Chapter 1
The Verbal Fuel for Ethnic Hatred and Political Violence in Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Africa has been plagued by many violent conflicts in history and in contemporary times. Causes of these conflicts range from disagreements over allocation of national resources to ethnic rivalries over grazing fields, to territorial expansionism in the past, to economic development, elections and others, more recently. Hate speech or inflammatory language, or dangerous language both on line and off line, and elections have developed as major catalysts in recent violent conflicts. This chapter explores language (hate speech, inflammatory or dangerous language) as the verbal fuel that has ignited violent political conflicts in Kenya over the last two decades. It concludes that even though language fuels conflict, efforts to end conflict must go beyond language and elections (surface manifestations of deep-seated grievances) to economic marginalization which is at the core of differences that spasmodically erupt in violence.

INTRODUCTION

Africa, in general, and Kenya in particular have been plagued by regular spirals of violent conflicts that have been characterized as ethnic. While many of such conflicts have pitted ethnic communities or blocs of communities against each other, there is nothing intrinsically confrontational about the ethnic groups in Africa and Kenya. It is the set of historical, political and socioeconomic circumstances that communities have found themselves in from precolonial, colonial, and contemporary times that have embroiled them in violent conflict, their mere ethnicity, their languages, or indeed the elections in which they compete for power, being mere triggers for violence.

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BACKGROUND

All through history, conflicts have existed in Africa, from the precolonial tribal raids to those experienced during the colonial period, either between indigenous people and the colonial administration itself or between African communities, and most recently between ethnic groups or other interest groups about boundaries, elections, governance, economic development, foreign intervention, or indeed from militarization of the society (Oyeniyi, 2011). In recent times, the continent has seen an upsurge of political violence since the 90’s during the “third wave of democracy”. Such violence has occurred even in nations hitherto perceived as relatively stable, like Kenya. Most of the violence has been experienced at the onset of elections or immediately after them, raising the question whether elections are the real causes of the violence or mere triggers where the core reasons remain deep-seated. Omotola (2008: 55) describes electoral violence and its aims by citing Albert (2007:133) as “…all forms of organized acts of violence – physical, psychological, and structural – aimed at intimidating, harming, blackmailing a political stakeholder before, during and after an election with a view to determining, delaying, or otherwise influencing an electoral process” Bekoe (2010) claims, about the incidence of violence at election time, that “Violence in Africa’s elections affects between 19 and 25 per cent of the elections. In many countries where electoral violence is a risk, it tends to recur and may consequently lead to unfavorable views of democracy.” She further suggests that the violence occurs in democracies that have “strong authoritarian legacies or deep ethnic cleavages…”In Kenya, there were violent conflicts between 1991 and 1994, prior to and after the country’s first multiparty elections in 1992, in 1998 after the second multiparty elections in December 1997, but the violence that occurred between December 2007 and February 2008 in the wake of the elections of 2007 was on an unprecedented scale. Later investigations revealed that the violence was caused by a host of unattended historical injustices and that these elections and a saturation of virulent verbal messages were the triggers for the violence. Other African nations that have been affected by violence at elections include Uganda, Zimbabwe, Sierra Leone, Ethiopia, Togo, Guinea and Burundi.

The influence of language in stoking violence at election is particularly heavy because of the use of language in campaign meetings, in media advertisements, TV and radio shows, on the internet in blogs, on Facebook, twitter, and other social media platforms. Campaign language has been thought to influence election results for a long time. Umar (2015) opines that language is “…the most potent tool with which one individual influences and controls the behavior of another. In the broadest sense, the term language may range from verbal communication to expressive attitudes, appearances and gestures (body language). In that sense, language comes into powerful operation when an aspirant verbally addresses (in person or by proxy) an electorate” That inflammatory language can virulently catalyze violence at election time is plausible.

This chapter explores the use of exclusivist language and metaphors, emerging as a characterization of the sutures that have existed among the ethnicities of Kenya, which have progressively built up an attitude of political aggression that have led to cycles of violence seen between 1991 and 1994 on a smaller scale and in the conflagration of postelection violence of 2007/2008. The chapter also examines the measures that have been instituted to eliminate violence and underlines the fact that violent political or ethnic rhetoric is a surface structure reflection of deep-seated ethnic cleavages in the Kenyan society and that addressing the surface structure features will not provide concrete and sustainable solutions to political violence. At best, it can only lead to a temporary ceasefire.
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