# A Focus on Kenya Nationalism and the Bottlenecks it has Faced since Independence to Date

**David Sande**[*]

*Department of Sociology and Psychology, Moi University, Kenya*

[*]**Corresponding author:** David Sande, Department of Sociology and Psychology, Moi University, Kenya, Tel: +254 723 496 834; E-mail: sandedavid64@gmail.com

## Abstract

Kenya as a nation was initially brought together through the spirit of nationalism to tame colonial rule and attains sovereignty. The existence of diverse backgrounds in terms of ideals, ethnicity, religion and political affiliations are causal factors for the fluctuations of the country's state of nationalism. This paper thus aims at discussing the contemporary state of nationalism in Kenya since independence to date, and the bottlenecks she has faced in her quest to achieve it. They include negative ethnicity, poor governance, and lack of democracy, corruption, social inequality and marginalization. The paper elucidates on the remedies to the aforementioned grievances. Lastly, the paper concludes that the existence of poor governance, poor social services and lack of democracy have a direct correlation to the threat of the Kenyan nationalism.

**Keywords:** Nationalism; Ethnicity; Democracy; Corruption; Social inequality; Marginalization

## Introduction

The concept of nationalism is one that derives its origin from the word nation that basically means bringing together of persons who have differences in ideas, culture, ethnicity, religion and race in order to carry out development projects in a country and co-existence purposes [1]. Nationalism was etymologically begun by the Greek people who at the ancient time lived in established city states that were referred to as polis [2]. It is in these polis where the Greeks enhanced their development through carrying out trade and improving on its buildings [2]. It is from this idea that nationalism spread to the other parts of the globe including Europe and Africa.

In Africa and more so Kenya, the idea of nationalism came into being in an effort to eliminate the colonial rule and untold suffering that the Africans were being subjected to [3]. That is the reason some scholars argue that the African nationalism in the country was a forced coalition purposed to fight against the colonial rule [3]. On attaining independence in 1963, the founding father of the nation President Jomo Kenyatta came up with a philosophy which he termed as 'Harambee' that could unite Kenyans to spur development in the country. According to him some of the aspects that were critical for the idea to be met included:

- Hard work: President Jomo Kenyatta called on all Kenyans to be more proactive and not reactive and to ensure that they put together their efforts and skills to develop the country.
- Responsibility: He called on all Kenyans not to be taking blames to other persons since they owned the country and hence everybody was to be accountable to his/her actions and misgivings in nation development and co-existence.
- Constitutionalism: According to him it was upon all Kenyans to work towards ensuring that the country operates through the stipulated rules so as to avoid the country from being dragged into an anarchic empire [3].

The idea of President Jomo Kenyatta coining the word Harambee to unite Kenyans towards developing the country was not unique as at the time, most countries in Africa were undergoing the wave of obtaining independence. If we borrow a leaf from our neighboring country Tanzania, its founding President Julius Nyerere came up with the philosophy of Ujamaa whose tenets encompassed unity, freedom and equality in order to enable people to work harder in unisom as they feel they work under no coercion and feel part and parcel of the country [4]. President Nyerere also saw that through this philosophy, it will put the priorities of the country first before those of individuals and hence eliminate elements of corruption [5].

The aspect of nationalism has been tentatively instrumental in bringing together Kenyans of different ethnic backgrounds so as to enhance national growth and development. This has been echoed and cherished by all our presidents upon taking the mandate of leading the nation. To attain nationalism, the government had to solve the African grievances that ranged from access to social services including education, healthcare and most importantly land that had been taken by the white settlers. On the aspect of education, the government through the Ominde Report of 1964 recommended the reform of Kenyan education system that saw the increase of government schools through the spirit of Harambee that involved cost sharing between government and the people in construction. This enabled Africans to access education and reduced the sufferings that they were subjected to and ensured that their skills and expertise were incorporated in the national development [6,7].

His successor President Daniel Arap Moi also had a keen eye on education. He went a step further to champion and support girl child education by fighting against wayward cultures such as female genital mutilation (FGM) by building more girls schools and introduced free milk in schools that was referred to as "Nyayo Milk" to fascinate and entice learners [8]. President Mwai Kibaki also took education to its apex on the quantitative aspect through increased enrolments. It was among his important pillar in the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) government manifesto. He ensured that his government drives the country to the right path in achieving the Millennium Development

Goal (MDG) number two of ensuring universal attainment of free primary education [8]. This resulted to an approximate increase of 1.5 million primary school enrolments in the country [8].

President Uhuru Kenyatta's Jubilee administration has also subsidized secondary education fees and offered to pay examination fees for both class eight and form four candidates in public and private schools [9,10]. This synopsis on education clearly postulates that all the four regimes consider education as pivotal in spearheading national growth and unity across the country regardless of ones creed, religion and economic background. In addition, it was also a vessel of fighting the rampant vice of poverty.

Another aspect is the issue of land. During the colonial rule the white settlers had taken the African lands particularly in the highlands. President Jomo Kenyatta's administration was welcomed by all Kenyans as it carried the hopes and aspirations of recovering their lands as they were living as squatters and had little land to graze their livestock [11]. This issue has been very sensitive and elusive to all Kenyans and the three subsequent governments have tried to solve it without much success which has threatened our nationalism. It started with sharp division of ideas and counter accusations after independence when leaders such as Bildad Kaggia wanted equitable and fair distribution of land to all Kenyans [3]. This has seen the subsequent governments try to provide land title deeds to legal owners of the plots to avoid conflicts among the people.

Medication and the fight against diseases was another major pillar that the country had to grapple with immediately after independence [3]. The government at the time ensured that all Kenyans of all works of life could access medication at a subsidized cost. This aspect has also been so important in the subsequent administrations. For instance, President Uhuru Kenyatta's administration has started to provide free healthcare services to Kenyans in government health facilities [12]. In addition, there has been the introduction of beyond zero campaign that was spearheaded by first lady Her Excellency Margaret Kenyatta whose aim was to ensure that women deliver through the help of qualified medical personnel and reduces maternal deaths [13]. Based on the above discourse, it is evidently clear that 55 years on since independence, all the subsequent governments have been striving to meet these three pillars that include: ignorance, diseases and poverty that were identified as key problems facing the young nation by President Jomo Kenyatta at the time of independence. It is therefore through the spirit of cooperation and unity that all these pillars can be achieved successfully.

## The State of Ethnicity in Kenya

From the onset, the existence of different ethnic groups in Kenya cannot bare the blame of national disintegration as it only signifies persons who share a common history and culture [1]. This therefore gives Kenyans an opportunity to accommodate and learn from various societies; and put together all their skills, experiences and aspirations towards nation building [1]. Since independence it was evident that Kenya was going to have diverse ideologies and multiparty democracy considering different needs and priorities of different communities [14].

We ought to embrace ethnic diversity as a country as there is a dictum that goes, 'If you want to walk very fast walk alone but if you want to go very far walk with others'. This therefore implies that as a nation, we cannot afford to carry out development in isolation of a given ethnic group. If that could have been the case, then our founding

fathers of the nation could not have defeated the colonial rule. They were pragmatic enough to put aside their differences for the sake of the country's independence [14].

In the same vein, we have had leaders who have risen to the occasion when the country needed them most. In the year 2002 general elections when the current President Uhuru Kenyatta was defeated by his predecessor His Excellency Mwai Kibaki, he respected the verdict of Kenyans and this helped in preventing violence and bloodshed that could have rocked the country. A leader such as the late Professor George Saitoti took the interest of the country as a priority when he shelved his ambition of running for presidency in the 2002 general elections for another candidate when he delivered his notable and nostalgic speech by saying, 'There comes a time when the nation becomes more important than an individual' [15].

Thus far, we need to look at where the rains started beating us to thwart our aspirations of Kenyan nationalism. Upon attaining independence, we never got the opportunity to coin our own ideals that could be conceptualized and understood by all Kenyans for the sake of unity and development [3]. If we take a closer look at Tanzania, it is more ethnically diverse with approximately 120 tribes [16], as compared to Kenya's 42. Contrary to the Kenyan case, Tanzanians have never been hard hit by the issue of negative ethnicity; and all this was facilitated by the adoption of socialism that they referred to as Ujamaa by President Julius Nyerere [5]. This ideal has been the cornerstone among all Tanzanians as they have been able to identify by it and provided guidance towards achieving national objectives.

As Kenya attained its sovereignty status, the country was expectant of diverse school of thoughts on national matters whose solutions could strengthen the country's stability even further. The first regime under President Jomo Kenyatta had the opportunity to prevent such emergence and escalation of ethnic divisions and enhance national unity. Unfortunately, it was never realized as the primary huddle was to address historical injustices that were subdued for the sake of independence. This failure could be analogized as a volcano whose magma forms and erupts later causing massive destruction of property and loss of life.

The colonial rule employed the divide and rule tactics to stamp their authority in the protectorate. For instance, the British rule that colonized Kenya employed the same rule in Nigeria to make their governance easier [17]. In Kenya they divided people into various regions that included: Central Nyanza, Western Nyanza, South Nyanza, Rift Valley and the Coast to strengthen their rule [3]. This led to the commencement of these ethnic divisions bedeviling us immediately after attaining independence. Despite President Jomo Kenyatta's call of Harambee, it did not attempt to address those barriers that existed among us at the time. There started to be divisions in the ruling party Kenya African National Union (KANU) that were based on ideologies as one group led by President Jomo Kenyatta, James Gichuru and Tom Mboya were pro capitalism while the other group led by Jaramogi Odinga and Bildad Kaggia supported socialism [3]. The latter believed that the country could develop when social services such as education and healthcare could be offered at a certain fee and supported private ownership of property [14]. The later favored free and fair distribution of land, free access to education and health services that they felt were the major reasons for the fight for independence [14]. These emerging divisions were never solved amicably by the government at the time. These leaders who subscribed to different thoughts from the government felt left out; and so were

their respective constituent that was a recipe for negative ethnicity [14].

At this juncture much power was centrally placed to the President thus posed a threat to ethnic groups that did not come from that of the President [3]. In fact, it is on this premise that President Daniel Arap Moi almost had a barrier of ascending to power after the death of his predecessor President Jomo Kenyatta; as certain politicians such as Njenga Karume and James Gichuru wanted to change the constitution so as to suit their ambitions of clinging to the center of the presidency [3]. It was also at this time that we started seeing the formation of tribal associations such as Gikuyu, Embu and Meru Association (GEMA), Akamba Union, Luo Union; all of which were formed and anchored on the hunger of access to power and had no interest of all Kenyans [3]. This made certain ethnic communities who were smaller to feel inferior thus the genesis of negative ethnicity. This is a vice that has affected the subsequent governments to date.

## Social Inequality and Development

In the earlier discourse on the ways we can achieve nationalism, we saw that it was a collective mandate of every person in the country. In the absence of this, people will lead parallel directions in achieving their objectives thus thwarting the spirit of togetherness and national growth. Therefore, to achieve this mandate, it is prudent that we take a look at some of the existing inequalities that exists in the country. In the scramble for independence, it was majorly precipitated by the injustices and inequalities that existed which ranged from lack of access to education, healthcare and land [3].

Since independence there have been notable inequalities that have been bedeviling the nation. The challenge of land has been critical in the country to date. To a larger extend it was the major reason for the struggle for independence [3]. Therefore by attaining independence, the Africans were confident of getting their lands back. This never happened as the retrieved land was rewarded to political loyalist; a move that went against the wishes of Kenyans [3,14]. To strengthen our nationalism, it is prudent to solve such an elusive historical grievance among Kenyans to allow proper settlement of people in their ancestral lands [1]. This has been a cyclic menace that has been facing Kenyans since the first administration to date. Land issues have triggered violence and displacement of people especially in the name of settling political scores; as that exhibited during the post-election violence of the year 2007/08 that resulted in the death of 1,300 people and close to 300,000 people were displaced from their lands [18]. Generally, land issues thus exhibits a deep brewing conflict which constantly threatens to polarize the country.

Increased growth rate has had a direct congruency to limited social services and opportunities such as employment, health services, education and security. At independence Kenya's population was low and people had adequate access to social services at a subsidized cost [19]. At present, unemployment rate among the youths in Kenya stands at a whooping 78 percent out of the overall unemployed labor force in Kenya [20]. This has caused these youths to demonstrate their anger through engagement in criminal acts and hooliganism; and the formation of a number of revolutionary groups that include Mombasa Republican Council (MRC), Mungiki and Sungu Sungu; as avenues to vent out their anger and seek redress. The status quo has threatened the state of nationalism as such revolutionary groups have led to the manifestation of calls for secession as in the case of MRC in the coastal region [21].

Poverty has been a thorn in the flesh to most Kenyans which has been exhibited by low social economic status, poor housing and sanitation facilities [20,22]. The limited access to the better side of the national cake by the majority population also poses a threat to the country's nationalism. This clearly exhibits the existing inequalities that exist in the country despite all Kenyans being subjected to paying taxes. This economic imbalance causes people to be pessimists with regards to the national objectives; and thus some people opt to evade from paying taxes or thwart any efforts of developing the country.

Corruption has also been a catalyst to the existing inequalities in the country. Since independence the country has witnessed major corruption scandals such as Goldenberg, Anglo leasing, National Youth Services scam in 2015; Biometric Voter Registration kit scam in 2012; and Tassia Estate scam in 2014 [23]. The rampant manifestation of corruption in the country has caused great dishonor to the nation in its quest of achieving the overall national goals by demeaning it to individual benefits [20,22]. According to J.M. Kariuki, a charismatic leader and a critique of President Jomo Kenyatta's government on the subject of corruption summarized it with the statement: 'There is no point of having 10 people who are millionaires and 10 million people who are beggars [24]. President Julius Nyerere who came before JM Kariuki hold the view that however much we had our own needs and responsibilities, it was imperative to be our brothers and sisters keepers not to a mass a lot of wealth illegally while others were languishing in poverty [16]. As a nation, we need to be critical and learn from the countries that have fallen to almost being extinct; such as Rwanda who out of political competition and discrimination between the Hutu and Tutsi led to a conflict and war that rose to a level of a genocide [16].

## Democracy and Kenyan Politics

Democracy is a system of governance that countries have adopted to govern themselves by accommodating every citizen in formulation and administration. Democracy is a word that is coined from two Greek words Demos which means people and Kratos which means power. Democracy can thus be defined as a political system where the majority of the people give the mandate to leaders to represent them in political offices through the stipulated laws in the constitution such as carrying out elections [25]. Democracy can also be said to be a process through which people choose their leaders freely who in turn become responsible to the subject [26]. These two definitions illustrate that leadership in a democratic state is derived from the people and not through coercion such as the use of military coup or rigging of elections [27].

Democracy was a system that was first practiced in the ancient Greece where they had the right to canvass their problems and because it was a country with social justice, the men were allowed to conduct elections in order to elect leaders of their choice to lead them for a particular period [2,27]. To ensure that democracy is attained in a country, there are a number of salient features that have to be visible that include:

- Presence of a political system that allows the electorates to elect and replace leaders through free and fair elections after a certain period as spelt by the law. In the Kenyan case, the general elections are held after every five years with mini or by elections conducted in an event of death or misconduct by the incumbent honorable member.

- There should be active participation of all citizens in matters politics to enhance sustainability of national development programmes.
- There should be the respect of human rights and dignity; and political equality irrespective of ones race, gender, religion or creed in society [27].

Based on the above expositions, it is important to dissect our democracy from independence to date. We can argue that Kenya's young democracy at independence started on a rocky path. This was based on the sharp divisions that were overtly observed within the KANU administration [3]. These radicals that were opposed to government policies felt left out for not being heard; thus culminating to the formation and sprouting of opposition parties that included Kenya Peoples Union (KPU) and Africa Peoples Party (APP) [3].

This perception of the government towards certain section of political leaders percolated to their constituents; and thus the genesis of tribal parties and political violence to capture power thus making political equality to be a myriad [27]. In his own words on politics of exclusion and the gradual growth of negative ethnicity, Ochieng postulates that:

If Kenyans have so far failed to dislodge tribalism from their political life it is because, at the core of nationalist parties, like KAU, KADU and KANU were strong tribalist tendencies. In deed each time any of the above parties called for party elections, painstaking efforts were made to ensure that each major ethnic group was given an important party post to assuage tribals. This tradition has continued in Kenya, with balanced tribal representation in KANU and at cabinet [3].

The existence of politics of exclusion betrayed the spirit of democracy where the winner becomes the servant of all regardless of their political affiliations and support [12]. This has caused politicians jostling for power to have regions that are regarded as 'strong holds' which are characterized by having same ethnic grouping and beliefs. This has gone a notch higher to imposing quarantine to politicians from outside to seek for votes in such areas thus polarizing our nationhood. To demonstrate the magnitude of this ethnic polarization in Kenya, Ochieng posits that:

Towards independence the small tribes in Kenya banded together in KADU in fear of the alliance of the Kikuyu and Luo in KANU. By 1965 it was certain that the Kikuyu- Luo alliance had failed. The Luo accused Kenyatta of tribalism and selfishness. On his part Kenyatta regarded the Luo as the ambitious and bitter rivals of the Kikuyu for political power. In this struggle Kenyatta forged some loose alliance of most Kenyan ethnicities with the Kikuyu and isolated the Luo throughout his rule [3].

Generally, the future of this ethnic politicization will push the country to the brink of a failed state as it causes the country to be susceptible to political instabilities and untold suffering to the masses; and merit the elite in society. This is a position that is hold by Vilfredo Pareto and Gaetano Mosca who in their discourse on elite theory argue that the elites employ all tenable means such as use of propaganda and organizing people in tribal cocoons to achieve their objectives. This has been witnessed through the formation of tribal alliances to win elections. For instance in the year 2002 general elections, the opposition party, National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) won the election on the premise of bringing together larger ethnic groups and their leaders [27]. This pattern of political re-alignment has followed the country's subsequent elections to date. The above foregoing contradicts the initial conceptualization for those who were pro multiparty democracy that was geared towards accommodating diverse ideas for the betterment of national development and stability [28].

## Remedies

In most of the African countries, the subject of negative ethnicity has threatened the existing social fabric and nationalism to the extend of categorizing their populace into majority and minority tribes [29]. These negative consequences have thus been a catalyst of nation polarization [30]. This is a subject that as a country has to be taken seriously as some years back; multiethnic states such as Yugoslavia, Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia suffered the same fate [29]. Kenyans thus opt to conceptualize their own nationalism to be one that embraces social inclusion of all communities; a union that supersedes their culture and values [29]. The country should thus do a thorough soul audit and define this concept in their own way without much dependence from the western community [31]. As a nation, we should change our politics to be institutional and not individual based. This has been exhibited in countries such as Mauritius, Botswana and Ghana that have enhanced smooth transition of leadership [32]. Kenyan politicians should thus prove critiques wrong who favored single party democracy to that of multi party democracy by allowing membership of all ethnic groups in political parties and enlightening people to embrace ethnic diversity [33]. This can be emulated from Tanzania whose citizens refer to themselves as brothers and sisters and exhibit high sense of commitment and togetherness to the nation [16].

Good governance is pivotal in ensuring that the social needs of the populace such as health services and education are adequately met [34]. If these demands are not met, this may cause a section of the people not to feel as part of the country and hence a threat to Kenya's unity and nationalism. The government can be successful through emulating what their counterparts in Tanzania did in fighting corruption through word and deed; ensure transparency and accountability of public finances [35]. For instance, in Tanzania, the Presidential Inquiry into Corruption found a deep crisis of corruption in all its governmental sectors, which it subsequently and successfully fought to the level of receiving applause from the international community [35]. The government should thus continue fighting this menace without fear or favor of ones status in society. Provision of services to the population should also be based on merit to allow regional balance [36].

Elections in Africa have all over the years been a matter of life and death to the extent of threatening the stabilities of most countries and destruction of property. Politicians have thus used their people to ascend to power and in an event they lose elections, they instigate ethnic violence [37]. The rule of law should thus be above everyone within our jurisdiction; and in case of any election petition or grievances, they should be tackled by the laid out constitutional procedures. For instance, due to the disrespect of the rule of law by the Kenyan politicians in the year 2007/08 general elections, it caused post-election violence due to political incitements by politicians that led to the death of approximately 1,000 people and massive destruction of property [37]. Kenyan leaders should borrow a leaf from their counterparts in developed countries such as United States of America and Europe; who have mature democracies and are guided by the rule of law to enhance their respective countries unity.

In addition, the country's constitution should be amended to ensure that all candidates upon the announcement of the elections produce a win-win result to enhance cohesiveness and unity [29]. This can be realized through introducing positions such as that of the Prime Minister, his deputies and allow opposition leader to have an opportunity to legislate in the National Assembly and help keep the government in check. Generally therefore, as a country we should ensure that there is transparency and accountability in the manner we carry out elections. If rigged elections were allowed to stand, that implied people were robbed of their chosen leaders [27]. Key institutions such as the electoral body Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) and the Judiciary should be strengthened to allow them perform their duties impartially to the satisfaction of all Kenyans [38].

The issue of corruption has to be fought ruthlessly in order to allow all Kenyans to receive adequate social services. In the past three administrations, we have seen a number of corruption scandals that have touched senior public figures. As a nation, we can only be victors in this war against corruption when there is political goodwill and impetus to change the status quo [39]. Tough legislative measures should also be enacted to act as punitive measures to corrupt perpetrators so as to allow justice to be served. These tough measures might include denying them jail bail, freezing their bank accounts both within the country and in foreign countries; and retrieving their moneys back to the public coffers.

## Conclusion

Based on the above foregoing, it is evident that there is a direct correlation between aspects such as negative ethnicity, social inequality and development, corruption, democracy and Kenyan politics and the state of Kenyan nationalism. There is need to ensure that the existing multiparty democracy comes up with political parties that are formed on issue basis and not on tribal groupings as it will polarize the country further. It is thus imperative as a nation to continuously have national dialogues to enlighten citizens on important aspects such as politics, democracy and social cohesion. On the issue of governance, the government should strive to ensure that it achieves the three pillars that were identified by our founding fathers of the nation. They include poverty, ignorance and diseases; and reduce the existing social inequalities and marginalization in the country. The country should also strengthen its institutions such as the Judiciary to ensure that election grievances and corruption cases are handled fully and amicably without going through the court of public opinion that is violent and an avenue that is non-constitutional.

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