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Two households, both alike in dignity

Why ethnic voting is denying Kenyans the chance of building a fairer society

Tomorrow Kenya will hold a series of elections, including for the president and parliament. But whether or not they prove to be free, fair and credible, Kenyans will still be denied the chance to build a mature and prosperous democracy. This is because the election will not be won by the candidates with the best ideas, but by those best able to mobilise voters from their own ethnic group and forge alliances with other ethnic chiefs. But when did ethnic voting begin and why is it so important to a majority of Kenyans?

To answer this we need to go back to pre-independence Kenya under British colonial rule. To mobilise support for independence, the Kenyan educated elite established political associations based on ethnic groupings. This was only natural, given the fact Kenyans had lived exclusively within their ethnic groups before the British Crown colony was established in 1920. In 1921, Kikuyus established the Young Kikuyu Association, while the Luo and Luhya established the Young Kavirondo Association. Other ethnic outfits followed and all of them had one goal: to kick out the British and reclaim the land taken by colonial settlers.

Despite being rooted in ethnicity, these associations were united in purpose. So much so, that when the British granted Kenya independence in 1963, the proposed president Oginga Odinga from the Luo ethnic group refused to take leadership until his comrade Jomo Kenyatta, a Kikuyu, was released from prison. Kenyatta had been jailed during a 1952 crackdown on Mau Mau freedom fighters. He was the unifying symbol in the fight for Kenyan independence.

Emergence of political parties

By 1960, two main political parties had emerged: the Kenya African National Union (KANU) and the Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU). The latter aimed to defend the interests of the KAMATUSA (Kalenjin, Maasai, Turkana and Samburu ethnic groups) against the dominance of the larger Luo and Kikuyu that comprised the majority of

KANU's membership. KANU wanted a centralised government while KADU favoured a devolved structure. The first elections in independent Kenya were held in 1963 with KADU losing to KANU. This was the first exercise in ethnic voting.

Kenyatta became president and Odinga his vice-president. Kenyatta convinced his rivals KADU to dissolve and join the government. Cabinet positions were dealt out to leaders of the various ethnic groups. KANU went on to rule for almost 40 more years. A bust-up with Kenyatta over land redistribution in 1966 led to Odinga being kicked out of government and ostracised until his death in 1994.

Ethnicity and its place in Kenyan politics

Tomorrow's election may be the last in which two independence era dynasties battle against each other for the presidency. But ethnic voting now and in future elections will impede Kenya's chances of making a clean break from its clientelist system. The assigning of cabinet position to leaders of the different ethnic groups means that each minister becomes a de facto custodian of his ethnic group's commercial and social welfare interests. The system is underpinned by a patriarchal culture in which male elders hold sway on all decisions in the household, clan and ethnic group as a whole. The chief is supposed to get a share of the national cake and distribute it to the men in his own ethnic group (since only men tend to be involved in community decision-making in Kenya). Proximity to the ethnic chief is hugely financially and politically rewarding, while those who dissent are viewed as traitors and ostracised by the entire community.

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Many of these leaders have used their positions to acquire enormous wealth and influence, offering community-wide support for the presidential candidate that offers their ethnic group the most political appointments, lucrative governments tenders and other perks. Usually around two thirds of public appointments are made within the president and vice-president's own communities, with the remaining third chosen from other compliant ethnic groups.

Whereas Western-style democracy as officially adopted by Kenya requires an electorate that is able to analyse election pledges and make informed choices, in practice blind loyalty to one's ethnic group means Kenya fails to live up to its democratic ideals. Ethnic groups whose leaders are in power benefit from roads, schools, electricity and other

rewards while those represented by the opposition are side-lined.

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Corruption is endemic and nepotism the order of the day. Those who crony up to their ethnic leaders can turn into overnight multi-millionaires and influential power brokers. Meritocracy is thrown out of the window when semi-illiterate but well-connected people lead key government agencies into failure. The knock-on effect is inequality and ethnic animosity.

In 1992, Kenya reverted from a de facto one party state to a multi-party democracy. Ethnic groups once again formed their own political parties with both Forum for Restoration of Democracy (FORD) Asili and the Democratic Party representing Kikuyu interests. The Luo created FORD-Kenya while smaller ethnic groups formed their own parties or coalesced around allied ethnic groups. Only when most of the larger ethnic groups deserted KANU and joined forces in 2002 to form their own party did Kenya escape KANU's 40 year grip. KANU's candidate Uhuru Kenyatta, son of the founding president, lost to Mwai Kibaki of the National Rainbow Coalition, also a Kikuyu.

Democracy's second coming

Kibaki's 2002 victory spelled a new era of hope in Kenyan politics. It kicked off with a high-profile anti-corruption campaign that involved ordinary citizens performing arrests on corrupt public officials. The promise of a new constitution that would decentralize power and redistribute wealth was now within reach. Citizens renewed their faith in public institutions, which were slowly becoming more meritocratic.

Once again though, the ethnic voting that had dislodged KANU would come to haunt this new Kenya. The 2007 elections saw the Kikuyu contest with the Luo for the presidential seat. Other ethnic groups rallied around one or the other. The aftermath saw ethnic violence on a scale never before witnessed in Kenya. Subsequent reconciliation was mostly cosmetic, but a new constitution in 2010 was a welcome development, ushering in a new system of devolved government that promised to distribute wealth and create prosperity for all.

The current campaign suffers from a pitiable lack of substance

Fears of a repeat of ethnic violence in the 2013 elections averted wide spread clashes, but this should not lead to complacence in the 2017 elections. Once again the Kenyatta and Odinga

families are virtually neck-and-neck in the race for the presidency, with pollsters giving Uhuru Kenyatta a slight lead. Kenyatta and Raila Odinga (son of Oginga Odinga, a founding father) have marshalled their Kikuyu and Luo ethnic groups to support them to the last man. Kenyatta of the Jubilee Party has chosen William Ruto from the Kalenjin group as his running mate, while Odinga of the National Super Alliance (NASA) has Kalonzo Musyoka from the Kamba as a potential vice-president. Musalia Mudavadi from the Luhya is heading NASA's national campaign. These ethnic groups make up the big five; Kikuyu 22%, Luhya 14%, Luo 13%, Kalenjin 12%, and Kamba 11% of Kenya's population. Smaller ethnic groups are seen as swing voters and are being wooed to support either formation.

The current campaign suffers from a pitiable lack of substance. There has been no serious discourse on issues affecting Kenyans, and Kenyatta snubbed a TV debate, despite being the sitting president. In campaign rallies both presidential candidates address crowds by their ethnic identity and appeal to their ethnic sensibilities. It's a game of numbers where issues-based politics is abhorred. This is why Kenya will not evolve into the nation envisioned at the start of the Second Republic in 2010, in which power and resources were meant to be shared more equitably.



Titus Kaloki
Nairobi

Titus Kaloki is a Programme Coordinator at the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung based in Kenya. He coordinates the political education programmes as well as work around securing land rights.