

# THE IMPACT OF ETHNIC GEOGRAPHY ESTABLISHED IN COLONIAL KENYA ON POLITICS POST-INDEPENDENCE

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*Many colonized nations post-independence struggle to maintain a political system representative of the majority of its people and instead consolidates power and resources to a select few. Kenya in particular has struggled with this, as they have been independent of British rule since 1963 yet have been unable to maintain an effective multi-party democratic system. Much of Kenya's political turmoil comes from tensions amongst various ethnic groups as they fight to obtain access to power and resources for their specific groups. These tensions between ethnic groups can be traced back to British colonial rule as Britain initially divided the region into distinct districts giving groups of people tribal identities based on their location. While this style of rule mostly benefited European settlers, some tribal groups would benefit more than others based on their location and access to resources. This paper will look at how this system which consolidated power to a select few, would have lasting effects in Kenyan politics and result in a struggle to maintain an effective multi-party democracy.*

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One style of colonial rule employed by empires was that of “indirect rule,” which was the policy that some powers would be delegated to certain indigenous groups within a colony while the imperial regime would maintain overall administrative control. This was often the case in Africa due to the vast regions empires would be colonizing that were full of interspersed groups of people. Such was the case in Kenya; when the British arrived, it appeared that these varied groups of people had no centralized society. To manage these vast areas of land and varied groups of people, British officials separated the colony into distinct districts. How they chose to separate these districts would set in motion a series of power struggles shaping Kenya's political landscape for multiple decades.

In 1963, the colony of Kenya was declared independent from British rule and would become its own nation through a democratic election. However, the country would

not see another multi-party election until 1992. Kenya's struggle to maintain an effective multi-party democratic system has many contributing factors; however, one of the driving forces is ethnic discrimination established by its imperial rulers decades earlier. Ethnicity-based issues became a key point in many political parties' campaigns as differing groups strived to achieve power. While the British benefited from this style of rule, it resulted in a political system that struggled to maintain an effective multi-party democracy.

When British authorities separated the colony of Kenya into distinct districts, they attributed ethnic identities to communities based on where they resided despite these groups being more varied.<sup>1</sup> In order to better manage the African population, authorities assigned tribal identities to these groups and segregated them to designated districts restricting their use of land outside those areas. Additionally, the British were able to hand off administrative responsibilities for these groups by anointing a tribal chief who would oversee the group's needs. This style of rule mainly benefited European settlers as it ensured the best land was available to them and helped manage African labour.<sup>2</sup> However, it created inequalities amongst the African population as resources were consolidated to certain regions allowing some tribes to become more integrated into the colonial economy while cutting off other tribes from agricultural land and labour.<sup>3</sup>

Not only did this ethnic geographical system secure land for Europeans, but it also acted as a method to keep nationalist factions from forming against the imperial regime as segregated groups were unable to organize across districts. However, there was an exception in 1919 with the rise of The East African Association (EAA). The EAA was a collection of multiple tribes in Kenya protesting against issues such as taxes and forced labour. By 1922, following riots led by the EAA, British authorities successfully arrested many of the group's leaders and officially disbanded the party altogether. Going forward, British authorities instead encouraged more tribal-based political parties to form, which would focus on tribal-specific issues in their region.<sup>4</sup> Kenya would not see a national party form again for two more decades. Tribal-based issues became a theme in Kenya's post-independence elections as political parties based their platforms on ethnic identity focusing on issues unique to specific groups, rather than the nation as a whole.<sup>5</sup> As a result, many small ethnic groups in Kenya lacked proper representation in government, while the larger groups maintained control of resources.

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Parsons, *Being Kikuyu in Meru: Challenging the Tribal Geography of Colonial Kenya* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 65.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 65-74.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Branch, *Kenya: Between Hope and Despair, 1963-2011* (Yale University Press, 2011), 4

<sup>4</sup> Rok Ajulu, *Politicised Ethnicity, Competitive Politics and Conflict in Kenya: A Historical Perspective* (2002), 255.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 256-257.

The issue of ethnicity in Kenya often resulted in violence which eventually erupted in a civil war, known as the Shifta War, in the years leading up to independence. The peoples of north-eastern Kenya bordering Somalia wanted to integrate with Somalia as they felt closer ties to them than the rest of Kenya. This was denied during colonial rule and again post-independence by the KANU (Kenya African National Union) government, led by Jomo Kenyatta. Despite the violence that had been occurring, Kenyatta was adamant about retaining that region. Therefore, he responded by establishing a forced settlement of northerners into designated villages, which allowed the government to police Shifta activity more easily.<sup>6</sup>

Though the Shifta War's core issue was ethnic identity, it was also a war for a redistribution of wealth, as the northern communities felt neglected during colonial rule and cut off from much of Kenya's economy.<sup>7</sup> The issue of redistribution of wealth was not unique to the northern communities; it would become a common theme in the political tension in Kenya and one that political parties would often use as their campaign platform during elections. However, the previous system under colonial rule restricted redistribution and instead benefited only a select few groups. Therefore, political parties struggled to develop a platform that would provide the type of systemic reform needed to overhaul that system. Instead, opposition parties formed based on ethnic groups marginalized by the current group in power. Thus, they would continue the system established by their colonial rulers, rather than dismantling it altogether.

These political dynamics were evident in the first election leading up to independence. A key issue during this election was the redistribution of land; an issue Kenyans had been fighting for since the colonial era. The government would need to decide how to distribute land that had become available after many settlers left the country. However, some settlers wanted to stay in Kenya, and therefore KANU needed to strike a balance between both interests. KANU was ultimately successful in this election as they became Kenya's first independent government, led by President Kenyatta. However, KANU represented the ethnic Kikuyu, the group most integrated in the colonial economy and had closer ties to British interests. Therefore, much of the newly available land went to Kikuyu instead of the broader Kenyan population as promised during the election.<sup>8</sup> So, while Kenya appeared united in some ways as they became independent from Great Britain, disillusionment came as struggles for equality, power, and especially land rights came to the forefront of politics.

This struggle between ethnic groups would continue throughout Kenyatta's presidency, which lasted until he died in 1978, and throughout the next presidency,

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<sup>6</sup> Branch, 25-35.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 1-24.

led by Daniel arap Moi. Moi was not elected; as the Vice President to Kenyatta, he took over the Presidency after Kenyatta's death. While a change of leadership can signify a substantial change in government, this would prove not to be the case with Moi. Instead, Moi wanted to see the influence of the Kikuyu people reduced and replaced with his ethnic group, Kalenjin. This "Kalenjinization"<sup>9</sup> of government was a gradual process often met with violent opposition. This was another example of the deep ethnic discrimination in the politics of Kenya, where one group sought to hold power over another.

Kenya re-introduced multi-party elections in 1991, with the next election held in 1992. This period would show marginalized ethnic groups try to form political parties in opposition to Moi's government. However, it seemed these parties could not build a strong enough national platform to bring the type of reform needed. This resulted in tension and fighting within these opposition parties, as was the case with one of the largest opposition parties, FORD (Forum for Restoration of Democracy). FORD split into two separate parties, ultimately costing them the election as Moi won the votes.<sup>10</sup>

The issues of ethno-centred politics, tension, violence and the struggle for a fair distribution of resources have been going on in Kenya for multiple decades. These were issues that plagued the country when it was under colonial rule and continued into independence. When we can see the roots of this system dating back to British colonial rule of the region, why has this continued to go on for so long without meaningful change? It would seem that Kenya's economic and governmental systems continue to benefit some groups over others rather than the entire nation as a whole. Therefore, once a particular group or individual obtains that power, it becomes less urgent to make those major reforms.

The political system that emerged post-independence has not been representative of the majority of people in the country and instead consolidates power to a select few. This type of system is not unique and in fact is one that emerges commonly in post-colonial states as that is how imperialism is established in colonies. However, the division of ethnic groups based on territory, along with the consolidation of power and resources to select groups in Kenya has played a key role in its political system, and its ineffectiveness at maintaining a multi-party democracy.

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<sup>9</sup> Godwin Rapando Murunga, *A Critical Look at Kenya's Non-Transition to Democracy* (Journal of Third World Studies, 2012), 96.

<sup>10</sup> Murunga, 96-98.

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