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## THE EVOLUTION OF LOCAL ADMINISTRATION IN KENYA

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### Abstract

This study provides a comprehensive historical and political analysis of the evolution of local government in Kenya from pre-colonial times to the present day. Kenya's local government has faced various challenges throughout its journey, including the impact of colonialism, changes in the post-independence era and current devolution exercises. The current system in Kenya has been shaped by significant institutional and policy frameworks imposed by the British administration during the colonial era. Post-independence reforms aimed to achieve greater autonomy and local governance but have met with varying degrees of success and difficulty in achieving their objectives. Local governance and politics in Kenya are intertwined, with the former exerting a significant influence on the political climate at both local and national levels. This study examines the potential for future reform of local government in Kenya. It analyses the actors involved and the challenges they face. It aims to provide a thorough understanding of the historical and political factors associated with local administration in Kenya and, through case study analysis and in-depth research, to highlight its importance in the socio-political development of the state.

**Keywords:** *Kenyan Local Administration, Pre-Colonial era, Post-Independence reforms, Decentralisation, Devolution system.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Kenya's history of local administration is a rich tapestry woven through time, reflecting the nation's colonial past, post-independence ambitions, and contemporary efforts to decentralise governance. The dynamics of local administration, with its historical and political underpinnings, have profoundly influenced the country's social and political landscape. As we embark on a journey through Kenya's administrative history, we find ourselves traversing pre-colonial landscapes, colonial legacies, and the ongoing quest for effective governance at the

local level. This article examines the multifaceted history of local administration in Kenya, offering insights into its evolution and its role in shaping Kenya's political destiny.

The historical context of local administration in Kenya is inseparable from its pre-colonial heritage, marked by diverse communities, indigenous governance systems, and unique ways of organising and managing local affairs. The mosaic of pre-colonial Kenya was characterized by a plethora of ethnic groups, each with its governance systems, traditions, and hierarchies (Berman, 1998). These indigenous systems were rooted in customary law, consensus-building, and local leadership, reflecting the historical diversity and complexity of the region. While these systems varied widely, they shared a common thread of community-based governance, which provided the foundation upon which colonial powers would later impose their structures.

The colonial legacy, a pivotal chapter in Kenya's administrative history, significantly changed the nation's governance structures and institutions. The British colonial administration imposed a top-down system of governance with a focus on centralisation and control (Maxon, 1992). During this period, we have witnessed the establishment of administrative units, the introduction of indirect rule, and the appointment of local chiefs and headmen as intermediaries between colonial authorities and indigenous communities. While the colonial system aimed to serve the interests of the colonial power, it left a lasting impact on Kenya's local administration, including the institutionalisation of tribal divisions and hierarchies that persist to this day.

Independence in 1963 marked a turning point in Kenya's history, heralding a new era of self-determination and nation-building. Post-independence governments were tasked with redefining the nation's local administrative structures to align them with the aspirations of a free and democratic Kenya. Reforms sought to distance the nation from the colonial legacy and empower local communities by redefining the role of local administrators and instituting measures for local self-governance. However, reconciling historical legacies with contemporary demands for decentralized governance proved to be a formidable task. As Kenya navigated its post-colonial path, local administration evolved, reflecting the new nation's spirit and the complexities of its historical baggage.

Decentralisation efforts in Kenya have aimed to reconfigure local administration by devolving powers and responsibilities to the local level. This endeavour has been marked by constitutional changes, legislative reforms, and political commitments to empower local authorities. Decentralisation endeavours are pivotal to enhancing local participation, improving service delivery, and fostering local ownership of development initiatives. However, they have also

raised questions about the effectiveness of these reforms and the extent to which they have translated into meaningful local autonomy.

The political dynamics surrounding local administration in Kenya are deeply intertwined with the nation's broader political landscape. Local administrators, including chiefs and local councillors, have played influential roles in shaping local and national politics, often serving as conduits for political mobilisation and influence. The interaction between local administration and political actors has had profound implications for electoral processes, party politics, and governance. Therefore, to understand Kenya's political structure, it is crucial to understand the political dimensions of local governance.

In this study, we embark on a comprehensive exploration of the historical and political dimensions of local administration in Kenya. By delving into the historical context, colonial legacy, post-independence reforms, decentralisation efforts, and the political intricacies surrounding local administration, we seek to provide a holistic understanding of the evolution of local governance in Kenya. Through the analysis of key stakeholders, challenges, and the potential for future reforms, we aim to shed light on the significance of local administration in Kenya's ongoing socio-political development. In doing so, it hopes to contribute to the academic discourse on this vital aspect of Kenyan governance while offering insights to policymakers and the public.

## **2. BRIEF HISTORY OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN KENYA**

The historical context of local administration in Kenya is deeply rooted in the nation's pre-colonial heritage. Before the arrival of colonial powers, the region now known as Kenya was a tapestry of diverse ethnic communities, each with unique governance systems, traditions, and social hierarchies. These indigenous governance systems laid the foundation for the country's subsequent evolution of local administration.

Kenya's pre-colonial era was marked by a mosaic of ethnic groups, including the Kikuyu, Luo, Maasai, Luhya, and many others, each with distinct languages, customs, and ways of organising local affairs. Within these communities, governance structures varied widely, reflecting the diverse geographic and ecological settings in which they were situated. For instance, the

Kikuyu, who predominantly inhabited the Central Highlands, had a well-developed system of councils and age-set divisions, which played a crucial role in decision-making and conflict resolution (Leakey, 1977). In contrast, the Maasai, who roamed the vast expanses of the Great Rift Valley, were organised around a decentralised kinship system that emphasised communal ownership of livestock and resources (Speke, 1863).

Common to many pre-colonial African societies, these indigenous governance systems were characterised by consensus-building, communal ownership, and a close relationship between local leaders and their communities (Mbiti, 1969). Decisions were made collectively, and leaders were often selected based on their wisdom, age, or achievements within the community. These systems reflected the historical diversity and complexity of the region, with local administrators serving as intermediaries between the community and its ancestral traditions.

The arrival of European colonial powers, mainly the British, in the late 19th century disrupted these indigenous systems and introduced a new chapter in Kenya's local administration's history. The colonial administration sought to impose its governance, control, and taxation systems, leading to significant changes in managing local affairs. To facilitate this, the British introduced the "indirect rule" concept, which relied on local chiefs and headmen as intermediaries between colonial authorities and indigenous communities. These appointed chiefs often held considerable power in their respective areas, although their authority was subject to the directives of colonial administrators.

The colonial era brought about the establishment of administrative units, the issuance of identity cards, and the classification of communities into ethnic and tribal categories, which would have enduring consequences for post-independence Kenya (Anderson, 2001). These colonial structures and classifications laid the groundwork for the later development of local administration in independent Kenya, shaping the trajectory of the nation's governance systems.

### **1.1.Colonial Legacy**

The colonial legacy plays a pivotal role in understanding the evolution of local administration in Kenya. The British colonial administration, which ruled Kenya from the late 19th century until independence in 1963, left an indelible mark on the nation's governance structures, local administration systems, and political dynamics—the colonial period profoundly influenced the trajectory of local governance in Kenya, introducing a top-down approach that continues to shape the country's administrative landscape.

One of the critical aspects of the colonial legacy was the British policy of "indirect rule." This approach aimed to govern Kenya by relying on indigenous authorities, particularly chiefs and headmen, as intermediaries between the colonial authorities and local communities. These appointed chiefs were tasked with enforcing colonial laws, collecting taxes, and maintaining law and order within their respective areas. While the intention behind the indirect rule was to reduce the administrative burden on the colonial government, it had significant implications for local administration in Kenya.

The colonial administration's selection of chiefs often favoured individuals who were compliant with British directives, even if they did not have traditional leadership roles within their communities. This approach sometimes led to tensions within indigenous communities as leadership positions were reshaped to align with the interests of the colonial administration (Hobsbawm, 1987). These tensions and the imposition of colonial boundaries reshaped local identities and affiliations, which would have lasting consequences for post-independence Kenya.

The British colonial authorities also introduced administrative units, such as districts and locations, as part of their centralised approach to governance. These units were designed to facilitate tax collection, control of labour, and the implementation of colonial policies. District commissioners were appointed to oversee these units, and they often held significant authority, even at the local level. This centralisation of power within the colonial administration further marginalised traditional governance structures and local autonomy (Maxon, 1992).

Identity cards, introduced during the colonial period, became an enduring symbol of the legacy of colonial classification. Ethnic and tribal categories, defined by colonial authorities, were included in these cards and official records. These classifications established a hierarchy among communities and further divided the population along ethnic lines (Anderson, 2001). The repercussions of these classifications continue to influence Kenyan politics and governance, as they often form the basis for political affiliations and disputes.

The persistence of tribal divisions and hierarchies also marks the colonial legacy in Kenya's local administration. These divisions have sometimes been manipulated for political purposes, contributing to ethnic tensions and competition for resources and power. The colonial administration's preference for certain ethnic groups and leaders further exacerbated these divisions (Throup, 1987). The political dynamics of post-independence Kenya have often

revolved around these tribal identities, leading to challenges in building a unified and inclusive nation.

## **1.2. Post-Independence Reforms**

Following Kenya's attainment of independence in 1963, they ushered in a new chapter in the history of local administration. With the promise of self-determination, Kenyan leaders sought to redefine the nation's local governance structures, distancing themselves from the colonial legacy and advocating for greater autonomy and local self-governance. This post-independence era was marked by a series of reforms aimed at reshaping local administration to align with the aspirations of a democratic and independent Kenya.

One of the earliest and most notable post-independence reforms was establishing the Local Government Act of 1963. This legislation aimed to decentralize governance and grant local authorities more decision-making powers and responsibilities. The Act outlined the structure and functions of local governments, setting the stage for devolution (Barkan, 2009). It significantly departed from the colonial approach, emphasizing local participation and control.

In 1966, the Kenyan government furthered its commitment to decentralization by creating the "Harambee" system, which encouraged local communities to take an active role in development initiatives. This grassroots approach sought to empower communities and local leaders in decision-making, aligning with independence and self-reliance (Tignor, 2002). The Harambee system brought communities together to mobilize resources for local development projects, fostering a sense of local ownership and participation.

While these reforms represented a shift toward greater local autonomy, they were not without their challenges. Implementing the Local Government Act and the Harambee system often faced bureaucratic hurdles and resistance from entrenched administrative structures. Additionally, the legacy of centralised colonial governance persisted, making it difficult to fully realise the ideals of decentralisation (Ndegwa, 1997).

In the 1980s and 1990s, Kenya witnessed political and constitutional changes that further impacted local administration. The reintroduction of multi-party politics in 1992 marked a significant turning point—the return to a multi-party system allowed for more diverse and competitive political landscapes at the local level. Traditionally associated with the ruling party, local administrators navigated the changing political tides as local elections became more

competitive (Chege, 2000). They have had implications for local administrators' role in shaping local politics during this period of political transition.

The post-independence era also witnessed efforts to redefine the role of traditional leaders in local administration. While the colonial administration had used appointed chiefs as intermediaries, post-independence leaders sought to reconcile traditional leadership with modern governance. Various initiatives were undertaken to integrate traditional leaders into the formal local administration structure (Kinyanjui, 2018). The aim was to recognize traditional leaders' historical role and potential contributions to local development.

The reforms of the post-independence period marked a significant departure from the colonial legacy, as Kenya sought to establish a more democratic and participatory system of local administration. However, the journey towards effective local governance took time, including bureaucratic obstacles, political transitions, and the need to balance traditional and modern forms of leadership. The ongoing quest for effective local administration continued to evolve as Kenya navigated its path to democratic governance and self-determination.

### **1.3. Decentralisation Efforts**

Decentralisation has been a central theme in Kenya's efforts to reshape local administration and foster greater local autonomy. Decentralisation initiatives aimed to devolve powers and responsibilities to local authorities, enhancing their capacity to make decisions and manage local affairs. These efforts were driven by the aspiration to bring governance closer to the people and improve service delivery at the local level.

One of the pivotal milestones in Kenya's decentralisation journey was promulgating the 2010 Constitution. The new constitution introduced a comprehensive framework for devolution, establishing two levels of government: the national government and 47 county governments (referred to as counties). The counties had significant powers and responsibilities, including control over local resources, health, and education (Sifuna, 2013). The constitution marked a significant departure from the previous centralised system, paving the way for substantial decentralization efforts.

The devolution of powers to counties entailed the transfer of administrative functions, budgetary allocations, and service delivery responsibilities. Each county was granted the authority to manage its local affairs, make development project decisions, and set local priorities. County governments were established to represent their constituents' diverse

interests and needs, acknowledging the nation's cultural, economic, and geographic variations (Muoria, 2013).

The shift toward devolution, however, came with its share of challenges. Establishing county governments required building administrative capacity, financial management systems, and human resources capable of delivering essential services. The transition to the new system had hurdles, including disputes over resource allocation, intergovernmental relations, and the need for constitutional reforms (Cheeseman, 2015). Nevertheless, these challenges underscored the commitment to decentralisation and recognising local governance as essential to the nation's development.

The devolution of governance has redefined the administrative landscape and reinvigorated local politics in Kenya. Local elections have become highly competitive, with county governors and representatives playing pivotal roles in shaping local and regional development. The competition for political positions at the county level has resulted in a vibrant political environment, with local administrators often becoming key figures in local politics (Kiringai, 2014). This has amplified the importance of local administrators and underscored the complexities of the political dynamics surrounding local administration.

In addition to the constitutional framework, the Kenyan government has implemented several policy measures to support decentralisation efforts. For example, the Kenya Devolution Support Program (KDSP) was established to provide technical assistance, capacity building, and financial support to county governments, aiding in the implementation of devolution (World Bank, 2017). The KDSP aimed to address the challenges associated with the transition to the new governance structure, emphasising the importance of effective local administration.

Decentralisation efforts in Kenya are crucial for improving local service delivery, promoting citizen participation, and fostering local ownership of development initiatives. However, it is essential to recognise that the success of decentralisation hinges on effective governance, financial management, and intergovernmental cooperation. The ongoing journey toward decentralisation continues to shape the local administration landscape in Kenya and plays a significant role in the nation's quest for democratic governance and sustainable development.

## **2. ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURES OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN KENYA**



In Kenya, the administrative structure of local government is a critical component of the country's governance system, enabling effective service delivery and democratic participation at the grassroots level. At the pinnacle of this system is the Counties Administration, established by the 2010 Constitution to decentralise power and resources. The County Government embodies the principle of devolution and empowers regions to address their unique challenges and priorities autonomously, with 47 counties, each led by a locally elected governor. (Constitution of Kenya, 2010, Art. 1). (Constitution of Kenya, 2010, Art. 179).

The County Assembly, a legislative body responsible for making laws and policies tailored to each county's needs, is the cornerstone of the County Government. The Assembly made up of Members of the County Assembly (MCAs) elected from different wards, serves as a platform for robust debate and decision-making, ensuring that the voices of local communities are heard and represented in the policy-making process (Constitution of Kenya, 2010, Art. 185). The County Executive Committee (CEC) plays a vital role in implementing the laws and policies formulated by the County Assembly within the county government structure. The members of the CEC, whom the Governor appoints, oversee specific departments such as health, education and infrastructure and work together to deliver essential services and drive sustainable development initiatives in their areas of responsibility. (Constitution of Kenya, 2010, Art. 183).

In addition, the County Public Service Board acts as the custodian of the county government's employees and is responsible for recruitment, training, and discipline within the public service sector. By upholding standards of professionalism and accountability, the County Public Service Board contributes to the efficient functioning of the County Administrative Services and promotes public confidence and trust in local government (Constitution of Kenya, 2010, Art. 235).

At the grassroots level, the Ward Administration is a vital link between the communities and the County Assembly. Ward Representatives or MCAs advocate for their constituents and promote initiatives to address local needs, promoting inclusive decision-making and participatory democracy at the grassroots level. (Constitution of Kenya, 2010, Art. 177).

Sub-county and local administrations facilitate decentralized delivery of essential services, ensuring that governance structures are accessible and responsive to Kenya's diverse communities. Under the supervision of chiefs and assistant chiefs, these administrative units

play a crucial role in maintaining law and order, resolving disputes, and promoting community cohesion within their respective jurisdictions.

Kenya's local government structures are committed to decentralization, participatory democracy, and equitable service delivery. By empowering counties and sub-counties to govern independently and involving citizens in decision-making, they aim to promote sustainable development, enhance accountability, and strengthen the nation's social fabric.

The 2010 Constitution introduced county governments. They are responsible for governing the country's 47 counties. Here is an overview of the administrative structures that make up local government in Kenya:

1. **The County Government:** Each of the 47 counties in Kenya has its government, headed by a governor elected by the county's people. The county government is responsible for various functions, including agriculture, health services, county transport, trade development and regulation, public works, and county planning and development.
2. **The County Assembly:** Each county has its own elected County Assembly, which is responsible for making laws for peace, order, and good county governance. The County Assembly comprises Members of the County Assembly (MCAs) whom the people of the wards within the county elect.
3. **The County Executive Committee:** The County Executive Committee (CEC) is appointed by the Governor and is responsible for implementing the county's laws and policies. Each member of the CEC is responsible for a particular department or sector within the county government. Examples include health, finance, education, and agriculture.
4. **The County Public Service Commission:** Each county has a County Public Service Board, which is responsible for matters relating to public service in the county, including the appointment of employees of the county government.
5. **Ward-level administration:** Wards are smaller administrative units within counties, and each ward has an elected representative, known as a ward representative, or

MCA. The MCA represents the interests of the ward's residents at the County Assembly.

6. Sub-county administration: Some services are administered at the sub-county level. Sub-counties are further subdivisions within counties. They are headed by a sub-county administrator appointed by the county public service board.
7. Location administration: Locations are smaller administrative units within sub-districts. They are headed by chiefs who are appointed by the national government and appoint assistant chiefs. The chiefs are responsible for maintaining law and order at the local level and play a key role in grassroots administration.
8. Sub-location administration: Sub-locations are smaller administrative units within locations. Assistant Chiefs head them.

### 3. FUTURE PROSPECT

Kenya's local government will continue to develop and adapt to satisfy the needs of a shifting society. Several significant opportunities and paths become apparent as Kenya struggles with the issues and disagreements surrounding its local governance structure.

Firstly, increased momentum is anticipated for the ongoing decentralization process. The devolutionary constitutional framework established in 2010 has paved the way for more comprehensive and efficient local governance. Counties that address resource allocation disparities and capacity-building needs should see an increase in their ability to manage local affairs and spur development. Maintaining the commitment to devolution will be essential to democratizing governance and strengthening local communities.

Secondly, local administrators are expected to become more influential in determining local policies and development projects as long as local politics remain competitive. The changing political climate at the local level is reflected in the increasing significance of county governors and representatives. In this situation, maintaining efficient local governance and service delivery will depend heavily on the objectivity and professionalism of local administrators.

Kenya's local government's prospects depend on its capacity to balance acknowledging traditional leadership and utilizing contemporary governance frameworks. Maintaining democratic values while incorporating traditional leaders into the official administrative structure is still tricky. The country's ability to oversee this process will be crucial in determining its ability to promote a cohesive, diverse, and inclusive local government.

In summary, more profound decentralization, more political clout at the local level, and the challenging task of balancing traditional and modern governance are the hallmarks of Kenya's local administration's future. Kenya continues to move towards a local governance structure that is more democratic, accountable, and successful as it negotiates these opportunities.

### **CONCLUSION**

The history of local administration in Kenya is a rich and intricate tapestry that spans pre-colonial legacies, colonial impositions, and the quest for effective local governance. This article has embarked on a comprehensive exploration of Kenya's local administration's historical and political dimensions, uncovering the nuanced evolution of this pivotal aspect of governance.

Kenya's pre-colonial heritage provided the roots of local administration, with a diverse array of ethnic communities and indigenous governance systems reflecting the region's historical intricacy. Colonial rule introduced a top-down administrative structure featuring indirect rule and the appointment of local chiefs as intermediaries. These colonial legacies, including the classification of ethnic and tribal divisions, continue to influence the contours of Kenya's local administration.

Independence marked a turning point as post-independence leaders sought to redefine local governance structures. Reforms aimed to decentralize power, promote local autonomy, and reconcile traditional and modern leadership systems. The introduction of the 2010 Constitution and the establishment of county governments heralded a significant era of devolution, transferring powers and responsibilities to the local level.

The decentralization endeavours introduced a new chapter in local politics, marked by competitive local elections and the emergence of local administrators as influential figures shaping local and regional development. However, these endeavours have been accompanied by challenges and controversies. Issues such as resource allocation, corruption, capacity building, political contestation, and intergovernmental relations have posed substantial hurdles.

Balancing the need for transparent and accountable local administration with the complexities of tribal and ethnic politics is an ongoing challenge. Finding equitable solutions to resource allocation and addressing capacity-building needs are paramount to successfully implementing decentralization efforts. Furthermore, fostering intergovernmental cooperation and ensuring the impartiality of local administration in the face of political rivalries are critical to Kenya's pursuit of democratic governance and sustainable development.

The history of local administration in Kenya is a testament to the nation's rich and diverse history and ongoing commitment to democratic governance, citizen participation, and local ownership of development initiatives. The complexities and challenges faced along this journey serve as important markers of progress, highlighting the areas needing ongoing attention, reform, and a continued pursuit of democratic ideals.

In conclusion, Kenya's history of local administration underscores the nation's resilience and determination in the quest for a vibrant, self-determined, and participatory local administration. The complexities of the pre-colonial era, the colonial legacy, and the post-independence reforms have all contributed to Kenya's intricate tapestry of local governance. As Kenya grapples with the challenges and controversies accompanying the pursuit of effective local administration, it remains a testament to its enduring commitment to democratic governance and self-determination.

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