Ethnicized Politics in Kenya[1]

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Abstract:

This paper aimed at examining ethnicized politics in Kenya and their contribution to elections and public governance from independence to date. This paper looks into the historical context of ethnicized politics in Kenya and events that have entrenched this undesirable factor of Kenya political landscape from colonialization to date. The paper demonstrates how political elites take advantages over their ethnic groups to form political parties that enable them to occupy positions of leadership as tribal chiefs, As politicians they purport to advance their ethnic group's political interest but their aim is to form governments and to consolidate power. The paper shows that ethnicized politics have led to marginalization of small tribes and their subsequent resentments that have resulted to major conflicts like the post elections violence of 2007, the conflicts witnessed in 2017 and the post elections tensions of 2022. Ethnicized politics have led to demonstrations and political violence in Kenya leading to loss of life and property, human rights violation and abuse of the rule of law. The paper recommends de-escalation of ethnicized politics and enhanced national cohesion. It advocates for granting of national jobs to individuals based on meritocracy rather than ethnicity.

Introduction

According to the United Nations, the Republic of Kenya is one of the 54 Countries making the African Continent. It is located in the eastern part of Africa bordered by South Sudan and Ethiopia to the north, Somalia and the Indian Ocean to the east, by Tanzania to the south, and by Lake Victoria and Uganda to the west (Emmanuel., 2014). As per 2019 Kenyan Census conducted by the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, it has a population of 46.7 Million people who are made up 43 ethnic groups, the main identification tag in the country, who are unevenly distributed over a land of 580,000 km2. Some of the Kenyan citizens are distributed in East African Countries and abroad (KNBS, 2019). According to the 2010 Kenyan Constitution the country has a devolved system of government with the National Government being headed by the President who is elected by the citizens after every five. There are also 47 County governments headed by County Governors who are independent with their own budget allocated by the National Parliament in the Country's annual budget. The country also has an independent parliament and a senate each headed by a speaker. It has the Judiciary which is headed by the Chief Justice as its president.

Methodology

The research adopted a historical research design by applying its objective and systematic evaluation of occurrence of ethinicized politics in Kenya, their impact on the present and in making prediction of the future. This method is based in its capacity to present and analyse historical trends on the development of ethnicized politics in post conflict Kenya and the cost they come with in a developing society. The research establishes the nexus between ethnicized politics, and how these has led to the current Kenyan statehood. Secondary sources of data including journals and the internet were the major approaches to data collection. The data was qualitatively analysed and presented to give a balanced view on the topic of research.

Colonialism and Ethnicity

Ethnicized politics in Kenya is understood when looked at back from colonialism. A clear legacy of colonialism in Kenya today is the sense of ethnic division that has cemented group identity within the country, and which has over the years been used as a mobilising agent in pursuit of economic interest (Kwatemba, 2008) (Oucho, 2010). Ethnicism is a major phenomenon in the Kenya's politics. Same as it is in other African countries, seeds of ethnicism in Kenyan politics originated during colonial era, when borders were set arbitrary and numerous ethnic groups were grouped together form the national framework (Depetris-Chauvin and Özak, 2019). Ethnic identities have over the years continued to shape power dynamics and governance systems since independence

by influencing political allegiances and affiliations (Sefa-Nyarko, 2021). In a post-conflict situation in any country, ethnical politics that result in political violence have serious detrimental repercussions. Kenya, a country that has had remarkable democratic improvement over the past 20 years, has witnessed ethnically instigated political bloodshed, which happens most often every election season (Musya, 2023). For example, the 2007-08 PEV followed that the contentious presidential election in 2007, took an inter-ethnic conflict in the country (Makori, 2018).

Ethnicized Politics in Kenya

In Kenya, tribalism is not a historically inevitable phenomenon. It cannot be linked to past animosities or conflicts between cultures over time (Quadri and Oladejo, 2020). Prior to the arrival of colonialists, there was little to no interaction between the main opposing groups that historically formed around the Western Kenya (Luo, Luhya, Kalenjin, Kisii), and the GEMA (Kikuyu, Embu, and Meru People) from the Mount Kenya areas of Kenya. However, a number of incidents provided a breeding ground for harmful tribal stereotypes, which eventually spread throughout Kenyan culture. (Boahen, 2020; Okeyo, 2020). For illustration between the Agikuyu/Luo tribes, the Agikuyu are perceived to stereotype Luo as fish-munching, indolent, uncircumcised and unpredictable to an extent they don't support Luo political leader who shows interest in presidency. The Kamba on the other hand perceive GEMA Community as conspirators, deceivers and untrustworthy, a fact which has affected their political relation even to date (Anangwe, 2014) (Kiruga, 2018). The colonialists in Kenya profited on the tribal divisions by implementing the divide and rule policy. This was accomplished by the British colonialists' arbitrary practice of basing local government and administrative borders on cultural and linguistic lines. It is assumed that this decision was made on the presumption that Africans lived in tribes, and that tribes are the foundation of colonial administration (Kwatemba, 2008).

Arguably therefore, ethnicized politics in Kenya can be linked to colonialism's balkanization of the country along tribal lines (Kimani, 2018). Once independence was achieved, the Kenyan political elite found success with this transfer of methodology. Subsequently, Agikuyu and Luo ethnic groups united in the early years after independence to form the Kenya African National Union (KANU) in December 1963 and which went on to form the first government (Oduor, 2022). According to the arrangement, Luo ethnic leader Jaramogi Odinga was the second in command and Agikuyu leader Jomo Kenyatta led this party. The other minor ethnic groups felt excluded as a result, and in an effort to challenge KANU domination, they reorganized to join the Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU) (Anangwe, 2014; Kimani, 2018).

Ethnicism and Kenyan Political Landscape

The Kikuyu ethnic group was given preference under the late Jommo Kenyatta government, as seen by the majority of parastatals and ministries being led by members of this group, and without meritocracy (Kimani, 2018). The president continued to favor the Kikuyu ethnic group, which led to the Luo ethnic group experiencing discrimination in appointments and government operations. As a result, the bonds between the two communities soon began to deteriorate. The Luo complaint led to coercion and even opposition group assassinations. The president issued dire warnings to the community, and Jaramogi Odinga was placed under house arrest by the administration he assisted in creating. (Anangwe, 2014; Kwatemba, 2008). At the Majimbo structure of government was fronted by KADU ideology with the intention of accommodating other marginalized ethnic groups, despite its prejudiced position (Oucho, 2010).

In 1964 KADU was merged into KANU in a major political realignment. Immediately after this, Mr. Tom Mboya, a Luo elite and by then a government appointee was assassinated. It was presumed that this assassination was planned and executed by the Kikuyu mafia who were in government with the direction of Jomo Kenyatta their leader (Tarus, 2019). Luo felt betrayed and this widened the tribal rift between Kikuyu and Luo. There was a major outcry in Kenya with other ethnic group accepting the ideology that the Kikuyu had assassinated one of the brightest minds in Luo land (Ogendi, 2022). Since then, Kikuyu and Luo have been pitted against one other in Kenyan politics, with each ethnic group attempting to win over more members in order to form the national administration (Anangwe, 2014, Kwatemba, 2008).

Daniel Arap Moi, a member of the Kalenjin ethnic group, succeeded Jaramogi Odinga as President Kenyatta's vice president. He went on to become the president of Kenya following the death of President Kenyatta in 1978 (Makori, 2018). President Moi's tenure, saw the ethnic Kalenjin group controlled his government, and often devoid of merit, the community members were appointed to head the police, criminal investigation department, parastatals, Central Bank and ministries (Hamasi, et al., 2023). He made sure that the majority of the provincial and district commissioners in Kenya governance structure were Kalenjins. He even went so far as to change the Kenyan constitution so that KANU would be the only political party in the nation and Kenya would become a one-party state (Towett, 2021). Kenya was ruled by Daniel Arap Moi from 1978 until his political retirement in 2002. Moi was replaced in 2002 by a new alliance made up of Kikuyu and Luo, with strong backing from Kamba (Yamano, et al., 2010). Unfortunately, this union did not survive long because Raila Odinga, a luo, campaigned for a severely ill Kibaki, a Kikuyu. Therefore, Raila, according to the Luo, deserved a part in government. This caused discord in 2005, when Raila led a campaign in 2005 advocating for a number of constitutional amendments that supported Mwai Kibaki's viewpoint. (Moywaywa and Nyagaka, 2023).

The subsequent push and pull between various ethnic groups resulted in a highly contentious general election in 2007 that saw many ethnic groups banding together to overthrow the Kikuyu ethnic group, which they believed had long dominated Kenyan politics (Jeong and Jeong, 2023). Their primary argument was that other communities needed to be liberated since they had been marginalized for a very long time. With Luo and Kalenjin controlling the politics to unseat the Kikuyus, the election turned into a battle of 41 tribes against the Kikuyu (Yamano., et al, 2010). Despite all these a Kikuyu, Mwai Kibaki, was declared the winner of 2007 presidential election (Elischer, 2008). Following his pronouncement, the nation saw post-election unrest that resulted in thousands of deaths and the damage of property valued at billions of dollars. (Materu, 2015). The significance of ethnicity in the nation is demonstrated by the peace negotiations led by Kofi Annan and the subsequent formation of the Government of National Unity, which included the Luo, Kalenjin, Kamba, and Luhya ethnic groups (Waki Commission, 2008). Even after the government was established, disputes between the three main ethnic groups – Kikuyu, Kalenjin, and Luo – hampered its operation (Hamasi and Amutabi, 2023). Each ethnic group desired a significant share of the executive branch.

Ethnicity during the 2012 to 2022 Elections

Tribal leaders continued courting other ethnic groups to support them in the 2012 elections with the goal of forming the next government. During this process, Uhuru, a Kikuyu, competed for president, while Ruto, a Kelenjin, served as his deputy (Oduor, 2022). The Kikuyu and Kalenjin established a coalition known as UhuRuto that dismantled Raila Odinga's other ethnic coalition and pushed out marginalized ethnic groups in Kenya.   Despite the loss, the Luo ethnic minority believed that Raila's win had once again been stolen. Political protest was formed as a public uproar that Kikuyu and Kalenjin communities were disproportionately represented in government positions, marginalizing other communities. This persisted until 2018, when Raila and Uhuru Kenyatta, a Kikuyu, shook hands (Elischer, 2008).

A rival ethnic alliance led by Raila Odinga (Luo), Martha Karua (Kirinyaga), and Kalonzo Mosyoka (Kamba) was defeated in 2022 by a different coalition headed by William Ruto (Kalenin), Rigathe Gachagua (Kikuyu), and Musalia Mudavadi (Luhya). After winning the Kenyan general election, the ethnic coalition led by Mr. Ruto established the current administration. (Brechenmacher and Sambuli, 2022). A recent court action was filed alleging that Kikuyus and Kalenjins, who were instrumental in founding the current government, predominate in government appointments, thereby perpetuating the ethnic minority in government. (Oduor, 2022). There are an presumption that anyone who does not belong to any of the two ethnic group despite meriting cannot secure a government appointment.

Recommendations

For Kenya to become a strong state, there must be a paradigm shift in all public spheres and especially on ethnicization of its politics. This should be enhanced national cohesion and in recruiting government employees that should be based on meritocracy rather than ethnicity. It is the high time Kenya take responsibility and abide by the constitution that assures that every citizen get political good as fundamental right regardless of ethnic and political affiliation. Failure to this, Kenya could sink into weak state and experience a similar fate like the post PEV of 2007/09.

Conclusion

It is important to draw the conclusion from the discussion above that political parties in Kenya are often created along ethnic and tribal lines, which contributes to the prevalence of ethnicized politics and electioneering process in the country. Since independence, politics generally and especially during elections time has been through ethnical formations. From 2002 when Kenya can be perceived to have fully demonstrated and exercised the real multiparty democracy, different parties headed by tribal chiefs have came together to form a major coalition. These coalitions and alliances include NARC (National Rainbow Coalition) which defeated KANU in 2002 General election; the Party of National Unity (PNU) formed as a Mount Kenya regions ethnic groups, the Gikuyu, Embu, Meru Association (GEMA) Party with Mwai Kibaki as it leader; and Orange Democratic Movement (ODM), a Luo political tool under Raila Odinga. Wiper Party with Kalonzo Mosyoka was also formed as a political tool of the Kamba ethnic group. Political offices in Kenya are thus positions of "tribal chiefs".

Conflict of Interest

The author hereby declares that no competing financial interest exists for this manuscript.

Notes on Contributor

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