



Symbolic politics in Kenya: An analysis of the major political parties' symbols since independence and their contribution to the general elections

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Cite this article in APA

Ochieng, E. E. O. (2022). Symbolic politics in Kenya: an analysis of the major political parties' symbols since independence and their contribution to the general elections. *Journal of politics and international studies*, 1(1), 8-15. <https://doi.org/10.51317/jpis.v1i1.249>



A publication of Editon Consortium Publishing (online)

Article history

Received: 10.02.2022
Accepted: 19.09.2022
Published: 30.09.2022

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Abstract

This study aimed to analyse political parties' symbols in Kenya and assess their contribution to the general elections. Political symbolism has always been used to represent a political standpoint or party. The symbolism may occur in various media, including banners, flags and pictures. Political parties usually associate themselves officially or unofficially with symbols. The study relied on descriptive research design and was premised on Ferdinand de Saussure Semiotics theory. The theory helped to understand how meaning is created and communicated. Purposive sampling was used to select the data, in this case, selected political parties' symbols under study. Content analysis was the main form of data analysis in the study. The study findings are useful to political parties and political communication during election campaigns. The study has established that the Kenyan political party history can be divided into five distinct periods: pre-independence, post-independence, single party period, multiparty period and the new constitutional dispensation. During each of these periods, the political parties in existence adopted various symbols to represent the various views and ideologies they held at the time.

Key terms: Symbols, symbolic politics, political parties, general elections.

INTRODUCTION

All over the world, political parties are important tools for entrenching and enhancing democracy. Through political parties, leaders are able to mobilise support from their followers to implement laws and policies that help enhance life and build better societies. A political party is an organisation of voters from a particular group, community or nation who share common ideologies on how the government should interact with its citizens (Lumen, 2021). Ideologies may include the approach to education, taxes and war. In a democratic government system, a disagreement among the populace on how the government should act calls for the expression of the voters' sentiments through an election (James & Charles, 1960). In this way, the voters can choose a candidate with the same views and opinions (Kadima, 2006).

For a political party to share its views, goals and objectives to new and existing members, there is a need for effective communication. One of the ways through which this is accomplished is by the use of symbols (Lumen, 2021). A symbol is any object or mark that has a name and conveys a thought, an idea, a notion or a benefit (Greenlee, 2018). Every symbol conveys a particular meaning or value attached to it. This means that the meaning of a symbol influences people's perception towards it. A symbol's meaning is not transmitted directly to us; we actively participate in its creation based on the interactions of complex conventions and codes of which we might not even be aware (Nyongesa, 2018). Symbols have an important function in every sphere of human life, whether economic, religious, social or political.

In politics, symbols are the means to identify a group of voters. Political parties stand for basic principles that guide voters' perspectives. Because political party symbols have real value and represent abstract ideas, it is important to take into consideration that an actual political party symbol may influence the failure or success of the party (Malande, 2018). Political party symbols are used the world over for purposes of identification in an effort to avoid confusion by making political activities visible. Political parties are mainly formed to participate in grassroots, regional and national elections, thereby promoting democracy (Kadima & Owuor, 2014). Voters identify and align

themselves with one political party or the other on the basis of several factors, such as the symbols the party uses, the philosophy of the party or the party's flagbearer in national elections. This ultimately affects their decisions when voting in an election. Therefore, political party symbols are important for telling apart one political party from another. Visual symbols, in particular, are very efficient at communicating the intended political message to the voters in the most basic and convenient manner possible. The symbol used, its colour and shape normally represent the ideology of the party using them (Nyongesa, 2018). The choice of a symbol to use by a political party is influenced by the ease of understanding, recognising and remembering by the voter, especially since some voters are not able to read. When such voters see the party symbol, they are immediately able to recognise it.

According to Business Daily newspaper (2017), the 2013 general elections witnessed a higher rate of rejected ballots of more than 300,000. This caused concern, leading experts to conclude that political parties are not doing enough to help members familiarise themselves with their parties (Jonyo, 2013). It was observed that party symbols are normally printed on t-shirts, caps, and reflector jackets for members to wear. Politicians and political parties are trying to sell themselves constantly, which is why political logos or symbols are so powerful and well-designed.

The issue of political symbols and their significance is essential. For example, the United States has the bald eagle as a national symbol for its two major political parties governing it. The two political parties are usually represented by two different animals: an elephant for the Republican Party and a donkey for the Democratic Party (Matt, 2016). Similarly, the political symbols and their significance in Kenya are important for democracy. This is particularly so because a significant portion of Kenya's adult population is not educated, which accounts for the high number of errors committed by voters in the previous general elections. Kenya has had several political parties since it acquired her independence in 1963, which each party has its symbol. The symbols created to represent these parties; each of these

symbols has significance to elections. Therefore, this study sought to analyse political parties' symbols in Kenya and assess their contribution to the general elections.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The political parties and the symbols have been used since independence. At the dawn of independence, Kenya had two main political parties: the Kenya African National Union (KANU) and the Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU). The two parties were as different in their ideologies as they were in the symbols they chose to adopt. KANU employed the use of a rooster as its symbol. KADU agitated for a devolution kind of government where regional governments could be empowered to encourage balanced growth. On the other hand, KANU stood for a centralised government system in which the president had more power (Nyström, 2000). KANU managed to clinch most of the seats in the National Parliament and the Senate in 1963. When Kenya was converted into a Republic in 1964, KADU, which was the official opposition party, was voluntarily wound down, and the members joined KANU.

The leadership struggles, ideological differences and the suppression of dissent within the KANU rank led to the exit of most of the former KADU members. They later formed Kenya People's Union (KPU) in 1966. The government proceeded to ban the KPU in 1969, resulting in Kenya becoming a de facto one-party state (Kanyinga, 2014). This situation prevailed until the amendment of the constitution to make Kenya a de jure single-party state in 1982 after a failed military coup. The Constitution was repealed in December 1991 to reintroduce the multiparty system of politics. By this time, KANU had enjoyed monopoly power for more than 20 years (Khadiagala, 2010). The reintroduction of multiparty democracy provided the freedom and impetus needed to register for more political parties. However, these parties had weak structures and lacked an administrative framework to institutionalise them and guarantee a strong democratic space for the populace. No proper legal framework would guide the political parties' registration, management, operation and financing (Langat et al., 2017). This explains why KANU still managed to win the next two elections by the majority (Brown, 2001). The existing political parties, though

many, were viewed simply as private clubs and associations. As a result, they often bickered among themselves, split and created new parties that often had the same symbols and/or names (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2010).

In 1995, the opposition parties attempted to come together under the United National Democratic Alliance, which was not successful since most of the parties still maintained their outfits. There were about 26 political parties registered in 1997, but only 10 barely managed to secure seats in the parliament Office of the Registrar of Political Parties (ORPP, 2021). By 2002, it was quite clear that to unseat the incumbent KANU from power; all the parties had to come together and present a united front. Thus, the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) formed, on whose ticket Mwai Kibaki road to clinch the presidential seat against Uhuru Kenyatta. He Moi had groomed to take over from him. As a result, more parties were registered for the 2007 general elections (147 in total), with only 117 managing to take part in the elections. The establishment of the Office of the Registrar of Political Parties through the Political Parties Act 2007 sought to institutionalise political parties (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2010). Parties were now required to register with the new office and not with the registrar of societies, as was the case earlier. This reduced the parties registered to 47 in 2009. The new constitution in 2010 promulgation brought full cycle the efforts to have political parties institutionalised and their functions streamlined. The new constitution stipulated the principles of formation of political parties by providing an extensive regularity and institutional framework for registering, regulating and funding political parties.

This study was grounded by the Semiotics theory as conceptualised by Ferdinand de Saussure as cited by Leeds-Hurwitz (1993). The theory describes how meaning is created and communicated. Semiotics refers to the study of sign processes, including any process, conduct or activity involving signs (Malande, 2018). A sign or a symbol is anything that communicates a certain meaning, not the symbol itself, to the interpreter. The symbol's meaning can be a spoken word with a particular meaning or a medical symptom being interpreted as an indication of a particular medical condition. Symbols convey

messages through auditory, tactile, visual, gustatory or olfactory senses (Lanir, 2019). The meanings derived from symbols are a product of social convention and connotation and hence cannot be directly figured out. Instead, one needs to understand the social context in which the symbol is used to comprehend its meaning.

Symbols, including words, can be combined in numerous different structures to give different meanings. The structure of symbols drawn from a combination of meanings influences the human language, the highest and excellent form of human achievement, which shapes society's way of thinking (Nyongesa, 2018). Hence, every political party needs to be careful in selecting the symbol they will use so as to convey the right message. The use of colour, shape and zoosemy of political party symbols is also critical during elections. Nyongesa (2018) analysed animal symbols used by political parties in Kenya. The study sought to establish how these symbols create and sustain the realities of parties and the social groups associated with them. The study found that due to the low literacy levels in Kenya, there was a need to sensitise political parties on adopting appropriate symbols to facilitate easy identification by the voters. Similarly, the electoral commission and the registrar of political parties need to legislate the use of symbols to avoid the clashing of symbols and colours from different political parties (Nyongesa, 2018).

Malande (2008) also established that although the Kenyan political party symbols, names, slogans and colours have meanings and are manipulated by the political elite to shape conversations, voters have little confidence in their capacity to effect real and meaningful change in Kenya. The voter attitude towards politicians and political parties is one of wariness and almost borders on the negative (Michael & Mwangi, 2008). They perceive Kenyan political parties as personal entities that mainly promote personal interests, tribal, corrupt, undemocratic and short-lived (Elisher, 2008). Malande also found out that there is a lack of legislation to control the choice of party names, colours and symbols. The study therefore recommended that government develop the appropriate structural framework to streamline the process so that the adoption of political party names, symbols, colours and slogans eliminates the practice of sharing such items (Malande, 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Political Party Symbols

The history and symbolism of political parties in Kenya can be traced back to and analysed within the political context in which they were used. Therefore, the major political parties for each period, their symbols, and their significance will be analysed to draw lessons from them. For analysis purposes, this period was categorised into the contexts outlined below.

a) At Independence

At the dawn of independence in Kenya, two major parties were formed to represent the interests of Kenyan voters. KANU was a more left-leaning party whose ideologies tended towards support for a unitary and centralised system of government, in which the state organs strongly took part in the economy. On the other hand, KADU favoured a federal government system that advocated for limited interference by the central government so as to guarantee that minority group interests were safeguarded (Nyström, 2000). The symbol adopted by KANU was the rooster. When elections were conducted in 1961, KANU won but boycotted the formation of government in protest against Kenyatta's imprisonment. The federal system of government formed by KADU at independence was quickly dismantled by KANU when they ascended into power. This was further consolidated when KADU dissolved in 1964 to join KANU in government. A new party KPU was formed in 1966 by members who broke away from KANU because they were dissatisfied with the direction the ruling party was taking. However, the party was banned in 1969, effectively making Kenya a one-party state (Khadiagala, 2010).

b) 1969 – 1992: One-party system

During this period, Kenya was a one-party state. All other parties were banned, and the government harassed those in opposition. KANU enjoyed monopoly status and won every election (Nyström, 2000).

c) 1992-2010: Multiparty period

Multiparty politics was restored in Kenya in 1992 after several groups, including the international community, civil societies and religious groups, agitated for the abolition of the single-party system. Immediately after the constitution was changed to allow this, several

parties were created (Nyström, 2000). The proliferation of political parties proved to be quite confusing for the voters to tell many of them apart. Several parties attempted to register using names and symbols already adopted by others. As many as 168 political parties were registered in the year 2008. This number was further reduced to 47 when the new constitution came into effect in 2010 (ORPP, 2021). The major parties formed during this period included Forum for the Restoration of Democracy (FORD) which later split into three factions (FORD-Asili, FORD-Kenya and FORD-People), Democratic Party of Kenya (DP), National Development Party (NDP), National Rainbow Coalition (NARC), Party of National Unity (PNU) and Orange Democratic Party (ODM).

d) 2010 to date: New constitutional dispensation
The promulgation of the 2010 constitution ushered Kenya into a new era of political party activity. One of the major changes that took place was the institutionalising of political parties. (ORPP, 2021) Whereas in the past parties mostly acted as private clubs and associations, they were now entrenched in the constitution with a clearly spelt out framework for their registration, regulation and financing (Khamala, 2015). This brought a semblance of order by drastically reducing the number of registered political parties, making it easier for the electorate to identify them. By the time the 2017 general elections were being conducted, 59 political parties had been registered (Bouka et al., 2019). As of 2021, 75 political parties have been registered, as shown in Table 2 below.

Table 1: Number of registered political parties 1960-2021

Period	Number of political parties
1960	About 2
1963-1964	2
1964-1966	1
1966-1982	1
1982-1991	1
1991-1992	10
1992-1997	23
1997-2002	51
2002-2007	149
2008	168
2009-2011	47
2012	51
2013-2014	59
2014-2021	75

(Source: ORPP, 2021)

Types of Symbols used by Political parties in Kenya

a) Animal Symbols

Animal symbolism has always played a huge role in politics all over the world. Parties have adopted animal symbols because of what they represent. In the United States of America, for instance, the two major parties, Democrats and Republicans, use the donkey and elephant, respectively (Smith et al., 2014)). Similarly, Kenyan political parties have used animals as their symbols to communicate their ideology to their members and the general public (Malande, 2018). For example, KANU was represented by a rooster/cockerel. This was symbolic of a new

beginning after the darkness of colonialism by the British. Just like the rooster crows early in the morning to signify the dawn of a new day, KANU was seen as an opportunity to begin anew (Nyongesa, 2018). Other parties that have used animal symbols include the United Democratic Movement (UDM), which adopted the crane to represent freedom. The Republican Liberty Party (RLP) uses the horse to represent strength, majesty and speed. The People's Empowerment Party (PEP) uses the elephant as its symbol to represent greatness, wisdom, royalty and happiness.

In contrast, the Party of Development and Reform (PDR) uses the bull to signify bravery and valour. The Agano Party of Kenya uses the lamb as a symbol to signify meekness and reconciliation. At the same time, the shark has been adopted as the symbol for the Shirikisho Party of Kenya. Other symbols include the lion (FORD-Kenya) and the leopard (New FORD Kenya) (Nyongesa, 2018)

b) Plant symbols

Several parties have also used plants and parts extensively as symbols. These include an orange (Orange Democratic Movement, ODM), a flower (Narc-Kenya), a tree (Mazingira Greens Party Kenya), a maize plant (Farmers Party), tree roots (Roots Party of Kenya), an olive branch (Amani National Congress, ANC) and a coconut tree (KADU-Asili) (Nyongesa, 2018).

c) Other symbols

Other objects have been used as symbols by political parties as well. The most recognisable include the rainbow (National Rainbow Coalition), Two fingers raised (FORD-Asili), a star (Labour Party of Kenya), two hands clasped in greeting (Jubilee Party), Safina (ark, Safina Party), two flaming torches (Party of National Unity, PNU), the bus (Alliance Party of Kenya) and the umbrella (Wiper Democratic Movement - Kenya) (Malande, 2018).

While political party symbols have played a great role in determining the success or failure of the party in most parts of the world, the findings of this study reveal that this is not the case in Kenya. This has to be understood based on the colonial political legacy bequeathed to the Kenyans by their British masters. When it became apparent that the Kenyan people were not willing to relent in their pursuit of self-governance and self-determination, even after violent repression during the state of emergency, the colonial administrators adopted the divide-and-rule mechanism to ensure that Kenyan leaders did not present a united front (Kanyinga, 2014). They cherry-picked a few key collaborative leaders whom they rewarded with positions in government while those who opposed them were harassed, jailed and often tortured. As a result, there developed hostility and mistrust among the African leaders. Consequently, when offered a leadership position, many Kenyan politicians saw it as

an opportunity to advance themselves against their opponents (Elisher, 2013).

The major political parties in Kenya were formed on the basis of propelling the key leader into power. Although there was an attempt to ground the first parties in ideology and idealism, there was no structural framework to achieve this. As a result, party systems collapsed to become tools of convenience for the person seeking political power (Elisher, 2008). During the single-party period in Kenya, then President Daniel Moi entrenched KANU into power so much that even after the return of multipartyism, the opposition found it hard to topple it unless they united. Even when this unity managed to oust the incumbent KANU in 2002, it proved to be based on convenience, and the idea was deserted in 2005 when President Kibaki failed to honour the pre-election memorandum of understanding (Keverenge, 2007).

If the parties themselves have served as tools of ascendancy into power, so have their symbols as well. While party symbols are seen elsewhere as important communication tools capable of conveying deeper truths, Kenyan political symbols have merely served the purpose of popularising the leader. Consequently, only the symbols associated with the most famous parties and their leaders have gained national prominence (Elisher 2008). The rooster by KANU, the rainbow by NARC, the flaming torches by PNU, the orange by ODM and the clasped hands by Jubilee have therefore gained prominence in the Kenyan electoral space due to the leaders and coalitions associated with them. This explains why there is always a scramble to create new political coalitions in the run-up to every general election in an attempt to ouster the incumbent. Kenya's political parties, therefore, lack the organisational structure to stand on their own, with the appropriate ideology forming the basis of their operation (Keverenge, 2007).

CONCLUSIONS

Political symbolism represents a political party or standpoint. Political party symbols are important because they help communicate the party's position in a simple and effective way. The study has established that the Kenyan political party history can be divided into five distinct periods: pre-independence, post-independence, single party period, multiparty period

and the new constitutional dispensation. During each of these periods, the political parties in existence adopted various symbols to represent the various views and ideologies they held at the time. These symbols included animal and plant symbols as well as common everyday objects like a wheelbarrow, hoe, torch or stars. While these symbols were expected to play the role of advancing the party's agenda, the study established that this was not the case. The parties themselves and the associated symbols were rather viewed as objects of convenience with the sole purpose of helping the leader ascend to power. Consequently, there has been a minimal effort in structurally grounding the political party and its symbols to significantly determine its outcome in a general election.

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