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Power Narratives and Political Campaigns in Kenya

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Abstract

Narratives are stories that people tell about the past and the present for the purpose of making sense of their lives. They are used to pass on information from the past to the present and also for constructing the present, and influencing the future. Narratives can be real or imaginary and today some of them are based on fake news. Those narratives used by politicians can be referred to as power or political narratives. A political narrative is impactful in its ability to elicit pathos, thereby allowing the narrative to be influenced through the value it provides, rather than the truth that is told. Politicians construct disparate facts and weave them together cognitively to make sense of reality. They use narratives to appeal to the emotions of the electorate by talking pompously about themselves while casting doubt on the suitability of their opponents. This paper starts by defining narratives and then moves to focus on political narratives. The next section examines power narratives in the context of the Kenyan political landscape in the run-up to the 2017 General and Presidential Elections. The paper concludes that narratives are told by different people for different reasons, but specifically to pass on messages. Kenyan politicians use narratives, devoid of ideas, to talk a lot about themselves and to disparage their opponents, but the media, especially social media, also generate many stories about the politicians.

Key words: Narratives, political narratives, Kenyan situation.

Introduction

A narrative can be defined as a personal construct that humans use to understand the world around them. This means that narratives enable us to make sense of the world around us. According to Mayer (2014), humans are, whatever else, storytelling, story-consuming, story-enacting animals. Stories imbue human experience with meaning, and imagined interpretation or interpretations to suit one's interests. Narratives provide a rich source of how people make sense of their lives, about how they construct disparate facts and weave them together cognitively to make sense of reality (Patterson and Monroe, 1998). In Africa, the tradition of storytelling or orature has been used to pass on oral history from generation to generation. It was Jan Vansina who pioneered the use of oral traditions to reconstruct African history. This was taken up by the fathers of Kenya's oral history, namely, John Osogo, Bethwel Ogot (1967) and Gideon Were), to reconstruct the history of their own ethnic groups. It is also worth pointing out that in Africa, the oral art of passing messages through songs, poems, proverbs, riddles and chants has enabled African people to teach morals, educate, illustrate, enlighten, inform, persuade, stimulate and inspire generations

(www.africa.undp.org). Thus, stories or narratives have, from time immemorial, played an important role in the socialization of African children as well as to entertain and cajole people.

Mayer (2014) goes on to assert that as creatures constituted by narratives held in mind, humans can be called by stories told to them by others. This is because stories have the power to transport people into alternative worlds, and in so doing to move them emotionally and to change their understanding. For this reason, storytelling is at the core of persuasion, and central to the formulation of "interests". Narrative is especially necessary for creating empathy and, therefore, for building altruistic, ideological, and patriotic interests. However, for a single story to capture interests of the community, it has to satisfy a number of factors. These factors include alignment with self-interest, first in the storyteller, and frequency of the telling, but also resonance with those widely held narratives a community already holds in mind, that is, the narratives of culture. In essence this means that people will believe in a story told by one of their own who uses the story to articulate their interests, and the more he or she does it the more it captures their minds (Mayer, 2014).

The concept of "narrative" was originally simple: it was a story told by a literacy character, or, more, broadly, the story itself. However, starting with the French literacy theorist and philosopher Roland Barthes and others in the 1970s, narrative was turned into a far complex idea. Social scientists and humanists of the time began to appreciate that stories structured reality, created and maintained identity, and provided meaning to people, institutions and cultures. Consequently, political organizers, activists and others learnt to use narratives of oppression and marginalization to attack dominant cultural narratives of elites, while companies learnt to generate narratives that supported their brands. Today, narrative is, *inter alia*, power: it is a vehicle for manipulating individuals so that they are more inclined to do what you want, not because you have forced them to, but because you have convinced them that they want to do what you want them to do (Allenby, 2017).

According to theorists Patrick Reinsborough and Doyle Canning (2010), narrative space defines the intangible realm of stories, ideas and assumptions that frame public perceptions of the situation and the players in question. In political terms, narrative helps to define what is normal and what is legitimate, as well as the limits of what is politically possible. However, what makes a story powerful is not necessarily facts, but how the story creates meaning in the hearts and minds of the audience. Thus, the barrier to convincing people is mostly not what they do not know but really what they already know. This means that the assumptions and beliefs that people already have can act as filters from hearing social change messages (https://beautifultrouble.org/theory/narrative-power-analysis/).

Power Narratives

In the context of this paper, we define power narratives as political narratives. Political narratives are used by politicians the world over to woo voters and to discredit their opponents. According to Andrews (2017), this type of narratives examines ways in which stories, or narratives, are used to investigate the political world. Andrews goes on to point out that, historically, stories have not been considered as legitimate sources of information for such investigations. However, this has changed in recent years as a result of the "narrative turn" hitting the social sciences. Nevertheless, while disciplines such as psychology, sociology and anthropology were receptive to this alteration,

many political scientists continue to resist the idea that political narratives can offer a very special, and almost unique, perspective on how individuals and groups construct the political world and are constructed by it (Andrews, 2017).

Psychological research has granted a kind of professional and empirical zeal of approval to the claim that people think, perceive, imagine and conduct moral decisions through narrative structures. Consequently, scholarship has also come to realize that narrative patterns are a critical instrument for the study of human thought and that analysing the ways in which people "story the world" can contribute to their understanding of how those people make meanings. This logic has also been applied to the collective level of human behaviour, thereby leading to the recognition of the important role played by narrative in shaping and expressing political identity, perspective and ideology (Shenhav, 2006).

Thus, over the last couple of decades, the idea of political narrative has gained increased attention in public debates and academia. Political experts draw the concepts of *homo narrans* (literally, "storytelling human") and of narrative structure as being universal, to point to the central position of "stories" in politics. They argue that narratives are both critical and effective in mediating political stance, in selling political programmes or in positioning forceful "metanarratives" of liberalism, conservatism or socialism. It has been found that catching stories and being "on message" facilitate political success (https://networks.h-netorg/node/3128/discussions/174152). A metanarrative is a grand narrative common to all. In critical theory and particularly in postmodernism, the term refers to a comprehensive explanation, a narrative about narratives of historical meaning, experience or knowledge, which offers a society legitimation through the anticipated completion of a master idea (https://www.definitions.net>definition>).

The use of narratives in political domain situates contemporary occurrences in a broad temporal context of collective experiences and bestows upon the individual a story of collective agency, as in "the nation" or "our state". This means that narratives embrace current political events in a time frame which can go beyond the present event. In so doing, they give their audience a sense of familiarity and continuity with events that they personally could have never experienced (Shearer and Shenhav, 2009).

Mayer (2014) asserts that to motivate collective action, leaders begin by seeking to captivate the community in a common dramatic narrative that expresses the problem as an impending tragedy. Collective action refers to action taken together by a group of people with the aim of enhancing their status and so achieve a common objective. Examples include voting in mass elections and engaging in social protests. The second thing that the leaders do is to try to foster a sense of crisis, in which the 'now' is the pivotal moment in the collective narrative. Finally, the leaders seek to create a sense of communal efficacy, in which acting can turn tragedy into victory. In the grip of a collective narrative, taking part in collective action becomes an act of deep personal meaning, an expression of identity politics.

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The Kenyan situation

The narratives presented here relate to the Kenyan political situation to the run-up to the 2017 General and Presidential Elections. Some of these are stories by the media about the politicians while others are by the politicians themselves.

On the 10th of March, 2017, Michael Wainaina posted on his blog (profmichaelwainaina.com) that politics is about narratives and that these narratives are imagined. In cases of competing narratives, the dominant one carries the day. In his opinion, at the time the political class in Kenya consisted of two dubious CORD/Jubilee divide but with a single narrative which it had succeeded in making it unimodal and dominant. The narrative was that of tribe and access to state resources using tribe. In this kind of scenario, the choice is not between those who support the tribal narrative and others, but between which tribalist. Thus, people will always choose their tribalist. Since the tribal warlords want it this way, the tribal political narrative was not about to change. In any case, the political class cannot survive without it since access to state largesse and legitimization of corruption occurs via this narrative. This is what breeds the mentality of 'it is our turn to eat', on the one hand, and that of 'we are being finished', on the other. The tribe or tribes in power consider themselves to be 'political in', whereas those in power see themselves as being 'political out'. When those who are out complain about corruption, it is not that they want to get rid of it but, rather, because they are excluded from the eating. Thus, corruption is fueled by the political narrative. Because of this, the tribal political narrative is the instrument of choice for the tribal warlords that dominate the political landscape in Kenya.

On his part, columnist Wycliffe Muga, in an opinion published in the Star newspaper of 22nd September, 2016, argued that what determines electoral outcome in Kenya is not some form of "tribal absolutism", but rather the persuasive narratives that candidates come up with. In his view, for people to believe in anything and to be willing to act, they need some kind of story which persuades them that this thing really matters. However, in many cases the narratives fall short of persuasion. To be persuasive the narrative should explain why the electorate should vote for the narrator. For example, in the 2017 campaigns, the Jubilee Party came up with the narrative that theirs was the most united, inclusive and widely supported political party in the country. On the other hand, they portrayed the Opposition CORD (Coalition for the Restoration of Democracy) as being led by a perennial loser in the name of Raila Odinga. In response to this, the Opposition came up with the narrative that the Jubilee government only ascended to power through a rigged election and that once in office, the leaders quickly raided the public coffers. In addition, they alleged that the Jubilee Party was a house built on sand and that it would not be able to successfully hold together all the rival ambitions within it. If this happened, there would be a fatal split within its ranks before the next election[1]. These two different stories were obviously sweet music to the ears of the two rival groups. However, in terms of persuasion they failed the test, since they did not answer the question, "So why should we vote for either of you"?

In a comment posted on 20th June, 2017, Ken Opalo (https://twitter.com<kopalo>status) identified what he described as three important narratives that were emerging that specifically relate to William Ruto's quest to be Kenya's fifth president. This suggests that the 2017

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[1] This actually happened or was engineered after the March 2018 Handshake between President Uhuru Kenyatta and Opposition Leader Raila Odinga.

Presidential Election was not just about President Kenyatta winning a second term in office, but also about the possibility of his Deputy succeeding him. The first narrative was, "Stop Raila Odinga at all costs". The story was that the only person standing between Ruto and the presidency was Raila Odinga. This is because if he pulled a surprise win over Uhuru Kenyatta, this would have dealt a severe blow to Ruto's presidential ambitions as it would have cut off the constant flow of resources needed for the campaign. Without these resources, he would not be in a position to mount a campaign to match Raila's since the latter has better sources of income.

Ken Opalo's second narrative was that Uhuru Kenyatta's promise to back William Ruto should be made water-tight. This was based on the perception that Kenyatta's promise to do so did not appear to be credible. Two factors were apparent in the minds of Ruto's supporters. One was that since Kenyatta's supporters did not owe Ruto any debt, they would be free to back any candidate of their choice in 2022. Two, as a former president, Kenyatta will not be in a position to compel the political and economic elites in his political backyard to support the candidate of his choice[2]. To deal with this situation, Ruto sought to strengthen the credibility of Kenyatta's promise by establishing a strong political party within Jubilee Party. The party was supposed to tie Kenyatta's hands by joining the political destinies of the Ruto and Kenyatta wings of the ruling coalition both in 2017 and in 2022. The story was that if this scheme worked, it would greatly enhance Ruto's status, since he would be the *de facto* party leader, and so influence the public political behaviour of elites associated with Kenyatta. If this influence was enough, it would help those elite to remain sincere to Kenyatta's public commitments.

Opalo's final narrative was that of consolidating the Rift Valley vote for Ruto. This arose from the realization that unlike retired President Daniel Arap Moi, Ruto had no solid command of the Kalenjin vote. In fact, in 2017 he was being challenged by politicians like Isaac Ruto who, it was feared, might ruin his chances in Bomet and parts of Kericho by dividing the Kalenjin loyalty. However, this narrative turned out not to be persuasive enough as William Ruto vanquished Isaac Ruto. It was also feared that in 2022, Gideon Moi, President Moi's son, will definitely make a run for Elgeyo-Marakwet, in addition to his home base of Baringo as well as Nakuru and other areas in the Rift Valley Region. To counter this, there is a narrative that Ruto is a powerful politician who can weather any storm in his home base. This is based on the fact that as Deputy President, he seems to have unlimited access to state resources that he can use to his advantage. On the other hand, unlike Kenyatta and Raila who enjoy near-fanatical support from their bases and with no serious elite challenges, Ruto does not enjoy that kind of luxury thereby making him extremely vulnerable. Indeed, Gideon Moi has capitalized on this to mount an early challenge to Ruto's perceived supremacy in the Rift Valley and present himself as an alternative centre of power. How this rivalry will ultimately play out in 2022, only time will tell. Isaac Ruto is also trying to come out and challenge the Deputy President after some lull that seemed to suggest that he had thrown in his political towel.

Before the 2017 General Elections, the opposition National Super Alliance (NASA) invented two narratives but which were in a sense related to each other. Led by their presidential candidate Raila Odinga, they floated the narrative that the Independent Boundaries and Electoral Commission (IBEC) could not preside over a free and fair election because it was biased against

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[2] However, contrary to this the President has gone ahead to do so.

them. So, they demanded the disbandment of the Commission before the August elections. They appealed to their supporters to come out in weekly demonstrations to force out the commissioners if they did not step down willingly. Although these demonstrations were supposed to be peaceful, they always turned chaotic, leading to confrontation with law enforcement agencies which resulted in looting, destruction of property and injuries. However, as it turned out the narrative was not persuasive enough since, apart from Nairobi, Kisumu and Mombasa, other areas did not organize any demonstrations. The demonstrations eventually fizzled out without achieving the intended purpose. The second narrative was that Jubilee was planning to rig the elections. This narrative was in a sense related to the first one and a continuation of the narrative that emerged after the 2013 General Elections which were won by the Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto's coalition parties of the National Alliance Party (TAP) and the United Republican Party (URP), respectively. That is why the Opposition were demanding that IBEC was not in a position to preside over a free and fair election and, therefore, deserved to be disbanded before the August 2017 General Elections.

The latter narrative has been perpetuated to this day. In the opinion of NASA, a number of companies colluded to deny them victory. These included Safaricom, the Telco in charge of transmitting the election results from the polling stations to, ultimately, Bomas of Kenya where the IBEC was collating all the results to transmit to the nation. NASA also blamed the British firm, Cambridge Analytica, for their loss. As late as 3rd June, 2019, Raila blasted this firm for tainting his name. At a Charter House Conference in London organized in honour of the late Kofi Annan he claimed that during the campaigns for the 2017 General Elections, this firm ran a platform which always displayed his picture alongside very negative stories. These pages were removed after the campaigns, thereby making it difficult for him to seek legal redress. Raila also said that Facebook, Twitter and even Google facilitated the work of outfits like Cambridge Analytica, and therefore were implicit in poisoning democracies. This narrative was based on the fact that Cambridge Analytica had been exposed in an investigative series aired on Channel 4 of News TV in Britain in which the firm claimed that it wrote Jubilee Party's manifesto and speeches and that it was also behind the party's rebranding. The important point to note here is that this was merely a claim; nevertheless, the Orange Democratic Party (ODM), Raila's political outfit, wanted the firm's operations to be fully investigated.

Raila also came up with a narrative that, in the opinion of his supporters, would resonate very well with the Christian voters. He declared himself as the Joshua that would lead Kenyans to Canaan, the Promised Land. According to the Holy Bible, after the death of Moses, who had liberated the Jews from slavery in Egypt, God anointed Joshua to lead the people across the River Jordan into Canaan. So, by christening himself Joshua, Raila was telling Kenyans that he was the one chosen to bring them the freedom they had been yearning for. However, the problem with this narrative was that Moses was missing in the picture. Who was the Moses that Joshua was succeeding?

Another narrative that relates to the 2017 General Elections could be described as the ethnic narrative. In this kind of narrative politicians of different parties form coalitions on the basis of how many votes an ethnic group can bring to the coalition's ballot box. As an example, in the run up to the August 2017 polls the fight was between Jubilee headed by the incumbent Uhuru Kenyatta and his Deputy William Ruto and the Coalition for Reforms and Democracy (CORD),

headed by opposition leader Raila Odinga and supported by Kalonzo Musyoka of Wiper and Moses Wetang'ula of FORD-Kenya. Whereas Jubilee already had its torch bearers, CORD was still debating as who among the three would be the torch bearer. Then, towards the end of 2016, Musalia Mudavadi, the leader of Amani National Congress (ANC), who had kept to himself all the while, started showing signs of willingness to join in a coalition with like-minded leaders. As a result of this, leading presidential aspirants stepped up efforts to court him because analysts believed he would play a critical role in the coming elections. According to the Saturday Nation Team (2016), CORD and Jubilee strategists believed that since Mudavadi comes from the second most populous ethnic group, he would seal the polls in their favour if he joined their camp. In the 2013 elections, Jubilee had won with a margin of 700,000 votes in the first round and CORD believed that if Mudavadi joined their side to form a super alliance, they would not only deny Jubilee the constitutional 50 plus one threshold to win in the first round, but they would emerge clear victors. On their part, Jubilee leaders were confident that Mudavadi's support would hand them a decisive win in the first round. As it turned out, Mudavadi decided to join his former colleagues in CORD to form the National Super Alliance (NASA). However, the super alliance failed to reap the expected fruits. This is because Mudavadi failed to marshal all the Luyia vote for the alliance. It is also most probable that the northern Luyias saw Raila's dalliance with Mudavadi, who had just come in, as a betrayal of Wetang'ula, who had been with him all along, and gave their votes to Jubilee. In any case, the Luyia do not vote as a block, meaning that there was no way Mudavadi was going to get all the Luyia voters to vote for NASA. Furthermore, in the 2013 presidential vote Mudavadi and his running mate, Jeremiah Kioni, had managed to get only 483,981 votes, which was certainly not a sterling performance.

The General Elections were held on Tuesday the 8th of August, 2017 as per the constitutional requirements. These elections were declared by all observers as having been largely free and fair. However, according to the Carter Center (2017: 1), on the following day as the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) began announcing results showing President Uhuru Kenyatta with about roughly 10 per cent lead, opposition presidential candidate Raila Odinga and his NASA claimed that there had been massive fraud and that the results had been hacked. In essence this was a continuation of a narrative that had been created before the elections, namely, that Jubilee was planning to rig the elections with the connivance of the IEBC. No evidence was adduced at the time to back these allegations. In fact, the results of a parallel vote tabulation (PVT) by a Kenyan citizen observation organization, namely, Election Observation Group (ELOG), were consistent with the nearly complete provisional results released on the 9th of August 8, 2017, which showed that President Kenyatta was leading with 54% of the vote while Raila Odinga had obtained about 45% of the vote. These results were based on data gathered from a representative random sample collected by about 1,700 observers deployed around the country (https://elog.or.ke/index.php/resource-centre/item/20-verification-statement-of-the-official-2017-presidential-results). The results were released on 11th August, 2017, the same day that IEBC released its final results and the two results were consistent with each other. In any case, in nullifying the results of the presidential election, the Supreme Court found no evidence to support NASA's claims of fraud and hacking. Neither did it find malfeasance on the part of staff of the IEBC (The Carter Center, 2017: 1). In fact, the Court's verdict was premised on the process of the elections and not on the vote tally.

Because of the narrative that the presidential vote had been stolen, there were violent protests in Kisumu and the slum areas of Kibra and Mathare in Nairobi where the opposition had fanatical support. These protests were fueled in part by narratives based on fake news. For example, a photo of a boy screaming in terror allegedly taken in Kisumu during a police operation on the day the presidential results were announced was posted by someone on a social media platform. The photo stirred emotional debate and was used to show how the Kenyan media had turned a blind eye to police brutality in Nyanza and parts of Nairobi. However, this later turned out to be fake as it was the same photo that had been posted in Kibera in 2008 by AFP photographer Walter Astrada. In another fake news earlier that day, the photo of the bodies of five people supposedly killed in Kisumu the previous day was posted on a WhatsApp group. The photo immediately went viral on social media. However, on close scrutiny, it was discovered that the bodies were those of the 2007/2008 post-election violence. Finally, on the same day a social media user posted that a bus travelling from Kisumu to Nairobi had been set on fire at Ahero. The post went viral within seconds. The fact of the matter, however, was that the bus was driven into Ahero Police Station after a group of youth pelted it with stones. This particular post was one of the hundreds of fake news items that did the rounds across the world, inaccurately depicting ongoing protests against Friday's announcement of President Uhuru Kenyatta's election victory against opposition leader Raila Odinga (Oywa, 2017). The purpose of these narratives was to demonstrate to the world that the country was in serious trouble and that people were suffering from police brutality but which the mainstream media houses had chosen to ignore. The fact of the matter, however, is that apart from a few pockets of violent confrontation between the police and some people, especially in Kisumu and in the informal settlements of Kibra and Mathare in Nairobi, the country was largely peaceful. In addition, the mainstream media were active in those areas and providing their followers with updates of the happenings there.

The final narrative that I would like to comment on is that propagated by the opposition that the Kenyan constitution is bad because it allows 'the winner takes it all'. The argument is that the constitution does not have room for losers to share in the spoils. This is the genesis of some politicians' call for amendments to the constitution to expand the Executive by creating several new positions. Some people see this as a veiled attempt to weaken the Office of the President further by turning it into a ceremonial office while at the same time creating the position of a powerful Prime Minister, ostensibly for Raila Odinga. This way, the story goes, we would have dealt with the issue of exclusivity which exists in the current constitution. My question here is, where in any democratic nation does the winner not take it all? In the United States system, a new president comes in with his own new cabinet, envoys and all state house operatives. This is also the case with the United Kingdom, the oldest democracy. In that country, a new Prime Minister chooses his or her own team, unless it is a case of taking over after a resignation of the incumbent. So, where is the peculiarity of the Kenyan situation?

Conclusion

From the above presentation, it can be seen that narratives are stories that are told by practically everybody and in different ways and with different intentions. They are a powerful and compelling way of transferring knowledge and information in a memorable way. Narratives provide meaning, and these tales and personal stories help society to connect to the bigger picture. In the case of Kenya, political narratives help politicians to connect with the electorate and to open their eyes to

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issues that they would otherwise have been unable to do so. Of course, it has to be pointed out that many of these narratives are created for the selfish interests of politicians by whipping up ethnic emotions. Storytellers can also use the power of metaphor to engage their audience. On the Kenyan political landscape, Raila Odinga is the master of this art. That is most probably why he is such a popular politician, with his political rallies always full of a captive audience. Finally, stories set a firm foundation for building a compelling vision for the future. In this connection, it is worthy pointing out that sometimes people want their biases confirmed, their personal struggles validated and their world views echoed in the speeches of their leaders. That is why Kenyan politicians and/or their cronies engage in all manner of narratives about how bright the future of Kenya would be if they were voted into power. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that most political narratives are based on false information or fake news. The argument is that the end justifies the means. However, although politicians try to tell stories about themselves, they are invariably overwhelmed by the stories that other people, especially through the media, say about them. For example, in this country the social media are awash with story after story about the political leaders.

Acknowledgements

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