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OVERCOMING ETHNICALLY MOTIVATED POLL VIOLENCE IN KENYA

Executive summary

Violence expressly motivated by ethnic hatred and ethnic conflict is increasingly defining general elections in Kenya. This policy brief, which focusses on the period between 2007 and 2017, highlights the main issues that promote poll violence in the country. These include voting along ethnic lines, and the use of gangs by some politicians. Ethnic balancing that will give institutions a Kenyan face, addressing social media abuse, nurturing patriotism, and increased efforts to address gangs are some of the steps that the country can take to help overcome ethnically motivated poll violence in the future.

Background

Kenya is East Africa's economic giant, and the region's role model in terms of democracy. At the moment, many political parties in the country are affiliated with particular communities. These parties dominate certain areas, giving traction to descriptions such as 'strongholds'. While Kenya's position as the region's leading democracy remains, the country is failing when it comes to the handling of the general election.

Election related violence is one of the first things that comes to many peoples' minds every election cycle. The history of election related violence in Kenya can be traced back to 1991. That year, Jaramogi Oginga Odinga, a Luo community leader, announced the re-establishment of an opposition party in Kenya. The ruling party, Kenya African National Union (KANU), under the leadership of President Daniel Moi, a Kalenjin, feared losing political power. The Kalenjin people ordered Luos and non-Kalenjins to leave Rift Valley (where most Kalenjins live), or face consequences. Ethnic violence erupted. There were politically and ethnically motivated attacks and counter attacks. In the process, an estimated 1,500 were killed, and 300,000 displaced. KANU's 39-year reign ended in 2002. This happened when the opposition put their differences aside to form a coalition against the ruling party. This brief will focus on election related violence that has taken place since 2007.

On 27 December 2007, Mwai Kibaki was proclaimed winner of the general elections, and declared president. His opponent, Raila Odinga, rejected the results claiming that they had been rigged. This led to an outburst of violence from the Kalenjin and Luo towards the Kikuyu, and vice versa. 1,100 people were killed, and 600,000 people displaced from their homes as a result.

There was tension in the country following the 4 March 2013 general elections as people feared a repeat of the 2007 general election violence, but the country was peaceful. In 2017, 48 people including a 6-months-old baby were killed in the aftermath of elections.

Key findings on political violence in Kenya

Leighann Spencer (2017) argues that political violence in Kenya has generally been ethnicized, and aggravated by vigilantes and militias deployed by politicians seeking to gain support. She gave examples of Kalenjin warriors and Mungiki in the 2007 post-election violence. It was alleged that the Mungiki (an outlawed vigilante group) was funded by Uhuru Kenyatta while Kalenjin warriors (a militia group) were funded by William Ruto. A case into the responsibility of Kenyatta and Ruto for the 2007-2008 post-election violence was referred to the International Criminal Court (ICC). The case was adjourned at the request of the ICC chief prosecutor, citing insufficient evidence required for trial, and later withdrawn.

Research by the Human Rights Watch (2013) suggests that some political candidates employ gangs to silence their opponents including at rallies, and even frighten voters. This causes tension. Violence often results when gangs affiliated with two or more opposing parties confront each other. Some politicians are allied to gangs that end up causing violence and disruption in case they lose elections.

Stefan and Roxana (2012) conducted two surveys, one before, the other after the 2007 general elections. They observed that the chances of being a victim of political violence were high in areas with land conflicts, and where politically affiliated gangs operate.

Michael and Mwangi (2008) conducted a survey, and used a national probability sample to ascertain voting patterns in Kenya. They found that an individuals' ethnic origins drive voting patterns in the country. They noted even though Kenyans think of themselves as non-ethnic, their insecurities come up when they interact with others as they fear other people will organize themselves along ethnic lines. In this regard, ethnic bloc voting in Kenyans is a defensive measure, not an exclusive activity. Very few Kenyans vote in line with policy issues, they observed.

Esbensen, Deschenes, and Winfree (1999), conducted a multi-site survey, studying reasons why youth, both male and female, join gangs. They found that youth seek gang membership to meet their social needs such as money, protection, respect, and adventure. The risk factors for gang membership include alcohol and drug abuse, victimization, and negative life events.

Conclusion

Kenyans have been voting on ethnic grounds. Furthermore, gangs tend to emerge during the electioneering season. Some of these gangs are affiliated with politicians or their political parties. Other gangs represent different ethnic groups. Gangs spawn criminal behaviour and violence, and are generally used to frighten, and silence opponents, and/or disrupt civil order. Thousands of people have been killed, and thousands more injured or displaced because of ethnically motivated, gang-related poll violence in Kenya in the recent past.

Recommendations

Several measures could be considered to help Kenya overcome ethnically motivated election violence.

Addressing gangs. The police force, which is charged with ensuring civil order in the country, should be re-trained, to improve intelligence gathering and intelligence sharing about outlawed groups. Intelligence gathering will be improved by concerted efforts to bridge the gap between the police and citizens. The police should also be taught effective crowd management strategies.

As gangs spawn criminal behaviour and violence, measures should be taken to address the root causes of crime, violence, and gang membership. These include engaging youth in economically viable ventures to reduce youth unemployment and poverty, and equitable distribution of national and county resources.

Activists must pressure politicians and other individuals who use gangs and/or encourage gang violence for political mileage to stop doing so.

Nurturing patriotism. A sense of patriotism should be instilled in children as they grow. Children should also be taught to respect others irrespective of their origins. This may be through the implementation of a related syllabus.

Abuse of social media. Some individuals, including politicians and their online armies, and sympathizers, use social media platforms to insult others and spread negative ethnicity. Issues of hate speech and incitement should be taken seriously. Offenders should be arrested and charged.

Ethnic balancing. It is an open secret that many unqualified and undeserving people are employed simply because they belong to the 'correct' tribe. Tribalism and nepotism as bases for resource distribution creates hatred among people. One way to reduce ethnic conflict is to insist on ethnic balancing in institutions, and equitable resource distribution.

Sources

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