

**Kenya: Ethnic Agendas and Patronage Impede the Formation of a Coherent Kenyan Identity**  
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Introduction

Kenya is a nation in mourning. In December 2007 and into 2008, the country experienced unprecedented ethnic violence that erupted after the disputed general election. The elections sparked chaos that escalated into ethnic violence pitting supporters of incumbent President Mwai Kibaki (a Kikuyu), against those of challenger Raila Odinga (a Luo), who was later named prime minister in a power-sharing agreement. Over 1,800 people lost their lives and more than 340,000 were displaced from their homes. The violence not only shattered the foundations of Kenya as a nation but also painted a picture of a country severely fractured by ethnic cleavages. Many scholars (Lotte 2011; Branch et al. 2010; Otieno 2009) and journalists have tried to explain how we arrived at this low point in our history. They conclude that the crisis revealed a fundamental failure of the nation-building project in Kenya. While Kenya had been perceived as a strong democratizing country, its institutions of governance remained in fact weak, fragmented, corrupt, and unable to deal with underlying causes of conflict and the emerging violence. Successive Kenyan regimes politicized and "ethnicized" state institutions and used the various offices as political tools for maintaining a system of ethnic patronage. The corruption at the highest level of governance created a political, economic, and social barrier between the citizens and their rulers. As a consequence, a profound level of distrust and fear exist between some of the 42 ethnic groups that make up the Kenyan population. Many citizens are therefore deeply ignorant of one another's histories and cultures, and have erected imaginary walls between ethnic communities, failing to appreciate the shared histories, narratives, memories, cultural practices and values that unite them.

Ethnic agendas

Kenya attained independence in 1963 from the British government and Jomo Kenyatta, a Kikuyu, became the first president of Kenya. Kenyatta inherited a colonial legacy of authoritarianism and ethnic divisions which he and his successor Daniel arap Moi maintained and perfected. As many scholars (Elkins 2008; Berman 1998) have noted, the British government had instituted legislative measures that ensured that Kenyans would not unite and rebel against the colonialists. The short-lived Luo-Kikuyu alliance in the late 1950s attests to this. It hastened Britain's retreat from Kenya and forced the release of Kenyatta from a colonial detention camp. But three years after independence in 1963, the Luo-Kikuyu alliance fell apart and Kenyatta and his Kikuyu elite took over the state. The Kikuyu then enjoyed many of the country's spoils throughout Kenyatta's reign. A similar alliance in 2002, led to the defeat of the dictatorial Moi regime.

Ethnic cleavages were also manifested in the struggle for independence. The struggle, which took various forms—intellectual, political, trade unionist, active non-violence and armed struggle—was marked by ethnic activism (Atieno-Odhiambo 1996). The political parties that championed the nationalist struggle were basically distinct "ethnic unions". The most consistent movement was the Kikuyu Central Association (KCA) which had set its agenda in the 1924–1932 period (Atieno-Odhiambo 1966). This was a period riddled with culture conflicts, political tensions and strenuous socio-economic upheavals. In 1920, for instance, the country had officially become a British colony and Kenyans had started experiencing the effects of colonialism, which included land alienation, forced labour requirements, carrying of kipande (identity documents), paying taxes and cultural impositions. At the same time the KCA started organizing the disaffected Kikuyu and administered oaths so as to galvanize their unity. The entire community became dissatisfied with the colonial regime and saw the birth of many anti-mission and anti-government movements that focused on liberating the country from their colonial masters. This was given impetus by the return of soldiers from World War One who told the people what violence meant (Gachanga 2010).

The KCA agenda for recruitment at that time was articulated around the twin issues of ancestral land and continued validation of a historic sense of Kikuyu nationhood. Jomo Kenyatta embraced this agenda and internationalized it. When he became the president in 1963, he embarked on implementing the content of

his Kenyan nationalism which was dedicated to his people the Kikuyu. His awareness and knowledge of rural Kenya was limited to those areas where the Kikuyu lived (Atieno-Odhiambo 1996).

### The Land Issue

On the eve of independence, Kenyans had great expectations that poverty, illiteracy and disease would be things of the past. They also hoped that the land would revert back to them and that there would be greater cohesion and integration. This was never to be. On the contrary, Kenyatta used ethnic patronage to maintain power and to distribute resources. He blatantly showed bias in the distribution of land by favouring Kikuyus at the expense of other ethnic groups. He also appointed members of his own ethnic group to key government positions and excluded other communities. For instance, 31 percent of all the permanent secretaries were from his Kikuyu community. There was no Kalenjin PS during this time, not to mention many of the other smaller ethnic groups. Most of the directors of the many financial institutions were Kikuyu. This created a highly ethnically imbalanced society.

On the issue of land, subsequent hopes that the land would revert back to the Africans were never fully realized. Under the independence agreement with Britain, the Kenya government was to buy the land from the settlers. The British government advanced a loan to Kenya to facilitate this purchase. This in turn meant that there was no free land for distribution. The price-tag made land very scarce and the majority of landless people were unable to raise even the basic sum needed as a down payment for the purchase of "their land". They had no option other than to let go of the land which they regarded as their mother or the umbilical cord through which their spiritual and mental contentment could be realized (Harold 1984; Gachanga 2006). The largest beneficiaries of this land distribution programme, however, were the Kikuyu and their allies, i.e. the Embu and Meru. The Kikuyu with their allies quickly formed land buying companies and cooperatives with the blessing of Mzee Jomo Kenyatta. They were also given preferential treatment in the award of loans for buying land. As a consequence, Kikuyus bought much of the land even in non-Kikuyu regions. This resulted in Kikuyu families holding land in the midst of other ethnic groups, especially in the Rift Valley, the main region of turmoil in every election that Kenya has seen since a multiparty system was introduced in 1992. Land-tenure therefore became a factor of ethnicity and this created a sense of animosity between the Kikuyu and "original" occupants of the land in these areas.

One of the strongest critics of Kenyatta's style of governance was Jaramogi Oginga Odinga, a Luo leader and the then Vice President of Kenya and the ruling party, the Kenya African National Union (KANU). Odinga wanted to nationalize foreign-owned corporations, to seize settler farms in the former "white highlands" without compensation, and for Kenya to follow a non-aligned foreign policy (Throup 1993), in contrast to Kenyatta, who sought to reassure European settlers, telling them they were welcome to stay and farm, without fear of the bogeyman and that his government would protect them (Lotte 2011). Their ideological differences took an ethnic turn and became a struggle for domination between the Kikuyu and the Luo. Odinga was seen as a threat to Kenyatta's government and had to be removed. In 1966, he was maneuvered out of his post and sidelined. He responded by forming his own political party—the Kenya Peoples Union (KPU). Shortly after, in 1969, Tom Mboya, a Luo leader and key trade unionist, was assassinated. A few months later Argwings Kodhek, another prominent Luo politician, was also assassinated. Other nationalist leaders who are believed to have been assassinated by the government included Pio Gama Pinto and J.M. Kariuki who were viewed as threats to the regime and potential contenders for political power. Those who refused to support the status quo experienced various types of repression and even detention without trial. At the same time, individual members of the opposition were weaned back to the fold through appointments to government positions and allocations of land as well as the provision of other perks.

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Three months later in 1969, ethnic animosity between the Kikuyu and Luo was manifested when Kenyatta visited Kisumu to officially open the New Nyanza Provincial Hospital. The town residents went into an anti-Kenyatta frenzy, pelting the presidential motorcade with stones after a public quarrel between

Kenyatta and Odinga at the opening ceremony. Kenyatta's security responded by firing on the crowd killing hundreds of people in what is referred to as the "Kisumu massacre". Odinga was imprisoned and his party was banned, effectively introducing the single party state (Oloo 2011). The government accused the KPU of being subversive, intentionally stirring up inter-ethnic strife, and accepting foreign money to promote anti-national activities. According to Korwa and Munyae (2001), Moi explained that the KPU leaders were detained because "any government worth its salt must put the preservation of public security above the convenience of a handful of persons who are doing their utmost to undermine it." Following these incidents, Nyanza Province, like other non-Kikuyu areas, was virtually written off with regard to "national" development plans. This heightened ethnic animosity between the Kikuyu and the Luo.

By 1978, when President Kenyatta died, the Kikuyu had amassed a lot of wealth, far more than all other ethnic groups put together. They had bought the bulk of the so-called "white highlands" and were the main beneficiaries of the government's settlement plan for the landless, at no cost or at minimal rates. They thus expanded their land ownership and settlement beyond their traditional home—Central Province—into the Rift Valley Province, and into the Coast Province, apart from their widespread networks in urban centres within Kenya. They also enjoyed good modern roads, abundant school and education facilities, expanded health services, piped water, electricity and other forms of infrastructure. They visibly outdistanced other ethnic groups at a pace that posed immediate political risks to their newly acquired positions in government structures. The Kikuyu regions were envied by other ethnic groups. It was perceived as unfair and heightened ethnic hatred between the Kikuyu and other communities.

### A One-Party State

Kenyatta was succeeded in 1978 by Daniel arap Moi, who had been vice-president for ten years. Since Moi was a Kalenjin, this marked a new era in which political and economic power shifted to the Kalenjin. Moi's first move was to centralize and personalize power. This he did by amending Section 2(a) of the Constitution which transformed the country into a single party state. He then reinstated the detention laws that had been suspended since 1978. This was followed by withdrawal of the parliamentary privilege that gave representatives the right to obtain information from the Office of the President. It meant that members of parliament, and by extension their constituents, surrendered their constitutional rights to the president. Parliamentary supremacy became subordinate to the president and the ruling KANU party (Korwa and Munyae 2001).

Having taken control of power, President Moi started restructuring Kenya's political economy by diverting resources and patronage from the Kikuyu to his own ethnic group in Rift Valley and to his political allies, the Abaluhya of Western Kenya and various groups from Coast Province. He began to "de-Kikuyunize" the civil service and the state-owned enterprises previously dominated by the Kikuyu ethnic group during Kenyatta's regime. He appointed Kalenjins to key posts in, among others, the military, the Agricultural Development Corporation (ADC), Kenya Commercial Bank (KCB), Kenya Posts and Telecommunications (KPT), Central Bank of Kenya (CBK), Kenya Industrial Estates (KIE), National Cereals and Produce Board (NCPB), and the Kenya Grain Growers Cooperative Union (KGGCU). He created Nyayo Tea Zones (NTZ), Nyayo Bus Company (NBC) and Nyayo Tea Zones Development Corporation (NTZDC) (Korwa and Munyae 2001). Road maintenance in the formerly flourishing Kikuyu areas was also abandoned. As a result business and financial institutions owned by Kikuyu inexplicably deteriorated and begun to have problems. As a consequence, their access to development was diminished.

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With the economy collapsing, disenchantment with the government among the Kikuyu intensified. Moi exploited this and it became the norm to call any politician who complained of economic and political problems a "tribalist". Politicians had no right to complain of atrocities committed in their constituencies, lest they be called tribalists and lose their jobs (Macharia-Munene 1992; Throup 1993). Detentions and

political trials, torture, arbitrary arrests and police brutality reminiscent of the colonial era became common. Kenyans began advocating for political pluralism.

As demands for competitive elections and an end to detention without trial continued, Kenya's Foreign Affairs Minister, Dr. Robert Ouko, was assassinated in February 1990. Demands to reveal his real murderers amplified those for pluralism and respect for human rights. To save his regime from collapse, Moi adopted even greater authoritarian tactics, arguing on a number of occasions that multipartism would cause chaos in the country because Kenya was not "cohesive enough". This heightened ethnic hatred between the Kalenjin and other communities in Kenya (Korwa and Munyae 2001).

By early 1990 disillusionment with the Moi government was widespread. This was exacerbated by increasing pressure from the international community for Kenya to embrace political pluralism. Moi reluctantly gave in to the pressure amidst a warning that a multiparty system was not suitable for Kenya. In December 1991, Section 2(a) of the constitution which banned multipartism was repealed and multiparty politics were re-introduced. This created new opportunities for ethnic "power barons" to profile themselves as defenders of their ethnic groups. It also led to ethnic suspicions, hostility and witch-hunting which culminated in massacres, destruction of property, socio-economic uncertainties and insecurity. In addition, it generated a vicious struggle for political power, capital accumulation and unseen cutthroat rivalry for domination and control of strategic resources across the nation (Osamba 2001, 39).

#### Multipartism and ethnic violence

On 29 December 1992, the first multiparty elections (both presidential and parliamentary) since 1966 were held. To prove that a multiparty system was not fit for Kenya, the KANU government went as far as instigating ethnic violence in the Rift Valley which spread to other districts within a few days. The government also hired militia groups to instigate violence and attack opposition groups. This was repeated in the 1997 general elections. According to Osamba (2001), the motives for the violence were three fold: to prove the government's often stated assertion that political pluralism was synonymous with ethnic chaos, to terrorize ethnic groups allegedly supporting the opposition, and to intimidate non-indigenous people to vacate Rift Valley. Under this ethnic cleansing policy, the province was supposed to be the preserve of the Kalenjin, Maasai, Turkana and Samburu (KAMATUSA).

In 2002, Mwai Kibaki (a Kikuyu) became the president after defeating Uhuru Kenyatta, Jomo Kenyatta's son and Moi's chosen successor in KANU. He succeeded after joining forces with Raila Odinga (a Luo) and forming the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC). This was heralded as a great milestone in the democratization process for Kenya. His government introduced free primary school education, making education accessible to all Kenyan children. School enrolment levels also increased greatly and senior citizens even got an opportunity to enroll to increase their literacy. Mzee Maruge was one of Kenya's seniors to begin primary school at the age of 84, becoming the oldest person to begin primary school, according to the Guinness World Records. Kibaki's government also started providing free drugs for treatment and management of HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis (TB). It has also improved the standard of health services in all public hospitals. Kenya's economic growth rose from less than one percent in 2002 to 6.1 percent in 2006. Efforts were also made to revive many local public industries that had collapsed or were on the verge of collapsing. Many rural areas were also supplied with electricity. The introduction of devolved funds, such as the constituency development funds (CDF) and local authority transfer funds (LATF), led to improved rural road infrastructure and better social services. The government has also worked to provide clean piped water to many rural areas. Kenyans also enjoyed unprecedented freedoms of speech and assembly.

However, squabbles over power and the rise of an ethnic chauvinist clique around Kibaki isolated Odinga, who never rose above the post of cabinet minister during Kibaki's reign. This slight helped push him into the opposition, and he quickly drew his supporters to the cause. The fallout from the failed power-sharing government was acrimonious. Leaders on both sides reverted to base ethnic stereotyping as the political row developed. This went on up to the 2007 general elections.

As the campaign heated up for the 2007 presidential and parliamentary elections in Kenya, animosity persisted and ethnic slurs and hate speeches intensified. Kikuyu politicians who supported Kibaki ran on his record of economic growth, provision of free primary and secondary education for all and reform. They consolidated their base on a platform of continued reform but also appealed to Kikuyu nationalism. They portrayed Odinga as a dangerous man, playing on the fear of the unknown. They argued that Odinga had been involved in a failed coup in 1982 and alleged that he had communist leanings because he had studied in Eastern Europe. In addition, they drew on the negative cultural stereotype that Luos are irrational and impulsive. They also claimed that Odinga would take revenge on certain ethnic groups if elected.

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For their part, some opposition politicians both openly and covertly stoked ethnic hatred against the Kikuyu, citing the political behavior of Kibaki and his clique as arrogant and greedy. Odinga explicitly challenged the balance of power between the country's ethnic groups. As a member of the Luo tribe, he charged that the Kikuyus, whose members include both Mr. Kibaki and the country's founder, Jomo Kenyatta, have long gotten more than their fair share of government benefits. He promised to end ethnic favoritism and spread the country's wealth more equitably. These actions degenerated into the 2007–2008 ethnic clashes whereby members of President Kibaki's Kikuyu community were targeted following the announcement of his victory.

#### Hope out of violence

Kenya can succeed in forming a coherent Kenyan identity. The post-election violence generated some positive change as well as processes that can facilitate such change. First, it led to a negotiated power-sharing deal that was signed in March 2008. It included the appointment of a President and a Prime Minister from the two main parties that had been in contention and involved in the post-election violence. The agreement was designed to create an environment enabling Kenya's political leaders to look beyond partisan considerations to the greater interests of the nation, and so far it has contributed to some degree of stability. On one hand, it led to the cessation of most inter-communal violence and to greater peace in Kenya. Many, though not all, of the people displaced by the post-election clashes have been able to return home. On the other hand, the two principals, the President and the Prime Minister, have projected the image of a "unified executive" and have helped to create conditions conducive for a more coherent Kenyan identity.

Secondly, the post-election violence heightened Kenyans' consciousness of the need to deal with historical issues and injustices. This led to importing national reconciliation as a strategy for governance. A Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Commission (TJRC) was instituted in 2009 to address historical injustices and the culture of impunity in Kenya.

Thirdly, it increased momentum for reviewing and renewing the country's Constitution, which Kenyans accepted in a landmark referendum on 4 August 2010. To begin with, the new Constitution exalts equity and diversity, including cultural diversity. It also provides for a broadly popular President who must have an absolute majority of votes cast and at least 25 percent of the votes cast in more than half of the 47 counties. And it provides checks and balances over key public appointments which cease to be the exclusive prerogative of the President. On the issue of land, the new Constitution establishes the Kenya Land Commission which is supposed to investigate present or historical land injustices and recommend redress. Under the Bill of Rights, it provides for equality and freedom from discrimination. In addition, it guarantees the basic economic and social rights of all, while encouraging respect for diversity and fostering a sense of belonging. It also obliges the state to provide for the representation of minorities and marginalized groups in governance, and to provide access to employment and special opportunities in educational and economic fields. Finally, on the issue of elections, the new Constitution overhauled the electoral system and provides for a new electoral body—the Independent Electoral and Boundaries

Commission (IEBC). Unlike the former Electoral Commission of Kenya (ECK), the IEBC has built-in safeguards to help insulate commissioners from political manipulation.

As another general election approaches in less than a year, Kenyans are hoping for peace. This election will be a kind of a referendum. It will be time to choose between the rule of law and impunity, between reform and a reversal of recent gains, between order and anarchy. One positive sign is that the new Constitution has evidently empowered Kenyans, and it will not be possible to ignore the document's key provisions. Another positive sign is that people are becoming more tolerant as far as political differences are concerned. This should be encouraged. Kenyans must start looking at each other as brothers and sisters sharing the same resources but having different political preferences when elections are called. And such differences must not be allowed to lead to violent conflict.

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