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## A FIRST CUT AT UNDERSTANDING YOUNG PEOPLE'S ATTITUDES TOWARDS POLITICS IN KENYA

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### Abstract

Cet article soutient qu'il est essentiel de comprendre les différentes postures des enfants face à la politique. C'est afin de nous aider à comprendre comment la socialisation politique contemporaine fonctionne dans l'attitude critique et durant la période de formation de l'identité de l'adolescence. Le document présente les conclusions d'une étude qualitative à petite échelle menée en 2013 au Kenya sur les perspectives des enfants, hommes et femmes, âgés de 14 à 18 ans, à propos des attitudes possibles envers la politique et leur identité ethnique. Les données, collectées par le biais de groupes de discussion et d'entretiens approfondis, seront présentées à travers les quatre dimensions de la politique africaine de Chabal et de Daloz; à savoir les limites de la politique, la notion d'individu, la notion de légitimité politique et la question de la représentation. L'objectif est d'appuyer une réflexion contemporaine sur ces points de vue de la politique africaine, dans la perspective des jeunes, afin de déterminer s'ils constituent un moyen pertinent d'analyser les classes populaires sur le sujet.

**E**thnicity and politics are intertwined in the Kenyan political space. An attempt to explain the details and nuances of the Kenyan political context would be a thesis itself. Key in understanding the Kenyan political system is an understanding of the colonial and post-colonial context. Fundamental to this is the politicisation of ethnicity. The politicisation of ethnicity, or as Mahmood Mamani terms it, the 'civicisation of politics' covers a wide range of relevant issues ranging from generational politics to ethnic group demands for land rights and

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political recognition<sup>1</sup>. With 42 ethnic groups in Kenya, it is easy to see why this has become a political issue. The common thread that runs throughout this literature is the fact that ethnicity has been transformed from a purely local cultural and social resource to a "political resource" that has often hindered the democratisation process.

The paper will look at more detail into this feature of Kenyan politics, among other salient features by adopting, as a theoretical frame, Chabal and Daloz's<sup>2</sup> four dimensions that they put forth in understanding African identity politics (there were five in their book but the last which is the meaning of political opposition will not be discussed in this paper.) These are: the boundaries of politics, the notion of the individual, the issue of political legitimacy and the question of representation. These features have been recurring attributes in some quarters of Africanist political science in the last ten years. The aim of this paper is to test their current validity by applying them to young people's opinions of politics and ethnicity. These opinions were collected during a pilot study conducted from the 10th of September to the 10th of October in one urban and one rural area of Kenya. The young people (both women and men) were between the aged of 14 and 17 and were recruited through secondary schools in the research areas.

The main research question that guided the study was: How do children perceive and exercise their ethnicity [in relation to politics]?

### Methods

Focus group discussions and in depth interviews were used as the primary data collection methods and these were conducted in one urban school girls school in the capital Nairobi and one rural boys school in Nyeri Kenya. The method also involved a narrative exercise, where the participants in the focus groups were asked to write on flash cards, what they would like to tell the presidential candidates. These methods were underpinned by a peer led framework. There has been a growing trend towards young people's participation in the research process. The method that was adapted for this study is that which has been used in

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<sup>1</sup> Mahmood Mamdani (2001), *Beyond Settler and Native as Political Identities: Overcoming the Political Legacy of Colonialism*, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 43, No. 4, pp. 651-664.

<sup>2</sup> Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz (2012), *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument*, Indiana University Press.

peer training for HIV prevention where young people are trained in HIV prevention methods and allowed to facilitate informal sessions with their peers. In my case the peer educators have been reorganized as peer researchers. The following section will be an analysis of the findings from the interviews, using the four themes from Chabal's and Daloz's work<sup>3</sup>.

### **The boundaries of politics**

In Kenya, the divisions are less clear between politics, religion, culture and ethnicity. As Young would term it, ethnicity is "an enduring attribute of African political dynamics" which is needed to win elections, gain power and sometimes even successfully operate a government. This is because of particular communities benefiting and others being marginalized depending on who is in power. For instance, in one constituency in the western region of Kenya, the party primaries for the recently concluded elections (March 2013) for the CORD alliance highlighted this fact. The majority ethnic group in that area has dominated politics to the perceived detriment of the minority community. The elders of the latter have stated that in the forthcoming elections, it should be one of their members who will succeed to political office in order to secure their interests which they claim have not been taken into account. The boundaries of politics are therefore about how different identities come into play in the political space.

As was mentioned in the introduction, Mamdani among others have spoken of the "politicisation of ethnicity." This is a two way street where negative ethnic elements are activated by politics as well as ethnicity in itself directly influencing political options. An example of the former can be seen during election periods in various African countries where citizens are more likely to ascribe to their ethnic communities than at other times or in other situations. On the other side of the coin, community interests are often times paramount and there is a strong pressure for politicians from below to conform to the needs and interests of their communities. But over and above the politicisation of identity there has also been a criminalisation of identity as is referenced in Brilliant Mhlanga's work on ethnicity in Zimbabwe. In the colonial era, ethnicity in the form of the various traditions espoused by tribes was seen as backwards and it was the duty of the colonisers through missionaries and educational institutions to modernise the African. This is still prevalent today with talk about tribes and tribalism being seen as not a useful endeavour. This was clear when

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

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before young people were interviewed in one rural school, they asked me why I was interested in talking about ethnicity, as there was no use. They considered themselves Kenyans and to them, thinking in tribal terms was backward.

What will be looked at below is how these ideas of ethnicity play out among young people before looking at its influence on their attitudes towards politics in Kenya. This will look at the dynamism of identities, ethnic stereotypes as well as attitudes towards national and ethnic identity.

##### **Dynamism of identities**

There is a dynamism that is associated with young people's identities. The term "aspectival" may come into play here, with identities not being an objective constant term, but open to negotiation and indeed in a state of flux. This is illustrated by the statement below from one of the participants saying he is seventy-five percent from one community.

Ok, me I am seventy-five percent kikuyu. We are people who like money most of the time.

While he did not elaborate on this particular statement, this is an interesting phrase that illustrates that ethnic identities are not static, neither are they fixed to one particular community, but can shift between them depending on the situation and context. With increases in inter-marriages between communities and rural-urban migration, this is perhaps fast becoming a salient feature of this particular generation. They are not as tied to the past as their predecessors and are free to mould and merge their identities as it suits them in their different contexts

Another instance was in an interview where one of the participants noted in her life history that her mother had separated from her father. This was a painful event, as he had left them abruptly and without warning. What was interesting from this story is when she mentioned that immediately after the separation her mother told her that she was no longer a member of her father's ethnic group. I should mention here that her parents were from two separate ethnic groups. It seemed that she had initially taken on the identity of the father as is common in most societies, particularly patriarchal ones, but she was asked to revert back to her mother's ethnic identity. She did not see this as unusual, as her mother had brought her

up with an appreciation of the traditions of both communities. This is illustrated by her statement below;

My real tribe I am Kamba but my mum does not appreciate that she always told me that I am no longer a Kamba but I am a Luhya. As she is my mum, I had to respect but from my Luhya tribe, it does not have hard rules to follow and it's a good tribe that does not rely mostly on tribalism.

Language was one of the ways through which identities were expressed. There was, however, a conflict between being able to speak your ethnic language with someone who speaks the same language versus only speaking Kiswahili. It seems in the school setting, speaking ethnic languages is discouraged and there was debate about this policy. As one participant highlighted, there was a need to speak the national language as "we are cosmopolitan here" and do not want to "marginalise anyone" as there are people from other communities. On the other side of the argument was the need for freedom of expression.

Feel free when you are speaking kikuyu in school [...] when it is the language that you understand.

There was a feeling that this freedom was clashing with the need for a more "national" outlook as will be seen from the other sections in this paper. For example, one participant noted that he had to learn the language of the dominant ethnic group (Kikuyu) when he moved to that area to study, because, outside of the classroom in the dormitory and around the area that was what was spoken and he had to adapt. His tone was one of lament for this situation and he would have liked wider use of the national language – Kiswahili. One of the potential effects of this is a sense of imbalance that these young people have where on the one hand, they are told to be proud of their communities but on the other, they are told to ignore them.

### **Ethnic stereotypes as determinants of future prospects**

Ethnic stereotypes are common in the Kenyan context and indeed they are the subject of a number of comedic episodes in various local shows. They are taken quite for granted and as self-evident, though in the general public discourse, not all tribes are included in this, mainly those that are dominant in the political discourse. For instance, Kikuyus are seen to be "money hungry misers" Luo's to have "class" and Luhya's to be "strong bodied". In the African context, this kind of stereotyping has had

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a negative association with violence as can be cited with the Rwandan case where the Tutsi community were cast as cockroaches that needed to be eradicated. While there are some decidedly negative stereotypes out there, what is interesting is it seems that there is a perception among the young people that they can play a role in determining your life prospects. For instance, Luhya's are apparently known as watchmen and "Kikuyu's are business oriented."

This quote was followed by an explanation where one of the participants highlighted that they felt that they were under an obligation to fulfil this scenario. When he came to high school he felt that he should open a small business to make some money, because that is what is expected of his group. This also brings to the fore, the notion of habitus in their identities. That subconscious way in which we are socialized that helps us act in certain ways within our social habitat. It seems that habitus of ethnicity serves as an indicator of their future prospects.

"I feel like all these things that we hear they compel you towards a certain path in life. For example, like myself, the way I have been raised, I have been hearing that the Kikuyu love money, until it becomes a part of my soul until one feels that I was born to make money, therefore you go and make it because you have to prove it to others. Also the Luo's you see them on the street, talking very good English, and the way they act, it is something that is expected of them."

### **National versus ethnic identity**

There were references that were made to how national identity, ethnic identity and more personal identities are linked. It emerged that there is some understanding of the reality of living within a state. Some of the participants highlighted that they live within a country, with common laws, rules, language and regulations and that is what makes them feel Kenyan. A national identity is seen as acquired by birth. You are born a Kenyan. But, different aspects of life in Kenya either make them proud of this fact or not. The participants used what was a national unity campaign slogan to highlight their thoughts, with *Najivunia kuwa mkenya* (I am proud to be Kenyan) emerging as good climate, dominance in the East African economic market and Olympic prowess. The latter brings in the issue of context (and in this case local context) being key when these identities come into play. For those who were from conflict hotspots such as Eldoret and more recently the Tana River region. For instance, one participant contested the view of Kenya as peaceful when he stated;

There were clashes in Eldoret. So let me ask you, these children that are born in that place and that time, during the post-election violence, does it mean that they will view Kenya as peaceful?

This was further highlighted in a ranking that participants were asked to take part in that was not in the original focus group guide. They were asked to rank family, tribe and country in order. The majority ranked it as family – country – tribe though there were dissenting opinions such as "without that tribe there would be no Kenya." and "propaganda of the government is one tribe one Kenya." One of these dissenting views reflected quite clearly how their day to day existence affects their outlook by stating, "What is the Kenyan spirit?" Which is similar to sentiments expressed in Daloz's chapter "can we eat democracy?" For this participant he did not feel Kenyan the state did not provide for his needs. This kind of instrumental identity would perhaps explain the view of effective politics as "performance politics" that will be explained in the later sections of this paper. In addition, they recognize identity as situational and dependent on the context. A respondent mentions the case of David Rudisha (Olympic gold medallist from the Kalenjin ethnic group) stating that this gave him pride in being a Kenyan identity but if the Olympics had been during the 2007 post-election violence, then he may have felt more Kalenjin than Kenyan. Ethnicity is therefore a key feature in social life, more so in politics as is seen from the views below of politics as being inherently ethnic.

### **Politics as inherently ethnic**

From the perspectives of the young people, one of the problems with politics and local administration was tribalism. This was especially highlighted among local administrators such as chiefs who are appointed rather than elected. The interests of the politicians group it seems come first to the interest of those of other groups.

[...] we are all Luo's but in that our area there are different clans, so the chief the chief that we have is chosen he came from another clan and, whenever you are found with any case I don't think if he will, he cannot even help you. He only helps those people who come from his clan.

The other feature of this inherent tribalism was that it was essentially negative to vote along tribal lines and was a sign of backwardness with development only coming when this was at an end. The blame for this

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was laid squarely on the door of the politicians and what they term their "elders" who include their parents and those older than them who have the power to vote and effect change.

[...] the people who are standing for ODM (party) in that constituency [Ndhiwa constituency] had to win; [...] tribalism here is still there. We can't do away with it. If the elder people have not come together to say that we should stop tribalism because us the new generation will follow the same chain as we found there so I don't think tribalism will ever end.

Linked to this view of politics as ethnic was the notion of "dirty politics" in terms of politicians as selfish and self-interested and not effective with the political "game" consisting of underhand tactics. There is a feeling of frustration and anger with this status quo, which they know is not right, but feel helpless to be able to do anything about it.

Respondent one: Mostly the politicians, they are just playing a dirty game here. They trying to black mail people but it's like - they are just trying to blackmail people with their sweet words, with their money.

Respondent 2: I think politicians are very corrupt, you know they don't consider the teachers which are now striking but them – them they are continuing to campaigning for themselves to get some votes and some people are suffering.

Ethnicity and ethnic identity is, however, not only viewed in negative terms. The importance of the young people's ethnic identities is highlighted with a reference to modernity by one of the participants who stated that modern life is disassociating people and the fact that people were still helping each other out was a key indicator of what ones tribe means to someone. From this, it seems it is the point of contact and trust and a form of social capital that is drawn upon both in times of joy, through the celebration of traditional rituals of marriage and circumcision but also in times of crisis. What these identities mean for us is in their interaction with the field of politics, and what emerges from this interaction. What emerges is that the lived realities of citizens cannot be divorced from the practice of politics. Young people especially are aware of the nuances of political discourse and therefore any attempt at civic education needs to take this into account. Focusing only on ideal types of how democracy and politics should work while important, does not take into account how democracy and politics works now. If we are to



have the successful political engagement of young people for democratic transition, then this is essential.

### **The notion of the individual**

According to Chabal and Daloz, “individuals are not seen as being [...] meaningfully separated from the communities to which they belong.” To understand politics on the continent, we must understand how Africans can “be both modern and non-individualist.” This is not to imply an inherent socialism to African politics but to situate ethnicity and the implicit allegiance to one’s ethnic group as a core part of an individual, especially as they interact with politics and society. In addition, there is the concept of the ‘cult of the individual’ where the politician that is sanctioned by the community commands a large amount of loyalty and has the ability to carry that communities vote in an election. The following sections will illustrate this theme in terms of the interviewee’s narratives on the responsibility for the negative status quo of Kenyan politics.

### **Politicians to blame vs. people to blame**

All the respondents agreed that there is something essentially wrong with Kenyan politics. They do not go into detail on the particulars of this, but it is taken as self-evident fact and the question that arises then is who then is to blame for this state of affairs. Two definitive schools of thought emerged from the focus groups. One was what I term the “politicians are to blame camp” while the other was the “people are to blame”. The former opinion can be illustrated by this argument presented by one of the participants:

It is our own opinion for us to elect the members but you see us Kenyans we don’t have any option. These politicians they can grab somebody’s votes and say that they were voted for. So what I can say is that the problem is not the Kenyans, the problem is the government because they are promising things and they are not doing it. Those money which the government is using peoples’ taxes and taking them to the ministers, when they give an member of parliament money to give the people in the slums he is taking the money so I think the government is the problem not the people.

On the other side of the coin, the blame the people camp can be illustrated by the following extract from the same focus group conversation

With me I want to say us citizens we are the ones who are stupid because let's take for example –this election I have been wondering let's take for example [...] in Nyanza and you will never hear like [...] a Luhya winning the seat you will just find like it is the Luo's who are the ones who are supposed to win these seats. Now me I see the citizens are the ones who are stupid because they have that mentality that we are staying in Luo Nyanza now our person is the one who is supposed to win the seat, nobody (else) can come because they are just like encouraging tribalism.

The blame the people camp also included the argument that their parents and other elders were to blame for being gullible and allowing themselves to be lied to by the politicians as well as those who were uneducated not being able to make informed decisions. In addition, there seemed to be a cult of the individual, with political personalities being seen as representing their parties. In addition, it was highlighted, though not quite as strongly, that the politicians were representatives not only of their constituencies, but of their communities. Any embarrassment does not only reflect on the individual or the area they represent but on their entire ethnic group. This is highlighted by the following statement from one of the respondent's letters to political candidates.

Am not being tribalistic but even if we are in the same tribe but you aren't representing us well.

### **The issue of political legitimacy**

What may be understood as political legitimacy in other contexts may not be the same for the Kenyan/African context. Weber would define it at the basic level as "faith in a particular social order." Legitimacy in the state and government is not universal, mainly because of unequal distribution of resources and perceived election malpractice. For instance, those in the northern arid parts of Kenya may have issues with the legitimacy of the government as they consider themselves marginalized by it. In addition, legitimacy in the African context is about "performance" and therefore authoritarian governments can be seen as legitimate as long as there is positive economic performance or positive performance to a particular support group. The key thing is the responsiveness of government can be seen as the ability of the government to "perform" and provide the basic necessities to the people.

From this initial data in the pilot study, legitimacy is implicitly touched upon and confirms Chabal's view of legitimacy as performance, with

statements such as “To improve and take care of common citizens life standards as first priority” for politicians but also highlighted Nasong’o’s view of legitimacy as fairness, with call for equal distribution of resources confirmed by statements such as “To all aspiring candidates: Please let us use our energy for positive gain of this country as a whole.” (Letter to political candidates, Rural Peer led FGD) In addition, legitimacy is gained not only from performance but also from a sense of visibility. Participants reference a politics that you can taste, touch and feel. They judge politicians on what they have done for the community. And this has to be seen, more especially in a material way. One participant noted of a particular politician, "Peter Kenneth, most developed constituency but don't see him [...] talking." This can be illustrated from the data extract below where participants were questioning what work that their political representatives have done;

Respondent one: Let me ask you. Peter Kenneth is an M.P for Gatanga. The most developed constituency. But he is rarely seen in his constituency. Most developed. What have you seen the politician here doing?

Respondent two: the majority thing [...] am telling you that is simply walking the talk. Talk less but you act most.

Respondent three: She has only built a big house for herself [...] But there are also people who have received a bursary?

Respondent one: I want something I can see. At least a general hospital, a good one. Seriously

It is therefore easy to see why a politician, who takes care of these needs, would have the support of the people, regardless of his/her other vices including corruption. Therefore, corruption in certain cases can become an acceptable practice though in most cases that we have seen, it is an indicator of legitimacy and more often than not threatens the politician who engages in it. Corruption will be looked at in more detail below.

## **Corruption**

Politics is seen as inherently corrupt with self-serving politicians at the helm. For instance corruption was the most mentioned issue of concern in the narrative exercise when they were asked to write a note to the political candidates who were standing for election. While this is not a

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surprising finding in and of itself, the different ways that they understand corruption is. It was highlighted that certain cases of corruption such as voter buying were acceptable. For example one respondent stated that politicians often come to the constituency and give money to the people, especially during election time. They said that their vote, or rather voting cannot help them, but the money that the politician would give them would enable them to get some food to eat. This reinforces the idea of sustained economic development leading to poverty reduction as one of the factors in ending corruption as poverty is what leads this to be an acceptable and indeed expected practice as illustrated in the quote below.

When this minister come even if it is me I will take the money but what I can say to the people is this; even if you take the money but during the election just [...] vote for the one who can change (things)

What this illustrates is a sense of expectation of this practice. It is often said that corruption, like tribalism is perpetuated by the elites and it is at the elite level that we should concentrate prevention mechanisms. It is legitimated as an instrumental reality. It is a case of, I may never see the politician again (as is common, politicians are only ever present during election time) so I might as well get something out of this encounter. The implication for politicians is that those who do not engage in this practice will be at a disadvantage. In addition, there was the perception in the urban areas that one of the reasons that is given for this state of affairs is a lack of education, it being seen as a practice that is predominant in rural areas.

The more recent literature on ethnicity has shown that pressures from below can contribute to politician's rhetoric on tribalism and it seems this can be said to be the same on certain practices associated with corruption. Though, as has been shown by the second respondent, citizens should be "smart" about it and still vote for the person who will cater to their needs and bring about change. The key thing to note here is that personal and material needs have to be taken care of, thus the need to accept politician's money. This theme also has a generational element to it, with the elders (read parents, and generally anyone older than them) being perceived as being more gullible to this political machination than younger people.

## The question of representation

“In mature democracies the function of the representative is to act on behalf of [...] a given constituency, in Africa the situation is more complex.” For instance, the current coalition building in anticipation of the March 2013 elections features power sharing agreements that are geared towards not only representing diverse communities but also the ability of the politicians to ‘pull’ voters from their various communities. Therefore, the Jubilee alliance consists of two key principals, Uhuru Kenyatta, a Kikuyu to bring in his community as well as William Ruto, a Kalenjin who is supposed to focus his campaign in his particular ethnic stronghold. “Representation, therefore is necessarily communal” and takes can take on ethnic dimension.

Some political analysts such as Mutahi Ngunyi term this “ethnic mathematics” and though he has been criticised quite heavily in the media for his views, he did an analysis that showed possible scenarios if registered voters voted purely along ethnic lines for the presidential candidates. He was proved somewhat prophetic as his calculations did not fall wide of the mark in the recently concluded elections. The relevance for this here is that it serves to reinforce the ethnic nature of representation in Kenyan politics. In addition, there is a resource mobilization value attached to ethnicity. This is not necessarily different from other countries for instance the phenomenon of African Americans trend of supporting the Democratic Party but how it is manifested is what is unique because of the African context. It is about interests being fulfilled and the perception is that, as has been highlighted in the previous section of this paper, there is an element of trust that a member of your ethnic group will fulfil your interests rather than one from another community of which you may have no knowledge. As Chabal emphasizes,

Indeed, formal democratic theory would stress the need for individual representation. However, for reasons having to do with the importance of communal, racial, regional, ethnic and religious forms of identity, any system of representation operates within a collective rather than individual context—by which I mean that either representatives are chosen for reasons having to do with their communal affiliations or that elections are interpreted on particularistic grounds.

While the young people seem to understand that the MP's represent both their constituencies and their “people” for instance, with one of the participants saying in the letter to the President that one of the political

candidates, Raila Odinga should not embarrass members of their community, but should represent them well, they are aware, that in the background, this is all a political game and the enmity that the politicians engage in by pitting one community against the other is driven by political pressures, not personal or ethnic dislikes.

To add on that the way she said on air, they (politicians) are not like talking to one another so when they the citizens are watching television, they will just say ah, this one is not a friend to this one so let me follow this one and leave the other one so they will find like citizens are following this one and the other one are following the other one. So it creates enmity.

### **Conclusion**

The paper above has provided contemporary illustrations on four key themes of African identity politics namely the boundaries of politics, the notion of the individual, the issue of political legitimacy and the question of representation. This has been done by looking at young people's attitudes along these dimensions. This has shown that young people are essential to our understanding of African politics and can serve as a reflection of the status of the political system. What is clear is that young people's identities are a key influence on their political attitudes and these identities are as a result of their daily lived realities especially those of poverty, marginalisation and economic disenfranchisement. What this paper reflects is the status quo of Kenyan politics, explained by looking at young people as indicators of the political culture and political attitudes in the Kenyan context. The scope of this paper does not include a prescription for a solution or the effects of these attitudes, specifically regarding to those negative elements that have emerged but perhaps in future research, this normative component will be pursued. Young people are also not ignorant of the practice of politics and show a high awareness of its nuances and realities. What then, are the implications of this?

Firstly, this work is relevant for any civic education initiatives. At the moment, there is no specific civic/citizenship education component in the Kenyan secondary school curriculum though there have been curriculum reviews conducted that have suggested that it needs to be introduced as a compulsory subject in secondary schools. Any such curriculum would benefit from this understanding of young people's political attitudes in order to formulate it in a way that will encourage political engagement.

Secondly, this paper opens up opportunities for future research in children's political attitudes both in Kenya and the wider African context. With the opening up of greater democratic spaces, young people have the opportunities that perhaps their parents did not to actively engage in politics. Researching this phenomenon could provide greater insights into the future of democracy in Africa.