

The Impact of Multi-Partyism on Gusii Community Politics in Kenya

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Abstract: This study analyses the impact of various social divisions among Abagusii on political competition in Gusiiland, especially during the multi-party era. The main contention of the study is that the re-introduction of multi-partyism in Kenya in the late 1991 did not immediately transform Kenya into a democratic society. Multi-partyism is not synonymous with democracy. Factionalism derails the growth of multiparty democracy in Kenya. Among the Abagusii, for instance, factions exist, which have become obstacles to the growth of democracy at the local level. Therefore, the study sought to illustrate how sectarian politics in Kisii have affected the democratisation process. The study covered Gusiiland, which constitutes Kisii and Nyamira Counties in South Western Kenya. These two Counties are entirely inhabited by Abagusii. Gusiiland is tiny and one of the most densely populated areas in Kenya. Before the late 1980s, when Nyamira District was hived from Kisii District, the entire Kisii region formed one administrative district. The study was descriptive and the data was collected through document analysis. Primary data for the study was obtained through oral interviews and perusing archival sources such as newspapers, magazines, ministerial and local government reports. The sample population for oral interviews was selected from the entire population of Kisii and Nyamira counties. The data was analysed, interpreted and organised into a report where this paper was taken. The study is important, as it will address the issue of political leadership in Gusiiland. It will also address the problem of women's low representation in elective positions in Gusiiland since the reintroduction of multi-partyism. The findings of the study is further useful to scholars interested in focusing on the influence of ethnicity on Gusii politics.

Keywords: Ethnicity, Gusii Politics, multi-partyism.

INTRODUCTION

From the beginning of multi-party politics in Kenya, ethnicity proved to be more powerful than ideology in determining political loyalties. Often a particular political party was perceived as belonging to a specific ethnic group(s) rather than a national party. They have the conviction that they have a common identity and common fate based on issues of origin, kinship ties, traditions, cultural uniqueness, a shared history and a shared language. Even so, cleavages exist in this seemingly homogeneous society, which becomes constraints to multi-party democracy in Kisii.

The Gusii community is divided into seven major clans: Abanyaribari, Abagetutu, Abagirango rogoro, Abagirango maate, Abamachoge, Ababasi and Abanchari. Each clan is further sub-divided into numerous sub-clans, *houses*, families and lineage groups. Other divisions within the Gusii ethnic group include gender, class and religious denominations. Throughout the post-colonial period, these divisions have proved more influential than policies, ideas and programmes in determining political preference in Kisii. Section 2A was a serious impediment to multi-party democracy in Kenya. However, its repeal in

December 1991 did not immediately create a democratic society. Instead, sectarian politics came to the fore. This is because section 2A was not the only impediment to democratisation in Kenya. Social divisions based on ethnicity, religion, clans, gender, and so on impinge on multi-party political competition in various regions of the country. The study focused on politics among Abagusii to demonstrate how intra-ethnic cleavages also influence on multi-partyism. Abagusii, who are the main inhabitants of Kisii and Nyamira counties, constitute one vast society, which is characterised by common features such as a common language (Ekegusii), shared territory (Gusiiland), common customs and traditions, and a belief in a common ancestor, *Mogusii* and God, *Engoro*.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Various studies on the political history of Kenya have been done. However, the existing literature on multiparty politics in Kenya mainly focuses on the national rather than the local or community level. For instance, scholars such as Ogot and Ochieng' have studied the development of Kenya's political history from proto-national politics of African response to colonial conquest, through colonialism to post-colonial

politics in Kenya[1]. Throup and Hornsby did a detailed study of multiparty elections in Kenya culminating into a book titled *Multiparty Politics in Kenya*, which is mainly about the 1992 general elections. The book provides an exhaustive account of the 1992 elections when, for the first time since independence in 1963, the KANU government had to face an electoral challenge to its rule. As these two authors put it in the 'Introduction', the book is about that challenge; that is, about the evolution of the Kenyan state, the emergence of the opposition, the re-establishment of multi-party politics, the political contest of 1992 (culminating in the election), and the Moi regime's reconsolidation of power during 1993 and 1994[2]. It attempts to explain both what happened in Kenya and why, during the vital six years from the discredited national and party elections of 1988 through to 1994, when the direction of events in the new 'democratic' era had become clear. The two scholars discuss the evolution of the democracy movement, why the government decided to accede to its demands, the events that led to the government's electoral victory, and the reasons why the emergence of multi-party electoral competition was unlikely to lead to a peaceful transition between governing parties in 1992 or other subsequent elections.

One key lesson the reader learns from Throup and Hornsby's book is that multi-party democracy, multiple national parties competing openly and nationally, still does not exist in Kenya. They conclude that Kenya did not experience a true multi-party election in December 1992 General Election. Instead, the country underwent a set of single-party elections, a heavily biased campaign and a tilted electoral process. These still did not deliver quite the result the state required, necessitating a last-minute 'correction'[3]. Communal rivalries and the ethnic nature of multi-party politics in Kenya is a central theme in Throup and Hornsby's book. The book, being a survey on politics in the whole country in late 1980s and early 1990s, only gives a cursory mention of Gusi politics.

Oyugi, in his article titled 'Ethnic Politics in Kenya' [4] discusses some aspects of inter-ethnic relations in Kenya, especially in the post-colonial period. He contends that these relations have been characterised by rivalry, competition and conflict. He argues that the underlying problem has been the quest for the control of the state and the benefits that are associated with it. In addition, Oyugi focuses on party politics and access to public services especially the struggle for jobs and land. In the Kenyan context, Oyugi sees ethnicity as referring to 'tribalism', that is, a relationship between people from different tribes. This relationship is 'special' in a sense that people identify other exploited people as the source of their insecurity and frustrations rather than their common exploiters. By ethnic group, Oyugi refers to the forty-two or so socio-

cultural communities in Kenya that have been identified based on language and other ascriptive criteria, and which are associated predominantly with specific geographical regions of the country. The presence of such groups in places other than 'their own' introduces new dimensions in their relations. Furthermore, Oyugi asserts that ethnicity emerges when individuals acting in groups attempt to use their supposed common origin as a basis for their relations with others. In addition, ethnicity in Kenya connotes group antipathy against others, including suspicion, hatred and envy. Hence, to speak of ethnicity is to speak of inter-group interactive situation characterised by rivalry, competition and often conflict.

Oyugi traces the origin of ethnic rivalry, competition and conflict in Kenya to the colonial period. Before colonialism, he argues that ethnic relations were mutually beneficial hence helped to neutralize potential rivalry and conflict. However, during colonialism contacts between ethnic groups were expanded and intensified in a new mode. This new mode of interacting was the 'colonial situation' [5]. The 'colonial situation' itself and the policies pursued by the colonialists explain the development of ethnicity in Kenya. Oyugi goes ahead and identifies these colonial policies, which fostered ethnicity and through the identified policies explains the role of colonialism in fostering ethnicity. Oyugi discovers that the colonially fostered ethnicity was inherited by the new state.

At independence, the inter-party power struggle between KANU and KADU was essentially between the 'majority' and 'minority' ethnic groups. When KADU disbanded in the late 1964 leaving KANU as the sole political party in Kenya, the KANU party became an arena for factional ethnic conflict. The inter-ethnic conflicts within KANU were mainly between the Kikuyu and Luo. For a while, the ethnic struggles were disguised as ideological struggles between the Left and the Right of the party. When the struggle eventually led to the split of the KANU party in March 1966, the party that emerged from it, the Kenyan Peoples Union (KPU), became just another ethnic party, supported predominantly by the Luo. Several political parties formed in 1992 when section 2A was repealed, were ethnic parties. The 1992 General Elections and results clearly illustrated the magnitude of ethnic exclusiveness in the political process when Kikuyu-led DP and FORD-Asili parties swept all the seats in Kikuyuland; while Luo-led FORD-Kenya party dominated in Luoland; the Kalenjin led KANU swept all the seats in Kalenjinland. The same pattern was repeated in presidential voting. The proposed study will focus on why the FORD-People party swept all the seats in Gusiiland and only Abagusii overwhelmingly supported Nyachae's presidential bid in the 2002 General Election.

Generally, Oyugi illustrates in the essay that throughout the post-colonial period ethnicity has been a major factor influencing political behavior in Kenya[6].

Another study of elections in Kenya is that of Michael Cowen and Karuti Kanyinga[7]. Their article covers Kenya's 1997 General Election. However, this work concentrates on providing a political account of why KANU and President Moi won the 1997 elections. Cowen and Kanyinga endeavour to explain the extent to which an anti-KANU and Moi majority prevailed over the countervailing anti-Kikuyu majority. They focus on what brings change in the counterbalance between these two negative political forces. According to Cowen and Kanyinga, Moi's plurality of votes indicates the extent to which these two negative political forces counterbalanced each other. The two scholars wonder whether Moi, who had opposed the advent of multi-party politics in Kenya in early 1990s, is the same one that has won the multi-party elections for two consecutive terms of five years each since the inception of multi-partyism. To Cowen and Kanyinga, Moi's regime continued to exist because of Kenya's ethnic pattern of voting. Ethnicity, which Moi asserted would tear the country apart, ensured that his regime continued to command a plurality of votes in the face of ethnoregionally divided opposition parties. Their central argument is that the question of 'tribe', the territorial association between an ethnic people and a region is conflated with the 'local' political representation in Kenya. Given that the local has always played a major part in intra-party electoral contest, it is through the interaction between the national and the local political action that these two scholars endeavour to show why the paradox of multi-party democracy in Kenya has brought communal politics to the fore. This way, different communal logics of political association bring the local into the interplay with the commanding heights of state power[8]. For instance, this interplay has occurred historically in Kenya at the electoral process.

Cowen and Kanyinga point out that it is during the first two multi-party elections before independence, the 'Kenyatta' elections of 1961 and the 'independence' elections of 1963, that a communal pattern of voting, based on ethno-regional electoral blocs, was established in Kenya[9]. After the reintroduction of multi-partyism in 1992, a very similar pattern of voting was obvious for the multi-party general elections of 1992 and 1997. Cowen and Kanyinga examine communal politics since the attainment of independence in 1963 to 1997.

Cowen and Kanyinga convincingly argue that local-level issues have increasingly come to inform the outcome of parliamentary elections in Kenya. In some constituencies during the 1997 elections, for example, what were perceived to be the personal qualities

demanding of a constituency parliamentary representative, including the proven capacity to 'deliver development' became one important basis upon which candidates were judged and votes delivered in return. Mix-and-match voting in the same constituency for presidential and parliamentary candidates with different party affiliations was a marked feature of the 1997 election. In some seats, voters chose parliamentary candidates according to their 'development' record but would vote presidentially according to a bandwagon effect. Electors were willing to protest electorally by disposing of politicians who were not trusted to meet what was taken to be local need.

Therefore, local factors especially those that put pressure upon candidates for development, contributed towards electoral instability in 1997. Almost 60 percent of MPs who were elected in the 1992 multi-party elections lost their seats for one reason or another in 1997. These two authors use the case study of Meru area to show how the electoral dynamics of the local area more often than not governed as much by the substance of the economic as the politics of the communal. In addition, through this case study, they succeed in showing how and why 'certain national issues and options' were brought to the substance of local politics. This is the case study illustrates that in Kenya national-level economic and political issues have been both expressed by, and contested in, the name of the communal. Local constituencies put aggravated pressure on their parliamentary candidates to place themselves proximately around state power to approximate development resources. That is, the electorate express their 'desired' need to access state resources through 'one of our own' because this is the only way to 'eat'. Thus the expression that it is 'our turn to eat because another group ate or has eaten' becomes the organizing slogan around which the regional precept of the communal political logic is founded. The mix-and-match 1997 election results, Cowen and Kanyinga concludes, showed evidence of the local determining voting at the parliamentary election with the national playing a major part in accounting for presidential votes .

Mitullah and Owiti discusses women's situation in transition politics in Kenya[10]. The two authors begin by providing a theoretical perspective of gender disparities in development. They opt for liberal feminist theory in explaining the gender inequality in Kenya's political arena. The article then highlights the various international conventions aimed at improving the conditions of women all over the world. Key among these conventions is the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which Kenya ratified in 1984. The two authors submit that although the Kenya Government is a signatory to all the relevant international human rights

and gender requirement provisions, the domestication of these provisions lags behind.

Analysis and Discussion of the Situation

After the 1997 General Election, Simeon Nyachae disagreed with Moi and in February 1999, the President moved him from the Finance ministry to the less glamorous Industrial Development portfolio. Nyachae resigned from the cabinet as a protest against President Moi's move to transfer him. Although he stayed in KANU as a member of parliament, Nyachae had now fallen out with the party leadership. He perceived that the KANU party chairperson, President Moi, had clearly indicated his lack of confidence in him during the cabinet reshuffle. There was also this matter of a staged 'coup' in his backyard in Kisii led by Geoffrey Asanyo where-upon he was ousted as KANU branch chairperson. Putting all these under consideration, Nyachae thought that he would not get the party's clearance to run for the Nyaribari Chache parliamentary seat on a KANU ticket in the next general elections[11]. He began scouting for another political party while still a KANU MP. The disagreement between Nyachae and the KANU leadership took an ethnic dimension and the Abagusii started to quit KANU en masse.

Ethnicity had been a major factor influencing political behaviour in postcolonial Kenya[12]. During the 1963 elections, the KANU party, which enjoyed the support of larger ethnic groups, Kikuyu and Luo, won against the KADU party, which got support from smaller ethnic groups. The KADU party had been formed in 1960, for the 1961 elections, to represent the so-called 'minority tribes' against the 'larger tribes'. Before the first Lancaster House conference of 1960, their common opposition to European rule hence bound African members of the Legislative council together united. After the 1960 conference they realised that European domination in Kenya would end soon hence had to look for new policies to suit new situations. This resulted to realignment along an ethnic basis within the African leaders. The issues of land and government positions fostered the realignment[13]. That is, who will occupy the 'white' highlands left behind by the settlers? In addition, since the administration was to be handed over to the Africans, what kind of government would Kenya have and who would occupy government positions vacated by British administrators? The outcome of the 1961 and 1963 elections corresponded exactly with the ethnic realignment behind the KANU and KADU parties.

In 1964, the KADU party was merged with its only rival, the KANU party. Within less than two years after KADU was incorporated into KANU, the original Kikuyu-Luo coalition of KANU fragmented. In 1966, Oginga Odinga resigned from the KANU government

and formed another party, the Kenya People's Union (KPU), which ideologically stood for socialism and in opposition to the capitalist orientation of policy, which the Kenyatta leadership of KANU had set in train. Soon the KPU proved to be a predominantly but not wholly Luo phenomenon[14]. That is, the bedrock of its support came from the Luo community although, on ideological grounds, the KPU generated support within the Kikuyu heartland, especially in Murang'a district. The Luo had effectively withdrawn their support from the KANU to the KPU party. Unfortunately, the KPU was banned in 1969 leaving the Luo in a political wilderness. The Kikuyu, now the majority in KANU, prospered economically under the Kenyatta regime due to their command of the state apparatus as a whole.

However, Moi's ascendancy to the presidency in 1978, and his tightening grip over state power during the 1980s politically capitalized upon anti-Kikuyu majoritarian sentiment within the country as a whole. President Moi, within the same party of KANU, set about diminishing the place of the 'Kikuyu' within the state structure while building Kalenjin privilege into the structure of the state. Gradually, Moi incorporated into KANU those smaller groupings that were politically represented in KADU at independence. That is, through the 'minority tribes' of 1963, Moi confronted the threat of Kikuyu and Luo domination through KANU. In replicating the historical experience of the Kenyatta regime, the Moi presidency used the same method of commanding the state apparatus to favour Kalenjin interests. After the reintroduction of multi-partyism in late 1991, the KANU government made ethnic politics more emphatic for perpetuating its electoral hold over state power.

The legacy of the colonial state had continued to inform the pattern of politics and development in post-colonial Kenya[15]. In colonial Kenya, the 'native' question was central to the organisation and the re-organisation of the colonial state. The colonists attempted to provide political and economic security to immigrant settlers through the restriction of the Africans to 'native reserves', resulting in a society that was ethnically and racially divided. The native reserves provided a stage for the construction of ethnic identities and therefore ethnicization of the society. Each ethnic group lived in a specified territory and a clear demarcation of ethnic identities began to coalesce. Each reserve was governed by customs specific to its ethnic community and the colonial administration prevented ethnic groups from interacting with one another. Thus, the colonialists solidified and deepened inter-ethnic cleavages in Kenya colony, which in the pre-colonial period were most often in a state of flux, due to migrations, assimilations and borrowings[16]. The colonial policy of 'divide and rule' discouraged inter-ethnic rural migrations, especially since some

'reserved' African rural districts; like the Samburu, Turkana and Maasai Reserves, were 'closed' throughout most of the colonial period to people from outside those districts. Consequently, various African communities began to view their neighbours as completely different from them, and therefore unacceptable.

Furthermore, ethnic or 'tribal' identity arises out of territorial association between the space of an area of land and people of a given language grouping and/or culture[17]. In colonial Kenya, the boundaries of administrative regions broadly corresponded to what was judged to separate different sources of 'tribal' identity. A significant institutional arrangement for elections in postcolonial Kenya is that the tribal and ethnic basis of the old colonial administrative boundaries has been perpetuated for mapping the distribution of parliamentary constituencies and which thereby governs the basic rule of the political game in Kenya. The Regional Boundaries Commission in 1962 'divided Kenya based on either ethnic homogeneity; that is, one tribe per district, or compatibility; that is, more than one tribe per district where they were happy to coexist'[18]. While following this principle, Kisii District was carved in 1962 from the former South Nyanza District, which the Abagusii shared with the Luo. That is, the Abagusii got their own district and the Luo their own because they were perceived as lacking a happy coexistence between them. The 1987 delimitation of constituencies during the one-party period, within which the multi-party elections have been conducted since 1992, was based on the same principle. Fundamentally, regions are identified with particular ethnic group(s).

The colonial administration ethnicized the society through the creation of native reserves for different ethnic groups and the transformation of ethnicity into the most important variable in associational life both in the rural and urban areas. After attaining independence, the Kenyatta regime did not reform the divided state that was inherited from the colonial era. Instead, the colonial structures were largely retained by the postcolonial state. In some cases, the structures were only re-defined to suit the purposes of the new elites: consolidation of political power. The new elite used the state framework for an accumulation of wealth and turned to ethnicity for political support[19]. After attaining independence, the concept of tribe became more important as the new elites turned to their ethnic groups for support. State institutions such as the police, army, and the civil service were ethnicized rather than reformed. Public enterprises provided the required patronage resources, which the state elites used to establish loyal elites and to punish opposing elites and their respective communities.

The formation of ethno-political associations by each of the numerically large ethnic groups in the 1970s as the main platform on which political careers were built, intensified ethnicity in postcolonial Kenya. The ethno-regional associations primarily articulated socio-political concerns of the particular group. This phenomenon of organisations tended to intensify the ethnicization of the society in ways similar to the colonial experience. After Kenyatta's death, ethnicity became increasingly politicized as Moi, his successor, sought the support of the Luo and Luyha ethnic groups to expand his power base through an inclusion of numerically big communities. He established hegemony by playing one ethnic group against the other and one politician against the other. Ethnicity became one of the most important factors that shaped the political process. Moi deconstructed the Kenyatta state by simply replacing the Kikuyu senior elites with elites from his Kalenjin ethnic group. During the campaigns for the return of multipartyism in Kenya, support for multi-party democracy was interpreted by those allied to Moi to mean the removal of Moi and the Kalenjin from political power. No ideological differences existed between the different political parties formed after the re-introduction of multi-partyism in Kenya. Party policy objectives were largely the same and differed only in approach and emphasis[20]. The opposition political parties were fragmented along ethnic cleavages.

It is extremely difficult to disregard ethnicity as a primary determinant of political allegiances in Kenya[21]. Ethnic group still constitutes the most natural unit, which people identify with when they are acting in certain competitive situations. Ethnicity remains a major form of consciousness that influences how groups and individuals react to political situations[22]. When a leader feels him weak on the national platform he begins to calculate that the only support he may have will come from his own ethnic community. He starts to create antagonism of his sort, so that he can at least entrench himself as a leader of his ethnic group. In their fight for survival, Kenyan politician's led ethnic sentiments to help them maintain and improve their positions. They progressively identified their personal interests and destiny with those of their ethnic communities. These tribal leaders sought each other out and those leaders who were triumphant in the power struggles tried to dish material benefits out to their people quite out of proportion to what others get[23]. When the politicians no longer had a voice in the centre of power, they could no longer secure funds for development projects in their constituencies. The sidelining of political heavyweights implied the marginalisation of their respective ethnic communities. Nyachae symbolized the association of the Abagusii with the KANU Government and with the power of the Government. Therefore, after his fallout with the

KANU establishment in 1999, there was a growing antipathy towards the ruling party in Gusiland.

CONCLUSION

Generally, political parties in Kenya have failed to institutionalise themselves as strong autonomous organisations with clear policies and ideologies. Instead, they are entities that exist to advance and protect ethnic interests and presidential elections in Kenya are essentially ethnic competition. For example, when Moi got into power in 1978, KANU trusted Onyonka more than Nyamweya. As a result, Nyamweya lost his parliamentary seat in 1979 and continued to weaken politically. Onyonka's dominance of Gusii politics during the Moi era was covertly or overtly opposed by Nyachae; a senior civil servant. However, Onyonka's resilience was demonstrated in 1988 when he successfully prevented Nyachae from contesting the Nyaribari Chache parliamentary seat. In 2002, ethnicity proved to be more powerful than ideology or programme in determining political loyalties in Kisii. For some time, the FORD-People party was perceived as belonging to the Gusii ethnic group rather than a national party. The ethnic violence of 1991-1992, 1997 and 2007 show that ethnicity continues to impinge on democracy and peaceful co-existence of communities in Kenya.

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