

CHAPTER 24

**HIGH-STAKES ETHNIC
POLITICS**

SUSANNE D. MUELLER

INTRODUCTION

THIS chapter examines the issue of ethnic politics: when it becomes important, why, and to what effect. The focus is on post-Independence Kenya, with reference to the colonial period and selected theoretical literature on ethnicity. I argue that ethnic politics is the by-product of historically weak institutions and political parties. When institutions are fragile and geography and ethnicity coincide, politicians generally woo their ethnic base with particularistic promises rather than policies. This is often self-reinforcing; the more winners and losers fall along ethnic lines, the greater the incentives for non-programmatic ethnic appeals. Accordingly, political trust weakens and ethnic divisions rise, sometimes inviting violence and reinforcing a vicious circle.

Ethnic politics in Kenya is traceable to three critical junctures: first, to colonialism, which largely confined Africans to ethnic enclaves and prohibited national associations; second, to Independence in 1963, when the question of who gets what, when, and how became more salient as ethnically designed regions and districts battled for scarce national resources; and third to the return of multi-party politics in 1991, when politicians turned electoral contests for the executive into do-or-die events. Each of these junctures reinforced the personalization and regionalization of politics along ethnic lines. The result was non-programmatic political parties unable to make credible policy commitments to their constituents (Keefer 2008). This accompanied and promoted other important tendencies: weak institutions with only nominal checks and balances, political parties lacking policies and ideologies, and a strong centralized executive with a great deal of power to reward and sanction. Hence, ethnic groups either saw the presidency as their preserve or felt it was their turn to take power (Wrong 2009).

Citizens frequently vote for individuals in the hope of personal gain and out of fear of other ethnic groups excluding them from political power and patronage, a phenomenon

I term “exclusionary ethnicity” (Mueller 2008). However, winning or losing the presidency is understood not simply as a personal gain or loss but as an ethnic one, with ethnic elites willing to use violence to preserve their power and patronage. In turn, this threatens democracy, with three of Kenya’s five multi-party elections resulting in mass violence targeted along ethnic lines (Mueller 2014a; Lynch 2014). Much of the literature seeking to explain this syndrome argues that ethnically directed political violence revolves around identity and land. I suggest instead that it is more about capturing power, fear of the other, exclusion, and the refusal to lose (Mueller 2008, 2011).

UNDERSTANDING ETHNICITY

In the 1960s and 1970s, scholars of African politics largely bypassed ethnicity, focusing on the state, the development of capitalism, and class. However, academics increasingly understood patronage and clientelism, including how those in power reward their own. A renewed interest in ethnicity ensued. Recent discussions of ethnicity, including on Kenya, agree on the following. Ethnicity is situational and malleable rather than primordial (Lynch 2011; Posner 2004; Hornsby 2012: 25). Citizens and politicians evoke clan, smaller, and larger ethnic identities depending on what is functional (Posner 2004). Ethnicity tends to become key during elections (Bates 1983; Posner 2007). Countries such as Kenya and Malawi, with large ethnic blocs which can engage in strategic alliances, increase the political saliency of ethnicity compared to states with many small ethnic groups like Tanzania and Zambia (Posner 2004).

Development has not decreased the significance of ethnicity as many once thought. Modernization theorists believed progress was unilineal (Rostow 1960), and would produce a bourgeoisie whose need for the rule of law and strong institutions would supersede ethnicity and other attachments. This did not happen in Kenya or elsewhere (Horowitz 1984; Bates 1983; Cheeseman 2015; wa Wamwere 2008). Instead, the salience of ethnic politics has increased, principally because it is functional (Eifert, Miguel, and Posner 2010; Bates 1983); elites have used it effectively to gain and retain political power (Mueller 2008, 2011).

Notwithstanding formal legal changes in the 1990s allowing for democratic politics and various efforts to make laws and institutions more independent of the executive, ethnic elites have worked informally to undermine these changes (LeBas 2016; Mueller 2011), as has occurred elsewhere (North 1994). While we have far less information on personal patronage, including the provision of individual jobs, loans, trade licenses, and school placement, more data now exist on the relationship between ethnicity and the distribution of public goods. Studies of certain sectors, including education, roads, and electricity, indicate that when co-ethnics have one of their own as president they tend to receive more public goods and when their leader leaves office they lose these gains (Burgess et al., 2013; De Luca et al., 2015; Kramon and Posner, 2015; Franck and Rainer, 2012; Harris and Posner, 2019). This risks turning politics into a winner-takes-all contest where defeat is unacceptable.

The reliance of elites on personal and ethnic patronage to gain support tends to be self-reinforcing, both weakening institutions and under certain circumstances inviting the use of violence to gain power. Historically, ethnic violence tends to beget ethnic violence (Keefer and Vlaicu, 2008; Keefer, 2007). Violence also increases the salience of ethnicity as it “confirms individuals’ worst fears,” leading them to “switch off other identities” and retreat into group safety (Sambanis and Shayo, 2013: 300). Nevertheless, we do not fully understand how ethnic hopes and fears are attenuated or instead become violent. Some argue that both presidential patronage and violence decrease with stronger and more independent institutions (Burgess et al., 2013; Acemoglu and Robinson, 2000). However, existing research is mixed, with no convincing answers about when such institutions arise, their effects, or if they actually attenuate “negative ethnicity” (wa Wamwere, 2008).

COLONIAL ROOTS AND LEGACIES

The Kenyan state was the product of colonial rule. With colonialism came new boundaries and laws confining most citizens to ethnic enclaves. Africans were forced to carry passes known as *kipande* and could not move easily out of their home areas. Migration occurred when settlers needed labor and when government alienated African land.

Colonialism created a new countrywide administrative system with a repressive provincial administration, a district focus, and controlled Local Native Councils (LNC) to stifle dissent. The incentive system with sanctions and rewards encouraged obedience to local chiefs appointed by the colonial government and British district administrators. Restrictions on freedom of movement and association (Mueller 1984) meant that Africans were forced into local political associations, with early attempts at forming national associations banned, thereby reinforcing ethnic politics (Mueller 1972).

When the Mau Mau Emergency was declared in 1952, the colonial government continued to ban national political parties until 1960 and permitted the formation of regional parties only in 1955. Kenyans therefore had little time to create countrywide associations. When they did, they had a regional rather than a national flavor, with local ethnic barons in charge, and were far less powerful than the provincial administration (Mueller 1984; Hornsby 2012: 19–92). The Kenya African National Union (KANU) mainly received support from the Kikuyu, Luo, Embu, Meru, and Kamba. The Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU) emerged from ethnic associations of smaller regional ethnic groups including the Kalenjin, the Maasai, the Somali, the Luhya, and Coastal communities, all of whom feared Kikuyu and Luo domination and wanted a federal system to protect themselves.

These cleavages have persisted to this day, as has the fear by groups in the Rift Valley and the Coast of losing control of “their” land and politics to Kikuyu migrants, many of whom have lived there for decades. This, in turn, set in motion a discourse on who really belongs where, something that conflicted with the “willing buyer, willing seller” land policies after independence (Lynch 2011) and migration.

Two constitutional conferences resulted in a regional system, known as *majimboism*, creating more ethnically devised administrative boundaries and divisions. The result further institutionalized tensions between local and national concerns. Some leaders quit political parties and created new non-programmatic ones to propel themselves into power, thereby reinforcing ethnic politics and personal patronage as a means to that end.

KANU won national elections held just a few months before independence. Voting patterns revealed a strong ethnic divide, with Kikuyus and Luos subsequently dominating the cabinet. KANU starved regional governments of funds, made sure the state retained control of key functions, and worked aggressively to dismantle the *majimbo* Constitution, undermining the potential for local ethnic self-governments emerging. Just one year after independence, KADU folded, but ethnic legacies and tensions remained.

INDEPENDENCE

The colonial legacy of weak non-programmatic ethnic parties persisted after Independence within factions of the one-party state, intensifying under multi-partyism, when ethnic groups feared losing presidential power and patronage. The feeling of marginalization stemming from a lack of power-sharing nationally exacerbated this situation. Kenya has over 40 ethnic groups, but to date only the Kikuyu and Kalenjin have captured the presidency.

Ethnicity and the one-party state

After independence in 1963, Kenya was first a *de facto* and subsequently a *de jure* one-party state until 1991. The only exception was under President Kenyatta (1963–1978), when former Vice-President Oginga Odinga formed an opposition party, the Kenya People's Union (KPU), in 1966. Kenyatta's response was to repress it, ban it in 1969, and detain its remaining MPs (Mueller 1972, 1984).

At independence, citizens as well as local party officials had enormous expectations. Kenyatta had numerous resources to distribute once the colonial government and settlers departed: ministerial, civil service, parastatal, and military appointments, jobs from the district level on down, land, government contracts, and numerous other perks. Apart from these big jobs, including ministerial, parastatal, and high-level civil-service appointments, ordinary citizens went to local party officials and MPs and party officials to headquarters with expectations of personal patronage. Yet preliminary evidence suggests a paucity of patronage at the grassroots level; the top-down nature of party politics made an extensive reward system unnecessary, with co-ethnic voting patterns often assumed, unlike machine politics in the United States (Kasara 2007; Mueller 1972: 143–144).

Many have accused President Kenyatta and presidents after him of favoring their co-ethnics in government appointments (Hornsby 2012; Kanyinga 2013; Nellis 1974; Simson 2019; Stubbs 2015). There is evidence of this, but it is far from complete or systematic (Hornsby 2012). While Kenyatta had a close inner core of Kikuyu advisors, the KANU government also consisted of regional political power brokers of different ethnicities who expected patronage and often got it. This included blocs like the “corner bar” group in the 1960s and the different factions of KANU A and B.

However, most MPs stayed inside KANU in part because government was highly centralized around a powerful president who could both give and take away, and did so using the carrot and stick (Mueller 1972). While the KPU began as a multi-ethnic party with MPs from different parts of the country and a more left-leaning party program, Kenyatta came down particularly hard on non-Luo MPs in an effort to turn the KPU into a Luo party and then disparaged it for being “tribalist” once that was achieved. As KANU officials reminded citizens in Nyanza, “Kenyatta has sugar, let’s go lick his hands” (Mueller 1984: 423).

Kenyatta consolidated power by increasing the number of ministers and assistant ministers and appointing backbenchers to parastatals, commissions, and other boards, which at one point amounted to two-thirds of all MPs (Hornsby 2012; Mueller 1972: 165). Evidence of ethnic politics and patronage led to expectations that power would remain in Kikuyu hands, and once Kenyatta was clearly ailing his allies tried to keep Vice-President Daniel arap Moi from becoming president. However, this was unsuccessful and Moi ruled Kenya, first as a one-party state from 1978–1991 and then as a multi-party system until 2002.

The Moi state proved to be far more repressive than Kenyatta’s, especially in its later years. Moi turned Kenya into a legal one-party state in 1982, increasing the power of the executive and provincial administration over other institutions (Mueller 2014b). Unlike Kenyatta, who had the resources to give without taking away, Moi had to take away to give to generate patronage in a more difficult economic climate (Mueller 2008). He did this by undermining Kikuyu hegemony and building Kalenjin privileges into the structure of the state. Accomplishing his goals required more repression and more of what one might call ethnic theft. Moi’s methods were to tax and make Kikuyu agricultural associations unprofitable, and to fill the civil service, parastatals, and the university with co-ethnics. This bred increasing opposition to his rule, necessitating further violence and generating more resentment (Mueller 2008). As Hornsby notes:

A view of politics as an ethnically driven competition for resources, a survival of the fittest where the prize was control of the resources of the state, was built into the country from independence. It was reinforced by almost every act of Kenyatta, Moi and Kibaki, each seeking to rule a fractious community of sub-nationalities by a combination of patronage, incorporation and reliance on their own ethnic community for their security. (Hornsby 2012: 9)

Multi-party ethnic politics

When both domestic and international pressure forced Moi to legalize multi-party competition and hold Kenya's first contested presidential election in 1992 his political control was threatened. He resorted to using political violence to retain power. A coalition of smaller ex-KADU ethnic groups including the Kalenjin, Maasai, Samburu, and Turkana supported his efforts. Moi himself was a Tugen, a sub-ethnic group of the Kalenjin, itself an ethno-linguistic identity that emerged under colonial rule. To reinforce and strengthen this coalition, Moi sought to build a new overarching identity under the acronym KAMASUTA, with the Kalenjin and himself at its head. Consistent with Posner's argument, this demonstrates how ethnic identities are malleable and political elites can reformulate them (Posner 2004).

Strategically, the larger Kikuyu, Luo, Kamba, Embu, Meru, and Luhya ethnic groups joined together to start a new party, the Forum for the Restoration of Democracy (FORD), which then splintered along personal, ethnic, and sub-ethnic lines. The resulting factions were FORD-Kenya, headed by Raila Odinga, son of Oginga Odinga, and FORD-Asili, headed by Kenneth Matiba, a prominent Kikuyu leader and businessman. Further dividing the opposition, Mwai Kibaki, another senior Kikuyu figure, launched the Democratic Party. Hence, opposition leaders did not unite to defeat Moi in the 1992 and 1997 multi-party elections.

The emerging multi-partyism failed to address the key issue: that political parties remained deeply personal, non-programmatic vehicles for ethnic barons bereft of credible policy commitments. They were so hollow that if a candidate did not get on a ticket in one party he just formed another, these were often termed "briefcase parties," as they did not even have offices, let alone policies, programs, or countrywide organizations. That said, the possibility that power and an ethnic transfer of resources could be up for grabs pushed Moi to do whatever was necessary to retain the presidency. This included using all the repressive instruments inherited from the colonial and early Independence period. He also introduced a new instrument to maintain power: ethnically targeted state and extra-state mass violence against Kikuyu and other up-country minority groups living in the Rift Valley. His aim was to reduce their votes and push them physically out of the Rift. To stay in power and for the Kalenjin to keep what they had gained, KANU had to get a majority, plus 25 percent of the vote in five provinces, something that worried him.

Ever shrewd and conscious of political ethnicity, Moi strategically posted Kalenjin members of the provincial administration to ethnically mixed areas so that officials would not interfere in violence directed at Kikuyu and others. Conversely, he placed non-co-ethnic administrators in other areas (Hassan 2017). Government commissions and human rights reports confirmed that the militia conducting the violence was state-sponsored and supported by the provincial administration (Government of Kenya 1992, 1999; HRW 1992).

However, the president did not rely on violence alone to maintain his dominance. Moi also created new districts and sub-units in non-co-ethnic swing areas to entice MPs to stay with KANU. With these administrative units came new jobs and resources,

thereby wedding the local MP to Moi and KANU and in turn, his constituents to both (Hassan 2016).

We know little about the Kalenjin militias that executed the electoral violence of 1992 and 1997, but many believe they were press-ganged. From the Kalenjin perspective, Kikuyu and others were outsiders who had taken Kalenjin land. Numerous analysts disagreed. Many Kikuyu had lived in the Rift since colonial times, and others had bought their land legally. Likewise, much of the “Kalenjin land,” which had originally belonged not to them but to the Maasai, was already in the hands of Kalenjin elites and not exclusively dominated by Kikuyu (Mueller 2008). Ethnic appeals also suggested that if Moi retained power and got rid of outsiders, Kalenjin would retrieve their land, a promise that never materialized.

In 2002, the opposition finally united around Mwai Kibaki, a Kikuyu politician, and defeated Uhuru Kenyatta (also a Kikuyu), who ran with Moi’s support. The anti-Moi sentiment proved highly effective in mobilizing the multi-ethnic opposition around Kibaki, including both Kikuyu and Luo, thereby defeating Kenyatta. As two Kikuyu were running against each other, the election was mostly peaceful.

When Moi was defeated, his adversaries told him to go back home and tend his cattle, while Kalenjin in ministries, the military, and corrupt banks lost power and jobs. The worst fears of Moi and the Kalenjin materialized: personal political losses turned into ethnic material losses. However, the alliance that put Kibaki in power soon began to fray as the Luo and Raila Odinga, who headed the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), complained of ethnic marginalization and broken pre-election promises. They felt that Kibaki’s “Mount Kenya Mafia” controlled the government and that the Kikuyu were its main beneficiaries.

By the 2007 presidential election, Raila Odinga and his Luo MPs had united with William Ruto, a Kalenjin, under the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM). In a hotly contested election, controversy over the process of vote-tallying triggered high-level organized and targeted ethnic violence. Kalenjin militia attacked Kikuyu once again in the North Rift, and the Kikuyu gang Mungiki retaliated mainly against Luos in Nakuru and Naivasha. In a repeat of the 1990s, government institutions failed to remain politically independent and restore confidence in the process. Few trusted the judiciary or the electoral commission, with both viewed as extensions of the executive. And parties, highly personalized and organizationally weak, succumbed to a strong provincial administration and ethnic militias.

The violence displaced targeted groups from ethnically mixed areas. In the North Rift this translated into rural ethnic homogenization, a 35 percent drop in Kikuyus re-registering to vote after the 2007/2008 violence, and a 35 percent change in voting patterns that consolidated Kalenjin power (Harris 2018). In short, violence worked. Furthermore, while voting along ethnic lines always has been a mainstay of politics in Kenya, the frequency of ethnic violence has intensified the salience of “exclusionary ethnicity” (Mueller 2008); individuals vote against non-co-ethnics who could exclude them from gaining control of the presidency and receiving critical public goods and private patronage, fearing both loss and retaliation from the ethnic other.

The ethnic violence of 2007/2008 in the North Rift was, on one hand, an elite Kalenjin blowback against Kikuyus whom they saw as having excluded them from power, jobs, and patronage after Kibaki's 2002 win. On the other hand, Kikuyu retaliatory violence was a "never again" response to Kalenjin ethnic cleansing of their co-ethnics in the North Rift following three bouts of electoral violence since the 1990s. Behind this were twin fears: the Kikuyu fear of another Kalenjin takeover undermining the economy and excluding them from its fruits; and the Kalenjin fear of having Kikuyu politicians and entrepreneurs overwhelm them in their "own" part of the country (Mueller 2011).

The 2013 election and the emergence of the so-called "alliance of the accused" (Lynch 2014) perversely united Uhuru Kenyatta, a Kikuyu, and William Ruto, a Kalenjin, against Raila Odinga. It was mostly a marriage of convenience, a defensive run to protect each other from the International Criminal Court (ICC) (Mueller 2014a). The ICC had charged both Kenyatta and Ruto with being the kingpins of the opposing militias and political thugs that targeted each side's co-ethnics in the Rift in 2007/2008. Yet, the coalition failed to resolve the underlying fears associated with ethnic politics. Even with the introduction of formal institutional changes including a 2010 devolved Constitution, a stronger judiciary, and new election rules, ethnic party politics and executive dominance have persisted and failed to reverse ethnic polarization, as a Northian analysis might predict (North 1994).

However, many of these same changes were less transformative than initially thought. Devolution appeared to be entrenching "decentralized despotism" (Mamdani 1996), increasing corruption, and further marginalizing ethnic minorities. The judiciary faced challenges to its independence and political battles over ethnic arithmetic. Furthermore, requiring presidential candidates to win a 50 percent plus one vote in half of the 47 counties risked turning the first round into a do-or-die political event.

Adding to these tendencies, the 2017 presidential election further deepened ethnic polarization. Characterized by challenges, refusals to lose, attacks on independent institutions, increasing repression, and frosty inter-ethnic relations, a vicious circle of ever-heightening ethnic vilification and distrust ensued. This continued until 2018, when President Uhuru Kenyatta and the head of Kenya's opposition, Raila Odinga, came together in an unexpected "handshake." While the handshake has worked temporarily to diffuse underlying ethnic animosities and to bring other key politicians from Kenya's big five ethnic groups into the fold, it also could herald a reversion to a one-party state in all but name, and threaten democracy.

EVIDENCE OF ETHNIC PATRONAGE

Focusing on the operation of ethnic patronage in practice provides convincing evidence of its scale and dynamics. The data suggest that presidential co-ethnics received more higher-level ministerial, civil service, military, and parastatal appointments than non-co-ethnics in both the one-party state and multi-party eras (Kanyinga 2013). Presidential

appointments, including the choice of ambassadors, heads of regulatory boards, and various enterprises, also indicate that having a co-ethnic in power increases the number of co-ethnics in key portfolios.

The numbers are suggestive. In 1972, under President Jomo Kenyatta, Kikuyus, who constituted only 20 percent of the population, received 33 percent of the cabinet and held 17 percent of the assistant ministers, 45 percent of permanent secretaries, and 75 percent of deputies and district commissioners, as well as 50 percent of other posts (Nellis 1974: 15). These results are consistent with the figures from elsewhere in government and the private sector. This created a patron–client trickle-down effect to the home areas of these jobholders, with the provision of “contracts, jobs for clients, and preferential allocation of development funds” (Hornsby 2012: 257). The results led to “a self-reinforcing structure of privilege that was never fully dismantled,” and further fueled corruption (Hornsby 2012: 257). The initial appointments after Independence were, however, not solely the result of ethnic favoritism. They also stemmed from the Kikuyu having had more educational and other opportunities, given their proximity to the capital. Furthermore, a study of the civil service after Independence shows that education and merit criteria rather than ethnic bias largely explained who got these jobs (Simson 2019).

When Moi became president, he replaced Kikuyus with Kalenjin and appointed others from his KAMASUTA alliance to top posts in government, the university, security, banking, and parastatal sectors. This also occurred in foreign companies such as Lonrho, and in the private sector, where government pressured businesses to hire Kalenjin; in the military and the police there also was a large takeover by Kalenjin (Hornsby, 2012). Increased development funds to the KAMASUTA areas followed, as did a growing resentment of Kalenjin favoritism and Moi’s many unqualified appointees (Mueller 2008; Hornsby 2012). Nevertheless, “increasingly ethnic groups saw positions held by their kin as their property,” and viewed any sackings of them as “ethnically motivated attempts to finish their community at the national level” (Hornsby 2012: 555). This perception of politics as a zero-sum spoils game has endured and increased along with the use of ethnic violence to gain power (Mueller 2014b).

Allegations of ethnic favoritism continued under President Mwai Kibaki’s NARC coalition after Moi lost power in 2002. Kibaki won the 2007 election amidst allegations of rigging, followed by targeted ethnic violence. He appointed Odinga as prime minister in a power-sharing government to keep peace, but the opposition complained and still felt sidelined. Such feelings of marginalization among the Luo and other groups intensified after Uhuru Kenyatta defeated Odinga in 2013. At this point, Kikuyu candidates had won three competitive multi-party elections. Hence, the security, intelligence forces, and the top levels of government were full of co-ethnics. After 2002, Kibaki replaced most of Moi’s top Kalenjins and later, they no longer dominated in government, parastatals, business, or in the security sector (Hornsby 2012: 711–713).

The historic message is that losing presidential elections is ethnically costly in terms of power and resources. The past has proved resilient (Mueller 2014b). The stakes for holding on to presidential power for as long as possible and using violence to do so make both political and economic sense to those who control the state. The vicious circle

perpetuated by weak institutions, ethnic divisions, and presidential patronage exacerbates what Padró i Miquel calls “the politics of fear.” A president’s own ethnic group is more willing to tolerate his rule, mismanagement of the economy, and even corruption to avoid “political instability” and “falling under an equally inefficient and venal ruler that favors another group” (Padró i Miquel 2006: 3).

Poll results collected around the 2013 elections confirm such findings. Perceptions about how well or badly the government was doing, support or opposition vis-à-vis the International Criminal Court, and numerous other matters mostly fell along predictable ethnic lines and remained consistent during and after the pre- and post-election period (Ipsos Synovate 2012, 2013). Moreover, recent research supports the claim that public goods are actually distributed according to who is in power, at least in some sectors (Kramon and Posner 2013). A worldwide study of night-time light intensity, one indicator of prosperity, shows that political leaders’ ethnographic regions display 10 percent higher light intensity than those of non-co-ethnics (De Luca et al. 2015). Similar findings suggest ethnic favoritism in primary education and infant mortality (Franck and Rainer 2012). Co-ethnics of presidents and ministers of education receive more primary and secondary schooling and have higher completion rates than non-co-ethnics, with additional benefits accruing to a president’s home area sub-group (Kramon and Posner 2016).

This was also true for the provision of roads. A study of road building in Kenya from 1963–2011 reveals that presidential co-ethnics receive four times the length of paved roads compared to non-co-ethnics (Burgess et al. 2013). Furthermore, all studies, with the exception of Burgess et al., show no decrease in the ethnic favoritism of presidential co-ethnics when a country changes from a one-party to a multi-party system. This is significant because it shapes the extent to which an MP will support certain development projects at the regional or district level. A countrywide study of how MPs allocate constituency development funds demonstrates when MPs in ethnically monolithic constituencies will fund projects in opposition areas. In multi-ethnic constituencies, leaders support projects only in locales where their co-ethnics reside, and sometimes only in MPs’ home areas. The belief is that they can sway co-ethnics to vote for them but not non-co-ethnics (Harris and Posner 2019). These findings support Keefer and Khemani’s (2009) argument that MPs’ personal constituency development funds actually hinder the development of programmatic parties, and weaken political institutions. Furthermore, for a president coming from a smaller group such as Moi’s, the pressure to create spillover benefits for his broader KAMASUTA coalition may have increased under multi-partyism. Even with a competitive electoral system, the expectations and structures of political parties align with more top-down, personalized, and spoils politics with the executive and the administrative apparatus of the state still dominant.

Moreover, findings from Kenya are replicated elsewhere in Africa. In Malawi, MPs provide more boreholes to co-ethnics in geographically segregated areas, thereby supporting their own and punishing non co-ethnics (Ejdemyr, Kramon, and Robinson 2018). In Benin, constituents reward good performing MPs with votes only if they are co-ethnics, while punishing bad performers only if they are non-co-ethnics (Adida et al. 2017).

CONCLUSION

Weak non-programmatic political parties reinforce colonial legacies and encourage the perpetuation of ethnic politics. Co-ethnics of presidents and vice-presidents receive more public goods than do non-co-ethnics in certain sectors, leading to fears of losing, the need to capture power at all costs, and the use of targeted ethnic violence against others. Violence reinforces the ethnic fear paradigm. Voters cast their ballots to avoid exclusion from resources and to protect themselves. This, in turn, threatens the foundations of political democracy and independent institutions.

However, ethnic coalitions are also necessary to win elections (especially those that include one dominant ethnicity). Hence, Kenyan elites have been promiscuous in starting new parties and making temporary alliances with old ethnic enemies. Non co-ethnic coalition elites may benefit amidst increases in ethnic polarization. More research is necessary to determine the extent and nature of the distribution of public-sector goods by sector, and to learn more about personal patronage within and beyond core ethnic constituencies.

Additionally, the evidence of formal institutional reforms mitigating negative ethnicity is unconvincing. Increasing checks and balances may not succeed in producing political pluralism as parties, unable to make credible commitments, maintain indistinguishable policies and non-programmatic appeals. Scholars still know little about what breaks this pattern or leads to greater institutional autonomy. To date, rapid urbanization, a growing middle class, and rising inequalities in Kenya have reinforced rather than undermined ethnic politics. Furthermore, the possibility of Kenya going backwards to a less democratic past, rather than forwards, also exists.

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