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Published in:

Journal of Eastern African Studies

DOI:

[10.1080/17531055.2020.1831849](https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2020.1831849)

Publication date:

2020

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (APA):

Rasmussen, J., & van Stapele, N. (2020). 'Our time to recover': young men, political mobilization, and personalized political ties during the 2017 primary elections in Nairobi. *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 14(4), 724-742. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2020.1831849>

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'Our Time to Recover': Young Men, Political Mobilisation, and Personalized Political ties During the 2017 Primary Elections in Nairobi

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Abstract:

In this article we show how youth groups in Nairobi's poor settlements engage politics and how they try to carve out a political space for themselves and provide a livelihood. In doing so, we challenge dominant neo-patrimonial narratives of youth radicalisation and instrumentalized youth mobilization in relation to electoral processes. Rather, based on long-term ethnographic engagements we argue for a more complex dynamics between local youths and politicians. We employ the emic term *kupona* (Kiswahili word meaning recovery or healing) to explain the youth's political engagements along lines of participation, recognition, and re-distribution, which all in different ways concern the task of social recovery. Empirically, the article draw on events and examples from the primary elections in 2017, which provide a privileged frame for investigating local politics and responses to the recently initiated devolved government structure¹.

Keywords: Elections, Kenya, Youth, Politics, Recognition, Redistribution, Agency, Clientelism, devolved government

Introduction

Electoral politics in Kenya have increasingly become associated with political mobilization of youth for violent and disruptive purposes. Interestingly, this tendency has gained prevalence since the introduction of multiparty elections in 1992. The apparent tensions between

democratic progress and an upsurge in violent mobilization of youth has often been explained by the need for power-seeking politicians to outsource violence and intimidation beyond government forces and state police in order to separate the state from politically motivated oppressionⁱⁱ. While this view captures certain political dynamics surrounding electoral violence in Kenya it presents a top-down view on the relation between politicians and youth and favours an instrumentalist understanding of how the relation unfolds and what the drivers for mobilization areⁱⁱⁱ. It is often overlooked how such state sanctioned neo-patrimonial logics reproduce youth politics as radical.

Somewhat contrary to this instrumentalized understanding of youth mobilization, we explore the tension between a politics of patronage and handouts and youth mobilization as it is experienced from the viewpoint of the mobilized youth themselves. While youth are mobilised for political purposes of votes, chaos, and security, our paper reveals how youth politics are located in communities informed by shared pasts and shared senses of belonging that elucidate different experiences of democracy and participation. We argue that power is re-negotiated through the processes of political mobilization informing a different experience of democracy and re-distribution than was constitutionally intended. In doing so, this paper counters a dominant narrative about poor urban youth as ready for violence and eagerly following the electoral cycle waiting to be mobilised by the will and money of the political elite^{iv}. Rather, the relational aspect between youth and local politicians reveal an on-going engagement with a less one-sided distribution of agency. We try to unpack the relation between youth and politicians through the emic term *Kupona* ('recovery' or 'healing' in Kiswahili), which captures the interplay of participation, redistribution and recognition. The paper is based on ethnographic insights of youth groups from two constituencies in Nairobi during the 2017 primary elections (Shauri Moyo and Pumwani in the Kamukunji constituency and Kia Maiko

in Mathare constituency) and draws on decade-long and ongoing ethnographic engagements with the locations and the youths in Nairobi's informal settlements^v.

The 2017 elections are only the second elections following the 2010 constitutional referendum and the introduction of the devolved government structure that allocates more decision power and more funds to local representatives. The 2010 constitution has not only transferred more power to local politicians, it has also secured people the right to assembly and given the population better insights to local budgets and possibilities for questioning budgetary decisions. The 2010 constitutional was partly provoked by the widely contested and violent elections of 2007 and it replaced the 1963 constitution and followed several flawed attempts at constitutional reforms. As such, the 2010 constitution was an immediate reaction to electoral violence and a core objective of the reforms and the devolution of power was to provide for a more varied political representation and possibilities for participation^{vi}. The 2017 elections was the first time the electorate could hold their locally elected politicians accountable at the ballot boxes for the period they had served under the decentralised government, and for many Kenyans, the 2017 elections carried hopes of re-invigorating their trust in democracy.

While there is general hope that the devolved government might strengthen democracy at the local level^{vii}, there is also concern that patronage will be equally devolved as competition for local seats has increased^{viii}. Evidence from Ghanaian party elections reveals that party youth activists mobilized by local political candidates have caused an increase in low-intensity electoral violence at the local level^{ix}. In some constituencies like Kamukunji and certain parts of Mathare where one party or political alliance dominates, the party nomination is more important than the general election because once nomination is secured the electoral win can almost be taken for granted. Therefore, looking at the dynamics between local politicians and youth groups at the party primary elections juxtapose the stakes for the political

candidates with the expectations for inclusion and participation of local youth, and offer privileged insights into the tension between political mobilization and electoral violence with the pragmatics of redistribution and the expectations for democratic inclusion. While challenging the dominant explanatory framework on political youth mobilization that rests on notions of instrumentalization and radicalisation the paper argues that youth mobilization is equally founded in quests for recognition, redistribution, and social justice informed by senses of community and historical ties to local places.

The paper is divided into five main sections. The first elaborates the emic term *kupona* and its explanatory qualities in terms of understanding youth agency, political participation, and the personalized aspects of politics in Kenya. Each of the four remaining ethnographically informed sections focuses on the issue of political mobilization of youth groups, and reveal how the devolved government has opened up new opportunities for re-negotiating access to power and political participation while also recasting the experiences of democracy.

Personalized political relations and social recovery

Kupona is a Kiswahili term meaning ‘to recover’ or ‘to heal’ and is generally used in the context of bad health often with an individual and subjective orientation. However, in the informal settlements around Nairobi local youths have incorporated the term into the urban slang *sheng* and they use it to describe their general predicament and collective social standing. When used in this context, it suggests that young people perceive their position in society as 'sick' or 'unwell', and that their position in politics and in relation to the Kenyan state requires healing or is something that is in need of recovery^x. During the primary elections in 2017 several youth groups used the term when reflecting on their engagements as party agents or security providers

for local politicians, thus indicating that the relations to local politicians is a means for collective recognition and social recovery.

Historically in Kenya, recovering from bad health or economic destitution wasn't an individual endeavour; often it entailed a community involvement and the financial support of wealthy ethnic patrons or clansmen. Kenya's first independent President, Jomo Kenyatta accounted for this aspect of Kenyan political culture and societal customs, when describing notions of hospitality and mutuality in the relations between poor constituents and local politicians in his monograph on the Agikuyu^{xi}. However, during his rule as president he didn't fully live out this obligation to his poor constituents. Somewhat contradictory to his ethnographic description, Jomo Kenyatta turned the idea of self-help and community support in the form of *Harambee* collections for local development into a central part of his political rule and hence allowed for the possibility of bargaining personal relations between politicians and their constituents^{xii}. Kinuthia Macharia and Angelique Haugerud have given a similar description of the logics of redistribution and personalised politics during Moi's reign, although they demonstrate that Moi, in contrast to Kenyatta, at least made an effort of paying lip service to the poor^{xiii}.

Beyond reminding us of wealthy politicians' disregard for poor Kenyans in the modern history of Kenyan politics, these examples point to the cultural roots of personalised politics that has often been understood only in terms of instrumentalized top-down patronage relations. As the literature on Kenyatta's and Moi's evocation of *Harambee* demonstrates, there has been deliberate attempts at instrumentalizing these traditional forms of community support, but there seems to be a tendency to reduce relations between politicians and constituents to clientelism and patronage and thereby neglect the mutuality and hospitality entailed in the personal meeting. As we will show, the personal meetings with politicians are important for

young constituents both for patronage but also as a means for making politics meaningful through the negotiation of personal relations and for gaining recognition, maintaining cultural habits, and (re-)establishing community^{xiv}. The term *kupona* allows the youth to express their quest for participation and inclusion while simultaneously resonating the tradition of personalised political relations and acknowledging its wider societal and political implications.

Central to the personalized meeting with politicians, both historically and contemporarily, are the notions of recognition and re-distribution. For the youths in Nairobi using the term *kupona*, the personal relations to politicians provide a possibility for being seen and the potential for having their political engagements recognised. Examples of politicians' handing out money to youth in return for votes, security, and violent intimidation testifies to the instrumentalization of the relation, whereas the youth's expectations of accountability and deliverance on political promises speaks to the notion of re-distribution and the prospective dimension of *kupona*. In many ways, *kupona*, or recovering, as it is used by the youth groups around Nairobi captures sentiments and experiences of simultaneous mis-recognition and mal-distribution. Elections, whether at local or national level, provides an opportunity for those seeking participation beyond the vote, and thus they form events and avenues for seeking recognition and influencing the flow and distribution of resources.

In our attempt to theorize youth mobilization and personalised political relations, participation is a central yet contested criteria. In her work on social justice, the critical thinker Nancy Fraser equally emphasises participation, though her ambition is to develop a more general normative and critical theory of justice than our humble emic conceptualisation. In her theory of justice, Nancy Fraser argues for an integrated (or two-dimensional) approach to justice that builds on recognition and re-distribution, but for justice to be achieved it must be guided by an overarching normative notion of parity of participation^{xv}. We find it instructive to draw

out some parallels between Fraser's thinking and the way the youth talk about their experiences of political participation. Fraser argues that claimants must show that the given economic arrangements deny them the conditions for participation and that their possibility for participation is restricted by the institutional structuration of cultural norms producing them as inferior^{xvi}. The accounted political shifts away from mutuality in the relation between politicians and their constituents in Kenya is one example of such limitations, another is the policing practices of the urban poor and youth in the informal settlements that targets particularly socio-economic identity groups rather than a general protection of the rights of citizens^{xvii}. For Fraser, the status model allows her to address ethical questions of distribution and recognition without turning to the philosophy of ethics but rather to address them as matters of justice that can be captured under the precondition of parity of participation^{xviii}. Our empirically informed approach to youth mobilization and political participation through the emic notion *kupona* is more focussed on practice than with the ethical (or philosophical) dimension, but Fraser's analytical connection of distribution and recognition as integral parts of a parity of participation resonates with the youth's sense of being sub-ordinated and barred from participation in concrete and practical ways and through structurally reproduced means of socio-economic segregation.

The ethnographic examples of youth participation and negotiation of personalized political relations in the following sections present itself as the flipside to instrumentalized mobilization and illustrates the youth group's active and collective quest of recovery. Through the notion of *Kupona* we challenge the instrumentalized view of personalized politics in Kenya, and give accounts of experienced agency and a sense of historical communality among the poor youth in Nairobi's informal settlements.

Electoral chaos at ‘Our lady of Mercy’: injustice and the quest for change

On the 26 April 2017, the schoolyard at ‘Our Lady of Mercy’ primary school in Shauri Moyo, Kamukunji constituency in Nairobi is full of happy and excited voters waiting to cast their vote for the Jubilee Party nominations prior to the General Elections in August^{xix}. Voters expect a close race between the current Member of Parliament (MP) Yusuf Hassan and Simon Mbugua the previous MP who hopes to win back the seat from Hassan.

There are a couple of hundred people waiting. It is mostly young men and women, quite a few accompanied by their children who are off school for the day as schools are closed due to the primary elections. People struggle to get into the shade of the huge tree in the middle of the schoolyard. A few armed General Service Unit (GSU) officers stand under the porch of the school building next to the classroom turned polling station for the day. The officers overlook two full ballot boxes placed on the grass outside the classroom. The candidates have hired young men from local youth groups as electoral agents, observers, and security. Youth from the neighbouring Embakasi constituency have been spotted at different polling stations, fuelling rumours and creating fear that some of the candidates have hired them to cause trouble. Other rumours convey incomplete voter registers allowing voters to circulate between polling stations voting for different MCA (Member of the County Assembly) candidates and the same MP candidate in several places, even beyond one’s constituency or ward.

Suddenly, a man in dirty overalls runs through the lines of people and kicks over the ballot boxes. A young party official lashes out at him shouting something about ‘killing democracy’. The guy in the overalls is swaggering like a drunk. The two men dance like boxers for a few seconds. Then, a shot rings out across the schoolyard. A GSU officer has fired a warning shot into the air. Within seconds, everyone is fleeing the school yard, including the guy who kicked over the ballot boxes. More shots! Hundreds of ballot papers are dispersed on

the ground and circles calmly in the wind. On the street the crowd disperses. People check on each other. A few giggles can be heard. However, most heads are bowed, seemingly in disappointment.

A few days after the electoral chaos at ‘Our Lady of Mercy’, the young man who kicked over the ballot boxes is still in police remand. He is a local mechanic from Shauri Moyo, who eventually was apprehended by the GSU. A youth group who were mobilized as party agents for the sitting MP Yusuf Hassan share the sentiment that democracy has been failed. Yet they don’t blame the mechanic. ‘We know him’. ‘We went to school with him’. ‘He is one of us’, they say^{xx}. They speculate that the other contestant for the MP seat in Kamukunji, Simon Mbugua and his camp paid the mechanic to spoil the party nomination process. But regardless of who was behind it, there is agreement that ‘they’ [the politicians] should bail him out, now that he did their dirty work. The youths feel sorry for him, for the beating he is bound to have received in police custody, and for what they describe as an act of poverty.

Most of them have walked ‘the same path’. They have also offered muscle to local politicians and entrepreneurs for security, intimidation, and land grabbing. But this time, the elections were supposed to be different, because of the devolved government and more local ownership and access to local funds. This time, they were supposed to play an active role in changing their own predicament, they were supposed to get access to redistributed public funds and they were supposed to get recognition for their community work and political participation. This was supposed to their time to recover. And now, they are left disappointed already at the primaries because youth (as a generalised category) had been mobilized for violence once again^{xxi}. Regardless of political loyalties, many people in Shauri Moyo agree that this is yet another example of what Kenyan political history is so rich with: wealthy politicians buying off poor local youth for political intimidation and violence.

This vignette captures the tension between youth mobilization and a politics of handouts and patronage, as well as the renewed hope in democracy at a local level. It points to the increased competition for local seats and internal party nominations. Despite the recent constitutionally sanctioned allocation of power and economic responsibility to local electorates, disruptions of primary elections is far from new in Kenya. In his account of the 2007 primary elections Wanyama reveals how the MP for Nairobi's Kasarani Constituency, William Omondi, stormed an ODM (Orange Democratic Movement) polling station in Roysambu with over 100 armed youths, grabbed ballot papers and tore them. Similarly, in Makadara, youths were mobilized to cause havoc at the ODM polling centre, and supporters of the PNU (Party of National Unity) candidate Patrick Muiruri burnt ballot papers in Gatundu North Constituency^{xxii}.

The youth group in Shauri Moyo who had volunteered themselves as party agents for Yusuf Hassan were not surprised about the violence itself, but their disappointment is deep as the incident has proven to them that despite their effort to reform from 'goons' for hire to engaged party agents overseeing the electoral procedure the structural dynamics influencing the relations between youth and politicians seem to have let them down. The incident also reveals a sense of community and collectivity that runs deeper than the loyalties to individual politicians, which is revealed through the shared sentiment that it is not the mechanic but the structural conditions and the dominant logic of patronage that have failed them. The blatant injustice of state representatives paying the poor youth to cause chaos and violently disrupt the electoral process only for the state security forces to lock him up and violently abuse him reveal the state's double role as both producing and sanctioning youth as radicals^{xxiii}. While some politicians mobilize youth to cause chaos, violence and disruption, other state units like the police are expected to maintain order, and they effectively conceal the link between local youth

and politicians through the forceful arrests, hence making sure that the poor youth are kept in their rightful place. Yet for the youth group, their hopes for social recovery hinge on their ability to negotiate a different relation to individual politicians, which will allow them to participate in politics and society on different terms. The youth hoped that the constitutional change had structural impact that would provide them with an opportunity of gaining further ground in both economic and political terms. Acting as party agents at the Jubilee party's primary elections they hoped to establish a base from which to participate politically while also setting up related businesses like public toilets and kiosks.

Initially, Simon Mbugua won announced as the winner, but Yusuf Hassan contested the result. Hassan and others accused Mbugua's people of fraud and irregularities, like the incident at 'Our Lady of Mercy' Primary School. The Shauri Moyo youth group displayed local figures in favour of a Hassan win, figures which contradicted those reported to the party leadership indicating tampering with the votes between the polling station and the party headquarters. Yusuf Hassan ended up getting appointed as Jubilee's MP candidate for Kamukunji after President Uhuru Kenyatta's intervention convinced Mbugua to step down providing the explanation that the Hassan's Somali support base is strategically important for the support for Jubilee in the General Elections. The youth group have since received economic support for setting up a small kiosk on a small piece of land next to a busy road in the area, thus receiving some recognition for their contribution while also strengthening their agency.

Uprising in Kia Maiko: eating from the hands of politicians

In Kia Maiko (a ward in Mathare constituency), members from the 'base' Uprising (a term for a local youth group who claims a particular space as theirs) sit side by side on wobbly wooden benches.^{xxiv} It is a hot and dusty day two weeks before the Jubilee Primaries, to be held at the

end of April 2017. At 11 AM, most members of the group are already chewing khat. They are relaxing. They had an eventful day the day before. Yet many of them still woke up at 4 AM, as they normally do, to work at the near-by bus stop or to wash public minivans at the Uprising car wash. The day before, most of the Uprising members had accompanied an aspirant nominee for the Member of the County Assembly (MCA) for the Jubilee party named 'Kagis' on his campaign tour of Kia Maiko. Dadi talks animatedly, spitting a bit of thoroughly chewed green khat leaves out while he speaks: 'Kagis needs us, youth. Security, hah, when he walks around to talk to people, to vote for him. We went with him the whole day. We had all these meetings, and it was us there, with him. We ate his money hahahaha.' Another member called Jamo expounds that at night they had celebrated their success at a bar in Kariobangi after Kagis had left the area, a rare occasion for these men considering that the price of a bottle of beer normally equated most of their daily income. 'We are having hang downs (hang over),' he says proudly.

What comes out of the discussion this morning is that alongside the prospect of earning money through their affiliation with Kagis as a group, by doing tasks such as providing security, chasing opposition voters and mobilising new voters, the group members also feel recognised as a group. Their affiliation with Kagis makes them feel respected. They share that walking around with Kagis, attending meetings as his security detail and intimidating opposition voters, improves their standing in 'their community', with which they mean their family, friends and neighbours. They also expect more work to come their way from now on. On top of that, Jamo jokes, 'now we can walk around the neighbourhood without police harassment'. The others burst out in laughter.

Last week, police had arrested three Uprising members, allegedly for smoking marijuana. They were detained for a couple of hours at the John Saga Police Station in Huruma and were only released after paying a bribe of 2000 KSH each. Dadi at the time had exclaimed:

‘Our base is a bank for the police, Mpesa. When we walk the streets, we are arrested. When we sit at our base, we are arrested. Every time you have to pay to be released, but if you can't pay you go to [the] cell, or they can just shoot you. We have lost so many of our members.’ Hence, their visible affiliation with Kagis to them also means safety from police, at least for as long as the run-up to the Primaries lasts. Dadi confidently explains that if an Uprising member would get arrested now, so close to the Primaries, ‘Kagis would even come to bail us out, now that he relies on us, from Uprising, for his security’. The arrests testify to some of the structural constraints the youth experience and ambiguous relation to state officials who seem to target them as mainly for being poor young and looking idle. The sense of gaining local and political recognition speak to an at least temporal change of that order and their sub-ordinate role.

They laugh at the question: ‘Why does Kagis need you as his security?’ and they seem surprised at the ignorance of logics they consider obvious. Enrico, with his soft voice, takes it upon himself to answer what they all clearly consider a rather naive question: ‘politicians, eh, they can't come here in our neighbourhood and just walk around. Maybe they get robbed, or opposition youth come to chase him, no he needs us to protect him.’ However, providing security doesn’t necessarily mean political support as Jamo explain: ‘We will vote for him, we already ate his money. But he is not the leader we need.’ Another member called Simo chimes in: ‘He is not different from all the others. They (MCA's) are there (in the County Assembly) to loot; they want their money back as soon as they get elected. Now he is dishing out money, here and there, we take advantage of that.’ Others nod in agreement; the atmosphere shifts and becomes a bit glum. For many of them, this is the first time they can vote, but even prior to casting their vote they seem disappointed in the local political leadership. Winding up the discussion, Dadi explains that the members of Uprising expect Kagis to win the Jubilee nomination during the Primaries, and working with him indicates continued opportunities for

the group in the run-up to the General Elections. ‘This is our time to recover. We take the money from Kagis, and also other politicians, haha like Kidero when he comes, we don't look at the party, we look at the money.’

While the youth group expresses a clear instrumental logic here, it also testifies to a sense of agency and a strategic investment of their resources and a critical reflection of how to best make the highest financial gain while working to install the best suited political candidate for their purposes. Participation, recognition, and redistribution take on unlikely expressions and seems connected to logics that at first seem incongruous and contradictory, but nevertheless speak to a sense of agency and understanding of political dynamics informed by locally situated knowledge. The volatile conjuncture of election campaigns, during which all positions of power are renegotiated, creates spaces of possibilities for young men to recover and regain a position of citizenship, local residents who matter because their votes count and who can even make other votes count (through intimidation, campaigning and so on). This reveals that it was not only about financial redistribution, a word some of the Uprising members used when talking about the sudden cash flow in Kia Maiko and other wards during the prolonged campaign periods, it was also about recognition, respect and long-term improvements. In some ways Uprising was rising up to the Kagi's and other politicians ideas of instrumentalized mobilization by taking the cash handouts without necessarily selling their political loyalty in return.

A network of reformed thieves in Mathare: Strength in unity

Kagis expectedly received the party nomination for MCA by the Jubilee party during the Primaries. Similar to many other MCA campaigns in Kenya, the Primaries in Kia Maiko for MCA were widely considered more important than the General Elections, seeing that this ward was expected to support the Jubilee alliance. Therefore, after his nomination in April 2017,

Kagis was almost certain that he would be chosen to become the new MCA during the General Elections of August 2017, and his campaign changed from one geared towards mobilisation to one of maintenance.

During a group discussion with Uprising in June 2017 Jamo complains: 'We expected much more money, but Kagis does not call us that often nowadays. He also works with other groups, ha ha yeah also with the network (of youth groups).' H refers to a network of over 300 youth groups, which had been established a year before in anticipation of the upcoming campaigns and of their potential to bring with them opportunities and conflicts. Uprising had joined this network after the initiators, a group of young men and women from different bases in Kia Maiko, had visited the Uprising base one afternoon and had offered them a vision of 'strength in unity'.

During the protracted run-up to the 2013 General Elections a similar though much smaller network of youth groups had been established at Dandora Dumping site. This network had organised a committee and all political aspirants visiting the area had to work with this committee to distribute money to the youth groups and engage them in political activities, regardless of their party affiliations. Through this committee all bases would be paid equal amounts in order to prevent conflict over money between the various local groups. According to several young men working Dandora at the time, this network had been quite effective, since it had greatly reduced conflicts between local groups, which were known to clash during election periods.

The network in Kia Maiko was in part inspired by this previous success in the nearby Dandora constituency, but soon grew into a far more ambitious undertaking. Within a year, it succeeded to unite over 300 formal and informal groups of young men and women in the run-up to the 2017 Primaries and General Elections with the aim to increase their negotiating

position in relationship to politicians and to reduce conflict over resources in the process. Also, it had the ambition to engage in social audit activities on government funds (such as the Ward Development Fund and School Bursaries) and other forms of top-down resource allocation at a ward-level (such as land grabbing). The idea behind this was that in future, such audits would keep local leadership in check (ranging from the MCA to the chief and village elders). The idea of so-called Citizen Budgets were a central part of the 2010 constitution and the devolved government and ideally provides the opportunity for public participation in planning local budgeting, but it naturally requires that local communities agree on priorities. In the meantime, this network in Kia Maiko had already started to function as a gateway to opportunities in county government projects (such as road construction project). Obviously, all these activities together could prove rather problematic in practice, given that the local leaders under scrutiny of proposed social audits also decided on participation of local workers in such projects. Yet, overall, the network's leaders and different member were optimistic, especially about its main objective to represent the vast number of youth groups and bases in Kia Maiko and improve their social, political and economic positions in the long-run^{xxv}.

However, during the group discussion in June 2017, several Uprising members brought out that this network had completely and utterly failed them, because, as Dadi said, it had been 'hijacked by politicians'. The network also worked with Kagis and other politicians, and in the period between the Primaries (April 2017) and the General Elections (August 2017) it had offered opportunities from local politicians, for instance, Kagis to many different groups under its wing, but only to a limited number of members per group. Subsequently, two select members from Uprising had benefitted from security work for Kagis, and over time they both had become the contact persons who represented the group within this larger network. This meant that they could call other Uprising members to join them whenever opportunities came

up. Yet, within the group itself Dadi had always been more influential, and he and his following felt left out, or 'overtaken' as they phrased it.

The internal divisions caused by the selection to represent groups in the broader network were also informed by the reputation of individuals and their perceived respectability as Enrico recounted: 'Some of us at Uprising are still taken as thieves, so they could not join some of this work. Everyone knows them', while alluding to specific individuals within the group. Moha confirmed this during a later conversation: 'Yeah, we can't work with thieves. Only those of us who are reformed.' He was quite adamant about this and said that they were building a network of youth groups that would not only increase their access to (government) opportunities, but which also could set an example of 'public participation' on their terms. Moha also reflected on Kagis' shift of strategy following the Primaries, during which he opted to work through the network instead of directly with different bases: 'Kagis had spent so much money for the Primaries, now he had to keep his campaign going from May to August 8, so he saw that the network could help him keep the youth groups on his side.' This shift gave the network a chance to shore up and prove its relevance to its member groups. Yet, the above also revealed that this has had other, perhaps unforeseen, implications, which could potentially put the same member groups in danger of falling apart.

Devolution transformed the prospects tied to the position of an MCA (Member of County Assembly)), making this seat more desirable for political aspirants than before and also tentatively more relevant to ward residents, especially during campaigns. The former ties in with the forecasts of expanded decision-making powers and resources available to MCA's for ward administration and development purposes. The latter not only derives from the predictions of increased powers of MCA's, but also to the proximity of MCA aspirants during the campaign periods given that these candidates could fully focus on relatively small neighbourhoods and as

such forge close relationships with different social groups here. Nonetheless, the above shows that from the perspectives of these groups devolution signified an opportunity to (somewhat) influence the political game in their favour during campaign periods, even if this space turned out to be fleeting. The increased formal and constitutionally secured opportunities for participation has produced its own conflicts and contestations at the local level that recasts the role and importance of local youth groups and communities in defining how democratic participation takes place. While the parity of participation is formally guaranteed, in practice it ties into local politics of youth mobilization.

Shifting allies and community loyalty in Shauri Moyo and Pumwani

Where youth groups in Kia Maiko, Mathare in general organised themselves into a wider youth network in order to secure more influence on the electoral process at a local level, the youth groups in Kamukunji didn't seek such collective collaboration as they differ on which local candidate to support. These differences are also manifested at different levels of the political system, where some groups have very close ties to different MCA of MP candidates others are connected to one of the gubernatorial candidates. This can partly be explained through the areas' religious and ethnic diversity, which have historical roots, but more recent Muslim influence on local politics also needs to be taken into consideration. However, despite these differences in their immediate political allegiance the youth groups display a strong sense of a shared belonging and a shared embodied uncertainty associated with growing up as second or third generation in Nairobi's first settlements designated for Africans during British colonial rule^{xxvi}. The lack of blame, substituted for care and pity expressed for the mechanic who kicked over the ballot boxes is an example of this sense of community among the youth groups in Shauri Moyo and Pumwani, and it expresses a recognition of the necessity for each to try his/her

luck to respond to the shared precarity that corresponds to being young in these neighbourhoods^{xxvii}.

All youth groups in the area have a space they control – a base, from where they operate small business like car washing, distribution of water, operating showers and toilets, or loading/offloading trucks for the second hand clothing market Gikomba nearby. The older and in some cases more economically successful groups even have permanent building structures they rent out. Most of these places have been acquired through occupations, that is ‘a kind of land grab’ as Justice the chairman of a Shauri Moyo youth group calls it. These land grabs are usually surrounded by contestation and sometimes-downright conflicts, as free plots are scarce, even small ones. To be operationalized, the actual land grab must be complimented by titled deeds, allotment letters, or documents designating the users rights – such paperwork is usually mediated by local politicians who can influence the allocation of user rights and construction of permits at the Chief’s office or sometimes even at municipal level.

‘Old Boys’, a Pumwani based group, have for years lent their votes and physical support to the local MCA Kenneth Irungu - some of the members have known him since their teenage years. Irungu provided bureaucratic and technical assistance for the group when they first occupied a piece of land used for dumping garbage more than a decade ago. Since then, the group has established a car wash business and even own a matatu vehicle (a minibus used in the informal public transport sector). They have an ambition of expanding their business and purchasing a whole fleet of matatus. For the 2017 Jubilee primaries, ‘Old Boys’ has decided to change their long-term support from Irungu to Simon Mbugua, who allegedly is well connected to car and matatu importers.

Due to their long history in the area, which includes battles over local security during the 2008 post-electoral violence, and due to their successful economic activities, the group can

influence several of the other youth groups in the area. 'Old Boys' are aware of their local influence and power but where they were more prone to engage in physical fighting some years and local security provision some years back it has become important for them to maintain peace due to their business interests. The combination of local influence and economic aspirations has led the group to change their political allegiance, without using these words the members describe how they have grown bigger than the patronage their old political friend can deliver. They are aiming for more influence. The members of 'Old Boys' have recently played a central role in mediating conflicts with younger groups who unsuccessfully tried to grab a piece of public land. Instead, 'Old Boys' adopted the young men into their car-wash business and assisted them in saving up money which they are about to invest in land in Embakasi, further away from the city centre. The loyalty of Old Boys is to the community rather than to politicians, even if they have long-term relations to them. They are aware of the instrumental logics of politicians and try to establish recognition at community level and to situate themselves as the favoured and most influential local group through a combined diplomatic effort of violence, politics, and business. Recovering, or *kupona*, for them is about building the community and maintaining enough local stability for them to make economic progress through renewed political relations.

Some three hundred meters away from Old Boy's car wash, in an alley between clay houses, another youth group has their base next to the public toilets and underneath a public water tank. Most of the young men gathered are chewing *khat*. They point to a leak in the water tank. Simon Mbugua donated the water tank some years back in return for political support. Asked about the meaning of 'political support', one of the boys laughs and flexes his biceps. In other words, they have provided muscle. The group complains that they haven't seen Mbugua since then. 'He only has time for us when elections are up'. The Gubernatorial candidate Mike

Sonko, on the contrary, has time for them. Sonko is extremely popular in Pumwani and among the traders at the nearby Gikomba market because of his street style appearance and his ability to talk to people in an ordinary language. The controversial outgoing Senator and Gubernatorial candidate for Nairobi appears as a man of the people and he even gives personal calls to the leader of the group, JayJay. JayJay has decided not to support Mbugua for MP. The group will put their energy into supporting Sonko for the Gubernatorial elections and has decided not to engage actively in the MP campaign.

But when the day arrives for the Jubilee rally at the Chief's camp, JayJay admits to having received some handouts from Mbugua's main contestant, Yusuf Hasan. The fact that JayJay is a Muslim like Hassan combined with the money, and his growing disappointment with Mbugua has been decisive for his choice. JayJay is afraid to display his deflection to Mbugua at the rally, so he hides the flyers for Yusuf Hassan under his shirt and sneaks out of the Chief's compound the moment Mbugua's campaign entourage arrives. As JayJay explains, there is no reason to deliberately offend Mbugua and thereby close the door for future collaboration. A few days later JayJay and six of his group members have been summoned for a prayer rally in town by Sonko and high on a combination of khat and illegal brew they are preparing themselves for whatever might come. While displaying a sense of agency and choice in deciding which candidate to support and work for, not having the means and possibilities for securing a long-term livelihood makes the choice volatile and produce a risk of exposure and vulnerability. In the eyes of the youth groups, the accountability of politicians often seem to concern deliverance of patronage but non-deliverance is nevertheless sanctioned by shifting allegiances based in sentiments of mis-recognition and senses of unjust distribution of funds (private and public). While being vulnerable to the power of politicians, social recovery for these groups also means recovering a sense of dignity by not buying into the same instrumentalized politics of handouts

as last time the politicians came around. The groups in Pumwani and Shauri Moyo are trying to position themselves in relation to where the opportunities are while also balancing their local loyalties. The party primaries provided new opportunities for the youth groups for political participation and for re-negotiating their positions and influence at the local level.

Conclusion

The devolved government and the decentralisation of larger parts of the budget to the MCAs, MPs, Senators, and Governors have not only increased the competition for these positions, it has also changed the dynamics among local youth groups. For the youth groups the primaries and the devolved government offer an opportunity for them to recover and to re-negotiate how funds and opportunities are re-distributed. The re-distribution might not take the ideal democratic form, but rather entails some kind of patronage. However, as the examples above has revealed, the patronage are still relatively open and allows the youth groups some room for manoeuvring and hence for influencing the electoral process. The way they choose to position themselves is partly informed by aspirations and promises, but also by the politicians' ability to deliver both in terms of patronage and local development.

Furthermore, the examples show how community and a sense of shared past in relation to particular places in the city informs loyalties across political allegiances and individual aspirations. These insights add to the complexity of youth mobilization for political purposes that go way beyond instrumentalist understanding of the relation between youth groups and electoral participation. While the 2010 constitution should secure the right to political participation for all citizens, the ability to participate beyond the vote is still very unequally distributed and the examples of the paper show how the idea of participation is contested and negotiated in ways not captured if looking only from the viewpoint of the

politicians or through a neo-patrimonial lens. Poor youth might still be engaged in violent acts in relation to electoral politics, but the logics and drivers behind their engagements are far more complex and dynamic, and they are rooted as much in loyalties to local communities and perceptions of political accountability as they are informed purely by cash handouts. Hence, the emic notion of *kupona* reveals a different sense of democratic reasoning and democratic behaviour among local youth groups, which often gain little recognition in studies of youth mobilisation and electoral politics in Kenya and the wider Sub-Saharan Africa.

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Notes

ⁱ This work was supported by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NOW) for the collective research project ‘Securing the Local: The Role of Non-state security groups (NSSGs) in the Struggle against Extremism in Kenya, Nigeria and Indonesia’ under the project number: W 08.420.113.

ⁱⁱ Kagwanja, “The politics of marionettes”; Mutahi, “Political violence in the elections”; “Fjelde and Höglund, “Ethnic politics and Elite Competition.”. Despite the attempts at separating political violence from the state the Kenyan police and other units within the security apparatus are accused of being involved in various kinds of political oppression and other human rights violations, and the political instrumentalization of youth violence doesn’t seem to have decreased the political use of government security forces.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mueller, “The political Economy of the Kenyan Crisis”; Murunga, “Spontaneous or premeditated?”

^{iv} Hansen, “Political violence in Kenya”; Nguni and Katumanga, “From monopoly to oligopoly in Kenya”

^v van Stapele, “Kude? Kudedi!” and “We are not yet Kenyans”; Rasmussen “Outwitting the Professor of politics?” and “Parasitic politics”.

^{vi} Kanyinga and Long, “The political economy of reforms in Kenya”

^{vii} Harris and Posner ask the question “(Under what conditions) do politicians reward their supporters?” and show that there is weak evidence that local electees redistribute funds to their political and ethnic allies.

^{viii} Cheeseman, Lynch and Willis, “Decentralisation in Kenya”; D’Arcy and Cornell, “Devolution and Corruption in Kenya”.

^{ix} George Bob-Milliar, “Party youth activists”.

^x Naomi van Stapele was first to identify the term *kupona*’s analytical applicability during her work in Kiao Maiko, Mathare.

^{xi} Jomo Kenyatta “Facing Mt. Kenya”, 299-300.

^{xii} Widner “The Rise of a party-state in Kenya”, 130.

^{xiii} Macharia “Slum clearance and the informal economy”, 229; Haugerud “The culture of politics in Modern Kenya”, 45-46.

^{xiv} In her research from Niger, Lisa Mueller points to similar insights. In “Personal politics without clientelism?”, 48, she argues for the existence of personalised political relations that are not inherently clientilistic, and suggests that this hypothesis is tested in Africa beyond Niger.

^{xv} Fraser “Recognition without ethics?”; Fraser and Honneth “Redistribution or recognition”.

^{xvi} Fraser “Recognition without ethics?”, 90.

^{xvii} Jones, Kimari and Ramkrishan, “Only the People can defend this struggle”; Van Stapele, “We are not yet Kenyans”

^{xviii} Fraser “Recognition without ethics?”, 103-104

^{xix} The vignette from ‘Our Lady of Mercy’ is reconstructed from observations and fieldnotes from the party primaries in Kamukunji April 2017, Jacob Rasmussen

^{xx} Quotes taken from fieldnotes late April 2017, Jacob Rasmussen.

^{xxi} Similar anticipations for the 2017 elections are found in other locations, like Mathara and Pumwani.

^{xxii} Wanyama, “Voting without institutionalised parties,” 80.

^{xxiii} For similar points see Ruteere et. al. “Missing the point”; Jones and Kimari, “Only the people can defend this struggle”; Rasmussen, “Outwitting the Professor of politics”

^{xxiv} The vignette from ‘Kiao Maiko’ is reconstructed from observations and fieldnotes from the party primaries in Kamukunji April 2017, Naomi van Stapele.

^{xxv} Retrieved from footnotes March 2017, Naomi van Stapele

^{xxvi} Akare, “The Slums”; White, “The Comforts of home”; Kaarsholm and Frederiksen, “Amaoti and Pumwani”

^{xxvii} For a general point about precarity in Africa see Cooper and Pratten “Ethnographies of uncertainty,” 12.