



REVISITING MUNGIKI'S ROLE IN THE 2007-2008 KENYAN POST ELECTION VIOLENCE

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The Post Election Violence in Kenya

The International Criminal Court (ICC) has recently made the decision to investigate the alleged perpetrators of the 2007-2008 Post Election Violence (PEV) in Kenya. The Kenyan general election of December 2007 was a contest between Kenya's two main political parties: the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) and the Party of National Unity (PNU). Voting ballots were opened on 27 December and eventually Mwai Kibaki of the PNU was declared to have been re-elected as President of Kenya. Anger and frustration over the PNU victory sparked protests followed by violence carried out by ODM supporters, which caused widespread property destruction, and the death of over 1500 Kenyans.

The initial patterns of violence were similar to previous election violence experienced in the 1990s; the brunt of the conflict occurred in Rift Valley Province and those belonging to the Kikuyu ethnic group were the main targets. Politicians were accused of being heavily involved in the violence, which ranged from incitement of ethnic hatred to funding attacks. Despite this targeting of the Kikuyu by other ethnic groups, there were never any significant levels of Kikuyu retaliation during this time. This changed in January 2008 when large-scale, organised retaliatory attacks occurred in Rift Valley towards the end of the month, particularly in the towns of Nakuru and Naivasha.

It is this unprecedented degree of Kikuyu retaliation which sets apart the January 2008 violence from Kenya's previous ethnic clashes. The clashes which occurred in Nakuru and Naivasha have been described as 'revenge attacks' due to the perceived involvement of the Kikuyu-based organisation 'Mungiki'. Based on the views of eleven members of the Mungiki organisation, from leaders to junior members, this paper argues that intra-ethnic antagonisms between Mungiki and Kikuyu society have been overlooked by the general literature on the PEV. These antagonisms would have precluded Mungiki committing 'revenge attacks' on behalf of Kikuyu society.

Mungiki is a large organisation, with over one million estimated members, and thus the views of eleven members cannot necessarily be generalised to represent the views of the entire organisation. Although their views on Mungiki itself may have differed, all those interviewed shared the same view of the relationship between Mungiki and Kikuyu society in the context of the PEV. This evidence presents a strong argument regarding Mungiki's motives during the violence, although further research is necessary before one can make conclusions regarding the organisation's actual involvement.

Reviewing Previous Conclusions

Up until now, all investigations into the violence have been internal, the most notable being the report by the Waki Commission published in October 2008. The ICC's investigation will provide an opportunity to revisit some of the conclusions reached by this report, some of which concern Mungiki's involvement in the violence. According to The Waki Commission, members of Mungiki were heavily involved in the Nakuru violence and Mungiki leaders were instrumental in organising the attacks. The Kenya National Commission for Human Rights, Waki Commission, and the media have largely portrayed Mungiki as a Kikuyu organisation which was acted to defend and avenge fellow Kikuyu in Rift Valley towards the end of January 2008. While conflicting assertions make conclusions concerning Mungiki's actual involvement in the violence impossible at this stage, evidence based on interviews with the organisation's members suggests that the prevailing literature's account of Mungiki acting out of motivations of ethnic kinship for Rift Valley Kikuyu are unlikely. This is due to the long-standing intra-ethnic antagonisms which exist between Mungiki and Kikuyu society.

Mungiki and Kikuyu Ethnocentricity

Mungiki has generally been perceived as a secretive member-based organisation which engages in various criminal activities in Nairobi, and has a strong connection to Kikuyu culture and religion. Believed to have originated in the late 1980s, Mungiki began as a religious organisation purporting a return to traditional Kikuyu spirituality and moral values. Thus its origins can be described as essentially ethnocentric. Some authors have laid emphasis on the early 1990s as the period of Mungiki's conception, as Mungiki opposed the KANU government which had been perceived as responsible for the Rift Valley clashes and the targeting of Kikuyu during this period. As well as advocating a return to Kikuyu traditional values, Mungiki developed a political agenda early on by calling for the right to land and opposed the neo-colonial control of Kenya's economy, thus pitting themselves against the ruling regime.

Kikuyu Class Antagonisms

Ethnographic evidence reveals that Mungiki consider themselves to be a continuation of Mau Mau, the Kikuyu militia group which fought the British for independence. Mau Mau's militant consciousness meant they were pitted against the more conservative Kikuyu, who believed in using formal politics and collaboration in order to achieve liberation from colonial rule. There was a clear generational, as well as class, antagonism between Mau Mau and the more conservative Kikuyu. The Kikuyu poor questioned to what extent Kikuyu elites should enjoy the profits of power, and Mau Mau represented the populist militant politics of the poor.

Interviews with Mungiki members reveal that they believed the PNU government to be a continuation of the Kikuyu elite who collaborated with the British government in order to secure post-colonial power. According to those interviewed, during the PEV they did not want to help the PNU government as they viewed them as the same Kikuyu who have oppressed them historically. Members claimed that they supported the ODM opposition during the election, and did not help the Rift Valley Kikuyu during the violence as these Kikuyu supported the PNU, and thus did not have the same ideology as Mungiki.

Intra-ethnic Grudges

During 2007 there were numerous accounts of extra-judicial killings committed by the Kenyan police, during which time significant numbers of Mungiki members were murdered. The motive behind these killings is thought to lie in the government's frustration with Nairobi's organised crime, much of which is believed to be controlled by Mungiki. The issue of extra-judicial killings has frequently been mentioned by the Kenyan media, as well as in UN Special Rapporteur Philip Alston's recent report on Kenya's extra-judicial killings.

Mungiki members claimed that these killings not only increased antagonisms between their organisation and the PNU government, but also pitted Mungiki against Kikuyu society; according to Gitau, a spokesman for the organisation, Kikuyu society never protested during the extra-judicial killings. Thus, when the PEV occurred Mungiki could not fight for their fellow Kikuyu, as during the extra-judicial killings they had all "kept quiet".

Conclusion

Mungiki members were more concerned with intra-Kikuyu class conflict than inter-ethnic antagonisms, which they viewed as a strategy which the Kikuyu elite use to retain power. The Mungiki members interviewed saw the PEV as intra-elite antagonism, and thus by fighting for the Kikuyu, who they viewed as PNU supporters, they would be fighting for the Kikuyu elite. Donald Horowitz has argued that ethnic conflict amounts to challenging nonexistent or barely dangerous enemies and avoiding the real issues, namely the ruling class. Due to Mungiki's focus on the ruling class, they had no interest in the ethnic conflict in the PEV.

Class conflict is often ignored during analyses of politically-orientated violence in sub-Saharan Africa, and the general literature on the Kenyan PEV relied on flawed concepts of ethnic homogeneity regarding Mungiki's involvement in the Rift Valley 'retaliatory attacks'. The ethnographic and historical evidence referred to in this article demonstrates that long-standing Kikuyu class antagonisms, combined with a perceived betrayal by Kikuyu society, would have precluded the necessary feelings of ethnic kinship required for Mungiki to either avenge or defend their fellow Kikuyu during the PEV. This issue should be considered by any further investigations into the violence; if Mungiki was involved in the violence, then it is unlikely they would have acted out of motivations of kinship, and thus the economic and political influences on the organisation during this period must be explored further.

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