

**Exploring Rural Politics in Kenya: Change in Voter Behaviour in Aldai  
Constituency, 1963-2007**

**By**

**Eliud Nyawino Biego Lubanda**

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper is concerned with the voter behavior in Aldai constituency, a typical rural constituency in Kenya and attempts to meet two main objectives. Firstly is to analyze the trend in voter behaviour in Aldai constituency in the context of the country's changing political history in the period 1963-2007 and then to attempt an explanation of the 'change' taking place in the voter behaviour in Aldai's elections at grassroots level (constituency and ward) within this period. The subaltern theory is the main interrogative tool that probes various aspects and elements of politics in Aldai. This, hopefully, illuminates the 'change' taking place among the electorate themselves. Primary and secondary sources of data were examined for this study; broadly categorized into oral and written sources. Primary sources were gathered from; oral in-depth interview, archival materials, observation, and questionnaires. The target population was both randomly and purposively sampled. Secondary sources included mainly written sources viz; published books, unpublished theses, periodicals, seminar papers, newspapers, maps, magazines and dissertations. Preliminary findings of this research are; firstly, that the colonial boundary making exercise in Aldai laid grounds for chaos that plague the region and impacted heavily on the peoples' political behaviour in early elections after independence. Secondly, that the political subaltern is gaining more control of his/her vote unlike the case in the elections before 2002. Thirdly, that a whole range of factors including clan, wealth, ethnic group and personality affect the voter behaviour.*

## Introduction

Voting in Kenya raises issues, such as political domination and regime legitimacy, the articulation between the local and national levels of politics and the perennial problem of lack of institutionalization of legal procedures and techniques imported from Europe (Cowen and Laakso, 2002:3). Issues that stand out in rural elections include patronage and ethnicity, bribery, violence or threats of violence, vote buying, communal voting, absence of secret ballot (*mlolongo*), age group, clannism, gender, religion, and socio-economic location in society among others (Ibid). Although these African elections are state controlled, they are semi-competitive, reflecting what has been described as a culture of '*accountable authoritarianism*' which allows a degree of freedom to the electorate to elect their members of parliament and civic leaders as long as this does not threaten the presidency (McOnyango, 1996).

The first President of independent Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta, widely exercised a one-man rule. All power and authority to govern the country were centralized on the presidency soon after independence through several constitutional manipulations. Decisions made at the center percolated to the grassroots and were hardly questioned. With the centralization of power came the command over state resources (Cowen and Karuti, 2002; 133). This was key for political command at the onset of transition government and political independence. Since the Kenya Government determinedly avoided Socialist politics, there emerged, with tacit state approval, African capital interests in commerce, agriculture, and other areas of the economy.<sup>1</sup> This major policy direction at independence

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<sup>1</sup>See Sessional Paper No. 10 of 1965 titled '*African Socialism and its Application to Development in Kenya*'.

taken by the government (amidst strong dissent from a considerable number of senior government officials led by the Vice President Jaramogi Oginga Odinga) ensured that pre-independence owners of capital continued to dominate economic and political life in the country after independence (Odinga, 1967). In the run-up to independence and in the years that followed, former colonial loyalists wielded political influence to consolidate their own interests and power. Under Kenyatta, many of the former loyalists became influential members of the new government. This system of loyalist patronage percolated all the way to the local level of government, with former home guards dominating bureaucracies that had been the preserve of the young British colonial officers in the African Districts (Elkins, 2005). Added to the fact of use of political office to skew the distribution of state resources, these African capital interests had great impact on the country's early electoral behaviour (Ibid).

Thus, in the first of the two multi-party elections before independence, the '*Kenyatta elections*' of 1961, for a representative Parliament as part of constitutional self-government, and the '*independence elections*' of 1963, a communal voting behaviour emerged, based on ethno-regional electoral blocs was emerging (Nyong'o, 1992). The fact that the executive could easily influence the results watered down the existence of free and fair elections between 1960s and mid 1982. In this period, Kenya, though a *de jure* multiparty state, was largely a *de facto* one-party state under the firm rule of President Kenyatta.

The years between 1982 and 1991 were part of the period of Kenya's second president Daniel Toroitich Arap Moi's regime. Several authors have passed judgment regarding this era. Cowen and Karuti (2002) have termed this as the era of political patronage, corruption and authoritarian rule under Moi. Kakai (2004; 7).

With the 1992 elections and subsequent 1997, 2002 and 2007 elections, the ethnic calculus in voter behavior witnessed in earlier times of the country's independence was intensified proper (Ibid). Obonyo (2006) argues that tribal or land clashes have been a common feature since independence but they have intensified since the repeal of Section 2A in 1991 which ushered in competitive multi-party politics. Section 2A was the Constitution of Kenya (Amendment) Act Number 7 of 1982, which had made Kanu the sole legal political party.

While it is clear that national politics in Kenya has undergone epochal changes and has widely been studied, the kind of change that is taking place in the country's rural political structure (usually subterranean) has been hardly studied. This study is concerned with the issue of change in the rural politics of Aldai. The interplay of national and these rural politics (which is inevitable given the nature of the interconnectedness of power politics) will interest the study. The central question that guides this work is the role of Aldai's 'political subalterns' (or lack of it) in the constituency's politics.