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## REVIEW ARTICLE

### A SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE OF THE POST ELECTION VIOLENCE IN KENYA

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#### ABSTRACT

This paper presents the chronology of ethnic clashes in Kenya including the 2007 post election violence. The clashes have occurred in this country since 1991 and over time both frequency and damage have escalated. The epitome was the 2007 post election violence that led to destruction of property, displacement of people from various regions as well as death. The paper has also delved into the commonly believed etiological factors, some of which include land ownership, inequalities as well as general elections' results. The bulk of the paper's concern was a social psychology explanation of the etiological, precipitating and motivational factors in the post election violence of 2007. The conclusion is that since a purely psychological explanation can be given for the post election violence, it is possible to come up with practical social psychology approaches to dealing with the post election violence in Kenya.

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## INTRODUCTION

### History of tribal clashes and post election violence in Kenya

Tribal clashes have occurred in Kenya for many years, with the frequency being high between 1991 and 2007. A keen analysis of the violence and clashes indicates that most of them occur just before or just after the general elections in Kenya. According to the Kroll Report (2004), nothing raises so much fear and apprehension in Kenya's rural and urban (especially slum) population as the spectre of "ethnic conflicts" and/or "land clashes", similar to those that rocked the country in the build-up to the 1992 multi-party general elections and after. The wave of inter-ethnic conflicts in the Rift Valley, Nyanza, Western and some parts of the Coastal provinces went down in Kenya's history as the worst since

independence, and those which scarred some Kenyan families forever. The Kroll Report seems to suggest that the ruling class of 1990s took advantage of the fact that all of Kenyan provinces are haunted by actual or potential ethnic conflicts and actually hired an ex-Israeli Defense Force Commander to instigate these clashes. According to the same report, certain politicians in Kenya are known to rely on ethnicity to perpetuate their dominance and hegemony in an atmosphere characterized by scarce resources, fear and prejudice. The proliferation of ethnic conflicts in this country is so widespread that there is hardly any region where the problem has not been reported with death. Opponents of ex-President Daniel arap Moi claim he exploited factional violence, competition over land, and ethnic patronage to bolster his own power and that of his supporters, and to discredit a multi-party approach to politics that was restored in 1991. In 1992, an estimated

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2,000 people died and 20,000 were made homeless in ethnic clashes in Western Kenya, and in 1993, fighting in the Rift Valley between the Kalenjin and the opposition Kikuyu group killed 1,500 people and displaced 300,000. Foreign observers accused authorities of pursuing a policy of ethnic cleansing in the fighting (Kroll, 2004). Ethnic clashes were especially violent due to the availability and use of small arms, as well as the erosion of traditional tribal power structures. In 1997 Moi was reelected President for a fifth five-year term in chaotic and contested elections that maintained divisions between opposition groups. After a serious Kalenjin attack followed by opposition retaliation left hundreds dead in early 1998, Moi called for calm and renewed peace dialogue, which reduced the conflict to some degree, but did not lead to tangible progress. The 1999 report of a presidential commission on ethnic clashes was not made public (Armed Conflicts Report, 2008).

According to the Armed Conflict Report (2008), apart from the 1991 and 1992 tribal clashes, there have been other similar clashes as presented in the following summary:

- I. 1998-Post-election peace and reform aspirations were shattered as politically- and economically-based ethnic clashes and police-sponsored extra-judicial killings increased during 1998. Most clashes took place in Rift Valley Province between members of the president's ethnic group and rivals, though serious fighting also occurred in the northeast among several groups, including ethnic Somalis and Sudanese.
- II. 1999-Political ethnic clashes increased in 1999 with most of the last concentrated in the northern regions of the country. At least 550 people died in the violence, up from the previous year.
- III. 2000-Inter-tribal feuds, cross-border fighting pitting Kenyan tribes against tribes in Uganda and Ethiopia, and mob violence continued during the year. At least 100 people were killed by the end of September, down from estimated figures for 1999.
- IV. 2001-Conflict between numerous tribal groups continued through 2001, with an escalation in the fighting targeting non-combatants. Over 100 people were reported killed in the clashes.
- V. 2002-Clashes along ethnic lines in several districts of the country resulted in more than 100 deaths. There also was violence around presidential elections in December.
- VI. 2003-Inter-communal violence, fueled mainly by economic interests, continued especially in the north-west as Kenyan, Ugandan and Sudanese populations clashed with each other, often in cross-border raids.
- VII. 2004-Inter-communal conflict continued in several parts of Kenya at a reduced level. Clashes again were economic in nature, with land at the forefront.
- VIII. 2005-Inter-communal violence over natural resources, mainly land and water, escalated in northeastern Kenya. Over 180 people were killed including 76 civilians killed in a single episode in July.
- IX. 2006-Clan violence continued over struggles for land, water and cattle along the northern Kenya/Ethiopia border. Raids by Ugandan and Somali bandits were also reported, as well as clashes between Kenyan tribesmen and Somali refugees. Hostilities resulted in at least 125 civilian deaths. In addition, the Kenyan government became the centre of speculation following the uncovering of the 'Anglo-Leasing' scandal, which intended to divert funds to the promotion of 2005's rejected constitution. As a result, several cabinet ministers, including the former finance minister have resigned and aid has been withheld.
- X. 2007-Although clan violence was responsible for the deaths of nearly 200 people during the year, this figure pales in comparison to the some 1,500 who have died since the announcement of the December 2007 presidential election results. This was the peak of the clashes ever witnessed in Kenya since independence.

Kundu (2003) describes the effects of the 1992 clashes thus: The social consequences of the clashes in Kenya were enormous and cannot be easily quantified, especially the psycho-social ones. Most of the victims of these clashes were left homeless, landless, destitute, injured, dead, abused, to mention but a few of the atrocities resulting from the menace. The immediate and real consequence of the clashes in Kenya was felt most at personal and family level. There was loss of security in the clash-prone areas as the civilians took the law into their own hands, targeting perceived enemies. As a result of insecurity, there was indiscriminate loss of human life. Food shortage was one of the far reaching economic consequences of the clashes in the study areas. There was a drop in food production, food supply and raw materials for the agro-based industries such as sugar, tea,

coffee, cereal (maize), pyrethrum and other agricultural crops. As a result of food shortages, many clashes victims experienced famine and this necessitated the appeal for local and international food aid and relief. As a result of the clashes in Kenya, thousands of families lost a lot of personal and household possessions as their houses, granaries, farms, shops and other business premises went down in flames. The Kiliku Parliamentary Select Committee of September, 1992 put the death toll of clashes victims at 778, those injured at 654 and those displaced at 62,000. These figures exclude the number of persons who were killed, injured and displaced after September 1992. The Human Rights Watch Africa estimated that the number of those killed by November, 1993 was at least 1500, while those displaced was at least 300,000. However, with continued clashes in 1994 and 1995, the total number of those who died, injured or displaced increased drastically, following the Enosopukia, Maela, Mtondia, Nyatike and Kibera incidence. If we were to go by the NCKK Review Report of August/September 1994, the number of displaced people for 15 districts in Kenya was about 311,433 persons in 43,075 households. This study, building on the previous statistics, *estimated that up to July, 1995, at least 1800 people were killed, 30,000 injured and 350,000 displaced as a result of the clashes*. To this date, no politician has ever been charged in a court of law for instigating these clashes.

#### **Given etiological factors in tribal clashes and post election violence in Kenya.**

The reasons given for the post election violence in Kenya are several, including:

- I. The historical injustices involving the allocation of land among the different communities in Kenya. Kenya has over 40 tribes and generally it is argued that members of the Kikuyu tribe or community unfairly benefited from large chunks of land distributed to them by the first president of Kenya, Mzee Jomo Kenyatta. It is believed that the community was given land belonging to members of other communities.
- II. Secondly, is the issue of unfairness in the management of the election process. Severally, it has been observed that the intercommunity violence begins immediately after the general elections which take place after every five years. Members of communities which believe that their candidates have lost unfairly resort to violence as a way of recapturing power or getting even with the "winners"

#### **A social psychology perspective of post election violence in Kenya.**

One reason that could explain the post election violence is attribution. According to Baron and Byrne (2000), the attribution theory views people as motivated to discover the underlying causes of behavior as part of their effort to make sense of the behavior. Thus, attributions are thoughts about why people behave the way they do. The perpetrators of external attributions, that is, are causes of behavior are external to the person, for example social pressure, aspects of the social situation (in Kenya, the loss of political victory), money, the weather or luck. Heider (1958) argued that this external dimension is the central issue in attribution. Social pressure could have come from peers at the local level who were discontented with the loss of the elections.

The second cause or reason could have been the attitudes. Attitudes are beliefs or opinions about people, objects and ideas that predispose people to act in certain ways towards the attitude objects (people, objects or events). The attitude of the post election violence perpetrators toward the past regime and the election "thieves" could have fueled the violence. In such cases, the attitudes could have been strongly negative and therefore quite unfavorable towards the victims of the post election violence. According to Flick (1998), evidence exists that changes in behavior sometimes precede changes in attitudes. When people experience dissonance, they tend to feel uneasy, if they cannot justify to themselves the differences between what they believe and what they do. The perpetrators of the Post Election violence could have reduced the dissonance by attacking the "election thieves". In this case, individuals tend to avoid information inconsistent with an individual's views.

A phenomenon called effort justification could also have been responsible for the violence, as a cause. According to Aronson (2000) effort justification refers to a strong need to justify the effort we put forth in life, for example, the attackers had put in so much effort in the political campaigns but all that effort was wasted when they lost the elections. Those individuals had valued highly certain political goals which were lost, throwing them into a dissonance which produced hostility. Again, the perpetrators of the violence could have been provoked into the violence because their self-esteem was involved, there by intensely justifying their actions. According to Aronson (2000) our most intense justifications of our actions take place when our self-esteem is involved. After acting in a cruel manner, the post election violence perpetrators must have engaged in mental gymnastics in order to keep themselves from thinking that they are cruel people. The most dissonance results when individuals with the highest self-esteem act in cruel ways. What about individuals with low self-

dissonance because acting in cruel ways in consistent with their attitudes towards themselves—indicated by such self-levels as loser, jerk, zero and bad guy. The majority of the participants in the post election violence were individuals of low self-esteem, individuals from low social economic status.

The other possible immediate cause of the post election violence is conformity and obedience. According to David (1993) conformity is a change in a person's behavior to coincide more closely with a group standard. Conformity comes, in many forms and affects many aspects of people's lives. Conformity is at work when a person takes up mountain biking because everyone else is doing it or when an individual cuts her hair short one year because short hair is fashionable and then lets it grow long the next year because long hair has become the vogue. In relation to post election violence in Kenya, the groups that were experiencing psychological effects of losing the elections "unfairly" were keen to "fight" for their victory and all members of their alignment had to conform. The group factors that could have caused or motivated individuals to participate in the post election violence could have been the normative social influence and the informational social influence.

According to Cialdini and Trost (1998) normative social influence is the influence that other people have on us because we seek their approval or in order to avoid their being disapproved. Individuals from the communities that strongly supported the party that had lost the elections had no otherwise, other than to participate in or support the violence, lest they suffered attacks and reproach from their community members. It was reported in the media that individuals who refused to participate in the post election violence were forced or threatened by members of their communities and consequently, they had to conform. The informational social influence is the influence other people have on us because we want to be right. The tendency to conform based on informational social influence depends especially on two factors: how confident an individual is in his/her independent judgement and, how well informed he/she perceives the group to be.

Those individuals who were not sure of the "stealing" of the elections could have been influenced by the information they received from the social groupings in their regions. The primary factors in conformity, with respect to the post election violence could have been unanimity of the group (the attackers or the attacked), as well as their cultural values. According to Sewell (1989), people tend to conform more when the group's opinion is unanimous, but when the group's opinion is divided,

also influence conformity. The values in most cultures in Kenya favour confidentiality and social support. Individuals from both camps in the post election violence (attackers/perpetrators and the victims) were bound together by values embodied in their culture. Values in some cultures favour and encourage people to be naturally warriors. Obedience also played a role in the post election violence where the youth who were participating were complying with the explicit and implicit demands of the individuals in authority. Those in authority could have been the party leaders, local leaders, and self-declared or situational group leaders in different parts of the country. According to Milgram (1974) when an authority figure demands, that we do something, we do it. The party leaders demanded that their supporters demonstrate in public and they did so (unfortunately the public demonstrations degenerated into violence, every time they were called). Obedience, however, is different from conformity. In conformity, people change their thinking or behavior so that it will be more like that of others. In contrast, to obedience, there is no explicit demand. Obedient behavior sometimes can be distressingly cruel, for example the massacre of Vietnamese civilians at my Lai, the Nazi crimes against Jews and others in the World War II, the obedience of radical Islamic who are instructed to participate in suicidal attacks against Israelis' and westerners. Millions of people throughout history have obeyed commands to commit acts like these (Santrock, 2005).

Group influence is another factor that could have been etiological to the post election violence in Kenya. In general, regardless of the size of the groups serve a useful human purpose include: satisfying our personal needs, provision of information, raising our self-esteem, giving its members an identity, as well as courage (David, 1993). Gross acts of violence within the groups of youth attacking others can be explained by social facilitation where an individual's performance improves because of the presence of others. Zajonc (1965) argued that the presence of other individuals arouses us. The arousal produces energy and facilitates our performance in groups. In the case of the post election violence, the presence of others could have encouraged the youth to be more cruel and destructive. De-individuation is another factor under group influence which could have caused the post election violence. According to Pennington (1986), de-individuation occurs when being part of a group reduces personal identity and the sense of responsibility. The groups gave the attackers anonymity and so the members acted in a disinherited way because they believed that authority figures and victims were unlikely to identify them as the culprits. The participants or attackers could get away with the violence since they

attackers from different regions were sent to other regions to attack since they could not be identified by the victims in the areas where they went for an “operation”

Risky shift and group polarization are other group phenomena which could have been the main motivators in killings and meeting other grievous harm to the victims. Goethals and Demorest (1995) argue that risky shift is the tendency for a group decision to be riskier than the average decision made by the individual group members. People do not always make riskier decisions in groups than when alone, though the risky shift phenomenon could have given the attackers courage to kill, maim, burn, destroy property among other unbecoming acts. Group polarization on the other hand is the solidification and further strengthening of a position as a consequence of a group decision and discussion (Flick, 1998). It is argued that the attackers from different communities took oaths in order for their groups to solidify. At the local level, it could be that planning or strategy did not allow for members to go back or withdraw; if one did not join the warriors, he/she was supposed to support them. Group polarization may occur because people hear new, more persuasive arguments that strengthen their original position and they dismiss arguments that do not support their position. Group polarization also might occur because of social comparison. We may find that our opinion is not as extreme as other's opinions and be influenced to take a stand at least as strong as the most extreme advocate's position.

There is also the concept of group think as an etiological factor. According to Santrock (2005), in group think, group members' decision making is impaired and there is avoidance of realistic appraisal in order to maintain group harmony. Groups think evolves because members are motivated to boost each other's ego and self-esteem, especially during stress, for example, during the post election violence, due to loss of the elections, land among others. During the violence, it was possible that there was no room for the perpetrators of the violence to think about other avenues for resolving the dispute, and therefore the violence was unanimously embraced due to group think leadership also played a role in the post election violence. Leadership refers to the interpersonal influence exercised over an organized group of people in their goal setting and goal achievement activities (Cole, 1996). Most group leaders of the chaotic mobs or groups were contingency or situational leaders. They emerged then and served as a unifying factor. The great person's theory of leadership may have found application. In this theory people may have perceived certain key leaders (National leaders) as

lose of the election and the contingency leaders on the ground, the violence was unstoppable. Group identity is another possible psychological explanation of the post election violence. He group identify is the issue of us versus them. According to Deaux (2001) social identity refers to the way we define ourselves in terms our group membership. In Kenya, in 2007, there were two main political groups, the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) and the Party of National Unity (PNU), together with their supporters perceived from either positions, there were in-groups and out groups. Individuals from other groups, therefore, were targets and subjects of or for the violence. To identify with a group does not necessary mean that we know or interact with every other member of the group or party. However, it does mean that we believe that we share numerous features with other members of the groups. This was the case during the election campaigns of 2007 in Kenya. Members of different parties even had party colors and livery).

Ethnocentrism may have been at the centre of the violence or chaos. According to Ashmore & Wilder (2001), ethnocentrism is the tendency to favor one's own ethnic group over the groups. During the post election violence, it was a case of one tribe versus the rest of the forty one (41) tribes. In some parts of the country, the “password” for personal safety was 41, meaning that one was from the other 41 tribes of Kenya and therefore such a person would not be attacked. Members of the other one community did not know the password and therefore were victims of the violence in those areas. Prejudice may have been one of the cornerstones of the post election violence. Jones (1997) and Nelson (2002) conceptualize prejudice as an unjustified negative attitude towards an individual, based on the individual's membership in a group, for example a group comprising people of a particular race, age, sex, tribe among others. In Kenya, members of a certain community who were the majority in one of the two major parties voted and went home, only to be attacked later on grounds that their party had won unfairly, yet most of them may have had no knowledge of where, how and when the rigging occurred. They may have been victims of more prejudice. The reasons for the prejudice could have include (1) individual personalities of the attackers, for example aggressing on people who break conventional norms, (2) competition between groups over scarce resources, for example economic and political power ( members of one community were perceived to be advantaged in terms of their population, economic power and to make matter worse, they were taking political power unfairly) (3) prejudice could also have been caused by cognitive processes that contribute to a

example, members of one tribe setting in other parts of the country (other than their original province) were stereotyped as having unfairly acquired land belonging to the locals in the regions members of the one community had migrated to. Analysts indicate that a significant proportion of members of the said community may have bought land in different areas where they have settled. This led members of the community that was prejudiced against to hit back at the attackers by also turning violent. Closely related to prejudice is discrimination. Monteith and Voils (2001) opine that discrimination is an unjustified negative or harmful action toward a member of a group simply because he or she is a member of that group. Different groups in different parts of Kenya were attacked for being from certain "Wrong" tribes or for being affiliated to ODM or PNU parties, yet both parties had membership from among people of different tribes. A typical example of discrimination is what happened when the vice-president was appointed from the third largest party – immediately after appointment, his tribesmen indifferent parts of the country were attacked. Another possible etiological factor could have been aggression. According to Santrock (2005), aggression is the intentional action directed towards the injury of another person.

According to the frustration-aggression hypothesis, the frustration for having lost the election unfairly sparked off the violence. The aggression could have been triggered by the need for equity (since the loss of the election may not have been fair) and for the initial subjects of the violence, the aggressive reactions were meant to 'equalize' or balance the equation. Intentions could also have sparked off the violence, that is, the losers of the elections may have felt that someone had intentionally made away with their victory. Aggression per se could have been fueled by positive enforcement. The violence opened gates for looting for economic gains, free sex, attention from and coverage by the media among others. The aggressive acts were reinforced positively by the gains that people made due to the anarchy that was experienced. Aggression and violence were seen as means for attaining, re-capturing or protecting power. Cross-cultural variations can also be used to explain the aggression that was witnessed during the post election violence. According to Bellesiles (1999) aggression and violence are more common in some cultures than others. In the case of Kenya, Nilotes are observed to be more aggressive (hostile aggression) compared to Bantus (most of who were the victims of the post election violence). The vote of the media in the post election violence cannot be over-emphasized specifically, the media covered the violence (both in print and electronic media) hence fueling the violence

pictured as a way of life throughout the popular media: on the news and on the television, in movies, and in song lyrics. Evildoers kill and get killed, police and detectives violently uphold or break society's laws among others. It is easy to get the message that aggression and violence are the norm - infact; they are the preferred mode of behavior. Generally the media glorifies violence, especially the television. A part from the media, in Kenya the mobile phones were also used to send prejudice messages, rumors, propaganda and messages of fear.

Other etiological factors for the post election violence may have been altruism and egoism. Oliner (2001) opines that altruism is an unselfish interest in helping someone else, for example, the participants in the violence were helping the politicians to fight for their rights, that is the stolen election victory (or the election victory) or to protect their current positions. Over the years, politicians in Kenya have always had their own small "armies" for example the *Jeshi la Mzee*, *Jeshi la Embakasi* among others. Egoism on the other hand is giving to another person to ensure reciprocity or to gain self-esteem. Specifically, some youth in Kenya died so that their leaders could get their rights or positions and so that the rest of the population could enjoy good leadership weather that happened or not, is a subject of discussion. An extreme view on the post election violence in Kenya is that the violence was a struggle between classes, that is, between the haves and the have-nots, the owners of factors of production and the workers. After the victims of the violence had moved to sager places, the warriors turned on their own who are well-to-do.

## Conclusion

Clearly, there may have been other causes of the post election violence in Kenya. However, this paper has shown that it is possible to attribute the violence to social psychology phenomena. As much as political solutions are sought in order to curb the re-occurrence of the post election violence, it would be prudent to pay attention to the psychological issues and phenomena raised in this paper.

## Recommendations

The paper makes the following recommendations on how to minimize or stop the ethnic clashes and post election violence in Kenya:

- 1) De-emphasizing tribe issues in political issues and campaigns,

on issues of national importance,

- 3) Using media and other social platforms to preach peace,
- 4) Include peace studies at primary and secondary levels of education,
- 5) Kenyans should embrace inter-tribal integration, for example through games, sports and inter-marriages,
- 6) The government should create jobs or other income generating activities for the youth who may have participated in the violence because of being idle and for economic gains as well and,
- 7) A multi-dimensional approach which would use the social psychology issues raised in the paper.

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