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## Post-colonialism and the politics of Kenya (review)

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## *Book Reviews*

**Ahluwalia D. Pal, *Post-colonialism and the politics of Kenya* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, Inc.) 1996, 217 pp.**

Post-colonialism as a framework of analysis remains subject to debate and controversy. Although post-colonialism has been around for close to two decades, it has in recent times been a fiercely contested and debated paradigm. Given its newness and elegance in the world of academic discourse, it is not surprising that its reception has been characterized by a great deal of excitement, confusion and in many cases scepticism. Debates surrounding the study have laid claims to questions of the legitimacy of post-colonialism as a separate analytical entity in the academic discourse, its validity as a theoretical formulation as well as its disciplinary boundaries and political implications. Also, the prefix 'post' has complicated matters as it implies an 'aftermath' in two senses - temporal, as in coming after, and ideological, as in supplanting. It is the second implication that the critics of the study have found contestable.

The contestation has been on the dividing line between what is colonial and its link to what counts as post-colonial. The argument has been that if the inequities of colonial rule have not been erased, it is perhaps premature to proclaim the demise of colonialism. The intervention being couched by ardent post-colonial theorists is that there is a co-existence of both post-colonial and neo-colonial conditions in many Third World countries and one has not erased the other. In this sense, whereas such countries are formally considered independent, they remain economically and culturally entrapped and dependent on their former colonial powers at the same time. Whereas the importance of formal decolonisation cannot be gainsaid, the fact that unequal relations of colonial rule are re-inscribed into the contemporary imbalances between the 'First' and 'Third' World nations cannot be dismissed as well.

*Post-colonialism and the Politics of Kenya* gives us a succinct entry into this unique approach to the study of Kenyan politics. Contrary to many studies of post-colonialism that usually tend to become amorphous and sometimes rob themselves of historical specificity, the author ably locates this text within a defined disciplinary and geographical space. It is on this strength that the book emerges as a lucid, judicious and representative text whose influence in Kenyan historiography could be decisive. Rather than post-colonialism being merely treated as "the latest catchall term to dazzle the academic mind" as observed by Russell Jacoby<sup>1</sup>, Ahluwalia Pal underscores and discounts the sources of misreading associated with the study of post-colonialism in general.

As a backdrop to the text, the author foregrounds a politics of opposition and struggle and problematises the key relationship between the centre and periphery as it has come to be characterised in the popular representations of the latter by the former. These representations, themselves merely reinforcing early images acquired through Western representations of Africa, continue to resonate and inform contemporary Eurocentric thinking on Africa, thus influencing the nature of its politics. Within the Kenyan context, the author argues that these representations illustrate that the very conduct of politics remains entrapped by Western constructions of institutions and the practice of politics (p. 16). The study of Kenyan politics is thus inextricably linked not only to the colonial period, but to other social, economic and cultural parameters as they have come to be dominated by the colonial legacy within the whole African context.

Indebted heavily to Edward Said's pioneering work *Orientalism*<sup>2</sup>, which argues that the Western academia is responsible for the creation of the Oriental other, Pal argues that Africanism, on the other hand, is a product of the hegemonic role of African studies in the West. Like Orientalism, Africanism marks an end to an intellectual hegemony often taken for granted and institutionalised domination inherent in the Western academy. To quote the words of Mafeje<sup>3</sup>, Africanism is not simply a state of social and spiritual being but a pervasive ontology that straddles space and time. Inspired by political and ideological struggles for a second independence or renaissance, it suggests that decolonisation in Africa did not fully achieve liberation, except in the narrowest political terms. The West continues in its dominance through the various neo-colonial guises, which have also permeated the very imagination of the colonised peoples. In an attempt to deal with the different episodes of Kenyan politics, the author demonstrates that the continuing colonisation of the imagination, as is evident in the various texts on Africa and Kenya in particular, has continued to dominate the political scene.

As a prelude to the different currents in Kenyan politics, the author contextualises both the Kenyatta and Moi regimes within the wider framework of power and how, through its control, the two regimes successfully counteracted the different forms of resistance that continually sought to challenge their legitimacy. It is vividly demonstrated that an intricate web of forces, both colonial and post-colonial in character, sought to challenge the nationalist project vouchsafed by the two regimes. Such forces included the larger European settler presence and the violent nature of the Kenyan decolonisation process as was characterised in the Mau Mau liberation war. The need to contain such forces and ensure the sustainability of peace in the country became a major pre-occupation of the various instruments of the state. The book highlights the instruments and conflicts engendered between the

democratic and authoritarian tendencies and illustrates the way in which the law and its enforcement were utilised to protect the interests of the ruling elite.

The use of the law and other state instruments to suppress the critics of the state is a theme that the author picks up in Chapter Two, which considers the period between 1963 and 1969. The author underscores the fact that Jomo Kenyatta and the ruling party, KANU, then in charge of the various machinery of the State, considered the eradication of “regionalism” or “Majimboism” as their central political goal. This, they achieved through political manoeuvre and the shrewd use of the provincial administration that operated through a clearly laid down strata running from the provincial commissioner to the local chiefs and headmen. The end of regionalism and the subsequent dissolution of the Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU) were significant political developments within this period. In addition, a greater part of Kenyatta’s energies were directed at trying to overcome the breakaway and rival party, the Kenya Peoples Union (KPU), which had leftist linings and was led by the then vice-president, Oginga Odinga. The political rivalry between Odinga and Kenyatta played a crucial role in resuscitating and heightening ethnic divisions and tensions within the country. With the assassination in Nairobi on 5<sup>th</sup> July 1969 of the famous Luo politician and trade unionist Tom Mboya, the alliance between the Kenyatta regime and the Luo community became a fragile phenomenon. Kenyatta, without a strong Luo ally, had to resort to violence and detention in order to maintain stability and solidify his position.

Politically, the foregoing strategy by Kenyatta proved ineffectual in addressing the major issues affecting the masses, including economic matters. This ineffectiveness is the author’s concern in Chapter Three, which analyses the period between 1970 and 1975. It is this period that also witnessed what could be described as ‘the rise and fall of J. M Kariuki’, a Nyeri Kikuyu and Member of Parliament for Nyandarua North. Kariuki became a major political force in Kenya especially in his campaign for the plight of the landless, the school leavers and the urban unemployed. His mysterious murder in March 1975 unleashed one of the most dramatic political uncertainties in the country following that of Tom Mboya.

These uncertainties were, however, shrewdly managed and controlled from degenerating into a political disorder. Part of the tactics employed by Kenyatta to overcome the challenge was to tighten his rule by relying upon an inner circle of political associates, as the author demonstrates in Chapter Four of the text. These associates, who benefited most both economically and politically from the regime, included Kenyatta’s close family members and members of the Gikuyu, Embu and Meru Association (G.E.M.A). Some of these politicians, especially between 1976 and 1978, played a crucial role in the “change the

constitution” controversy that was aimed at preventing Moi from ascending power after Kenyatta. The latter was viewed as portend threat to their material and political gains accruing from the central role they played in the Kenyatta regime.

The political manoeuvres that underpinned the ‘change the constitution’ debate failed miserably as the author argues in Chapter Five. President Moi’s transition to power after the passing away of Kenyatta in 1978 was characterised by relative political stability. However, despite the peaceful succession and consolidation of power by Moi, problems of ethnicity, power management and ideology that were evident during the Kenyatta era began to rear their ugly head again, but now within a changed context and political dispensation. Perhaps then, the positive connotation attached to Nyayoism<sup>4</sup> as an ideology may also have had its negative dimension in this transition process.

Moi’s problems could not be easily wished away. The inability to legitimise his rule in the light of a resurgence of ethnic politics culminated into an attempted coup d’etat of August 1, 1982. The failed coup and the concomitant struggle by Moi to re-assert his authority, re-establish political legitimacy and permit a more open political process are discussed in Chapter Six and Seven of the book. The author argues that Moi’s problems were deeply rooted in society itself, primarily because of fundamental economic and political grievances, which remained un-addressed and continued to undermine his rule (p.145). But, ethnicity as a causal variable needs to be emphasised as a major central component that acted to define the major political actors at the centre of power. It is true that part of Moi’s problems were associated with his lack of the economic power base and support that had taken an ethnic angle during the Kenyatta regime. Although Moi inherited this set up and sought to transform it, his authoritarian aberrations were equally infused with an ethnic touch.

The salient institutional changes put in place by Moi received the greatest test during the democratic transition that occurred in many African countries, Kenya inclusive, in the late 1980s and early 1990s as the author demonstrates in the final chapter. This transition, resulting from the sweeping winds of change worldwide, ushered in a new phase of multi-partyism in Kenya. But as the author rightly argues, this transition that was infused with Western liberal democratic norms did not hold much for the Kenyan context. Its correlation with economic progress, political success and generally good governance remains a fad and has continued to elicit intense debate, and of course, failed promises.

Generally, the book offers a brilliant and original departure from the various historical studies on Kenya that have tended to concentrate on the traditional political economy approach as the main framework of analysis. By introducing

an alternative approach in the reading of Kenyan history, Pal has ably offered a deeply researched and intellectually engaging text that is worth reading by all historians and other social scientists interested in understanding the evolving nature of the State and Kenyan politics. This of course notwithstanding the minor factual and structural inadequacies inherent in the text. Factually, the issue of ethnicity and its relation to the various facets of the Kenyan political, economic and social life needs to be contextualised within the colonial and the two post independent periods of both Moi and Kenyatta. The tendency by certain Kenyan political analysts, and Pal becomes a victim (on p.145), to blame one regime for certain inadequacies fails to put emphasis on its root cause and hence masks the possibility of offering solutions to the problem of State failure in Kenya. This merely translates into what some scholars have called “the politics of selective blame in Kenya”<sup>5</sup>, whose central character is vilification and unbridled regime demonisation. There are also factual oversights in the text in relation to dates, which need to be streamlined. The author, for instance, writes that Tom Mboya was assassinated in Nairobi in June 1968 (p.24). The correct position, however, is that Mboya was assassinated on July 5, 1969.

Structurally, the text needs to be fine-tuned on various counts. In the introductory section (Chapter One), the layout and summary of the themes considered in various chapters seem to be mixed-up. What appears in Chapter Two is discussed as appearing in Chapter O and this runs through all the chapters. The final impression created is that there are seven chapters in the text, yet there are only nine chapters, the conclusion included. The book also has a number of translation limitations and numerous spelling mistakes. On page 17, for instance, the author refers to a seditious publication in the possession of a Nyeri politician, *Pambana*, as ‘wrestling’. The correct translation should, however, be ‘to struggle’. Spelling mistakes, especially in reference to place names and personalities include, *Burudi Nabweta* instead of *Burudi Nabwera* (p.73), *Elementaita* instead of *Elementeita* (p.86), *Oduya Oporang* instead of *Oduya Oprong* (p.97), *Tamback* instead of *Tambach* (p.106) *Kieno* instead of *Keino* (p.121), *Aloo Aringa* instead of *Oloo Aringo* (p. 133), *Mbijiwe* instead of *M’Mbijiwe* (p.142), *Adunwgi* instead of *Adungosi* (p.143), *Raila Odongo* instead of *Raila Odinga* (p.143), *Ocuka* instead of *Ochuka*, (p.143) *Zechary Onyonka* instead of *Zachary Onyonka* (p.166) , *Kukuomboa* (to liberate) instead of *Kukombo* (p. 176). These oversights and mistakes may present a picture that the author seems less familiar with the language, personalities and place names he analyses. It is necessary, therefore, that they be corrected in the subsequent editions of this otherwise stimulating and thought-provoking text.

**NOTES**

1. Jacoby, R. 1995. Marginal returns: The trouble with post-colonial theory. *Lingua Franca*. (September/October): 30-37.
2. Said, E. W. 1978. *Orientalism*. London and Heriley: Routhledge and Kegan Paul.
3. Mafeje, A. 2000, Africanity: A combative ontology. *CODESRIA Bulletin*, no. 1
4. *Nyayo* means 'following in the footsteps'. Nyayoism, as an ideology fronted by Moi, sought to follow in the footsteps of Kenyatta in running the government.
5. Murunga, G. R. 1999. Globalization and the politics of selective blame in Kenya, 1963-1990. Paper presented at the International Conference on Mainstreaming Democratic Governance in the Social Sciences, 29<sup>th</sup> Sept. – to 1<sup>st</sup> Oct. 1999, University of Dar-es-Salaam.

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