

Issue-Based Politics in Kenya: Assessing the Underlying Factors, Progress Made, and Barriers

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ABSTRACT

Over the last three decades, Kenya's democratization journey has been marked by significant progress evidenced by the adoption of multiparty politics, new constitution promulgation in 2010, and institutionalization of key reforms in government and civil space. This formed a strong foundation for the entrenchment of issue-based politics as envisioned in Kenya Vision 2030's Political Pillar that advocates for *"a democratic political system that is issue-based, people-centered, result oriented and accountable to the public and viable political party systems guided by policy and ideological differences rather than region or ethnicity."* However, a litany of underlying issues and factors –have to a greater extent –been the cause of political violence majorly ethnic driven and thus dimming the prospects of transition of the country to issue-based politics away from ethnic-centered politics. This paper aims to discuss the underlying issues and triggers of political violence in Kenya, take stoke of progress made, and barriers in the advancement of issue-based politics. This study is premised on secondary data in form of journal articles, newspapers, occasional papers, online websites, and policy documents. Findings reveal that 1) Underlying issues and triggers of political violence include and are not limited to the multi-ethnic nature of Kenyan society, historical land injustices, political and socio-economic inequalities, politics of betrayal, revenge and hate speech 2) Kenya has made strides in actualizing issued based democracy through promotion of national parties anchored on ideologies, development of manifestos by various political parties, presidential debates by prospective candidates, undertaking civic voter education, conducting issue-based campaigns. 3) However, prevalence of misinformation, disinformation and propaganda, bribes, populism, poor governance and corruption, lack of political goodwill, seems to erode gains made in advancing issue-based politics. If Kenya promotes and natures a culture of issue-based politics then it will strengthen its democratic credentials.

Keywords: Issue-Based Politics, Underlying Issues, Progress, Barriers, Kenya

INTRODUCTION

Since gaining independence in 1963, Kenya has experienced mixed outcomes in the context of development and consolidation of democracy. Notably, Kenya embraced Westminster democracy with multi-party institutions at independence. The rise of Federalism popularly known as majimbo – as a system of governance in Kenya- was short lived. The ruling party-KANU – deconstructed the federal systems and made it hard for regional governance to function. It also ushered in a raft of changes that consolidated presidential power. Consequently, the amendments considerably shrank the democratic space and the state increasingly became intolerant of dissent (Kanyinga, 2014). As a result, a splinter group with critical views

resigned and formed Kenya People's Union in 1966. With a view of centralizing power unchallenged, the ruling party-in 1969- banned the opposition. The government attained unchecked supremacy. In 1982, Kenya became one party state following the constitutional changes in parliament. The status quo continued unchanged up to 1991 whereby robust pressure from pro-democratic citizens and international community forced the government to repeal section 2A of constitution that occasioned reverting back to multi-party state (Muluka, 2022). This resulted in the widening of space for political and civil freedom enjoyment. In general, it promoted democracy. However, the gains were not sufficiently consolidated on one hand due to the feeling that the status quo would be changed and have a ripple effect on the effective administration of the state's activities; on the other hand, multi-party politics was really a novel type of governance for the state and therefore it put out a lot of resources in a bid to understand the possibilities attached to such a setting as opposed to supporting it wholesomely. Hence; this democratic transition period was characterized with little transformation. The then government interfered with political activities of opposition parties. This was evidenced by opposition members being disallowed to operate in regions perceived to be government strongholds. Notably the opposition were denied permits to organize political related meetings (Kanyinga, 2014). Regrettably, a culture of political violence permeated Kenya political space. Notwithstanding the aforementioned setbacks, Kenya's democratization journey has been marked by progress evidenced by the adoption of multiparty politics, new constitution promulgation in 2010, and institutionalization of key reforms in government and civil space over the last three decades This formed a strong foundation for the entrenchment of forming a foundation for issue-based politics as envisioned in Kenya Vision 2030's Political Pillar that advocates for *"a democratic political system that is issued based, people-centered, result oriented and accountable to the public and viable political party systems guided by policy and ideological differences rather than region or ethnicity."*(GoK, 2007) A review of literature reveals that a little has done with respect to assessing the progress made and barriers in entrenching issue based politics. It is against this background that this paper is set out to discuss the underlying issues and triggers of political violence in Kenya, take stoke of progress made, and barriers in the advancement of issued-based politics.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was based on desktop research and personal insights to achieve its objectives. Findings presented in this study are a result of analysis of secondary data obtained from various sources which include policy documents, legal frameworks, journal articles, reports and relevant websites.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Triggers and underlying causes of election violence

Understanding the main triggers and underlying causes of political violence is key to finding long term solutions. This section discusses factors that have contributed to political violence in Kenya.

Multi-ethnic nature of Kenyan society

As country of diverse ethnic groups, Kenya's pluralist elections have been marked by strategic manipulations along ethnic lines. The multi-ethnic nature of Kenyan society presents a breeding ground for political polarization and mobilization by the political elite with an end goal of controlling political and economic resources. The end result of such mobilization in Kenya is ethnic related conflicts. 1992, 1997 and 2007 general elections were characterized by inter-ethnic related violence that resulted into massive loss of life and displacement of people. Therefore, highly polarized nation along ethnic lines offer a conducive climate for political violence to occur. From 1992, Politicians have always mobilized Kenyan voters on the basis of ethnicity paving way to the emergence of ethnic political kingpins (Elischer, 2013). It is noteworthy that majority of Kenyan political class understand the import of their ethnic orientation and manipulate

circumstances around them to either project themselves as victims or heroes for their communities. Politics of manipulation along ethnic lines bring the notion of a certain community is being targeted by the ruling elite and as such they need a strong political leader who can protect their interest. This then erodes the nationalist perspective of politics and reduces it to ethnic interests.

Historical Land Injustices

While it is undoubtedly true that election-related violence witnessed in 2007, 1997, and 1992 were politically motivated along ethnic lines as discussed above, but the concrete violent mobilizations were fundamentally underpinned by land-driven grievances. Land remains a critical element and a culturally complex matter in Kenya. The colonial administration used unscrupulous means of obtaining land and subjected the natives to reserves which ideally were unoccupied and not very lucrative areas within the republic. This caused tension among the natives due to permanent displacement and uncertainty on land usage. It became clearer post-independence that communal land issues were a long-term effect of the land subdivision. Some communities believed they were forced off their rightfully owned land and viewed the occupiers as an extension of colonialist. Therefore, unresolved historical injustices about land ownership, access, use and distribution are one of major contributors of political violence. In all the general elections since the introduction of multiparty politics, historical land injustice issue has been capitalized by political actors as a mobilization tool to attack other ethnic groups. Addressing the land question can play critical role in reducing the risk of political violence.

Political and Socio-economic inequalities

The significance of elections in Kenya is rooted in the fact that it is a key determinant of an ethnic group's share in economic and political resources of the country. High number of public servants particularly the leadership positions such as cabinet ministers, head of state parastatals, and head of diplomatic missions are drawn from ethnic membership of the sitting head of state at the expense of other ethnic groups. This has to a greater extent enhanced the practice of winner takes it all politics hence raising the cost of winning and losing elections. As a results, appeal for engaging in electoral malpractices and violence by any means necessary to win the elections has been heightened. Such political horizontal inequalities incentivize politicians to mobilize people on the basis of ethnicity. A case in point is the 2007/2008 post-election violence. Therefore, personalization of presidential power has been and continues to be a factor in facilitating political violence. The common perception that the elected president conveys rewards his or her ethnic group makes leaders enthusiastic to use violence to obtain and maintain power. The ethnic groups are much more affected by socio-economic horizontal inequalities which forms part of their daily experience. In situation where these inequalities are huge and sharp, there is a high probability that people will positively respond to mobilization efforts (Stewart, Brown, & Mancini, 2010)

Therefore, sharp and significant political and socio-economic horizontal inequalities in Kenyan society are directly associated with violent conflicts including political violence. This reinforced perceptions of marginalization and neglect among the communities who have not been part of political leadership of the country and hence the quest for political power is which sometimes turn violent is informed by need to promote equal distribution of both political and socio-economic goods among the Kenyan society.

Hate speech.

During electioneering period, politicians have used language to incite violence against other ethnic groups in the political divide. Violence attributed to hate speech has become synonymous with Kenyan elections. Every election since 2007 has been marked by inflammatory speech. Kenya witnessed the manipulation of political speech on the internet in the 2007, 2013, 2017 and 2022 elections. The 2007 provides an important case study given the role played by several local radio stations in facilitation of the spread of hate speech.

The propagation of hate speech has resulted deadly ethnic violence characterized by internal displacement and death of monumental proportions (Sugow & Rutenberg, 2021).

Progress made in entrenching Issue based politics in Kenya.

The following section takes stock of progress made in entrancing issue-based politics in Kenya towards enhancing democratic consolidation.

Shift from ethnic based campaigns to issue based campaigns

The use of ethnicity as a tool for mobilization of political support has been a common feature of Kenyan politics. The origin of voting in Kenyan along ethnic lines can be attributed to nature of some political parties as well as political ethnic kingpins that have shaped Kenyan politics. Most, if not all, of the main political parties that have competed for presidential elections have revolved around five (5) largest ethnic groups soliciting support other minor groups to shore up their numbers. On paper, a significant number of parties fashioned along certain ideological orientation to advocate for specific issues that are vital to any part of the body politic. However, reality on the ground have forced them to refocus on ethnic route with a soul aim of remaining politically relevant. Notably, there have been paradigm shift from ethnic based to issue-based campaigns in Kenyan politics. A case in point is the 2022 Kenyan elections. The change in political narrative in the in pre 2022 elections period was evident. Initially, it was the hustler versus dynasty narrative advanced by former Deputy President and which sort to tap into the country's groundswell of grievances and inequalities. After it came under serious denunciations for being polarizing, his team later reframed their narrative "bottom-up economic model" because they opined 'top-down' economic approach proved futile in addressing economic crisis as believed by some proponents of bottom-up approach (Karanja, 2022). The Azimio side also responded with a blueprint that emphasizes a reduction in the high cost of living, a social welfare programme targeting extremely poor families and fighting corruption. Coupled with political alliances that largely cut across communities that have historically been politically adversarial, the 2022, contest –to an extent- shifted away from one of ethnic identities and alliances towards issues.

Organization of presidential debates

Debates between and among candidates contending for election positions have not only become campaign tool but also platforms for promotion of issue-based politics. Worldwide, presidential debates which creates an impeccable opportunity for issue-based deliberations-have been a catchphrase for democratic elections that are democratic in nature. Kenya (in 2013, 2017 and 2022), Tunisia (in 2019) Egypt (in 2012) are only 3 out of 54 countries in Africa have organized and conducted presidential debates (Kwanja, 2022). In Kenya, presidential debates have been conducted by the Presidential Debate Secretariat. The foremost debate in 2013 epitomized a positive turn in Kenya electoral process. The campaigns characterized more sober and robust issue-based form of electoral contestation away from ethno-regional driven and personality politics. Even though, major contenders failed to participate in the televised presidential debates in 2017 & 2022, the debates covered issued based thematic areas. It is instructive to underscore that well design debates help prospective candidates to put forth their campaign agenda that is policy oriented to enable voters make informed decisions. In a robust electoral democratic system, actively engaged, well-versed citizens make rational choices and subsequently voice their opinions by means of voting and possibly other forms of participation (Leeper & Slothuus, 2018). In any political systems, debates are the cornerstone of democracy. They form core part of freedom of expression and right to information. The debates were crafted as an essential process that epitomized maturity of election campaigns in Kenya (Moss, & O'Hare, 2014).) The debated are deemed as high-level national events of crucial importance in integrating issued based politics and are living proof of a healthy democracy, characterized by transparent and accountable election process

where fair competition is practiced (Kawanja,2022).

Development of Party Manifestos by Political Parties

Article 91 of the Kenyan constitution 2010 enumerates fundamental requirements for parties. It stipulates that a political party shall have a national character as prescribed by an *Act of Parliament, abide by democratic principles of good governance and not be founded on a religious, linguistic, racial, ethnic, gender or regional basis or seek to engage in advocacy of hatred on any such basis among other issues*, whereas article 92 provide basis for legislation of political parties (GoK, 2010). The Political Parties Act, 2011 additionally seeks to imbed proper governance of political parties. Specifically, with regard to party documentations, Section 17 (1) (c) provides that: *'A political party shall maintain at its head office and at each of its county office in the prescribed form, an accurate and authentic record of... a copy of the policies and plans of the political party.'* Party manifestos are important tools for entrenching issue-based politics in Kenya. Manifestos has been constant features in Kenya's political landscape. Most political parties and coalitions in post-independent period, have published and made public their manifestos, outlining their plans to the electorate and their ideological orientations (Mzalendo Trust, 2020). In 2013, Both Coalition for Reforms and Democracy's (CORD) and Jubilee Alliance and developed manifestos to persuade their voters to vote for them. On one hand Jubilee Alliance's manifesto was anchored on three pillars of economy, unity and openness. while on the other hand, CORD paid much attention on implementation of the new constitution with a commitment to promotion of harmonious and united society found on social justice and democracy as well as equal enjoyment of socio-cultural economic and political by all citizens. In 2017, the Jubilee party advocated for transformation of lives, society and nation in its three pillars (Jubilee Party, 2017) while National Super Alliance Coalitions was driven by need to achieve a 6-point plan which included state building, nation building, governance transformation, and realization of socio-economic rights, job creation and poverty eradication, regional and international cooperation (NASA, 2017). Much recently in 2022, the Kenya Kwanza coalition develop plan with 5 core pillars which include creative economy, agriculture healthcare Micro, Small and Medium Enterprise (MSME) economy, digital superhighway as well as housing and settlement while Azimio-One Kenya Alliance manifesto focused on 10 key areas including sovereignty of the people manufacturing responsible leadership, education, water health, women security and agriculture.

Notably, manifestos are vital tools that political parties in Kenya have to contend due to some reasons. One, manifestos are portion of the broad campaign framework that provide an opportunity for parties to implement strategies in order to communicate the electorate. Even though, significant number of the voters are motivated by number of factors which include and are not limited to personalities, monetary gains and ethno-regional considerations when it comes to election choices, a few consider the promises outline in party manifestos. Two, political parties use manifestos to distinguish themselves from their competitors and thus gives them unique (Mzalendo Trust, 2020).

Civic and voter education

Voter education refers to rolling out of programs, dissemination of materials and information that seeks to develop capacity of voters on specific electoral process as well as general electoral process. Civic education, on the other hand refers to formal, non-formal, as wells as informal education which equips citizens with necessary skills set, knowledge, attitudes to enable play fundamental role in the society such as active participation in political the community, government affairs. Article 88(4) (g) of the Kenyan Constitution (2010) provide mandate to the Independent Electoral and Boundary Commission (IEBC) to carry out voter education (GoK, 2010). In addition, section 40 of the Elections Act, 2011 directs IEBC to institute mechanisms continuous provision of voter education and also prepare a voter education curriculum (GoK,2012). In this regard, commission has developed voter curriculum covering three modules which include legal and administrative framework in elections, electoral system and process and management of

election outcomes, disputes, violence, and security (IEBC, 2017). The curriculum enhances skills, knowledge and attitude of voters to enable understand their rights and responsibilities, political systems, election process, equip them with right set of skills for effective participation in electoral process, aid voters to conduct their right full role in developing and safeguarding democracy enhances growth of a more tolerant and mature political culture in a society, facilitates election of highly competent leaders, minimizes election malpractices and voter manipulation by individual seeking election positions (IEBC, 2022). In the run up to 2022 elections, the IEBC accredited 111 competent local and national organizations to conduct voter education on its behalf. The commission also identified and involved, local and national radio and TV stations and print media platforms for voter education across the country and in diaspora. This facilitated active engagement of media actors promoted spread of voter education messages. Other strategies for conducting voter education included use of caravans at grassroots level, bulk SMS, use of opinion leaders and influencers (IEBC, 2022). Specifically, two voter educators were engaged by the IEBC in each and every ward (EU,2022). Training of voters enable them to make informed decisions and hence promote issue-based politics. Capacity development of voters on meaningful ways of participation in elections, their rights and responsibilities is an important prerequisite for realizing fruitful democratic elections. (Sossion, 2022)

Barriers

However, despite the significant strides made in entrenching issue-based politics, Kenya is yet to realize its optimal potential. A litany of barriers has characterized the democratization journey towards building robust political system. The barriers are as deliberated below.

Prevalence of Misinformation, Disinformation and Propaganda.

Misinformation and disinformation are often used interchangeably but they are distinguished by one thing: intent. Misinformation is any untruthful information that is spread, notwithstanding the It is the dissemination of untruthful and inaccurate information in an inadvertent way. Disinformation is the deliberate sharing of inaccurate information with an intention to disgrace an organization or a person (Gebel, 2022). Propaganda, on the other hand, is systematic dissemination of biased/misleading information to influence public opinion or manipulate other people's beliefs, attitudes, or actions. The concern over the problem of misinformation, disinformation and propaganda during elections has been growing globally, with social media platforms becoming the main conveyance tools. Indeed, election process have been to a larger extent transformed by digital technologies on universal scale. Notably-in recent years-such risks to nonviolent political transitions have been more ubiquitous. This can be attributed to instrumentalization of social media platforms to fuel polarization among ethnic groups during voting period. With substantial rise of digital connectivity, political players are utilizing digital spaces to drive their political agenda. While use of technological platforms is very critical in dissemination of campaign message to reach wide range of audience due to high internet penetration, some political actors negatively use such platforms for misinformation and disinformation that has potential to incite violence. In equal measure, – democratic leaders, demagogues and dictators-have used social media platforms for controlling or influencing not only campaign narratives but also electoral results through complex disinformation campaigns(McKay, 2023) In Kenya, these tools were widely used in last four (4) general elections (in 2007, 2013, 2017 and 2022), providing new avenue for political discourse on one hand while at the same time being used to disseminate hate speech, provocation, and mobilization for violence intent (Mutahi, 2020).

Therefore, misinformation, disinformation and propaganda lead to erosion of democracy and consequently hinder growth of issue-based politics.

Bribes

Giving or receiving a bribe is an offence under the Elections Offences Act of 2011. The penalty for

committing the offence attracts an *imprisonment not exceeding six years or is a fine not exceeding Sh2 million, or both*. In addition, IEBC code of conduct gives it authority to offer a charge to any political party or politician who participates in any form of malpractice. Measures taken may include are not limited to denial entry of party or individuals to certain regions, organizing political meetings, having posters or billboards. The consequences of not complying with aforementioned orders may results into disqualification from participation for the current and subsequent elections or fine payment. While failure to comply with other sanctions may lead to the party being disqualified from future elections (Neil, 2022). However, despite existing of robust policy and legal framework to prevent or mitigate against the vice of bribes, offences have continued unabated. Prospective voters are drawn politicians who display opulence and are moneyed and therefore they are swayed to voter for candidates who are willing to offer them money and reject good candidates with strong ideological orientation. As a result, elections become driven by money as opposed to issue-based politics. The glamour of elective office generates tight competition between and among candidates with some investing substantial amount of financial resource during the coalition or parties' primaries with a view of securing a safe-seat party ticket hence promoting commercialization of politics. This act is unhealthy democracy and leads to deconsolidation of democratic gains. Of vital concern is reduction of vital opportunities to participatory dialogue or debate between the citizens and elected leaders on crucial policy issues by the transactional nature of politics (The Conversation, 2022).

Populism

Canovan (1999) defines populism as “*an appeal to ‘the people’ against both the established structure of power and the dominant ideas and values of the society*” Populism as argued by some scholars provides promise of rebirth of democracy, bring on board new policies and plays into the existing political system. While it is recognized that populist in power have then ability to politics of a nation more representative, they weaken accountability structures. They also erode the institutional checks and balances on executive authority essential for durable and mature democracy (Liddiard, 2019). Populists avers that existing nation's elites are extremely corrupt and selfish cartel who are not concerned with common good of the citizens and they do not have the interest of people at heart (Muriithi, 2023). In Kenya, some politicians use populism as a strategy to win votes but lack political good will to implement their promises once they gain power. This discourages growth of issued based politics where politicians deliver the campaign promises to citizens.

Poor Governance and corruption

Poor governance is one of the main obstacles to a country's progress economically, politically and socially. It causes economies to collapse, generates political instability, creates an unwarranted bad culture in society that normalize persistence of poor leadership and subsequently breeds ground for succession of corrupt and greedy politicians. Kenya is not an exception to this. Some leaders in public office use the undue publicity to position themselves politically to seek an elective seat and most times use their machinery to seek successful votes. Even though, there exist legal provision barring politicians with corruption cases and questionable integrity from running for or holding public offices, some of them exploits existing lacuna in law to seek political leadership positions. The act of claiming innocence until proven guilty in court of law offers a leeway for bad leaders to exhaust all appeals and hence do

not resign from office but seek reelection in elective posts (Kiplagat, 2021). This demonstrates elements of poor governance that sets bad precedence for entrenching culture of impunity where rule of law is not obeyed. In addition, citizens end up electing individuals who not satisfy legal, ethical and moral requirements for eligibility for election. This kills the spirit of issue-based politics which thrives on strong foundation of integrity and respect for rule of law.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In order for Kenya to strengthen its democratic credentials, it has to promote and nurture a culture of issue-based politics. The political parties should focus on issues affecting the society and not on money and ethnicity with aim of solving societal problems. On the basis of findings, this study recommends that government of Kenya should allocate sufficient funding to support country wide voter education initiative, the Presidential Debates Secretariat should organize free fair and balanced presidential debates acceptable to all prospective presidential candidates, and political parties should embrace full issue-based politics as a theory of change to consolidate democratic gains. The state should implement fully the provisions of chapter six of the constitution of Kenya 2010 on leadership and integrity. It is only through accountability that the confidence of the people of Kenya can be assured. Good governance practices and balanced approaches to social, political, economic and environmental issues will go a long way in ensuring peaceful co-existence and equitable sharing of scarce resources.

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