

THE ROLE OF POLITICAL PARTIES  
IN DEMOCRATIZATION OF  
SOCIETY AND THE STATE  
Prof. G-C. M. Mutiso

muticon  
box 14333  
nairobi  
phone 860772  
fax 860771

## INTRODUCTION

The author was requested to write on the topic of Role of Political Parties in Good Governance. The title of this paper is different for a variety of reasons.

The first one is lack of good definition of good governance. It has become a catchall that includes privatization, structural adjustment, elections and so forth. It would have been interesting to write about what role parties play in structural adjustment etc.! However, this, in the opinion of the writer, would not have served this seminar well for it would have masked the important role of parties in democratization of society and the state.

The second reason is that creation of real political parties is still unfinished business in Kenya and indeed in the rest of the continent. Power, influence and control over instruments of rulership are organized on personalistic or cabal basis without due attention being paid to the participation of the population in meaningful ways.

By re-titling the paper, the author is able to show that there is need for building viable political parties to be used in the yet to be democratization of society and the state. The author is also able to argue that internal party processes need to be democratized so as to enhance representation. This approach also opens up discussion of ethnicisation of parties and their possible negative effects on democratization of society and the state.

## POLITICAL PARTIES DEFINED

Fundamentally political parties are organizations for aggregating political interests of their members with a view to getting control over the instruments of rulership and thus controlling the state. Interest/pressure groups on the other hand never have the ultimate objective of capturing state

power. They exist for purposes of furthering their unified members' interests short of capturing state power. Political movements, on the other hand, are differentiated from political parties and pressure /interest groups in that their membership is not differentiated. Movements incorporate members with extremely varied attributes, end goals and even strategies.

<sup>i</sup>These definitions are extensively discussed in Seymour M. Lipset and Stein Rokkan. eds. *Parity Systems and Voter Alignments: Cross-National Perspectives*. New York: The Free Press. 1967. Particularly important in showing the roots of parties in cleavages existent in society is *Cleavage Structures, Party Systems and Voter Alignments: An Introduction*, by Seymour M. Lipset and Stein Rokkan pp. 1-64.

Aggregation of interests, by parties, can be done on ideological, occupational, geographical, origin or other basis. There is nothing intrinsically requiring that parties by their very nature capture the instruments of rulership peacefully.

It is usual that when the parties capture the state instruments they favor their followers in giving them those benefits, which emanate from operating the state instruments. This ranges all the way from direct patronage in employment to being favored indirectly by public policy outputs.

It is important before we leave this section to underscore how the history of the rise of political parties has shaped our thinking about them. Above, following a classical study, we defined parties as organizations for aggregating their members' interests with the objective of capturing state power. When parties began to emerge in the Western World, there were two major processes emerging in that world. These were the emergence of the nation state and industrialization. Consequently, there was struggle over who was to control the state. The cleavage in interests at that period was those who owned industry and those employed. The parties that emerged thus tended to reflect this existent cleavage in society.

As the demographics and economies of the countries changed, so did the political parties and so were there changes in those who captured the state. This should not be used as an argument that parties were always on the democratization side. Indeed there are parties in the Western tradition which have also played undemocratic roles but on the whole, they are a minority in comparison to the behavior of parties in Eastern Europe, Asia, Latin America and Africa. Till the decade of the nineties parties have essentially been instruments of non-democratic behavior.

## **PARTIES IN KENYA'S HISTORY**

If the definition of political parties above is acceptable, we can quickly review their role in the past. In the past sixty years there has been a variety of parties seeking to capture state power. The first parties were by the colonizer settlers. They sought to wrest state power from the colonial bureaucrats who dominated the instruments of state power. They are not of much concern to us as progenitors of parties now for they did not include natives.

Native party organizations were instruments to use to get state power. However since colonial rule did not allow them to operate on colony wide basis, there was a tendency, officially encouraged, to fragment political party organization and to keep it at the tribal level. This was particularly so in the period before Mau Mau. Where Organizations like KCA and KAU tried, there were many limitations put on them by the legal and administrative regime of the colonial state. These not only limited party organizational reach and thereby subsumed parties to the nationalist movement. The second reason for subsuming parties under the nationalist movement was the undifferentiated nature of both the followership and the lumped end goal of mass nationalism called independence. It meant many different things to many people. The point is that there was no clear cleavage in society based on social classes that would have generated parties similar to those of the western tradition.

In the post Mau Mau period, and before independence, the framework for political parties which was to last until 1990s was laid out. One should note that very many localized political parties were created within district frameworks. Amalgamation of these broadly into two tendencies, essentially driven by standpoint on collaboration with Europeans in independent Kenya and Homo Kenyatta's role in independent Kenya politics emerged. This is the KANU /KADU divide. At independence, the need for power led to the absorption of KADU by KANU. Ironically, this triggered serious discourse on the nature of political parties and whom they represented. In other words the merger of the two parties led to the first discussion on what interests were to be aggregated and who was to benefit from the capture of state instruments.

It is worth discussing the first three years of independent Kenya political parties for the rain that beats us now started then. Perhaps the best source on this is Gladsworthy's Tom Mboya: The Man Kenyans

Like to Forget. In this work and many others, the debate on the nature of the Kenyan state is highlighted. More specifically, the issue of who was to benefit from the distribution of the former Whitehighlands land distribution was central to the discourse on the nature of the party and the state. The leftist position, championed by Odinga and Kaggia weighed in with the demand that there be socialist tendencies in handling land and in other outputs of the state. The right position championed by Kenyatta and Mboya weighed in on a capitalist approach to land and indeed all other state outputs.

The later view ultimately dominated and since it was powerful it changed the organization of the party KANU, at Limuru, in 1965 and got rid of the left wing from the party. Although Odinga and others formed KPU, it was harassed and ultimately banned in 1969. One concludes then that a political party, which served the interests of those who favored a capitalist approach, became the only national organization allowed *de facto* until 1991. This single party did not contribute to democratization of either society or the state for that was not its objective. Its objective was no more than to reward the cabal which controlled it for it also did not practice either internal democracy or seek opinion of the population it was lording over.

Between 1965 and 1991, KANU flouted its own internal election provisions. It held no referendums to check with the public that it was ruling their policy preferences. There was little popular debate on policy alternatives. There was little dissent within the party or within Parliament. Those who dissented disappeared. One does not therefore look for a tradition of democratization from this quarter. The party argued that to build the nation there should not be dissent. This argument was made by most African regimes.

KANU never put to play internal processes, which it can be argued furthered democratization. In terms of party process, it is interesting that KANU never systematically held party elections. It also did not provide for primaries to choose party candidates. It had a loyalty committee which from time to time expelled members. All these practices are authoritarian and not conducive to democratization for if the internal party process is not participatory, it is doubtful that the party accepts participation in aggregating interests.

## THE MULTI-PARTY ERA. 1991 TO DATE

Since 1991, there are many parties in Kenya. The key ones are KANU, DP, SDP, Ford Kenya, Saba Saba Asili. These parties have essentially spun from KANU. Their internal practices leave a lot to be desired for they seem to be more in keeping with the behavior of the single party. Practices which militate against internal party democracy are *inter alia*:

- a. Lack of continuous dialogue mechanism for consultation with party members.
- b. Lack of mechanisms for discussion and policy development by members.
- c. Lack of holding primaries in choosing party candidates for local and national elections.
- d. Domination by the national officeholders over all party affairs, particularly on the selection of candidates for national and civic elections.
- e. Inter-party migration by parliamentarians without authorization from members or party officeholders.
- f. Lack of systematic records of membership.
- g. Lack of systematic organization and procedures for socializing young members into party processes and thus building future leadership.
- h. Lack of party information/propaganda to members.

If these are the internal problems, a variety of other problems related to dealing with other political parties exist. Among them are *inter alia*:

- a. Lack of clear party policy guidelines on relations with other parties.
- b. Domination of parties by the parliamentary wings and thus lack of policy inputs by members or secretariats on parliamentary party positions.
- c. Lack of clear long term party policies about specific policy areas.
- d. Lack of professional secretariats to administer agreed party programs in key areas of membership, policy and candidates.
- e. Lack of long term strategies about specific party problems like succession.

In the post 1991 parties have essentially behaved as if they are running mass movements. There is no clear evidence that they are concerned about building up followership with specific interests. Perusal of their policy statements does not elucidate major variations in ideology and orientation. In any case those documents were drafted

for the party by a limited number of people and there is absolutely no evidence that the wider membership was given the documents to comment and then adopt as party documents.

## CONSEQUENCES FOR THE FUTURE