

Online Article

Tribe and Tribalism in Kenya's Politics

I already realised the problem was not just one of disagreement between political leaders over an election result: the countrywide violence meant the problem was more fundamental, arising from the makeup of the Kenyan political system and its relationship with society. We needed a process that would address the root causes of Kenya's problems, otherwise any agreement would constitute nothing more than a delay before the next violent crisis ... Our mediation needed to be the beginning of a true process of political reform.

– Kofi Annan, former Secretary General, UN

Following the violence that took an ethnic form after the controversial outcome of the December 2007 presidential elections in Kenya, Kofi Annan, the mediator among the conflicting parties, in his pursuit for a peaceful settlement made the above point emphasising the key political problem in Kenya: that of creating a nation out of diverse tribes.

The concept 'tribe' is itself a problem; what it connotes presents an even more complex phenomenon in understanding and dealing with a postcolonial situation. In the case of colonial Africa, the European colonialists used the word 'tribe' to define the conglomeration of the local communities they found in Africa, who they defined as *primitive, backward, uncivilised and in need of salvation*. The colonists therefore tended to herd the 'natives' together in homelands and deny them all the modern benefits of 'European civilisation', such as education. Such homelands were called 'districts' in the case of Kenya. South Africa was the extreme where racial segregation, called

Peter Anyang' Nyong'o
Governor of Kisumu County,
Kenya

Caroline Karugu
Finance and Investments Expert
Nairobi, Kenya

apartheid, lasted much longer than elsewhere in Africa. What put an end to this ugly phase of imperialism called colonialism was not the good nature or free will of the imperialists but the *struggle for independence and self determination* by the Africans themselves.

Since 'tribe' had been used to divide Africans so as to politically oppress and economically exploit them, tribe also an enemy of nationalism and the struggle for independence. According to Amilcar Cabral, the leader of the African Party for the Independence of Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde (PAIGC), the whole idea of the struggle for independence was *to die a tribe and be born a nation*

in the post-independence situation. But the expression of tribe in terms of *political exclusion based on tribe* has made the birth of politically cohesive nations almost a permanent work in progress, quite often degenerating into the kind of conflict that Kofi Annan was mediating in Kenya. The conflict became a tribal conflict since the parties to the conflict were grouped into political parties with generally *tribal boundaries*. Need this have been the case?

Not really, since Amilcar Cabral pointed out that the independence struggle should itself be a process of nation-building, of dying as tribes and being born as nations. But it is what happened in Africa. Or it happened in various degrees and with diverse outcomes from one post-independence situation to the other. In Tanzania, Mwalimu Julius Nyerere's Tanganyika African National Union (TANU), subsequently transformed into Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) after the union with Zanzibar, actually became reasonably successful in creating a conscious process of

nation-building by substantially reducing tribal political and economic competition. Kenya, on the other hand, since independence, has seen the continuous formation of political parties that obey the boundaries of tribe: hence Kofi Annan's observation. What, then, needs to be done in the case of Kenya? Or, to put the question in a more active way: *what have Kenyans done, or what do they intend to do, to overcome these boundaries?*

By the time Kofi Annan was mediating in the post-election conflict of 2007–2008, it was quite clear that whatever had been done had failed to produce the political fabric for *dying a tribe and being born a nation*. The result was the recommendation by Kofi Annan's team for radical constitutional changes that would widen the frontiers of democratic politics in Kenya so that political struggles for scarce resources would rise above ethnic conflicts under *new rules of the game that would promote nationhood*. The 2010 Constitution tried to do exactly this, both in its preamble and in proposed legislation for creating national cohesion through political, economic and social institutions and processes.

The problem in Kenya, however, continues to be the makeup of the Kenyan political system and its relationship with society, which is due to two interconnected but different phenomena: tribe and tribalism. Tribe can be broadly defined as an association of people who share linguistic, kinship or other similar ties, whereas tribalism is the political mobilisation of 'tribe' to secure or maintain state resources to the exclusion of other tribes. This distinction is important because it helps us shed the impression that

tribe is inferior to race and primordial or atavistic: it simply refers to dynamic, ever-changing identities.

Tribalism, on the other hand, is nowhere near as benign or benevolent. Tribalism leads to neglect, marginalisation, exclusion and, in Kenya, violent conflict. In Rwanda, it led to genocide.

The struggle for ethnic inclusion in Kenya is as old as the country: scholar Professor Karuti Kanyinga has argued that 'In Kenya ... the colonial administration created native reserves by force. The state did not allow interaction between groups. This alone firmed up ethnic identities. The state imposed restrictions on movement of these groups from one area to another.'

Consequently, the different communities became 'ethnicised' ... [and] isolated.

Kanyinga has shown with dexterity how, in post-independence Kenya, critical state positions have been controlled and/or dominated by the tribe from which the president hailed. There is no need for me, at this juncture, to argue against this point because the figures and data that support his view are granite-solid. Indeed, it is because of this that the failure of the NARC coalition to hold together after its devastating electoral victory over the then-ruling Moi–Kanu regime in 2002 spiralled into the 2007–2008 post-election crisis and led to Kenya's worst existential nightmare.

I would, instead, like to pose the question: 'So what are we to do to slay this monster called tribalism?' Arend Lijphart and Will Kymlicka, who have both studied ethnically fragmented/divided/fractious societies extensively and made clear

cases on how these societies should manage these fissures, have made useful contributions to this debate.

Lijphart's proposed solution to the problem of tribalism in Kenya's body politic revolves around the theory of 'consensus democracy', or consociationalism, which goes beyond mere majoritarian democracy. Consensus democracies have multiparty systems, parliamentary systems with oversized (and therefore inclusive) cabinet coalitions, proportional electoral systems, corporatist (hierarchical) interest group structures, federal/devolved structures, bicameralism, rigid Constitutions protected by judicial review, and independent central banks. These are all elements that currently feature in the Kenyan constitution. But 'presidentialism' quite often undercuts them in the public sector and state structures, thereby superimposing tribalism in constitutional practice.

On the other hand, Kymlicka talks of 'pluralism'. Pluralism is defined by The Global Centre for Pluralism as an 'ethic of respect that values human diversity'. Pluralism is a deliberate choice that is made to ensure and enhance inclusion and participation within societies that are characterised by the diversity that results from differences in, for example, culture, language and religion. In pluralism, such diversity does not need to lead to division and conflict. Instead, it quite often softens the edges of potential conflicts by democratically promoting unity in diversity.

Pluralism is not accidental; instead, it results from considered decision-making and thoughtful public investment. Moreover, it is characterised by good governance,

strong civic institutions and sound public policy choices. Thus, the state plays a central role in whether a society enjoys pluralism or not.

Kymlicka has characterised pluralism as incorporating both 'hardware' and 'software'. 'Hardware' features items such as Constitutions and institutions, including legislatures, courts, schools and the media. 'Software' involves cultural habits and public mindsets, which include conceptions of national identity and historical narratives. Kymlicka notes that these habits and mindsets shape our perceptions of who belongs and who contributes, and they influence how we interact with others on an everyday basis.

It is important to note that both the hardware and software dimensions of pluralism are equally important; they are interdependent and constantly interact, affect and condition each other.

Kymlicka observes that, at their best, these dynamics produce virtuous circles: the emergence of pluralistic narratives and identities makes inclusive institutional reforms possible, which in turn serve to strengthen habits and mindsets of respect for diversity.

But the dynamics can equally go in the opposite direction, as exclusionary mindsets lead to discriminatory institutional reforms, which in turn serve to further polarise at-

titudes and exacerbate feelings of distrust or enmity.

The jury is still out as to whether the Building Bridges Initiative (BBI) would have been a catalyst to deeper consociational democracy in Kenya were it to have been implemented. Notwithstanding the resistance against it, the issues it raised and tried to resolve are still pertinent. In postponing their resolution Kenya sacrifices greater national cohesion as tribalism continues to feed the interests of the political elites.

The struggle, as it were, continues.

– END –