



The History Of Political Pluralism in Kenya Since 1960

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Abstract

This study examines the history of political pluralism in Kenya from 1960 to 2002, with a particular focus on the political career of Joseph Martin Shikuku Oyondi. Anchored in Pluralist Theory, the research explores the phases of Kenya's democratic evolution—from the promise of independence and early multipartyism, through the consolidation of a one-party state, to the resurgence of political pluralism during the Second Liberation. Using a combination of archival research, oral testimonies, and secondary sources, the study assesses how both systemic structures and individual agency shaped the political landscape. Findings indicate that while Kenya began its postcolonial journey with a multiparty system, the ruling elites quickly manipulated legal frameworks to marginalize opposition parties. The 1982 constitutional amendment that formalized the one-party state marked a significant regression in democratic governance. However, it also catalyzed a decade of resistance by reformists, civil society actors, and political dissidents, including Shikuku. His parliamentary interventions, grassroots mobilization, and principled stance against authoritarianism contributed to the political awakening that culminated in the repeal of Section 2A in 1991 and the reintroduction of multiparty democracy. The study underscores that political pluralism in Kenya has been both a legal and social struggle, shaped by contestation, resilience, and negotiated reforms. It concludes that although the reintroduction of pluralism was a milestone, genuine democratic consolidation remains an ongoing project. The paper recommends stronger preservation of political history, enhanced civic education, and institutional reforms to sustain a robust pluralist culture. The research contributes to the historiography of Kenya's democratization and affirms the enduring relevance of political actors in shaping national governance.

Keywords: *Political Pluralism, Kenya's Democratization, Democracy and Multiparty Politics*

Introduction

Political pluralism has been a defining feature of democratic governance, particularly in societies transitioning from colonial rule to self-determination (Diamond 1999). In Kenya, the journey toward pluralism has been marked by contestations, elite negotiations, and state repression (Throup and Hornsby 1998). At the heart of this struggle stood notable political figures such as Joseph Martin Shikuku Oyondi, whose contribution spanned both the colonial and post-independence periods. Born in 1932, Shikuku emerged as a youth delegate to the 1960 Lancaster House Conference and later became a vocal opposition figure who consistently advocated for multi-party democracy, transparency, and constitutional reform (Ochieng' 1995). The formation of political parties, such as the Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU) and Kenya African National Union (KANU), signified the early stages of political pluralism in the country (Branch 2011). However, the shift toward a de facto and later de jure one-party state curtailed this momentum (Barkan 2004). From the 1960s to the early 1990s, Kenya oscillated between political centralization and demands for democratic space. Throughout these transformations, Shikuku maintained an unwavering commitment to participatory governance, often at great personal and political cost (Mutua 2008). This study explores the evolution of political pluralism in Kenya through the life and career of Joseph Martin Shikuku Oyondi. By centering on his ideological stance, legislative activity, and grassroots mobilization, the research provides a lens through which to examine broader trends in Kenya's political development, particularly during moments of transition and repression.

Methodology

This study adopts a historical research design that is both exploratory and descriptive in nature, aiming to document and interpret political events, ideologies, and behavior across Kenya's postcolonial timeline (Tosh 2015; Given 2008). Utilizing a case study



approach, it centers on Joseph Martin Shikuku Oyondi as a representative figure in the evolution of political pluralism in Kenya (Yin 2018). Data collection was conducted through oral interviews, archival research, and documentary analysis, aligning with best practices in historical and political inquiry (Thies 2002; Berg and Lune 2017). Oral testimonies were obtained from former politicians, civil society leaders, journalists, and individuals who worked closely with Shikuku, following protocols for qualitative interviewing in political biography research (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). Archival materials included parliamentary Hansards, media archives such as the Daily Nation and The Standard, as well as documents retrieved from the Kenya National Archives (Branch 2011; Ogot 2000). Secondary sources, including biographies, scholarly books, and peer-reviewed journal articles, supplemented the primary data (Berman and Lonsdale 1992; Mutua 2008). Thematic content analysis was employed to organize and interpret the qualitative data, with themes emerging both deductively—guided by the study’s theoretical framework (such as participation, dissent, and civic space)—and inductively from oral narratives and historical records (Braun and Clarke 2006). Triangulation was used to ensure the credibility and validity of findings by cross-verifying data from multiple sources (Denzin 1978; Flick 2018).

Results and Discussion

This section addressed the following themes that emerged; The Decolonization Process of Kenya and the Birth of Political Pluralism (1960–1963), the Transition from Political Pluralism and the Shift to a De Facto One-Party State (1963–1969), the Consolidation of the One-Party State (1970–1982), the Second Liberation and Reintroduction of Multiparty Democracy in Kenya (1982–1991), and finally, the Multiparty Era and Political Liberalization (1992–2002) and the Democratic Transition and Constitutional Reforms (2002–2010). They are discussed as follows:

The Decolonization Process of Kenya and the Birth of Political Pluralism (1960–1963)

Political pluralism in Kenya gained momentum as nationalist movements intensified during the late colonial period. According to Peter O., decentralization of power and the formation of civic and economic groups by settlers, Asians, and traders catalyzed political diversity (Peter, O., Oral Interview in Butere, on 11th July, 2024). Key parties—the Kenya African National Union (KANU), Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU), and African People's Party (APP)—emerged between 1960 and 1962, shaping the independence struggle by providing platforms for African political expression and self-governance (Gertzel, 1970; Ogot & Ochieng’, 1995). Colonial administrators, however, viewed multiparty politics as destabilizing and suppressed African political activity with restrictive laws (Anderson, 2005). Oral accounts confirm nationalist leaders’ commitment to political diversity. Holiness O. recalled: “The colonial government never wanted Africans to form parties, and the ban was lifted in 1958 when Sir Alan Lennox Boyd visited Kenya through his constitutional reforms. It became easier for the likes of Jaramogi Odinga, James Gichuru, Ronald Ngala, and Martin Shikuku to push for a multi-party system to ensure their voices were heard” (Holiness, O., Oral Interview in Butere, on 11th July, 2024). This aligns with historical records that pluralism was seen as a vehicle to resist colonial rule (Branch, 2011).

The Lancaster House Conferences (1960 and 1962) shaped Kenya’s constitutional framework accommodating multiparty democracy (Hornsby, 2012). However, KANU under Jomo Kenyatta rapidly dominated, marginalizing smaller parties like KADU. Lwali O. noted the dissolution of KADU was “occasioned by bribing of Ronald Ngala by the KANU government” (Lwali, O., Oral Interview in Butere, on 23rd August, 2024). KADU merged with KANU in 1964, ushering in a de facto one-party state (Gertzel, 1970). Despite KANU’s dominance, grassroots support for pluralism remained strong. A 1961 colonial report observed, “African political parties are increasingly gaining traction among the population, with widespread calls for broader representation beyond KANU’s dominance” (Kenya National Archives [KNA], 1961). Robert M. explained, “People in our village would gather in markets to listen to speeches from different political leaders, discussing the future of Kenya” (Robert, M., Oral Interview in Butere, on 9th July, 2024). K. Kenneth recalled, “Shikuku and other young politicians actively engaged the people, emphasizing that independence should not be monopolized by a single party” (Kenneth, K., Oral Interview in Mumias, on 10th August, 2024).

Tensions emerged as KANU consolidated power. Calson Atinya said: “There were fears that KANU wanted to suppress other parties, but leaders like Shikuku and Ngala insisted that democracy should allow different voices” (Calson Atinya, Oral Interview in Kakamega, on 13th July, 2023). Administrative pressure also curtailed opposition; a 1963 government circular instructed monitoring of political meetings held by non-KANU parties (KNA, 1963). Scholars argue that the gradual shift to a one-party state was driven by elite co-optation and colonial legacies empowering KANU to silence opposition (Gertzel, 1970; Throup & Hornsby, 1998). Focus



group participants noted a shift from ideology-driven parties in the 1960s to today's personality-based politics (Focus Group Discussion, 15th July, 2024). While early independence reflected pluralism's importance, post-independence political consolidation under KANU prevailed. Opposition resilience ensured political competition persisted, paving the way for multiparty democracy's return in the 1990s (Mueller, 2008).

The Transition from Political Pluralism and the Shift to a De Facto One-Party State (1963–1969)

After Kenya's independence in 1963, political pluralism declined as opposition parties were systematically dissolved or absorbed into the ruling Kenya African National Union (KANU). The 1964 merger of KANU and Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU) marked a decisive move toward a one-party state, effectively eliminating opposition under the guise of national unity. Oral testimonies suggest this merger was pressured: "KADU leaders were forced to join KANU, and those who resisted were sidelined politically" (Robert, M., Oral interview in Kakamega, on 14th July, 2025). Historical records confirm the use of both incentives and coercion to weaken opposition parties. Post-independence constitutional amendments centralized power. The 1964 constitutional change abolished the Prime Minister position, making Jomo Kenyatta Kenya's first executive President with broad powers to appoint regional leaders, dismantling federal structures that had allowed political competition (Oyugi & Ochieng, 1998). Archival directives urged political leaders to align with KANU's agenda to maintain "unity and progress" (KNA, 1965), framing dissent as a threat to national cohesion.

Respondents recalled that political space shrank rapidly: "In the early years, there was still space for opposition, but after 1964, those who challenged the government were branded as traitors" (Rosemary, M., Oral Interview in Kisumu, on 16th April, 2025). Kenneth K., noted that "Shikuku was among the few leaders who openly opposed the one-party rule, and he faced numerous arrests because of it" (Kenneth, K., Oral Interview in Nairobi, on 21st February, 2025). Pluralist theory posits that democracy thrives on competing interest groups (Dahl, 1989). However, Kenya's ruling elite dismantled opposition parties, centralizing power in the executive. The 1965 assassination of Pio Gama Pinto, a vocal critic, heightened a climate of fear that stifled political competition (Throup & Hornsby, 1998). By 1969, the Kenya People's Union (KPU), the last major opposition party, was banned, cementing Kenya's de facto one-party state.

Focus group participants recalled government intimidation of opposition supporters: "Many people supported KPU because they wanted a strong opposition, but the government used police intimidation to silence its supporters" (Focus Group Discussion in Shikunga, on 19th May, 2025). Archival reports detail security surveillance to suppress KPU activities (KNA, 1969). Scholars argue that the 1960s political culture of suppressing opposition shaped Kenya's authoritarian governance for decades (Gertzel, 1970; Wehlye, 2018). The state used constitutional amendments, political intimidation, and security forces to undermine pluralism, despite initial hopes for democratic diversity. Ethnic divisions, ideological conflicts, and Cold War geopolitics further complicated the political landscape, reinforcing KANU's dominance and setting the stage for multiparty struggles decades later.

The Consolidation of the One-Party State (1970–1982)

The 1970s marked intensified political repression in Kenya under Presidents Jomo Kenyatta and Daniel arap Moi. While retaining a façade of pluralism, the regime consolidated Kenya African National Union (KANU) dominance through detention, intimidation, and surveillance (Throup & Hornsby, 1998; Barkan, 1992). Political activists like Joseph Martin Shikuku and J.M. Kariuki were frequent targets. Archival evidence indicates this period was pivotal in Kenya's shift to authoritarianism, culminating in a de jure one-party state in 1982 (Ogot, 2000). Detention without trial became a common tactic. Hansard records show Shikuku was detained in 1975 after declaring in Parliament that KANU was "killing democracy" (Republic of Kenya, 1975). Bildad Kaggia endured persistent harassment for condemning corruption (Ogot, 2000). After the failed 1982 coup, leaders such as George Anyona, Jean Marie Seroney, Chelagat Mutai, and Raila Odinga were detained without trial (Mutua, 2008). Former Zambian President Kenneth Kaunda noted that Shikuku "dared to speak against the government" and was detained for it (Kaunda, 1982).

Although Moi initially projected a conciliatory image, his administration quickly mirrored Kenyatta's repressive style (Branch, 2011). In 1980, George Anyona was arrested for attempting to form an opposition party with Jaramogi Oginga Odinga. After the 1982 coup



attempt, the state targeted dissidents in universities and civil society, detaining figures like Raila Odinga and Willy Mutunga. According to Calson Atenya, the government regarded opposition leaders as “enemies of the state,” making open criticism dangerous. By the late 1970s, KANU was indistinguishable from the government, and dissent was criminalized. The 1982 constitutional amendment (Section 2A) officially declared Kenya a one-party state (Republic of Kenya, 1982). Peter O., emphasized that any political opposition thereafter was considered treasonous (Peter, O., Oral Interview in Bungoma, on 1st March, 2025). Newton, K. noted that this eradicated political competition and reduced democratic space to near-zero (Newton, K., Oral Interview in Kakamega, on 5th July, 2025). Parliament became a rubber stamp, the civil service and judiciary were politicized, and the press faced censorship (Throup & Hornsby, 1998). Patronage networks flourished, while academics and journalists critical of the regime were silenced or exiled. From a pluralist theory perspective (Dahl, 1971), the suppression of opposition eroded democratic institutions and accountability. Scholars argue that the centralization of power during this era fostered corruption, human rights abuses, and civic decay (Mutua, 2008; Berman & Lonsdale, 1992). These conditions later fueled pro-democracy movements, leading to the repeal of Section 2A in 1991.

The Second Liberation and Reintroduction of Multiparty Democracy in Kenya (1982–1991)

The 1982 constitutional amendment declaring Kenya a de jure one-party state marked a turning point in its political history. President Daniel arap Moi and KANU loyalists defended it as vital for national unity after the failed August 1982 coup, warning that multipartyism would deepen ethnic divisions (Throup & Hornsby, 1998). Opposition leaders, including Martin Shikuku, Jaramogi Oginga Odinga, George Anyona, and Raila Odinga, condemned the amendment as entrenching authoritarianism and stifling citizen participation (Widner, 1992). The state responded with repression—Anyona and Jaramogi were arrested for attempting to form the Kenya African Socialist Alliance (KASA), Raila was detained over alleged coup links, and Shikuku faced persistent harassment (Throup & Hornsby, 1998). Underground groups like Mwakenya continued mobilizing despite detentions without trial (Republic of Kenya, 1985). Lwali O., recalled the detention of Koigi wa Wamwere and Chelagat Mutai for defying KANU (Lwali, O., oral interview, May 15, 2025).

Economic decline compounded dissent. Inflation exceeded 20% by the mid-1980s, external debt rose from KSh 43 billion in 1980 to over KSh 200 billion by 1991, and Structural Adjustment Programs worsened unemployment and weakened public services (World Bank, 1991). According to Suleiman K., donor conditionalities increasingly linked aid to democratic reforms (Suleiman, K., Oral Interview, June 4, 2024). Civil society, churches, and student groups amplified calls for change. Leaders like Bishop Ndingi Mwana a’Nzeki and student activists such as Titus Adungosi and Wafula Buke faced arrests for anti-regime activism (F. Mwale, oral interview, June 10, 2025). The Saba Saba protests of July 7, 1990—led by Kenneth Matiba, James Orengo, Charles Rubia, and Shikuku—were violently suppressed but exposed the regime’s fragility (F. Mwale, oral interview, June 10, 2025).

Under growing internal and external pressure, the government repealed Section 2A in December 1991, restoring multiparty democracy (Republic of Kenya, 1991). Newton O., described this as a reluctant but inevitable concession (Newton, O., Oral Interview, May 2024). This shift reflected Pluralist Theory’s emphasis on governance through competition among interest groups (Mutua, 2008). However, as Mutua noted, entrenched patronage systems persisted. Kenya’s reforms paralleled regional trends, with Zambia, Malawi, Tanzania, and post-apartheid South Africa embracing multipartyism in the early 1990s (Shivji, 1989). These transitions signaled a continental wave toward political liberalization.

The Multiparty Era and Political Liberalization (1992–2002)

The repeal of Section 2A in 1991 ushered in multiparty politics. Martin Shikuku joined the Forum for the Restoration of Democracy (FORD), initially uniting leaders like Jaramogi Oginga Odinga, Kenneth Matiba, and Masinde Muliro (Widner, 1992). Internal rivalries split the coalition into FORD-Asili, co-led by Matiba and Shikuku, and FORD-Kenya under Jaramogi (Throup & Hornsby, 1998). Shikuku’s populist style—symbolized by his “ugali at State House” gesture—resonated with the public (F. Mwale, Oral Interview, June 10, 2025).



In the 1992 elections, opposition disunity allowed Moi to win with 36.4% of the vote against Matiba's 26% (Republic of Kenya, 1992). Shikuku disputed the results, citing voter intimidation and defections to KANU (H. Mukolwe, Oral interview, May 21, 2024). Archival and media evidence indicates the regime exploited divisions through state operatives and fomented ethnic clashes in opposition strongholds (Daily Nation, 1992; The Weekly Review, 1992). Despite political setbacks and the weakening of FORD-Asili, Shikuku remained a vocal advocate for electoral integrity and constitutional reform, warning against replacing "one dictatorship with another" (H. Mukolwe, Oral Interview, May 21, 2024). The 1997 elections repeated the pattern of opposition fragmentation, enabling Moi's reelection amid widespread irregularities (Republic of Kenya, 1997; B. Mukolwe, Oral interview, August 10, 2024). The 1990s revealed the limits of Kenya's democratic transition: multipartyism expanded political space but did not end elite cooptation, ethnicized politics, or weak institutions (Mutua, 2008). Figures like Shikuku embodied the persistence of grassroots activism in the face of systemic resistance.

The Democratic Transition and Constitutional Reforms (2002–2010)

The 2002 general elections ended nearly four decades of KANU dominance, ushering in the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) led by Mwai Kibaki. This peaceful multiparty transition was hailed as a democratic milestone. Although less active politically, Martin Shikuku remained a respected elder, welcoming the change but warning against "replacing one dictatorship with another" (Shikuku, 2003). He continued critiquing corruption and elite bargains, emphasizing the need for ethical governance. NARC promised sweeping constitutional reforms to reduce executive power. Initially pursued, these reforms soon faced internal divisions, with Raila Odinga and allies accusing Kibaki of renegeing on an MoU for a parliamentary system (Kenya National Archives, 2005). The 2005 constitutional referendum saw rejection of the draft supported by the pro-government "Banana" camp in favor of the opposition "Orange" team. Shikuku criticized the draft for preserving excessive presidential powers, calling it "a clever way of legitimizing executive authoritarianism" (Shikuku, 2005). He aligned with the Orange movement as a moral voice defending constitutionalism.

Despite tensions, the post-2002 era expanded democratic space with a stronger civil society and media, though corruption and patronage persisted (Lusweti, 2024). The 2007 elections highlighted both democratic progress and peril. Disputed results triggered ethnic violence causing over 1,000 deaths and mass displacement (Kenya Human Rights Commission, 2008). Geoffrey Angima noted democracy had become "a matter of life and death" due to ethnic politicization (Angima, 2025). International mediation led to the 2008 National Accord establishing a power-sharing Grand Coalition Government, a temporary fix that failed to address deep institutional problems (Mutonyi, 2010). The post-2007 crisis accelerated constitutional reform, culminating in the 2010 Constitution, which introduced devolution, curtailed presidential powers, and strengthened judiciary and electoral bodies (CKRC, 2010). Though less politically active, Shikuku praised these reforms as "the fruit of decades of struggle" but warned against superficial implementation that would allow "the same old impunity" (Shikuku, 2010). Grace Mutonyi highlighted ongoing ethnic and elite challenges to democratization (Mutonyi, 2025). Pluralist Theory underscores democracy's reliance on competing interest groups. This era showed how civil society, opposition, and international actors pushed reform, yet elite interests and identity politics limited consolidation. The 2002–2010 period marked a critical democratic transition in Kenya, with Shikuku's enduring advocacy cementing his role as a democratic watchdog.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

This study has examined the evolution of political pluralism in Kenya since 1960, using Joseph Martin Shikuku as a central figure of analysis. The findings reveal that political pluralism in Kenya has been a contested and uneven process, shaped by colonial legacies, state repression, internal resistance, and grassroots mobilization. Shikuku's unwavering advocacy for multiparty democracy—despite detentions, marginalization, and threats—reflects the resilience of pluralist ideals in Kenya's political history. From the early post-independence period marked by forced mergers and authoritarian consolidation, to the restoration of multipartyism in the 1990s and constitutional reforms in 2010, the path has been defined by citizen struggles for accountability and inclusion. Despite advances, pluralism remains fragile, often threatened by ethnic polarization, weak institutions, and elite co-optation. The study concludes that



while formal multipartyism has been achieved, substantive political pluralism—based on tolerance, participation, and institutional independence—requires continued vigilance and civic engagement.

Recommendation

Based on the findings, this study makes the following key recommendations. First, civic education should be enhanced to promote a culture of tolerance, democratic participation, and respect for diverse political views, especially among youth. Second, constitutional safeguards on multipartyism, civil liberties, and electoral integrity should be strengthened through continuous legal reforms and independent oversight. Third, political parties should be compelled to democratize internally, reduce ethnic patronage, and advance issue-based politics. Additionally, the contributions of political pioneers like Joseph Martin Shikuku should be formally acknowledged in national history curricula to inspire democratic values in future generations. Media, academia, and civil society should work collaboratively to protect spaces for dissent, promote fact-based political discourse, and hold leaders accountable. Lastly, research on political pluralism should continue, especially with a focus on underrepresented voices such as women, youth, and minority communities, whose inclusion is vital to achieving sustainable democratic governance in Kenya.

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