division and creates a hostile environment between ethnic groups of which some become winners while other become losers (Romero, 2008).

In response to the question, I will use the theory of instrumentalism of ethnic conflict to fully explain the role of political elites in politicisation ethnicity and ethnic conflict. According to the Instrumentalist Theory, it is not about the differences between ethnic groups that cause the ethnicised conflict, but it is the manipulation and politicisation of the ethnic identities by the political elites for political and economic reasons. Thus politicians make efforts to please their supporters by promising as well as providing more benefits for a particular ethnic community at the expense of ignoring other ethnic groups (Collier, 2004). Miguel (2004) emphasises this point, claiming that ethnicity itself is not a problem but its role in the electoral competition which raises tensions between tribes and finally results in democratic failures.

The instrumentalist theory of ethnic conflict views the concept of ethnicity as "neither inherent in human nature nor intrinsically valuable" (Varshney, 2007). Therefore, ethnicity is generated within and between ethnic groups merely to form alliances in search for a more significant share of the national economy and politics (Williams, 2015).

Drawing heavily from the Instrumentalist Theory, I argue that there other factors that explain the politicisation of ethnicity and ethnic conflict in Kenya other than ethnic identity which include: competition and inequality (Stewart, 2010); greed and grievances (Collier, 2004). Racial violence coloured with Kenya's electoral championships since 1992 are not ethnic battles as it may appear on the surface, but deep underneath, the fact is that it is politically-constructed ethnic conflict designed by political elites to reach socio-political, and ultimately economic, advantages (Ajulu, 2002).

The paper will continue as follows: an in-depth analysis the behaviour of the electorates and the key reasons that drove the Kenyan politicians to compete for elections on the basis of ethnic lines and finally, the implications of politicisation of ethnicity in the harmony and co-existence on diverse ethnic groups.

Politicisation of Ethnicity during electoral competition

Kenya is an East African country of 42 ethnic groups (Sawe, 2017) who speak more than 68 languages (Anon., n.d.) The main ones are the Kikuyu, Luhya, Kalenjin, Luo, and Kamba respectively and they are 72 percent of Kenya's 47.6 million population (cia.gov, 2017). Even though this shows Kenya's cultural and linguistic diversity, the ethnic groups themselves are not in fighting with each other nor pose a threat to the country's peace merely because their traditional and philological features are not the same (Kwatemba, 2008).

However, understanding ethnic violence in Kenya needs to consider the knowledge of causes and trigger factors which indeed is not an issue that emerges in an overnight. Many African scholars hold the view that the ethnic animosity was primarily triggered by the politicisation of ethnicity which began with the arrival of British Colonists in Kenya's soil in 1920 (Butale, 2015). As Deng (1997) argues the modern Kenyan state is the product of British colony and thereby consideration was not given the cultural, linguistic and religious differences of the ethnic groups. According to Kwatemba (2008), the British colonial administration purposely created new boundaries without the consent of different ethnic communities. Such territorial invention brought mutually antagonistic communities together while further divided up homogenous groups into multiple sub-tribes placing them under new administration system, ruled by new values and principles (Deng, 1997).

For over forty years, British Colony adopted the 'divide and rule' politics to administer Kenya's different ethnic communities. For instance, the Kikuyus and Luos were played against each other because their prominent numbers were a threat to British administration (Deutsche, 2017).

"The British had spent decades trying to keep the Luo and Kikuyu divided, quite rightly fearing that if the two groups ever united, their combined power could bring down the colonial order. Indeed, a short-lived Luo-Kikuyu alliance in the late 1950s hastened Britain's retreat from Kenya and forced the release of Jomo Kenyatta, the nation's first president, from a colonial detention camp." (Elkins, 2008)

The colonial infiltration of Kenya and its uneven relationship with the different ethnic groups set the stage for the politicisation of ethnicity after independence. The Luos and Kikuyu, for examples, though political and economically crippled by the British colonial administration but they relatively had more access to education earlier than the other ethnic groups owing to contact with the missionaries (Ajulu, 2002). It was therefore not accidental that members of these ethnic groups had far much political and economic influence in Kenya's post-colonial political and economic life.

Colonial governance through 'divide and rule' policy, uneven development and resource allocation, consequently, heightened ethnic competition and politicised ethnic consciousness (Ajulu, 2002). Lonsdale (2008) believes that the problem of ethnicity, though began during the colonial era, its negative use as a tool of political mobilisation became visible right after the independence. For example, three years after independence in 1963, Kenya's major tribes, Kikuyus and Luos, were enemy towards each other, making their alliance come to a standstill. Jomo Kenyatta (from Kikuyo) became a president and Oginga Odinga (from the Luo) fiercely opposed him. Since then, Kikuyu-Luo ethnic competition lies with access to public

services and opportunities, re-distribution of the land formerly owned by white settlers, and most importantly sharing the power (Oyugi, 2002).

Kwatamba (2008) argues that post-colonial leaders have not promoted a harmonious civic culture within the country's bureaucratic system because those at the heart of political authority followed factional and egocentric policies. As a result, the "politics of tribe" has been responsible for the country's electoral tribulations (Conversation, 2017). In fact, such ethnic problems were noticeable in all the political competitions since the introduction of multiparty elections in 1992 (Malik, 2013).

It has commonly been recognised that Kenya's political life since the rebirth of multi-partisan politics has seen the rise of ethnic values which have overtaken the pursuit of national agendas (Ajulu, 2002). While the most ethnic conflicts occurred before 1992 and 1997 elections, the 2007 post-election violence happened entirely right after the election results were released (Malik, 2013). The politics of ethnicity has consequently become an inter-community competition, not merely for representation in governance, but for resources (Conversation, 2017).

The examples of Kenya post-independence electoral competitions support instrumentalist theory which emphasises that ethnic conflicts are engineered by the aims of political leaders. What happened in 1992, 1997, 2007 and the final 2017 elections are testimonial pieces of evidence that the Kenyan politicians played out their political campaigns mainly on ethnic lines (HRW, 2017). As a result, the political elites have not put better alternatives forward to mobilise their supporters, but they instead used ethnic-based promises such as "if you support your tribesmen you will survive, and public services will be at your disposal" (Benn Eifert, Edward Miguel and Daniel N. Posner, 2010). Responding to these empty promises, a large number of voters turned out to vote for presidential candidates from their ethnic communities, expecting that their elected politicians would best pursue their ethnic interests (Namu, 2017).

"Politics of issues has not yet taken root in Africa. The politics of patronage are very strong. So everybody knows that if the President is a Kikuyu, the Kikuyus will get the plum appointments but if the President is a Luo, the Luos will get the plum appointments. Look at Ruto. Ruto is the Deputy President. Look at his Ministerial Appointments: Agriculture—Kosgei (Kalenjin), Finance—Kalenjin, Energy—Kalenjin. You know, the pattern is continuing. But if he doesn't do that, his community will not stand behind him. So it's a tough situation." (Malik, 2013)

Even though Kenya had shared these similarities with the most of post-independence African states, the distinctive feature of their political life was that the politicians would mainly appeal for tribal voters only if they believe that their ethnic-inspired political promises would reverberate, which indeed rely on the voters trust about how these commitments are seriously taken. (Eifert, 2010). In the same way, albeit most ethnic supporters should not need to be reminded that their ethnic association with whoever becomes president would possibly be influence their degree to access state resources after the elections, but then politicians' appeal to them undoubtedly strengthen such political aspirations (Benn Eifert, Edward Miguel and Daniel N. Posner, 2010). According to Webera (2009), ethnicity is a politically salient factor in Kenya particularly at the times of the election run-up for the reason that politicians are seen grouping their supporters from particular ethnic tribes and hope to

dispense resources that he accessed through his political position to his co-ethnics. The ethnic group that forms the support base must, therefore, be big enough to earn a winning majority.

Turning now to how ethnicity drives voting behaviour in Kenya since decolonisation, Archer (2007) claims that there is a popular belief in Kenya that at the end of the day it is nevertheless safer to vote for somebody from their tribe. The rationale seems to be that if there somehow should be the slightest possibility for them to get a job or to be granted a loan, it would have to be in a situation where their tribe has power over state resources. The case of Kikuyus who overwhelmingly emphasised securing property rights and on less redistributionist policies is an excellent example in this regard. With this in mind, the instrumentalists' theory fails to explain the role played by the electorates in electoral competition. Kwatamba (2008) critically clarifies that the use of ethnicity as a tool does not always come from the political elites but is sometimes created from below- the electorates themselves with the logic of 'eating through one of our own'. Thus 'it is our turn to eat because another group has eaten becomes the organising slogan around which other considerations revolve' (Kwatamba, 2008).

According to Archer (2007), Kenyans, in general, lose faith in a neutral state and to a certain extent in politicians altogether. The concentration of power around the president, however, made many Kenyans believe that politicians from their ethnic group have to be in high office in order both to embezzle public funds and secure benefits while keeping the other ethnic groups away from taking jobs, land and entitlements. Similarly, Kenyan ruling elites generated grievances channelled as racial feelings in every electoral competition which had a negative influence on a vast majority of the population who got ill-feeling that they would not receive a just and equal share of power if one of their own is not elected to the presidency (Stewart, 2010).

Kenyan politicians, for instance, Ruto, Raila and Kenyatta approached to their tribes, Kalenjins, Luos and Kikuyus respectively, to solicit support for their political campaigns while promising they would do a great deal of economic and political favours in government for their ethnic groups (Deutsche, 2017). As (Benn Eifert, Edward Miguel and Daniel N. Posner, 2010) claim that the electoral competitions in Kenya have brought ethnicity to the surface of the political system. Therefore, Kenya's prominent tribes, principally Kikuyu (22% or 6,622,576/22), the Luhya (14% or 5,338,666), the Kalenjin (13% or 4,967,328), the Luo (12% or 4,044,440) and the Kamba (11% or 3,893,157), determine who is elected as a president because of their sizeable numbers (Kenya, 2009).

Many Kenyan voters have had worries about the how the political campaigns are conducted throughout the electoral people. Hatred speech, voter bribery and intimidation against other ethnic groups were all used by the political elites which further deepened the ethnic divisions and fueled the tensions between tribes (Rohwerder, 2015). According to Kenya National Commission on Human Rights(KNCHR) report, the Kenyan politicians used hatred speeches since 1992 up until 2003, describing negative manifestations against their political rivalries and ethnic communities that opposed them (Rights, 2007). For instance, the weeks before 1992 election, President Danial arap Moi and his Kenya African National Union party, provoked ethnic clashes between Kalenjin and Kikuyus merely to show his dominance in the Rift Valley region. Quite clearly the hatred speeches used by President Moi motivated the ethnic tensions which ultimately engulfed the lives of 2000 people, and 500,000(mainly non-Kalenjin) were forcefully removed from their homes (Somerville, 2016).

The Instrumentalism theory of ethnic conflict elaborates that ethnic strife often emerges out of political elite's wish for economic gain. Such political attitude is what is referred to as 'political greed' as per Collier's research work (Collier, 2004). Against this background, the political ethnicity has a long history in Kenya, triggered by grievances over different resource allocation for ethnic groups such as social services and land properties (Chanie, 2015). For instance, Kikuyu ethnic group were favoured politically and economically by both the British colonial administration and successive presidents, particularly, Kenyatta and Kibaki, against other ethnic groups, including Luhya, Luo, Kalenjin and others (CSIS, 2009). The two presidents were both from the same ethnic community and promoted their ethnic interests rather than the national interests. As such, CSIS (2009) reports that ethnicity has remained the critical axis on which Kenyan politicians mobilise their supporters, and the success of elections are determined by ethnic calculus rather than performance or national vision.

President Kibaki, for example, has left no stone unturned to maintain power whatsoever means. His power greediness played a vital role in the loss of more than 1,400 lives, while 600,000 people were chased away from their cities in weeks' time, as Kenya plunged treacherously close to total civil war (Brownsell, 2013). With this move, he favoured his ethnic group Kikuyus and gave them a head start in economic development while ignoring his main rivalry Odinga's tribe, Luo. Similarly, most of the Kenyan presidents, Jomo Kenyatta and Moi in particular, promoted ethnic interests, and hence the solidarity of the diverse ethnic groups was hardly created. They have all used ethnopolitics as a political strategy during their time in office, which in three instances has ended with severe political violence. This is exemplified by the fact that Kenya's ethnic communities were not equally represented in the government and some ethnic groups, for instance, Kikuyus and Kalenjins who are the tribes of President Kenyatta and Moi respectively has been given more than their portion of 'the national cake'.

The electoral competition in Kenya has made a different sense for many voters. For some voters, it meant that a road to paradise would be walked on if their candidate wins (Wanjiku, 2017). The fact that the competition politicised the ethnicity in Kenya, however, Kibaki for instance, channelled government resources to his ethnic group, Kikuyus, to sustain political power for another term and as such his Kikuyu followers started to feel entitled to national resources more than any other ethnic group (Conversation, 2017). Oyugi (2002) illustrates this point stating that Kenya's main ethnic groups felt that keeping their 'sons' in power would mean that they would prosper in a great deal and whoever threatens that economic and political privilege is not only an enemy to their 'sons' but to their entire ethnic group too. Overall, these cases support the view that every key ethnic actor assumed that their ethnic-based party's win would end their relative deprivation. These views were fundamentally controversial and made ethnic tribes in Kenya lose faith in each other, and the racial sentiments have a long time overtaken the national cohesion.

According to Crawford (1998), the shortage of national resources may allure the politicians to favour their tribes over others because they no longer can afford to deliver services and divide the wealth equitably and because patronage networks as allocative mechanisms need few transaction costs. This is shreds of evidence by the fact that the grievances expressed by most of Kenya's ethnic tribes against Kikuyus are primarily attributed to the firm view that Kikuyus had enjoyed relative political influence and richness since the independence in 1964 (Konrad Adenauer Foundation, 2009). Because of this deep-rooted belief, the homes of Kikuyus, President Kibaki's ethnic tribe and his supporters, were heavily attacked by other ethnic

groups, mainly Kalenjins and Luos, who were the supporters of opposition coalitions, during the 2007 post-election violence in Kenya (Rice, 2008).

The Implications of Political Ethnicity in Kenya's 2007-Election Violence

Kenya had relatively enjoyed uninterrupted peace since 1963 when it gained its independence from Great Britain. As Kwatemeba (2008) points out this was a notable success particularly at times when most of the post-independence African states were dragged into total wars. However, Kenya had its fair share of political and social unrest. Almost all the electoral competitions in Kenya were characterised by racial violence and anarchic situation, leaving hundreds of lives dead and extensive devastation of property (Romero, 2008). According to (Mwiandi, 2014) Kenya's fall into ethnicized political crisis showed the state was not founded on a firm foundation and it unfolded the truth that Kenya is vulnerable and shaky.

Many conflict experts, nevertheless, anticipated that Kenya would be dragged into ethnicised violence in 2007 because the political parties had ethnic motives and the politicians mobilised their supporters through racial lines (CSIS, 2009).

Key local politicians frequently used inflammatory and hatred speech at times of electoral competition with the aim of creating ethnic division so that their ethnic-based support remains with them (Somerville, 2016). This has made the electoral game between the parties more problematic as each had the significant backing of their ethnic-based supporters who could not accept defeat whatsoever hence the country was plunged into deadly violence (Malik, 2013). The electoral competition demonstrated the fragility of the nation-state and that Kenya is not founded with shared values. Thus the ethnic conflicts seen in almost every election time was an illustration that the postcolonial political leadership for having played out with ethnicity among Kenya's 42-odd disparate ethnic groups (Archer, 2007).

Collier (2004) firmly believes that the politician's greediness was stronger than ethnic group's grievances as a significant cause of ethnic conflict given the fact that ethnic disputes take place in the pursuit of opportunities for primary commodity predation. This is supported by the instrumentalist theory of ethnic conflict which suggests that "rational for parties to organise along ethnic lines depending on the benefit it brings to them" (Williams, 2015). Consequently, most of Kenya's ethnic conflicts happened because the national resources have not been available adequately for all the ethnic groups thereby each politician mobilised their supporters to 'steal the natural resources' for his ethnic group at the expense of others' misfortune (Chandra 2004).

In response to the question, ethnicity was a strong motivator and salient force behind the ethnic conflicts in Kenya. The deep scars left by the recent 2017 violence is still fresh, and its solution lies with Kenya's leadership and, more importantly, Kenyans themselves.

Conclusion

Drawing from the historical perspective of Kenya's political process while considering the theory of instrumentalist of ethnic conflict, the political and social breakdowns in modern Kenya was primarily attributed to some factors of which the most notable one is the use of ethnicity as a tool by political elites to mobilise their supporters during electoral competitions which had raised the racial tensions and ultimately triggered the ethnic clashes in Kenya. This

paper has addressed the concept that ethnic conflict was also caused by the ancient natural hatreds, elite manipulation, and the result of historical processes that was practised since the independence (Gibson, 2015).

But to understand Kenya's ethnicised conflict only from the angle of ethnicity is to ignore other vital factors in Kenya's political life such as negative colonial legacies and Kenya's democratic handicap (Hollman, 2008). Therefore, the mistrust and hatred of Kenya's ethnic tribes was not only exasperated by the political elites' greediness for political power but was also grievances accumulated over the years since the arrival of British colonialist. The 'divide and rule' system of governance adopted by the colonial administration tore Kenyan society apart, and the successive post-colonial administrations added insult to an injury (Worker, n.d.). Furthermore, the political institutions also failed to translate their mandates into tangible results as they were also rotten by Kenya's political ethnicity too. Elkins (2008) strongly contends that "fears of ethnic ascendancies, power-hungry political elites, undemocratic processes and institutions all are hallmarks of today's Kenya, just as they were during British colonial rule".

In this paper, however, my argument is that ethnicity per se is not the cause of Kenya's ethnic mistrust and violence but what is hurting Kenya's co-existence and solidarity more than anything else is the politicisation of ethnicity which always engineered by self-interested and power-hungry political elites who have no long-term vision for the masses. These politicians aim to attain short-term political and economic objectives for themselves and their ethnic supporters, and yet do not carefully consider the means to reach their ends. As such, their excessive use of political ethnicity have further enfeebled the unity and brotherly co-existence of ethnic groups but rather have inspired racial animosity and hatred which would have many a time brought Kenya to a total demise and dissolution (Stewart, 2010).

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