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Politics and Ethnic Conflict: The Influence of Political Manipulation in the Polarisation of Ethnic Communities in Harugali, Bundibugyo District, Western Uganda

Resolving ethnic conflicts across the world has been a challenge. Indeed, more than a decade now in the 21st century multifaceted ethnic conflicts associated with politics and State intervention in the context of struggles for self-governance, social and economic independence, and recognition and preservation of self-identity. These ethnic conflicts pose a threat to States' security, political, social and economic stability. We witness also this in the case of Uganda, in particular the Rwenzori region where ethnic tensions take a drastic move between the Bamba-Babwisi and Bakonzo communities in Bundibugyo district. 208

The purpose of this study is to analytically explore the influence of political manipulation in the polarisation of ethnic communities in Harugali sub-county, Bundibugyo district of western Uganda. The study aimed specifically at establishing the elements of political manipulation of ethnic differences in the polarisation of ethnic communities in Harugali sub-county; to find out the reactions to political manipulation of ethnic difference, and to establish measures for managing reactions to political manipulation by the ethnic communities. The study was a qualitative research with a single case study on individuals' perceptions and interpretation on the question of political manipulation of ethnic difference leading to the ethnic tensions. Interviews and focus group discussions were methods used for collecting data for the study. The study found that the core elements of political manipulation as means of achieving political interests include demand for self-governance and recognition of social, economic, cultural and political right of formation of kingdoms, or demand for a new district. The study found out that stereotyping as an instrument or element of political manipulation for political interests fueled the ethnic conflict between Bamba-Babwisi in Bundibugyo district. The study also established that land is a major issue especially on the question of geopolitical boundaries between the ethnic communities pressed by the high demand for resources and creation of a new district advocated by the politicians. The study ascertained that there were ineffective measures for managing the tensions caused by a number of factors such as fear of political heresy against the government, strong attachment to one's ethnic group, and fear of being considered too soft and submissive to the interest of a particular ethnic group. And that the government used repression and military force as a measure to reduce the tensions between the Bakonzo and Bamba-Babwisi ethnic communities in Harugali, Bundibugyo district. The study generally concludes that in pursuit of their political interests, politicians politicise and manipulate ethnicity for the sake of power and other socio-economic, cultural and political gains. The political interests are achieved through ethnic mobilisation and other means to demand for self-governance, formation and recognition of kingdoms as well as creation of new district for the realisation of these huge economic, social, cultural and political benefits.

Key: words: Conflict, Ethnic, Political, Polarisation, Manipulate, Influence, Bakonzo, Bamba