THE INFLUENCE OF ETHNICITY ON PUBLIC POLICY: THROUGH THE LENS OF POLITICAL PARTY FORMULATION IN KENYA

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the way through which ethnicity has affected the policy in Kenya by through the formation of political parties. It makes the argument that political parties are vehicles of ethnic interests organizing communal blocks more than expressing ideological programs, which entrenches ethnic patronage into state structures and policy making. Based on a secondary analysis of the available empirical and theoretical literature on ethnicity, party politics, and public policy in Kenya and Sub Saharan Africa, the paper connects the formation of ethnic parties to fragmented policy preferences, distorted distribution of the public good, and macroeconomic inefficiencies. Current researches on ethnic favoritism in appointments and resource allocation, consequences of devolution, coalition politics following the 2010 Constitution are incorporated in showing how individual policies and sectors such education, infrastructure and county level expenditure have been affected by ethnically organized party competition. The paper concludes that an inclusive development and national cohesion should entail institutional reforms that diminish the ethnic stakes of capture of the state as well as a transformation in the party competition, on the basis of ethnic patronage, towards programmatic politics and issue-based politics.

KEYWORDS: Ethnicity, Political party formation, Ethnic vehicles, Ethnic patronage, Public policy.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of ethnicity and such public policy is one of the most acute concerns of governance in the twenty-first century that serves as the main prism according to which the political life

and distribution of state resources are structured in most of the developing countries (Posner, 2010). Ethnicity has far-reaching impacts on the development of political parties by making them to be ethnic vehicles-political alliances of communal elites meant to win the state besides allocating its spoils to its respective home bases (Ilorah, 2009). Such an overlap of identity and politics fundamentally changes the process of the formation of the policy in the country, diverting the priorities of the national welfare to the restricted and group interests (Cheeseman, 2008). The political chronicle of Sub-Saharan Africa can be characterized as a growth tragedy whereby the possibility of the rapid growth has been undermined by the entrenched ethnic differences (Alesina et al., 2003; Easterly & Levine, 1997). This is not the case in Kenya, a country where ethnolinguistic differences are very high, political competition is rarely a result of ideological differences. Rather, it is defined by a tactical fight over patronage, in which the establishment of political parties is a way through which the ethnic groups come and claim their portion of the national cake (Kramon & Posner, 2016; Mueller & AfricaSntudies, n.d.). Such an environment leads to a zero-sum political culture of high preference heterogeneity, where they disagree on the priorities to the public policy, especially where there is high wealth difference between the groups (Lieberman & McClendon, 2013). Additionally, to sustain power in an ethnic coalition, rulers tend to pursue growth-stifling policies i.e. distorted exchange rates or high government deficits, which will give their supporters immediate rents at the national cost. The resultant impact is that, in many instances, the principle of the impartiality of economic agents is compromised by the public policy that will result in the uneven distribution of infrastructure, education, and health in terms of communal belonging (Kimenyi, 2006). The main objective of the analysis is to determine the extent in which the ethnic establishments of the formation of political parties in Kenya determine the quality and fairness of its societal policy. It aims at investigating how ethnic polarization prevents consensus among the people on growth enhancing public goods, and how it promotes an institutional culture of patronage and institutional corruption (Cheeseman et al., 2016; Young, 1998). To do this, the paper is organized in the following way: first, the formation of ethnic coalitions and construction of parties as ideological platforms are analyzed; second, the building of the policy agenda that citizens are asking of their government based on the ethnical identity is described; third, the idea that ethnically divided political systems tend to under-deliver the necessary infrastructure is presented; and the last, the assessment of the socio-economic outcomes and the growth tragedy caused by ethnic bias and political instability is provided.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a secondary analysis design, relying entirely on existing scholarly literature, policy analyses, and empirical studies on ethnicity, political parties, and public policy in Kenya and comparable African contexts. The analysis is therefore interpretive and synthetic rather than based on original fieldwork; its contribution lies in systematically connecting dispersed, often sector-specific findings to a coherent account of how ethnic party formation structures public policy.

Architecture of Identity -Political Party Formulation in Kenya

Parties as Ethnic Vehicles and the Group Heuristic

Political parties in an established democracy usually coalesce around opposing ideological visions- social welfare and market liberalism. The process of party formulation, however, in Kenya is motivated by what scholars explain as the so-called ethnical vehicle model. The parties are usually shells or necessary requirements of law that the ethnic kingpins use to structure their communal foundation (Posner, 2010; Young, 1998). This is motivated by the group heuristic: a mental shortcut which assumes that the voters of the particular ethnic group will be more trustworthy in providing the resources to the particular region (Lieberman and McClendon, 2012). As a result, the rise of parties such as the Jubilee Party, ODM, or UDA in the history of Kenya does not revolve around a policy platform but the politics of numbers (Cheeseman et al., 2016). These parties are ethnic coalitions that are aimed at getting to 50 percent plus one effectively forming a majority of minorities to get hold of the state.

Strategic Takeover of the State and the National Cake

The main reason why parties in Kenya were formed is the takeover of the executive, which dominates the sharing of the national cake. According to Ilorah (2009), the leadership in most states in Africa considers the state as a tool of ethnic discrimination and favoritism. When one of the parties is developed along ethnic lines, the policy platform of a party is implicitly perceived by its followers as a promise of patronage and preferential access to public goods (Mueller, 2011). This creates a zero-sum politics solution. Since the party is also identified with the ethnicity, the defeat of an election is not only a shift in the course of ideologies but is understood as a complete absence of the participation in state-led development over a period of five years. This winner-takes-all system, combined with the centralization of the Kenyan presidency (up to and even after the 2010 Constitution), makes the formation of partying the important mobilization of ethnic groups (Cheeseman, 2008; Kimenyi, 2006).

The Effect on the Public Policy Preference Diversity and Distortion

Preference Diversity and the Consensus Problem.

Another critical manner in which ethnicity has impacted on the policy of the populace is preference diversity. Lieberman and McClendon (2012) reveal that in multiracial societies, there is usually no agreement among the relevant parties on which common good is to be given priority. For instance, a party representing a pastoralist community might give livestock insurance and water infrastructure higher priorities whereas a party representing an agrarian community might give higher priority to fertilizers subsidies and rural roads (Kimenyi, 2006). The resulting politics policy is usually disjointed when the political parties are formed based on these narrow ethnic identities. Unlike a unified national development strategy, it is a mosaic of deals with different ethnic coalitionists (Alesina et al., 2003; Cheeseman et al., 2016).

Transgression of the principle of anonymity of Economic Agents

The impartiality of economic agents is a classic feature of a good public policy, meaning that the law, as well as the market, is expected to be indifferent of who you are. Nevertheless, Ilorah (2009) observes that party politics that is based on ethnicity results directly into a lack of respect to this principle. Civil service appointments often prioritize ethnic loyalty and political allegiance over merit, undermining bureaucratic efficiency and policy implementation (Murunga & Nasong'o, 2007). Similarly, public procurement processes frequently devolve into ethnic "tender-preneurship," where contracts are awarded to financiers and allies of the ruling ethnic coalition rather than through competitive, transparent mechanisms (Kimeu, 2014).

The "Growth Tragedy": Distortion of Policies and Under-provision

The ultimate impact of this ethnic influence is what Easterly and Levine (1997) term as a "growth tragedy", which affects Africa. They show that under-provision of public goods comes as a result of high ethnic fragmentation channeled through political competition. Since the different groups cannot agree with the location or nature of the infrastructure, many projects are simply stalled or concentrated in particular parts of the country that would be considered as politically correct (Alesina et al., 2003; Kramon & Posner, 2016). Macroeconomic instability further emerges as ruling parties engage in excessive government expenditure to meet immediate needs of an ethnic constituencies, contributing to fiscal deficits and rising public debt, as observed in multiple phases of Kenya's economic history

(Ndulu & O'Connell, 1999). Market distortions including policies made by the ruling elites such as protectionist trade policies and selective exchange-rate interventions, are similarly deployed to protect elite ethnic interests rather than actually encouraging domestic market competition within the country (Easterly & Levine, 1997).

The Critical Reflection-Institutional vs. Cultural Explanations

Even though the Kenya policy terrain can be explained by the so-called ethnic vehicle model to a large extent, it is worth mentioning that the 2010 Constitution tried to address this issue by establishing Devolution. The zero-sum character of the national party politics was supposed to be watered down by shifting power to 47 counties. But devolution, Young (1994) indicates, without a processual movement towards the civic as opposed to the ethnic identity, is likely to devolve ethnic prejudice so far as the county level. Ethnicity as a source of influence over the decision process in the form of the policy of Kenya is therefore a structural problem with the channel of party formulation being the conveyor belt that transports the ethnic grievances and ambitions into the center of the state decision-making. Until the parties see it wise either by legislation or by a shift in the political culture itself to rival on an ideological basis, the question of communal redistribution is likely to continue being a tool of social policy, rather than a means to national prosperity (Cheeseman et al., 2016).

CONCLUSION

Ethnicity and political party formation in Kenya have a significant impact on the formation of the public policy in the country. Ethnic affiliations are the most important in mobilizing politics and turning parties into a means of ethnic interests, not ideological agendas. This is a game of zero sum politics whereby the accessibility of state resources is a struggle of ethnic blocs at the expense of the national unity and fair policy formulation. The resulting favor and patronage-based governance distort the provision of the public goods, undermine economic impartiality, and lead to a growth tragedy of stagnant infrastructure development and fiscal instability. Even though constitutional devolution was meant to alleviate such problems by decentralizing power, unless there is a cultural change towards civic identity, ethnic fragmentations will prevail at county levels. In conclusion, the policy issues of Kenya can be solved by changing the nature of party competition in Kenya to be based on ideology instead of ethnic patronage, thus leading to inclusive development and national prosperity.

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