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Elections and Stability in East Africa: The Kenyan Case

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Abstract:

Inclusive politics in Africa developed dramatically in the 1990s and 2000s, with the number of African nations conducting democratic elections rising from 7% to 40%. In 2010, 18 African nations were classified as electoral democracies (Freedom house, 2010). In Africa during the last two decades, there has been a tendency toward more responsibility from political leaders, whose domestic credibility is primarily connected to and restricted to elections. However, the 2020 Freedom in the World report recorded the 14th year of worldwide decrease in democratic government and human rights observance, with Africa aiding in the decline. Currently, only seven African nations are rated in the free category (Freedom house, 2020), none of which are in East Africa which is the lowest figure since 1991. The level of public involvement has deteriorated as elections have gotten more common. While elections have increased political involvement in certain African countries, they have also been a major source of upheaval and economic losses. Unrest has progressed beyond intimidation and arrest of dissident leaders to open confrontations between citizens and security personnel. Elections in East Africa are growingly prone to violence, afflicted by intimidation and discrepancies, and appear to aggravate current sociopolitical conflicts without resulting in constructive political reform, enhanced policymaking efficiency, or civic engagement, despite their intensity and revered place in the performance of democracies. Recent elections in Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, Tanzania, Burundi, South Sudan, and Uganda have recently received harsh criticism. This paper will focus on the elections and stability in East Africa particularly in Kenya. It will examine the main causes of election disputes and instabilities in the area as well as the main drivers behind this poor political norm and the lessons learnt from post-election violence experienced in the country

Keywords: Elections, stability, east Africa, Kenya, politics

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

Countries in East Africa; Burundi, Rwanda and recently, Ethiopia, Uganda and more specifically Kenya have experienced stubborn conflicting electoral instability in almost every election period. This to some extent has emerged as post-election disputed cycles over the years. It is important to point out that in the period between 2020 and 2022, there have been already five elections and more are yet to come in 2022 that have shaped and profiled East Africa negatively for the next decade. Four key elections took place in East Africa in the year 2020: Burundi, Ethiopia, Tanzania and Somalia. Each of these countries faced its own unique set of political and security challenges. Even if all four of these nations managed to hold peaceful and decisive elections in 2020, the outcome each had an impact far beyond their domestic borders (Henry, 2017).

Ethiopia became the democratic hope of the region in 2018 but the country risked falling apart under escalating ethnic tensions (Lafargue, 2020). Meanwhile, the increasingly totalitarian rule of Tanzania by then the late John Magufuli had many crises on his re-election (Hutton, 2015). As for Burundi, anything was expected towards horrific violence that followed 2015. Burundi was not left out, when it was expected to elect its new president on May 20 with the ruler Pierre Nkurunziza insisting, he won't vie again, despite constitutional changes in 2018 that could have paved the way for him to remain in power until 2030 (Mwangi, 2017). Somalia held its first election in 50 years amidst the ongoing threat of al-Shabaab. Then, Ethiopia: Parliamentary election followed. Arguably, the Somalia election could also be the most important election across Africa in 2020, due to the international ramifications events Somalia have. The security and logistical challenges were severe, too, with the constant threat of militant al-Shabaab targeting government efforts to legitimize its power. One way or another, the above countries in East Africa made the most significant year's violent politics in the history of humanity giving the region a very bad reputation. It is of great importance to point that once again East Africa Community has found itself in the middle of political conflicts witnessed due to disputed elections that disrupt peaceful coexistence in the region (Celestin, 2018). Sometimes several experts warn that such post-election clashes, if not resolved early, could weaken the stability of the region.

Uganda, Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan have been experiencing internal conflicts tied to marginalization, regime changes and more specifically elections that have stretched over months and even years, threatening the stability of a region previously dominated by peace and tranquility. Prof Macharia Munene, a scholar in international relations, recently argued that the conflicts currently being experienced in the region are tied to succession politics and a fight for regime change in countries such as Uganda, where President Museveni has been at the helm for 35 years. President Yoweri Museveni was facing a growing rebellion to his re-election bid from the overstuffed young population. The politician Robert Kyagulanyi alias Bobi Wine accused Mr. Museveni of running down the country.

Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed is also facing an internal conflict within the semi-autonomous Tigray region an area that has conflicted with the Ahmed administration since 2018 when the prime minister took office (Lafargue, 2020). The conflict has already been imbibed in Sudan a country facing its conflicts being carried out by rebel forces that have for close to 17 years, accused the government in Khartoum, including that of toppled strongman, Omar al-Bashir. This is becoming just but a backdrop of election cycles in terms of regional changes and disturbances. It also appears to be a generational change, where the old politicians, attempt to cling to power and retain their leadership positions within their government.

The above elections and regional instabilities conflicts are not tied to the above few mentioned countries in East Africa alone. The causes of election instabilities in East Africa are complex, with many intertwining root causes, based on various factors such as; the period before the election which is marred by unhealthy campaigning, Poor politicking (Political alignment: different parties), the election process itself, Seems not to be free and fair, and the way it is conducted is not the formally constituted procedure When one party wins the election; the other parties don't accept the results, which brings Post-election, Resource Based Conflicts, Ethnic Based Conflicts and Poor Politics revolve around elections.

While scrutinizing the usefulness of the current understanding of disputed elections, there is a need for re-thinking of a comprehensive approach to East Africa politicians and politicking models. It is worth noting politics are more of historical backdrops dating back to the 1990s, East African elections and electoral processes, especially their nature and root causes have been the subject of intense debate.

1.2. Problem Statement

Most election winners in most East African countries regard their victory as genuine, notwithstanding the questionable conditions under which they were obtained. While every situation in each country is different, some patterns have emerged that put nations in danger of election violence. Elections do not inevitably cause violence. They can, however, increase political, ethnic, regional, and religious tensions and lead to bloodshed, especially if not carried out within an adequate institutional structure. Jobless youngsters tend to be particularly fruitful prey for political players intent on committing acts of violence. Elections held as part of peace treaties, when rapprochement among the parties has yet to take root, are more vulnerable to violence. In such cases, additional consideration must be given to how elections are organized and ordered in respect to other parts of the accord. Political regimes that are partially democratic and partly authoritarian have shown to be particularly prone to election violence because they lack the organizational structure needed to direct frustrations constructively. This is a significant source of worry in Africa, where, it has been pointed out that; about twenty-five, nations are classed as hybrid administrations, neither full democracies nor full autocracies.

1.3. Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this article is to explore the state of elections and stability in East African countries, particularly in Kenya, that seem to be periodically recurrent during the election period.

1.4. Research Question

The study answered the following question: What is the state of elections and stability in East Africa particularly in Kenya?

2. Literature Review

In 1963, Kenya claimed independence from British colonial rule. After December 27th 2007 (Otieno, 2007), it was the colonial power that initially pitted Luos against Kikuyus, and the sense of fierce tribal competition has never subsided since. Too many feel they have nothing left to lose, and the deprived are once again pitted against one another along tribal lines. It is the poor Kenyans who suffer most from death and destruction and they are also the majority of those who are easily swayed into engaging in violent mass action and end up acting violently.

The 'democracy prescription' for Kenya is not working. There is a need for a fresh diagnosis of the country's ailment of leadership and governance. For Example, Kenya went to the polls on December 27th 2007, but, in all likeliness, the elections were flawed, a fact that has since been confirmed by the Election Commission of Kenya (Stevenson, 2008). Based on this, Kenya is experiencing periodic battles, bloodshed and defiant anxiety. After all, democratic Kenya was supposed to be rising like the phoenix from Africa's charred debris of civil wars, corrupt governance and endless tyrannical regimes. For this country, everything was looking up before December 27th 2007. The economy was booming, and so was the stock market. Democracy was supposed to breed truth, justice, transparency and accountability but it now looks like splintered China on the rocks of ethnicity and power greed (Gettleman, 2008).

Kenya is set to hold a general election on 9 August 2022, which is expected to see changes for all elected positions within the government, including members of parliament, senators, and the presidency. The ruling Jubilee Party is also being pulled in different directions, with many members openly supporting candidates from other parties (OHCHR, 2008). Despite once being seen as a beacon of peace in Africa, during 1992, 1997, 2007, and 2017 general elections the country experienced violence that killed many people and displaced hundreds of thousands of its citizens (Mwangi, 2017). This violence primarily impacted multiethnic, low-income areas in Nairobi, Naivasha, Kisumu, and Mombasa (Stevenson, 2008). Beyond the direct victims of physical violence, there were also severe economic impacts, as VOA (2009) reported at the time, explaining that 'The mayhem has had a major impact on the country's economy which has been one of Africa's strongest. The subsequent general election in 2013 was relatively peaceful but ethnopolitical tensions continued to build up in most parts of the country, with Tana River County experiencing a series of massacres in late 2012 and early 2013 that killed over 170 people, wounded many more, and displaced tens of thousands (HRW, 2013). This situation laid the groundwork for violence following the 2017 general election as police and opposition supporters clashed violently, mainly in Nairobi and western Kenya, after the opposition leader Raila Odinga questioned the credibility of the results (NYT, 2017). Civil society organizations and international non-governmental organizations, such as Human Rights Watch, raised concerns over grave violations of human rights as protests by opposition supporters were met with excessive use of force by the police, leading to the loss of many lives (Juma, 2018). It is also notable that social media platforms such as Facebook, which young Kenyans use extensively, were used by politicians to drive political intolerance as they promoted polarizing rhetoric (The Conversation, 2017).

A similar pattern of violence as that exhibited in the lead-up to the 2007 elections has cropped up today. These tensions are generally related to ongoing campaigns over the Building Bridges Initiative (BBI), which is a draft bill calling for a constitutional referendum in June 2021 before the general election in August 2022.

3. Discussion of Findings

Following the evaluations of elections and stability in East Africa, it is noted that the past elections and instability is relevant when looking ahead to the 2022 election (Kitiabi, 2011). These include the following considerations: Public expectations of violence; there seems to be a general expectation of violence in 2022. Shifting political alliances and divisions. Traditional political rivals have been working to bridge their disagreements while established alliances have been breaking apart and threatening new ethnopolitical divisions. The exploitation of socioeconomic grievances; there are indications that 2022 may become a class-based contest along the lines of narratives about the 'haves and have nots,' (Al Jazeera, 2019).

Prevalence of misinformation; there is an established precedent for rumours and misinformation (including disinformation that malicious actors deliberately spread), Kenya is a perfect example of such a country due to the high degree of digital connectivity among its population, especially youth who live in the regions most affected by ethnopolitical tensions (Githinji, 2018). Major changes include introducing the positions of prime minister, two deputy prime ministers, and a leader of the official opposition while also expanding the legislature by adding 70 more parliamentary seats.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

4.1. Conclusion

This article has focused on the elections and stability in East Africa, particularly in Kenya. It has examined the main causes of election disputes and instabilities in the area as well as the main drivers behind this poor politics and the lessons learnt from post-election violence experienced in the country (Kitiabi, 2011). This article seeks to will illuminate discussions on the negative outcome after the disputed elections and electoral processes, political inclinations based on ethnicity and irresponsible use of the media. External powers, poor leadership and incitement which might be conflict triggers that light the touch paper, resulting in violent conflict by the name of election malpractice.

4.2. Recommendations

Preparing to ensure peace during the entire electoral process is an urgent matter. There is now an opportunity for a concerted effort by various actors to reduce the risk of violence in 2022 by putting in place peacebuilding initiatives at local levels. At the same time, stakeholders must still prepare for violent outcomes by building capacity and setting up mechanisms to support Kenyans in coping with violence if it does happen. Seizing this opportunity now requires rapid action by various actors to mobilize the necessary resources and start working as soon as possible.

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