

# Change and Continuity in Youth Political Mobilization in Tharaka North Sub-County, Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya, 1991 -2022

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## ABSTRACT

Kenyan youth have remained central to electoral and political mobilization. Since the return of multi-party politics in 1991, they have formed a key constituency actively engaged by politicians during electoral cycles. The background to this study lies in the growing concern over how political actors continuously mobilize youth, often without long-term benefits for the youth themselves. This study examined continuity and change in youth political mobilization in Tharaka North Sub-County, Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya between 1991 and 2022, with the aim of understanding how youth participation has evolved and the factors influencing this trajectory. This study took the form of an exploratory research design and employed both primary and secondary data to accomplish its goals. The respondents for the field interviews were selected using stratified random and purposive sampling approaches. Stratified random sampling was used to select 90 respondents who comprised of ordinary youth residing in Tharaka North-Sub-County in the period under study. This was backed up by purposive sampling technique which was used to select 10 lead respondents, mostly youth leaders and elders. Research instruments used included questionnaires and interview schedules with open-ended questions. Qualitative methods of data analysis and interpretation were used. Key findings revealed that while youth have always been politically active, the nature of their mobilization has shifted from ideology-driven participation to transactional engagement. Anchored on the theory of patron-client relationship, the study argued that the political class take advantage of the desperate situation of the youth to promise goodies if propelled to positions of power. The study concludes that youth agency is compromised and recommends empowerment through civic education and sustainable economic opportunities.

**Keywords:** Continuity, Change Youth; Political Mobilization

## INTRODUCTION

The political engagement of the youth has been studied by academics globally. Sloan (2018) criticizes the growing lack of interest among young people in politics in the United Kingdom. In the US Dycke-Norris (2008) laments of voter apathy among the young people in the 2008 Presidential elections. The same trend is recorded by Kunduri (2017) who observes of increased interest in political matters by the youth in India. This is supported by Garalyte (2016) who records increased political mobilization of young people through student movements in India. Young people are visible in the political activities of both the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Congress Socialist Party (CSP).

According to Onodera et al. (2018) young people have often challenged political establishments in the Middle East and North African countries which are predominately Muslim. Youth political mobilization in Africa can be directly linked to colonial liberation movements, claims Clapham (2006). Nationalist leaders frequently included disgruntled youth in their fight for independence. Young people served as a source of legitimacy for post-colonial administrations (Resnick and Casale, 2011).

Afolayan (2018), documents that young people have historically been instrumental in instigating political changes in Nigeria. The scholar laments that despite this, young people still have to deal with prejudice, unemployment, poverty, and other issues. These obstacles have hindered youth political engagement, turning them into passive political observers at the mercy of the political class. According to Roessler (2005) both the

genocidal Interahamwe in Rwanda and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone were founded by disillusioned and unemployed youth.

Bayne et al (2009) argue that the youth in Kenya were actively mobilized to commit atrocities in the 2008 post-election violence. Nyanchoti (2015) undertakes an evaluation of political mobilization strategies employed by vigilante groups in Kisii County during the 2013 general elections in Kenya. The author stresses the importance of the youth in mobilizing votes for politicians in electoral contests. The same is supported by Kanyinga (2014) who observes that the youth in central Kenya were very instrumental in voter mobilization in the 2013 general elections.

Despite the numerical strength and historical significance of youth in political activities, young people in Kenya tend to be invisible in political affairs. In spite of the existence of literature on youth political participation in Kenya no attempt has been made to examine youth political mobilization in Tharaka North sub-County, Tharaka Nithi County. It is against this background that this study analyzes change and continuity in youth political mobilization in Tharaka North Sub-County between 191 and 2022.

### **Statement of the Problem**

In Kenya different social groups participate in politics in one way or the other. There has however been a tendency by scholars to concentrate efforts in studying the role of social cleavages such as gender, ethnicity and religion in Kenya. Consequently, the impact of generational identities on the political process has received relatively little attention compared to other social cleavages. Young people in Kenya make up more than 60% of the population. Youth political mobilization in Kenya has not been adequately addressed in spite of their numerical advantage and historical significance. Most significant is that the changes that have occurred in youth political mobilization over time have been given minimal scholarly attention. The political class in Kenya has frequently used the youth as a tool to gain political support. The youth in Kenya continue to be marginalized in local and national politics. It is against this background that this article examined change and continuity in youth political mobilization in Tharaka North-Sub-County, Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya between 1991 and 2022.

### **Specific Objective**

This study undertakes a historical examination of trends in youth political mobilization in Tharaka North-Sub-County, Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya between 1991 and 2022.

## **REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

The democratization wave of the late 20th century led to the transition from single-party regimes to multiparty democracies across Africa. Scholars like Huntington (1991) and Bratton & Van de Walle (1997) link this shift to global democratic trends and pressures from the emerging neoliberal order. Youth played a central role in resisting authoritarianism, while party pluralism came to symbolize good governance (Maina et al., 1990; Kanyinga, 2003). Countries like Zambia, Tanzania, and Kenya reformed their constitutions in the early 1990s to allow multiparty politics, reflecting both internal demands and international influence (Kabemba & Eiseman, 2004; Nyirabu; Mbai, 2003). The reintroduction of multiparty politics in Africa brought major political transformations, including the legalization of opposition parties, enhanced political freedoms, open political mobilization, and press freedom. These changes significantly influenced youth political engagement across the continent.

In Ghana, youth mobilization surged following the end of President Rawlings' one-party rule (Kalyango & Adu-Kumi, 2012). In Zambia, the return to multiparty democracy sparked a vibrant youth movement that actively participated in the 1991 elections, contributing to the defeat of President Kaunda by Fredrick Chiluba (Kabemba & Eiseman, 2004). Similarly, in Tanzania, youth were active in political campaigns after the political reforms (Nyirabu). In Kenya, multipartyism heightened youth political awareness and participation. Youth were heavily involved in both ruling party and opposition campaigns and were direct participants in the 1992 general elections (Mbai, 2003; Kanyinga, 2003).

The return of multi-party politics in Kenya led to the formation and registration of numerous political parties (Apollos, 2001). Most of the supporters of the new political parties were urban-dwelling young people who desired political reforms. However political mobilization of the youth during this period revolved around ethnicity as opposed to generational politics (Kimenyi and Ndung'u 2005). Kenyan youth flocked to the streets to demand change in response to the erosion of human rights and mounting unemployment. As a result, youth political participation in Kenya grew in numbers and magnitude.

The return to competitive politics in Kenya did not translate to regime change in Kenya as President Daniel Moi and the ruling party KANU defeated a divided opposition to remain on power in the December 1992 General elections. The in the subsequent 1997 General elections Moi again defeated a divide opposition. Throup and Hornsby (1998) observed that the transition from one-party system to multi-party system did not bring about the expected significant change. The political landscape did not change significantly besides opening of political space. In most African countries, this did not result in real regime change. For them, it represented a continuity rather than discontinuity. There were no significant changes in political activity in Africa.

This raises the question as to whether the re-introduction of multiparty politics increased youth political mobilization. This study interrogated the relationship between competitive politics and youth political mobilization. The question as to whether the re-introduction of multi-party politics represented continuity rather than a discontinuity in youth political mobilization was addressed.

Murunga and Nasong'o (2006) document on the new political dawn occasioned by the end of the over four decades of KANU rule in Kenya. They note that the end of Moi and the KANU era was greeted with a lot of positive expectations by a majority of Kenyans. To many this was the Kenya's third liberation. When Mwai Kibaki transcended to power Kenyans expected a lot of positive changes as the NARC, government was very popular. According to Oloo (2005) the period begging 2003 in Kenya marked a new chapter in party politics in Kenya. Kenya was governed for the first time since independence by a new political party. The election results produced euphoria and a sense of national unity unlike any prior election. The youth in Kenya played a leading role in the so called third liberation. This was demonstrated by the large youth turn out in the 2002 elections. The post-Moi era in Kenya gave the youth an opportunity to mobilize and participate in local and national politics. Mwai Kibaki was eventually declared the winner in the subsequent elections giving hope to the youthful voters that change had finally come.

Kagwanja (2010), documents on the roles played by the youth in the 2007 general elections and the post-elections violence of 2008 in Kenya. He concludes that the youth in Kenya were mobilized by the political elite to engage in acts of violence. This brings into question why the youth in Kenya have remained objects of mobilization by the ruling elite. In the same vein Bosire (2012) documents of preference by politicians to involve the youth in political campaigns in the 2007 general elections. He mentions well-funded and politically connected youth groups such as *Waremba na Kibaki*.

In the 2007 post-election violence, Kenyan youth were criticized for their part in the politically motivated and election-related ethnic clashes. They were also criticized for acting violently as ethnic warriors. However, what receives less attention is the fact that the youth although criticized, continue to be the majority of casualties and victims. It cannot be denied that a majority of those who lost their lives and suffered displacements were women, children and young people. The prevalence of electoral violence in Kenya has been acknowledged by numerous scholars. However, little is known about the nature and scope of youth involvement in electoral violence beyond the observation that youth are almost always the one social group that is most visibly involved and used to penetrate and spread violence (HRW, 2008).

Odhiambo (2010) argues that Kibaki's government failed to incorporate youth in his administration. Youth who actively held demonstrations, campaigns and protest to get Kibaki into government were agitated as they did not get a fair share for their effort. Instead Kibaki gave lucrative positions to old and retired personalities majorly hard core and business tycoons from Kikuyu, Embu, Meru elites and tribes that were politically regarded as GEMA from Central Kenya. The study found out that Kibakis administration rewarded old personalities from GEMA with lucrative positions in government but the current study focused on how the

youth in Tharaka North Sub-County have been sidelined by the government from post-colonial period, moreover the study investigated and documented how the youth continued to suffer during the time of multiparty state in Tharaka North Sub-County.

In the 2013 General elections in Kenya saw one of the biggest youth mobilization shows by the political class. This trend was a continuation of youth mobilization during the Kibaki era. Kanyinga (2015) opines that the 2013 general elections pitted the old generation against the young generation in reference to the contest between Raila Odinga's CORD and Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto's Jubilee Coalition. The implication was that the youthful politicians triumphed over the old generation. This trend continued in the subsequent elections of 2017. It was interesting to see how the youth in Kenya in general and Tharaka North-Sub-County in specific have continued to be mobilized in the upcoming 2022 general election.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study was anchored on the patron-client theoretical framework.. According to Sandbrook (1972), patron-client systems involve powerful individuals maintaining loyalty through personal, transactional relationships with subordinates. In return for loyalty and services such as votes, labor, and political allegiance, clients receive protection, access to resources, and opportunities. Bayart (1985) expands this idea with the concept of the "politics of the belly," where political elites exchange goods and services for public support. This clientelism can be coercive or voluntary, and it often involves vote-buying or conditional access to state resources. Clientelism is widespread in modern democracies and thrives in contexts marked by poverty, inequality, and weak formal institutions (Kettering, 1988; Migdal, 1988). It becomes a form of survival politics where both patrons and clients depend on mutual exchanges. In Africa's "winner-takes-all" electoral systems, youth—due to their energy, numbers, and socio-economic vulnerability—are frequently mobilized by political elites. This turns the youth into a "standing army" of political actors in exchange for short-term material benefits or promises of inclusion.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This study was qualitative in nature using the explanatory research design to examine trends in youth political mobilization in Tharaka North Sub-County, Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya between 1895 and 2022. Both primary and secondary sources of data were employed by the study. The main instruments of data collection were interview guides with open ended questions. Target population was the youth in Tharaka North sub-County. This included ordinary youth, youth leaders and youthful politicians. Primary data was collected through one-on-one interview with informants. Published books, journal articles, government records and archival materials formed the bulk of secondary data.

### **Change and Continuity in Youth Political Mobilization in Tharaka North Sub-County, 1991-2022**

#### **Youth Political Mobilization Tharaka North Sub-County in the Multiparty Era, 1991- 2002**

This study examined the rise in youth political mobilization in the advent of the re-introduction of party pluralism in Tharaka North sub-County. This study noted that the main political parties in competition for political power in the larger Meru region included the ruling party KANU and the two opposition parties DPK and FORD-A led by Mwai Kibaki and Kenneth Matiba respectively. According to Nyamu the ruling party KANU had an upper hand in comparison to the two opposition parties in Tharaka North sub-County. This he attributed to patronage and use of state resources to buy political support in the region. The respondent adds that in as much as the old generation strongly supported the ruling party KANU, most of the youth in the region identified with the opposition party DPK (O.I. Nyamu, Kathuana, 4<sup>th</sup> May, 2023). This is echoed by Wawira who notes that;

*"The old generation who preferred a status quo was easily bribed by goodies such as foodstuffs and cheap money to support and vote for the ruling party KANU. In contrast, most young people from the region openly showed support for the opposition party DPK led by Mwai Kibaki. They did this despite the fact that DPK did*



*not use a lot of oney in its campaigns as compared to the ruling party KANU. This was a clear indication that young people wanted change” (Wawira, O.I. Gatue, May 21<sup>st</sup> 2023)*

The reintroduction of multiparty politics in Africa brought major democratic reforms, such as the legalization of rival parties, expansion of political rights, and freedom of the press. These changes significantly boosted youth political mobilization across the continent. In Ghana, youth engagement surged after the end of Jerry Rawlings’ one-party rule (Kalyango & Adu-Kumi, 2012). Similarly, Zambia experienced a vibrant youth political movement that played a key role in the 1991 elections, leading to the defeat of President Kaunda (Kabemba & Eiseman, 2004). In Tanzania, youth actively participated in campaigns following democratic reforms (Nyirabu). In Kenya, the return of multiparty politics heightened youth political awareness and involvement, with many taking part in campaigns and voting during the 1992 general elections (Mbai, 2003; Kanyinga, 2003). This study examined the significant changes brought about by the return to multiparty politics on youth political mobilization. Ngugi noted of that;

*“The widening political space gave the youth an opportunity to mobilize and assert their influence in the politics of the region. Prior to this the youth in Tharaka North sub-County had limited opportunities in terms of access and participation in politics. The respondent added that in the single party state the only platform for recruitment to politics was through the ruling party KANU which was dominated by old politicians. In this case the old politicians were the ones who decided the extent to which young people could participate in politics”(Ngugi, O.I. Gikingo, 6<sup>th</sup> May, 2023)*

The emergence of a democratic environment in the country served as an impetus for the youth in Tharaka North to engage actively in political activities. The quantity of young candidates in the 1992 general elections, both for parliamentary and civic roles, saw a notable rise. This was corroborated by Richard Mutegi, who asserted that he had run for a civic seat in the now-defunct Chuka Municipality under the opposition party DPK during the 1992 general elections. Mutegi remarked that despite his defeat, he demonstrated that young individuals could participate in politics (Mutegi, O.I. Maragwa, 14th May 2023).

This study indicated that Mutegi was not the sole young candidate in the parliamentary and civic elections of 1997. Mwenda Murungi, a former politician, confirmed that in the 1992 general election, the DPK presented 26 youthful civic candidates throughout the broader Meru region, with 2 contesting in what is now known as Tharaka North sub-County (Mwenda Murungi, O.I. Kathagachini, 18th May 2023). From this information, it is evident that the number of young politicians vying for political positions increased during the 1992 general elections. This supports the assertion that the reintroduction of party pluralism in Kenya positively influenced youth political mobilization. As a result, the youth in Tharaka enhanced their political engagement. Although there was a rise in the number of young individuals running for political positions, the majority of them were candidates for civic roles rather than parliamentary seats.

Field interviews revealed that most youth aspiring for political office in Tharaka North sub-County were supported by opposition parties rather than the ruling KANU, highlighting the continued dominance of older, conservative politicians within KANU. This raises doubts about the extent to which the return of multiparty politics transformed Kenya's political landscape. Scholars like Throup and Hornsby (1998) argue that despite the expansion of political space, the transition failed to bring significant change. Murunga and Nasong’o (2006) similarly contend that the nature of political practice in Africa remained largely unchanged. Consequently, this study explores the extent to which competitive multiparty politics has influenced youth political mobilization in Kenya. The question as to whether the re-introduction of multi-party politics represented continuity rather than a discontinuity in youth political mobilization was addressed. Murage notes that;

*“There was no substantial change in the manner in which the youth mobilized in politics. What were witnessed were the same strategies used. The emerging opposition parties which claimed to be fighting for reforms were not different from the ruling party KANU. This was witnessed in the way in which they conducted their nomination processes which were marred by violence and other irregularities. The emerging opposition parties in the same way as KANU gave the young people a raw deal. Getting a nomination slot in the major parties in Tharaka North depended on the wealth status of the candidate and connection to the party*

*leadership which gave old politicians an advantage over the young and poor politicians” (Murage ,O.I. Kathagachini 26<sup>th</sup> May 2023)*

In representative democracies recruitment to political positions is through political parties. Such a party-centric leadership recruitment system worked against young people in Tharaka North sub-County. This is due to the fact that such political parties are dominated and controlled by old men who also have the advantage of controlling substantial wealth. Party primaries therefore became the biggest barriers to young people ascendency to political office.

### **Youth Political Mobilization in Tharaka North in the post-KANU Era 2003- 2013**

The end of President Daniel Moi's era and the fall of KANU in 2002 marked a pivotal shift in Kenya's political landscape. Under Moi, youth political participation remained minimal, with young people largely used as vote mobilizers for older male politicians. Moi's selection of the youthful Uhuru Kenyatta as his successor sparked internal rebellion within KANU, leading to the formation of the opposition National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) under Mwai Kibaki. NARC's victory in the 2002 general elections ended KANU's nearly 40-year rule and signaled Kenya's first true post-multiparty political transition.

This period offered new opportunities for youth mobilization. The 2002 elections, dubbed Kenya's "Third Liberation," saw unprecedented youth engagement, both as voters and active participants in political campaigns. According to Ndegwa (2003) and Murunga & Nasong'o (2006), the transition ushered in a hopeful era marked by high public expectations and national unity. The youth played a significant role in this political shift, viewing Kibaki's victory as a symbol of long-awaited change and renewed political inclusion.

This study examined youth political mobilization in Tharaka North sub-County during the 2002 general elections. It was noted that the dormant political parties in Tharaka sub-County during the 2002 general election were the ruling party KANU and NARC. It was noted that both parties opened their doors to youthful politicians in both civic and parliamentary elections. Nkatha supports this by arguing that;

*“There was a substantial increase in the number of young people going for elective posts in both parties. Comparatively NARC had a higher number of young people than KANU aspiring for political positions in Tharaka North. Even more NARC had a strong presence in the area as compared to KANU. Most of the youth in the region were seen to be identifying more with NARC than KANU. This could be attributed to the revolutionary promises made by NARC. This was reflected in the final outcome of the 2002 general elections in which NARC carried the day in the region” (Nkatha, O.I. Gatue 31<sup>st</sup> May 2023)*

This study observed that there was active youth mobilization by both political parties in Tharaka north sub-County in the run up to the 2002 general elections. The youth were very vibrant in mobilizing votes for individual politicians and attending rallies. The youth was also in many cases hired by the political elite to unleash terror on opponents. The pattern of employing young people in violence still existed even in the sunset days of KANU. However, the outcome of the 2002 general elections did not reflect much on a significant increase in youth political representation. Overall youth political mobilization remained low. In Tharaka North sub-County young people spectated as old male politicians tightened their hold on political power as they continued to marginalize and exploit them. The belief that young men were still not ripe for leadership positions seemed to hold. Subsequently, the youth continued to be marginalized in political participation (Kiura,O.I. Kathagachini 14<sup>th</sup> May 2023).

Within less than six months of President Mwai Kibaki's regime cracks began to emerge in NARC. NARC captained on a platform of ending corruption that was mostly associated with KANU, enacting a people driven constitution, ending ethnicity and nepotism in government appointments and creating a free and democratic society (Daily Nation, November 22<sup>nd</sup> , 2002). Most important of these promises was the enactment of a new constitution as the fulfillment of the other promises was highly depended on this. The memorandum of understanding (MOU) which was to be honored through expansion of the executive to accommodate summit members through the creation of new positions such as the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister could only be possible through enacting the constitution (Wanyande, 2006).

The decisive factor in the disintegration of the NARC government was its failure to enact a people driven constitution in 100 days as promised. The ability of NARC to stand as strong coalition was tested with the 2005 Constitutional referendum. Voting in the November 2005 referendum was pegged on voting YES represented by the symbol of the banana and NO represented by the symbol of an orange. The YES side was championed by the government while the NO side was supported by the opposition. The government side lost the referendum to the opposition leading to the final disintegration of the coalition.

The youth in Tharaka actively mobilized in the November 2005 constitutional campaigns. Youth political mobilization mostly revolved around the NARC faction of government considering that region was the stronghold of the then President Mwai Kibaki. This did not however mean that they were no opposition supporters in the region. Muturi recalls of how they could wake up every day to campaign for the constitution to go through. We were paid an allowance for what we did throughout the campaign period. The provincial administration through the local chiefs was instructed to ensure that the government project carried the day. Senior politicians mobilized young people to campaign, attend meetings and vote for the 2005 constitution. The sad thing is that the government side lost the vote (Muturi, O.I.Maragwa 14<sup>th</sup> May 2023).

Following the 2005 referendum defeat, President Mwai Kibaki reshuffled his Cabinet, removing dissenting ministers and setting the stage for the formation of the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) by the opposition. The 2007 general elections, contested between Kibaki's PNU and Raila Odinga's ODM, saw intense youth mobilization on both sides. Politicians actively engaged youth groups such as *Waremba na Kibaki* and ODM-aligned youth in campaign efforts (Bosire, 2012). However, the elections triggered widespread post-election violence that nearly escalated into civil war, prompting AU-mediated intervention led by Kofi Annan.

Scholars like Bosire (2012) and Kagwanja (2010) note that youth were central to both campaign mobilization and the ensuing violence, often used by politicians to attack opponents and intimidate communities. While youth have often been blamed for election-related violence as "ethnic warriors," they have also been the primary victims—suffering disproportionately in terms of injuries, deaths, and long-term trauma. The role played by the youth in Tharaka in the 2007 general elections and the violence that followed was investigated by this study. Kagwira had the following to say;

*“In the entire Tharaka North the campaigns and voting during the 2007 was generally peaceful. There were few incidences of skirmishes between rival candidates on allegations of vote rigging. In the post-election violence that followed the region remained peaceful as other parts of the country erupted in violence. This could be attributed to the peaceful nature of the Tharaka people”.* (Kairuthi, O.I. Gikingo, 15<sup>th</sup> May 2023).

During the 2007 post-election violence in Kenya, youth were heavily criticized for their role in ethnic and politically driven clashes, often portrayed as violent ethnic warriors. However, less attention has been given to the fact that youth, alongside women and children were also the main victims—suffering the majority of casualties and displacements. While electoral violence is widely acknowledged in Kenyan scholarship, the specific nature and scope of youth involvement remain underexplored, despite their visible presence.

Odhiambo (2010) argues that the Kibaki administration failed to meaningfully include youth in governance, despite their significant role in campaign mobilization and protests. Instead, political appointments favored elderly elites, particularly from the Kikuyu, Embu, and Meru communities (GEMA), causing disillusionment among the youth who had hoped for greater representation and rewards.

### **Emerging Trends in Youth political Mobilization in Tharaka North sub-County, 2013- 2022**

The enactment of Kenya's 2010 Constitution marked a turning point in the country's political development, aimed at preventing a repeat of the 2007 post-election violence. Backed by 67% of voters, the new constitution promised greater inclusivity, equity, and youth participation in governance. It introduced provisions for nominated seats, prohibited age-based discrimination, and devolved power through the creation of 47 counties, including Tharaka County. These reforms raised hopes among the youth for increased political representation and participation.

Despite these reforms, youth involvement in electoral processes continued to be shaped by violence and political manipulation. Scholars such as Maringira and Gukurume (2020) highlight how youth in Zimbabwe were mobilized by ZANU-PF through patronage networks to carry out political violence. Similarly, Raleigh (2016) notes that in many African democracies, militia groups—often composed of youth—act as agents of violence, serving elite political interests. Dodez (2021) adds that such groups use violence either to enforce or challenge regime agendas, revealing how youth continue to be instrumentalized in broader power struggles across the continent.

Election periods in many African countries are often marked by intense political mobilization and violence. Turnbull (2021) highlights how gubernatorial elections in Nigeria are highly contested, with politicians using state patronage and recruiting social movement figures to incite violence. In Ghana, Bekoe (2012) and Lindberg (2006) link electoral violence to vigilante youth groups affiliated with political parties.

In Kenya, the use of politically connected militias has been a key feature of election-related violence. Scholars such as Mwangi (2008), Maribie (2010), and Anderson (2002) document the roles of groups like the Mungiki, Taliban, Kamjesh, and Chinkororo in spreading violence, especially in urban informal settlements and regions like Kisii and Likoni. Kagwanja (2003) argues that political manipulation transformed Mungiki from a moral movement into an ethnically charged political militia.

Despite this history, the 2013 general elections in Kenya saw high levels of youth mobilization without widespread violence, unlike 2007. According to Kanyinga (2015), the 2013 elections symbolized a generational contest between older leaders and youthful politicians like Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto, a trend that continued in the 2017 and 2022 elections.

According to Alex Mugendi the 2013 general elections in Kenya presented the youthful population from Tharaka North with the opportunity to contest political seats and especially the newly created position of Member of County Assembly (MCA) that replaced the civic councilors. More and more young people developed interests in vying for political positions. In Tharaka north he noted, there were a total of 18 young men who contested in The Party of National Unity (TNA) nominations. Out of these two young men were able to be elected as MCAs (O.I. Kaberia, , Gatue, 18<sup>th</sup> May, 2023). Kamunda adds that;

*“Although the youth had the opportunity to vie for political positions there were obstacles that stood in their way. To begin with was lack of funds; two was the perception that the youth glorified violence. Third was that the major political parties in the general elections were controlled by old politicians. These worked against young people vying for political positions in Tharaka North” (Kamunda , O.I. Kathagachini, June 25<sup>th</sup> 2023)*

The same trend was observed in the 2017 and the 2022 general elections where the youth continued to be used by senior politicians to mobilize votes for them.

## CONCLUSION

In Tharaka North, the late 1980s marked the beginning of a wave of democratic reforms, largely driven by internal demands for increased political space and the global shift following the end of the Cold War. Reform movements across the country focused on the reintroduction of multiparty politics and elections grounded in democratic principles. The youth in Tharaka North played a crucial role in these struggles, actively participating in efforts to dismantle single-party regimes. The resulting wave of democratization in the early 1990s led to the widespread adoption of multiparty system in Kenya.

The shift to multiparty democracy significantly reshaped youth political mobilization in Kenya. Subsequently the youth became central actors in pushing for change, participating in protests and civil society movements against single-party regimes. Young leaders, particularly within professional bodies like the Law Society of Kenya, were vocal in demanding reforms. As active participants in the democratic transition, youth also emerged as key beneficiaries of the expanded political space. In Kenya the return to competitive party politics led to the formation of a number of opposition political parties. The main support base for the newly formed opposition parties were young urban dwellers across the country. Young people joined the opposition ranks for



desired change. Kenyan youth flocked to the streets to demand change in response to the erosion of human rights and mounting unemployment. As a result, youth political participation in Kenya grew in numbers and magnitude.

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