Chapter Five

Ethnopolitics and the Military in Kenya

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In a continent renowned for its unbridled praetorianism, Kenya stands out as one of the few African states to have maintained civilian rule throughout its independence. Despite the historical quagmire of successive coups and rebellions experienced by the surrounding region—Ethiopia to the north, Somalia to the northeast, Uganda to the west, and South Sudan to the northwest—Kenya’s military establishment has been able to preserve its reputation as a highly professional and distinctly apolitical outfit. This achievement is all the more surprising given the continuing salience of ethnicity in the country, a characteristic that often penetrates the national military establishment, divides it, and pushes it into interventionist practices.

The propensity of ethnicity to divide in Kenya was recently demonstrated by the post-election violence of 2007–2008, for which the country’s president and vice-president may eventually stand trial at the International Criminal Court for alleged involvement in inciting violence against each other’s ethnic communities. Kenya’s military has not only remained united amidst the destructive ethno-political conflicts that have occurred throughout the country’s five-decade history, but has resisted interfering in the civilian domain at almost every historical juncture.

The post-election violence, however, laid bare some of the major historical fault lines in Kenyan society. Kenya’s population of approximately forty-one million is divided across eight provinces: Western, Nyanza, Rift Valley, Eastern, North Eastern, Coast, Central, and the City of Nairobi. These provinces exhibit a highly uneven pattern of economic development, from the comparatively wealthy Central Province to the impoverished Nyanza Province. With the exception of Nairobi, the provincial demarcations also map
closely onto the established locales of Kenya’s principal ethnic groups: the Kikuyu (17.2 percent of the total population in 2009) from Central Province; Luhyas (13.8 percent) from Western Province; Kalenjin (12.9 percent) from the Rift Valley; Luo (10.5 percent) from Nyanza, and Kamba (10.1 percent) from Eastern Province. The Kikuyu, in particular, are regarded as Kenya’s “heartland tribe.” They are numerically the largest, located near the capital city, politically active, and historically important, and they have consistently been a target for ethnic violence. With at least forty-two distinct ethnic groups, all with different languages, traditions, and economic interests, the task of addressing Kenya’s social cleavages has always been fraught with difficulties. The enormity of the challenge has only been intensified by political leaders, all of whom have sought to mobilize support on the basis of ethnic appeals.

Given the unusual combination of ethnically polarizing politics and military subservience to civilian control, Kenya looms large as a critical case in exploring the interplay of ethnic and military identities. To what extent can the military’s continuing apolitical stance be attributed to an evolving quasi-ethnic military identity that has transcended the pre-existing categories of ethnic identification? This chapter seeks to address this question by tracing the historical dynamics of ethno-politics in Kenya and its impact upon the military establishment. It separates Kenya’s history into three chronologically ordered sections covering periods of presidential rule, with a final section drawing conclusions. In short, the chapter finds that a military quasi-ethnicity is not emerging in Kenya. Instead, as part of a coup prevention strategy, Kenya’s civilian leadership has continuously applied an ethno-political arithmetic to military recruitment and promotion, elevating the functional relevance of primordial ethnic identities above competing occupational referents. Nevertheless, with no ethnic group exhibiting an outright majority in Kenyan society, civilian leaders have also needed to rely on a membership distribution that contains a significant portion of non-aligned ethnic groups, which has offered a check on the absolute dominance of allied ethnic groups. On aggregate, this has kept the military in political stasis.

The Kenyatta Era, 1963–1978

To understand the evolution of ethno-politics and its relevance to the military, it is important to consider the key historical events directly prior to independence. Kenya became independent after years of unrest caused by the Mau-Mau emergency, an overwhelmingly Kikuyu-based rebellion stoked by the alienation of their lands to Europeans, deteriorating working conditions for squatter labor on European estates, and increasing population pressure on African reserves. A state of emergency was declared by the colonial government in October 1952 that lasted until 1960. Although the British brutally suppressed the rebellion, thereafter they were compelled to negotiate an accession to independence with African nationalists. In December 1963, the Kenya African National Union (KANU) formed Kenya’s first independent government. KANU was a consortium of Kikuyu and their cultural cousins, the Embu and Meru, as well as the Luo, and was led by the presidency of Jomo Kenyatta, a Kikuyu, and the vice-presidency of Jaramogi Oginga Odinga, a Luo. KANU’s alliance of ethnic groups accounted for 53 percent of Kenya’s population at the time. An opposition party, the Kenyan African Democratic Union (KADU), had already been established to defend the interests of smaller ethnic groups against the dominance of the Luo and Kikuyu. However, by 1964, KADU was dissolved and its leaders incorporated into KANU, including KADU’s second-in-command, Daniel arap Moi.

The Kenyan military was constituted from the remnants of the British King’s African Rifles (KAR) units. Prior to independence, Kamba, Kalenjin and Samburu ethnic groups dominated the Kenyan battalions of KAR, with the Kamba in particular having been regarded by the British as a martial race. The Kikuyu, however, were underrepresented as a result of a deliberate colonial policy to exclude them from the army, given the threat they had posed during the Mau-Mau emergency. Immediately after independence, the Kamba and Kalenjin each comprised approximately one-third of the forces, with the remainder including a wide spectrum of Kenya’s other ethnic groups. The officer ranks were predominantly British and Kamba, while military heads were exclusively so.

Independence ushered in a period of Kikuyu dominance over Kenya’s political sphere. Not only did Kenya have a Kikuyu president, but the civil service was also Kikuyu-dominated, due both to ethnic favoritism and, more benignly, the historical coincidence of Kikuyu homeland proximity to Nairobi and consequent Kikuyu interaction with British institutions. The distribution of patronage and services also favored the Central Province, the Kikuyu homeland, which became a major source of discontent for the Luo, who received little preference from the state despite having supported KANU into government.

In 1966, after numerous disagreements with Kenyatta over the direction of the country, Oginga Odinga resigned from KANU to form the Kenya People’s Union (KPU). The split alienated Kenyatta permanently from the Luo community, who instead supported Odinga’s KPU. As a side effect of the whole affair, the Luo ethnic group lost significant status among Kenyan society and soon came to be viewed as second-class citizens. In the public sector, they became increasingly distrusted in the military, police, and para-stats because they were no longer aligned to KANU. In the private sector, they could not gain traction because Nyanza was unsuitable terrain for growing tea or coffee and the commercial sector was already dominated by Ki-
kuyu. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Luo increasingly blamed their marginalization on Kikuyu. 13

In 1969, tensions escalated when Tom Mboya, a prominent Luo politician who had remained loyal to Kenyatta and KANU, was assassinated by a petty crook of Kikuyu descent with connections to the intelligence services. 14 Later in the year, a visit to the Nyanza city of Kisumu by Kenyatta was met by hostile Luo crowds who blamed Kenyatta for Mboya’s murder; in response, Kenyatta’s security team fired into the crowd, leaving several dead, hundreds injured, and dramatically escalating the animosity between Luo and Kikuyu. In the wake of these events, the KPU was banned and Odinga was imprisoned for two years, effectively signifying the beginning of a de facto single-party state.

The Kenyan military in the post-independence era experienced a brief period of discontent with the 1964 East African army mutinies, in which disgruntled enlisted men challenged their continued subordination to expatriate officers and the continuation of pre-independence pay structures. 15 Thereafter, African officers assumed operational command of all major units. Despite an ethnic military composition which was decidedly non-Kikuyu, Kenyatta was effectively sheltered from threats to his leadership from the military. For one, the Kenyan military maintained close ties with the British forces. Throughout the 1960s, British military advisors were overseeing the Kenyan army to ensure that it continued to operate along KAR lines. In the process, the British assured the military’s professionalism and, more importantly, its political reliability. 16 In addition, army recruitment had, at least up to this point, insulated the army from major ethnic conflicts, especially those associated with the Luo–Kikuyu divide. The Kamba, who were a non-aligned ethnic community, were in 1966 still the single largest group represented in the officer corps, comprising 28 percent of the total, compared with their population share of 11 percent; 17 and they were scarcely a challenge to Kikuyu dominance given their modest political aspirations. 18 Another stabilizing factor that may have helped maintain civilian control of the military was the existence of an external threat. The Kenyan army had already been built up by 1964 to confront the shifia, a Somali secessionist movement in northern Kenya that sought union with the kindred groups in Somalia. The army’s success in suppressing these forces gave legitimacy to professional norms of military conduct beyond the somewhat facile reasoning that struggled to maintain such conduct as a virtue in and of itself. 19

Nevertheless, Kenya was not without ethno-political wrangling for control of the military. Kenyatta embarked on a process of Kikuyuization of the military, particularly within the officer corps. In 1966, Kikuyu held 23 percent of the officer corps and 19 percent of the total population, despite having barely featured at all in the military at independence; by 1967, there were as many Kikuyu as Kamba officers. 20 The Luo officer component, in contrast, was 10 percent in 1966, and Luo comprised 14 percent of the total population. Furthermore, the Kamba-British line-up of military heads at independence was replaced by a Kamba-Kikuyu combination as British commanders left and Kikuyu officers were promoted.

During the 1970s, military heads were exclusively Kamba, Kikuyu, or British, except for the sole exception of one ethnic Taveta, who held the post of commander of the Navy from 1972 to 1978. 21 Throughout the 1970s not a single Luo featured above the rank of major. 22 In the lower ranks, Kamba and Kalenjin continued to dominate in the late 1960s. Kamba made up 21.4 percent of the army, but only 11 per cent of the total population, while Kalenjin comprised 22.4 percent of the army, and 10 percent of the population. 23 The Luo community was the most underrepresented in the rank-and-file. 24 This pattern continued into the 1970s.

Kenyatta also established a new paramilitary force, the General Service Unit (GSU), which was independent of both the army and the police and was largely commanded by Kikuyu officers. 25 In what turned out to be a prescient comment, Colin Leys remarked that, “while the GSU was in no way a match for the army, it could be used independently for political control in situations in which the army could not be deployed without the risk of making it an arbiter of policy.” 26 Indeed, history demonstrates that it would become somewhat of a predilection among Kenya’s presidents to utilize the GSU for ethno-political purposes. In the Kisumu massacre of 1969, for instance, the GSU was largely responsible for the shootings. In 1971, the GSU would be called upon to arrest a slapdash coup plot, resulting in purges of Kamba military officers and further rounds of promotions and the inevitable recruitment of Kikuyu. 27 The GSU was also periodically called upon to clamp down on dissent, as when university students demonstrated following events such as the banning of the KPU and Tom Mboya’s assassination. 28 Even prior to this, the GSU had been sporadically deployed in Nyanza to search for weapons and to intimidate the Luo, apparently tactics geared to forestall rebellion. 29

Notwithstanding its Kikuyuization, the military contrasted with the GSU by maintaining a veneer of political neutrality during Jomo Kenyatta’s tenure, and steered clear of engaging in overt partisan functions for Kenyatta, KANU, or the Kikuyu. On the one hand, Henry Bienen points out that Kenyatta did not need to use the army as an ethno-political base for political power because the Kikuyu held numerous non-military bases. 30 The Kikuyu, or at least the Kikuyu elites, could rely upon their dominance in the civil service, commerce, and even a prosperous farming cohort. In any case, if the Kenyan army had been continuously summoned to engage in ethno-politics, it would have become increasingly difficult to keep the army itself insulated from its own internal ethnic conflicts, an undesirable prospect given the external threat of Somalia. 31
On the other hand, the military’s role in politics could also remain negligible in the face of the socialist challenge, since ethnic divides effectively displaced any emerging class consciousness for the most exploited groups in society. Class divisions had, in fact, proceeded the furthest among the Kikuyu themselves. The rhetoric of ethnic conflict, and that of brute force via military intervention, was strategically deployed by KANU nationwide to divide and destabilize socialist opposition movements, such as the KPU. This also presented itself as a sensible course of action given that the economic performance of the regime was highly dependent on foreign direct investment, expatriate presence, and tourism, all of which were vulnerable to the use of outright force to suppress opposition.

During Kenyatta’s reign, there was a progressive enlargement of Kikuyu control over the apparatuses of coercion. Even so, the Kenyatta regime remained a predominantly civil one; the army was not a day-to-day actor in Kenyan internal affairs. The Kikuyu-dominated GSU, rather, offered an effective counterweight to the military, one that could be deployed to intervene in domestic affairs for ethno-political purposes. The military remained a professional institution reported to have high morale, although Donovan Chau’s historical account of the Kenyan armed forces at the time alludes to anxieties felt by military recruiters. Attempts to insulate the military from ethnic cleavages and inter-ethnic conflict suggested that cultural solidarity was far from established in the military, and a distinct quasi-ethnic identity was even further from reality. Indeed, the fear that ethnic divisions would ultimately tear the military apart appears to have been one of the reasons that ethnic Kambas continued to be recruited disproportionately. The Kamba were seen as a natural buffer, a significant factor in mitigating conflict between Kikuyu and Luo within the military. A large Kamba presence also ensured that the military could not become an instrument of civilian leaders for domestic coercion. John Murray pointed to this when he suggested that a move to intervene domestically by Kikuyu officers alone would likely bring reaction from non-Kikuyus in the lower ranks. He observed that threats by the army to intervene, were they to have been realized, would have called for a degree of trust and cooperation between Kikuyu and non-Kikuyu officers beyond what seemed at the time to exist.

The Moi Era, 1978–2002

Kenyatta ruled up until his death in 1978, at which point KANU vice-president Daniel arap Moi, a Kalenjin, took the reins of power. Moi was originally backed by a faction of two key Kikuyu politicians, Charles Njonjo and new vice-president Mwai Kibaki. His cause was also greatly assisted by the effective cannibalization of Kikuyu candidates from various factions, each vying for power. As a member of what was at that stage a non-contending ethnic group, Moi was an acceptable compromise to both the Kikuyu and the Luo. He has been described as a far more autocratic ruler than his predecessor. A deft populist and manipulator of ethnicity, Moi was also acutely aware of the ethnic tensions that had formed over the course of Kenyatta’s rule, especially those opposing Kikuyu dominance. He masterfully played ethnic groups, including the fragmented Kikuyu contingent, against each other, while solidifying support from his fellow Kalenjin, as well as the Luhya, pastoralist tribes (e.g., Maasai, Turkana, and Samburu), and various minority ethnic groups from the Coastal Province.

The manner in which Moi played ethno-politics was more brazen than had been the norm under Kenyatta, and with good reason. Moi lacked not only his predecessor’s sizeable ethnic base, but also personal anti-colonial resistance credentials. He did not possess the economic resources of Kenyatta to develop patronage networks and co-opt potential opponents. He had not accrued vast personal wealth. He could not benefit from the distribution of the fruits of independence in the way Kenyatta had (especially through land vacated by European settlers). And he had to contend with an unfavorable global economic climate following the oil price shocks of the 1970s.

Rather, Moi’s favored ethno-political instrument was the use of oppression. In 1982, ethnic welfare organizations, most prominently including the Gikuyu (Kikuyu), Embu and Meru Association (GEMA), were prohibited. Later in the same year, Moi amended the Constitution to entrench the de jure one-party state. The ensuing dissatisfaction expressed by contending ethnicities manifested in an abortive 1982 coup attempt, in which lower ranks of the air force attempted to seize power. The coup was spearheaded by Luo and a few Kikuyu junior and non-commissioned officers. Both the GSU and members of the army still loyal to Moi were responsible for crushing the coup attempt.

Moi’s wariness increased after the failed coup, triggering the proliferation of fresh measures to curtail civil and political freedoms. Moi also began to redistribute many of the advantages hitherto enjoyed only by the Kikuyu and the Central Province to allied groups and regions. These included development initiatives and appointments to key positions in the central government, civil service, and parastatals. In the military establishment, Moi pursued a similar control strategy to that of Kenyatta: manipulation of the officer corps through promotion and reassignment of sensitive positions, and the use of the GSU as a counterbalancing ethnic army. This strategy entailed a dual process of “Kalenjinization” and “de-Kikuyuization.” Moi began by reducing Kikuyu in the officer corps, since they posed the greatest risk of a coup, and replaced them with either Kalenjin or with non-contending ethnic groups such as Kamba, Somali, or Samburu. A similar strategy was adopted for recruitment in the GSU and included the sacking and conviction of the Kikuyu commandant for failing to have taken sufficient action to prevent the
attempted coup. In 1986, one-third of the lieutenant colonels and colonels were still Kikuyu, and the Kamba component was even larger, Kalenjin held only one-fifth of the senior posts. However, the seven top military positions had already been reassigned to Kamba, Kalenjin, Somali, and Samburu, with Kikuyu no longer represented. By the mid-1990s, the process of Kalenjinization of the army was effectively complete. Of the five military heads in 1996, three were Kalenjin and the remaining two were Maasai and Mijikenda. Of the eight generals in the Kenyan army, one-third were Kalenjin, despite accounting for only one-tenth of Kenya's population. This ethnic patterning could also be observed in the lower ranks and in the GSU. The Luo, who had by now been portrayed as the epitome of indolence, poverty, and rebellion, continued to be discriminated against in military recruitment.

Another significant moment during Moi's tenure arose in the early 1990s with the increasing international pressure to reinstate multiparty politics following the fall of communism. For the international community, the eradication of the communist threat shifted attention from Cold War geopolitical alignment, where Kenya's pro-capitalist and anti-communist stance made it a donor darling among Western nations, to concerns over human rights violations and lack of political freedoms, for which Kenya's record was frankly appalling. Condemnation over Kenya's performance was brought to a head with the unresolved murder of the Luo foreign minister Robert Ouko, an act widely assumed to be ethno-politically motivated because of his growing independent political prestige in the international community. Coupled with a sudden domestic demand for multiparty politics, Moi was publicly hobbled.

It was at this delicate moment that the Kikuyu business elite pushed for greater political representation. They were suffering from yet another economic downturn after a decade of Kalenjinization and de-Kikuyuization. The Luo community, represented by Oginga Odinga of the old guard, also needed a dynamic forum to articulate their discontent following decades of marginalization and exclusion from the political sphere and the fruits of economic gains (for which Ouko's death was an additional source of bitterness). These two domestic groups were able to mobilize grassroots support against the regime, undermining KANU's ability to demobilize the opposition to the one-party state. Mass protests were met with brutal repression from Moi's GSU. Pro-democratic activists were detained and tortured, further incensing the international community. Sufficiently repulsed by Moi's penchant for crude violence, donors halted their financial support pending political reforms. In 1991, Moi finally announced Kenya's return to multiparty politics.

Moi's capitulation on the one-party state was accompanied by self-fulfilling warnings about the dangers of inter-ethnic violence in a multiparty context. Once opposition had been permitted to function openly, Moi began “outsourcing” the use of violence from state institutions like the GSU to extra-state militia. The Kalenjin militia in the Rift Valley was mobilized with money, threats of non-compliance, and an ideology of intra-ethnic solidarity and inter-ethnic hatred in a push to drive Kikuyu out of the area. Rival militias backed by opposition parties, such as the Mungiki, also emerged. By labeling what were effectively political clashes in ethnic terms, presumed to have been a deliberate KANU strategy of “ethnicizing violence,” opposition parties became, in effect, ethnically balkanized entities, thus undermining their multi-ethnic appeal. By retaining a Coastal and Rift Valley support base (a relatively diverse base, under the circumstances), Moi and the ruling KANU party won the 1992 multiparty election. The unsuccessful challengers included Kenneth Matiba's Forum for Restoration of Democracy-Asili (FORD-Asili), which drew on Kikuyu and split Luhya support, Oginga Odinga's Forum for Restoration of Democracy-Kenya (FORD-Kenya), a vehicle for the Luo vote, and Mwai Kibaki's Democratic Party, capturing some Kikuyu support and ethnic groups in the Eastern Province (such as the Kam- ba). The fragmentation of the opposition, itself enhanced by Moi's careful deployment of divide-and-rule tactics, had clearly worked in KANU's favor. The subsequent 1997 election repeated these tactics, though conflict was concentrated in the Coastal Province, where Kikuyu and Luo “migrants” were attacked by local militia.

Although the 1990–1992 clashes resulted in more than fifteen hundred deaths and the displacement of over three hundred thousand inhabitants, conspicuous in its absence was the military. It may have been reluctant to become embroiled in the suppression of militia because the institution itself was divided—the military was disproportionately Kalenjin, although it was by no means majority Kalenjin—or because it had a legacy of professionalism to uphold, part of which entailed maintaining distance from domestic affairs. Given the evidence in judicial inquiries that high-level actors in Moi's government recruited individuals directly from the military to foment the clashes, the former may be the most plausible explanation.

The Kenyan military, in any event, largely refrained from intervening in civilian affairs during Moi's reign, either for or against him, and remained a relatively professional force. Moi stacked the military with his fellow Kalenjin as a coup prevention strategy, although one should not discount the extent to which he was able to obtain loyalty through patronage. He was thought to have offered farms and parastatal positions that could be redeemed upon retirement to senior military officers, for example. The military nevertheless remained divided. This may ultimately explain why Moi did not call upon it to serve his immediate political interests. For instance, in 1985, Moi was warned that the growing proportion of Kalenjin among senior officers was creating discontent among the wider military personnel. It is also known that Kikuyu and Luo officers voiced their complaints on several occasions.
over the Kalenjin-biased promotion processes, and other ethnic groups pointed to the Kalenjin-skewed recruitment regulations. 68

It is difficult to foresee how an independent, quasi-military identity could emerge in such an environment. The enduring salience of primordial ethnic attachments within the Kenyan military was confirmed by Hornsby's observation that a culture of 'tribalism' remained embedded in the army—in no small part because of the continuing ethno-political calculus applied to military appointments. 69

Kibaki and Beyond, 2002–Present

Moi was barred from running in the 2002 presidential elections by a constitutional limit of two elective terms. Uhuru Kenyatta, son of Jomo Kenyatta, was appointed by Moi as successor to the leadership of the KANU party. After almost forty years in power, however, the reconfigured leadership could not engineer one more election victory. The previously fragmented opposition united to form the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) party, a loose alliance between Kikuyu former vice-president Mwai Kibaki, who became heir to the presidency, and Luo leader Raila Odinga, son of Oginga Odinga. In a re-creation of the original KANU alliance of the early 1960s, the coalition stitched together ethnic support from the Kikuyu, Embu, Meru, and Luo, along with substantial gains in support from Kamba and minority ethnic groups in the Coastal Province. 70 In marked contrast to the elections of 1992 and 1997, the 2002 election was a peaceful affair, in part because both major candidates were Kikuyu, in effect minimizing the potential for ethnic polarization. The subsequent transfer of power also proceeded smoothly. This was largely because Moi understood that Kibaki would never seek to investigate him for corruption perpetrated under his regime, given their common and equally culpable historical experiences in KANU. 71

It is widely understood that there was an initial opening of democratic space and ethnic comity during Kibaki's tenure. 72 Although the most powerful posts in the central government—the ministerial positions in finance, defense, justice, and security—were all held by members of the Kikuyu and closely related Embu and Meru ethnic groups, the cabinet was far more balanced ethnically and regionally than it had been under Moi. 73 Ethnic anxieties soon resurfaced, however, as a new historical round of Kikuyuyization unfolded in the civil service and top echelons of the military and GSU, often at Kalenjin expense. 74 Within the military, several senior Kalenjin figures were retired, usually into appointed roles as parastatal heads, while Kikuyu and Kamba representation increased. Prior to Kibaki's election in 2002, there were no Kikuyu military heads; by 2005, four out of six of the top military positions were held by Kikuyu. 75

Meanwhile, power tussles within the NARC government eventually led to its collapse in November 2005. Tensions between Kibaki's National Alliance Party of Kenya (NAK) faction and Odinga's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) contingent were already palpable after Kibaki's failure to honor pre-election agreements with Odinga (e.g., that the post of prime minister would be divided equally between NAK and LDP). Differences eventually came to a head over constitutional reform, with the LDP opposing NAK's proposed changes. When the government lost the Kenya Constitutional Referendum, Kibaki retaliated by throwing key LDP leaders out of government. These actions effectively signaled that the multi-ethnic consensus that had held NARC—and arguably the nation—together had finally disintegrated. Its breakdown led to a resurgence of populism and ethno-nationalism, sowing the seeds of ethnic violence in 2008. 76 For Luo, in particular, Kibaki's actions rekindled anti-Kikuyu resentment by adding to a divisive ethnic narrative that had Kikuyu "behaving according to type" and doing "just as Jomo Kenyatta had done to Oginga Odinga." 77

Raila Odinga and his LDP stalwarts went on to form the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) to challenge the incumbent, Kibaki, and his rebranded Party of National Unity (PNU) in the 2007 election. Controversial political figure William Ruto, a former Moi protégé who represented Kalenjin interests, also joined ODM to form what was essentially an anti-Kikuyu bloc. 78 The ODM's rhetoric prior to the election could be distilled as "Kenya against the Kikuyu." The Kikuyu were depicted as synonymous with Kibaki and PNU, and were scapegoats for a myriad of social, political, and economic ills that had plagued Kenyan society since independence. 79 The parliamentary vote in the election was won comfortably by the ODM, while the presidential vote was extremely close, with Kibaki declared the winner despite clear indications of voting irregularities and electoral fraud. 80 The announcement of Kibaki's victory triggered widespread civil conflict. Violence erupted in the Rift Valley, as Kalenjin militia attacked Kikuyu and anyone else suspected of supporting the ruling party, and in urban centers, those protesting the election result were subjected to violence from rival militia and the police force. The ethnically heterogeneous Kibera slum in Nairobi also became a major hotspot for Luo-Kikuyu violence. 81 Like the violence of 1992, elements within the Kalenjin, Luo, and Kikuyu political elite are thought to have mobilized these outbursts. At the time of writing, William Ruto and Uhuru Kenyatta may well stand trial in the International Criminal Court (ICC) for their alleged involvement in organizing the violence, although perhaps surprisingly, Odinga was not implicated, despite the widely held view among Kenyans that he had incited riots in Kibera. 82

The 2007–2008 post-election violence resulted in over 1,100 deaths and 350,000 internally displaced persons, as well as destruction of approximately
117,000 private properties and 500 government-owned properties. Peace was ultimately restored on 28 February 2008, when the parties signed a National Accord, brokered by former United Nations secretary-general Kofi Annan, paving the way for a power-sharing arrangement between Odinga and Kibaki. Appointments to key military positions in 2011 reflected the compromise, with two Luo included. The National Accord that ended the conflict also established the Commission of Inquiry into Post-Election Violence (the Waki Commission) as part of the post-conflict peacebuilding process. The resultant Waki Report heaped criticism on the police for their unwillingness to confront protesters in their own home areas, and on both police and the GSU for contributing to the escalation of the violence. During the crisis, Kibaki was ultimately forced to rely on the Kikuyu-dominated GSU to hold strategic points around Nairobi from falling into pro-ODM hands, while deploying as many police units as possible outside their home areas. Although reluctant to become involved, the military was also called in to undertake some of the police duties. They were briefly deployed to quell fighting in and around the Rift Valley urban center of Nakuru and to secure major transport routes throughout the country. The Waki Report notes that the military performed its duties well; it acted apolitically, was subject to civilian rule, and did not resort to violence. The Commission also expressed surprise in the report that more military involvement was not initiated, and suggested that additional military support could have reduced the impact, extent, and duration of the post-election violence.

Although Kibaki stuck to the two-term constitutional limit, the 2013 election was yet another ethnically polarized affair, though a largely peaceful one. In a realignment of Kenya’s ethnic coalitions, Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto harnessed their respective Kikuyu and Kalenjin support bases and formed the Jubilee Alliance to challenge Raila Odinga’s Coalition for Reform and Democracy (CORD). The Jubilee Alliance is, at first glance, a perplexing coalition given that the two men are accused of crimes against humanity for their respective roles in orchestrating violence against each other’s ethnic groups. Given their history, it is difficult to ignore Susanne Mueller’s observation that their run together was part of a broader strategy to deflect and undermine the ICC. For Odinga, having lost Kalenjin support, CORD was formed as a broad coalition of ODM and several minor parties in an exercise of ethnic arithmetic. Odinga was able to obtain the support of the Kamba, who had voted outside the two major ethnic blocs in the 2007 election, while retaining Luo and Luhyia support. Jubilee’s marriage of convenience ultimately defeated CORD, resulting in Uhuru Kenyatta’s election to the presidency and William Ruto’s election to the vice-presidency. Uncertainties over their ICC indictment continue to hang over Kenya, and could be a politically explosive issue in the future.

In the meantime, security challenges posed by Kenya’s incursion into southern Somalia in October 2011, continue to threaten stability. Al-Shabaab, the radical Islamic group that the Kenyan military was deployed to suppress, has responded with an intermittent string of low-level terror incidents in Nairobi, Mombasa, and other urban centers, mostly involving hand grenades aimed indiscriminately at the public. A terrorist attack on Westgate Mall on 23 September 2013, in which sixty-seven people lost their lives, raised serious doubts over Kenya’s internal security and the role of the military.

Since Moi relinquished leadership there has been little evidence of the emergence of a quasi-ethnic identity in the military, largely because little changed under Kibaki, and it is too early yet to speculate on the second Kenyatta government. Ethic recruitment and promotion into senior military roles has continued apace, and the GSU still acts as an ethnic counterweight to the army. More alarmingly, perhaps, Peter Kagwanja warns that the ethnic character of the post-election violence has eclipsed civic nationalism and entrenched notions of “ethnic citizenship.” Of equal concern are Adam Ashforth’s findings in conversations with Kalenjin that ethnic cleansing of Kikuyus from the Rift Valley is overwhelmingly seen as a “good thing.” Under these circumstances, it is difficult to envisage how the military could remain insulated from such an ethnically toxic environment, despite their abstention from overt ethno-political acts on civilians. That this ethnic division does not preclude the military from acting professionally is curious in itself, as it suggests that the development of a quasi-ethnic identity is not a requisite condition for the effective functioning of the military.

CONCLUSION

Cynthia Enloe once remarked that alterations in military ethnic relationships are rarely left to chance. Unlike many African countries, Kenya has survived over five decades as a functioning nation-state without the imposition of military rule, in large part as an outcome of an active process of ethnic calculation in military personnel management. Kenya has faced only one serious threat to ongoing civilian rule during this time, the botched coup attempt of 1982. Equally impressive is the military’s lack of involvement in political engagements, neither in support nor in opposition to the government. It is curious, in view of this, that the civilian leadership has never maintained absolute dominance over the military establishment. With no ethnic group in Kenya forming close to an outright majority, civilian leaders have had to rely on several non-aligned groups to counterbalance the Kikuyu. The use of “martial races,” such as the Kamba, has been one neo-colonial response taken by the political leadership. Another has been to employ the
services of pariah ethnic groups who, lacking the political capital, economic resources, and numerical base, have been incapable of laying a credible claim to the state apparatus (and elicit no such pretensions), such as the ethnic Somali. Both of the aforementioned groups have remained ambivalent throughout the major ethnic conflicts in Kenyan society, principally between the Luo, the Kalenjin, and the Kikuyu, and have thus preserved the military largely in a state of political stasis.

Despite the military’s putative respect for civilian control, however, Kenyan society continues to be divided ethnically, perhaps more so than ever before. The ongoing salience of ethnicity is best understood as the outcome of an elaborate history of ethno-politics. Kenya has a long history of repeated transformations of ethnicities into political identities, with leading members of Kenya’s political class having mobilized support along ethnic lines, beginning in the early days of KANU and KADU. Furthermore, the introduction of multiparty elections in 1992 has, unsurprisingly, failed to arrest these tendencies. Political parties have been, to quote Mueller, “non-programmatic and little more than shells for ethnic barons.” The most brazen feature of Kenya’s history of ethno-political manipulation, however, is the way in which ethnic alliances have been constantly reconfigured along lines that remain most politically expedient for leaders. The malleability of these allegiances has bordered on the absurd, such as the Kalenjin-Kikuyu alliance forged by William Ruto and Uhuru Kenyatta merely one election cycle after the two groups were primary antagonists in the most violent episode of Kenya’s independent history.

The pervasive narratives, largely based on the precipitous actions of Kenya’s civilian leadership, have both reified and demonized the ethnic “other” in a profoundly multi-ethnic society. While the military has been able to maintain its distance from the most severe ethno-political conflicts, it has not been totally insulated either. That insularity, a possible product of a quasi-ethnic military identity, simply does not exist. The composition of the Kenyan military is multi-ethnic, however, albeit out of sync with the ethnic proportions of Kenyan society and manipulated from time to time by political exigencies. It is also clear that in the interests of coup prevention, civilian leaders would not be best served by fostering the development of a quasi-ethnic military identity, as Kenya’s presidents have no doubt been well aware. We might instead contemplate whether they have been systematically engaged in a deliberate attempt to reinforce the primacy of pre-existing categories of ethnic identification within the military establishment. Consider Moi (though any of Kenya’s presidents would suffice). By way of Moi’s putative de-Kikuyuization and Kalenjinization of the military establishment, he effectively installed an incentive structure that conferred Kalenjin (and allied) ethnicities with special membership status, along with material rewards, thereby accentuating internal ethnic divisions within the military establishment. It became beneficial for Kalenjin officers to emphasize their “Kalenjin-ness” over competing identities since it was linked to opportunities, including career advancement. From Moi’s perspective, harnessing “Kalenjin-ness” functioned to strengthen intra-ethnic loyalty bonds, thereby offering a strong deterrent to challenges to his authority from within the military.

The best military in the eyes of a civilian leader is one where its soldiers are not only the most competent, but are also the most politically reliable, a fact that was obviously not lost on Kenya’s leaders. Successive presidents have manipulated the senior ranks of the military to emphasize either members of their own ethnic group or ethnically non-aligned, numerically marginal, and politically reliable groups. Members of the GSU paramilitary force have also been overwhelmingly drawn from a single ethnic community, usually that of the president. Security planning in Kenya has been, and continues to be, viewed through an ethnic lens. In a context where ethnic criteria are instrumental to career and life opportunities for military personnel, it is inescapable that primordial ethnic attachments remain their primary point of reference.

In this overwhelming political context, the Kenyan military has been unable to establish its own quasi-ethnic identity.

NOTES

1. Joel Barkan, *Kenya: Assessing Risks to Stability* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2011), 3–4. All other ethnic groups make up less than 10 percent of Kenya’s population. These include the following: Kenyan Somali of North Eastern Province (6.2 percent), Kisii of Nyanza (3.7 percent), Mijikenda of Coast Province (5.1 percent), Meru of Eastern Province (4.3 percent), Turkana of Rift Valley (26 percent), Maasai of Rift Valley (2.2 percent), and other groups making up less than 1 percent of Kenya’s population each (9.3 percent).


The fall of Oginga Odinga was seen as the obvious choice for second-in-command following the fall of Tom Mboya. However, Mboya had such a charismatic claim and was Luo—an ethnic group that was becoming increasingly antagonistic—to be given the vice-presidency. It instead fell to Joseph Murumbi, a half-Masai half-Goan. The marginality of his ethnic background made him a non-threatening candidate, since he was unlikely to complicate the already overloaded ethnic playing field outside the Kikuyu and Luo.

Two major instances where the army did become involved in internal affairs were when Tom Mboya was assassinated and when Oginga Odinga was arrested. The provocations between Hope and Despair...
61. On 4 July, 1990, two former Kikuyu ministers, Keneth Matiba and Charles Rubia, were detained. The two had been holding meetings with Oginga Odinga and his son Raila, threatening Moi’s political stranglehold with the reestablishment of the Kikuyu-Luo alliance that had existed at independence. Their arrest was precipitated by the fact that they had called an unauthorized rally in Nairobi in the coming days. When crowds assembled on 7 July, 1990, to attend the now-banned rally, they were dispersed by the GSU, sparking days of rioting that resulted in at least 20 deaths and 1,000 arrests.


68. Chau, Global Security Watch Kenya, 44.


70. Barkan, Assessing Risks to Stability, 8.


72. Frank Hohnquist, “Kenya’s Postelection Euphoria—And Reality,” Current History 102, 664 (2003): 202–5; Mueller, “The Resilience of the Past: Government and Opposition in Kenya,” 342–43. Mueller further notes that while repression was still deployed on occasion under Kibaki, individuals were not killed or detained as they had been under previous regimes.


79. Kagwanja, “Courting Genocide: Populism, Ethno-Nationalism and the Informalisation of Violence in Kenya’s 2008 Post-Election Crisis,” 372–77. As Kagwanja points out, the “Kenya against the Kikuyu” rhetoric was a reinvention of history given the impoverishment Kikuyu endured under Moi. It also ignored class divisions among Kikuyu themselves.


BIBLIOGRAPHY


Researchers have tended to agree that there is no political force in civil society that can consistently compete effectively with the armed forces for political power. Military establishments simply have the ability to take power and to control most countries by force at will. This is especially true in developing countries, where there are deep ethnic and/or religious divisions, and political leadership is mainly formed by elites who, "in one way or other, were the product of the colonial era." There are, of course, specific strategies that can facilitate the acquisition of power by individuals within the armed forces. The creation of a separate military identity is one of these, and the case of Algeria illustrates this strategy well.

Although Algeria for all intents and purposes has been under a military system since its independence in 1962, it has remained an integral part of the Arab world in most of its international agreements, practicing French conventions, to which it was trained and subjected for more than a century, thus retaining a profound legacy. The effects of the past formal and present neo-colonialism, then, are tangibly present in Algeria today. One of these effects is the character of the elites who have guided Algerian society over the past fifty years. Belkacem Saadallah notes that in the late nineteenth century a "French-educated elite . . . tried, despite their limited number, to find a formula by which the native and colonial societies could live together harmoniously."2

These elites, with their distinctive mentality, have notably failed to condition native Algerians to accept the domination of the French regarding the Algerian Muslims. This, moreover, must be seen in the context of the path of the Algerian revolution, one that is unique in that it has proceeded without