

ABSTRACT

STATE, MULTI-PARTY ELECTIONS AND ETHNIC VIOLENCE IN KENYA

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Kenya has undergone three cycles of electoral violence since the resurgence of multi-party elections in 1992 that have raised serious questions not only as to the consolidation of the democratization process, but also whether the disintegration of the Kenyan state was more likely than before. The periodic violence in Kenya has been engendered by a complex interplay of multiple factors, principally the centralized nature of the Kenyan state, winner-take-all electoral system, and ethnicity.

The orthodoxy on ethnic conflicts in Africa has tended to simplify what is otherwise a complex phenomenon more so when the different ethnic identities are perceived as the real issue as well as the notion that to be "ethnic" is necessarily conflictual. The point of departure in this paper is that ethnicity *per se* is not the problem, and, indeed, it can be better understood and managed by embracing a paradigm shift towards restructuring fundamentally the post-colonial state as well as reforming the electoral systems in the continent.

The central argument in this paper is that ethnicity acquires potency during multi-party elections when groups compete to secure control of the highly centralized Kenyan state under an electoral system that dangerously raises political stakes in a zero-sum way, and threatens to deny a significant part of the population from accessing public resources and opportunities for "development." Therefore, electoral violence is perceived, sometimes mistakenly, by both winners and losers as legitimate means to fight for their entitlement and to deal with the threat of political exclusion.

Arising from this analysis is a conclusion that the future of democracy in Kenya lies not only in the restructuring the Kenyan state by abolishing the "imperial presidency" and devolution of political power and authority away from Nairobi in order to reassure major ethnic groups of their stake in government. The initiative must also be accompanied by a reform in the electoral system in an ingenious manner in order to minimize the "tyranny of the majority," however defined, and bearing the ethnicised context in mind.