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The power and limits of social movements in promoting political and constitutional change: the case of the Ufungamano Initiative in Kenya (1999-2005)

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2012-07-25
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/11720

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ABSTRACT

The Kenyan political landscape has, since the 1990's, been tumultuous and characterised by multiple political and social struggles centred on embedding a new constitutional order. This thesis is a qualitative case study of the Ufungamano Initiative, a powerful movement involved in these struggles between 1999 and 2005. Emerging in an environment of deep societal divisions and multiple sites of struggle, the Ufungamano Initiative is a remarkable story of *how* and *why* previously disjointed and disparate individuals and groups came together in a 'movement of movements' to become a critical contender in Kenyan constitutional reforms. The movement utilised direct citizens' actions and was directly in competition with the Moi/KANU state for control of the Constitution Reform Process. This direct competition and challenge, posed a legitimacy crisis on the state led process forcing an autocratic and intolerant regime to capitulate and open up space for democratic engagement of citizens in the Constitution Reform Process. But the Ufungamano Initiative is also a story of the limits of social movements. While holding so much power and promise, movements are limited in their ability to effect fundamental changes in society. Even after substantial gains in challenging the state, the Ufungamano Initiative was vulnerable and agreed to enter a 'coerced' merger with the state-led process in 2001. The merger dissipated the Ufungamano Initiative's energy.

This study therefore speaks to the power and limits of social movements in effecting fundamental changes in society. Applying a socio-historical approach, the study locates the Ufungamano Initiative within the broader social, economic and political struggles to argue that contemporary constitutional reform struggles in Kenya were, in Polanyi's (1944) terms, double movement type of societal counter-movements to protect itself from an avaricious economic and political elites. Engaging the political process model, this thesis analyses seventy in-depth interviews and secondary data to explain the dynamics in the rise, operations, achievements and decline of the Ufungamano Initiative as illustrative of how movements emerge, take on a life of their own and sometimes metamorphose into phenomenal forces of change, or just fizzle out.

Keywords: Social movements. Civil Society. Citizen Participation. Constitutional Reform Struggles. Kenya.