

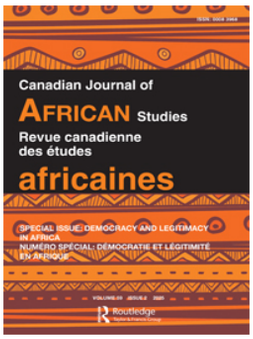
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Catherine Musuva

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Contestation of power and identity in Kenya's 2022 governor election in Machakos county

Catherine Musuva

African Centre for Migration and Society, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

ABSTRACT

The introduction of sub-national governments in Kenya, along with an increased number of elective seats, has expanded interest in electoral politics beyond the presidential vote. Building on the broader debates on the emerging literature on the electoral politics of devolved units in Kenya, this paper uses secondary data to examine political contestation for the powerful governor position in the 2022 elections in Machakos County. The dynamics of elite competition between co-ethnics are explored by examining how the candidates presented themselves and their opponents to the electorate. The extent to which the presidential campaigns intersected with the county governor campaigns is also examined. The study finds that intra-ethnic competition for the governor's office is shaped by class privilege, a combination of self-identification and social differentiation strategies, as well as presidential election dynamics. These results have implications for how politicians perceive what makes a good leader and how leaders are chosen to vie.

RÉSUMÉ

L'introduction de gouvernements infranationaux au Kenya, simultanément à l'augmentation du nombre de sièges électifs, ont accru l'intérêt pour la politique au-delà de l'élection présidentielle. S'appuyant sur les débats élargis de la littérature émergente sur la politique électorale des unités décentralisées au Kenya, cet article utilise des données secondaires pour examiner la contestation politique concernant le puissant poste de gouverneur lors des élections de 2022 dans le comté de Machakos. La dynamique de la concurrence entre les élites des deux ethnies est explorée à travers l'examen de la manière dont les candidats se sont présentés et ont présenté leurs adversaires à l'électorat. La mesure dans laquelle les campagnes présidentielles ont croisé celles des gouverneurs de comtés est également examinée. L'étude révèle que la concurrence intra-ethnique pour le poste de gouverneur est déterminée par les privilèges de classe, une combinaison de stratégies d'auto-identification et de différenciation sociale, ainsi que par la dynamique des élections présidentielles. Ces résultats ont des implications sur la façon dont les politiciens perçoivent ce qui fait un bon dirigeant et sur la façon dont les dirigeants sont choisis pour concourir.

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CONTACT Catherine Musuva catherine.musuva@wits.ac.za

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Introduction

Kenya's Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) conducted general elections in the country on 9 August 2022. These were the third elections since the 2010 constitution that made far-reaching changes to Kenya's political governance structure and electoral system. The celebrated 2010 constitution (re)introduced two distinct and interdependent tiers of government while retaining Kenya as a unitary state. A range of national government functions were decentralised to the forty-seven counties that make up the sub-national government tier. Carved out of the old districts that fell under the former ministry of local government, county governments were granted fiscal, administrative and political autonomy. Each county is led by a governor and consists of a county executive and legislative assembly. Counties are funded by an allocation of national revenue from the national government, conditional government grants and revenue that they generate.

The constitution also made some noteworthy changes to promote political representation. First, the number of elected representatives was increased from three to six to cater for the new county governments and the reintroduction of the senate. During general elections, legislated to take place every five years on the second Tuesday in August, voters are handed six ballots for president, member of national assembly, senator, woman representative, governor and member of county assembly. Second, Kenya retained the first-past-the-post system for all elective seats except the president, whose election was changed to a plurality majoritarian system with a second round if the candidate with the highest number of votes in the first round fails to garner more than 50% plus one of the total votes and more than 25% votes in at least twenty-four counties.

Third, the ballots for president and governor include candidates for deputy president and deputy governor, respectively. Therefore, presidential and gubernatorial candidates are elected on a joint ticket with their running mates. The president and governors can serve a maximum of two consecutive five-year terms. Fourth, provisions were included in the constitution setting out basic rules for political parties and requiring them to, among other things, have a national character and reflect the country's diversity. At the same time, the electoral rules were modified to allow independent candidates to vie.

All the above legal changes have had implications for how electoral politics is practised in Kenya. Counties have become political centres of power, and county positions, especially the governor and county assembly seats, have become a major terrain of political contestation. Therefore, analysing competition for county-level seats is important for furthering our understanding of electoral politics and democracy in Kenya. A concentration on sub-national elections also has the potential to reveal important dynamics that tend to be screened out of analyses of Kenya's competitive presidential elections which dominate the literature. Therefore, this paper analyses the 2022 gubernatorial election campaign, which was the second most widely covered election by the press after the presidential election.

Specifically, the paper investigates how the 2022 governor election campaigns in Machakos county were shaped by the candidates and external dynamics. It is based on a systematic analysis of various secondary sources which include manifestos, interviews, media reports, images and videos of the candidates' campaigns as well as content produced by the candidates' campaign teams and posted on their social media pages.

From this rich body of data, I obtained information on the specific electoral strategies of the main contenders and how national dynamics played into their campaigns.

Machakos county, which is strategically situated next to the capital, Nairobi, has a dominant ethnic majority and a history of political stability. This makes it a suitable context to study the dynamics of sub-national elections and the factors that shape inter-elite competition among co-ethnics in a different setting, avoiding the tendency to focus on counties with a history of intercommunal violence or marginalisation before the 2010 constitution (Carrier and Kochore 2014; Elfversson and Sjogren 2020). The Machakos governor contest reveals that co-ethnics highlighted certain attributes over others based on their understanding of what makes a good leader. They also tapped into fluid constructions of identity and belonging to discredit their opponents. Finally, national political alliances and inter-ethnic divisions among the Kamba elite played a role in determining which candidates could stand. These findings may be relevant for other counties in Kenya and other young African democracies that have adopted decentralisation reforms.

The remainder of the paper unfolds in seven sections. The first part is a brief reflection on the relevant literature on devolution. This is followed by an overview of the political economy of Machakos county and its significance as a sub-national locus of power. This leads to a discussion of the campaign strategies, the main aspirants and their manifestos. The fourth section examines how aspects of identity, belonging and social differentiation moulded the campaigns. It is followed by a discussion of how national and regional politics intersect in the campaigns. The election results are then presented and discussed. Finally, the paper offers tentative conclusions on inter-elite competition in co-ethnic contexts.

Devolution and electoral politics in Kenya

The public optimism that came with the promise of devolution a decade ago has waned. This has translated into an apathetic and disillusioned electorate that has voiced its discontent in various ways, including by not voting. According to the IEBC, electoral participation significantly declined from 78% in the 2017 polls to 64.77% in 2022, or slightly more than fourteen million registered voters (Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission 2022). This was the lowest turnout in fifteen years and represented less than 46% of the voting-age population, a cause for concern in terms of the role of citizen participation in a democracy and who elected leaders can claim to represent when making decisions that affect citizens (International IDEA n.d.; The East African 2022).

The extent to which devolution has been transformational in line with its multiple objectives is a matter of perspective and requires a more systematic assessment than this paper can offer. Within the scope of electoral dynamics, two perspectives are presented. These are the literature on devolution's effect on ethnic politics and how devolution has altered or retained relations and linkages between counties and the centre.

Scholars have pointed out that devolution presents a dilemma as it paradoxically requires both expressing and ignoring ethnic difference, and to achieve both without contradiction poses a multi-layered challenge (Berman, Eyoh, and Kymlicka 2004, 319–20). Given Kenya's history of electoral violence and politicised ethnicity were some of the triggers that led to the adoption of the 2010 constitution, scholars have characterised

counties as the new context for ethnicised politics. Carrier and Kochore (2014) studied the instrumentalisation of ethnicity in the 2013 presidential election in the northern Kenya counties of Isiolo, Mandera and Marsabit. They highlight that these counties have taken on greater significance owing to the 25% vote threshold in a majority of counties for the presidential election. Presidential candidates mounted campaigns not only for themselves but also for other county elective posts, advocating for "six piece voting," while candidates seeking these seats sought the endorsement of presidential aspirants. Elfversson and Sjogren (2020) locate their study on the impact of power-sharing arrangements in Nakuru and Uasin Gishu, counties which have previously experienced intercommunal conflict between the Kalenjin and the Kikuyu, arguing that the numerical and electoral strength of these two groups have added to their significance in the national context.

A key objective of devolution was to reduce the saliency of national government and the presidential election. Countering arguments that decentralisation does not curb state power, Waddilove (2019) conducted research on the 2017 presidential election rerun to reveal a complex relationship between national and county politics. Waddilove (2019) applied an expanded definition of political linkages to underline that governors are required to operate in both the county arena and the national arena. One linkage relates to how the national government has undermined the operations of county governments, and another linkage pertains to how national election alliances shape the geography of how presidential and county electoral campaigns align. Cheeseman, Lynch, and Willis (2016) explain that governors have emerged as influential and relatively independent actors due to the authority conferred on them by the constitution. However, the national government is still the stronger actor and allocates finances to the county governments. Governors, therefore, have to find the "sweet spot" between pro-decentralisation and pro-centralisation (Cheeseman, Lynch, and Willis 2016, 18).

County government positions have created another focal point for political contestation in which the popularity of certain candidates may have an effect on other candidates' electoral chances. This dynamic is well articulated by Gadjanova (2019) in the context of gubernatorial elections and the 2017 presidential election, during which parties grappled with endorsing specific candidates. An analysis of the 2013 elections in Nakuru, Kiambu, Mombasa and Kilifi by Cornell and D'Arcy (2014) suggests that the results led to the entrenchment of existing elites and patronage networks as the majority of the governors elected were insiders who previously held jobs in public administration or were former parliamentarians. Even though devolution has created a new local elite, Chome (2015, 300) describes governors as "vulnerable to competing and incompatible expectations of devolution between the centre and region" based on research he conducted on Coastal region governors. Reference is made to how the governor role is depoliticised by the national government and defined in technocratic terms. Despite this, there is rampant patronage and informalisation of the county bureaucracy that is hidden by performances of bureaucratic effectiveness and efficiency (Chome 2015, 309).

This paper contributes to the scholarship on electoral politics at the sub-national level. It builds on the work already done on how campaigns are conducted for governor elections, with a focus on how candidates at this level present themselves and those they are competing against. Devolution has awakened forms of identity and citizenship that could be employed to privilege or exclude. With resources being disbursed to county governments,

this raises debate on who is best suited to manage these resources. Underlying this are questions around who makes a good governor and who can stand for election. These questions are relevant for understanding electoral politics in Kenya and elswehere.

Overview of Machakos county

Counties in Kenya can be distinguished by level of development, population groupings and political dynamics, among other characteristics. The political economy of Machakos county is sketched out in this overview.

Machakos county borders eight counties including Nairobi, the capital city, and covers an area of 6208 square kilometres. Despite its proximity to Nairobi, 70.9% of its population resides in rural areas and 29.1% is urbanised (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics 2019a). Machakos has a population of approximately 1,421,932 and a population density of 177 people per square kilometre. An estimated 65% of the population is between the ages of fifteen and sixty-four, and over 60% of residents are classified as poor (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics 2019a). The county is divided into eight constituencies, nine sub-counties, forty wards and 234 villages.

With resources flowing to the county since devolution and increased migration to Nairobi's peripheral areas, infrastructure within the county and its connection to Nairobi have improved remarkably. Machakos has become noticeably more urbanised and multicultural in its population. Its appeal lies in its peaceful environment, lower land and housing costs compared to Nairobi, scenic hilly landscapes and investment opportunities. In 2022 it was ranked the thirteenth best county to live in based on access to infrastructure and amenities (Kenya Data and Statistics n.d.-a.). Mavoko constituency is the industrial hub and hosts the two fastest urbanising areas of the county – Mlolongo and Athi River – which are considered part of the greater Nairobi metropolitan area in urban planning. The county headquarters is in Machakos Town constituency, named after the administrative capital of the county, situated sixty kilometres from Nairobi's Central Business District. Konza City, a national government flagship project and Kenya's first smart city is also partly located in Machakos Town constituency.

Although the county government failed to meet its revenue targets between 2018 and 2022 to implement its five-year County Integrated Development Plan (CIDP), budgeted at 65 billion Kenya shillings, Machakos contributed 3.2% of Kenya's gross domestic product and was ranked sixth in the country with a gross county product of 378 billion Kenyan shillings (Kenya Data and Statistics n.d.-b). Most of this is derived from manufacturing and agriculture. Machakos and the neighbouring counties of Kitui and Makueni have formed the South Eastern Kenya Economic Bloc (SEKEB) to champion economic transformation and development of the region. The SEKEB counties are historically dominated by the Kamba people, a Bantu group estimated to be Kenya's fifth largest ethnic group (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics 2019b, IV:12). Kambas, however, are dispersed throughout Kenya and make up a significant population not only in these three counties but also in the Coastal counties and Nairobi. Likewise, many ethnic groups reside in Machakos but the Asian, Kikuyu, Borana, Kisii, Maasai, Luo and Swahili make up the main minority ethnicities (National Gender and Equality Commission 2017, 45).

The elevation of Machakos to a resourced and autonomous county and its geographical location on the periphery of the capital add to the prestige of the governor position.

The first governor, Alfred Mutua, was proactive in promoting the county to the rest of Kenya, describing Machakos as "The Place to Be" and launching a series of development projects under the political party he established to run for a second term, a party he named *Maendeleo Chap Chap* (Quick Development). Like Mutua, all the candidates seeking to take over from him after 10 years in office were from the Kamba ethnic majority. The 2022 race attracted a mix of old and new personalities, including a strong female contender in a male-dominated race.

Machakos was also significant for the presidential election. Regarded as an opposition stronghold ahead of the 2022 election, it had 687,565 registered voters. The main presidential candidates sought to win these votes to help them reach the threshold of at least 25% of votes from at least twenty-four counties.

Campaigns and candidates

Canvassing for votes commenced long before the officially designated IEBC campaign period from 29 May to 6 August 2022. According to Albert (2007, 57), campaigns start with the decision to run for office. The pre-campaign phase is associated with in-depth research aimed at developing an understanding of the issues, stakeholders, context, cost and responses (Albert 2007, 57). A tremendous amount of strategic planning and fundraising went into the campaign machinery, affirming that high political office in Kenya is an elitist affair. Only the privileged few with money from questionable sources and the ability to marshal an army of campaign workers became strong contenders for the powerful governor seat. Such an uneven electoral playing field raises questions about the legitimating role of elections.

Machakos governor aspirants rolled out several strategies to drum up support from multiple audiences during the actual campaign phase. They all produced manifestos with catchy slogans and general pledges to address development challenges through sectoral projects, and targeted interventions for different stakeholders such as religious, women, youth, business and professional associations, among others.

Candidates spent the bulk of their time on the ground. They raced to outdo one another with the number and size of posters and billboards on display throughout the county and held rallies, townhall meetings, meet-the-people tours and road caravans in branded vehicles. In these energetic events, they adorned themselves and their campaign teams in attention-grabbing branded clothing and accessories, which they also dished out to the public along with cash handouts. Candidates engaged in the typical mediocre rhetoric, but politicians also took positions on issues (Bleck and van de Walle 2012, 1395).

Campaign strategies can be understood through the lens of a moral economy in which politicians speak to two compatible registers of virtue, one civic and one patrimonial (Cheeseman, Lynch, and Willis 2020, 212). An example of this from the Machakos governor race would be the use of policy pledges to signal a commitment to development while simultaneously giving handouts as a way of responding to voters' expectations of receiving material benefits from their leaders.

Candidates also reached out to other audiences by participating in interviews and debates organised by radio and TV stations and creating social media pages. The use of hybrid rallies in which face-to-face rallies were covered on social media as well as the creation of WhatsApp groups were unique aspects of the 2022 electioneering (Lynch 2023, 334).

Several individuals had declared interest in vying for the seat, with different motivations. In the end, however, only five made it to the ballot and the contest was then further narrowed to three candidates: Wavinya Ndeti, Nzioka Waita and Johnson Muthama. Interestingly, the incumbent deputy governor's candidature did not gain much traction. The three main candidates are discussed in this article and their profiles are presented briefly below. It is worth mentioning that none of the aspirants participated in party primaries to earn their party nomination, pointing to lack of intra-party democracy.

Wavinya Ndeti was the Wiper Democratic Movement Party candidate. She is a politician, former senior civil servant, trained computer scientist, businesswoman and farmer (Ndeti 2022, 2). Ndeti hails from a political family and was encouraged by her parents to enter politics (Mahugu 2022). She was the first woman to be elected as a member of parliament (MP) for Kathiani constituency in 2007 (BBC News 2022). In the 2013 and 2017 polls Ndeti contested the Machakos governorship as the *Chama Cha Uzalendo* (CCU) candidate and Wiper candidate, respectively, and lost. Among a raft of roles in the public service, she was an Assistant Minister in President Mwai Kibaki's cabinet from 2008 to 2013 and a Chief Administrative Secretary in President Uhuru Kenyatta's government from 2020 to 2022, when she resigned to run for governor of Machakos for the third time at the age of fifty-five.

Ndeti promised to focus on eradicating hunger and poverty if elected, and her rallying call was *liu mesani, mbesa muvuko* (food on the table, money in the pocket) (Ndeti 2022). The three pillars of her manifesto were food security, socio-economic empowerment and infrastructure, and it was anchored on the principles of integrity, transparency, efficiency and civic engagement (Ndeti 2022). Ndeti selected Francis Mwangangi, a former MP for Yatta constituency, as her running mate.

Nzioka Waita was the CCU party candidate. He is a lawyer by profession, with significant experience in the private sector and public service. Waita served as the Head of the Presidential Delivery Unit and Chief of Staff to President Kenyatta for seven years before resigning in 2022 to join elective politics at the age of forty-seven. He was motivated by a calling to use his privilege to uplift the rural poor (Engage Talk 2023). Prior to that, he held various positions at Safaricom, Kenya's leading telecommunications company, where he worked for fourteen years.

Waita vied on the principles of competence, experience and integrity (Waita 2022a). His campaign slogan was *Masaku mbee* (Machakos forward) and the title of his manifesto, *Machakos Metro*, captured his vision of a town that achieves metropolitan status by 2027 and city status by 2032 (Waita 2022a). His manifesto was centred on six pillars to reduce poverty: health, agriculture, education, water, tourism and jobs (Waita 2022a). His running mate was Florence Mwangangi, the former Speaker of the Machakos county assembly.

Johnson Muthama, a prominent businessman and experienced politician, was the United Democratic Alliance (UDA) party candidate. He owns one of Kenya's largest gemstone mining companies and his wealth portfolio also extends to investments in real estate and agriculture (Business Today 2023). Muthama joined grassroots politics during the Kenya African National Union (KANU) one-party era. He was the MP for Kangundo constituency from 2007 to 2013 and government Chief Whip in the National Assembly. He was elected Senator of Machakos from 2013 to 2017 and named Senate

Minority Whip. He has been portrayed as a mover and shaker in the formation of the party alliances created ahead of elections to rally behind a particular presidential candidate since the 2013 elections ("Johnson Muthama" 2023). He is also the chairman of UDA and joined the governor race at age sixty-nine.

Muthama's manifesto focussed on water provision, food security, jobs, education and healthcare (Maundu 2022). He pledged to donate half his salary to educate needy children (Johnson Muthama [@nduyamuthama] 2022). He also promised to fully equip county hospitals and convert the extravagant building that hosts the governor's office into a hospital (People Daily 2021). He picked Faith Muli, the director of the Machakos Medical and Technical Training College, as his running mate.

Identity and social differentiation of the candidates

This section considers characteristics of the three aspirants highlighted during the campaigns based on fluid social constructions of identification and belonging. Identity here is simply understood as a constellation of attributes, both ascriptive and socio-cultural. Ethnicity is defined as it is used in common parlance, to mean a social group bound together by a shared culture, language and recognised geographic area (Lynch 2006, 50). A social group itself, however, does not have a fixed identity and is constituted through differentiated relations (Young 2000, 99). What follows addresses the question of how political elites with shared ethnic membership defined and positioned themselves in relation to other aspirants. In the same vein, it looks at attributes they used to discredit one another. Both of these address an important underlying question of who can stand as a candidate (Bøås and Dunn 2013, 22).

Weaving insider–outsider narratives based on certain attributes was a key decampaigning strategy. Waita, a first-timer to elective politics, was the most stereotyped. In addition to being portrayed as a stranger to politics, he was labelled a foreigner because of his lack of proficiency in the local tongue. Muthama and former Mavoko constituency MP Patrick Makau, who dropped out of the governor race, wondered how Waita could represent the Kamba nation without being conversant in Kikamba (Mueni 2022). Waita, who was brought up in Nairobi, stated that although he was not a fluent vernacular speaker he understood the language, and retorted that his opponents could not speak English, which is what mattered because it is the language of policy (Robi 2022).

Waita also narrated how he received comments to the effect that he did not have Kamba physical features, whatever these might be, that his height and ears suggest that he is probably from the Masai tribe (Engage Talk 2023). He handled doubts about his Kamba-ness by turning to clan leaders to "authenticate" him. In a video posted on his Facebook page, a group of clan elders at a ceremony detailed Waita's lineage, proving that he was a son of the soil, and went further in threatening a curse on his opponents who declared otherwise (Waita 2022b).

Candidates also identified with a place of origin to show their rootedness. They all associated themselves with their ancestral roots in Machakos, although their CVs betrayed their lengthy residency in Nairobi where they could also have claimed to be from based on residency or birth. Rather than outwardly embracing a cosmopolitan or multi-local identity, they identified themselves as indigenes. Ndeti identified herself as hailing

from Mavoko, Waita from Kalama and Muthama from Kangundo. Indeed, nativeness might genuinely constitute an important part of their identity, but due to the natural occurrence of migration it is common to have attachments to multiple places even within the same county.

Waita rooting himself in a homeland in Machakos gave credence to his candidature in an environment of ethnic political salience and perceptions that electors will only vote for "one of our own." Perhaps in a cosmopolitan setting it might have been more palatable to introduce himself as being from Nairobi, where he was born and bred. However, he narrated the contradictions of belonging that he encountered. On the one hand, his opponents called him a Nairobian during the campaigns. On the other hand, during his time in national government he was referred to as a Mkamba and not a Nairobian, because the culture of allocating national resources is still based on ethno-regional considerations and the notion that when appointed to government you are there to serve your community's interests, not the interests of all Kenyans (Engage Talk 2023). Because ethnicity is still stressed in government circles, which part of Kenya one hails from is a political question.

Othering was also done with respect to marital status, targeted at the two rivals married to non-Kambas. Ndeti's marriage to a Nigerian, who died in 2016, was seen as a reason to exclude her from running as she had supposedly renounced her ethnic citizenship, whereas Waita's marriage to a Kikuyu was meant to imply a lack of Kamba purity (BBC News 2022; Engage Talk 2023).

Another common characteristic was that all aspirants sought to present themselves as gender inclusive. They each chose a running mate of the opposite gender. It was already quite remarkable to have a woman running for the high office of governor. Added to that and in Kenya's patriarchal society, her two main male opponents decided to select female deputies. Ndeti was the target of bullying and sexist remarks from male politicians but did not cower, saying that it was nothing new in her long experience in politics (BBC News 2022). It is likely that the female running mates had similar experiences, and one cannot rule out political posturing in the selection of women as running mates to deputise men.

Candidates also considered geography as a feature of inclusiveness by each picking a running mate from a different part of the county. As an example, Ndeti, herself from the urban constituency of Mavoko, selected as her deputy someone from the rural constituency of Yatta. This may also have been a tactic to win over votes from different regions and demonstrate intra-county leadership, again driven by the common mentality that having "one of our own" in office means that we stand to benefit most from development projects and government services.

Other attributes were education and professional experience. A university degree is a legal requirement to be eligible to run for governor. The importance of education was underscored by the candidates. On the campaign trail, Muthama and Ndeti's qualifications were the subject of speculation by detractors (Muhindi 2022; Nation 2022). In Muthama's case it was doubted that he possessed a degree, and in Ndeti's case the authenticity of her certificates was challenged in court. Both candidates were eventually cleared by the IEBC to contest. Muthama picked a professor as his running mate, stating that he was looking for "someone with brains" (Brian 2022).

In addition, the candidates showcased their professional competence and experience. To compensate for his lack of political experience, and aware of the disillusionment of

voters, Waita criticised the two old political hands for having a poor development track record when they held political office. He argued that "Machakos needs a Chief Executive Officer (CEO), not a politician" (Waita 2022a, 3). By emphasising his capacity to deliver based on his professional experience in government and the corporate sector, he made political experience a liability. His previous State House appointment was arguably merit-based, but that is not the reality of government positions such as Ndeti's appointments by presidents Kibaki and Kenyatta, which were loaded with political undertones. Either way, having held a high government office was packaged as an asset because it implied access to state resources, for better or worse.

The above examples demonstrate that even though individuals might share the same ethnic affiliation, their identity is derived not from the group but rather in relation to the group. Natural intra-group differences may not always be respectfully accommodated, but rather might be expressed negatively through prejudice to create a kind of hierarchy of belonging that members are assessed against. Thus, groups define and redefine themselves on the basis of external and internal difference in a never-ending process that is often contradictory and not clear-cut (Berman, Cottrell, and Ghai 2009, 467; Lynch 2006). Nonetheless, defining one in terms of ethnic affiliation and geographical territory is important both personally and politically. More significantly, ethnicity is not just about culture and tradition but also about competition for wealth and power (Berman, Eyoh, and Kymlicka 2004, 317). The gubernatorial polls took place in a structure of class privilege produced and supported by a range of assets such as education, professional experience, social networks and cultural supplements (Young 2000, 96).

Intersection of governor campaigns and national election campaigns

With governors straddling the county and regional arenas, this section analyses how the national politics and the presidential election campaign overlapped with canvassing at the county level. Kenya has struggled to build nationalist parties, and the state has been governed by a series of ethnic coalitions of the political elite (Muigai 2004, 212). This state of affairs is an enduring legacy of the divide-and-rule system of the colonial British administration, which governed natives on the basis of tribes, a system that "institutionalized tribal discrimination and justified it as an inevitable consequence of cultural identity" (Mamdani 2012, 53). Successive post-colonial regimes and political parties have entrenched ethnicity as the main basis for political mobilisation and organisation in Kenya's politics (Muigai 2004, 200). The politicisation of tribal identity and the persistence of ethnic sub-nationalism or the ethno-nationalist state in Kenya remains a lingering challenge to nation-building. In Mazrui and Tidy's words, "the problem is how to replace uni-ethnic sub-national consciousness by multi-ethnic or non-ethnic national consciousness" (Mazrui and Tidy 1984, 187).

During the one-party system, the ruling party, KANU, maintained power by claiming the support of entire tribes through a web of patronage that gave it the façade of a national party. The region known as Ukambani (the homeland of the Kamba community), which is now made up of Machakos, Kitui and Makueni counties, was a KANU stronghold. The notion of looking at Kenya in terms of ethnic blocs and regional kingpins continued into the return of multiparty politics in the 1990s. Since then, the

country has entered a phase of complex political alliances, none of which have stabilised into a national party as they rise and fall with every election (Khadiagala 2023). Thus, in 2022 Ukambani was viewed in terms of the number of votes its three counties could provide to the competing multi-ethnic alliances. The two main multiparty groupings formed on the eve of the presidential elections were the Kenya Kwanza and Azimio alliances. The former rallied behind the UDA presidential candidate, former Deputy President William Ruto, and the latter, a coalition of twenty-five constituent parties, rallied behind Raila Odinga, the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) party leader, former Prime Minister and veteran politician.

Ukambani has produced several individuals who have held senior roles in national government and risen to become national political figures. The most prominent in the last two decades is Kalonzo Musyoka, a lawyer first elected to Parliament in 1985 at age thirty-two, and who later held positions in KANU, the legislature, and the executive during the presidency of Daniel Arap Moi. He contested the presidency in 2007 as the ODM-Kenya candidate and came third with 9% of the vote. Musyoka was appointed Kenya's tenth Vice President by President Kibaki in 2008 and held the position until 2013. In the 2013 and 2017 polls he was on the ballot as the running mate of opposition candidate Odinga under the Coalition for Reforms and Democracy (CORD) and National Super Alliance (NASA) umbrellas, respectively. Musyoka was not on the ballot in 2022 but again supported Odinga for the presidency. His long political career and ascendance to national leadership make him the presumed political leader of the Kamba community.

Musyoka, a native of Kitui, is the founder and leader of the Wiper Democratic Party (former ODM-Kenya), and his was one of the parties registered as a member of the Azimio Coalition Party in 2022. Wiper's support base is undoubtedly mainly in Ukambani, although it claims to be a national party, and it is assumed that Musyoka carries a significant share of Kamba votes to whichever alliance his party supports. This makes Wiper a relevant player in the pre-election multiparty alliances. Wiper's support, like that of any other party, is conditional on being allocated certain influential government positions if the alliance candidate meets the threshold for winning the presidency, i.e. 50% plus one of the total votes and over 25% in more than half of the forty-seven counties.

Wiper attempted to zone Ukambani as its stronghold in the 2022 elections and field only one Wiper/Azimio candidate for governor. The party tried to front Ndeti, who was not subjected to party primaries and received a direct nomination from Wiper party as the Azimio candidate. This was strongly resisted by other aspirants and affiliate parties, and intensified competition between Azimio coalition parties in Machakos. Waita's party, CCU, was also a member of Azimio. This meant that both governor candidates campaigned for Odinga's presidency as they campaigned for themselves, but reciprocal support for them from Raila was complicated. Waita accused the Azimio leadership of favouring Ndeti. The Wiper Party leader had earlier prevailed on Waita not to run for governor and to wait for a prestigious role in government if Azimio won the elections, but he declined (Engage Talk 2023). As a political novice vying as a candidate of a small party, Waita did not receive much support from Azimio for his campaign. But he still decided to run on a small Azimio-affiliated party and raise his own campaign funds rather than as an independent candidate, probably sensing the popularity of Azimio on the ground. Political bargains for the presidency thus stifled competitive politics and pluralism at the county level.

Since the reintroduction of multiparty politics, the Kamba political elite have belonged to different political camps more than is often acknowledged. For example, Joseph Munyao was a member of the Democratic Party which won several seats in the former Machakos district in the elections of the 1990s. More recently, other Kamba politicians have developed a following in their locale and nationally, while still others have challenged Musyoka's dominance by breaking away from Wiper. One example is Muthama, the UDA candidate. He was once a confidant of Musyoka and in previous elections was elected to office on a Wiper ticket. Muthama, who was also said to be a key Wiper financier, fell out with Musyoka and left the party after the 2017 elections. He also crossed from previously supporting Odinga for president to siding with Ruto in 2022. Muthama played a key role in the formation of the UDA party and the Kenya Kwanza alliance and became the party chairman. This is also an example of how members within one ethnic group can choose to ally with new partners who are different from those supported by the majority of the group.

Politics in Machakos revolves around personalities and not parties, as the institutionalised parties that are integral to the functioning of a democracy are absent. Party affiliation is weak – even to Wiper, the supposed Ukambani party – because parties are mainly used as vehicles for election. The candidates' manifestos brandished their party logos and used party colours in their design but they expressed no substantive association with what the party stood for or how it informed their manifesto. The Muthama example above with Wiper and UDA also illustrates weak party affiliation as well as the other two candidates' party manoeuvres. Months before the elections, Waita joined an existing small party, from which Ndeti had run for governor ten years before. He became its chairman but quit after the election. The electorate has become accustomed to a recycled elite that changes parties or sides every election.

This section has highlighted the extent to which the fluid and opportunistic nature of political alliances and parties in national and sub-national politics, intra-ethnic divisions among the Kamba elite and personalised politics shaped the campaigns for the governor position.

Election results

In the end, as shown in Table 1, Ndeti was elected governor of Machakos with 226,609 votes. Waita came second with 129,181 votes and in third place was Muthama with 37,980 votes. Voter turnout was 61%. In the presidential race, the Azimio Coalition party candidate, Raila Odinga, obtained 304,809 (73.63%) votes and the UDA candidate, William Ruto, got 101,446 (24.50%) votes, largely mirroring the county governor

Table 1. Machakos county governor election results, 2022.

Candidate	Party	Votes
Wavinya Ndeti	Wiper Democratic Party – Kenya (WDM-K)	226,609 (55.52%)
Nzioka Waita	*Chama Cha Uzalendo* (CCU)	129,181 (31.65%)
Johnson Muthama	United Democratic Alliance (UDA)	37,980 (9.30%)
Francis Maliti	*Maendeleo Chap Chap* (MCC)	9981 (2.45%)
Rose Mulwa	Empowerment and Liberation Party (ELP)	4424 (1.08%)

Source: Equal Politics, https://ke.equalpolitics.com/results/county/16.

results and indicating that the endorsement of Ndeti had paid off in terms of votes for the presidential level. However, at the national level a different result emerged. William Ruto narrowly won the presidency with just over 230,000 votes.

It is impressive that Ndeti overcame cultural and gender biases to become Machakos county's first female governor. She probably drew lessons from her previous losses and capitalised on her patronage public sector presidential appointment between 2017 and 2022 to grow her influence and launch early campaigns before her competitors. Additionally, her campaign was boosted by having the backing of the most popular political alliance on the ground.

Waita's performance was remarkable for a first-time contender. Despite being painted an "outsider" by local politicians during the campaigns, coming in second was viewed as a positive development in terms of new progressive candidates entering the political scene without the backing of a big party or presidential candidate. Waita's negative campaign experiences underscored the complexity of ethnicity as a contested socially constructed identity that is mutable but one that has remained static in many of the examinations of Kenyan politics (Lynch 2006, 49–50).

Despite his long experience in politics and his financial muscle, Muthama performed poorly. It is not clear what motivated the former senator to run for governor, but he may have directed his efforts more towards the national level, seeking to portray himself as the UDA pointsman in Machakos or the Kamba ethnic leader instead of on his governor campaign. However, he managed to secure some votes for the UDA presidential candidate in Machakos.

Conclusion

This paper has investigated campaign strategies and factors that shaped intra-ethnic competition in the Machakos governor election from the perspective of the main candidates. Identification is a dynamic process that these elites capitalised on (Bøås and Dunn 2013, 12). This revealed nuanced ideas of identity and belonging, which have been awakened by devolution because of the significant resources channelled to county governments. In this regard, self-identification through the promotion of a range of assets to demonstrate suitability to manage county resources was done alongside negative campaigning of competitors. In addition, presidential campaigns overlapped with the governor campaigns to both undermine and enable competition. Intra- and inter-party democratic procedures were sidestepped in favour of direct nomination of candidates.

The findings raise important questions around what makes a good governor and who can vie for this office. They also flag a concern regarding the legitimacy of electoral processes in a setting where competition revolves around certain assets and influential personalities. Finally, the electoral process as analysed in the Machakos governor election has broader implications for the performance of elected leaders once in office.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Catherine Musuva is a senior researcher at the African Centre for Migration and Society (ACMS) at the University of the Witwatersrand and a research fellow at the Centre for Research on Democracy (CREDO) at Stellenbosch University in South Africa. She holds a PhD in political science from Stellenbosch University. Her research interests are in electoral politics, democratisation and migration governance in Africa.

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