Chapter 12

Hate Speech and Competitive Politics: Youth Gangs and Electoral Violence in Kenya’s Multiparty Era

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ABSTRACT

The study was motivated by identified gaps in literature, theory and practice on hate speech’s role in perpetuating negative ethnicity and youth violence. The study sought to add to existing knowledge with modifications to the Critical Race Theory, highlighting ethnicity as a dominant factor in Kenya’s political and social discourse. The study is founded on the Pragmatic Paradigm, employing various mixed methods techniques. The sample of the study was 150 youth drawn from a Kenyan University and University College through simple random sampling. Convenience sampling was used to select a sample for Focus Group Discussions. Five members of ethnic-affiliated university student associations were interviewed and snowball sampling used to identify five members of the Mungiki sect for interview. Data was analyzed by linking the research objectives to the data analysis procedure, transcribing data and analyzing textual content to determine features characterizing hate speech based on the target group’s perceptions, thus generating themes for analysis to facilitate the building of theory.

INTRODUCTION

This study highlights the emergence of hate speech, the result of ethnic cleavages, as a potential area of risk for the government of Kenya that could lead to dire consequences with respect to peace, human rights, security and ultimately the country’s stability, if not urgently addressed. The youth factor emerges as critical given the increasing wave of youth as a dominant factor of violent political conflict in Africa, as exemplified by cases in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Congo, Central African Republic and Southern Sudan.

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In examining Kenya’s case, this chapter isolates communication in the form of hate speech through various media as the conveyor belt for reinforcing ethnic identity and underscores its role in social differentiation and conflict in the Kenyan society. The underlying hypothesis is that there exist a number of fundamental interlinkages between hate speech and youth violence, that have remained indiscernible, either due to conceptual constructs or lack of sufficient research on the interaction of these two phenomena. The study traces in addition a causal link between hate speech and youth violence during political campaigns and elections, given that this form of communication is subject to the machinations of politicians exploiting the ethnic card to guarantee the much needed edge for staving off stiff political competition, notwithstanding the propensity for violence. The argument is then developed to demonstrate why Kenya remains susceptible to youth violence during elections and yet lessons learned over the multi-party era, which the study confines itself to, should have informed the designing of a sound framework for dealing with its causes; key among them hate speech. The research identifies gaps in the current policy making practise and proposes direction with due attention to cultural legacies, historical experiences and the emerging challenges of contemporary times.

Language plays a critical role in socializing a community into violence. A case in point is the speech that sparked xenophobic attacks in South Africa in March 2015 by the Zulu traditional leader King Goodwill Zwelithini in which he blamed foreigners for the high crime rate in the country. Although he retracted the statement insisting that it was misinterpreted, the damage was phenomenal and caused a mass exodus of foreigners from the country.

In Kenya, through jokes, cultural stereotypes, media portrayal of violence as ‘normal’, Kenyans purvey ideas that legitimize brutality against perceived enemies both through overt and subtle means. Against this background, media itself becomes gullible to misuse by overzealous politicians. The mushrooming of vernacular radio stations in Kenya, whereas a positive manifestation of media liberalization, could conversely represent a threat to the country’s stability under partisan political influence given their reputation as credible sources for public agenda-setting; the apparent role played during the 1994 Rwanda genocide during which the media provided a cue for ethnic polarization. Mobile phone text messaging has also proved a particular threat in Kenya’s case, where the vast majority of adults own a mobile telephone and SMS text messaging has great appeal because of its affordability. As well, the popular use of social media particularly among Kenya’s youth in recent times has introduced new dimensions in curbing the spread of hate speech, in light of the absence of a credible monitoring and regulatory framework. The impact of efforts by the Kenya government to curb hate speech have returned dismal results, generating concerns over the existence of institutions such as the National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC), a statutory body established in 2008 to promote national cohesion in the wake of a new coalition government after bitterly contested elections.

The study found that establishing the intricate link between hate speech and political violence, though challenging, can be facilitated by a deep understanding of the context, including cultural norms and values of the parties in question. In certain communities, the role of boys as warriors often makes the transition into militia easier due to this natural role as fighters. Examples abound in nomadic ethnic groups that practice cattle rustling in Kenya, Uganda and Sudan. The research identified youth as an instrument of unique appeal for partisan politics, increasingly in use during Kenya’s elections for settling political scores and advancing patronage, in the pretext of protecting perceived ethnic interests hence undermining the concept of national identity and patriotism (although ethnic and national identity may not be mutually exclusive).
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