Politics of ethnic alliances and ethno-regional parties: Which way for Kenya?

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Introduction

While much has been discussed about Kenyan political parties (Oyugi, 2003; Throup & Charles Hornsby, 1998; Widner, 1992; Barkan & Okumu, 1979) their leaders, lack of internal democracy, lack of ideologies and ethnic orientation, any genuine analysis of their history needs to take cognizance of the fact that Kenya has undergone many phases and transformation in terms of political party development. From a “non-party state” where Africans had no voice or representation, to individual representation at the regional (ethnic) level; from a multiparty democracy though short-lived, when the Kenya People’s Union (KPU) emerged in 1966, as a radical party ready to challenge the domination of KANU (Kenya African National Union), until it was banned in October 1969 (Oyugi, 2003; Widner, 1992, Barkan & Okumu, 1979). From this point, there was a slide back to a single party dictatorship where every Kenyan was expected to belong to one party (KANU), which only ended with the legalization of opposition parties in December 1991. This followed a wave of democratization that swept across the African continent during the 1990s (Lindberg, 2006; Diamond, 2006; Bratton & van de Walle, 1997). However, this change was only significant in that there were many parties allowed to compete but not to win. Freedom of the press was allowed but not to be effective, and the type of multiparty system was a semi-democratic one, in which party lines and ideological differences were difficult to draw due to defections or the pervasive “stomach philosophy” which induces legislative performance within the Kenyan parliament. The current political party scenario shows a significant growth of parties, which is a process, which began in the 1990s with the return of Kenya to a multiparty state as part of political transition in Kenya (Oyugi, 2003).

Political alliances and the shaping of ethno-regional parties

The wave of democratization in Africa (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997; Diamond, 1996) as elsewhere in the world (Huntington, 1991), took many different shapes and forms, and sometimes as in the case of Kenya, democratization resulted in the re-affirmation of ethnic identities, with political parties emerging along ethno-regional criteria rather than ideological ones. The recent developments in major political parties in Kenya are a pointer to the nature of political institutional development and its ethnic orientation, which is embedded in the national political system. While discussions on ethnicity have mainly revolved around personalities and their ethnic backgrounds, not much attention has been given to the draconian and retrogressive boundaries that either unjustly separate or unite numerous communities in Kenya against their will. These artificial enclaves are the outcomes of colonial and post-independence regime mechanization to divide and rule the people while removing them from prime land and maintaining the status quo of exploitation and primitive accumulation. While this can be a subject for a prolonged debate, the immediate relevance of the ethno-regional alliances currently taking shape, fits into the political party development discourse in Kenya (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), 2010; Barkan & Okumu, 1979), which has been appearing in the media of late. What is essential is to understand that the
political party system in Kenya has to evolve and what has been witnessed in the developments in Old Kenya African National Union (KANU) and New Kenya African National Union (New–KANU), Forum for Restoration of Democracy in Kenya (FORD Kenya), Forum for Restoration of Democracy-Asili (FORD-Asili), New Forum for Restoration of Democracy in Kenya (New FORD–Kenya), Forum for Restoration of Democracy in Kenya (FORD-People), National Alliance of Rainbow Coalition (NARC) and National Alliance of Rainbow Coalition Kenya (NARC-Kenya), Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) and Orange Democratic Movement Kenya (ODM-Kenya), ODM-Kenya and Wiper Democratic Party, United Republican Party (URP), United Democratic Movement (UDM), Party of National Unity (PNU) and its affiliates, and more recently the emergence of artificial constructs such as G7 and G42, are symptoms of an infection which had evaded diagnosis and now coming out while least expected. While this picture could be a bleak one due to uncertainties related to such eventualities, this development could be a blessing in disguise since it exposes an inherent flaw in the Kenyan political system.

The emergence of ethno-regional parties in Kenya should therefore be seen as an opportunity to unite people in a much broader way, in the context of failure by the post-independence parties to recruit their membership on ideology and development agenda platforms. It could also be interpreted as a continuation of the pluralism process in Kenya. Pluralism (Lijphart 1968) in its very nature is a concept that can be used in different ways. Nevertheless, from a political perspective, it is the acknowledgement of diversity, which is affirmed in the interests of citizens. For this reason, its applicability in the case of Kenya is appropriate for analyzing the democratic developments and political party politics in the country, and more so, in a situation whereby “negative ethnicity” (Yieke, 2010) seems to be the dominant rallying point during electioneering period, or in the context of the distribution of state resources. The term pluralism is also used to denote a theoretical standpoint on state and power, which to varying degrees, suggest that pluralism is an adequate model of how power is distributed in societies. In this regard, groups compete in a fair manner to access state power. Depressingly enough, the political competition in Kenya has been between the dominant forces against the citizenry, and with the advent of multiparty, it is between political parties that are individualistic, ethnic-oriented and disconnected with the citizenry they claim to represent, while at the same time using or whipping ethnic feelings for political expediency.

While few parties have managed to reach out beyond their registered offices, those that have gone out have always appealed for or reached out for tribal alliances, support and vote, so what difference would it make with ethno-regional parties in the context of inter-tribal/party alliances? First, let us try to understand what is meant by ethno-regional parties (Strmiska 2005, p.7; Bagaji, 2011). Ethno-regional parties can be conceived of as political parties whose electoral and legitimating potential is primarily based on identity mobilization of an ethno-territorial community of sub-national (sub-state) nature. However, ethnic and territorial aspects may assume different relevance within the different approaches to
understanding of ethno-regional parties. Regional parties are not necessarily ethnic parties and vice versa, so they could also be defined as formations with region-based electorate and mobilization resources, or as formations representing sub-national (regional) interest within communities exercising party functions to the full extent in a regionally defined operating space. Ethno-regional (ethno-regionalist) parties may thus be defined as some sort of regional (regionalist) parties. While the current parties have not come out clearly on the nature of their ethnic mobilization, what has been witnessed are tribal voting patterns; power-sharing; dishing out of public positions/jobs and the allocation of public resources with ethnic considerations. Clearly, many political parties have on many occasions appealed to a particular ethnic group to defend “their man in State House” or reached out for ethnic leaders to capture regional support. Nonetheless, this has never translated into the realization of the interests of a particular region per se, except for the GEMA and to some extent KAMATUSA, but even in these cases, there have been complaints that things have been done in their name, while the beneficiaries are a few individuals from the assumed beneficiary ethnic groups.

Political parties are ideologically bankrupt

According to Türsan (1998) (an expert in ethnic politics and political parties), ethno-regional (or ethno-regionalist) parties are characterized by their nationalism based on ethnic differentiation (or on an exclusive ethnic identity) and territorial claims within existing states, and can be defined as “ethnic entrepreneurs”. In the Kenyan cases, none of the political parties even though informed by ethnic considerations in their conduct, have used nationalism in their ethnic differentiation, nor made territorial claims (except for the recent initiatives by the Mombasa Republican Council (MRC). Nevertheless, ethnic entrepreneurship has been mainly used to ascend to position of power, or to insulate one’s position in cases of wrongdoing. The logic of expansion and after all, of mere reproduction of legitimating and mobilization potential of political parties, requires that a more or less diversified message gets across to the target population and this rule equally applies to ethno-regional formations. This is what KANU preached during the Nyayo era – “peace love and unity” (Shapiro & Opondo, 2012). Unfortunately, that did not resonate with the reality of ethnic clash victims in various parts of the country. Forum for Restoration of Democracy in Kenya (FORD Kenya), Forum for Restoration of Democracy-Asili (FORD-Asili), New Forum for Restoration of Democracy in Kenya (New FORD–Kenya), Forum for Restoration of Democracy in Kenya (FORD-People), Democratic Party (DP), Safina, Wiper Democratic Party, URP, UDM, PNU and its splinter groups or even National Rainbow Coalition (NARC), National Rainbow Coalition-Kenya (NARC-Kenya) and Kenya African Democratic Union (KANU) in their current form, but also such alliances as G7 or G42 are yet to exhibit characteristics of reaching out to a cross-section of ethnic groups based on issues where the platform of ethno-regional parties involves different ideological moments and not a focus on blocking one candidate from ascending to the presidency. If the alliance as issue-based and focus on what really affects the ordinary masses in the
respective ethnic regions as clearly outline in agenda four of the national accord, these formations could get some legitimacy through representation as well as formalization. This should be done without the need of any direct link between the issue of self-government and territorial (as is the case with Mombasa Republican party) and political reorganization.

Ethnicity is here to stay

The launching of leadership visions by various presidential candidates in Kenya could be a good precedent if followed by political parties in stating their ideological positions, even if they are ethnically oriented. The issue of ideological orientation of ethno-regional parties can assume greater importance only in cases of apparent pluralism in the political representation of nation-forming movements. More so it is likely where the different political groups or leaders begin to consciously identify themselves as radical or moderate both in terms of their approach towards the claim for self-government or independence, and of socio-economic and political criteria (with the latter being the most relevant in the case of Kenya). Moreover, they should not have federalist and separatist elements in them. This view is not necessarily a proposition for ethno-regional parties as such; the Kenyan reality informs us that ethnicity is here to stay. In this case, Kenyans should find better ways of dealing with it, making use of its positive sides, accepting that ethnic groups can live and work together even at political party level.

Economic and political marginalization of some regions in Kenya since independence is not ethnic-specific but rather cuts across many communities. Issues affecting North-Eastern province are not that different from Coast province, Ukambani area, North Rift and Luo -Nyanza, or even poverty that can still be found in some parts of Central and Rift valley provinces even though they two regions have had unlimited access to state power and resources since independence. But even in a scenario where Kenyan could have ethno-regional political parties all parties and/or quasi-party political movements, ethno-regional parties will not operate in a vacuum. Instead, they can form part of an institutionalized arrangement where they interact with other operational units of the establishment democratic system. Their activities could be part of or constitute the functioning of the respective party and political arrangements, and contribute to the formation and reproduction of prevailing interaction patterns, which are typical of these arrangements under well-established political systems. James Madison (the fourth President of USA) who was among the earliest to argue for pluralism feared that factionalism (also see Hochschild, 2003) would lead to in fighting in the new American republic. To avoid factionalism, it is best to allow many competing factions to prevent any one dominating the political system. Therefore, maintaining the current plural nature of Kenyan politics should be a core concern for those who want Kenyans to have a clean break from the past. The diversity in Kenya is a source of wealth not yet tapped. This diversity can be harnessed to take the nation a step further in its developmental path. The question is whether Kenyans accept their diversity or not? Or if they are willing to do away with such myths about
who owns Kenya (Kenya ina wenyewe demagoguery) or have they accepted the bitter reality that Kenya belongs to all who belong in it?

Where is the Kenyan citizenry in all this?

The recent and current developments in the political mobilization and participation vis-à-vis representative politics in Kenya are revelations, which are very critical for proper diagnosis of what ails Kenya as a country as far as political organizing is concerned. It is also useful for seeking appropriate prescriptions that could direct efforts towards institutional re-engineering and mental shift in the way Kenyans perceive relate with their leaders and hold them accountable. With decades of missed opportunities, disappointments and steep increase in the gap between the rich (the political elite and middle class) and the poor (who are the majority), the Kenyan voters are getting wiser by the day even though through painful socio-economic and political experiences that are occasioned by acts of political expediency, self-preservation and personal aggrandizement by the political elite. The impact of the recent mental shift in the Kenyan voters can be observed in the number of previous parliamentarians who lost their seats despite the huge sums they dished out to influence the voters. The forth coming general election which is linked to a new constitutional dispensation and devolution of the political system and sources will therefore see an enormous increase in the voter bribery price, but even with such large sums, winning an elective position will still not be guaranteed. This shift will therefore force the Kenyan political elite to re-strategize or re-invent themselves in order to attract voters through means other than money and state resources as part of the everyday political corruption and tools for manipulation in Kenya (Ong’ayo, 2005). The post-election violence in Kenya, which was the result of historical injustices (Ong’ayo, 2008a), and entrenched interests and culture of impunity has also revealed the mythical Kenyan politician who can easily sacrifice his/her community at the altar of political expediency for self-interest and insatiable egos. The ordinary people on both sides were the major losers. They now realize that they killed each other yet they shared the same poor conditions entrenched by the interest of the same persons they killed to defend their interests and ambitions. It is the ordinary person that still languishing in the camps for the Internally Displaced across the country (Kamungi, 2013; UN Human Rights Committee, 2012; OHCHR, 2012). In the face of such traumatic experiences such as the post-election violence in 2007 (Ong’ayo, 2008a) and failure of the government to address the underlying factors as observed in power-sharing arrangement (Ong’ayo, 2008b) and Agenda Four of the Kenya National Dialogue and Reconciliation Accord, majority of Kenyans are slowly beginning to realize that the old order is not for their own good, but for a few local capitalists and the political elite whose interests are served by the status-quo of weak state institutions, unaccountable leadership and impunity.

Despite these positive signs, the Kenyan citizenry is not yet out of the woods. As noted by Makau Mutua in a recent opinion article in the Daily Nation (Saturday, March 3 2012), the three “Kenyan traitors” are
Kenyans themselves who have allowed themselves to be enslaved by the Kenyan political class, the educated tribal chauvinist and the media in Kenya. The three traitors have a mutual convergence in which the act or omission by either party reinforces the dynamics that shape their relationship. In such a constellation of unintended consequence of the convergence of interest and submissiveness, the desired change in Kenya will only take place when the citizenry consciously refuses to give up their “agency” to the Kenyan political class and the “middle class” that derives their opulent lifestyle from the status quo in Nairobi. Whether the time for politics of ethnic alliances and ethno-regional parties has come, or the Kenyan citizenry has come off age to refuse slavery conditions under the Kenyan political elite and educated tribal chauvinist, the 2012 general elections will offer an interesting political litmus test for the new constitutional dispensation and path to democratization in Kenya.

References


