1 | *Introduction*

Mauche Settlement Scheme, Rift Valley Kenya, December 2007

On the evening of December 30, 2007, Kenya's Electoral Commission (ECK) announced the winners of the general election. Residents in the farming community of Mauche had gathered around radios and televisions in local bars and cafés to listen to the electoral results. Community members, most of whom identified as Kalenjin, were confident that their candidate, Raila Odinga, from the opposition Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) party, would win. The mood shifted quickly, however, as the incoming electoral returns pointed to a victory for the incumbent candidate from the Party of National Unity (PNU). ODM supporters in Mauche and elsewhere viewed the PNU win as a sign that the incumbent party had rigged the election. Anxiety and tension grew as residents watched TV images of a prominent ODM candidate, William Ruto, dragged offstage by Kenya's military police.[1] A young resident recounts, "When we saw this we knew the whole of the Kalenjin community had no one to champion for their rights, so the youths from the Kalenjin community proceeded to attack the Kikuyu."[2] Another resident explains how some community members "resorted to fighting" when their candidate didn't win because "they knew the next thing was their eviction."[3] That evening, Mauche

---

[1] William Ruto was an important leader in the Kalenjin community and ODM party. He was pulled offstage during the ECK announcement of Molo constituency. In 2010 the International Criminal Court accused him of involvement in the 2007–2008 postelectoral violence. In 2013, he became Deputy President of Kenya.

[2] Interview-Mauche SS-Nakuru, October 8, 2012 (1). The Kikuyu are the largest ethnic community in Kenya (20 percent of national population) and provided the largest political support base for the incumbent government in 2007.

[3] Interview-Mauche SS-Nakuru County, October 4, 2012 (3).

1

residents crossed into the neighboring village of Likia and began torch-ing the homes and properties of their Kikuyu neighbors.[4]

Ogilgei Settlement Scheme, Rift Valley, Kenya, December 2007

Less than twenty miles down the road, Kalenjin and Kikuyu farming communities also border one another. Yet Kalenjin resi-dents in Ogilgei provide very different accounts of the 2007 election. Rather than recounting episodes of violence or eviction, residents emphasize that here, "it was peaceful." It was stable enough in fact, that the government designated the ethnically mixed area as a temporary camp for the internally displaced. Most residents of Ogilgei did not believe that electoral results signaled imminent eviction from their land. Violence never esca-lated during the 2007–2008 postelectoral period, nor had it in previous elections.

The contrasting accounts of Mauche and Ogilgei motivate the book's main puzzle: Why does election violence escalate in one local context, but not another seemingly similar context? Why, for example, might violence escalate between two farming communities, while a short distance away similar farming communities remain peaceful? Why do certain regions, constituencies, neighborhoods, or villages experience significant levels of violence while seemingly similar areas do not?

The book explains this puzzle of local variation by suggesting that the occurrence of violence is a joint production between political elites and ordinary citizens.[5] Indeed, elites must have an incentive to use violence. Yet we know far less about why and when ordinary citizens participate. Explaining spatial variation thus raises a second and clo-sely related research question: why and when do ordinary citizens participate in election violence?

I argue that in contexts where land shapes livelihood and identifica-tion, and where property rights institutions are weak, land, and

---

[4] Most Kikuyu, who comprise the country's largest ethnic group, voted for the incumbent candidate, Mwai Kibaki, leader of the PNU.

[5] This concept of the "joint production" of violence builds on Stathis Kalyvas's argument that violence in civil war is jointly produced between national-level actors and allies at the local level (see Kalyvas 2006, 2003).
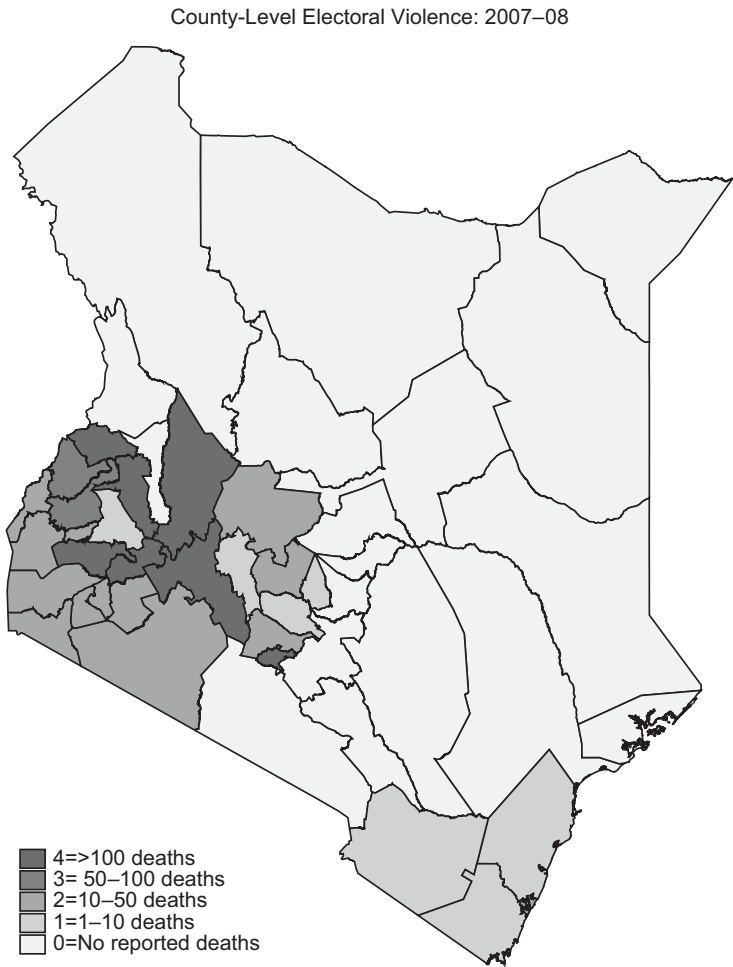
specifically, collective narratives around land, can provide a key device around which elites and citizens coordinate the production of electoral violence. Drawing primarily on evidence from Kenya's 2007–2008 postelection violence, the book finds that electoral violence escalated between neighboring and ethnically distinct farming communities only when a subset of residents in each community linked the outcome of elections with their ability to access, reclaim, or secure their land. In these cases, violence became a means of ensuring their preferred candidate at all costs, or a mechanism to preempt or defend against their own eviction.

The opening vignette illustrates the centrality of land: many of the Kalenjin residents of Mauche who attacked their Kikuyu neighbors linked the incumbent victory of Mwai Kibaki with their imminent eviction. Lacking title deeds and tenure security, violence acquired a defensive logic: "evict them before they can evict us." Yet in the nearby farming community of Ogilgei, Kalenjin farmers had few reasons to attack their Kikuyu neighbors despite the divisive appeals of politicians. Notably, because Kalenjin residents and their Kikuyus neighbors were both land secure, neither side linked the election outcome with their tenure security.

The Puzzle

In the postelectoral period of Kenya's 2007 general election, the country experienced its most devastating episode of electoral violence in its history. According to official reports, at least 1,300 people were killed and nearly 700,000 people were displaced from their homes (Government of Kenya 2008). Importantly, however, there were significant differences in the sites and scale of violence across the country. The map below illustrates the spatial variation in the level of violence across Kenya's forty-seven counties, which I measure by the number of reported deaths.[6] Map 1.1 shows that the majority of election-related

---

[6] These measures are based on the Uppsala Conflict Data Program at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset), the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), and the Commission of Inquiry into Post Election Violence (CIPEV) report (Government of Kenya 2008). See appendix for coding details.

County-Level Electoral Violence: 2007–08

4=>100 deaths
3= 50–100 deaths
2=10–50 deaths
1=1–10 deaths
0=No reported deaths

Map 1.1 County-level election violence: 2007–2008.

deaths occurred in seven out of Kenya's forty-seven counties, most of which were clustered together (darkest shading).

Some of the highest death tolls were in Nairobi, the country's capital city, as well as in the more rural counties of Nakuru and Uasin Gishu, where between 200 and 400 people died and thousands of people were displaced. Yet even within counties with such high death tolls, many residents did not experience physical violence directly. Instead,

residents watched or listened as violence escalated elsewhere: in a nearby village, trading center, or distant city.

What accounts for this significant variation in electoral violence across and within counties? Many existing studies analyze the broad institutional and political factors that help explain cross-national or temporal patterns of electoral violence (e.g. Fjelde & Höglund 2016a; Arriola & Johnson 2012; Straus & Taylor 2012). Theories emphasize the strategic calculations of national elites, the type of constitutional design and electoral rules, state capacity, ethnic polarization, and the role of election observers (e.g. Asunka et al. 2019; Daxecker 2014).

Yet most instances of electoral violence are highly localized. As the opening vignette of Mauche and Ogilgei illustrates, electoral violence does not occur uniformly, even in areas with similar political or demographic profiles. While this may seem like an obvious point to some readers, the implication is that while macro-level variables can explain broad cross-national or temporal patterns in electoral violence, the occurrence of electoral violence is often a function of much more local or regional dynamics. However, because most studies focus on macro-level explanations of violence, few can specify how local-level factors and mechanisms interact with macro-level forces to enable and restrain the organization of electoral violence (Balcells & Justino 2014; Kalyvas 2006). Importantly, there are a growing number of studies that focus on the subnational dynamics of election violence (e.g. Gutiérrez-Romero 2014; Dercon & Guiterrez-Romero 2012; Boone 2011; Wilkinson 2004) or on the interaction between micro- and macro-level factors (Söderberg Kovacs & Bjarnesen 2018). Yet we still know very little about why electoral violence varies so significantly within subnational spaces.[7]

Summary of Argument

This book aims to provide a theory of electoral violence that can help explain the significant local variation in violence that so often characterizes episodes of electoral violence in Kenya and elsewhere. Broadly,

---

[7] This research agenda draws inspiration from civil war scholars who focus on the interaction between micro- and macro-level factors (e.g. Balcells 2017; Balcells & Justino 2014; Kalyvas 2006; Weinstein 2006; Wood 2003).

I argue that the occurrence of electoral violence emerges as a joint production between elites and ordinary citizens. This concept borrows from civil war scholars, notably Kalyvas (2003), who argues that civil war is a "joint process" that relies on national elites seeking power at the center who must ally with local actors seeking to gain advantage locally (2003: 486). Drawing on this theory, I analyze electoral violence as a process of social and political mobilization that requires coordination between elites and ordinary actors rather than an event based solely on elite calculations.

I argue that in certain contexts, land narratives can serve as a key device around which elites and citizens coordinate the use of violence. The material and symbolic power of these land narratives varies locally and is often historically rooted. Narratives are the stories people tell "to makes sense of their world and environments" (Autesserre 2014: 6).[8] Land narratives are the ways people talk about and make sense of their claims and rights relative to others. They are the stories that group members tell to express beliefs about the legitimacy or injustice of the land distribution process, fears of losing land, and strategies of asserting claims to land and territory.

To understand how these land narratives can serve as a mechanism through which elites and ordinary citizens organize and restrain violence, the book analyzes the escalation of electoral violence as a process that includes two main causal paths or stages. In the first stage, I theorize the formation of contentious land narratives, analyzing how and why the salience and content of these narratives varies spatially and temporally. I argue that a key source of variation is the parity in land rights between two distinct but proximate groups. The book identifies three scenarios. The first is a scenario of *land equality:* two nearby but ethnically distinct groups both benefit from similar land rights (e.g. all households have a title deed). The second is a scenario of *moderate land inequality*, where members of one ethnic community hold slightly stronger land rights relative to a neighboring group. In a third scenario, there is *significant land inequality* between a landholding and landless class (e.g. landlords and tenants). Importantly, it is in the second scenario – moderate land inequality between ethnic groups – where salient and contentious land narratives are most likely to form.

[8] See also Patterson and Monroe 1998; Goffman 1974; Berger & Luckmann 1967.

The second stage of the book analyzes the organization of electoral violence: how and when elites compel ordinary citizens to participate in violence. I argue that under certain conditions, contentious land narratives provide elites with an effective tool to mobilize election-related violence. Specifically, I demonstrate how land narratives shape the mechanisms of political mobilization, the material and symbolic motives for citizen participation, and the logics of targeting.

A key premise is that the occurrence of electoral violence is far less common than the spaces where I observe or predict contentious land narratives. Therefore, I do not claim that contentious land narratives cause or predict violence. Rather, I treat land narratives as a mechanism linking inequality in tenure rights with the escalation of violence. My main interest is in explaining why land narratives enable elites to organize violence in some cases but not others.

In order for electoral violence to escalate, several factors must come into play. First, leaders are only able to invoke a logic for violence where they can also tap into salient and contentious local land narratives – narratives that emphasize anxieties of losing land and anger over previous acts of land grabbing or unjust allocation. Second, these narratives rarely emerge randomly or from elite manipulation alone. Instead, these narratives provide the strongest collection action frame where they are based on very local-level experiences of perceived inequality, injustice, or exclusion.[9] Specifically, I find that land narratives are much more salient where there is land inequality between neighboring ethnic communities who are also political rivals. Contentious land narratives emerge most often when one community holds title deeds to their land and the other community does not. Third, even where there is land inequality and contentious land narratives, elites are only able to use land narratives as tools to organize violence where there is a tradition of political elites acting as strong and credible "land patrons" – a political leader who provides or protects land rights in exchange for loyalty or political support. In these scenarios, followers are more likely to believe that their candidate has the capacity and political will to protect or alter the distribution of land rights in their favor. In these spaces – as in parts of Nakuru County – elections can signal a rare window of opportunity to gain and secure land, and equally, a moment to lose.

9 I borrow the term "collective action frame" from Bedford & Snow (2000).

In examining electoral violence as a coproduction between political elites and ordinary citizens, the book explains why elites succeed in organizing violence in some localities, yet across most others, they face significant constraints.

Summary of Methodology

The theory that I've outlined here draws on fifteen months of multi-method fieldwork that I conducted in Kenya between 2010 and 2013. The fieldwork consisted of two main data collection strategies. The first stage was qualitative in nature and involved what I call a "two-stage comparative case study" – a series of case comparisons across Nakuru County, located in the Rift Valley, and Kwale and Kilifi counties, located in Coast region. In selecting cases, I used a "most-similar" research design. Doing so enabled me to evaluate a series of hypotheses linking land rights with the occurrence of electoral violence, while considering alternative explanations. Specifically, I used this strategy to examine the determinants of contentious land narratives between groups (stage 1) and the determinants of electoral violence (stage 2).

I limited my universe of cases to settlement schemes and land-buying companies (LBCs): agricultural communities where the state or an elected official leverages significant control over the distribution of land and tenure rights. The research design thus enables me to control for a number of factors across cases. Yet it also creates an important scope condition, limiting the generalizability of my theory to spaces where the state controls rights to land. In total, I conducted 230 in-depth interviews with residents of these settlement schemes and LBCs, in addition to focus groups with elders and youths in each case study area.

This qualitative stage of the research was crucial for a few reasons. First, interview questions touched on a number of sensitive issues, including land documentation, perceptions of security, views of ethnic others, and one's experience with election violence. I prioritized creating an interview dynamic that encouraged respondents to feel comfortable speaking openly and honestly. To do so, I conducted one-on-one interviews in the privacy of a respondent's home and in the language that the respondent preferred.[10] Further, in nearly every

[10] In most cases, respondents chose to speak in Swahili, though some preferred their mother tongue (e.g. Kalenjin or Kikuyu). A few opted for English.

case-study community, I made repeated visits. This iterative engage-
ment also helped me gain the trust of community members. The
format of the qualitative interview, which relied on a structured ques-
tionnaire, was also important in that it enabled respondents to take
the time they needed: to ask for clarification or to expand on certain
questions or issues. In this regard, the interview format enabled
respondents to answer questions on their own terms; to tell their
own stories. While this helped to elicit trust, this last point also
allowed me to understand how individuals use particular frames or
narratives. It was only by conducting in-depth, qualitative interviews
that I could identify the salient narratives that community members
used, and further, how such narratives varied, in subtle and explicit
ways, across.

The second main data collection strategy was a household-level
survey with 750 respondents, which I conducted in two counties in
the Rift Valley region (Nakuru and Uasin Gishu) and two in the
Coast region (Kwale and Kilifi). The survey is novel and important
in part because there is no reliable, individual-level data on election
violence. Instead, and with a few notable exceptions, most studies
on cross-national and Kenya-specific studies of election violence
rely on event-count datasets. While these sources are invaluable,
they tend to conceal the more micro-level variation in violence. In
addition, these datasets typically rely on media or government
reports of violence, which introduces political and reporting bias.
While the survey data I present is limited in geographic scope, it
enables me to extend my inferential scope by testing the hypotheses
I examined in the first stage of data collection (qualitative inter-
views) across a larger number of observations. Further, it is one of
the few datasets on election violence in Kenya that relies on the
responses of "ordinary citizens" rather than bureaucrats, political
elites, or media outlets. I expand on the book's methodology and
research design in the next chapter.

Defining Electoral Violence

Electoral violence is not unique to Kenya, nor is it isolated to countries
in Africa. As the violence and hate speech following the 2016 presiden-
tial election in the US demonstrates, electoral violence can occur in
a range of country settings with different colonial and conflict histories,

and levels of economic development and democratic consolidation.[11]
By one estimate, 19 percent of all elections held between 1945 and
2010 experienced significant violence while protests accompanied
another 14 percent.[12] Since 1981, 37 percent of elections have been
violent (NELDA).[13] Across Africa, highly repressive or large-scale
violence has affected 20 percent of all elections held between 1990
and 2008 (Straus & Taylor 2012).[14] By 2013, 48 percent of voters
surveyed across thirty-three African countries reported that they feared
election violence (Mares & Young 2016),[15] and while recent attention
has focused on electoral violence across Africa, most incidents of elec-
tion violence have occurred in South Asia (e.g. India and Pakistan) and
Latin America (e.g. Colombia and Guatemala).[16]

Importantly, the way that scholars choose to conceptualize and
measure election-related violence, including decisions about how to
establish the time frame for observing counts of election violence,
or how to delineate organizers, participants, and targets, has impor-
tant implications for the theories that scholars generate, the obser-
vable patterns that emerge, and the ability for scholars to make
inferences across different datasets. For example, Hafner-Burton
et al. (2013) limit their definition of election violence to "govern-
ment-sponsored electoral violence" (Hafner-Burton et al. 2013).
This conceptualization excludes cases of election violence where
opposition leaders instigate violence (Collier & Vicente 2012) or
where ordinary citizens rather than state officials participate in
violence.

Many scholars define electoral violence as a subcategory of fraud
(e.g. Mares & Young 2016), a type of political violence aimed at

---

[11] The crowdsourcing platform, "Ushahidi" monitored and collected data on
incidents of hate speech during the US 2016 election (Kuo 2016).
[12] This statistic comes from the National Elections across Democracy and
Autocracy (NELDA) dataset (NELDA33). "Significant violence" refers to at
least one civilian death during, before, or after the election.
[13] A more conservative estimate, which uses a threshold of twenty-five deaths,
finds that 23 percent of all elections between 1985 and 2005 have been violent
(Arriola & Johnson 2012).
[14] These countries include Côte d'Ivoire, DRC, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, South
Africa, Sudan, Togo, and Zimbabwe (Straus & Taylor 2012: 27).
[15] The survey was conducted by Afrobarometer (Round 5).
[16] According to the Electoral Contentious and Violence (ECAV) dataset, the
highest number of election-related contentious events occurred in Asia
(31 percent) followed by Africa (26 percent).