

The aristocracisation of Kenya politics

How the electoral process in Kenya produces powerful political families that use identity to wield power

By Andrew M. Mwenda

Many factors may have influenced the 2013 election in Kenya. But three of these stand out.

The first is the influence of political families who have held sway over Kenya's politics since independence. The second is the role of money derived from wealth that has been accumulated through politics. The third is the ability of this political aristocracy to leverage identity to secure a following.

These factors are interconnected and self-reinforcing. They also have powerful implications on the nature of the state in Kenya and its ability to foster political institutions and public policies that can serve the ordinary citizen.

This election pitted the son of the first president against the son of the first vice president. Raila Odinga's father, Jaramogi Oginga Odinga, was the first vice president of Uhuru Kenyatta's father, Jomo Kenyatta.

Many of the other current influential politicians in Kenya; Musalia Mudavadi who run in the election, Noah Katana Ngala, Eugene Wamalwa, Gideon Moi etc., are sons of the first generation of post-independence leaders of that country.

These politicians may represent economic and social interests within Kenyan society. However, their political base is largely ethnic and their clout is derived from money.

People make political choices based on a number of considerations. They may vote on the basis of the ability of a candidate or political party to promote public policies that may improve the welfare of citizens. Here a political party or candidate may promise to deliver public goods such as roads, hospitals, boreholes, schools, farm implements, fertilizer and bridges. It/he/she may also promise to deliver public services like electricity, education, agricultural extension services and healthcare. These promises are realised at a later date. So they are uncertain. Thus quite often, voters in poor

countries also demand private goods during campaigns. Candidates may buy sugar, salt, rice, meat and alcohol or even make direct cash payments to voters. These are paid immediately. So they are certain. For many voters, they do better holding a candidate to account during campaigns than wait for the benefits of public policy. This structure of incentives tends to favour candidates who possess large sums of cash.

But voters may also make choices on the basis of ideology because a party or candidate's political platform appeals to their ideals. Many may vote a party or candidate that supports democracy and human rights. People may also vote because the candidate appeals to their patriotism and stands in opposition to foreign interference in local affairs. We see elements of this in the recent elections in Kenya where the West's threats of "grave consequences" if Kenyans elected those indicted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) served to mobilise voters in favor of the Uhuru-Ruto ticket.

However, people do not live on material interests and ideals alone. People also have "spiritual" needs as well. These bring them a sense of belonging and meaning to their lives. Such spiritual needs may include religion, race, or ethnic group.

For example, across Sub-Saharan Africa, people identify with U.S. President Barack Obama. This may be because of his ideals. But for the most part it is because Obama is seen to share their race. It matters less what his policies and ideals towards Africa are. For the vast majority of Africans, Obama feeds into our emotional need to see one of our own occupying the most powerful office in the world – for in his achievement we see an image of our own future. His success opens for us wider horizons on what we can achieve.

People do not vote on "either or" of these factors. They may consider all of them. Depending on the moment and holding other factors constant, the result reflects the average distribution of attention to all the three factors in an election and how the candidates have used them.

In Kenya's case, identity is a powerful influence. Even material interests are pressed forward through the prism of identity. One reason why ethnicity is a powerful political weapon is that while the political class in that country is filthy rich, most Kenyan voters are wretched poor. The country's gene co-efficient (the measure of

income gap between the rich and the poor) at 42.5 is one of the highest in Africa.

Thus, identity is one factor that allows Kenyan politicians to transcend economic differences with their voters. The more acute the income differences between politicians and their voters, the higher will be the tendency of the elite to rely on other issues such as identity to secure a following. By appealing to a common identity, a rich political class is able to create a common platform with poor voters on a shared heritage, ethnicity and culture. The income gap between a rich political class and an impoverished voting population in Kenya provides an important slice to the explanation for high levels of ethnic polarisation in that country.

This factor is very pronounced in the politics of the Republican Party in the United States. There, the rich white class commands the loyalty of poor white voters. To win this loyalty, the leaders of the Republican Party appeal to “traditional values” of anti-abortion, anti-gay rights, Christianity, and patriotism. However, “traditional values” is also sometimes a code word for white supremacy. Here, poor whites that may feel alienated from the affluence of their kin are given a psychological feeling of importance. By appealing to their sense of racial superiority, the corporate barons of the Republican Party are able to build a common cause with poor whites against those from other races, especially black people, with whom they share a common economic predicament.

These dynamics are also to be found in Kenya as well. Of course there are differences over policy among Kenya’s political class. But these differences are in degree or detail. Overall, the political class in Kenya possesses wealth and money and therefore a shared interest in the existing regime of property rights and the political institutions and public policies that undergird this structure. Since most of this wealth is derived from controlling the state, the political class in Kenya may be united around money but is divided around power. Who gets power has powerful implications on who makes money. The contest for power, therefore, tends to obscure the economic unity of this class by highlighting their ethnic differences. Electoral competition in Kenya therefore tends to get politically charged around the issue of identity.

However, the distribution of the population makes it difficult for any one ethnic group to win elections on its own. The largest ethnic group, the Kikuyu, constitute only 22 percent of the population. The

second largest, the Luhya, are only 14 percent. Therefore, no one can rely on their ethnic group and win a national election. To overcome this handicap, politicians in Kenya have to form alliances with others from different ethnic groups. These alliances are sometimes built around the economic interests of their constituents. Sometimes they are not. However, depending on how leaders at the top structure the coalition, even when they have not solved the underlying economic or land disputes, ordinary voters in Kenya tend to side with their leaders.

As seen in the recent election, over 90 percent of Luos voted for Odinga. Over 90 percent of Kalenjin, who had voted Raila by a similar margin in 2007 changed sides and voted for Uhuru. This is because Uhuru, a Kikuyu, allied with William Ruto, a Kalenjin and perhaps the most influential politician in the rift valley. Equally, the Kikuyu overwhelmingly voted Uhuru, a factor that may explain why with a small addition of votes from a few other communities, the Jubilee coalition won. Raila's Luo allied with the Kamba and other coastal groups. Regardless of the underlying principles of the CORD coalition, it was unable to rally sufficient numbers of ethnic block votes to stop the Jubilee train.

The tendency of Kenyans to vote in ethnic blocks explains why the democratic process in that country tends to sustain elite privilege even at the expense of public policies that are supposed to serve the ordinary citizen.

For example, Kenya's 2012/13 budget is in excess of US\$ 16 billion for a population of only 40 million. This equals to per capita expenditure of US\$400 per person. Compare this with Uganda whose expenditure per capita is US\$ 114 or Rwanda at US\$118. There is little in Kenya's public goods and services, compared to Uganda and Rwanda, to show for this high level of public expenditure. Instead, at a basic salary of US\$ 13,500 per month, an MP in Kenya earns more than twice what an MP in France earns (US\$6,400) – a country whose GDP is almost 80 times larger.

Thus, given that France's per capital income is US\$35,000, there is really a close relationship in income between an average citizen in France and their representative who earn US\$77,000 per year. The income of a Kenyan MP at US\$ 162,000 (or US\$350,000 in PPP) per year compares sadly with Kenya's per capita income of US\$830 (\$1,700 in PPP). Therefore, the income gap between an MP in Kenya

and that of his average voter is really large, making it difficult for the democratic process to produce legislators who can be real champions of the interests of their constituents.

Therefore, in spite of electoral democracy, and in spite of large outlays of government revenue compared to its neighbours, the ability of the state in Kenya to deliver public goods and services to the citizens remains relatively low. This is because in building a winning electoral coalition, Kenyan politicians need not appeal directly to the masses that vote. Rather they need to negotiate with powerful ethnic intermediaries that represent the masses. These powerful men and women then act as a bridge between the presidential candidate or political party and their co-ethnics.

This organisation of electoral coalitions has powerful implications on the strategies of the state. It means that the productive margin in the search for votes does not lie in provision of public goods and services to citizens. It lies with providing private goods to influential ethnic intermediaries. Private goods to elites may include a politically influential and economically lucrative ministerial appointment or an appointment to a board of a powerful state enterprise – and with it, huge perks and privileges including official cars, flights abroad etc. But it will also include unofficial opportunities to profit through corruption. Here, the politician may directly steal from the state or use the state to direct public sector tenders to companies owned by friends and allies.

If a politician can win the presidency by placating the interests of a few elites from a given community, that is a more cost-effective and cost-efficient strategy compared to providing public goods and services to that region. But this does not mean that the coalition ignores provision of public goods and services to ordinary voters. Constituents do demand public goods and services. Politicians win votes by showing how able they have been to leverage their positions to secure “development projects” for their constituencies. These projects may include roads, bridges, hospitals and schools. The point is that the primary driver of the coalition is the trade in private goods among elites – public goods and service to the citizen coming as a second.

The second consequence of these political strategies is corruption. To keep powerful elites in the coalition, the president and his ruling

party have to turn a blind eye to official theft. Take the example of the Uhuru-Ruto ticket. Whatever the issues that may have underpinned it, it was an alliance of the largest and third largest ethnic groups in Kenya. Meanwhile, the Raila-Musyoka ticket was an alliance of the fourth and fifth largest ethnic communities of Kenya. The second largest ethnic community, the Luhya – themselves a conglomeration of 16 sub ethnic groups – have never voted as a block. From the word go, therefore, this arithmetic meant that the dice was loaded in favour of the Uhuru-Ruto ticket.

Without Ruto's support, it is unlikely that Uhuru would have defeated Raila. Indeed, Raila may have realised that his break-up with Ruto was the critical factor that denied him the presidency. If Uhuru desires to win a second term, and holding other factors constant, the last thing he can afford is a breakdown of his relationship with Ruto. However, assuming Ruto and many of those in his group turn out to be incompetent and/or corrupt, what options does Uhuru have? Can he fire him? If yes: at what price?

Ethnic block voting, therefore, tends to strengthen the hand of elites over the masses. But this is only possible by leveraging ethnicity. However, to become a powerful ethnic powerbroker, the individual politician needs to accumulate wealth and money to sustain a large retinue of hangers-on – hence corruption. Within the context of such patronage politics, corruption becomes the way the system works, not the way it fails. Hence, in the specific context of that nation's politics, the democratic process in Kenya tends to produce an anti-democratic outcome.