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Devolution, shifting centre-periphery relationships and conflict in northern Kenya

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ABSTRACT

This article examines changing patterns of governance characterised by devolution as well as other developments associated with shifting centre-periphery relationships and their influences on conflict in northern Kenya. Kenya's 2010 constitutional reforms laid the ground for political devolution as a way to stem national-level political conflict as well as redress regional inequalities and historic marginalisation, particularly of the country's north. Counties in northern Kenya have benefitted from a windfall of public resources under devolution, coinciding with an influx of national and global investment in the region's infrastructure and resources. These parallel dynamics have raised the political stakes at the county-level as well as the spectre of a whole host of new tensions arising from people's expectations for jobs, contracts and greater economic opportunities. Focussing on Turkana County, the article finds that while levels of conflict have increased in northern Kenya since 2010, devolution enmeshes with other factors that define the region's changing relationship with the centre, including resource and infrastructural development as well as Al-Shabaab violence. These result in place-specific dynamics, creating a patchwork topography of conflict, confounding assumptions that there is a clear and unambiguous relationship between devolution, inter-communal relations and conflict.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades a number of states in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) have attempted varying forms of federalism and political decentralisation as a way to strengthen governance and address tensions that are thought to heighten the risk of conflict and violence. In 2010 Kenyans overwhelmingly voted for a new constitution with political decentralisation as its centrepiece. Plans for the new constitution were shaped by the country's post-election violence in late 2007 and early 2008, which brought Kenya to the brink of civil war (Anderson & Lochery, 2008). Kenya's National Dialogue and Reconciliation Team, which negotiated the National Accord that stemmed the violence, specified the inequitable distribution of resources, regional imbalances in development and perceptions of historical injustices as key drivers of violence (Kanyinga & Long, 2012). The sense that a strongly centralised state increased competition for the presidency, and thereby strained inter-communal relations, was a key motivation to restructure the state in order to prevent violence (Bakke & Wibbels, 2006; Brancati,

2006; Lijphart, 1977). By minimising competition for national power, and reducing inequalities between regions, it is expected that the risk of violence will diminish (Bermeo, 2002; Gurr, 2000).

The determination that the structure of the state itself, with powers concentrated at the national-level, raises the stakes for political competition while skewing public resource allocations has encouraged political and administrative devolution in Kenya and elsewhere in SSA. Decentralisation reforms can be seen as part of a reworking of the scalar organisation of *state space*, at least in its narrower sense (Brenner, Jessop, Jones, & Macleod, 2008). The development of new forms of governance that emphasise sharing powers – and finance – between the national and local levels are an important trend in the shifting geographies of political administration in many SSA states. The reworking of scalar relations implies an attenuation of powers at the centre and decentring these to sub-national actors, which it is thought could minimise the risks of secession, other forms of separatism and civil conflict. From a liberal peace-building perspective, this would happen through the intended accountability-enhancing effects of devolution coupled with the spreading out of public resources more evenly to sub-national political units. Yet there are mixed findings in the literature on conflict prevention as it relates to decentralisation (Bakke &

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Wibbels, 2006).

This article considers how changing patterns of governance characterised by devolution alongside other shifts in centre-periphery relationships have impacted levels and patterns of violence in northern Kenya. While devolution was meant to curb political violence and competition over centralised powers, violence has flared in many of the country's northern counties in the years since voters approved the new constitution. At least some see the violence as a harbinger of escalating tensions unleashed by devolution.¹ Yet, other dynamics characterising centre-periphery relationships in Kenya obscure a clear understanding of how devolution influences conflict. Devolution is happening alongside a new emphasis on developing resources and infrastructure in northern Kenya to support the country's national development ambitions (Mosley & Watson, 2016). Foreign investors have established and widened operations in locations across the region to exploit oil and wind power as well as enable other forms of capital penetration. Emergent tensions around these show how county officials can contest and seek to benefit from new projects. Further, Al-Shabaab's hand in a number of attacks that have affected a swath of northern and coastal counties in recent years also confounds analysis of devolution's effects on levels and types of political violence (Anderson & McKnight, 2015; Lind, Mutahi, & Oosterom, 2017).

Thus, while devolution provides unprecedented powers and resources for county governments to pursue their own development plans, forces and drivers at the national and regional levels continue to influence patterns of violence and the governance of security more widely. Assessment of Kenya's devolution commonly focuses on the transfer of powers and resources from the national to sub-national political levels as somehow constituting separate and fixed units of governance and politics – an idea long challenged within the field of political geography (Boone, 2003; Delaney & Leitner, 1997). It is concluded, and is indeed the case, that devolution heightens the risks of sub-national political violence because there are more resources to compete over at the sub-national level. However, a focus on relations between, and influences of, political and economic processes operating across geographic scales provides a different perspective to understand parallel but seemingly contradictory trends of political devolution, on the one hand, and the extending reach of the state on the other through militarisation, resource capture and dispossession. As this article shows, an emphasis on understanding the chain of violence operating through assemblages of actors nested and connecting across different geographic scales provides a complementary perspective of the potential impacts and influences of devolution.

Following a brief description of the methods and data used in the article, the wider historical framing of statebuilding in northern Kenya and its associations with violence are examined. The discussion then turns to Kenya's early devolution process, its connections with other developments shaping centre-periphery relationships, and how these influence conflict levels in the country's north. Finally, a closer examination of Turkana County, where oil development animates sub-national politics and conflict, brings into sharper focus the complex relationships between devolution and violence.

2. Methodology

The article uses a mixed method approach, combining

¹ 'Kenya's Nigerian future.' African Arguments Blog, January 11th, 2013. Available at: <http://africanarguments.org/2013/01/11/kenya%E2%80%99s-nigerian-future-%E2%80%93-by-ben-lawrence/>.

qualitative review of changing governance and conflict patterns with assessment of quantitative conflict data covering northern Kenya. For the purposes of the article, northern Kenya is defined to include the following counties: Turkana, West Pokot, Baringo, Samburu, Marsabit, Moyale, Isiolo, Mandera, Wajir, Garissa and Tana River (Map 1). It brings together literature on statebuilding and violence in northern Kenya, which have their own distinct histories and trajectories within the country, and devolution and Kenya's changing governance, to critically examine the relationships between devolution, shifting centre-periphery relations and conflict. Evidence from key theme analysis of secondary scholarly and grey literature is combined with insights from a limited number of semi-structured interviews conducted with key informants. These were identified through a snowballing approach to identify those having specific knowledge and insights on key research themes. Informants include political analysts, bilateral donor and UN agency representatives, journalists, civil society activists in Turkana, and Kenyan scholars. Interviews were carried out at different times between 2012 and December 2015, and spanned a range of themes including the influence of Al-Shabaab on Kenya's political dynamics and state security responses to the threat, wider conflict patterns in Kenya, and the impacts of extractive resource development. Devolution and the changing role of the state in northern Kenya were connecting themes explored across all interviews. Analysis of devolution and violence in Turkana County is based on qualitative fieldwork carried out over different periods between December 2015 and September 2016, and draws on semi-structured interviews with a range of local opinion makers, focus group discussions, and monitoring of local, national and international media.

Qualitative evidence is combined with analysis of conflict trend data from the Armed Conflict Location Event Database (ACLED) project. ACLED gathers real-time and historical conflict data in Africa from 1997 to the present, which is disaggregated by date, type of violence, actors and the location of discrete events. ACLED codes different types of conflict events, including battles, riots/protests, violence against civilians, and remote violence (referring to bombings or similar attacks from a remote location that do not require the physical presence of the perpetrator). Although ACLED is thought to under-report the conflict risk and incidence of violence in pastoral areas (Ide et al., 2014), it is useful for capturing trend lines in overall levels of conflict. The data reviewed here covers counties in northern Kenya. It spans the period from 2005, when Kenyans rejected the government's proposed constitution at the time, to the end of 2014. Thus, it aims to give a longitudinal perspective on conflict levels in the period leading up to Kenya's 2010 plebiscite and since devolution was implemented starting in 2013.

3. Violence and the state: the northern Kenya experience

In Kenya, as in many SSA states, violence has often been near to state-making processes and the constitution of power therein (Herbst, 2014; Mamdani, 1996). Warfare was central to the formation of the Kenya colony under British administration. Alongside emergency rule and counter-insurgency operations against Mau Mau fighters in Kenya's agrarian heartland (Anderson, 2005), northern Kenya, inhabited by a number of overlapping pastoral groups, was ruled under separate status as a closed militarised area (Hogg, 1986). The region has long presented a dilemma to Kenya's state-builders, whose notion of statehood equated with development of the country's 'high potential' agrarian highlands in the central and western parts of the country. This 'chlorophyll belt' – being the narrow, ecologically fecund strip in Kenya's south traversed by the Kenya-Uganda railway – has been the focus of public

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