

# Economic Reform, Political Liberalization and Economic Ethnic Conflict in Kenya

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**Résumé:** Le spectre de l'ethnicité et de conflits ethniques inquiète, une fois de plus, le milieu académique des sciences sociales. Les théories autrefois avancées pour expliquer l'ethnicité et ses manifestations en Africa, souvent fondées sur les analyses primordiales et modernistes, n'ont pas réussi à fournir des explications satisfaisantes sur les causes et la nature des conflits ethniques dans le cadre d'un vaste consensus intellectuel. Cependant, on semble convenir que l'Afrique connaît actuellement une nouvelle vague de manifestations ethniques et de conflits de même nature, au moment où la plupart des pays du continent se sont lancés dans des programmes de libéralisation politique et de réforme économique. Il est probable que les causes des conflits actuels se trouvent moins dans l'histoire que dans l'enchevêtrement complexe de la marginalisation sociale, de l'économie et de la politique. Une telle situation nécessite un renouvellement de la pensée théorique en vue d'élucider la manière dont les mutations socio-économiques ont précipité la création de foyers et de situations de conflit. Le présent article analyse le cas de conflits ethniques au Kenya en période de réforme économique et de libéralisation politique. Il montre la manière dont les forces de l'ethnicité, la politique et les classes, sont en train d'être manipulées pour provoquer des conflits ethniques. Il s'agit d'une contribution à une nouvelle orientation théorique sur les conflits et à la compréhension de la dynamique politique des sociétés qui sont traversées par des mutations structurelles.

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## Introduction

The re-introduction of political pluralism in Kenya, which culminated in the holding of multi-party elections in 1992, precipitated profound changes in the socio-economic structure of society. The drive towards multi-party democracy took place alongside pressures by the World

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Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for economic reform (structural adjustment). At the local level, the clamour for political liberalization, led by a conglomeration of local elites, lawyers, university lecturers and local entrepreneurs, went hand in hand with calls from pro-establishment politicians and elites for the creation of a 'majimbo' (regionalism) type of government, to check the political and economic domination of smaller ethnic communities by the more numerically stronger and more economically entrenched communities. It should be noted that most of the elites who championed calls for political liberalization came from the latter communities.

The liberalisation of the economy has seen the emergence of a financially endowed group of business elites from some regions of the country who appear to enjoy some political patronage. The consequence of this development has been the heightening of ethnic tensions and suspicions, in most cases resulting in violence.

Amidst the strains of a fragile economy and the burden of implementing Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPS), pro-establishment politicians tried to derail any efforts towards either political and economic reform. Statements from the political leadership suggested that the political and economic reforms were a scheme by foreigners to undermine Kenyan political and economic sovereignty. Ethnic conflicts and mass poverty were said to be the eventual outcomes of such neo-colonial schemes. This was the political and economic background in Kenya, before a new wave of ethnic hostilities and killings flared up in 1992. A broad analysis, in the context of this changing political and economic process, may therefore prove rewarding in explaining the causes of ethnicity and ethnic conflict in Kenya. For example, while the social impact of structural adjustment and liberalization programmes have been studied (see, for example Gibbon, Bangura and Ofstad 1992), the impact of the resultant structural poverty on the heightening of ethnic suspicions and conflict

has not been attended to. As evidence from elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa suggests, most ethnic conflicts have flared up during a period of political and economic restructuring.

In Kenya, literature is scant on the macro-political and macro-social issues arising from and associated with the economic adjustment process and its interplay with ethnic economic interests (Kanyinga 1994; Ngunyi 1995). This gives one little understanding of how the adjustment period in Kenya has impacted on the economic interests of ethnically based elites and how such interests have been politically manipulated to stir up ethnic conflicts. As Onimode (1992) remarks, the politics of adjustment involves not only conflicting ideas but also a struggle over resources. The struggle for resources is often manifested at the ethnic level between various social formations and social categories (classes) or at the national level between different interest groups.

Lehman (1992), for example, has shown how economic liberalization in Kenya led to a dispute between the Kikuyu and the Kalenjin, which saw the collapse of enterprises owned by members of Kikuyu ethnicity. In 1990, there emerged growing dissent and a mobilised opposition to the political leadership and the way in which reforms (SAP) were being selectively implemented. The ethnic conflicts which occurred during this period were of a political nature and resulted in 'ethnic cleansing' in some parts of the country. Subsequent programmes of parastatal reforms and privatization have been skewed towards members of certain ethnicities who enjoy political patronage. Such general observations introduce the economic ethnic factor as a contested terrain in the present political set up in Kenya. This nexus between economic reform and ethnic conflict will be analysed in this paper. But it is first imperative to provide a theoretical basis for that analysis.

## **Economic Reform and Ethnic Conflicts in Africa: Theoretical Perspectives**

Much of the literature on ethnicity in Africa has concentrated on analysing the phenomenon from one set of variables in an isolated manner. Ethnicity is accordingly seen as a colonial invention in Africa or just a continuation of the pre-colonial manifestation of sheer tribal emotions. This at least has been the reading one makes from the literature of the modernization school and that of the extreme left. Not much theoretical exposition has tried holistically to see the basis of ethnic conflicts on the interplay of the forces of ethnicity, economics and class, all acting at the same time. The theoretical exposure presented here is an attempt to overcome the one-sidedness of the approaches of the 'modernization' and 'extreme' left schools.

It is true that violent ethnic conflicts have increased in Africa, especially from the mid-1970s, and have picked up on a large scale from the 1980s. This was a period during which most African countries entered a state of economic austerity. At the same time, pressure was put on these countries from the international community to initiate programmes of political and economic liberalization. By 1980 most African countries had entered into agreements with the international financial institutions on specific areas of economic reform without much insistence on political reforms.

Three observations can be made on this brief introduction to help to build a holistic theory of studying conflicts in Africa. The first has to do with the manner in which the reforms (both political and economic) were introduced and implemented. While the donors have insisted that democratic political systems are crucial for the success of the economic reforms, they have not always not been put into place. In Kenya for example, only threadbare political reforms which allowed the registration of many political parties were readily allowed, while on the economic front, exchange controls by the state were lifted. These

reforms did not in total ease the burden of a repressive and patronising state from the backs of citizens. The net result has been that those who were already in business cashed in on the freeing of import controls to import goods and sell them at exorbitant prices in the absence of government surveillance. At the other extreme, the level of poverty among the majority, both in urban and rural areas, increased, and this tended to follow ethnic and gender lines. Consequently poverty and social provisioning have actually been politically ethnicised in Kenya.

The second observation relates to the nature of the current spate of ethnic conflicts in Africa. The level of violence and organization makes them slightly different from those that were experienced during the colonial period and may therefore not adequately capture the internal dynamics of these conflicts — causes and effects. New theoretical postulates have to be sought.

Lastly, the point that has already been made about the occurrence of the present conflicts in Africa, concurrently with economic and political reform policies, persuades one to seek a framework which locates the converging points of ethnicity, economic austerity and adjustment regimes in Africa.

One line of theorizing which can illuminate this study is the public choice theory. Aspects of this theory can be used to explain the occurrence of ethnic tensions and conflicts in Africa during a period of economic reform. The public choice theory postulates the likely distribution of gains and losses among competing social groups during a period of adjustment (Bangura and Gibbon 1992). Accordingly, political dynamics and their outcomes are deduced from a framework that assumes a transition from a structure of incentives based on state intervention to one where markets are believed to be fully liberalised or in a state of liberalising. The theory posits two conceptual positions about resource allocation during a period of adjustment which are central to the arguments in this paper. The first position is based on state

intervention in the economy leading to price distortions and economic rents for a privileged few. Arguably, within a context of economic reform, state patronage is used to the advantage of some classes and social groups, leading to wide economic polarities based on region, ethnicity and gender. The second position is based on the fact that the economic reform policies lead to the emergence of free competitive markets which allocate resources optimally. Of course this second position has not been true under interventionist state regimes.

In practice this theory can be argued further to examine the nature of relationships, most importantly the economic relationships that develop between different dichotomous groups. One has in mind here the relationships between urban elites and rural peasants, politicians and their constituents, and the like. Within the new emerging relationships, social interests are expressed and defended through the languages of pre-existing political and ideological traditions (Bangura and Gibbon 1992). This is where ethnicity finds its place as an ideological tool for the elites to defend their gains or argue about their losses from the reform process. As Nnoli (1995) notes, in the context of an interventionist state, the ruling classes use the state to build up their business enterprises. The struggle of the ethnic factions of these classes for state patronage in the process of embourgeoisement generates and promotes ethnicity (Nnoli 1995:7).

The validity of the public choice theory to the arguments in this study is that it shows how politics has blended with economics, often driven by class-based interests to manifest itself as ethnicity. The contention of this paper is that powerful class interests of an economic nature have been largely responsible for the ethnic conflicts experienced in Africa. Social groups (classes) and individuals act at various levels of society and within the state apparatus to influence the allocation of resources. Knowledge of who the gainers and losers are, and how various groups win and lose as a result of shifts in development

strategies is important in understanding ethnicity as part of the political dynamics of societies undergoing change.

The approach of the public choice theory will also show the role that ethnic-based groups and elites have in promoting ethnicity and how they eventually gain economically by mobilising ethnic emotions. Emphasis should be placed on class differentiations within ethnic groups and the role of the elites as ethnic entrepreneurs who manipulate ethnicity for their economic and political capital (Markakis 1993).

In countries such as Kenya, the period of economic reforms and political liberalization has occasioned a realignment of both economic and political forces in society. In most cases groups who had a monopoly of political power have lost it, together with the economic largesse that this power provided them as individuals. Two trends have become noticeable consequently. The first one (which zeros in on this study) is where previously privileged elites have acted defensively, often provoking ethnic violence, to stall the economic and political reform process. The second trend has been the emergence of ethnically based urban elite coalitions as a strategy of economic bargaining. In a sense, the current space of ethnic conflicts in Africa can be said to be a manifestation of the economic frustrations of elites and particular classes in society.

Wallerstein has confirmed the above position in asserting that ethnic consciousness and conflict occur when groups feel threatened with a loss of previously acquired privilege, or conversely feel that it is an opportune moment politically to overcome a longstanding denial of privilege (Wallerstein 1979:184). The mechanisms and machinations through which these groups advance their aims is what causes ethnic tensions and conflicts. The present manifestation of ethnicity in Africa is an elite and class phenomenon where one community's elites feel excluded by another from control of economic and political power. They then indoctrinate members of their ethnicity to believe that this is

a conspiracy by a whole community against another, which should be violently resisted. Thus within the context of socio-economic insecurity generated by the economic reform process, Nnoli (1995) asserts that ethnicity holds individuals together, gives them internal cohesion, encourages them to provide natural security for each other and promotes their sense of identity and direction. Ethnicity offers a personal solution to the problems of exploitation, oppression, deprivation and alienation.

Rothchild (1986) has shown why a public choice approach is germane to studying current ethnic conflicts in Africa. The fact that in Africa, one is dealing with interest-defined groups and elites. More specifically one is dealing with the economic, political and social interests of groups and elites within the state. That is why ethnic sentiments are not as explosive in the market places [to reassert, Nnoli's (1995) position], or in other centres of vested economic interests, even though they are articulated there, as they are in the political arena. Politics is seen as an overt way to entrench oneself in the economic sphere under the guise of ethnicity. This position is again convincingly shared by Fukui and Markakis (1994), with reference to the conflict in the Horn of Africa. The ethnocratic nature of the post-colonial state in Africa, means that the exclusion from political power of members of certain communities implies exclusion from the material and social resources controlled by the state. This struggle for social resources is then waged on the political level in the form of ethnic conflicts. The struggles often represent the interest of the elite and group competition for scarce resources.

The picture so far presented is that of a whole ethnic group raising up to demand a fair distributive mechanism of scarce resources, opportunities and power. Economic scarcity, therefore, seems to be at the centre of conflicts, within the context of gains and losses being counted by different communities. This situation is mediated through a



series of political manipulations. The part played by the elite from different communities in exacerbating these conflicts has already been alluded to. What needs to be clarified is the fact that rarely does a whole community lose or win from these conflicts. Rather it is powerful class interests that are camouflaged as ethnic interests. A director of one of the parastatal firms in Kenya was sacked for corruption. The man was found to have kept millions of Kenya shillings in his house besides what was in his many bank accounts. The next day, members of his ethnic community took to the streets and petitioned the President for his reinstatement. There was no evidence that the man had spent any of this money for the well being of his community. This is the sort of situation one finds almost everywhere in Africa. It is therefore the class interests of these ethnic elite warlords which are so often the cause of ethnic animosity. Ethnicity serves the interests of privileged African classes by enabling them to increase their share of the national wealth (Nnoli 1989; Fukui and Markakis 1994).

What need to be explained in consonance with the public choice theory is why whole ethnicities have been roused to conflict situations only to benefit a few individuals, classes and social groups in society. In fact a general observation should be made here that ethnic conflicts have taken place in the sphere of the socially marginal, in the urban slums and African rural areas where poor peasants live.

One impact that the economic reforms have had in Africa has been the emergence of a 'social underclass' totally excluded from national society and economy. The term 'social exclusion', according to Wolfe (1995), refers to situations where groups and movements are excluded from any control over factors affecting their livelihood and their place in society. They are incorporated into new conditions of exploitation, insecurity and improvement. Social exclusion is said to affect in particular those subject to the multiple deprivation of gender, ethnicity and age, as well as immigrants (Gore 1994). In the context of

socio-economic change, ethnicity and ethnic affiliation intertwines with national citizenship in complex ways in Africa, with ethnicity acting as a realm of citizenship in which the morality of new forms of social inequality are tested (Lonsdale 1992).

The main thrust of this argument is that during periods of austerity, the socially excluded provide a readily available reserve army which is mobilised and manipulated by politicians and elites. A kind of multi-ethnic coalition emerges among the excluded and the 'underclass', based on their economic situation. The coalition will then appeal to persons in the government to press for what are seen as their ethnic interests. This represents a mechanism thorough which the 'underclass' fights its exclusion from socio-economic marginalisation. Bargaining for the benefits accruing from the adjustment process has been done by these multi-ethnic coalitions in Kenya. In fact a Member of Parliament in Kenya at one time organized youths from his community to what he called 'jeshi la mzee' (old man's army). The youths were meant to harass people from another ethnic community in the urban areas and defend the political interests of the President (referred to as 'old man').

In a situation of competing economic interests, occasioned by the adjustment process, the emergence of a new dynamic of social, ethnic and religious movements has been witnessed, working from the 'bottom-up' to resist age-long frustrations (Aina 1997). The movements advocate new forms of entitlements and stake new claims to resources. These interests are pitched at the ideological and identity domains and express themselves as ethnic (Aina, *Ibid*).

Before concluding this discussion on the theoretical basis of the current ethnic conflicts in Africa, let me recapitulate. First, it is apparent that the economic reforms in Africa have brought with them notorious consequences of exclusion and insecurity for groups and individuals. Within this context, groups and communities, who were hitherto

incorporated in the state apparatuses as junior partners, are renegotiating the contract binding them to the nation state. Secondly, the exclusion of rural societies from the mainstream of national life exposes the peasantry to continued manipulation by ethnic elites. In a situation where poverty during the adjustment period has taken ethnic and gender lines, the ethnic community is found to be the only easily manipulated vehicle for achieving the economic goals of classes and elites. Lastly, though the aims of ethnic conflicts are economic, the battle for the control and distribution of economic resources is being fought in the political arena. Control of political power by members of one community is therefore assumed to cater for the economic interests of that community.

We now turn to the application of these theoretical positions to a discussion of ethnicity and ethnic conflict in Kenya.

### **Ethnicity and the Economic in Kenya: A Historical Perspective**

Since the task of this paper is to analyse ethnic conflict in Kenya and its basis in vested economic interests, it is worth looking at the historical process through which ethnic suspicions have been built. Literature on the origin of ethnicity in Africa abounds, often linking it to the colonial system of 'divide and rule'. Within this system, some communities allied themselves to the colonial powers and were rewarded both economically and politically. In Kenya, ethnicity has also been a function of the penetration of capital and the expropriation of peasants during the colonial period (Kitching 1980; Zeleza 1982). Economic factors have therefore been pivotal in the strengthening of ethnicity in Kenya. Over time, however, political manipulation has been used to gain access to economic privileges.

The independent Kenyan government was largely formed from Kenya's two major ethnic groups; the Luo and the Kikuyu. These two

ethnic communities comprise the greater part of the overall population. Besides, it is within the geographical area of these two ethnicities that the penetration of capital and socio-economic influence was first noticeable during the colonial period. At independence, the two communities thus constituted a population that was more educated, urbanised and more politically mobilised. This colonial inequality has not been entirely redressed and has occasionally been a source of ethnic tension.

After independence, minority ethnicities feared that if the Kikuyu and Luo dominated the political scene, this domination would be entrenched in the economic sphere. A coalition of these minority ethnicities formed a political party, Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU), to oversee their economic interests and check domination by Kenya African National Union (KANU), the Luo-Kikuyu alliance party that had formed the first independent government. KADU consisted largely of members of ethnic communities who had been bypassed by the colonial economy and therefore tended to be less educated, less urbanized and less politically mobilised.

From the beginning, KANU, under Kenyatta, established itself as a patron-client party. Using the promise of carrots and sticks — most notably the promise of cabinet posts for KADU leaders — Kenyatta managed to merge KANU with KADU in 1964 (Barkan 1994; Throup 1987). Consequently the Deputy Chairman of KADU, Daniel Moi, was made the Vice President of KANU and Kenya in 1966. This effectively eliminated any tangible opposition to Kenyatta's rule.

After eliminating political opposition, Kenyatta set out to address some problems which he thought were crucial in post-independence Kenya; that is land and the Africanisation of the civil service. He addressed the land issue by settling a large number of people from his ethnic community, the Kikuyu, on farms purchased from white settlers. Though some of the farms were in areas previously occupied by the

Kikuyu, those in the Rift Valley were in areas historically occupied by the Maasai. Hence large numbers of Kikuyu migrated into the Rift Valley, threatening the economic interests of non-Kikuyu ethnicities who were initially allied to KADU (Barkan 1994). It should also be noted that it is not only the Kikuyu who lost land during the colonial period. But when it came to resettlement, the other communities, especially the Maasai, never got back their land. The resettlement of the Kikuyu ethnicity was also carried on in the Coastal Region of Kenya, where they were given the economically lucrative 'Ten-mile-strip' of land formerly occupied by the Sultan of Zanzibar. Kenyatta's land resettlement policy, therefore, sowed the seeds for later ethnic conflict between the Kikuyu and other communities (*Daily Nation* 26 May 1993).

When it came to the Africanisation of the civil service, ethnic inclinations were also manifested. For example, the Industrial and Commercial Development Corporation (ICDC) and the Kenya National Trading Corporation (KNTC) were set up to provide credit and to support emerging entrepreneurs. Much of the demand for these services came from and was extended to the Kikuyu, reinforced by the fact that these bodies were controlled by Kikuyu appointees (Leys 1974). Besides Kenyatta enabled members of his ethnic group to take advantage of opportunities in the private sector. Elite Kikuyu members were allowed to be partners in joint ventures, appointed to boards of directors or to management positions or were allowed to receive commissions from newly launched enterprises (Hyden 1994). Hence Kenyatta promoted the interests of his Kikuyu people while retaining a loose alliance with patrons from other ethnic groups (Hyden 1994).

In summarising the domination of Kikuyu economic and political interests during rule, Atieno-Odhiambo has observed that, having captured the state, Kenyatta fell back on his primary lifelong agenda: tending to the needs of his basic community the Agikuyu. By 1978, he

had secured for them the state government, a vast homeland in the Rift Valley and along the Kenya Coast, had put commerce in their hands, in appropriate alliance with the Asian and European bourgeoisies, and had underwritten their security by manning the police, the military, intelligence and brutalising apparatuses like the general service unit (Atieno-Odhiambo 1996). One can perhaps agree with Atieno-Odhiambo that Kenyatta had no mental map of Kenya as a moral community. It is on these lands in the Rift Valley and the Coastal Region that serious ethnic conflicts are taking place over the control of economic extraction from the land.

One other thing that Kenyatta did was to isolate his major partners in the KANU alliance, the Luo, through political manipulations and killings. While they remained the most educated, Kenyatta effectively shut them out of politics and economics. When Tom Mboya, a Luo, with considerable support among the various groups including the Kikuyu, emerged as a threat to the Kikuyu establishment in 1969, he was murdered (Hyden 1994). This created suspicions between the Luo and the Kikuyu which still continue. Besides excluding members of other ethnic communities from economic and political power, Kenyatta saw to the strengthening of an economically endowed Kikuyu middle class.

When Moi came to power in 1978, he was aware of missed economic opportunities. His first project was to redistribute resources away from the ethnic groups that provided the social base of the Kenyatta regime to groups that constituted his own (Barkan 1994). He set out to redress what he regarded as the economic inequalities of fifteen years of Kikuyu rule. To this end, the phenomenon of 'Kalenjin' ethnicity was launched as a political project. Members of the Kikuyu community in government and administration were replaced by members of ethnic groups from the old KADU alliance, mostly Kalenjins.

Secondly, aware of the role that a powerful middle class could play, Moi started to wrest business from Kikuyu hands so as to destroy their economic hegemony. To destroy the economic foundations of the state, he denied the ascendant Kikuyu capitalist class any state patronage, politically squeezing them out of business (Throup 1987b). This policy also applied to the agricultural sector where Kikuyu economic interests were undermined. For example, the coffee industry, grain marketing, tea industry and the milk industry fell victims to official ethnic patronage (Chege 1994). The economic war against the Kikuyu culminated in a state sponsored financial and banking crisis which crippled the Kikuyu enterprises in the 1980s (*Finance* 3 November 1997). President Moi (a Kalenjin) precipitated the crisis in 1986 by having the Ministry of Finance and state companies withdraw their funds from three banks owned by Kikuyu businessmen (Lehman 1992).

Lastly, as has been argued elsewhere in this paper, Moi led a coalition of ethnic communities who were less educated and less urbanised. It is also instructive to note that the reform movement in Kenya was and is still spearheaded by educated intellectuals from the Luo and Kikuyu ethnicities. This is one fact that Moi has agonized about over time. Arguably, the economic power he has tried to 'push' to members of his ethnic group cannot be sustained without a strong educated elite who can transform themselves into an economically endowed middle class. To achieve this aim, funds were mobilised to develop modern educational infrastructures in the dominated Rift Valley. A series of reforms were made in the educational sector to favour his ethnic group, to the detriment of the educational interests of other communities. The upgrading and building of new universities and colleges in the Rift Valley can be seen as part of this scheme.

It can be safely argued that by 1990, two decades of political manipulation to advance ethnic and individual economic interests had created a volatile ethnic situation in Kenya. With calls for economic and

political liberalization, a situation of winners and losers was created on both sides of the political divide. As the saying goes in Kenya, the Kikuyu are aware of what economic opportunities they have lost under Moi and the Kalenjins are agonizing about the economic opportunities they will lose without Moi. It is within this context that elites, mainly from the Kikuyu and Kalenjin ethnicities, but also from some other ethnic communities exacerbated the violent ethnic conflicts of 1992. The clashes may be seen as an instrument used by the ethnic elite in order to derail economic reforms and to protect some of the gains in the economic sector threatened by the reforms.

### **The Economic Basis of the 1990s Ethnic Conflicts in Kenya**

From 1990, violent ethnic confrontations erupted in some parts of Kenya. The conflicts, as we have tried to indicate elsewhere in this paper, occurred in a context of political and economic reforms. The Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP), which Kenya had started implementing in the 1980s, had by the 1990s led to an increase in the level of poverty among the population. The degree of social exclusion and marginalisation among the population had widened. Among the urban poor and in the rural areas, the level of discontent with the government was increasing because of failed economic programmes. As already noted, poverty increasingly took on an ethnic and gender perspective in Kenya.

If the economic reforms had been undertaken as prescribed by the World Bank, the immediate losers would have been members of Moi's own ethnicity. This could have brought to an abrupt end Moi's scheme of creating a powerful Kalenjin middle class to counteract Kikuyu hegemony over the Kenyan economy. But they would not have been the only losers. All over Kenya, and especially, among the communities Moi perceived to constitute his alliance of 'small tribes', powerful and economically rich individuals had emerged using state patronage. This explains the continued resistance the donors have faced over



liberalization of the agricultural sector (Toye 1992). These vested economic interests were threatened by both economic and political reform. It is from these groups and individuals that voices and forces of resistance to the process of reform have come.

But even more annoying for the supporters of the Moi regime was the fact that by the 1990s it was mainly the elites from the communities settled in the Rift Valley and the Coastal Region who were campaigning for political pluralism. While the donors saw no tangible economic reforms, a group of lawyers, university lecturers, businessmen and other professionals forged a coalition to agitate for political pluralism. As argued by Woods (1992), however, those agitating for political pluralism came from the same middle class that had benefited disproportionately from Kenyatta's paternalistic mode of governance. Hence, the Moi regime saw a convergence between the socio-economic interests of this group and their demand for increased political democratisation.

There is another reason why the economic argument may explain the occurrence of ethnic conflicts in Kenya. Clashes have occurred and are still occurring within regions where migrant communities have bought land and settled. As we shall argue later, these communities are now being seen as 'strangers' or aliens encroaching on the economic sustenance of the host communities. This has been the situation in the Coastal Region, the Rift Valley and the Western Region of Kenya. As Barkan (1994) has successfully argued, up to 1990, Moi and his inner circle of compatriots were reluctant to embrace economic and political reforms, because they correctly believed that the main beneficiaries would have been their opponents, especially the Kikuyu. However, by 1990, with donor pressure, there was every indication that the reforms could not be stopped any longer. They had to look for a way of either derailing the reforms, or forcing those communities who were focal to the reform process to concede some form of bargain.

In a series of meetings organized towards the end of 1991, prominent leaders from Moi's Kalenjin ethnic group in the Rift Valley agitated for the restoration of Majimbo (Federal) system of government, and the violent eviction of non-Kalenjins from the Province (*Weekly Review*, 27 September 1991). These threats were obviously aimed at the Kikuyu, Luo, Gusii, and Luyha migrants who had settled in the Rift Valley. According to its crusaders, the Majimbo system of government was the only safeguard for each Region's economic autonomy.

Consequently, between December 1991 and March 1992 bands of armed groups attacked migrant farmers settled in different parts in the Rift Valley. Luo farmers were the earliest victims within Nandi District of Rift Valley. In the second half of 1992, Kikuyu farmers in the Rift Valley's Olenguruone area, scene of anti-colonial resistance in the late 1940s, suffered the worst fate (Chege 1994). This was followed by attacks on Luyha farmers in Trans-Nzoia District. There is endless documentation on the nature of the spate of displacements and killings. What was started by a group of leaders from the Rift Valley as a form of resisting imminent economic losses, has left Kenya with an endless orgy of ethnic conflict and cleansing which the government is unable to control. Even as this paper is being prepared, serious ethnic conflicts are taking place at the Coast, Rift Valley and Nyanza Regions of the country.

The outcome of the first multi-party elections in 1992 may have increased the intensity of ethnic conflict. Just before the elections, President Moi had consistently argued that multi-party politics could divide Kenyans along ethnic lines and lead to ethnic conflicts. The 'Kalenjin Mafia', as political leaders in favour of the federal system of government came to be referred in the press, warned the Kikuyu community resident in the Rift Valley to vote for KANU or move out of the region. After the elections, it was evident that the Kikuyu and most

of the other migrant communities had voted for the opposition. This fact triggered a series of declarations aimed at intimidating these communities so that they would move out.

William Ole Ntimama, a Member of Parliament from the Rift Valley declared 'Enosupukia', an agricultural area settled by the Kikuyu, to be a 'water catchment' area. The migrant settlers were asked to move out. When they hesitated, killings started (*Weekly Review*, 29 October 1993). The motive for this ultimatum and the killings was given during a meeting addressed by the 'Kalenjin Mafia'. They ordered district development communities to meet and cancel business licences belonging to non-Kalenjins in the province, since Kalenjins did not own businesses in Central Province (*Weekly Review*, October 1993:7). Ntimama, one of the leaders already referred to was more emphatic

...Maasais have suffered socio-economic degradation at the hands of outsiders — they have taken advantage of the Maasai pastoral way of life to exploit their resources with impunity.. the British suppressed us and we cannot have the Kikuyu suppress us again,... they have turned the Maasai into second class citizens in their own country... Kikuyu settlers are controlling about 90% of commercial activities in Narok... they are doing lucrative business and they want to control the politics of the area (Ibid. p.8).

The above clearly shows the economic motives that sparked off the conflicts. A situation where some communities are seen as 'strangers', with their right to exploit economic resources being redefined in the political arena. Later Ntimama classified the Maasai and Kalenjin as the only 'Indigenous' groups entitled to the economic resources of the Rift Valley, while the settler communities were seen as 'natives' (Amuka 1996). In a speech made in Parliament to defend his role in the Enosupukia killings, Ntimama had this to say

... Speaker sir, I want to say it is the Kikuyus who started this war... our cattle were mutilated, our homes were surrounded and they tried to burn them and we have normal rights of defending ourselves. We tried to raise the whole question of the plight of the people down

stream... that they were dying, their livelihood was in danger, their cattle were dying and their economy was in jeopardy... we were provoked beyond any reasonable doubt.... we can no longer be suppressed, we can no longer be looted. (Hansard, Tuesday 26 October 1993).

The conflicts, however, have not been limited to the Rift Valley and Western Kenya only. As early as 1991, the Muslim population in the Coastal Region started raising their age-old grievances. The trend of economic expansion which had generated widespread discontent about unequal distribution of gains between social classes and across ethnic groups is more noticeable in the Coastal Region. But the discontent in the Coastal Region did not turn into an open conflict until 1996, when political and elite opportunism again provided a chance.

The ethnic violence on the Coast has mostly been directed at the Coast's migrant 'up-country' people, specifically the Luo, Kikuyu and the Gusii. These are the people who work at the port and at tourist hotels, dominate transport and trade, own land and occupy prominent positions in management, teaching and business (*Witness* 1997). The Coastal Muslim population are part of the least educated and least urbanised in Kenya. Their history of social and economic marginalisation dates back to pre-independence days. Kenyatta's government never tried to redress this imbalance nor has the Moi regime done anything apart from promoting the economic interests of a few Coastal power barons mostly of Asian origin. The indigenous Coastal population have therefore watched their economic resources being plundered. It is these people who have been easily mobilised against up-country people supposedly to resist their economic domination.

As African Rights Group (*Witness* 1997) documents, there has been a history of inequality in the Coastal Region that could be exploited for political ends. The indigenous people have not been the beneficiaries of a good education and the economic advantages associated with it. Instead, they see a system of corrupt patronage of

land ownership which further impoverishes them. This has encouraged resentment, not least because of the obvious prevalence of rich up-country and foreign landholders at the Coast. Hence, it is true that ethnic-related suspicions have thrived at the Coast with the tacit encouragement of politicians keen to fish in troubled waters (Kenya Human Rights Commission Report, 1997). The up-country people are perceived as having enjoyed more than their share of economic and social resources on the Coast.

On 5 September 1997, the *Daily Nation* published a letter by David Odhiambo, a one time civil servant on the Coast in support of the grievances of the indigenous coastal people. He says:

...about 80% of the coastal people are squatters on their own ancestral land. Almost everyday, notices are given by the provincial administration to evict them from their homes. It has become common for up-country people, mainly Kikuyu and Kalenjin elites to be issued with title deeds giving them land occupied for generations by the natives. Most of the hotels, large factories and industries are owned by people from up-country who make massive fortunes... local schools, hospitals and religious centres are collapsing while the rich up-country investors continue to develop their home areas.

There seems to be a general consensus that the deliberate economic interest of the coastal people in favour of the economic interests of up-country communities was bound to escalate (*Update*, 30 September 1997). As early as 1978, the Kenyan Parliament had debated the issue of land ownership at the Coast. It was then noted that if personal economic interests were not tamed, the situation at the Coast was bound to explode into a full scale ethnic conflict (*Weekly Review* 5 May 1978). The onset of the economic and political reform period seems to have accelerated the rate of land speculation and economic marginalisation at the Coast. As one Muslim elder remarked in an interview with *Update* (September 1997), 'How do you expect people to keep quiet in such circumstances that alienate them from their own economic

resources'. The issue here, therefore, is the economic importance of land and the need to redefine land rights and rights of economic use.

While the masses, the Coastal Muslim population, had long-standing grievances against economic marginalisation, certain individuals and party operatives used this as a rallying point to settle political scores. As in the Rift Valley Region, the up-country population at the Coast provided a strong opposition force. Hence, elaborate plans were made by KANU barons to 'cleanse' the coastal area of its up-country population, which was seen as upsetting the political balance of power by overtly supporting opposition parties and giving them a decent presence in the area, to the chagrin of KANU politicians not accustomed to serious challenges (Kenyan Human Rights Commission Report 1997; *Witness*, October-November 1997).

## **Conclusion**

Ethnic conflict is not just a primordial phenomenon in Africa. As the Kenyan case shows, ethnic hegemony over economic interests within the context of economic reform explains much of the current wave of ethnic conflicts. One result of the economic reform process is that communities and social groups are demanding a redefinition of some economic rights, most notably land rights, in a way that could give them advantages in a liberalised environment. Unfortunately, these calls for redefinition have been made through appeals to ethnic economic sentiments. Besides, the economic reform process has created economic disparities between those who have continued to accumulate while the rest have been increasingly marginalised along ethnic and gender lines. Deteriorating economic conditions have led to the rise of ethnically based polarities and economic groups. These groups, often led by ethnic elites, have presented a platform for the elites to defend their economic interests under the guise of ethnic interests. The elite, therefore, bring one ethnic community into violent confrontation with another. The Kenyan case shows that not a single member of the upper

class or their business have been affected by the conflicts. Those affected are the already wretched peasants controlled by those either already in powerful positions or who are aspiring to them (Kenyan Human Rights Commission Report 1997). It can certainly be argued that economic and political reform posed a threat to some elite and ethnic interests.

The elite, realising the importance of political power for wealth accumulation, have fought for the control of political power. That is why ethnic conflict in Kenya has generally been seen in the media as a political conflict. However, careful analysis shows that this conflict would not have erupted without the economic implications discussed. Rex (1995) clearly summed this up when he asserted that the emergent ethnicities of the 1990s should not be regarded as being merely concerned with identity, but rather as forms of mobilisation in pursuit of political and economic interests.

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