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Elite strategies, emphasis frames, and mass perspectives on electoral violence in Kenya

Aditi Malik[a] and Philip Onguny[b]

[a]Department of Political Science, College of the Holy Cross, One College Street, Fenwick 311, Worcester, MA 01610, USA; [b]Saint Paul University, Conflict Studies, 223 Main Street, Ottawa, Ontario, K1S 1C4 Canada

ABSTRACT

Existing research on electoral violence has largely proposed either top-down (elite) or bottom-up (mass) explanations for such conflict. Consequently, scholars have scarcely considered how elites' tactics interact with the interests of citizens on the ground. This article proposes an issue-framing approach to fill the above gap. Drawing on over 140 original interviews conducted with elites and vernacular radio listeners in Kenya, we identify three emphasis frames – political marginalisation, victimisation, and foreign occupation – that found resonance with certain groups of Kenyan voters in 2007–2008. Specifically, we show that divisive messages – disseminated through ethnic radios – resonated among those communities for whom institutional or material factors had already provided reasons to fight. These findings from the Kenyan case suggest that in giving rise to election-related conflict, incendiary media messaging is likely to inform the choices of those groups who are predisposed towards violence.

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Introduction

Between December 2007 and February 2008, Kenya experienced its third major outbreak of electoral violence. Although such conflict had occurred in association with both the 1992 and 1997 elections, several features distinguished the 2007–2008 clashes from previous episodes. First, as opposed to the pre-poll violence of the 1990s, the most intense clashes in 2007–2008 broke out after the presidential election results were announced. According to pre-election polls and the prevailing sentiment on the ground, the opposition leader, Raila Odinga (a Luo), was slated to convincingly triumph over his rival, Mwai Kibaki (a Kikuyu) (Wolf 2009). Thus, the declaration of Kibaki's victory and his hurried re-instatement for a second term in office was met with widespread protests, and conflict broke out in several different parts of Kenya (Cheeseman 2008). Second, the violence of 2007–2008 spread beyond established hotspots – such as the Rift Valley and the Coast regions – and engulfed six of the country's eight provinces. By the time the post-election crisis ended, over 1,100 Kenyans had perished and more than 700,000 others had been displaced from their homes (Republic of Kenya 2008).

CONTACT Aditi Malik amalik@holycross.edu
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In the wake of the violence, numerous official and unofficial inquiries were set up to investigate how and why the 2007 election had taken this turn (Republic of Kenya 2008; Kenya National Commission on Human Rights 2008). Many scholars tried to explain why ordinary people had come to participate in the clashes (Cleven 2013; Klaus 2020). Over time, international institutions also became involved. In March 2010, for example, the International Criminal Court (ICC) initiated investigations to identify the perpetrators of the violence (Mueller 2014).

While existing scholarship has made significant contributions to elucidate the link between elite instrumentalisation and mass mobilisation as it relates to genocide (Straus 2006) and communal riots (Berenschot 2011), relatively little attention has been paid to this issue in studies of electoral violence.[1] Combining data from 146 in-depth interviews conducted with elites (i.e. politicians, community leaders, civil society leaders, and academic and policy experts) in Nairobi, Mombasa, Nakuru, and Eldoret and vernacular radio listeners in Kisumu, Eldoret, and Nyeri, this research draws on issue-framing with a particular focus on emphasis frames to fill this gap. The article carries out two specific tasks. First, it identifies the elite-driven narratives that resonated with certain radio listeners. Second, it describes how and why these messages – pertaining to political marginalisation, victimisation, and foreign occupation – found the resonance that they did.

Our central argument is that ideas about political marginalisation, victimisation, and ethno-territorial identity resonated with some radio listeners because they latched onto these voters' pre-existing grievances against the government and/or their material incentives to engage in violence.[2] More concretely, these emphasis frames found resonance with those radio listeners who were already predisposed towards conflict.

In advancing the above claims, the goals of this article are descriptive and conceptual rather than causal in nature. This is because our research does not include a systematic comparison with radio listeners who failed to perpetrate violence. For reasons that we discuss below, we also did not interview ethnic nationalists who were living outside their homelands. Thus, we do not make any causal claims about the connection between incendiary election rhetoric and ordinary individuals' decisions to participate in conflict. Rather, our more modest aim is to present issue-framing as a discursive factor that can interact with institutional and material variables to give rise to violence.

This article is organized as follows. We begin by reviewing the existing literature on election-related conflict in Kenya. We then detail our issue-framing approach and justify our focus on emphasis frames. The third section of the article discusses our research design and our interview data. Within this section, we also provide an account of the limitations of our research design and data before offering justifications for the same. The next two sections highlight the interview data collected from elites and radio listeners. It further illuminates the elite-deployed frames pertaining to political marginalisation, victimisation, and land occupation that found resonance among certain groups of voters. The penultimate section of the article discusses new emphasis frames that appeared during the 2013 and 2017 elections after Kenya promulgated a new constitution in 2010. We conclude by discussing the contributions of this study to the electoral violence and framing literatures and its implications for future work on the relationship between media and collective action in sub-Saharan Africa.

Election-related Violence in Kenya

Since the restoration of multiparty competition in the early 1990s, Kenya has experienced high-intensity violence around three out of six of its presidential elections.[3] According to existing data, 1,500 to 2,000 individuals died in association with the presidential contests of 1992 and 1997 (Africa Watch 1993; Kenya Human Rights Commission 1998). The ethnic clashes of the 1990s were largely attributed to the actions of party members from the ruling Kenya African National Union (KANU) who deliberately orchestrated violence as a means to hold onto political power (Klopp 2001). After a largely peaceful presidential contest in 2002, which resulted in the victory of the opposition alliance, NARC, Kenya once again experienced major electoral violence in 2007–2008.

Extant scholarship on this topic has identified several institutional and material factors that have been at the heart of election-related conflict. First, the concentration of power in the presidency – and the purposeful hollowing out of countervailing institutions – has rendered Kenyan presidential elections to be high-stakes contests (Mueller 2008). Second, Kenyan elites have been able to repeatedly organise violence due to 'a gradual decline in the state's monopoly of legitimate force' and a consequent diffusion of violence specialists (Mueller 2008, 186). Third, the non-programmatic nature of Kenyan political parties has increased the risk of election-related conflict (Mueller 2008). This is not only because parties use ethnicity as a tool to mobilise voters (Cheeseman 2008), but also because politicians deploy divisive ethnic narratives to instrumentalise violence. Fourth, those who have participated in election-related conflict have often done so for material reasons. Due to the pervasiveness of political patronage, a common belief among Kenyan voters is that only co-ethnic heads of state can accrue and distribute patronage to their constituents. A particularly powerful version of this belief pertains to the distribution – or re-distribution – of land in areas such as the Rift Valley, where indigenous communities have long held grievances against Kikuyus and other 'migrant' ethnic groups for settling in the region. Recent work has also shown that those living in poverty are more likely to participate in electoral violence and that these individuals often do so for small amounts of money ranging from 50 to 100 Kenyan Shillings (Cleven 2013).

All of these factors were relevant to the 2007–2008 post-election crisis. On 30 December 2007, the Election Commission of Kenya (ECK) declared that Mwai Kibaki (a Kikuyu) had won the presidential election. This unanticipated announcement generated some spontaneous acts of violence in opposition strongholds such as Kisumu. In more closely fought areas, such as the Rift Valley, several locations became inflamed in violent conflict, which targeted those communities (particularly Kikuyus) who were associated with Kibaki's Party of National Unity (PNU) and its allies (Anderson and Lochery 2008). Early on, the clashes in the Rift Valley were understood to be 'a spontaneous reaction to the alleged "theft" of the election' (Anderson and Lochery 2008, 333). However, it later became clear that much of the violence was deliberately organised, as elites had either appropriated or deployed violence specialists – oftentimes unemployed and poor young men who received small sums of money (Cleven 2013) – to mount conflict. Within this context, contentious narratives about land were also used to drive violence between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' (Klaus 2020).

One month into the violence, Kofi Annan and a panel of African Union leaders arrived in Nairobi to persuade Kibaki and Odinga to resolve the crisis. These negotiations resulted in

the creation of a grand coalition power-sharing cabinet between the PNU, the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM), the Wiper Democratic Movement-Kenya (WDM-K), and KANU, the crafting of a non-executive prime ministerial position for Raila Odinga, and the promulgation of a new constitution in August 2010. Kenya's new constitution further brought about a series of changes, including replacing the previous plurality threshold for the presidency with a simple majority requirement and ushering in devolution.

Conceptualising framing in contexts of election violence

Although the existing literature on operationalising the procedures for conducting framing research is mixed (Druckman and Parkin 2005), it is widely accepted that two dimensions – selection and salience – are key to the framing process. This is because these dimensions allow people to prioritise certain aspects of an issue over others (Entman 1993, 2010). Accordingly, framing influences an individual's behavioural engagement with, or response to, aspects of information by providing choice alternatives (Avineri and Waygood 2013). Whereas early uses of framing emphasised cognitive structuring of everyday life situations (Goffman 1974), contemporary debates have focused on whether framing should be treated as an autonomous field or an extension of agenda-setting and/or priming (Sheufele and Tewksbury 2007). Increasingly, framing is regarded as the *process* by which information is produced, structured, and presented to an audience (Druckman, Fein, and Leeper 2012).

This research situates framing in the context of political communication, and suggests that 'how an issue is characterised in news reports can have an influence on how it is understood by audiences' (Tewksbury and Sheufele 2007, 11). That is, the manner in which choice alternatives are organised forms the very foundation of framing research (D'Angelo 2011). For instance, the choice to participate in electoral violence might be framed around an institutional issue such as winner-take-all politics.

Given the polysemic nature of framing, we focus on emphasis frames, wherein 'a speaker's emphasis on a subset of potentially relevant considerations causes individuals to focus on [those] considerations when constructing their opinions' (Druckman 2001, 1042). We suggest that supplying strategically crafted messages through the media offers 'gatekeepers of thought' such as politicians with a possible means to influence outcomes like electoral violence. Although audiences may filter such content by relying on other predispositions – including their lived experiences – media sources can provide the structure and content to make complex conflicts digestible to listeners and consumers (Somerville 2017, 49). Stated differently, the media's dissemination of elite messages might crucially shape ordinary citizens' attitudes and choices. With regard to participation in violence, we find that incendiary messaging can influence the perspectives of communities that are predisposed towards conflict.

In light of the above discussion, our focus on emphasis frames in this article is threefold. First, we conceptualise election violence as a socially constructed phenomenon with varying degrees of meaning that are competitively framed and mobilised by political factions; we hold that these mobilisation attempts are likely to inform choices about violence in settings where pre-existing institutional and material factors support conflict. In places such as Kenya, therefore, we argue that voters who are already primed towards conflict –

that is, voters with material incentives for violence or historical grievances against the government – may use the salient constructs about electoral stakes to decide on whether violence is a justified response to a given situation.

Second, since people use heuristics or 'mental shortcuts' to understand complex situations (Gilovich, Griffin, and Kahneman 2002), highly emphasised electoral frames can serve as snapshots of perceived realities: as such, they could allow individuals to consider violence as a choice alternative while ignoring other conditions that may have led to the spiral of violence. Thus, this study holds that the selective function of framing and the manner in which competing political elites structure, essentialise, and emphasise electoral values provides emphasis frames with much of their *raison d'être*. At the same time, and as described above, we do not expect these frames to be equally effective across all audiences and among all audience members. Rather, because participation in violence presents a classic collective action problem, when they latch onto existing grievances, emphasis frames can be expected to resonate with those audience members who are predisposed to fight.

Third, since 'the media … remains the main source of information about conflicts and wars' (Somerville 2017, 48), individuals are likely to validate their beliefs, refute certain propositions, and acquire new claims about different phenomena – including electoral violence – through media reports. Issues rendered salient – such as marginalisation, unfairness, or a lack of transparency – can often culminate into substantive choice alternatives upon which people with a predisposition towards conflict ground their truths, beliefs, and justifications for violence. As the empirical sections of this article will demonstrate, for instance, in places such as Nyeri, disillusionment with Kenya's legal system was used to rationalise violence as a self-defence strategy.

Research design and interview data

The epistemological perspective guiding our methodology is based on the assumption that framing, both as an interpretive and as a cognitive mapping tool, hinges on the symbolic power of language for its representational relevancy. In identifying the key frames that resonated with radio listeners and in discussing the reasons for the resonance of these frames during Kenya's 2007–2008 post-election crisis, we opted for an inductive frame analysis, which involved identifying and refining the core themes that emerged from our data (Gale et al. 2013, 3). To better understand the extent to which divisive elite messages resonated with voters on the ground, we not only interviewed elites (i.e. politicians, community leaders, civil society leaders, and academic and policy experts) in Nairobi, Mombasa, Nakuru and Eldoret but also spoke to ordinary Kenyans (i.e. vernacular radio listeners) in Kisumu, Eldoret and Nyeri about their interpretations of elite narratives and their experiences of electoral conflict. Because the post-election crisis mainly involved Luos, Kalenjins, and Kikuyus, we opted not to interview other ethnic groups who were perceived as non-perpetrators of violence or ethnic nationalists living outside their homelands.

Our dataset comprised 146 original in-depth interviews collected over a period of nine months between 2010 and 2013. Of these, 96 interviews were conducted with key influencers from Nairobi, Mombasa, Nakuru and Eldoret, while 50 interviews involved conversations with vernacular radio audiences in Kisumu (Luo majority), Eldoret (Kalenjin majority) and Nyeri (Kikuyu majority). A breakdown of our interviews is provided in Tables 1 and 2.

We adopted a snowball sampling strategy to identify interviewees and relied on our initial respondents to introduce us to additional interview subjects. We interviewed politicians and political party leaders from across the political spectrum. Community leaders, civil society leaders, and academic and policy experts were included in our study based on their familiarity with the topic of election violence and their level of engagement with this issue. Finally, radio listeners (i.e. voters) were selected from three 'historically rival' ethno-linguistic groups (i.e. Kikuyus, Kalenjins, and Luos) that experienced conflict around the 2007 election. All interviews were conducted in English.

Prior to our interviews, we developed three interview guides: the first was designed for discussions with politicians and political party leaders, the second was used in conversations with civil society leaders, community leaders, and academic and policy experts, and the third was used for discussions with Luo, Kalenjin, and Kikuyu vernacular radio listeners. The first two questionnaires consisted of open-ended and non-leading questions. The purpose of our interviews with politicians and political party leaders was to understand *how, when* and *where* violence has made sense as an electoral strategy. However, because we recognised that elites would have vested interests to deny that orchestrating conflict can be electorally beneficial, we also interviewed civil society leaders, community leaders, and academic and policy experts. The third questionnaire, which we fielded among vernacular radio listeners, sought to uncover voters' dominant views on intergroup tensions and the ways and extent to which divisive elite narratives informed their understandings of the stakes of the 2007 election.

Drawing on Van Gorp's (2007) approach to frame analysis, upon completing data collection, we derived central themes from our elite and voter interviews. We relied on human coding to tease out the degrees of congruence and deviation between the narratives that emerged from our elite and voter interviews. We did not opt for computer-generated clusters because, as recent scholarship has noted, '… close reading of texts can reveal very important frame-relevant elements that might be completely missed by other automated approaches because they do not occur frequently, even if such elements profoundly influence public discourse about the issue' (Clarissa et al. 2011, 331). Our choice of human coding was also influenced by the fact that the managerial staff of the vernacular radio stations included in this study were reluctant to give us access to their transcripts and recordings due to the ICC investigations that were underway at the time of our fieldwork. This is because one of the individuals the ICC charged in 2011 was a Kalenjin radio presenter, named Joshua arap Sang, who had worked for KASS FM. The ICC confirmed charges against Sang and three others – including current President and

Table 1. Sub-national and categorical breakdown of elite interviews.

Interviewee category	Nairobi	Mombasa	Nakuru	Eldoret	Total
Politicians / Political party leaders	19	8	6	3	**36**
Police officers	1	1	0	1	**3**
Civil society leaders / Human rights activists	5	9	4	4	**22**
Ethnic and religious elites	2	2	4	3	**11**
Civil servants	0	1	1	0	**2**
Journalists	0	1	0	0	**1**
Academics	9	0	0	0	**9**
Policy experts	9	2	1	0	**12**
Total	**45**	**24**	**16**	**11**	**96**

Table 2. Sub-national breakdown of interviews with vernacular radio listeners.

Interviewee category	Kisumu	Eldoret	Nyeri	Total
Kalenjin radio listeners	0	17	0	**17**
Kikuyu radio listeners	0	0	15	**15**
Luo radio listeners	18	10	0	**18**
Total	**18**	**17**	**15**	**50**

Vice-President Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto, respectively – in January 2012 (Mueller 2014, 27). As a result, we were unable to access radio transcripts in both 2010 and 2013.

Ultimately, we identified three dominant emphasis frames – pertaining to marginalisation, victimisation and foreign occupation – from our interview data. The following two sections detail each of these frames. However, at this juncture, it is important to acknowledge some of the limitations of our research design and data, and it is to this crucial task that we now turn our attention. In doing so, we also offer justifications for our research design and data collection and analysis choices.

Limitations and justifications of research design and data

There are a number of limitations of using non-random in-depth are important for the rich range of interviewees with whom we spoke and the insights that these conversations generated. First, since we conducted voter and elite interviews in 2010 and 2013 respectively, our data almost exclusively captured respondents' *recollections* of inter-party relations, the 2007–2008 electoral process and the post-election crisis. Second, we acknowledge that some voters may have provided information based on their discursive interpretations of the 2007–2008 events beyond ethnic radio listenership. Third, it is possible that our interviews yielded insights on subjects' retrospective justifications for their actions to either orchestrate, or participate in, violence.

Despite these limitations, our data are important for the rich range of interviewees with whom we spoke and the insights that these conversations generated. In fact, it is because we interviewed both elites and ordinary radio listeners that we are able to identity and discuss the core overlapping frames that appeared across both groups. Additionally, our adoption of human coding and our subjective interpretation of frame clusters allowed us to integrate important context-specific variables into our analysis, which would have likely gone unnoticed had we relied on an automated approach. It was vital for our study to pay attention to the ways in which occupational and geographic contexts might have influenced voters' responses and understandings of election violence. Because we conducted interviews with respondents from multiple regions in Kenya, we spoke with voters who worked in a number of different occupations and resided in varying geographic settings. For instance, Kikuyus in the Rift Valley are known to be agriculturalists and land distribution is an emotive issue in the region. By contrast, Luos who are dominant in the Nyanza region tend to work as agricultural laborers and urban workers, and grievances surrounding land are far less prevalent here. Human coding made it possible for us to pay attention to these details.

The fourth limitation of our interview data is that respondents could have provided biased answers to some of our questions. Indeed, during data analysis, we noticed that vernacular radio listeners were occasionally prejudiced in their responses due to their

loyalty to local co-ethnic leaders. As one interviewee explained, the thinking around this inclination is as follows: 'why shouldn't we vote [for] our own so that we can also have our turn to eat?' (interview with an ODM politician, Mombasa, October 10, 2013). Although our interviews with civil society leaders, ethnic and religious elites, and academic and policy experts allowed us to overcome some of the biases that politicians might have held in describing their electoral incentives for violence, our data collection strategies for radio listeners did not allow us to surmount these hurdles with regard to voters' responses. Nevertheless, we do not have reasons to believe that all or even the majority of radio listeners provided us with biased answers. As such, we argue that our data offer appropriate samples for identifying overlapping frames between political elites and voters.

For these reasons, and as previously stated, this research does not offer causal findings. Rather, we offer a descriptive and conceptual account of how and when elite-driven discourses might resonate with vernacular radio listeners. With regard to the Kenyan case, the discussions in the next two sections demonstrate that the emphasis frames pertaining to political marginalisation, victimisation, and foreign occupation found resonance with Kikuyus, Kalenjins, and Luos due to two institutional factors: the high-stakes presidency and low faith in the legal system. From a material perspective, furthermore, all three frames tapped into Kikuyu, Kalenjin, and Luo voters' eagerness to secure access to the state.

Elite framing of electoral stakes in Kenya

Data analysis of elite interviews revealed that marginalisation and victimisation were the two major frames that politicians deployed during the 2007–2008 post-election crisis. With regard to marginalisation, those affiliated with the incumbent regime (PNU in 2007) noted that opposition candidates (particularly ODM politicians) had used this framework to build a narrative, according to which Kalenjin, Luo and Coastal voters had suffered alienation and deprivation at the hands of Kikuyus. This is believed to have resulted in anti-Kikuyu sentiments. To put it in the words of one Nakuru-based respondent:

> … The 2007 clashes [happened] because some tribes [Kalenjins, Luos] were grouped together and they were told that if you want to win this election, you must evict these people [Kikuyus] from this area. They were told, 'these people are responsible for your problems so you must fight them.' And once all the allegations began … that the election had been stolen … that only increased the intensity of the violence [against Kikuyus] (interview with a PNU party official, Nakuru, October 29, 2013).

Implicit in the above account is the notion that rival groups (i.e. Kikuyus) could only be fought if Kalenjins, Luos and Coastal groups won the election and ODM emerged victorious. As such, securing the high-stakes presidential office was viewed as necessary for reversing the long-standing marginalisation that these communities had experienced.

The second major frame that elites deployed emphasised victimisation. Interviews suggest that opposition politicians played an important role in supplying this narrative as a reason and/or justification for violence. Consider, for instance, what one interviewee aligned with the PNU had to say:

> The violence broke out because … and I blame it squarely on ODM … It [comes down to] the manner of [their] campaign. They [ODM] told people that it is forty-two versus one … Forty-

> two tribes versus one. As in, they cultivated the idea in the minds of Kenyans that it was Kikuyus [who were expected to support Kibaki] versus everyone else. So that was very negative campaigning. And at that time, we didn't have any laws to prosecute incitement. Electoral laws were very weak and the election commission was also not reformed. So, they [ODM] could get away with it. But really that violence was not so much of a Kikuyu-Kalenjin affair as much as it was [an] extremely bad way of campaigning and creating false expectations [among] people that 'we have won, we have won!' And then the facts were released and they had lost. So, they set the stage for a violent confrontation (interview with a TNA politician, Nairobi, October 17, 2013).

As the above interview makes clear, the victimisation frame targeted pre-existing and deep-set attitudes among certain Kenyan voters, particularly their proclivity to vote along ethnic lines. In adopting an ethnic approach to voting, existing research has shown that due to their historical hold on political and economic power, Kikuyus are the default rival group that many communities vote against (Battera 2013). This is because Kikuyus are perceived to have dominated both material (i.e. land and capital) and institutional (i.e. high-stakes political offices) domains of power in Kenya. Detailing the extent to which this perception is true or false is beyond the scope of the current research. However, what our data does highlight is that victimisation became a powerful framework to mobilise anti-Kikuyu sentiments, particularly among opposition supporters.

As one might expect, opposition leaders accounted for the post-election crisis by placing blame squarely on incumbent politicians. Much like their counterparts in PNU, ODM elites held that framing the election in terms of victimisation was a tactic that the ruling regime had employed. However, according to this account, the 'victims' were those voters who had supported the opposition and had subsequently been deprived of their rightful victory in the 2007 election when the contest had been 'stolen.' ODM elites claimed that opposition supporters had only become involved in violent conflict because, in the face of electoral fraud and PNU's actions, they had been left with no other choice:

> The Kikuyus were heading the government and their affiliates. And that built into the election. The election was largely peaceful until the day that they realized that they [PNU] were losing. And I can tell you very confidently that President Kibaki never won the election in 2007. He never won … But the matter was so grave for them that some people [Kikuyus] thought, 'if we allow this change in governance, then we are likely going to be victims.' That is why they fought – to retain power … And since they were the government at that time, we could see how they manipulated the agencies that dealt with security. So [opposition supporters] now resorted to violence because they were saying, 'Now, we have nowhere else to go. The people in leadership are violating the law with impunity' (interview with an ODM politician, Nairobi, December 10, 2013).

The third, albeit less frequent, frame that emerged from our elite interviews pertains to foreign occupation. To date, a venerable literature on electoral violence in Kenya has held that during the clashes of the 1990s, politicians from KANU had strategically appropriated the issue of 'historical land injustices' to rally 'indigenes' such as the Kalenjin and Maasai in the Rift Valley against the 'outsider' Kikuyus (Klopp 2001). Our interviews with political elites in Nairobi, Mombasa, Nakuru, and Eldoret uncovered that politicians also deployed discourses of foreign occupation to account for inter-group distrust in conflict-prone areas such as the Rift Valley. The interviews below, highlight these dynamics. For instance, a respondent associated with KANU stated:

> Every time there is an election, politicians … take advantage of the issues affecting a particular community. In [the] Rift Valley where the Kalenjins live, the biggest issue has been land. There is the whole issue of land [there], which is very emotive. So those issues now [around election time] come up. Politicians say, 'You have to reclaim your land and we will fight for you to reclaim the land.' And it becomes a very strong narrative … For a peasant to hear that, they see [it] as if there is a possibility for them to do that … So when the politicians come and say, 'these people are your enemies,' it makes sense [to voters]. So that developed enmity because it was politicised over a period of time. And the ruling government used it as a way to drive violence in the 1990s (interview with a KANU party official, Nairobi, September 12, 2013).

A party leader from the PNU similarly held that land becomes 'an excuse' to generate ethnic clashes around election time (interview with a PNU party official, Nakuru, October 29, 2013). This individual noted:

> The land issue has been [used] throughout … 1992 is when the Kikuyu opposed the government and they said that they were not going to vote for KANU; [they said,] 'we want to go for multiparty government … we want multipartyism.' And that brought in the other groups … The Kalenjins and other tribes felt that they didn't want a Kikuyu again in government. So they [Kalenjins] used an excuse of 'this is our land; you must move out.' And that's how the violence happened in 1992 and also in 1997 (interview with a PNU party official, Nakuru, October 29, 2013).

Notably, however, although civil society leaders noted that politicians had used narratives about land injustice to drive conflict in 2007–2008 (interview with a civil society leader, Mombasa, September 25, 2013; interview with a civil society leader, Eldoret, November 1, 2013), political elites did not mention doing so. This could be because the ICC investigations and cases that were underway at the time of our fieldwork strongly disincentivised Kenyan politicians from admitting to having deployed the foreign occupation emphasis frame in 2007–2008.

In sum, we find that while political elites disagreed considerably about the side that drove the 2007–2008 post-election clashes, two frames pertaining to institutional motivations for violence – namely, marginalisation and victimisation – served as key organising principles. A third framework – foreign occupation, which pertains to material incentives for conflict – also emerged from our data analysis, but it appeared less frequently and was predominantly used to account for the clashes of the 1990s. Whether and how these elite resonated with the views of voters on the ground is addressed in the forthcoming section of this article.

The resonance of elite frames and mass perspectives on election violence

We chose to pay attention to the perspectives of vernacular radio listeners in Kenya for two major reasons. First, despite the widespread use of television, print, and online news outlets, radios remain the primary source of information in in the country and sub-Saharan Africa more generally (Myers 2008). Yet, in the literature on violent contention in the region, besides Rwanda (Straus 2006; Thomson 2018) and a few recent studies of the post-election crisis in Kenya (Ismail and Deane 2008; Wachanga 2011), extant research has paid scarce attention to the ways in which radio messaging can contribute to deadly conflicts. In fact, systematic work on this topic is incipient even outside the African context

(Crabtree, Kern, and Pfaff 2018; Crabtree and Kern 2018). Second, compared to official-language media, vernacular radios have a unique social, cultural and linguistic appeal among their listeners (Frère 2009). In Kenya, vernacular radios have also 'grown from [having] a regional to a national reach' (Okoth 2015, 2). Altogether, then, radios can play an important role in constructing a sense of belonging among voters and in informing their political party affiliations and territorial attachments.

Our interviews with radio audiences revealed that the emphasis frame of political marginalisation resonated more strongly in Odinga's hometown, Kisumu, than it did in Eldoret and Nyeri. Given the multi-ethnic base of support that he had built, there seemed to be a high degree of certainty among the Luo that Odinga would win the 2007 election.[4] Moreover, in light of the fact that almost all the opinion polls leading up to the 2007 elections had placed Odinga ahead of the incumbent Kibaki, the vast majority of Kisumu residents interpreted these data as wholesale indications of Odinga's win. As the power of popular opinion became synonymous with reality, Odinga's electoral loss was construed as evidence to support prevailing perceptions that the government was determined to continue to exclude the Luo from political power. To quote one Kisumu-based respondent:

> When I look at what some of our leaders [politicians] were saying on radios of where I come from, they were telling us that no government in power [has] ever care[d] about the people of Nyanza. This is true … I don't think they [politicians] are lying because everybody knows this. What annoyed people is that this time Kibaki lost [the election] and forced himself [on] Kenyans so he can stay [in power]. [Yet] all the opinion surveys gave Raila a strong lead over Kibaki, even during the actual tallying of the votes. How can he lose [the presidency] with all that surely? They just don't want us in power (interview with a Luo radio listener, Kisumu, July 4, 2010).

Interviewees who detailed claims of vote-rigging in Kisumu and Eldoret, which were widely understood to be ODM-leaning zones, expressed this sentiment even more strongly. These respondents saw electoral fraud as the means by which the PNU regime and Kibaki supporters had gone about furthering Luo and Kalenjin voters' political marginalisation. As one respondent in Eldoret explained:

> I believe them [politicians' claims about vote-rigging] because a day before the release of the official results, there was confusion all over with contradicting messages from journalists. We know Raila won this election. What caused anger and violence against [the] PNU party and their Kikuyu members is that instead of leaving power peacefully, they rigged themselves back by force. I don't think people who voted for [Odinga] were going to accept that and move on as they keep telling us [to do] (interview with a Kalenjin radio listener, August 7, 2010).

Along similar lines, an interviewee from Kisumu held:

> Our leaders did not make this [up] … even independent observers said there was a problem with the tallying of votes and they were kicked out of the tallying centres … What is sad is that everyone went to vote in peace and they [the government] started playing around with people's will. You don't expect us to keep quiet and let go [of] our hard-earned victory (interview with a Luo radio listener, Kisumu, July 10, 2010).

Even though our data reveals that foreign occupation was not elites' preferred emphasis frame, ideas about autochthony and a territorial sense of belonging did figure prominently in voters' narratives, especially in the Rift Valley. As Table 3 shows, none of the respondents in Kisumu evoked issues of foreign occupation as a factor that resonated

with them. However, ten out of seventeen participants in Eldoret believed that Kikuyus had increasingly encroached on their ancestral lands.[5] In Nyeri, furthermore, all participants held that Kalenjin politicians had used radio airwaves to politicise the thorny land relations between the two groups. As such, we find considerable evidence that political rivalries and subsequent electoral clashes were essentialised and reduced to systemic grievances around historical land occupancy. Our interview with a respondent in Eldoret highlights the salience of the 'foreign occupation' narrative in the Rift Valley region:

> Everyone is aware that there are grievances about lands in Rift Valley, even in parts of the Coast[al region]. This is a very emotional subject for people here because we need the land to graze our cows … I think people were angry at some communities after being told that they needed to chase the people who took their ancestral lands (interview with a Kalenjin radio listener, Eldoret, August 10, 2010).

In this context, competitive representations of land access and tenure systems became a central subject of dispute between the Rift Valley's Kalenjin majority and sizeable Kikuyu minority. To put it in the words of another Eldoret-based interlocutor:

> The problem is that if some of our leaders [politicians] say the truth about historical injustices, people say they are tribal or whatever … [Yet] those Kikuyus who now say they belong here know very well that [Jomo] Kenyatta gave them land that was not theirs. Kenyatta himself took a lot of land for his family. I think there will always be a sore relationship between the Kalenjin and Kikuyu in [the] Rift Valley every time they are not in the same political party … In every [such] election, land [will] become a problem for people living here (interview with a Kalenjin radio listener, Eldoret, August 24, 2010).

Meanwhile, ideas of a shared and communal victimhood became common explanations for violence in Kibaki's hometown of Nyeri where post-election clashes in the Rift Valley were seen as planned attacks against Kikuyus. From an institutional perspective, and with regard to the state's decreasing control over the use of force, many respondents also held that local politicians had organised the violence. As one respondent in Nyeri described:

> Some of these [vernacular] radios are mouthpieces for the local politicians who use them to spread hate while advancing their personal agendas … Many Kikuyus were targeted and killed for political reasons, and some [politicians] openly called for the eviction of our communities, yet these people have lived there [in the Rift Valley] for decades. Where do they want them to go? (interview with a Kikuyu radio listener, Nyeri, September 6, 2010).

Interviewees also noted that politicians were able to instrumentalise violence because they did not expect the legal system to hold them to account. They revealed that when some Kikuyus appealed to the state to rescue those affected in the Rift Valley, their calls were framed in terms of kin-group-kin-state linkages. In the process, narratives of victimhood were used to justify group self-defence. To put it in the words of another Nyeri-based interviewee:

Table 3. Distribution of emphasis frames among vernacular radio listeners in Kisumu, Eldoret and Nyeri.

Emphasis frame	Kisumu	Eldoret	Nyeri
Marginalisation	17	3	1
Victimisation	14	12	15
Foreign occupation	0	10	13

> When you are attacked you have to defend yourself. […] I don't see the problem with our leaders telling our people to watch out for the attacks … The point is, these were planned attacks against the Kikuyus and we had the right to protect ourselves (interview with a Kikuyu radio listener, Nyeri, September 6, 2010).

As Table 3 reveals, the frames of foreign occupation, marginalisation, and victimisation appeared in our voter interviews from Kisumu, Eldoret and Nyeri. However, the distribution of these frames and their potential meaning varied across the three research locations.

This is especially true for Kisumu and Nyeri where victimhood was a salient narrative but was articulated and interpreted differently. In Nyeri, as previously discussed, issues of victimisation were negotiated in terms of planned attacks that occurred mostly in the Rift Valley. Conversely, Kisumu residents claimed to be victims of state coercion and police brutality. To quote one interviewee:

> We were told that the government was now using [the] police force to butcher those who protested … The problem we had is that some [radio] stations in Kisumu were switched off by the government … this made the situation worse because the government did not want journalists or our leaders to talk about police killings in Kisumu (interview with a Luo radio listener, Kisumu, July 21, 2010).

Overall, the victimhood narrative found the most resonance across the three research locations. This potentially indicates that even though elites may be interested in organising violence across multiple sites, conditional on voters' concerns, fears, and widely-held beliefs, emphasis frames can resonate to varying levels. A comprehensive exploration of the reasons for such variance is beyond the scope of this study. Nonetheless, our findings do suggest that among those predisposed towards conflict, political elites' argumentative schemes can inform voters' assessments of this choice alternative.

Emergent emphasis frames around the 2013 and 2017 elections

Following the 2007–2008 post-election crisis, Kenya promulgated a new constitution in 2010, which was implemented prior to the 2013 polls. This section explores whether and to what extent the country's revised constitutional dispensation has generated new frameworks that could influence future patterns of violence.

Although Kenya's 2013 presidential election was heralded as a peaceful contest, scholarly research and independent inquiries have highlighted that violence did occur in association with several county-level elections – such as Tana River and Marsabit – where narratives about reversing historical patterns of marginalisation seemed to resonate with voters (Kenya National Commission on Human Rights 2012; Human Rights Watch 2013; Malik 2020). Moreover, it has come to light that politicians associated with Odinga's CORD alliance accused Kibaki's government of facilitating Uhuru Kenyatta's win in 2013 so that the latter could use the state apparatus to frustrate the ICC's investigations (International Crisis Group 2013; Mueller 2014). These allegations may have rendered CORD supporters less likely to accept the election results. However, unlike the 2007 opinion polls, which consistently placed Odinga ahead of Kibaki throughout the electoral process, the 2013 opinion polls were ultimately undecisive (Onguny 2016).

This difference may explain the emergence of a new wave of political rhetoric to manage voters' perceptions about possible election outcomes. Mutahi Ngunyi's (2013) 'tyranny of numbers' thesis, for example, was one of the strategic frames used to orient voters' attention towards minority-majority voting power. The idea became a central sound-bite, and it steered media debates around the 2013 election. Taken together, although the 2013 election season was less conflict-ridden than the 2007 contest, several new emphasis frames raised suspicions about electoral malpractice and gave rise to localised violence in particular areas.

As in 2013, the 8 August 2017 presidential fight once again came down to a contest between Kenyatta (Jubilee Party) and Odinga (NASA Coalition). After an initial declaration that awarded Kenyatta a second term, on 1 September 2017, the Supreme Court of Kenya annulled the results and ordered a fresh presidential election within sixty days. This contest was eventually held on 26 October 2017.

To make sense of these unprecedented events, our work suggests that it is important to consider some of the emphasis frames that politicians had adopted in the run-up to the elections. First, in contrast to 2013, when Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto had used the plight of 'the accused' to consolidate electoral support (Lynch 2014; Malik 2016), in 2017, the duo had focused on their track records to convince voters that they merited a second term in office. Second, because Kenyatta and Ruto controlled the state machinery, they had the means to use their power to influence the outcome of the election in their favour. In fact, the opposition levied precisely this allegation in the wake of the death of the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission's (IEBC) ICT manager, Chris Musando. NASA politicians accused the incumbent regime of reinstating an authoritarian state (Rana 2017), and subsequently, called on their supporters to boycott the October polls. These appeals resulted in a turnout of only 34% in the re-run. Meanwhile, Jubilee politicians framed the newly reconstituted NASA coalition as a makeshift 'coalition of losers' who were interested in fulfilling their personal political agendas (Kaseyi 2016).

Following the annulment of the August 2017 elections, moreover, politicians on both sides of the aisle appeared to deploy new sets of emphasis frames. Elites associated with the ruling party painted the Supreme Court's decision as a 'coup' against the government and the Kenyan people (Obulutsa and Ndiso 2017). Critical to these claims was the notion that the Supreme Court had become a 'partisan' political tool (Blomfield 2017). In contrast, NASA politicians focused their attention on painting the IEBC as an incompetent and partisan body that had played a vital role in the flawed August election (Otieno 2017). Thus, with regard to the 2017 election, elite frameworks seemed to revolve around three central themes: the partisan Supreme Court and IEBC, a culture of impunity and an authoritarian state.

Conclusion and Implications

Drawing on original interview data on Kenya's 2007–2008 post-election crisis, this study has highlighted the ways in which elite frames pertaining to political marginalisation, victimisation and foreign occupation resonated with vernacular radio listeners on the ground. In doing so, we join a large group of scholars who have emphasised the central role that political elites play in driving election-time conflict (Klopp 2001; Berenschot

2011). Importantly, however, by also including interviews with voters, we move beyond elite-based accounts of electoral conflict. Furthermore, our explicit use of an issue-framing approach and our rich interview data collected from elites and voers offer a new model that highlights the ways in which a discursive factor such as issue-framing can interact with institutional and material predispositions to inform voters' choices about violence. Specifically, our data allowed us to identify and discuss the main elite-driven narratives that tapped into Kenyan voters' pre-existing anxieties about the distribution of power and resources in the country. Beyond the 2007–2008 post-election crisis, our reflections on the 2013 and 2017 elections further reveal that the potential manipulation of public opinion could lead to a recurrence of violence in the future. Stated differently, we suggest that incipient and new frames from 2013 and 2017 offer strong indications of the kinds of narratives that are likely to inform future patterns of election violence in Kenya.[6]

In developing and illustrating the aforementioned claims, this article has addressed important gaps in the electoral violence and framing literatures. With respect to the scholarship on election violence, whereas several studies have focused on the triggers and structural causes of such conflict, very little work has investigated the intricate and recursive relationship between elite discourses and mass perspectives on election-related clashes. To this end, our work has highlighted a number of important ways in which elite appeals can percolate down to local media audiences. With regard to framing research, Entman (2010, 401) has raised two critical gaps, one of which points to the failure in gauging the 'shifts and variations in framing over time that might be politically decisive.' In responding to this lacuna, this study has shown that the stability of frames hinges on disruptive mechanisms (positive or negative) that elites introduce and then variably negotiate over time and space. Entman (2010, 401) has also pointed to the 'neglect of the diverse levels and pathways on which framing operates.' By identifying political marginalisation, victimisation, and land occupation as three key emphasis frames that found varying levels of resonance among vernacular radio listeners in Kenya, our research has yielded new insights on the potential interactions between elite and mass perspectives on violence.

Finally, this study highlights important avenues for future research. With the rapid rise of the internet and social media across sub-Saharan Africa, new media technologies are now available not only to African elites - who might be interested in organising conflict - but also to citizens who are keen on containing violence (Ajao and Wielenga 2017) and challenging autocratic regimes (Branch and Mampilly 2015). Under what conditions might these new forms of media advance peace in the region? And when might they become tools to orchestrate violence? These will be critical questions for scholars to consider in the coming years.

Notes

1. Notable exceptions include research by Sarah Jenkins (2012) and Kathleen Klaus (2020).
2. The term 'voters,' as used here, is not meant to suggest that all vernacular radio listeners participated in the polls or had a hand in the post-election crisis. Rather, 'voters' is used as a shorthand for individuals who were exposed to divisive elite messages via vernacular radios and who *could* have participated in the polls and in electoral clashes.

3. Although some clashes also broke out in association with the 2017 election, due to the peculiarity of that contest, we don't count it among the three elections around which major violence has occurred in Kenya.
4. Detailing the tactics that were used to build this wide support base is beyond the scope of this paper. For a fruitful discussion of these strategies Lynch (2008).
5. Because voters typically identified more than one salient narrative, the number of respondents for each town in Table 3 is greater than the total number of respondents for Kisumu, Eldoret and Nyeri as shown in Table 2.
6. For details on the direction of media coverage on elections held in Kenya since 2013, see Peace Pen Communications (2018).

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Declaration of interest statement

The authors declare that there is no actual or potential financial or personal interest or belief that could affect their objectivity regarding this research. The authors have had and will have no financial, personal or other relationships (actual or potential) with other people or organisations within three years of beginning the submitted work that could inappropriately influence, or be perceived to influence, their work.

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Note on contributors

Aditi Malik is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts. Her substantive research is focused on the study of political parties, political violence and ethnic politics in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. Her research on these topics has appeared in *African Conflict & Peacebuilding Review*; *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*; *Politics, Groups, & Identities*; and *African Studies Review*.

Philip Onguny is an Assistant Professor at the School of Conflict Studies at Saint Paul University in Ottawa. His research focuses on political violence, identity-based conflict, and the role of media in conflict transformation and peacebuilding in sub-Saharan Africa.

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