

## Ethnic Mobilisation and Electoral Violence: The 2007-2008 Rift Valley Clashes in Kenya

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### Abstract

This paper examined the mechanisms through which ethnic identities were mobilised to produce organised violence in the Rift Valley region, focusing particularly on the clashes between Kalenjin, Kikuyu and Kisii communities. Drawing on an integrated theoretical framework combining elite manipulation theory, grievance-based mobilisation, and the ethnic security dilemma, this study analysed the 2007-2008 crisis as a case of deliberate political orchestration. This study employed a qualitative case study methodology. It also adopted an interpretivist epistemological stance. The study relied on multiple secondary data sources to triangulate findings and ensure analytical rigour. Primary sources included official reports from investigative bodies. The analysis employed thematic coding based on the theoretical framework. Data sources were systematically examined for evidence related. Process tracing methodology guides the causal analysis. The research showed that political elites manipulated historical land grievances from colonial displacement and post-independence settlement patterns to justify violence as a legitimate reclamation of ancestral territories. Local leaders and opposition officials facilitated this violence by distributing resources, inciting through vernacular media, and mobilizing youth militias, while institutional failures, such as police complicity and impunity for past violence, enabled widespread mobilization. The paper contributes to ethnic conflict theory by demonstrating how material grievances (land disputes) interact with symbolic ethnic boundaries and elite manipulation in contexts of electoral competition. Policy implications emphasise the critical importance of land reform, transitional justice, electoral system redesign, and early warning mechanisms in preventing recurrent ethnic mobilisation.

**Key terms:** Electoral violence, ethnic conflict, historical injustice, land grievances, post-election violence.

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Kenya presents a compelling paradox in contemporary African politics. Widely celebrated as one of East Africa's most stable democracies, with a vibrant civil society, relatively free press, and competitive electoral politics, the nation has nonetheless experienced recurring episodes of devastating ethnic violence during electoral periods. This contradiction reached its most horrific expression in the aftermath of the December 2007 presidential election, when the announcement of contested results triggered an explosion of violence that shattered Kenya's carefully cultivated image of stability. Over the subsequent two months, more than 1,500 Kenyans lost their lives, approximately 600,000 were forcibly displaced from their homes, and property worth millions of dollars was destroyed. The Rift Valley Province, a region of spectacular natural beauty and agricultural abundance, became the epicentre of this violence, transforming overnight from a patchwork of ethnically diverse farming communities into a landscape of burning homes, roadside massacres, and ethnically cleansed territories (Wrong, 2009). What made this crisis particularly striking was not merely its scale and brutality, but the speed and coordination with which ethnic identities became the organising principle for violence. Neighbours who had lived peacefully alongside one another for years suddenly became enemies defined solely by their ethnic affiliation. The violence followed predictable patterns, targeting specific ethnic communities in specific locations, yet neither state institutions nor civil society organisations proved capable of preventing or containing it. This paradox of democratic progress coexisting with periodic ethnic violence raises fundamental questions about the nature of ethnic mobilisation, the instrumentalisation of identity in electoral politics, and the resilience of historical grievances in shaping contemporary conflict.

The 2007-2008 post-election violence in Kenya's Rift Valley presents a critical puzzle for scholars of ethnic conflict and democratisation: why does ethnic mobilisation occur with such devastating effect during electoral periods in a country with otherwise functioning democratic institutions? This violence was neither spontaneous nor inevitable. It was preceded by warning signs, similar patterns in previous elections (particularly in 1992 and 1997), and explicit threats from political actors. Yet despite this predictability, neither the Kenyan state nor international actors successfully prevented the mobilisation of ethnic groups into violent confrontation. The existing literature on ethnic conflict offers various explanations from primordial hatreds to economic competition to elite manipulation, but struggles to account for the specific mechanisms through which ethnic mobilisation occurs in contexts like the Rift Valley (Berman et al., 2004). The region's particular history, characterised by colonial-era land alienation, post-independence settlement schemes, and evolving patron-client relationships between political elites and ethnic communities, creates a distinctive context that generic theories of ethnic conflict fail to fully capture. Moreover, the Rift Valley case challenges simplistic narratives about ethnic violence, as the region had experienced extended periods of peaceful coexistence between ethnic groups, suggesting that violence required active mobilisation rather than reflecting inherent inter-group hostilities. To understand ethnic mobilization in this context, one must examine the underlying structural factors that made communities vulnerable to mobilization and the strategies political actors used to activate ethnic identities.

Additionally, the institutional failures that permitted unchecked escalation of violence must be considered. This gap in understanding has practical implications: without clarity on how mobilisation occurs, interventions to prevent future violence remain inadequately targeted and ineffective.

This study addresses a central research question: What mechanisms enabled ethnic mobilisation in Kenya's Rift Valley during the 2007-2008 post-election crisis? This question seeks to move beyond documenting that violence occurred to understanding how diverse communities were transformed into ethnically mobilised groups willing to engage in violence against their neighbours (Refugee Consortium of Kenya, 2008). To answer this primary question comprehensively, the study pursues three interrelated sub-questions: First, what historical grievances were exploited during the mobilisation process? This sub-question examines the accumulated tensions surrounding land ownership, historical injustices from the colonial and post-colonial periods, and narratives of dispossession that political actors drew upon to justify violence. Understanding these historical dimensions is crucial because mobilisation did not occur in a vacuum but was built upon pre-existing resentments and grievances. Second, what role did political elites play in mobilising ethnic groups? This explores the agency of political actors, examining how politicians, business leaders, and local influencers actively fomented violence through speeches, resource provision, and organisation of violent groups. It investigates the incentive structures that made electoral violence a rational political strategy and the networks through which elites transmitted mobilisation messages to grassroots actors. Third, how did land disputes facilitate ethnic mobilisation? Given the centrality of land to livelihoods in the Rift Valley and the region's contested history of land allocation, this sub-question examines how disputes over land ownership, historical land transfers, and contemporary land scarcity created both grievances and material stakes that elites could exploit to mobilise violence.

## 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

This study adopted a constructivist approach to understanding ethnicity, rejecting primordial assumptions that ethnic identities are fixed, ancient, or inherently conflictual. Instead, ethnicity is conceptualised as a socially constructed category that becomes politically salient under specific conditions. Ethnic boundaries are neither natural nor immutable; they are created, maintained, and transformed through social processes, political contestation, and historical narratives. This constructivist perspective is crucial for understanding the Rift Valley case, where communities that had coexisted peacefully were rapidly mobilised into violent ethnic confrontation. Within this framework, ethnicity functions as a political resource that elites can strategically deploy to build constituencies, access state resources, and consolidate power. Ethnic identities become particularly potent when they can be linked to tangible material interests such as land, employment, or political representation and when they offer plausible explanations for experienced deprivation or insecurity (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2008). Successful ethnic mobilisation requires several conditions: the existence of identifiable ethnic boundaries, the presence of grievances that can be interpreted through ethnic lenses, political entrepreneurs willing to activate ethnic identities, and institutional contexts that reward ethnic-based political organisation. When these conditions converge, ethnicity transforms from a background identity into the primary organising principle for political action and, potentially, violence.

The instrumental theory of ethnic mobilisation emphasises the agency of political entrepreneurs who strategically manipulate ethnic identities for political gain. Political elites face incentives to mobilise along ethnic lines, particularly in contexts where formal institutional channels for political competition are weak, where state resources are distributed through patronage networks, and where electoral systems create winner-takes-all outcomes. Ethnicity serves as an effective mobilization tool in certain environments by providing pre-existing constituencies and lowering information costs. It also fosters credible commitment through a shared sense of identity. Ethnic outbidding, where politicians compete to be the most extreme defender of their ethnic group's interests, becomes a rational strategy in competitive electoral

environments. Politicians who adopt moderate, multiethnic platforms risk being outflanked by more militant ethnic entrepreneurs who promise exclusive benefits to their co-ethnics. This dynamic creates a race to extremes, particularly in closely contested elections where mobilising one's ethnic base completely becomes essential for victory (International Crisis Group, 2010). The logic intensifies in patronage-based political systems where voters expect tangible material benefits from co-ethnic politicians and where political power directly translates into resource access. In Kenya's context, this manifests through what has been termed "ethnic voting blocs", consolidated constituencies that vote overwhelmingly along ethnic lines in exchange for anticipated state patronage. Politicians cultivate these blocs through material inducements, symbolic recognition, and promises of group advancement. Violence becomes an extension of this mobilisation strategy when elites calculate that intimidating rival ethnic groups, consolidating territorial control, or demonstrating ethnic solidarity through violence will enhance electoral prospects or strengthen bargaining positions in post-election negotiations.

While elite manipulation theories emphasise agency and instrumentalism, grievance-based approaches highlight how historical injustices create the fertile ground upon which mobilisation occurs. Elites cannot mobilise communities from nothing; their appeals must resonate with the lived experiences of marginalisation, deprivation, or injustice. Historical grievances function as mobilisation tools when they are narratively constructed to explain present suffering and when they identify clear perpetrators, often other ethnic groups or their political representatives. In the Rift Valley, land disputes provide the quintessential grievance around which mobilisation occurs. The colonial alienation of Kalenjin lands for white settlement, followed by post-independence allocation of these lands to Kikuyu settlers, created a narrative of historical dispossession that political entrepreneurs could invoke to justify violence. Land grievances carry significant weight because they merge historical injustices with ongoing material hardships. Ethnic narratives about theft and settlement provide an explanation for landlessness or land scarcity. Memory and narrative construction prove central to this process. Historical events are selectively remembered, interpreted, and transmitted across generations to create collective memories of victimhood and entitlement. Politicians, educators, and community leaders shape these narratives, emphasising certain historical episodes while minimising others, constructing simplified stories where one's own group appears as innocent victims and rival groups as perpetual oppressors. These narratives need not be entirely fabricated; indeed, they are most powerful when rooted in genuine historical experiences, but they are strategically deployed to mobilise contemporary political action.

The ethnic security dilemma, adapted from international relations theory, provides crucial insight into how violence escalates once mobilisation begins. In contexts where state institutions cannot credibly guarantee security for all groups, and where political power correlates directly with group survival and welfare, ethnic groups face a security dilemma: actions taken to enhance one's own security (arming, territorial consolidation, and preemptive violence) appear threatening to other groups, prompting them to take similar actions, thereby escalating insecurity for all.

The logic of preemptive violence becomes particularly compelling during electoral transitions when power may shift between ethnic coalitions. Groups fear that losing political power means losing access to state protection, economic opportunities, and ultimately facing retribution from newly empowered rivals. This fear can motivate violence aimed at preventing rival groups from consolidating power through intimidation, displacement, or elimination, even before any actual threat materialises (International Crisis Group, 2008). The dilemma intensifies because groups cannot credibly commit to protecting each other

once their co-ethnics control state power; past experiences of state-sponsored or state-tolerated ethnic violence reinforce expectations that political exclusion means existential vulnerability. Tit-for-tat dynamics further escalate violence once initial attacks occur. Retaliatory violence, justified as self-defence or righteous vengeance, triggers counter-retaliation, creating cycles of violence that become divorced from original political grievances. Communities that initially remained neutral may be pulled into violence through these retaliatory dynamics, as violence against any member of one's ethnic group demands a collective response. The security dilemma thus transforms limited elite-orchestrated violence into broader communal conflict.

This study integrates these three theoretical approaches: elite manipulation, grievance-based mobilisation, and ethnic security dilemma into a comprehensive analytical framework. The integration recognises that ethnic violence results not from any single factor but from the interaction of elite agency, structural grievances, and institutional weakness. The conceptual model can be expressed as: Ethnic Violence = Elite Mobilisation × Historical Grievances × Institutional Weakness. Elite mobilisation provides the agency and organisation necessary to transform latent tensions into active violence. Historical grievances provide the narrative justification and emotional resonance that make mobilisation appeals effective. Institutional weakness creates the permissive conditions of the absence of credible state protection, impunity for violence, and the inability to resolve disputes peacefully, which allow mobilisation to translate into violence (Human Rights Watch, 2008). Critically, all three elements must be present; their interaction is multiplicative rather than additive, meaning the absence of any element dramatically reduces the likelihood of large-scale ethnic violence. For the case study analysis, this framework operationalises into specific empirical questions: What specific actions did elites take to mobilise violence? What historical narratives and grievances did they invoke? How did institutional failures enable violence to occur and escalate? By examining these questions systematically, the study illuminates the precise mechanisms through which ethnic mobilisation occurred in the Rift Valley during 2007-2008.

The roots of ethnic violence in Kenya's Rift Valley trace directly to British colonial land policies implemented from the early twentieth century. The colonial administration designated approximately 7.2 million acres of the Rift Valley's most fertile highlands as the "White Highlands," reserved exclusively for European settlement. This massive land alienation required the displacement of indigenous communities, particularly the Kalenjin peoples (including the Nandi, Kipsigis, Tugen, and other sub-groups) who had occupied these territories for generations. The displaced communities were relocated to less fertile "native reserves," fundamentally disrupting their pastoral and agricultural livelihoods. This colonial dispossession created several enduring legacies (Amnesty International, 2008). First, it established the Rift Valley as contested territory with competing claims of historical ownership. Kalenjin communities developed narratives of rightful ownership based on pre-colonial occupation, viewing subsequent settlement by other groups as illegitimate appropriation of stolen land. Second, colonial land policies created acute land scarcity and landlessness among the displaced, problems that would intensify through population growth in subsequent decades. Third, the experience of displacement and marginalisation became central to Kalenjin collective memory and political identity, providing a reservoir of grievance that future political leaders would exploit. The colonial land question thus established the fundamental territorial and ethnic dynamics that would shape Rift Valley politics into the post-independence era. Kenya's independence in 1963 raised hopes among displaced communities for the restoration of their lands. Instead, President Jomo Kenyatta's government implemented settlement schemes that largely allocated former White Highlands territory to Kikuyu settlers, many from Kenyatta's own ethnic community. These schemes,

officially framed as national development initiatives open to all Kenyans, were widely perceived by Kalenjin communities as replacing white settlers with Kikuyu settlers, perpetuating their historical dispossession under new management.

The settlement of Kikuyu families in the Rift Valley proceeded rapidly through the 1960s and 1970s, fundamentally altering the region's demographic composition. Kikuyu settlers, often arriving with greater capital and education, purchased additional lands and established prosperous farms, businesses, and communities in areas that Kalenjin groups considered their ancestral homeland. This generated Kalenjin perceptions of being marginalised in their own region, strangers in their own land, while outsiders prospered from resources that rightfully belonged to them. When Daniel Arap Moi, a Kalenjin, assumed the presidency in 1978, these grievances gained political expression. The Moi era saw intensified politicisation of land issues and advocacy for "majimboism", a federal system that would give regional communities greater control over local resources, including land. Majimboism rhetoric, while officially about devolution and regional autonomy, functioned as coded language for ethnic territorial claims, implying that certain ethnic groups belonged in certain regions while others were outsiders who should return to their "ancestral" lands. This discourse established the ideological framework that would justify ethnic violence in subsequent decades: the notion that the Rift Valley belonged exclusively to Kalenjin and that other communities, particularly Kikuyu, were illegitimate settlers subject to expulsion.

The introduction of multiparty politics in 1991 triggered the first major wave of ethnic violence in the Rift Valley. During the 1992 elections, organised attacks targeted Kikuyu, Luhya, and Luo communities in Rift Valley constituencies, resulting in approximately 1,500 deaths and 300,000 displaced persons. Similar violence recurred during the 1997 electoral period. Subsequent investigations, including the Akiwumi Report, documented that this violence was not spontaneous but deliberately organised by political elites seeking to consolidate ethnic voting blocs and intimidate opposition supporters. Between 1992 and 2007, ethnic violence in the Rift Valley claimed approximately 5,000 lives and displaced over 75,000 people across multiple episodes (wa Wamwere et al., 2008). The violence followed consistent patterns: it occurred during electoral periods, targeted specific ethnic communities perceived as political opponents, involved forced displacement and property destruction aimed at altering demographic compositions, and employed similar tactics, including roadblocks, identification checks, and attacks on ethnically mixed residential areas. Victims and civil society organisations characterised these episodes as "ethnic cleansing," aimed at creating ethnically homogeneous territories that would deliver predictable electoral outcomes.

Critically, perpetrators of this violence faced virtually no accountability. Despite evidence of elite involvement and organisation, prosecutions were rare and convictions almost nonexistent. This impunity sent clear signals that ethnic violence was a permissible political tool, emboldening future perpetrators and deepening victim communities' distrust of state institutions. The predictability of this violence and its recurrence during every electoral cycle, following similar patterns, in similar locations, made the 2007-2008 crisis foreseeable. Warning signs were evident, yet neither state institutions nor civil society interventions proved capable of preventing another eruption (Straus et al., 2012).

Understanding the 2007-2008 crisis requires recognising the Rift Valley's complex ethnic demographics and political economy. By 2007, the region hosted significant populations of multiple ethnic groups: Kalenjin communities claiming indigenous status, substantial Kikuyu settler populations, particularly in Uasin Gishu and Nakuru, Luhya communities, especially in Trans Nzoia, and Kisii populations in southern

areas. This ethnic diversity made the region electorally competitive, with no single ethnic group commanding overwhelming numerical dominance. Political party alignments largely followed ethnic lines, transforming electoral competition into ethnic zero-sum contests. Opposition parties, particularly Raila Odinga's Orange Democratic Movement (ODM), drew support from Kalenjin, Luo, and other communities marginalised during Kibaki's first term. President Mwai Kibaki's Party of National Unity (PNU) relied heavily on Kikuyu votes and communities that had benefited from his administration. The Rift Valley became a critical electoral battleground: its large population and numerous parliamentary constituencies made it essential for national victory, yet its ethnic heterogeneity made outcomes uncertain (Steeves, 2006). Kenya's winner-takes-all political system intensified these stakes. Presidential power in Kenya is extensive, controlling vast state resources distributed through patronage networks. Communities whose co-ethnics held power expected preferential access to government appointments, development resources, and economic opportunities. Conversely, communities excluded from power faced marginalisation in resource allocation and vulnerability to state-sanctioned discrimination. This high-stakes environment, combined with the Rift Valley's contested history and ethnic diversity, created volatile conditions where elections became existential contests and violence emerged as a rational, if horrific, political strategy.

The December 27, 2007, presidential election pitted incumbent President Mwai Kibaki of the Party of National Unity (PNU) against opposition leader Raila Odinga of the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM). Pre-election polls suggested a tight race, with many predictions favouring Odinga. The campaign was intensely competitive, with both sides mobilising support largely along ethnic lines. Kibaki drew core support from the Kikuyu community and allied groups, while Odinga assembled a coalition of Kalenjin, Luo, and other communities that felt marginalised during Kibaki's first term. As results came in on December 28-29, early returns showed Odinga with a commanding lead. However, as final tallies arrived from Central Province, Kibaki's ethnic homeland, the president's numbers surged dramatically. Amid widespread reports of electoral irregularities, including inflated tallies, destroyed ballots, and anomalous vote counts that gave Kibaki over 100% turnout in some constituencies, the Electoral Commission of Kenya (ECK) announced Kibaki's victory by a narrow margin (Sihanya, 2009). Kibaki was hastily sworn in at State House on December 30, with the ceremony conducted with unusual secrecy and security.

The announcement triggered immediate protests in Nairobi's opposition strongholds and across the Rift Valley. What began as political protests against electoral fraud rapidly transformed into ethnic violence of devastating scale and organisation. The speed with which violence erupted, its organised nature, and its systematic targeting of specific ethnic communities indicated that it was not spontaneous frustration over electoral irregularities but rather a premeditated mobilisation that used the disputed election as a trigger. The Rift Valley Province bore the brunt of Kenya's post-election violence, accounting for the majority of deaths and displacement. Violence concentrated particularly in Uasin Gishu County (including Eldoret town), Nakuru County, Trans Nzoia, and Narok, areas characterised by significant ethnic diversity and substantial Kikuyu settler populations. The violence followed clear ethnic targeting patterns, with Kikuyu and Kisii community groups associated with Kibaki's coalition facing systematic attacks, forced displacement, and property destruction.

The scale of violence in the Rift Valley was staggering. Approximately 400 people were killed in the region alone, out of Kenya's national toll of over 1,500 deaths. More than 400,000 people were displaced from their homes, with entire communities fleeing or being forcibly expelled from areas where they had lived for generations (Omotola, 2010). The violence was characterised by extreme brutality: families burned alive in

churches where they sought refuge, massacres at roadblocks where victims were identified by ethnic origin, systematic destruction of homes and businesses, and widespread sexual violence targeting women from victim communities. The geographic pattern revealed a deliberate strategy rather than a random eruption. Violence occurred in ethnically mixed areas where victim communities formed significant but minority populations, making them vulnerable to coordinated attacks by majority communities (Rutten et al., 2001). Conversely, areas with overwhelming dominance by single ethnic groups experienced less violence, as did regions where ethnic diversity was more balanced and no group could credibly threaten others. This pattern suggests that violence aimed at territorial consolidation, removing minority communities to create ethnically homogeneous zones, rather than spontaneous ethnic hatred.

Evidence from judicial proceedings, human rights investigations, and journalistic accounts demonstrates extensive elite involvement in orchestrating the Rift Valley violence. Local political leaders, traditional elders, and prominent businessmen played central roles in planning, financing, and directing attacks (Oyugi, 1997). Meetings held in the months preceding the election discussed plans for violence contingent on certain electoral outcomes, with participants including elected officials, youth leaders, and community organisers. Vernacular radio stations proved crucial mobilisation tools. In the days immediately following the election announcement, radio broadcasts in the Kalenjin language disseminated coded messages signalling the commencement of violence, identifying target communities, and celebrating attacks. These broadcasts transformed ethnic tensions into coordinated action, providing real-time communication that synchronised violence across the region. Political rhetoric had been building toward this moment for months, with opposition rallies featuring speeches that framed the election in ethnic survival terms, employing phrases like "this is our time" and describing Kikuyu residents as temporary "visitors" who would need to "return home" after ODM victory. Material resources flowed from elites to youth militias who executed the violence. Investigations documented the distribution of money to young men to participate in attacks, the provision of weapons, including machetes and crude firearms, and transportation to violence sites (Ojielo, 2010). Business owners close to opposition politicians funded these activities, while politicians themselves allegedly coordinated logistics. This elite orchestration transformed diffuse ethnic anxieties into organised violence, providing resources, coordination, and ideological justification necessary for large-scale mobilisation.

Elite mobilisers strategically invoked historical land grievances to justify violence and motivate participation. The mobilisation narrative framed Kikuyu residents not as fellow Kenyans with legitimate property rights but as "outsiders" and "settlers" who had illegitimately occupied Kalenjin ancestral lands. This framing activated the historical memory of colonial dispossession and post-independence marginalisation, constructing violence as historical rectification rather than criminal aggression. Promises of land redistribution provided powerful material incentives for participation. Attackers were told that once Kikuyu residents were expelled, their farms and properties would be available for redistribution to "indigenous" communities. This transformed violence from abstract ethnic conflict into opportunistic economic action: attacking neighbours became a means of acquiring land and property. The rhetoric of "reclaiming stolen land" provided moral justification for what was essentially land grabbing through violence (Ndegwa, 2003). The strategic manipulation of land grievances was cynically employed by elite political mobilizers. Despite their vast landholdings, these wealthy figures had no genuine intention of redistributing land to the poor participants. Instead, they exploited genuine community grievances about landlessness and marginalisation to mobilise violence that served their political objectives. The land

question provided the narrative bridge between historical injustice and contemporary violence, making ethnic mobilisation resonate with lived economic struggles.

The disputed election results activated acute ethnic security dilemmas. From the Kalenjin and broader ODM perspective, Kibaki's "stolen" victory meant continued political exclusion, economic marginalisation, and vulnerability to state power controlled by Kikuyu elites. This perception of existential threat motivated preemptive violence: if "they" had stolen power and would use it to dominate "us," then defensive action was necessary before state institutions could be deployed against opposition communities. Fear of Kikuyu political domination had a historical basis. The Kenyatta and Kibaki presidencies were perceived as periods of Kikuyu accumulation and favouritism, with state resources disproportionately benefiting Central Province while marginalising other regions (Mueller, 2011). The expectation that another Kibaki term meant five more years of exclusion created desperate urgency. Violence aimed not just to express frustration but to fundamentally alter the political calculus, making Kenya ungovernable under Kibaki and forcing negotiations that would include ODM in power. Once initial violence occurred, retaliatory dynamics escalated the conflict. Kikuyu communities in the Rift Valley, initially victims of organised attacks, mobilised defensive militias that conducted counter-attacks, particularly in Nakuru. Luo communities in Nyanza Province retaliated against Kikuyu residents there, creating violence that spread beyond the Rift Valley. These retaliatory attacks, while defensive in origin, appeared as ethnic aggression to their victims, prompting further counter-retaliation (Mamdani, 2001). The security dilemma thus transformed limited strategic violence into broader communal warfare, as each group's defensive actions appeared threatening to others, justifying their own defensive violence in a self-reinforcing cycle.

The scale and duration of violence reflected catastrophic institutional failures at multiple levels. Police response was compromised by ethnic divisions within the force, with officers often unwilling or unable to protect communities from their own ethnic rivals. Reports documented police complicity in violence, including officers standing aside while attacks occurred, actively participating in attacks, and using excessive force against protesters from particular ethnic communities while tolerating violence against others. The security apparatus, rather than serving as a neutral arbiter, became an instrument of ethnic domination. The impunity that had characterised previous episodes of electoral violence directly enabled the 2007-2008 crisis. Perpetrators knew from past experience that violence carried minimal risk of prosecution. The absence of accountability for the 1992 and 1997 violence signalled that ethnic violence was a permissible, even effective, political strategy. This impunity extended to elite orchestrators: political leaders implicated in organising violence faced no consequences, allowing them to employ the same tactics repeatedly. The Electoral Commission's crisis of credibility proved foundational. By announcing manifestly fraudulent results, the ECK delegitimised the entire electoral process and eliminated faith in peaceful political competition. When the official arbiter of political competition is compromised, disputes can only be resolved through extra-institutional means, including violence. The absence of credible mechanisms for contesting results peacefully meant aggrieved parties had strong incentives to use violence to force renegotiation of outcomes. Weak conflict resolution mechanisms allowed violence to escalate unchecked. Neither traditional dispute resolution systems nor formal judicial processes could respond adequately to the crisis. Civil society organisations, churches, and community leaders attempted mediation, but lacked the authority and resources to stop organised violence. The state's monopoly on legitimate force had collapsed, leaving communities to fend for themselves in a Hobbesian environment where violence became a rational survival strategy.

While elite orchestration and institutional failures explain the initiation and enabling of violence, understanding its execution requires examining community-level dynamics. Youth unemployment and economic marginalisation created pools of young men susceptible to mobilisation. With limited economic prospects and accumulated frustrations, violence offered immediate material benefits (looted property), social recognition (as ethnic defenders), and psychological outlets for resentment. Political entrepreneurs could easily recruit from this marginalised population by offering small payments, promising future rewards, and conferring status as community protectors (Lynch, 2008). Local networks facilitated rapid mobilisation. Youth groups, often organised around sports clubs or informal associations, provided ready-made organisational structures that political mobilisers could activate. Traditional age-set systems among Kalenjin communities offered cultural frameworks for coordinated action. These networks enabled rapid dissemination of mobilisation messages, coordination of attacks, and enforcement of ethnic solidarity, punishing those who refused to participate or who protected targeted communities. The breakdown of ethnically integrated neighbourhoods revealed how quickly social ties dissolved under pressure. Neighbours who had cooperated for years suddenly viewed each other through purely ethnic lenses. Mixed marriages faced impossible pressures. Children of inter-ethnic unions were forced to choose sides. The social fabric that had enabled peaceful coexistence disintegrated as ethnic identity became the sole determinant of friend or enemy. This breakdown was not automatic but actively produced through mobilisation that rewarded ethnic exclusivity and punished cross-ethnic solidarity (Lynch, 2006). Gender dimensions added particular horror to the violence. Sexual violence against women from targeted communities served multiple functions: as ethnic humiliation, as a weapon of terror forcing communities to flee, and as a violent assertion of masculine ethnic dominance. Women's bodies became battlegrounds for ethnic conflict, with rape used systematically to mark communities and territories. Pregnant women from targeted groups faced particularly vicious attacks, suggesting violence aimed not just at present communities but at preventing their demographic reproduction.

The violence might have continued indefinitely but for intense international pressure and recognition by Kenyan elites that continued conflict threatened everyone's interests. International mediation led by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan brought Kibaki and Odinga together for negotiations beginning in late January 2008. These talks, conducted under intense international scrutiny, produced the National Accord signed on February 28, 2008, which established a Grand Coalition Government with Kibaki remaining as president and Odinga appointed as prime minister, a newly created position. The power-sharing agreement effectively validated violence as an effective political strategy: what ODM could not win at the ballot box, it achieved through violence-forced negotiation. This outcome created a troubling precedent, suggesting that contesting election results through violence could yield political rewards. However, the agreement also halted immediate violence by addressing the fundamental grievance of political exclusion that had motivated mobilisation. Promises of accountability accompanied the political settlement. The Waki Commission investigated the violence and produced a list of suspected perpetrators, including political elites, which was forwarded to the International Criminal Court when domestic prosecutions failed to materialise. The ICC subsequently indicted six Kenyans, including Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto (who would later become president and deputy president, respectively), for crimes against humanity. While these prosecutions ultimately collapsed due to witness intimidation and insufficient evidence, they represented unprecedented accountability efforts. Constitutional reforms emerged as the crisis's most durable outcome. The 2010 Constitution established devolved county governments to address demands for regional autonomy, created stronger checks on presidential power, reformed the electoral system, and included extensive protections for marginalised communities. These

reforms aimed to address structural factors that had enabled ethnic violence, though their implementation remains incomplete, and their effectiveness in preventing future violence is uncertain. The 2007-2008 crisis thus produced both temporary political accommodation and longer-term institutional reforms, though whether these changes fundamentally alter Kenya's ethnic political dynamics remains an open question.

### 3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative case study methodology to examine ethnic mobilisation mechanisms during Kenya's 2007-2008 post-election crisis in the Rift Valley. The case study approach is appropriate because it allows for in-depth analysis of complex social phenomena within their real-world context, particularly where boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident. The 2007-2008 crisis represents a critical case where the phenomenon of ethnic mobilisation was highly visible, well-documented, and consequential, making it particularly valuable for theory development and testing. The research adopts an interpretivist epistemological stance, recognising that understanding ethnic mobilisation requires examining not just observable behaviours but the meanings, narratives, and motivations that actors attach to their actions. This approach acknowledges that ethnic violence is not merely a mechanical response to structural conditions but involves human agency, strategic calculation, and ideological justification that must be interpreted rather than simply measured. The study relies on multiple secondary data sources to triangulate findings and ensure analytical rigour. Primary sources include official reports from investigative bodies, particularly the Commission of Inquiry into Post-Election Violence (Waki Commission), the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights, and the Independent Review Commission (Kriegler Commission), which examined the electoral process. These reports provide systematic documentation of violence patterns, testimonies from victims and perpetrators, and evidence of elite involvement.

Academic literature on Kenyan politics, ethnic conflict, and the specific crisis provides theoretical context and comparative analysis. Journalistic accounts from Kenyan and international media offer contemporaneous documentation of events, capturing the immediacy and evolving dynamics of the crisis. Human rights organisations' reports, including those from Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and Kenyan civil society organisations, provide detailed victim testimonies and documentation of violence patterns. International Criminal Court proceedings and related legal documents offer particularly valuable evidence of elite orchestration, as prosecutors assembled extensive documentation of planning, financing, and coordination of violence. While the cases ultimately collapsed, the investigative materials reveal mechanisms of mobilisation in unprecedented detail. The analysis employs thematic coding based on the theoretical framework established in Section 2. Data sources are systematically examined for evidence related to: (1) elite actions in orchestrating violence, (2) deployment of historical grievances and land narratives, (3) activation of ethnic security dilemmas, and (4) institutional failures enabling violence. This deductive approach, guided by theoretical expectations, is complemented by inductive analysis that remains open to unexpected findings and emergent themes. Process tracing methodology guides the causal analysis, examining the sequence of events and mechanisms linking causes to outcomes. This involves reconstructing the chain of events from pre-election mobilisation through violence outbreak to resolution, identifying critical junctures, feedback loops, and causal pathways. Particular attention focuses on demonstrating how elite mobilisation activated latent grievances, how institutional weaknesses created permissive conditions, and how these factors interacted to produce large-scale violence. Comparative analysis situates the 2007-2008 crisis within Kenya's longer history of electoral violence, examining similarities and differences with the 1992 and 1997 episodes. This temporal comparison illuminates

patterns of recurrence, evolution of tactics, and the role of impunity in enabling repeated violence. Geographic comparison examines variation within the Rift Valley, asking why certain areas experienced more intense violence than others despite similar ethnic demographics.

Several methodological limitations warrant acknowledgement. First, reliance on secondary sources means the analysis depends on data collected by others with varying methodological rigour, potential biases, and different analytical objectives. Direct field research with participants, while ideal, is beyond this study's scope. Second, the highly politicised nature of the crisis means many sources carry explicit or implicit political perspectives that may shape their accounts. Triangulation across multiple sources with different political orientations helps mitigate this limitation but cannot eliminate it entirely. Third, the sensitive nature of the violence means certain information, particularly regarding elite planning and coordination, remains hidden, known only to perpetrators who have strong incentives to conceal their involvement. While ICC investigations uncovered substantial evidence, witness intimidation and the ultimate collapse of prosecutions limited what became publicly available. Finally, temporal distance from events means this analysis benefits from hindsight but may miss nuances apparent only to contemporaneous observers (Dercon et al., 2012). These limitations are inherent to studying violent conflict but are partially addressed through careful source evaluation, triangulation, and explicit acknowledgement of evidential gaps where they exist.

## 4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The success of ethnic mobilisation in the Rift Valley during 2007-2008 resulted from the convergence of multiple enabling factors that transformed latent ethnic tensions into organised violence. Pre-existing ethnic political identities and boundaries provided the foundational architecture for mobilisation. Decades of ethnic-based political competition had already constructed clear ethnic categories with associated political allegiances. Kenyans understood which ethnic groups supported which political parties, which communities were considered "insiders" versus "outsiders" in particular regions, and what historical narratives justified these divisions (Boone et al., 2011). This pre-existing cognitive infrastructure meant mobilisers did not need to create ethnic identities from scratch but could activate categories that already structured political understanding. Credible elite commitment to violence proved crucial for overcoming collective action problems inherent in mobilisation (Republic of Kenya, 2008). Potential participants in violence face risks of legal prosecution, physical harm, and social ostracism that create incentives to free-ride on others' participation. Elite provision of material resources, organisational coordination, and signals of protection from prosecution reduced these risks. When prominent politicians, wealthy businessmen, and respected community leaders openly supported violence through rhetoric, resources, and impunity guarantees, ordinary citizens received credible signals that participation was safe and expected. Elite involvement transformed violence from deviant criminality into sanctioned political action.

The institutional vacuum and state complicity created permissive conditions without which mobilisation would have failed. Functional security institutions can suppress ethnic mobilisation by credibly threatening prosecution, deploying force to prevent violence, and protecting targeted communities. Kenya's institutions did none of this effectively. Police ethnic divisions, corruption, and political interference rendered security forces unable or unwilling to prevent violence. The judiciary's weakness meant perpetrators faced minimal prosecution risk. This institutional failure was not merely incompetence but reflected deeper problems of state capture and ethnic bias within the state apparatus itself, with security forces often protecting co-ethnics while attacking ethnic rivals. The combination of economic incentives

around land and political incentives around power created powerful motivations for participation. For elites, mobilisation offered paths to political power through forced renegotiation of electoral outcomes and consolidation of ethnic voting blocs for future elections. For ordinary participants, violence promised immediate material gain through property seizure and longer-term benefits through anticipated land redistribution and privileged access to state resources if their ethnic coalition gained power (Republic of Kenya, 2008). These overlapping incentive structures, material and political, immediate and anticipated, individual and collective, made mobilisation appeals compelling across different constituencies with varying motivations.

Historical memory functioned as the cultural script that guided violence, providing templates for who should be targeted, what methods should be employed, and how violence should be justified. The 1992 and 1997 ethnic clashes created precedents that the 2007-2008 violence deliberately replicated. Similar tactics, roadblocks for ethnic identification, forced evictions, property destruction, and symbolic sites of massacre reproduced earlier patterns, suggesting conscious imitation rather than spontaneous eruption. Participants understood what ethnic violence looked like because they had witnessed or heard about previous episodes, creating ready-made behavioural models requiring minimal coordination. Intergenerational transmission of grievances ensured that historical injustices from colonial dispossession and post-independence settlement remained vivid in collective consciousness (Lynch et al., 2011). Parents transmitted to children narratives of lost lands, broken promises, and ethnic discrimination. These stories, repeated in families, communities, and political rallies, maintained an emotional connection to historical events that might otherwise have faded with time. Young men in their twenties attacking neighbours in 2007 invoked injustices from the 1960s events before their birth as justification, demonstrating how effectively historical grievances had been transmitted across generations. Elite manipulation of collective memory proved strategically central to mobilisation. Political entrepreneurs selectively emphasised certain historical episodes while minimising others, constructing simplified narratives where their ethnic group appeared exclusively as victims and rival groups as perpetrators. Nuances such as Kalenjin collaboration with colonial authorities, intra-ethnic land conflicts, or beneficial inter-ethnic cooperation disappeared in mobilisation rhetoric, replaced by binary stories of ethnic victimisation requiring violent rectification (Kenya National Commission on Human Rights (KNCHR), 2008). This manipulation succeeded because it built upon genuine historical experiences, making fabricated elements difficult to distinguish from accurate memory. Elites effectively weaponised history, transforming complex pasts into mobilisation tools.

Comparing 2007-2008 violence with earlier episodes reveals both continuities and transformations in ethnic mobilisation patterns. The similarities are striking: all three major episodes (1992, 1997, 2007-2008) occurred during electoral periods, concentrated in the Rift Valley, targeted similar victim communities, employed comparable tactics, and involved elite orchestration. This recurrence demonstrates that violence was not aberrational but rather structurally embedded in Kenya's political system. Each episode reinforced patterns that subsequent episodes reproduced, creating violent precedents that normalised ethnic mobilisation as a political strategy. However, the 2007-2008 crisis differed significantly in scale, organisation, and consequences. The death toll and displacement figures far exceeded previous episodes, suggesting intensified mobilisation capacity or decreased inhibitions against violence (Klopp et al., 2008). The organisational sophistication was unprecedented, with coordination across multiple counties, real-time communication through radio and mobile phones, and systematic targeting indicating advanced planning. International attention was qualitatively different: while previous violence had drawn concern, the 2007-2008 crisis prompted sustained international mediation, ICC intervention, and pressure for constitutional

reform, elevating Kenya's ethnic violence from domestic crisis to international concern. The predictability of violence makes its non-prevention particularly puzzling and tragic. Warning signs were abundant: similar violence in previous elections, explicit threats during campaigns, intelligence reports indicating planning, and mobilisation of youth militias before the election. Yet neither Kenyan state institutions nor international actors successfully prevented the eruption. This failure reflects several factors: elite complicity in violence removed political will for prevention, institutional weakness eliminated enforcement capacity, and the benefits of violence to political actors outweighed potential costs given persistent impunity (Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission (TJRC), 2013). Perhaps most critically, prevention would have required addressing underlying grievances, particularly land distribution and political inclusion that elites benefited from perpetuating. Violence was predictable but not prevented because those with the power to prevent it lacked incentives to do so, while those desiring prevention lacked the power to implement it.

This case study validates the integrated theoretical framework, demonstrating that ethnic violence results from interaction between elite agency, structural grievances, and institutional weakness rather than from any single factor. Elite manipulation theories alone cannot explain why mobilisation appeals resonated; grievance theories alone cannot explain timing or organisation; institutional theories alone cannot explain differential participation. Only their integration adequately accounts for the phenomenon (Kanyinga et al., 2009). The analysis reveals how land grievances provide material foundations for ethnic mobilisation that abstract identity appeals cannot. Ethnicity becomes politically potent when it correlates with tangible economic interests. Land disputes in the Rift Valley made ethnic identity economically consequential: one's ethnic category determined land access, making ethnic mobilisation simultaneously cultural assertion and economic competition. This finding suggests that ethnic mobilisation succeeds most readily where ethnic boundaries align with material resource distribution, creating overlapping incentives for ethnic solidarity. The case powerfully illustrates elite agency in activating dormant tensions. Ethnic groups in the Rift Valley had coexisted peacefully for extended periods, suggesting inter-ethnic hostility was not inevitable or constant. Violence required active mobilisation by elites who strategically deployed rhetoric, resources, and organisation to transform latent tensions into active conflict. This challenges deterministic accounts that treat ethnic violence as an automatic response to demographic diversity or historical grievances. Elite choices matter fundamentally; different elite strategies could have produced peaceful competition rather than violent mobilisation (Branch, 2011). The analysis demonstrates how electoral competition intensifies ethnic mobilisation in winner-takes-all political systems. When elections determine exclusive control over state resources for fixed terms, and when ethnicity structures political competition, elections become existential contests where losing means extended exclusion. This creates incentives for extreme mobilisation strategies, including violence, particularly in closely contested races where marginal mobilisation advantages determine outcomes. The finding suggests institutional reforms such as power-sharing requirements, proportional representation, or devolution that reduce winner-takes-all stakes might diminish mobilisation incentives.

While ethnic identity clearly structured the 2007-2008 violence, an exclusive focus on ethnicity risks obscuring other dimensions. Class and economic factors operated throughout but became invisible under ethnic framing. Elite orchestrators and poor participants had dramatically different relationships to violence: elites sought political power and protected their own properties while mobilising poor youth to attack neighbours. This class dimension exploitation of the poor by the rich within ethnic categories disappeared when violence was interpreted purely as ethnic conflict between groups, rather than also as class-based manipulation within groups. Intra-ethnic divisions complicate simple ethnic conflict narratives.

Not all Kalenjin supported violence; not all Kikuyu were victims (International Criminal Court (ICC), 2010). Within each ethnic category existed political differences, economic stratification, and moral disagreements about violence. Some Kalenjin individuals protected Kikuyu neighbours at personal risk; some Kikuyu communities organised self-defence rather than fleeing. These intra-ethnic variations suggest that ethnicity, while powerful, did not deterministically predict behaviour. Individual agency, local relationships, and moral commitments created space for resistance to ethnic mobilisation even under intense pressure. The agency of ordinary citizens in resisting mobilisation deserves recognition alongside accounts of successful mobilisation. Many Kenyans refused ethnic mobilisation appeals, maintaining cross-ethnic friendships, protecting vulnerable neighbours, and advocating peace despite danger (Cheeseman, 2015). Civil society organisations, religious institutions, and local peace committees worked to prevent and mitigate violence. While these resistance efforts ultimately proved insufficient to prevent catastrophe, their existence demonstrates that mobilisation was contested, not inevitable. Understanding why some individuals and communities resisted successfully while others succumbed to mobilisation could inform future violence prevention efforts. The challenge is avoiding simplistic narratives, either that ethnic violence was an irresistible force overwhelming all opposition, or that those who participated were simply morally deficient while resisters were heroes. Reality involved complex calculations about survival, loyalty, fear, and opportunity that produced varying responses to mobilisation pressures (International Criminal Court (ICC), 2012).

## 5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has demonstrated that ethnic mobilisation during Kenya's 2007-2008 post-election crisis resulted from the deliberate intersection of three critical mechanisms: elite orchestration, instrumentalisation of historical grievances, and institutional failures that created permissive conditions for violence. The analysis reveals that political elites strategically mobilised ethnic constituencies through coordinated provision of resources, inflammatory rhetoric deployed via vernacular radio, and organisational structures that transformed diffuse anxieties into systematic violence. These elites successfully activated mobilisation by invoking deeply resonant historical narratives about land dispossession, colonial injustice, and post-independence marginalisation that connected past grievances to contemporary political stakes. The land question emerged as the crucial material foundation upon which ethnic mobilisation was constructed. By framing Kikuyu residents as illegitimate "settlers" occupying stolen Kalenjin ancestral lands, mobilisers transformed ethnic violence into seemingly justified historical rectification and opportunistic economic advancement. Promises of land redistribution following expulsion provided tangible incentives that complemented abstract appeals to ethnic solidarity, making participation rational from participants' perspectives even as it served elite political objectives fundamentally divorced from grassroots economic interests. Institutional failures at multiple levels enabled mobilisation to translate into widespread violence. The ethnic polarisation and complicity of security forces eliminated credible state protection for targeted communities. Pervasive impunity from previous violence episodes signalled that ethnic mobilisation carried minimal legal risk, emboldening perpetrators. The Electoral Commission's credibility collapse delegitimised peaceful dispute resolution, leaving violence as the only effective means of contesting outcomes. These institutional weaknesses were not accidental but reflected deeper problems of state capture and ethnic bias within the state apparatus. The validation of the integrated theoretical framework represents a key finding. Neither elite manipulation theories, grievance-based approaches, nor institutional analyses alone adequately explain the violence. An elite agency was necessary to organise and direct violence, but elites could only mobilise successfully because they invoked genuine historical grievances that resonated with the lived experiences of marginalisation. Similarly,

grievances alone did not produce violence; they had existed for decades without erupting, but required elite activation and institutional weakness to translate into organised conflict. The multiplicative interaction among these three factors, where all must be present and their combination exceeds the sum of parts, provides the most compelling explanation for how and why ethnic mobilisation succeeded so devastatingly in the Rift Valley.

The Rift Valley case offers critical lessons for understanding ethnic violence in electoral democracies beyond Kenya's specific context. First, it demonstrates that democratic institutions, elections, multiparty competition, and civil society do not automatically prevent ethnic violence and may, paradoxically, intensify it when combined with certain structural conditions. Electoral competition in ethnically diverse societies with winner-takes-all political systems can transform ethnicity from background identity into the primary axis of political mobilisation, particularly when state resources are distributed through ethnic patronage networks. Democracy without robust institutional checks, equitable resource distribution, and inclusive governance may simply provide new arenas for ethnic competition rather than transcending it. Second, the analysis reveals that ethnic violence in electoral contexts is rarely spontaneous but typically involves substantial planning, organisation, and elite coordination. This finding contradicts common media portrayals of ethnic violence as irrational eruptions of ancient hatreds or spontaneous mob behaviour. The sophisticated organisation evident in the Rift Valley advance planning meetings, resource distribution networks, coordinated timing, and systematic targeting indicates that such violence should be understood as a calculated political strategy rather than an emotional outburst. This recognition has crucial implications for prevention: if violence is organised, it can be disrupted through intelligence gathering, elite accountability, and targeted interventions at planning stages. Warning signs and early intervention opportunities existed throughout the pre-election period, but were not acted upon effectively. Intelligence reports documented mobilisation planning, inflammatory campaign rhetoric explicitly threatened violence, previous election cycles had established clear patterns, and civil society organisations issued urgent warnings. The failure to prevent violence despite these warnings reflects not information deficits but political will deficits and institutional incapacity. This suggests that effective prevention requires not just early warning systems, which already existed informally, but political commitment to act on warnings and institutional capacity to implement preventive measures, even when doing so conflicts with elite interests. The case's relevance extends well beyond Kenya to other contexts characterised by ethnic diversity, competitive elections, historical grievances over resources, and weak institutions. Similar dynamics have produced electoral violence in countries including Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Myanmar, among others. Common patterns include: exploitation of historical grievances for contemporary mobilisation, land or resource disputes that align with ethnic boundaries, elite orchestration disguised as spontaneous conflict, security force complicity or incompetence, and impunity that enables recurring violence. Understanding Kenya's experience can inform analysis and prevention efforts in these contexts, though careful attention to context-specific factors remains essential to avoid superficial comparisons.

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