Ethnicity and Development in Kenya: Lessons from the 2007 General Elections

By Felicia A. Yieke, Ph.D*

Abstract

This article interrogates the issue of ethnicity in Kenya and its attendant, how these have been played out in the country’s political landscape, and how these have affected Kenya negatively in the process of its development. Of particular interest is the 2007 general election where ethnic tensions were played out and the possible effects it had on Kenya. The main argument is that multiparty kind of democracy that Kenya has enjoyed so far unfortunately seems to work along ethnic lines although all elections since 1963 have revealed ethnic dimensions. The general elections of 2007 seemed to be a replay of the general elections of 1992, in terms of the ethnic violence that was experienced before and after. It is only that this kind of violence was really large scale this time round and this magnitude had never been witnessed before in all the previous elections. Prior to these elections, the political elite had been conducting a lot of campaigns, but a closer look at these campaigns revealed that most of it was based on ethnicity and the different ethnic identities that exist in the country. It turned out that the political elite had actually exploited the fact of Kenyan different ethnic identities to forward their political agendas. The relationship between ethnicity, language and identity is interrogated, which leads to looking at how ethnicity is constructed in a discursive manner. How then do issues of ethnicity affect the whole fact of citizenship and identity, which are central in development? With all these in mind, it is asked whether ethnicity is a blessing or bane in independent Kenya. The article concludes by exploring the fact of ethnic diversity in Kenya for positive development. The article concludes giving suggestions on how ethnicity can be turned round for positive development in Kenya.

Key terms: Ethnicity; Development; 2007 elections; post-election violence

*Dr. Felicia A. Yieke teaches at Laikipia University College of Egerton University, Kenya, where she also serves as Dean, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences.

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Introduction

In multi-ethnic communities, ethnicity or ethnic identity is an additional variable in socio economic development over and above those normally present in the more homogenous communities. The role of ethnicity in development can be negative or positive. It can also be a problem or a potentially rewarding challenge. Unfortunately, it is the negative aspect of ethnicity that has been publicized or researched. Occasional violent ethnic conflicts have received far greater attention than years of peace in multiethnic and multi-cultural societies. Differences like
religious beliefs, language, and cultural heritage, and skin pigmentation, national or geographical origins of each group are often highlighted (Chien, 1984:30).

Kenya is a multi-ethnic society and has more than 40 ethnic communities that have lived side by side for a long time. The most dominant ethnic communities in this linguistic and ethnic landscape are the Gikuyu, the Luyha, the Luo, the Kalenjin, the Kamba, and the Kisii. There are however many other smaller ethnic communities in Kenya. Since the onset of colonialism, power in Kenya has been associated with a particular ethnic group. Kenya was initially a protectorate and later colony of the United Kingdom. From self-rule in 1963 until the death of the first president Jomo Kenyatta in 1978, political and economic power was increasingly vested in his trusted circle of fellow Kikuyu (Decalo, 1998:177). During the second presidential regime, political power became concentrated in the hands of Kalenjin élites. In all the different regimes then and after, the ruling group sought to use the resources of the state for the special benefit of its own ethnic community and its allies.

It is often suggested that land scarcity and its distribution, which was aggravated by other factors such as a high rate of population growth and environmental degradation, has contributed to the violent ethnic clashes in Kenya. Since the 1920s, political and economic factors have encouraged the movement of populations within Kenya’s national borders, often to zones where they constitute ethnic minorities. The British divided the Kenyan territory along ethnic lines into eight provinces, creating a different majority in each; each province was subdivided into districts, often according to ethnic groups and subgroups. For example, the Luo are based mainly in Nyanza (though it is also the home to the Kisii, who have their own district); the Luhya, in Western Province; the Kikuyu, in Central Province; the Somali, in North-Eastern Province; and the Mijikenda, in the Coastal Province. The Rift Valley is dominated by the Kalenjin, but also contains the Maasai, Turkana, Samburu and a good size of Kikuyus. The Kamba share Eastern Province with Embu and Meru, among others. Nairobi is the most cosmopolitan province, with the Kikuyu forming a plurality.

Nonetheless, these population movements into ethnically distinct areas did not cause any large-scale violent attacks prior to 1991. Historically, members of Kenya’s 40- plus ethnic groups have co-existed, traded and intermarried, often in a symbiotic relationship between pastoralist and agricultural communities (Lonsdale, 1992:19). Moreover, ethnicity was, prior to the mid-twentieth century, a more fluid concept than commonly supposed (Ogot, 1996).

Large-scale inter-ethnic violence is a new phenomenon in Kenya. The proximate causes of violence are intrinsically related to democratization and the electoral cycle; its roots are to be found in recent times and are politically instigated, and not primordial. As the move to multipartyism became increasingly probable, senior politicians in many political rallies issued inflammatory statements and utterances, asking for people to go back to their ancestral lands or they be forced out. The advent of the violent ethnic clashes closely followed these rallies (Human Rights Watch, 1993). As new political parties emerged, a clear enduring pattern of ethno-regional interests appeared (Human Rights Watch, 1999). The violence in Kenya appeared to be an ethnicized expression of political conflict. Ethnicity in this case, was the medium of political violence, not its cause. However, the system once in place, became self-perpetuating: it increased the likelihood of future conflict by sharpening ethnic identity and chauvinism, as well as promoting the doctrine that specific region of the country “belonged” to the groups that “originally” occupied them. This has led to terms coming up such as “outsiders,” “foreigners,” “strangers” or “aliens,” and this is regardless of the legal ownership of land and the constitutional right of all Kenyans to live anywhere of their choosing within their country (Ndegwa, 1997).
The multiparty kind of democracy that Kenya has enjoyed so far unfortunately seems to work along ethnic lines although all elections since 1963 have revealed ethnic dimensions. The general elections of 2007 seemed to be a replay of the general elections of 1992, in terms of the ethnic violence that was experienced before and after. It is only that this kind of violence was really large scale this time round and this magnitude had never been witnessed before in all the previous elections. Prior to these elections, the political elite had been conducting a lot of campaigns, but a closer look at these campaigns revealed that most of it was based on ethnicity and the different ethnic identities that exist in the country. It turned out that the political elite had actually exploited the fact of Kenyan different ethnic identities to forward their political agendas.

**Ethnicity, Language and Identity**

Ethnic issues are so fundamental in Kenyan society that they seem almost an integral component. This seems to have come up even more clearly in the run up to the 2007 general election. And even though we know that tribalism has always been there, the level to which the Kenyan community had fallen prey to tribalism was, and is still astounding.

In order to investigate into the relationship between language and ethnic identity, or ethnicity, one has to first understand how the concept of ethnicity is indeed planted among an ethnic group. Historically, the discussion of ethnicity diverges into two different opinions, namely the primordial and the instrumental perspectives. Traditionally the primordial view regards ethnicity as “constituting” a fundamental feature of society and that ethnic identity is natural and unalienable (Mac-Giola, 2003:27). In other words, the ethnicity of a group is defined by its cultural and biological heritage, and is territorially rooted. It is thus grounded by the group’s primordial ties and bound by the ancestors’ values, myths, languages, etc.

Instrumentalists however argue that the primordial approach emphasizes too much on the objective nature of ethnicity, which stresses that ethnicity is a “given” and one is born with it. They criticize the fact that the primordial approach cannot explain the evolution of ethnic groups over time. Instead of admitting solely to primordial ties, instrumentalists emphasize that ethnicity of a group should be understood in terms of its relationship to other groups. This means that the members of an ethnic group identify themselves subjectively in relation to other groups in order to maximize their social interest. Worsley says that cultural traits are not absolute or simply intellectual categories, but are invoked to provide [ethnic] identities which legitimize claims to rights (Worsley, 1984). They are strategies or weapons in competitions over scarce social goods. Adopting the instrumental approach to ethnicity, the relationship between language and ethnic identity becomes more apparent to us.

The instrumental view holds that ethnicity is a subjective way of interpreting a group’s identity, often in the hope of maximizing the members’ interest. However, in order to identify a group’s separate and unique ethnicity, the members often have to in some way find themselves certain features which can distinguish them from the other ethnic groups. For instance, biological heritage, religious divergence and language difference are commonly cited as proofs of ethnicity. It is however safe to say that the very majority of our social life depends on the use of language; and the use of different languages naturally separates people into different groups, each not being able to understand the others. Lacking channels of communication, we typically identify others as being ‘different’ from us. This is what makes language such a prominent objective factor in defining ethnicity. To say language is to say society (Duranti, 1997). Thus if you speak one particular language, you belong to that particular society.
The idea of language itself is however sometimes not an objective fact, but a matter of subjective interpretation and is often employed purposefully as an ethnic distinction. Linguistically, every regional dialect is more or less different from the neighboring dialects. Even though we may normally regard these dialects as dialects of the same language, it is so easy to take this difference as the evidence of independent ethnicity once the speakers find this parallel to their interest (Katzner, 2001). Consequently, this flexibility (or otherwise ambiguity) in defining ‘language’ creates its link to ethnic identity. In reality therefore, both ethnicity and language are not objectively defined ideas. Ethnicity is often subjectively interpreted by a group, and is thus a tool to fight for the social interest of the group members. Meanwhile, the very features of language serve a very good role in defining a group’s independent identity. On the one hand, language plays a very important role in the social life, and limits speakers of different languages into different social circles. On the other hand, the ambiguity in defining a ‘language’ makes it handy to claim linguistic independence once the need is there. These factors are favorable to the claim of independent ethnicity, and therefore make language closely related to ethnic and national identity.

The Discursive Construction of Ethnicity

Any group is defined through differences from others. The constitution of society comes within the articulation of differences, which receive generalized, symbolic meanings and are produced through and only within different symbolic systems. Society as a social and cultural phenomenon exists and is reproduced by means of symbolic communications (Lotman, 1994). In other words, social groups are constituted within discursive practices. So any society is, first of all, a symbolic construction that determines its mental, imagined character (Anderson, 1983). And in this logic, Anderson’s definition of a nation as an imagined political community is applied to an ethnic group. In this sense, ethnicity can be seen as a discursive construction of collective identity. Stuart Hall defines ethnicity as a historical, cultural and political construction. The term “ethnicity” then acknowledges the place of history, language and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity, as well as the fact that all discourse is placed, positioned, situated, and all knowledge is contextual (Hall, 1996a). From this perspective then, history, language and culture define ethnicity as discourse. Ethnicity is produced by the context in which identity and subjectivity are constituted. This approach to ethnicity comes from the re-conceptualization of identity as a process of identification. Identity is not absolutely stable, but changes in historical context. The dynamic moment of identification process is the recognition of the “Self” through relationship with the “Other”. As Hall notes, people have most of their identities not because of something deep inside them, but because of how others have recognized them (Hall, 1996b:344). For instance, in the 1979 population census in Kenya, an ethnic category called the Kalenjin, which was made up of smaller ethnic communities was introduced for the first time, and from then henceforth, these small groups have identified themselves as Kalenjin. Likewise, an ethnic category called the Abasuba was hived off the big Luo community, but so far, this ethnic category has failed to attract a significant number of subjects who are able to identify with it as belonging to that ethnic category and still craft their identity as Luo speakers. Identity is thus defined as a dialogic relationship to the “Other”, which is outside as well as inside the “Self”, because an individual can identify oneself only through an understanding of who the “Other” is.

If identity is a dynamic process, the only place where identity receives its stability is the representation of self-identity or narrative of the self. Identity is “the story we tell about the self
in order to know who we are” (Hall, 1996b: 346). Thus, dialectically, identity, which is a dynamic process of identification, is represented within narratives or discourses, but it receives stability and constancy in narratives. This stability of ethnic identity in narratives becomes the issue of political representation in claims of militants about ethnicity as a collective identity for a group. Politicians and Government agencies in Africa use ethnicity as a mobilizing factor of modern political movements. In fact, this political utilization of ethnic identity is no more than the realization of power upon representations of identities.

**Issues of Citizenship and Identity in Kenya**

The democratization process in Kenya has substantially expanded the public space, making the thrust towards full political and civil rights seem a reality. This has however been undermined by increased ethnic consciousness, interethnic tension and ethnic conflicts among ethnic communities in Kenya and exacerbated by the deterioration of social and economic conditions. The introduction of multiparty system as has already been discussed, which is a milestone in Kenya’s democratization process, has unfortunately led to increased ethnic hostilities.

Although constitutionally the nation state is the official basis of citizenship in Kenya, a shift towards a form of ethnic citizenship seem to be taking root, at least informally, as evidenced by increased ethnic allegiance among the different Kenyan communities. The nationally delimited citizenry is under challenge by the notion of ethnic citizenry. Thus while ethnic collectivities seem to be gaining greater ground as bases of citizenry, national collectivities seem to be on the decline as a basis for citizenry. This shift from national collectivity to ethnic collectivity, right from independence in Kenya, may be seen on one hand as a tendency towards disengagement from participation in national public spheres by a section of population, and on the other hand, as evidence of emerging participatory forms, and multiple arenas and levels whereby individuals enact and practice their citizenship (Soysal, 2000:12). At independence, smaller ethnic communities felt threatened because membership of the main political parties was made up of bigger ethnic communities. They therefore formed smaller political parties to represent them.

As a sense of belonging, we may distinguish two types of citizenship – primordial and functional citizenship (Ekeh, 1972). Primordial citizenship is based on a sense of belonging to an indigenous group or community in the nation. Functional citizenship is based on a sense of belonging often to a national as legally defined. While primordial citizenship in encoded in ethnic culture, functional citizenship is encoded in the national constitution. Along the same line, we make a distinction between ethnic and national citizenship. While ethnic citizenship is characterized by a sense of belonging to an ethnic group, national citizenship is characterized by a sense of belonging to a nation. One may, for instance, have an ethnic identity of a Luo, Luhyia, Kamba or Kikuyu and yet claim ones national identity as a Kenyan. But on the borders of Kenyan territory, one may also be an ethnic Luo or ethnic Maasai and yet be a Ugandan national or Tanzanian national respectively. National citizenship is defined legally or constitutionally while ethnic citizenship is defined socially and culturally. These two forms of citizenship do not only define a sense of belonging, but also imply a bundle of rights. This citizenship is not just about membership to a community, whether ethnic or national. It engenders the rights and obligations to the community. In this context, rights may be defined as political, social or economic advantages which one has a just claim to morally and legally or customarily while responsibilities and obligations may be conceived as duties the citizens have to the community.
However, ethnic citizenship of which primordial (ethnic) factors is primary negates the constitutional provision on national citizenship (Osaghae, 1990).

Problems of citizenship experienced by Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) are dire. Apart from physical violence, displaced persons are often denied social, economic and cultural rights, or are placed in a structural position in which they cannot enjoy or exercise those rights (Ibeanu, 1999:77). Moreover, as “non-indigene,” the victims of ethnic conflicts find their participation in the social, political and economic activities seriously impaired. In the Kenyan situation, ethnic allegiance is very strong and ethnic conflicts have generated internal displacement, as was even witnessed in the last general elections of 2007. After these elections and ethic violence escalated, citizens were told to pack up and go if they were perceived to be “outsiders” in the places they had been residing in. Kikuyus in parts of the Rift Valley, Nyanza, Western and Coast province were forced out of their homes. Likewise, other communities, notably the Luo, Kalenjin and sometimes Kisii were also forced out from parts of the Central province. Some places in Nairobi’s Eastlands area were zoned into different ethnic area and fierce battles took place there. This author was an IDP for two weeks, having fled with her family from her home in Thika town, and eventually relocated permanently to an area she perceived to be safer for herself and family. Many internally displaced people either fled to their ancestral homes, or IDP camps, or places they perceived to be safe in as far as their ethnicities were concerned.

The IDP problem is still there with us today. The question asked is how the country can speak of development, when a significant number of its citizens are still languishing in camps as IDPs, and even those ones that went back to their homes or relocated to areas they perceived to be safe still have a sense of insecurity and have not gone back to “business as usual” in the manner that they carried out their duties before the 2007 general elections.

Ethnicity: Blessing or Bane for Independent Kenya

Immediately after independence, efforts were made to subordinate ethnicity to nationhood (Ochieng, 1989). Nationhood was cultivated in the hope that it would undermine and ultimately replace ethnic attachments. This is because ethnic attachments were perceived as divisive and contrary to the nation and national building project. Jomo Kenyatta, the first president of the republic of Kenya, publicly condemned ethnicity and yet it was in his era that ethnicity took root in Kenya. One way in which the goal of national unity was to be achieved was through a single party system. Kenyatta therefore undermined the multi party system that was there at independence, and introduced a single party system which was believed to promote unity among the various ethnic groups in Kenya (At independence, Kenya was multiparty).

In Kenya, politicians exploited long standing ethnic tensions to forment the infamous violence labeled “tribal clashes” of the 1990s (KHRC, 1998). There are now very important moves to de-ethnicize Kenya (one recent example being the proposed county governments in the proposed constitution of Kenya), in the hope that the current feelings of animosity in the country can be reduced. Some leaders have in their ignorance even attempted to suppress individual ethnic languages in Kenya in the hope of suppressing ethnicity (Manyasa, 2005). Yet this process has the potential to undermine the nationhood (Simala, 1996). As a consequence of this posting, the discussion and legislation on this issue has tended to be more abstract than pragmatic. Because of pretences surrounding the issue of ethnicity, there is unmitigated ethnocentricism that
is inimical to the sustainability of most African states, as we know them today (Manyasa, 2005:68).

The truth of the matter is that ethnic and national identities are in competition and conflict. Ethnic ambitions have quickly replaced national loyalties in most African states (Manyasa, 2005:69). On any national issues, despite pretense at moral and intellectual arguments, one can see the tribal orientation of the debaters. In Kenyan multiparty politics, ethnic labels have acquired more salience than either policy or ideology. A Kenyan voter today is a member of an ethnic group first and a citizen of his/her country second. And yet all these are despite a section of the population coming from inter-ethnic marriages or are supposedly urbanized to the extent that on the surface, they seem to belong to no one specific ethnic community, and even proclaim so. However, on further enquiry, most of these people strike identity with one ethnic group or the other, even as they proclaim themselves as Kenyans. All these are detrimental to development projects in the country.

Liberal democracy, which is one of the most important western ideological legacies in Africa, has not improved ethnic relations in most countries. It has, in the short run, served to heighten competitive ethnic consciousness, ethicize political competition, increase ethnic tensions, generate conflicts and promote separatism (Mazrui, 1994: 127-136). This has eroded any gains against ethnocentrism from liberal capitalism, which is yet another important legacy of the west in Africa. While capitalism promotes individualism and a class struggle that begins to erode tribal allegiance, it is also exploitative and creates selective areas of poverty. It is also open to abuse, and indeed, it has been abused to reinforce ethnic dominance that quite naturally brews discontent and stirs rebellion. The best jobs, the best land, and the best commercial opportunities are disproportionately distributed to the privileged ethnic governing class. In return, the favored ethnic groups shield the (ir) leaders from public scrutiny. The rivalries initiated in the colonial era have been invigorated and ethnic prejudices perpetuated by the governing ethnic groups. Indeed, ethnicity has become one of the defining characteristics of post colonial politics of Africa. In multi ethnic nations, ethnic apartheid usually involves discrimination in favor of the governing ethnic group, while in dual ethnic nations, it involves discrimination against the other ethnic group (Manyasa, 2005:71). Kenya has not been left out in this unfortunate maze that is threatening the very existence and development agenda of the country.

Exploring Ethnic diversity for Development in Kenya

In multi-ethnic societies, ethnicity is an additional variable in socio-economic development over and above those normally present in the more homogeneous societies. As has been discussed, the role of ethnicity in development can be negative, but can also be positive; it can be a problem or a potentially rewarding challenge. Unfortunately, it is the negative aspect of ethnicity which has been publicized or researched. Occasional violent ethnic conflicts, as have already been mentioned, have received far greater attention than years of peace in multi-ethnic and multi-cultural societies, where people have had peaceful co-existence, bringing in their resources together for joint economic ventures and the like regardless of ethnic origin.

It would appear that two principal types of conventional wisdom can be detected in the area of ethnicity. The first is that ethnicity is the source of ethnic conflicts. The consequence of adhering to such an assumption is that the identification and elaboration of the distinguishing characteristics between ethnic groups in a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society become important. Differences like religious beliefs, languages, cultural heritage, skin pigmentation,
national or geographic origin of each ethnic group, are highlighted. At the policy level, the implication is that the solution to ethnic conflicts lies at the ethnic relations level. This results in proliferation of community goodwill committees, race and ethnic relations boards and so on. In such situations, problems of economic and political inequality among ethnic communities eventually tend to receive less attention and are downgraded sometimes to the detriment of development in the country.

The impression created so far is that in multi-ethnic communities, ethnic conflicts of a violent nature are inevitable. The question asked is whether this should always be the case. This thought can only be sustained if one firmly believes that ethnicity is the cause of ethnic conflicts. This is, however, suspect, as ethnicity, more often than not, is the symptom rather than the cause of the problem. In an exploitative economic structure, for example, exploitation would continue irrespective of the ethnic identity of the business people. Without overhauling the economic structure, the replacement of, for instance, immigrant business persons, or business persons from one ethnic community by indigenous ones would in no way contribute to the resolution of the problem of exploitation. In Kenya, for instance, there are many Somali immigrants who have settled in all the major towns in business ventures. Merely replacing them with “indigenous” people in Kenya would neither solve the problem of exploitation nor really improve ethnic relations in the area. The problems of ethnicity are more grave than this superficial approach.

In a situation in which feelings of insecurity, uncertainty and fear arising from adverse circumstances do not exist, social groups are less inclined to pay much importance to their ethnic identity. However, when such a situation arises, ethnicity becomes a shield, a rallying point or a protective mechanism for members of social groups. This is evident among immigrant communities all over the world. It is also common among existing communities which face competition from the immigrant ethnic groups. This picture is played out in the vast Rift Valley province of Kenya where the ethnic Kalenjin communities are the supposedly “indigenous” people, and the Kikuyu ethnic communities are the settlers. Incidentally, it is in the Rift Valley province where the most fierce and violent battles of ethnicity were fought after the general elections of 2007. It was also in this province that people suffered most in terms of internal displacement. It should also be noted that ethnic identification and ethnic consciousness are particularly strong among disadvantaged ethnic minority groups which suffer from problems of unemployment, upward social and political mobility. In this case, ethnicity has assumed an important role for the purpose of interest articulation and in the fight for social and economic justice as well as equality.

Ethnicity is also a convenient political resource in the negative sense. It can be readily exploited to serve the selfish purpose of an individual politician, a political party or a government. It is not unusual for an unknown politician to exploit ethnic issues to gain support and prominence. In this case, ethnicity can provide a shortcut to political success. This has been very clearly played out in the political landscape in Kenya and was visible in the events that led to post election violence (PEV) in 2007 – 2008.

There are people who are in the school of thought that in a society, stratification should be on the basis of class or ideology, and ethnic consciousness is consequently detested. The argument is that when a society is vertically stratified along ethnic lines, the potential for ethnic issues to be exploited is far greater than in a society which is stratified on the basis of class or ideology. The subsequent argument also is that when parameters other than ethnicity come up, then feelings of ethnocentrism are reduced to a minimum. After the Rwanda genocide, other social issues like gender were brought to the fore to blur the ethnic divide. Countries can actually
foreground issues of gender and sports especially, to neutralize the situation. Also, issues of equality, distribution of the country’s resources, economic empowerment, etc, should be exploited and this should consequently reduce ethnic tensions to a minimum. Unfortunately, the emergence of a more sophisticated enough social and economic infrastructures, which would drastically reduce the relevance of ethnic issues in the political arena, is a time consuming process. In the interim, such politicians are left with no positive frame of reference to guide them in the development of constructive policy or program measures to resolve ethnic issues. Attention so far has therefore been directed to the negative approach to the issue of ethnicity. The outcome of such an approach has been just as negative.

Fortunately, ethnicity is not an inherently negative phenomenon. It has positive qualities which can become a powerful resource for national development when its potentiality is fully recognized and developed. In a multi-ethnic society, from the point of human philosophy, culture, organization and technical knowhow, each ethnic community has its own strengths and weaknesses. For those involved in guiding societal development, the challenge is to mobilize the strengths of the various ethnic groups as the resource or input in the search for the realization of the goals of meaningful development. Such an approach to ethnicity is basically of interest to those politicians who identify the societal interests with those of their own, and is consequently of no interest to political adventurers who are primarily interested in searching for a short-cut to political prominence and the fulfillment of their personal selfish interest.

Although a positive approach to the issue of ethnicity is rare, it does exist. Malaysia is in the midst of such an experiment, and Kenya could borrow quite a bit from it. The development model from Malaysia integrates the Malays (53.9 per cent), the Chinese (34.9 per cent) and the Indians (10.5 per cent) in a symbiotic relationship between immigrant ethnic communities and indigenous ethnic communities. In this case, the Malay is the indigenous ethnic community whereas the Chinese and the Indians are the immigrant ethnic communities. This developmental model which is referred to by Chien as the Baba-Ali (in the case of Malaysia, ‘Baba’ is used here unconventionally to include all non-Malay ethnic communities, and ‘Ali’ to stand for the Malay ethnic community) approach operates on the following principles (Chien, 1984: 34).

a. To provide conditions which will reduce the sense of insecurity on the part of the indigenous community and to win the allegiance and loyalty of the immigrant communities so that they will contribute to the development and advancement of the well-being of all people in the country.

b. To utilize as fully as possible the strengths of the various communities, and

c. To tap the resources of the economically more aggressive ethnic groups to uplift the well-being of the economically disadvantaged ethnic groups so that development can be meaningful to all ethnic communities.

Unlike many ethnic politicians, political leaders in Malaysia do not subscribe to the ethnic conflict theory. To many of them, ethnic conflicts arise because of the economic imbalance between ethnic communities and the identification of race with economic function. To this end, the Malaysians have done intensive work in their economic sector and have come up with several economic policies to help them achieve this. Thus under the New Economic Policy unfolded in the Second Malaysia Plan 1971-1975, it was clearly stated:

The Plan incorporates a two-pronged New Economic Policy for development. The first prong is to reduce and eventually eradicate poverty, by raising income levels
and increasing employment opportunities for all Malaysians, irrespective of race. The second prong aims at accelerating the process of restructuring Malaysian society to correct economic imbalance so as to reduce and eventually eliminate the identification of race with economic function (Government of Malaysia, 1971:1).

In the Malaysian case, we therefore have a situation in which the ethnic-based political parties, while articulating and fighting for the interests of their respective communities, still work together as a team to further the long term common national development agenda. In as far as ethnicity and development is concerned, Kenya therefore has a lot to learn so that it gets out of the multi ethnic quagmire that it cultivated and move on to be a model in Africa of national cohesion and integration. This will go a long way in advancing the development agenda in the country.

Conclusion

From the forgoing discussion, Kenya has always been a multi-lingual, multicultural and multi-ethnic community and the different communities have had peaceful co-existence for a long time in its history. The kind of ethnicity experienced had so far been positive and had always added to the kind of diversity that Kenya had. This so far propelled Kenya to enhanced national development, and Kenya could actually be said to have been a kind of melting pot where different ethnic communities and culture lived in relative bliss. This is the good news. The bad news is that with multiparty politics, which started in 1992, selfish politicians and the political elite have used the kind of diversity in multi-ethnicity to balkanize the country and plunge it into violence, culminating into the kind of political crisis that was witnessed in late 2007 right through to early 2008. This kind of negative ethnicity, which was overtly exhibited in hate speeches, took centre stage in the voting patterns that were witnessed in the 2007 general elections. Today, most Kenyans know themselves as belonging to this ethnic community and not “the other”. The whole issue of “Them” vs. “Us”, or the politics of inclusion and exclusion has now unfortunately become more pronounced and magnified, and even in urban centers, most people now identify themselves first as belonging to a specific “tribal” community before looking at themselves as Kenyans. The whole idea of national identity has been relegated to the rear as ethnic identity takes centre stage. This does not auger well for Kenya.

If Kenya wants to salvage itself and bring back the social fabric, political cohesiveness and economic stability that it had enjoyed for a while, then its citizens have to cast aside negative ethnicity and selfish interests, and begin to see the positive gains that ethnicity had before they started using ethnicity as a means to the kind of violence and destruction of human lives that was witnessed. The promotion of positive ethnicity will allay fears and suspicions of other ethnic groups, enhance respect for other cultures, and facilitate the equitable distribution of resources, all of which can enhance socio-economic progress, justice and democracy in the country.

References


