

FETISHIZATION OF ETHNICITY IN KENYA'S POLITICAL DISCOURSE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS TO NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT.

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Abstract: *This paper interrogates the dominant role ethnicity plays in the Kenyan political discourse and national fabric. Of concern is why national cohesion has remained a mirage fifty years after independence. The paper begins by examining the definition of ethnicity and then delves into what fuels the politics of ethnicity in Kenya. Finally, the paper addresses ways to alleviate ethnic tensions in the country with negotiating ethnic relations as the main recommendation.*

Key Words: Ethnicity, Kenya, Politics

Introduction

Although Kenya is often referred to as the gateway to East and Central Africa, owing to the intersection of its geographical location and socio-economic gains, national cohesion appears to be the country's Achilles heel. It is a fact that ethnicity plays a central role in the country's social, political, and economic fabric. The purpose of this paper is to interrogate what fuels this polarization—the fetishization of ethnicity in the country's political discourse—and possible ways to deflate this ethnic polarization.

Defining Ethnicity

Jenkins (2008) provides an in-depth analysis of ethnicity. More importantly, he demonstrates how ethnicity is much more than a collectivity of people who identify with a common heritage and culture; that ethnicity is a political construct. He cites Barth who emphasizes that:

Ethnicity is situationally defined, produced and reproduced in the course of interactions that occur at or across—and in the process help to constitute—the ethnic boundary in question. Ethnicity is thus fundamentally political, at least with a small 'p', and ethnic boundaries are to some extent permeable and osmotic, existing despite the flow of personnel across them (and because of the interaction across them). (As cited in Jenkins, 2008, p. 54).

Based on Jenkins analysis, ethnic consciousness and identities are acquired and negotiated by communities in relation to how they define themselves, how they are defined by others, and the nature of interactions with other collectivities. Wamwere (2008), while addressing what he refers to as "negative ethnicity" in Kenya, states, "No human individual is ever born with negative ethnicity or racism; nor does it fall to us from the heavens. It is a product of our ethnic scramble for resources" (p. 61). Branch & Cheeseman (2008) echo this view in their analysis of the Kenyan situation that precipitated the 2007-2008 post-election violence (PEV). This theorization is important in understanding ethnic suspicion and tension that often characterizes the country's political discourse. It helps explain why politicians are most times implicated in inter-ethnic polarization, which at times escalates into ethnic cleansing particularly during electioneering time.

What fuels negative Ethnicity in Kenya?

There are definitely many factors that fuel negative ethnicity in Kenya. This paper addresses four that are most prominent:

1. "Elite fragmentation"

According to Branch & Cheeseman (2009), Kenyan elites form alliances that advance their political and economic interests. These alliances are not a new phenomenon. The British colonial establishment devised this system as a way of creating a cadre of loyalists who served the colonial administration. As colonization was waning, the colonial establishment bequeathed these loyalists the reins of power in order to preserve and reproduce the colonial apparatus. After independence, the interests of these elites converged and they formed alliances that were motivated by self-preservation (Branch & Cheeseman, 2009, p. 3). From the onset, these alliances are ethnically-based as politicians use their ethnic communities as pawns to bargain for political power and influence.

2. "Our turn to eat syndrome"

The reason elites command a near fanatical allegiance from their ethnic communities in the country is the false sense they propagate that they represent the welfare of their communities. This propaganda allows them to mask the real motives behind these elite alliances. As John Githongo, articulates in his memoir by Wrong (2009), the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) defeat of the Kenya African National Union (KANU) in the 2002 elections gave Kenyans the hope of a new dawn. The coalition brought together the so-called second liberation movement leaders—human rights campaigners, lawyers and civic leaders who, as Githongo puts it, "represented the country's frustrated conscience" (Wrong, 2009, p. 6). But, as soon as these "reformists" joined government, they perpetuated the greedy and corrupt practices of the regime they had worked so hard to defeat. Githongo, in the same memoir, reports how NARC acquired a new meaning: "Nothing Actually Really Changes" (p. 80) to demonstrate how the new elites perpetuated the status quo for personal gain. In essence, Kenyan elites capitalize on the pretense of representing community interests and the ensuing loyalty to bargain for position in the high table of politics in the country and stoke ethnic tension when such alliances collapse.

3. Weak national institutions

The 2007-2008 PEV and its aftermath exposed the weak nature of the Kenyan institutions. As the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights (KNHRC) pointed out in its 2008 report on the violence, although the management of the 2007 was the main trigger of the violence, policy failures of the past “had already prepared the ground” for the violence. Most prominent of all the grievances was the land question—the feeling of marginalization among some communities, especially in the Rift Valley, by the Kenyatta government. Many believe that after independence, the Kenyatta government facilitated the Kikuyu to take over land that had been alienated by the colonial establishment in regions inhabited by other communities instead of the land reverting to original owners (communities in those regions) (KNCHR, 2008, p. 21). The land question still remains a major sticking point in ethnic relations in Kenya, which demonstrates failure of national institutions to resolve national issues and community grievances.

4. Hypocrisy

Another major factor that fuels negative ethnicity is hypocrisy. Leaders and the general public seem to condemn ethnic prejudice only when it is practiced by others with total disregard to their own complicity. For instance, during the Moi regime, many people complained that his administration favored his Kalenjin community but when Kibaki came to power, most of those he appointed to top government positions were from his Kikuyu community. Likewise, the opposition used Kibaki’s favoritism of his Kikuyu ethnic community in government appointments as a major campaign platform in the 2007 elections, but a look at the composition of the coalition government reveals that each side of the coalition filled government positions with people from their own ethnic communities. According to the NCIC 2011 ethnic audit, “the Kikuyu [constituted] the largest single dominant ethnic group in all ministries and departments, with the exception of the Office of the Prime Minister and the Police and Prisons departments. The PM’s office [was] dominated by the Luo community” (Okeyo, *The East African*, April 6, 2011).

Way forward

Evidently, ethnic relations in Kenya are a major stumbling block to national cohesion that is requisite for national development. The country could accelerate socio-economic development if the energy expended on ethnic polarization was harnessed for national development. Some thoughts on the way forward:

1. Unmask ethnicity

A first step toward addressing the polarized ethnic relations in Kenya is to address it head-on. As Miguna (2014) has observed:

The superficial suppression of ethnic identity has not worked. It has only made matters worse by creating and promoting a culture of deception and dishonesty. Suppression forces diversity underground where it ferments chaos and intermittently erupts as ethnic cleansings and sectarian political mobilizations. (*The Star*, 2014, May 17).

Kenyans must wake up to this reality.

2. Negotiate ethnic relations

Some commentators have proposed a rotational presidency to mitigate the feeling of exclusion and marginalization among many Kenyan ethnic communities. According to Mutua, State University of New York Distinguished Professor and Dean of the Buffalo Law School, for instance:

The only way to deal with this “problem” [exclusion of other tribes from occupying the presidency] is to rotate – yes, rotate – the presidency among different groups. This means that certain groups would be automatically disqualified from contesting the presidency again until their turns come up – again. This is “ethnic democracy” that would lance the boil of tribal animosity. Perhaps that’s how Kenya will become a nation. (*Standard Digital*, August 9, 2014).

Likewise, Miguna is of the view that “majoritarian pluralism without a well-structured federal parliamentary system is a recipe for never-ending ethnic rivalries, inequality and chaos. We deserve a system that addresses people’s fears, frustrations, emotions and fundamental needs – and that is rotational presidency” (*The Star*, May 17, 2014).

But, is a rotational presidency the panacea of ethnic polarization in Kenya? Would such a system address all the underlying factors that fuel ethnic tensions in the country? Would such a system mitigate grievances that communities have accumulated over the years? Are there mechanisms in place for such a system to work? Nigeria has adopted such a system whereby the presidency is supposed to rotate between the North and the South, but that has not made Nigeria a cohesive country.

That is why it is prudent to have a national conversation on ethnic relations; after all as noted earlier in this paper, ethnicity is a socio-political construct. Thus, resolving ethnic relations would entail negotiations among ethnic communities. These negotiations would include how power is shared at all levels of government—the central government and in the devolved units, especially in counties that are cosmopolitan. Such negotiations would also address sharing resources—this would start with resolving the land issue which is the most prominent community grievance in the country (KNCHR, 2008, p. 21). In addition to land, such negotiations would include negotiating utilization of resources such as water points in the arid and semi-arid areas that are a major cause of conflict among pastoralist communities. It would also include sharing of natural resources such as mineral wealth, especially considering that in the recent past Kenya different kinds of minerals, including oil, have been discovered in Kenya. If land has been a major sticking point in the country, how much more complicated would it get when minerals are added into the equation? Kenya would benefit from adopting the Tanzanian model on ethnic relations—while Kenyan politicians were entrenching ethnic consciousness as the foundation of state policy and governance at independence, Julius Nyerere, was fostering national consciousness. It is no wonder Tanzania is one of the most stable countries in Africa; one of the very few countries in the continent where national consciousness mostly supersedes ethnic consciousness.

3. Strengthen national institutions

Another step in addressing ethnic polarization in the country is to strengthen national institutions. It is worth noting that although the country has experienced major ethnic clashes, more so after the reinstatement of multiparty politics in Kenya—there were widespread ethnic clashes in 1991, 1997, and 2007-2008 that resulted in many people being killed, maimed, raped, displaced, and property destroyed; but hardly anybody has been convicted for those atrocities. There is no way culprits would have evaded justice without the complicity of state apparatuses compounded with a weak judicial and law enforcement system. Respect for the rule of law and Constitutionalism would go a long way in guaranteeing everybody's human rights as enshrined in the Constitution that was promulgated in 2010.

4. Reform in political mobilization

Finally is the need to re-examine how politics is conducted in the country. As it has been pointed out already, Kenyan politics has always been organized along ethnic lines. However, there is need for political players to adopt a new paradigm and organize politics around issues. Although many issues driving campaign platforms would definitely have ethnic undertones, such as the land question and ethnic imbalances in government appointments, political players would be made to engage in honest discourse on these issues rather than typical politics of ethnic incitement. This would shift political rhetoric from ethnic demagoguery to healthy national conversations on the issues. In such a paradigm, political ideology and articulation of issues

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would override ethnic engineering as the primary driver of political mobilization and mapping of political constituents. Such a shift would have the potential of reducing the influence ethnic “chieftains” command in their communities.

Conclusion

This discussion has focused on the polarized nature of ethnic relations in Kenya, what fuels these tensions, and the danger of not addressing them. Of concern is that political leaders only seem to pay lip service to achieving national cohesion. The country promulgated a Constitution in 2010 and establishment of various commissions including the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights (KNCHR) and the National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC). However, the country remains ethnically polarized. Although measures like strengthening national institutions and reforming the way politics is organized in the country would go a long way in stemming ethnic violence in the country, the reality is that these measures lack the capacity to address the underlying causes of these tensions. That is why it is essential for the forty one ethnic communities that were arbitrarily put together by the colonial government to come together to negotiate how they would relate. Those negotiations will establish structures and a framework on how ethnic communities would interact and share resources, including power, and, therefore reduce inter-ethnic suspicions, hatred, and animosity. That would form the basis of a national project.