Violence and the Dynamics of Transition: State, Ethnicity and Governance in Kenya (Abstract)

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In: Africa Development, Vol. XXVI, No 1&2  
Publication: 2001  
The full article document has 37-54 pages

Although democracy made a historic leap forward in Africa in the last few years, many daunting challenges and obstacles are still threatening its consolidation. These impediments include, inter alia, violence and ethnic conflicts. Hence, ethnic conflicts and the encompassing civil wars are among Africa's most serious societal crises.

Since the 1990s, violence and conflict have become endemic in Africa. This fact is evident in the recent massacres in Rwanda, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Somalia and Algeria, among others. In Kenya, the government's unwillingness to expand the democratic space for political participation is being challenged by several pro-democracy movements through political actions and citizens' campaigns at various levels.

The wave of democratic political change appears to have led to the identification of democracy in terms of multi-party politics. This drive towards Western liberal democracy has engendered the polarisation of particularistic groupings, as parties crystallise, mostly on the basis of ethnic and regional interests rather than common ideology or political principles (Dayton 1995; Nzongola-Ntalaja 1997). This tendency does not augur well for the unity and stability of African States. Moreover, State policies of non-accommodation and recalcitrance provide strong push factors for ethnic conflict.

Issues concerning security, violence and ethnicity are very important in understanding the democratic governance of a nation. What is the new conception and content of the role and position of the State? It is against this background that this study addresses the problem of violence and democratic transition in Kenya. It argues that conflicts and violence cannot stimulate the much-sought-after democratic governance so vital for political pluralism.

Ethnic conflicts in Kenya appear to be the inevitable consequences of the unresolved political and economic contradiction behind an apparently partisan political system. This system seems to place a higher premium on ideological or sectional interests at the expense of national interests. The 'politics of the belly' syndrome appears to have been perfected by the Kenyan political elite.

Political conflicts generally radiate around the imperative of accumulation and the problem of legitimisation (Anyang-Nyongo 1993). This study shows the correlation between governance politics, ethnicity and violence in Kenya. There has been an upsurge in cases of conflict and violence in Kenya since the re-introduction of political pluralism in 1991. These have taken the form of student protests, labour unrest, ethnic violence, banditry and cattle rustling. Such violence has caused deaths, destruction of property, dislocation of populations and has added lawlessness to a state of insecurity.

Descriptors: Violence, Political Conflicts, Democracy, Ethnicity.
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