

The Role of Ethnicity in Africa: From a Comparative Politics Perspective.**By : Chikhaoui Ahmed, Assistant Profesor
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Ethnicity is one of the most important approaches to understand the political process and institutions as well as the analysis of the political act and its expectations. It is an important social component in African societies. Therefore, ethnicity must be studied in terms of the roots of its composition, and its role to understand the political process. This article gives a brief explanation about the role of ethnicity in Africa, taken from a comparative politics perspective.

تعتبر الإثنية أهم المكونات الاجتماعية تأثيراً على مستوى المجتمعات الإفريقية، فأصبحت تلعب دوراً محورياً في تفسير الظواهر السوسولوجية والسياسية، لما لها من تأثير في التنشئة الاجتماعية، وتكوين الثقافة السياسية، فأهم مدخل لدراسة التركيبة الاجتماعية، والأنظمة السياسية والحزبية والانتخابية، وهندسة المؤسسات السياسية، يتم عبر دراسة الإثنيات، فهي تمثل طرفاً في الصراع السياسي، ومحل اتهام في إثارة العنف في إفريقيا بعد عملية التعبئة الاجتماعية والسياسية، ومتغير أساسي في نجاح التحول الديمقراطي وترسيخه أو رفضه، من هنا يحاول المقال دراسة دور الإثنية في إفريقيا كمتغير سببي في الصراع والعنف، والعملية الديمقراطية، من منظور السياسة المقارنة.

Introduction

Africa is one of the most important regions of the world deeply affected and linked with the ethnic factor on both social structure and political domain. According to many previous studies, analysing of disputes and conflict within African societies should be taken from an ethnic entrance to understand its reasons. Political analysis attributes the cause of the failure of the continent to the narrow loyalties and the failure of social units consisting of ethnic basis. In addition and from a sociological point of view, explanations are trying to dismantle the components of the African society to understand its motives, roles and the nature of its relationships to build the political process and develop it to suits the peculiarities of this community.

As one of the factors, the social structure have a deep influence in the political process, it was and is still one of the major determinant in constituting political institutions in countries with multi-social structure and the most important classical topics in Political Science. Interests in this relationship go back to Aristotle who pointed out the role of social divisions in the stability of political systems in Greece, intending by this the horizontal divisions in society between philosophers and thinkers on the one hand and ordinary citizens on the other hand. The social characteristics have an impact on voting behavior in the election in terms of the selection and identification of programs or electoral agendas.

The common assumption in comparative politics studies since 1960 is that the social characteristics, such as belonging to a particular ethnicity, class, religion, geographical region, race and identity (Fearon james, 1999), are important determinants in the voting trends in Western Europe. The individual is thinking politically, according to his affiliation and the rank he is socially occupying. These social characteristics define the political preferences of the individual; the most important problem facing most African countries is to look in the constituting a common feeling among members of the same society. In this direction, the structuralism theories see that the basic dilemma lies in building social identity (Norris and Matters, 2003).

Accordingly, What is the role of ethnicity in analysing the political phenomena from the perspective of comparative politics? And what is the importance of ethnicity as an analysis unit of comparative politics in Africa within the framework of area studies?

The hypothesis is drawn as follow : The privacy of the ethnic phenomenon in Africa forms a factor causing unstablity or a factor of democracy consolidation

By the mid of the fifteen century, Portuguese expansion started as a later stage of previous historical arriving on the coast of Africa. Following that, waves of expansions arrived from Western Europe via English, French and German navy forces, in addition to spanish, Dutch and danes ones ; all these races had a historical role in the formation of African societies. (Cashmore 2004).

There is a difference in the social structure in Africa, ethnicity in Africa is a non official institution on as a part of the social fabric and influential political actor in the political process distinguished by examining characteristics that constitute it, such as, the loyalty (Donald horowitz, 1985), in addition to another important element that is the power of volunteerims and commitment of its members.

The definition of Ethnicity :

Ethnicity is a salient feature in several communities in the world due to the characteristic variation in its social structure. Race was the preoccupation of sociologists since the early stages when they approach topics such as ethnicity, ethnic groups and the minorities. Interests about ethnicity and race firstly emerged in the United States (Alba,2000), where the terms have become incresingly used in western literature(محمود أبو العينين, 2008).

Many sciences focused on ethnic studies, notably, are those approaches which define ethnicity in sociological and political perspectives and were taken by Hyden Goran According to the figure n1, there is a vertical axis which expresses the choice of liberation from restrictions and structural or institutional limitations of members. So, independence comes in exchange for subordination of culture and social relations.

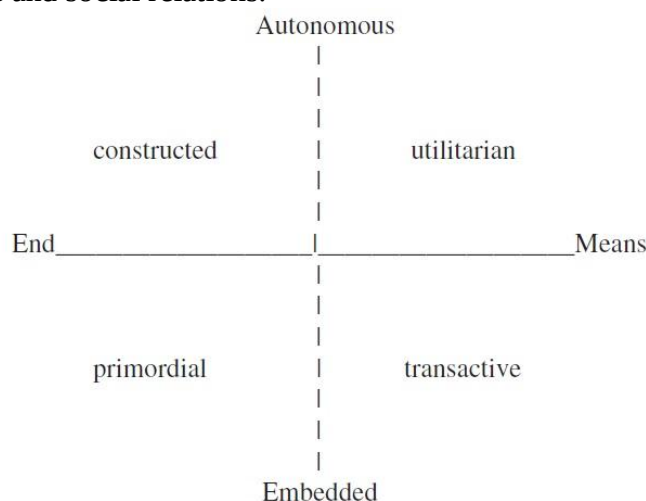


Figure 1 : Difinitions of Ethnicity according to Goran Hyden(2013).

According to Goran (2013), the first approach defined ethnicity was premodialism. It is considered as one of the eldest approaches in dealing with ethnicity, dating back to the fifties of the last century when modernization was a leading approach to the study of politics. Geertz (1663) was the most influential source on the subject at that time. His premise was that the old multiethnic societies would cause problems of integration in the new African states. Premodialism is based on the social presence in terms of inherence and it includes family, kinship, ethnicity and language as important factors in the social life.

The Constructivist approach comes as the second one according to Goran, identity is studied by giving independence to individuals through avoiding linking them to the culture of their environment. However, they use a part of their culture to indicate their identity affiliation, this approach is considred as being postmodernism. Constructivism argued that individuals construct their private community across religions, linguistic and ethnic factors ; culture is the key factor in the definition of ethnicity. This approach has been citicized for being subsidiary to symbolic factors and individuals act according to cultural motives.

Utilitarian approach in its definition of ethnicity assumed that individuals should work together to achieve and maximize their benefits, especially if these interests outweigh their individual capacities so the collective work is the way to achieve these goals according to Bouton (1993). Ethnicity is the general framework within which individuals exercised the political and the social act, holding on this special social unit is due to the feeling of people of being unable to protect themselves from harm and failure to achieve their goals in case of disintegration of this social group, also the historic deprivation and oppression push individuals to here to the assembly, however this historical factor is not always trade in the interpretation of the obligation on that ethnic members are characterized by.

Transactive approach in its study to ethnicity defines identity in terms of social interactions that occur between the social components. Self-determination is not enough to understand the source of identity which represent the power of ethnicity. Barth (1969) thought that we cannot ignore the nature and the origin of the ethnicity groups to understand the extent of ethnic force, its orientations and strategies in the interaction with the other groups. Also, linguistic and religions foundations should be known, because these foundations are the drive to social interaction and determine its advantages far from the other groups (Hyden, 2013).

There are factors that reflect the former fact which is the dominance of immigrants on the indigenous people and the monopoly of physical/ political and even cultural rights from the indigenous people, this fact is really experienced in America, Africa and Australia. (Cachmore, 1996).

The interchangeability in use between race and ethnic group was because of the misuse of race concept that is based on the policy of "Racial Superiority" however the difference is based on the natural, instinctive, biological dimension of aspects that constitute race, while the acquired and social dimension are the ones which differentiate the ethnic group. (Mateos, 2014). Ethnicity as a Cause for Conflict and Violence in Africa

Scientists have not settled in ethnic theme as a positive or negative aspect in the African context, the struggle according to many scholars is due to other reasons such as the economical or cultural differences and underdevelopment. Ethnicity is a social component that could be influenced by the actions and policies like the rest of the other ingredients, in addition to this, the cultural variant alone cannot be the direct cause of all the conflicts known in the continent. There are three categories in the study of conflict in Africa on an ethnic basis :

1. First : the cultural interpretation focuses on ethnicity itself as a principle interpretive variable to understand the conflict.
2. The second: it is a structural or economic, looks to ethnicity as not a principal factor, it is mainly the background from which we interpret the conflict, according to the interpretation it is an indirect cause.
3. The third : it is a social interpretation recognizes that ethnicity is one of the partial component of the conflict, without ignoring the importance of other structural factors.

The multiplicity of approaches in the interpretation of the conflict shows that the ethnic variable is the reason for the study of ethnic conflict in the African continent. There are those who consider ethnicity as a major cause of blocking development in Africa, both Easterly and Levine (1997) show in their studies that the ethnolinguistics retail is associated with a negative way in influencing the development of the continent. It has relationship with the low level of education. (Hyden, 2013), social interactions and also a negative impact on the integration process, on the grounds that stick in the mother tongue of each ethnic group in some regions of the continent increases the isolation and deepening of social cleavage on linguistic basis.

Lemarchand (1994) confirms that the motives of the conflict in Rwanda and Burundi are different from other cases of conflict in Africa. The social relations between the two are based on social and cultural integration and the one that is based on patronage knew some kind of imbalance as a result of sensitization and mobilization process within the Hutu ethnic group. There are driving factors to the conflict between ethnicities, the cultural factors and differences of self-interest may translate a part of this conflict. However both Collier and Hoeffler indicate

that the economic factors are also driving factors of conflict between ethnicities, the deteriorating economies of African countries and the rare economic values make the competition between ethnicities very sharp to be achieved. The conflict to share influence and leadership is important for the benefits of these parties, by this ethnicity became a background in the interpretation of the conflict added to the direct factors.

Leonard and Strauss (2003) confirm about the economic interpretation of ethnic conflict in Africa, the spread of sectoral industries in Africa, especially that of gold, diamond and oil increases hostility between ethnicities. Especially that the invested western factories go back to illegal methods such as bribery for investment in these industries, due to the weak institutional framework that governs these transactions, this economic situation exacerbated competition to predict the elites within undemocratic regimes. (Hyden, 2013).

In addition to cultural, social and economic factors, there are other political ones based on relations across ethnic groups, ethnic borders and limited relations between groups generate a special ethnic awareness. These boundaries between groups make identities a factor that deepens the distinctions between ethnicities and the adherence to these cultural factors evolve to establish the movements of different political programs (Clark william, 2013). The competition between these groups in the absence of international traditions and institutional politic leads to a non-institutional conflict, making the conflict taking the form of non-compatible and illegal dimensions.

Many scholars of African politics shifted from a focus on ethnicity (after they made sure that it is a part of the social fabric that cannot be changed) to the social mobilization as part of political competition played by the political elites. As well the packing become responsible for the political and social tensions as an aspect of ethnic conflict and exaggeration in this process can lead to other types of conflict.

Mobilization is considered as a new important topic in the political analysis or an explanatory tool of ethnic conflict and social allied or conflicting structures, as the most important source of political orientation, and expressive tool for change in the political values and ideology.

Political mobilization in the election could be a prelude to the conflict, the size of the groups or regions may be a catalyst and an important factor in this political mobilization. The competition between political leaders, which is transmitted for Public Mobilization makes groups fear of liability, and therefore it pushes towards adopting irrational ways in the political competition (Eifert, 2015).

Many scholars argued that the fragile ethnic relations are important origins of the social and political conflict. The ethnic context constituted from social units and relational systems began to be deceased, according to Lonsdale (1994), speaking about ethnopolitics is no longer as it was previously calculated on the basis of cohesive unity or the unit of strategy and leadership. Pattern of relations has become different from the former which influence the commitment and mobilization as an important concept in ethnicity, the leaders are heading for behaviors contrary to previous traditions both in their relations with state institutions or economic activities.

Ethnic Relationship to Democracy in Africa:

Talking about correlations between ethnicity and democracy, this leads to the concentration on social transformation and the extent of their ability to cope with the transition to democracy by accompanying processes of this shift such as politicizing ethnicity and upgrade freedoms; so as ethnicity will play a greater role in the institutions and the political process. The evolution of political freedoms is an important factor through which ethnicity excesses the subordinated barrier and oppression that they suffer from, as it works also to strengthen ethnic unity that has always defined as fragile and prone to vibrations such as admission to conflicts with other groups and being exploited by political parties.

The success of freedoms is coupled with the support of ethnicity and political leaders to upgrade individual freedoms within ethnicities. Democratic transformation in some countries

may be the cause of ethnic violence and the political desintegration. Besides, the political divisions have led to increase pressure on the regions and threatened the stability and the social units such as ethnicity. This formed the source of wars and conflicts and even secession, as happened in recent years in African countries such as Liberia, Ethiopia and Sudan, because the internal conflict may have external effects on neighboring countries and the conflict of powers.

The ethnic conflict and the hostile mobilization threaten the process of democratization, and the result is that under these circumstances democracy becomes impossible, on the other hand a question is raised about the possibility of creating a democracy under African conditions without the presence of the ethnic factor? As long as the reality of ethnic became imprisoned for the democratic process. Thus a strong civil community becomes the only link with democracy in these countries. This existed structural pluralism in society with the presence of a contradicted systems to the natural pluralistic fact create a plurality through which the real practices of totalitarian regimes are covered. (Ake,1992).

What are the political pluralism that creates a democratic practice in ethnic African communities ? Ake (1992) included this question not to separate political movements from social ones, but to incorporate the pluralistic rules approved of democracy on political pluralism. The nowadays prevailing trend in Western political studies and even the beliefs of African scholars asserts that social pluralism is not obligatory which is inconsistent with the existence of these social realities as it is considered being the biggest obstacle to political modernization and the building of democratic systems.

Many politicians in Africa, claimed that social pluralism based on ethnicity as a main criterion is considered dangerous for the unity and political stability. Those politicians address and combat the political parties because that will be based on narrow religious or ethnic cultural grounds which impedes the democratic nation-building. (Mattes and Bratton,2007). All these prosecutions are of those beneficiaries of the African systems and their goal is the survival of the situation and also because they consider that the construction of political pluralism would threaten their interests and political positions (Chandra kanchan, 2012).

Ethnicity is important in the African civil society, despite the totalitariaty of the state after colonialism in Africa, ethnicity was the only protector of individuals, and therefore, it was the only force parallel to the authority of the state and their tendency toward authoritarianism and the suppression of freedoms. By this, ethnicity remains one of the major contributors to the defense of human rights during the colonial period and after independence, in spite of the fact that this defense does not exceed the limits of individuals belonging to the ethnic group (Crowder michael, 1964).

Political power in the African regimes is based on personal or ethnic governing rules and the judgment will be according to the rules defined by the groups to which the ruling person belongs. This makes the society divided between pro-government and the opposition which contains ethnic groups (Eifert benn, 2015). This equation may be due to historical, economic or social reasons. Thus this opposition has other roots rather than political rivalry and the political process, and by these facts ethnicity is in the overall shape of the political map such as Uganda, Kenya, Benin, Togo, Somalia.

The significant impact of the military institution in the rest of the political institutions, economic activities and the selection of political leaders makes the political rivalry between these ethnic groups unbalanced and determined via the standard of belonging and loyalty to this institution, and the opposition suppressed by other ethnic groups across the institution. Thus, the military institutions are dominated by certain ethnicities such as the State of Nigeria and Togo.

Africa in its ethnic component is governed by mechanisms which in its turn are governed by ethnic conflict rather than the political competition. This conflict is considered as being misleading to many real phenomena that hinder democratic practices. Generally, this conflict is wethere:

1. It is managed by entities serving private interests, or by motivated members who are non-free in their choices; torture might be their motive. They can also be disorganized or deprived of their rights and thus their demands are through their ethnic groups in unstructured way.
2. The competence between ethnic groups may be devastating for all in many African cases such as Uganda and Nigeria. The political struggle for rights and democracy may be across political and social methods, their object either reflects the realities or aims to unauthorized interests which makes the defense of the rights scheme deviates and threatens all social components and the political by division, as has already happened in some countries where the colonization failed to do so whereas the ethnic conflict succeed in achieving it.
3. Ethnic groups which their members feel that they lack the political leaders as strong political competitors against other groups, like those in Congo, Burundi and Nigeria. (Ake,1992).

On these considerations, many accusations towards ethnicity can be launched as an inhibitor to the process of transition to democracy. The process of social transformation and integration into the political process must pass through ethnicity because race must be taken in a positive view by the politicians in the African countries and consider it as the first actor in the process of democratization. Among the considerations which give this judgement on ethnicity is the political participation of ethnicity, which was considered as subject to historical, cultural and narrow limitations.

After the private controversy on the ethnic role of ethnicity in the post-colonial period 1960, the concepts of ethnicity and tribe were used as a part of the rural community ; where the tribe is an extension of the same origin and family. According to Lentz (1995), correlations in this social unity should be very strong, also the urban ethnic groups have flexible relations between its members compared to the tribe as commitment of belonging to this group because the administrative Organs that control these groups have been formed by the former colonial governments. (Lentz,1995).

Conclusion:

The analysis of the ethnic role shows different directions for their roles in the analysis of social and political conflict, and its role in blocking shifting and democratic practice as well as the formation of political institutions. There is a consensus on its pivotal role in the social and political life in Africa , whether it is a positive or negative role , it is a social fact through which all social and political interactions , and even economic interests pass with.

Thereby, ethnicity contributes in the creation of an African societies if its rights are ensured. The democratic system passes through it, if it is structured in a democratic political institutions and building a shared democratic culture based on citizenship in light of the recognition with the distinctions and cultural specificities which constitute it. However, ethnicity may play negative role that works on the violent armed conflict. Thus, the the state and the community will lose the stability needed in building the development.

Social construction in most African communities is based on pluralism, by this, building political institutions of electoral and party system that recognizes this plurality becomes an urgent necessity. Western models which took the form of consensual democracy based on ethnic pluralism succeeded in activating the participation and ensure the rights and creation of integration and building democratic systems; these models are applied in some other African countries and prove its success in building stable systems, like in South Africa that took this sample of power devision between ethnicities that constitute the society.

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