The Politics of Identity: A Case Study of Northern Kenya

By

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the politics of identity in Northern Kenya, with a focus on the challenges associated with the issuance of identity cards without prior vetting. Using a qualitative secondary research approach, the analysis draws on published cases, interviews, observations, and relevant data to explore how systemic inefficiencies, discriminatory practices, and historical marginalization have impacted residents' access to legal identity documents. The findings highlight significant barriers such as wrongful classification as refugees, corruption, delays, and exclusion from essential services, which perpetuate social and economic marginalization in the region. Case studies from counties like Wajir, Garissa, and Mandera illustrate the tangible consequences of these issues. The study concludes that addressing these challenges requires comprehensive reforms, including transparent registration processes, strengthened oversight, community outreach, and legal support, to promote equitable access to identity documentation and foster social inclusion and national cohesion in Kenya.

Key words: Kenya, Identity, Nomadic Pastoralism, Border Insecurity, Drought

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1.Introduction and Background
1.1 Introduction

Ethnic identities, cultural links, and political dynamics are intricately woven throughout northern Kenya, especially in the North Eastern region. Since ethnic identification frequently acts as the main means of social protection and political affiliation, the region has long struggled with identity politics. A recent approach by the Kenyan government to provide identity cards to communities in North Eastern Kenya without initial background checks could have a big influence on the social and political climate of the area.

This initiative gets underway at a time when ethnic divisions are becoming a more prominent feature of identity politics in Kenya. These divisions have been made worse by political elites, who frequently use ethnic grievances as a means of mobilization. There are concerns regarding how this approach would impact social cohesion, political stability, and inter-ethnic relations in the area given that identity cards are being issued without prior vetting and authentication. Could it unintentionally worsen current tensions by shifting the demographic and political balance, or will it promote greater inclusion and recognition of neglected communities? These are some of the voids this paper aims to seal.

The purpose of this case study is to investigate how Northern Kenya's politics of identity are affected by the new identity card policy. We could gain additional information regarding how this strategy might affect social cohesion, political engagement, and regional economic development by looking at the dynamics of ethnic identification, governmental policies, and community responses. The research will also consider Kenya's larger identity politics setting, where social interactions and political discourse are still greatly influenced by ethnic identity.

1.2 Background of the Study

The politics of identity is a global phenomenon, often intertwined with issues of citizenship, belonging, and State recognition. Internationally, groups like the Rohingya in Myanmar and the Kurds across the Middle East face similar challenges. The Rohingya, for instance, have been denied citizenship and subjected to severe persecution, highlighting the complexities of identity and statelessness (Lynch, 2006). Similarly, the Kurds, spread across Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria, have long sought recognition and autonomy, exemplifying the tensions between ethnic identity and national borders.

Oluoch (2014) posits that In East Africa, the dynamics of identity are influenced by colonial legacies and modern-day nationalism. The region's borders, often drawn without regard for ethnic or cultural affiliations, have led to tensions and conflicts. In Northern Kenya, the Somali population has historically sought ties with Somalia, reflecting a desire for cultural and religious affinity. This has led to secessionist movements and identity crises, as seen in the early 1960s when some communities sought to join Somalia.

Nationally, Kenya has grappled with identity politics, particularly in Northern Kenya. The region has faced discrimination and marginalization, partly due to the vetting process for

national identity cards (The Daily Whistle, 2025). This process, which required residents to prove their Kenyan lineage, often led to statelessness and limited access to essential services. For decades, acquiring a national Identity Card (ID) in Northern Kenya was a lengthy and frustrating ordeal. Unlike in other regions where applicants only needed a birth certificate and parental identification, residents from Wajir, Mandera, Garissa, and other border counties faced an extra layer of scrutiny.

The recent abolition of this vetting process by President William Ruto marks a significant shift towards inclusivity and equality, aligning with constitutional principles that all Kenyans are equal. The removal of vetting processes is expected to empower these communities economically and socially, integrating them more fully into Kenyan society. However, historical tensions, such as those between the Borana and Somali communities, underscore the complexity of identity issues in the region

To sum up, identity politics in Northern Kenya reflect the larger regional and international issues as many communities struggle for acceptance and inclusion within national borders. One important step in resolving these problems and integrating underprivileged people into the country is the new policy on providing IDs without verification.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

Many people are killed annually and thousands displaced due to insecurity in northern Kenya. The volatility of the region is often associated with social, cultural, economic and political dynamics of the region. The main contention of this article is that identity politics, which revolve around ethnic and religious tensions have been the main cause of the ongoing conflicts and social disturbances that have afflicted northern Kenya, especially the North Eastern region. These problems have been made worse by the region's historical marginalization as well as a shaky social contract between ethnic Somali groups and the Kenyan government (Whittaker, 2012). The region still faces major obstacles in terms of poverty, underdevelopment, and access to essential services, even in spite of recent attempts on political and economic development. Peace and stability are difficult to attain because of the entrenchment of "winner-takes-all" ethnic politics at the county level, which further exacerbates intercommunal relations (Scharrer, 2018)

This study aims to address the knowledge gap in understanding how identity politics influences conflict dynamics in Northern Kenya. By examining the complex interplay between political, economic, and social factors, this research seeks to provide insights into the barriers and facilitators of peaceful coexistence among diverse ethnic groups in the region.

1.4 Research Question

1. How do historical and contemporary identity politics contribute to conflict in Northern Kenya?
2. What role does the Kenyan State play in exacerbating or mitigating ethnic tensions in the region?
3. How can devolution and economic development be leveraged to promote peace and stability in Northern Kenya?

1.5 Research Objectives
1. To analyze the historical context of identity politics in Northern Kenya.
2. To assess the impact of state policies on ethnic relations in the region.
3. To explore strategies for promoting inter-ethnic dialogue and cooperation through devolution and economic development initiatives.

2. Literature Review
2.1 Introduction
This section covers the theory underpinning the study objectives. It discusses the Theoretical Framework, General Literature Review, and the empirical literature review of the study.

2.2 Theoretical Framework
The politics of identity in Northern Kenya can be analyzed through the constructivist approach framework that explain how identity shapes political dynamics, particularly in ethnically diverse and historically marginalized regions. The constructivist approach to identity emphasizes that identities are not innate or fixed but are socially constructed through intersubjective processes, cultural contexts, and historical experiences. By incorporating this theoretical approach, the study aims to intricately understand the politics of identity in North Eastern Kenya

2.2.1 Constructivist Approach
The constructivist approach in political science and international relations has been developed and advanced by several key scholars. Alexander Wendt is one of the most influential figures in this field, emphasizing the role of shared ideas, norms, and beliefs in shaping State behavior and interests. He argues that State identities are socially constructed and evolve through interaction with other States. Another prominent scholar is Peter Katzenstein, who has contributed significantly to the study of identity in international relations, particularly through his focus on cultural and normative structures. Katzenstein highlights how these ideational factors influence National Security and State behavior.

Nicholas Onuf is credited for coining the term "constructivism" in international relations. His work focuses on how rules and norms are created through social practices, shaping both individual and collective identities. Ted Hopf has also explored the role of identity in shaping interests and actions, emphasizing intersubjective processes that define how actors perceive themselves and others. Christian Reus-Smit has contributed to constructivist theory by examining how shared values, norms, and beliefs constitute ideational structures that influence material conditions and state behavior. Additionally, Martha Finnemore's research focuses on the role of international norms and institutions in shaping State identity and interests, particularly through mechanisms like socialization.

These scholars collectively emphasize the importance of ideational factors—such as norms, culture, history, and social interactions—in constructing identities and shaping political behaviors. Their work underscores that identities are not fixed but are dynamically constructed through ongoing social processes, which in turn influence political outcomes and international relations. By highlighting the constructed nature of identity, constructivists provide a nuanced understanding of how political actors and their interests evolve over time. This perspective is particularly relevant when analyzing complex identity politics in regions like North Eastern Kenya, where historical, social, and political factors interplay to shape local and national identities

2.3 General Literature Review

Historical, social, and political factors have influenced the complicated and multidimensional topic of identity politics in Northern Kenya. With an emphasis on ethnicity, colonial legacies, socio-economic marginalization, and the function of governance, this literature review explores important themes associated with identity politics using the funnel method to address the study's objectives from a global perspective down to a regional one (Africa) then to the case study at hand of North Eastern Kenya.

2.3.1 Historical Context of The Politics of Identity

Globally, when it comes to the politics of identity, The Rohingya identity crisis is rooted in centuries of migration, colonial legacies, and systemic exclusion, culminating in one of the most protracted statelessness situations today. Their struggle for recognition as an indigenous ethnic group in Myanmar's Rakhine state intersects with geopolitical shifts, State-sponsored discrimination, and contested historical narratives. The Rohingya identity crisis and the politics of identity in Northern Kenya share significant parallels rooted in historical marginalization, exclusionary policies, and contested citizenship.

The Rohingya trace their origins to the Arakan region (modern-day Rakhine State, Myanmar) over a millennium ago, influenced by Arab, Mughal, and Portuguese interactions (Maizland, 2022). Historically, the region was an independent kingdom with a diverse population, including Muslims who are considered ancestors of the Rohingya. During British colonial rule (1824–1948), labor migration from Bengal to Arakan increased significantly. This migration was encouraged by British authorities for economic purposes but later became a point of contention with local Buddhist communities.

Maizland (2022) further postulates that after Myanmar gained independence in 1948, the new government denied citizenship to the Rohingya, labeling them as "foreigners" or "illegal immigrants" from Bangladesh. This marked the beginning of systematic exclusion and marginalization. The 1982 Citizenship Law formally stripped the Rohingya of citizenship by excluding them from Myanmar's list of recognized ethnic groups. This law made them Stateless and deprived them of basic rights such as freedom of movement, education, and access to healthcare.

Myanmar's military junta, which seized power in 1962, pursued policies of "Burmanization," promoting a homogenous Buddhist national identity (Chew & Jangai Jap, 2024). These policies marginalized ethnic minorities like the Rohingya and fostered discrimination. Similar to Myanmar's citizenship laws targeting the Rohingya. Kenyan policies have often treated Northern Kenyans as "outsiders." For example, residents have faced difficulties obtaining national identification documents due to suspicions of illegal migration from Somalia. These policies have fueled grievances over identity and belonging, exacerbating tensions between local communities and the central government.

Military operations such as Operation Nagamin (1978) targeted the Rohingya under the pretext of identifying "foreigners," leading to mass violence, displacement, and forced migration to Bangladesh. Similar crackdowns occurred in 1991–1992 and escalated in 2016–2017. The politics surrounding Rohingya identity revolves around contested narratives between the Rohingya community and the Myanmar State (Chew & Jangai Jap, 2024).

The Rohingya assert that they are indigenous to Rakhine State with a long history predating British colonial rule. They demand recognition as an ethnic group with full citizenship rights under Myanmar law. Their identity is tied to their claim for self-determination within Myanmar as a distinct ethnic group rather than being labeled as "Bengalis," which implies foreign origin. The government denies the existence of a distinct

"Rohingya" identity and refers to them as "Bengalis," arguing that they are descendants of colonial-era migrants from Benga. The denial of citizenship and systematic persecution has made the Rohingya one of the world's most persecuted minorities. Their plight highlights how identity politics can be weaponized to exclude vulnerable groups from nation-building processes.

In the African Context, several ethnic groups face the politics of identity, a phenomenon shaped by historical, political, and socio-economic factors. Colonial powers, particularly Belgium in Burundi and Rwanda, institutionalized ethnic divisions between the Hutu and Tutsi through identity cards and preferential treatment of Tutsis (Green, 2020). These divisions were exacerbated post-independence, leading to cycles of violence, including the Rwandan Genocide in 1994. In both countries, ethnicity has been politicized to consolidate power, with regimes favoring one group over the other. Post-genocide Rwanda has attempted to de-emphasize ethnic identities, but tensions persist beneath the surface. Green (202), further persists that in Sudan, the identity crisis stems from colonial-era divisions that privileged the Arab-Muslim North over the African-Christian South. Post-independence governments pursued policies of Arabization and Islamization, leading to civil wars and ultimately South Sudan's secession in 2011. Ethnic tensions persist within both Sudan and South Sudan.

The historical context of the politics of identity in Northern Kenya is deeply rooted in colonial legacies, socio-political marginalization, and post-independence State policies (Kisaka & Nyadera, 2019). During British colonial rule, the Northern Frontier District (NFD), which includes present-day Northern Kenya, was administratively isolated. The colonial government implemented policies that excluded the region from mainstream development and governance, treating it as a buffer zone against neighboring Somalia. This created a sense of "otherness" among the predominantly Somali Muslim population.

Ntarangwi & Ingham, (2019) state that The British categorized communities in Kenya along ethnic lines to foster control. In Northern Kenya, Somalis were viewed as culturally and politically distinct from other Kenyan groups, reinforcing their marginalization. After independence, many Somalis in Northern Kenya sought secession to join Somalia, leading to the Shifta War. The Kenyan government responded with militarized policies that further alienated the region. This conflict entrenched perceptions of Northern Kenya as a rebellious and insecure area. Successive post-independence governments neglected Northern Kenya in terms of infrastructure, education, and healthcare development. This neglect reinforced socio-economic disparities between the region and other parts of the country.

Residents of Northern Kenya have faced difficulties obtaining national identification documents due to suspicions of illegal immigration from Somalia (Ntarangwi & Ingham, 2019). This has fueled grievances over their status as Kenyan citizens and their access to rights and resources. The rise of terrorism, particularly by Al-Shabaab, has led to the securitization of Somali identity in Kenya. Policies such as forced repatriation of refugees and crackdowns on Somali-dominated neighborhoods have deepened mistrust between the state and local communities.

Despite being part of Kenya, Northern communities have historically been underrepresented in national politics. This lack of representation has limited their ability to influence policy decisions affecting their region. The Kenyan State has often framed Northern Kenya's Somali population as outsiders or threat to national security, perpetuating ethnic stereotypes that hinder integration.

2.3.2 Impact of State Policies on Ethnic Relation

Globally, the State has played a very pivotal role in matters of identity as is the case amongst the Kurds. The Kurdish struggle for identity is deeply intertwined with State policies that have historically marginalized Kurdish communities across Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. After World War I, the partitioning of the Ottoman Empire divided Kurdish-majority territories among these States, denying them autonomy or independence (Kuzu, 2015). Early Kurdish nationalist movements were met with repression, such as Turkey's Law No. 1850, which legitimized violence against Kurdish revolts and banned the Kurdish language, dress, and cultural practices. These policies entrenched ethnic divisions and framed Kurdish identity as a threat to national unity.

Resistance movements and limited reforms have emerged as responses to State repression. In Iraq, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) gained autonomy post-1991, though disputes over resources and territory persist (Aboutaam, 2024). In Turkey, reforms in the 2000s allowed limited Kurdish-language media, but cultural and political rights remain restricted. However, such measures are often superficial or inconsistent, failing to address systemic exclusion.

In Africa, the Biafra conflict in Nigeria highlights the significant impact of State policies on identity politics. The tensions between the Igbo and rest of Nigerians had been managemend well during the colonial period, but this went out of control after independence despite the fact that an Igbo, Namdi Azikiwe, was the president. It did not help matters that the Prie Minister, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa appeared to be putting northern interest first, before national interests. Historically, the Nigerian government's use of military force to suppress Biafra's secession during the civil war (1967–1970) entrenched ethnic divisions and undermined national unity (Nwangwu, 2022). Post-war policies continued to alienate the Igbo people, fostering a re-imagining of Biafra as an alternative political identity. This has led to a prioritization of ethnic identity over allegiance to Nigeria among many Igbo.

Igwe (2024) has suggested that one constant contributing factor to the radicalization of identity politics has been State repression. Prohibitions of organizations like the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and military actions like "Operation Python Dance," among other modern measures, have made the situation even more divisive. With projects like the Eastern Security Network (ESN), IPOB has changed from being a non-violent advocacy group to one engaged in armed resistance as a result of these efforts. Instead of addressing ethnic divisions, the Nigerian State's strategy has widened them, fostering separatist ambitions and undermining the legitimacy of the government.

The humanitarian and national unity implications of these policies are profound. The historical use of starvation and blockades as war tactics during the civil war exacerbated humanitarian crises and reinforced perceptions of ethnic persecution. Today, the state's reliance on force contributes to insecurity in regions like the South-East, where attacks on State facilities and violent clashes are common.

State policies have profoundly shaped the politics of identity in North Eastern Kenya, primarily through systemic marginalization and neglect. Historical colonial laws, such as the Outlying District Ordinance of 1902, restricted movement and isolated the Northern Frontier District (NFD), creating a "closed zone" with minimal investment (Abdullahi, 2023). These exclusionary policies persisted post-independence, leaving the region underdeveloped and disconnected from national systems. Residents often feel alienated, expressing sentiments of being outsiders within Kenya, which has fueled defiance and readiness to defend their territories against perceived external threat.

The marginalization of North Eastern Kenya has exacerbated resource-based conflicts over land, pasture, and water, often resulting in violent clashes between communities. State neglect in addressing these disputes and providing equitable development has deepened grievances among local populations. Additionally, the region's designation as a security zone by successive governments has prioritized state interests over the well-being of residents, further entrenching instability. This deliberate underdevelopment has contributed to insecurity and sporadic violence, including inter-ethnic conflict.

2.3.3 Devolution/Federalism in Curbing Politics of Identity

Globally, by offering a framework for addressing the great ethnic, linguistic, and cultural variety of the nation, federalism in India has been instrumental in containing the politics of identity. One of the most obvious examples is the linguistic and ethnic rearrangement of States that began in the 1950s. Regional identities were able to find administrative expression, for example, with the establishment of Andhra Pradesh as the first linguistic State in 1953 and further reorganizations, including the creation of Gujarat and Maharashtra in 1960 (Huma, 2015). This strategy preserved national unity while lowering tensions and assisting in the integration of various communities into the Indian Union.

Huma (2015), further, states that in the North Eastern region, federalism has been instrumental in managing ethno-regional conflicts. The granting of statehood to Nagaland (1963), Meghalaya (1972), and Mizoram (1987), among others, addressed demands for autonomy and recognition of indigenous identities. Similarly, sub-state arrangements like the Bodoland Territorial Region within Assam have provided localized governance to ethnic groups. These measures have legitimized regional aspirations while preventing secessionist tendencies by integrating these regions into India's federal framework.

More recently, the creation of Telangana in 2014 exemplifies how federalism continues to address identity-based demands. Telangana's formation was driven by long-standing grievances over resource distribution and cultural recognition within Andhra Pradesh (Kumar Naik & Kumar, n.d..). By granting statehood, India demonstrated its ability to adapt its federal structure to accommodate evolving identity-based demands. Overall, Indian federalism has proven resilient in managing identity politics through decentralization and power-sharing while maintaining a strong central framework.

In the African context, Ethiopia adopted ethnic federalism in 1995 under the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) Constitution, aiming to manage its diverse ethno-linguistic groups and curb identity-based conflicts (Berihun & Gebeye, 2023.). The federal structure divides the country into ethnically defined regional states, granting them significant autonomy, including the constitutional right to secession under Article 39. This arrangement was intended to address historical grievances and provide self-governance to marginalized groups, fostering unity in diversity while reducing ethnic tensions.

In practice, ethnic federalism has had mixed results. On the flip side, it has empowered regional identities by institutionalizing their governance and cultural expression. For example, regions like Oromia and Tigray have gained control over local administration, language policies, and cultural preservation. These measures have strengthened regional autonomy and recognition of ethnic identities, mitigating some historical marginalization. However, ethnic federalism has also exacerbated identity politics by institutionalizing divisions along ethnic lines. This politicization of ethnicity has led to increased inter-ethnic competition, grievances over land ownership, and violent conflicts between groups such as the Guji and Borena Oromo.

Additionally, the dominance of ethnic-based political parties and narrow ethno-nationalist agendas have undermined peaceful coexistence. While federalism was intended to promote inclusivity, it has often intensified ethnic polarization and mistrust due to unequal power dynamics and resource distribution. Critics argue that Ethiopia's federal system needs urgent reforms to address these challenges, including depoliticizing ethnicity and fostering a more inclusive national identity beyond ethnic affiliation.

Locally, devolution in Kenya, introduced under the 2010 Constitution, has had mixed success in addressing the politics of identity in North Eastern Kenya. On the positive side, it has provided historically marginalized communities, such as those in Mandera, Wajir, and Garissa counties, with greater political representation and access to resources. By decentralizing governance, devolution has empowered local leaders and allowed communities to have a say in their development priorities. For instance, the establishment of county governments has enabled infrastructure projects and service delivery that were previously neglected by the central government, giving residents a sense of inclusion in national governance processes.

However, devolution has also exacerbated some challenges related to identity politics. Clan-based rivalries have intensified as dominant clans monopolize county leadership and resources, sidelining minority groups within the region (Abdullahi, 2023). This has led to violent inter-clan conflicts, particularly in Mandera County, where disputes over political boundaries and resource allocation have reignited long-standing tensions. Additionally, corruption and mismanagement by county officials have undermined the potential benefits of devolution. Billions of shillings allocated to North Eastern counties have been misappropriated, leaving the region's development indicators among the lowest in Kenya despite significant funding.

2.4 Empirical Literature Review

This empirical literature review analyzes existing research on the Politics of Identity Politics: A case study of North Eastern Kenya. A systemic search was conducted across academic databases using key words such as NFD and Politics of Identity and two major results were profound.

Jeremiah Owiti (2012) highlights how historical injustices rooted in colonial policies, such as the Outlying District Ordinance of 1902, marginalized North Eastern Kenya, isolating it from national systems. He argues that systemic neglect has fostered a sense of alienation among residents, who often feel disconnected from the rest of Kenya. This marginalization has fueled resource-based conflicts over land, pasture, and water in counties like Wajir and Mandera. Owiti suggests that addressing these issues through constitutional reforms and reconciliation programs could help heal divisions and promote national unity.

Reginald M.J. Oduor (2022) examines the history of ethnicized politics in Kenya and its impact on public affairs management, noting that ethno-regional disparities in development are particularly pronounced in marginalized areas like North Eastern Kenya. He argues that respect for cultural identity and inter-ethnic equity can reduce the appeal of ethnic-based political mobilization. His analysis underscores the need for inclusive governance to address systemic inequalities and mitigate identity-based tensions.

3. Methodology
3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the methodology used to conduct qualitative secondary research for this study. The research focused on analyzing a case study of Northern Kenya

related to The Politics of Identity. The aim of this chapter is to explain how secondary data was sourced from the case study, how it was analyzed, and the procedures followed to ensure the findings were valid and meaningful.

3.2 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative secondary research design to explore The Politics of Identity: A case of Northern Kenya. Unlike primary research, where new data is collected through interviews or observations, this study used data already documented in the case study. The case study approach was particularly useful in understanding complex phenomena within real-life contexts of the politics of identity. It provided rich, detailed, and holistic information, making it ideal to analyze the historical context of identity politics in Northern Kenya, assess the impact of state policies on ethnic relations in the region and explore the strategies for promoting inter-ethnic dialogue and cooperation through devolution and economic development initiatives.

3.2.1 Rationale for Using a Case Study Approach

The decision to use a case study was driven by the need to examine the issuance of identification documents without prior vetting in depth. The Case study provided detailed accounts of specific instances, highlighting key factors and outcomes. This method allowed for a nuanced understanding of how The Politics of Identity manifests in real-world situations, drawing on existing documented evidence and experiences.

3.3 Data Collection

For this study reports, secondary data was gathered from published cases, interviews, observations and analyses that were directly relevant to the research topic.

3.3.1 Data Source Types

The data used in this study primarily came from: Publications from government agencies that analyzed or documented specific events, policies, or issues relevant to the study, Articles, interviews, and stories in newspapers or magazines that explore significant events, or phenomena relevant to the study. Audio-visual materials, including documentaries and interviews that provided first-hand accounts or analyses were also used. Data was collected from books and articles that explore historical events or cases in detail, offering narratives and reflections that provided qualitative insights into the context and dynamics of the case. Finally, social media posts, blogs, and user-generated content on platforms like Twitter and Facebook that discuss or comment on specific phenomena related to the study was also used. All data sources were selected based on their relevance, details, and alignment with the research question.

3.4 Data Analysis

The analysis of the secondary data followed a qualitative approach, with a focus on identifying themes, patterns, and significant insights from the case study. This study applied thematic analysis to the case study data. The researchers first familiarized with the data by thoroughly reviewing it to understand the context, content, and key findings. Notes were taken on recurring themes, insights, and key data points.

Key excerpts, phrases, and sections were coded using qualitative analysis software, NVivo to identify patterns and themes within the study. Codes were developed based on the research question and initial impressions of the data. The coded data were grouped into

broader themes related to the research focus. Themes were carefully reviewed to ensure they accurately reflected the case study data and the study's objectives.

Where applicable, a cross-case comparison was performed to identify similarities, differences, and overarching patterns across the various data. This helped to assess the consistency and variability of outcomes across different contexts. Once the themes were identified, they were analysed in light of the research questions. The findings from the data were interpreted to provide insights into The Politics of Identity, identifying common factors or influences that impacted the case study.

3.4.1 Ensuring Rigor in Data Analysis

To ensure the rigor of the analysis, the following strategies were implemented: Triangulation of different case studies were compared and cross-referenced to check for consistency and verify key findings. There was transparency where a detailed record of the data analysis process was maintained, including coding decisions, theme identification, and analysis steps. This allowed for replicability and transparency. Lastly, there was Reflexivity where the researcher maintained a reflective stance throughout the analysis process, recognizing and accounting for potential biases that might influence the interpretation of the case study data.

4. Presentations and Discussions of Findings

4.1 Introduction

This study, employing a qualitative secondary research approach, draws on a diverse range of sources including published cases, interviews, observations, and analyses to explore how ethnicity, cultural identities, and emerging social identities intersect with political processes. Understanding these intricate dynamics is crucial for fostering social cohesion, promoting inclusive governance, and addressing the persistent challenges posed by identity-based conflicts in the region.

4.2 Discussions and Findings

The study on "The Politics of Identity: A case of Northern Kenya" adopted a qualitative secondary research design, drawing on published cases, interviews, observations, and analyses directly relevant to the topic. The findings demonstrate that identity politics in Northern Kenya is deeply rooted in historical, socio-political, and economic contexts, with ethnicity and clan affiliations serving as central axes around which political and resource-based contestations revolve.

A key example is the 2013 general election, where Northern Kenya, traditionally marginalized from national politics, became a significant swing region (Ichuloi,2018). Political actors in counties such as Isiolo, Mandera, and Marsabit leveraged ethnic and clan identities to form strategic alliances and secure votes. Councils of elders played a pivotal role in anointing candidates, reinforcing the power of traditional structures in modern electoral politics. Ichuloi (2018) argues that while these strategies led to electoral gains, such as the notable swing to the Jubilee Alliance in Mandera, they also fostered exclusion and resentment among marginalized groups, sometimes escalating into conflict. The exclusionary politics, especially in Mandera and Marsabit, resulted in heightened inter-clan tensions and violence, underlining the risks inherent in identity-based mobilization.

Residents of Northern Kenya, particularly in border counties like Wajir, Garissa, and Mandera, face persistent obstacles in obtaining legal identity documents. The inquiry by the Commission on Administrative Justice (CAJ) highlights that, despite constitutional guarantees, many citizens in these regions are subjected to additional scrutiny, delays, and

outright denials. These barriers are often justified by the state on grounds of national security due to proximity to international borders and the presence of refugee populations. For example, numerous complaints documented by the CAJ detail cases where individuals were denied ID cards or experienced protracted delays because they were wrongly classified as refugees or subjected to "double registration," where their biometrics were entered into both refugee and national databases, effectively rendering them stateless and unable to access basic rights and services

Case studies and tangible examples from Northern Kenya illustrate the profound challenges residents face in obtaining identity cards due to the lack of a transparent and accessible vetting process. In Wajir, Garissa, and Mandera, individuals reported being asked for bribes ranging from KSh 3,000 to 10,000 by vetting committees to secure ID cards, effectively turning the process into a transactional and exclusionary ordeal (Naito, 2024). Many residents, particularly from pastoralist and borderland communities, remain legally invisible without these documents, which prevents them from accessing essential public services such as healthcare, education, and justice systems. For instance, children without birth certificates are unable to register for school exams, and adults without IDs cannot access government programs or formal employment.

Naito (2024) further argues that the problem is compounded by the geographical inaccessibility of registration offices and a general lack of knowledge about application procedures, leading many to rely on informal networks and exposing them to risks like fraud, extortion, and even human trafficking. Public inquiries and legal aid clinics conducted in counties such as Marsabit and Isiolo have documented numerous complaints about delayed issuance, corruption, and maladministration, highlighting the urgent need for a clear and equitable framework for identity registration in these marginalized regions.

Broader secondary analyses indicate that these identity dynamics are not static but are continually negotiated and redefined in response to shifting political and economic landscapes. The process of devolution, for instance, has created new opportunities for local empowerment but has also intensified competition along ethnic and clan lines, as groups vie for control over county-level resources and positions. This has sometimes led to violence, as seen in the post-election clashes and ongoing disputes in areas such as Marsabit and Mandera.

The findings underscore that the politics of identity in Northern Kenya is not merely an administrative challenge but a human rights issue. Discriminatory practices, whether through overly stringent vetting or arbitrary denial of documents, perpetuate cycles of marginalization and poverty. The CAJ's inquiry and subsequent legal interventions demonstrate that systemic reforms—such as the abolition of discriminatory vetting committees, improved transparency in registration processes, and targeted outreach to marginalized communities—are essential for ensuring equitable access to legal identity.

In summary, the qualitative secondary analysis reveals that identity politics in Northern Kenya is characterized by a complex interplay of historical legacies, administrative practices, and contemporary political strategies. Ethnic and clan identities are mobilized both for empowerment and exclusion, with tangible consequences for peace, governance, and development. The findings underscore the need for inclusive political frameworks and conflict-sensitive approaches to governance in ethnically diverse regions.

4.3 Conclusion

The study of the politics of identity in Northern Kenya reveals that the issuance of identity cards without proper vetting—or through discriminatory and opaque vetting processes—has

entrenched social exclusion and systemic marginalization in the region. Through qualitative secondary data, including published cases, interviews, and observations, it is evident that many residents face bureaucratic hurdles, corruption, and wrongful classification as refugees, which deny them their constitutional right to legal identity. Case studies from counties like Wajir, Garissa, and Mandera demonstrate how these challenges translate into real-life consequences, such as limited access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities, thereby perpetuating cycles of poverty and vulnerability. The findings underscore that identity politics in Northern Kenya is not merely an administrative issue but a critical human rights concern that demands urgent reforms.

4.4 Recommendations

To effectively address the challenges surrounding the issuance of identity cards in Northern Kenya, several key recommendations emerge. First, the government must fully abolish discriminatory vetting procedures that have historically excluded many residents, ensuring that all citizens in border counties access identity documents through transparent and standardized processes. A fair and comprehensive mechanism should be established to resolve cases of double registration, involving collaboration with civil society and affected communities to identify and assist all stateless individuals.

Additionally, the government should institutionalize and monitor the commitment to process ID applications within 21 days nationwide, holding officials accountable for delays and service shortcomings. Accessibility must be enhanced by expanding registration centers in remote and pastoralist areas and conducting regular mobile registration drives, with special attention to school-age children to facilitate their access to education. Public awareness campaigns are essential to educate communities about application procedures, complemented by strengthened legal aid services to support those facing wrongful denials or administrative errors. To curb corruption and exploitation, robust oversight mechanisms should be implemented, including independent audits and accessible complaint channels.

Finally, addressing the root causes of marginalization through inclusive policies and community engagement will promote social cohesion and ensure that all Kenyans, regardless of region or ethnicity, enjoy equal rights and opportunities. By adopting these measures, Kenya can build a more just, inclusive, and efficient identity registration system that upholds citizenship rights and fosters national unity

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