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# Call It By Its Name: Tribalism's Moment in American Politics

By Alex Roberts



The United States of America has a fundamental issue with using certain terminology. When it comes to certain hills, the cultural norm is to die upon them without admitting certain ugly truths. The issue of American tribalism is one such battle of attrition.

In the US, in all brutal honesty, there is no admittance to looking at issues through a tribal lens; it is considered an almost uncouth term, inaccurate, sensationalist and (through a more ugly lens) applicable to an interchangeable "other". I've had conversations revolving around this, when Americans are quick to point out that the issue of "tribalism" is a fundamentally African problem, something that occurs overseas, within countries that are painted with an unspoken brush of "lesser" - less developed, less "civilised", less democratic, less Western, depending on the kind of jingoistic plug they want to apply to racism or neo-colonialism.

Tribalism has become a buzzword within American politics at present, but that doesn't make it untrue. The affliction becomes especially acute when compared with the state of tribalism within East Africa, particularly in Kenya. The issue is, above all, an insidious indictment against another group. It is an inherent and unfounded bias against perceived characteristics that cuts across facts and rationality. Tribalism is, in many aspects, the very epitome of the "us against them" mentality. So how does this play into American politics?

The very definition of tribalism, according to Merriam Webster, is “loyalty to a tribe or other social group especially when combined with strong negative feelings for people outside the group”. Americans just tend to think that this is merely a question of ethnicity, of belonging to a literal tribe, thus positioning themselves falsely above the fray; in denial of any association with any such allusion parallel to an issue often associated with the “developing” world.

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As Kenyan citizens are all too aware, the very nature of tribalism is its pervasiveness. For those prescribing to fall in line with tribal ideas, it can become all-encompassing and derogatory of other groups in the extreme. In the mind of a “tribalist”, Kikuyus are shrewd business minds and are surely taking over the country to their own ends; Luos are loud and boisterous, too uncouth for political control; Merus have long fuses but terribly explosive tempers once the fuse is completed; Kalenjins will borrow things but are not to be trusted with them; Kambas are flashy in their style but have spent the rent for the style achieved. All of these stereotypes, when manifesting as the first and foremost notion of a group, can become deeply engrained, however head-slapping they may be.

Despite the progress made over these divisions in Kenyan society, it is still a common occurrence to come across an individual who holds true to their notions about others, and can't be told otherwise. It is the last aspect, that of being unable or unwilling to deviate from a divisive perception that is most applicable to the political situation in the United States approximately 17 months ahead of the 2020 presidential election. The liberal and conservative wings are at each other's throats to an extent that hasn't been seen in the United States since the darkest days of the clashes between those against the Vietnam War and those supporting the military action.

Therefore, it is only right to look with a critical lens towards my own side, my own social identity, my own political “tribe”. It is time for me to admit my personal political views. I fall into the liberal camp and have always done so. Despite my leanings, it is impossible to look at the tone of the liberal wing of American society objectively and not view them as part of the problem, at least with regard to the furthering of the tone. I will pause here and allow for a multitude of familial connections and social acquaintances to send me sharply worded messages explaining that their side is worse; it is them that are furthering the division, that it is Republicans who are on the wrong side and that good liberal democrats could never think as cruelly as conservative voters do. They prove my point: one of the ugly realities of tribalistic thinking is to buck criticism from those within your own ranks and to view such criticism as a betrayal to the group.

From the liberal side of things, the perception is clear. There is open talk among the left that Republicans are a “threat”; that they are “seizing control” and are “selling out to a dictator to get what they want”. It is rebounded off left-leaning media echo chambers, in satire, from Democratic politicians themselves. Tribalism, in its essence, is finding societal safety in a group, and damn the others if you think they impede on your safety.

The messaging from the left-leaning side is that the right-wing tribe is a threat, that they are a minority in the US that are seeking to maintain their ill-gotten political control by any means necessary, including those means that are less than democratic. They are only in the game for themselves, while exploiting members of their own political base (who will, of course, follow them blindly) to gain more of a stranglehold on American society; the Republicans are trying to form the

United States as moulded around the conservative ideal (which was based on oppression in the first place, of course) in spite of what would be a “positive outcome” for the long-suffering masses. (The Kenyan reader will probably find that prior statement uncomfortably familiar in tone to some of the talk swirling about before the 2007 elections. This is meant in no way to diminish the horrors of the post-election violence and elevate American problems as to somehow “more so”; merely to point out tonal similarities.)

The conservative tribe must also be examined in close detail, as there a direct line to cut towards tribalistic tendencies in both tone and action. From this end, some of the divisions have been made more acute, if not deepened in a more extreme fashion. When dealing with issues of the politically tribal, the top brass should be the major holder of any responsibility for the messaging and resulting actions of their followers.

There is no clearer example of an individual who should be held accountable than that of Donald Trump himself. It isn't an exaggeration to state that he has frequently engaged in incitement along tribal lines. His words must speak for themselves. Mexicans (and other Latin American migrants) are rapist criminal invaders, hell-bent on taking the “homeland” for their own ill purposes. Democrats are disgusting, manipulative and treacherous, seeking to overthrow the very power that the conservatives currently lay claim to within the United States. Muslims are a threat, and are to be banned. Political dissidents are committing treason. Those who investigate serious allegations of ongoing criminal activities are actively engaged in a “witch hunt” and must be ignored by those loyal to the White House, regardless of evidence.

The conservative end of the media, such as FOX News, isn't much different, repeating talking points, calling Democrats “rats” in front of millions of viewers. The barrage of information, misinformation, and accusation-hefting has become a constant staple. Those Republican politicians who have fallen into the camp of “dissent” have their loyalty publicly questioned by the White House. That's the essence of political tribalism - to further the message of the group through a means of clarity-by-murkiness.

In recent weeks and months, Trump has spoken repeatedly and publicly (without proven basis) of a conspiracy against him aimed at usurping the White House and launching some sort of coup (as those loyal to the left could never accept the outcome of a controversial election in 2016 and are thus trying to undermine the administration). Violent action is repeatedly hinted at, to be carried out at the hands of “those with the guns” in America.

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So what is the result of this political climate in America? Both sides have gone further towards their respective ideologies, leaving a gaping gulf between them, with little room for political maneuvering, social interaction, or public discourse within it. At a localised level, the true extent of tribalism comes to fruition: neighbours fuming at each other, families not on speaking terms, friendships ending and punches thrown at political rallies. This is fundamentally a problem of communities being pitted against one another; and is a question of being primed to do so, with the loudest voices being lifted to the forefront and drowning out what one report on tribalism in America called “the

exhausted majority” - those tired of the constant fighting but resigned to the untoward realities therein. Those at the fringes hold more and more sway, and hold the rest of the community accountable to fall in line, encouraging that silence. Right now in the United States, that is the pervasive tone. The average person, upon hearing a political discussion, seems spent by the very idea of engaging in it, turned off, angry and unsure of what to do; there seems to be an air of not knowing exactly what to do about the perceived takeover of the political discourse.

A fundamental misunderstanding of tribalism is that is the entirety of a population that becomes ensnared and takes extreme action. This largely isn't the case; it is usually a small proportion of the population yelling the loudest and taking to the streets in numbers that would intimidate other disorganised citizens. In America, those few yelling the loudest often have semi-automatic guns.

Will the United States look to Kenya to learn from the nation's recent history? There is, unfortunately, little to no chance of that, as American society is nothing if not jingoistic and bullheadedly independent. If one was apt enough to look though, the entire blueprint of the darkness of tribalism invading politics would be laid bare in the Kenyan example; the same tones used, the waters of messaging getting muddied, the divisions deepening, and finally, in the wake of a disputed and inflammatory election, an entire nation taken to the very brink of irreversible damage.

If tribalism, at its very core, is identity politics, are the political climates within the two countries truly all that different? It reflects badly upon the US, in a further parallel to view itself as somehow “above” sinking to political violence at levels comparable of those “other” countries. After all, in much of the West, Kenya pre-December 2007 was talked about in a patronising tone of being a “good” African country incapable of slipping into a vacuum of politically stoked bloodshed. The explosion in Kenya was largely sparked by a rough year-long period of fear-mongering and polarising rhetoric and speech so questionable that six prominent Kenyan public figures of politics and the media were investigated by Kenya and the International Criminal Court for incitement to violence. This period of amplification came atop decades of divisive politics and tribalistic tension.

Within the US, although the overall feeling remains that the nation will somehow carry on unscathed, historical evidence points to a potential for a darker outcome. Already, there have been calls that the 2016 election outcome was somehow “rigged” on the part of the Democrats, stealing a result that wound up in an electoral college victory regardless.

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The protectionist mantra has also been intensified, with “armies” of Latin American immigrants allegedly due at any second to stream across the border and snatch away power. There have been explicit nods to white nationalist causes from the White House, making the statement that in fact, yes, white America has something to fear. Trump in essence has been stating that he alone can combat the causes of those fears, real or imagined. It isn't a stretch of the imagination to look at some of the statements made by the current administration as acts of tribal incitement. He's offered protection to his supporters who would act violently at political rallies against protesters, offering to even “pay their legal fees”. He's repeatedly attacked his critics, even, in the case of Senator John McCain, after their passing due to their political opposition to him. He has repeatedly dehumanised those outside his support group, calling them cowards, liars, cheats. He has heralded the most vehement and extreme among his base, even to point of promoting them to be members of the White

House staff. He's even claimed publicly that if an attempt to formally remove him from office were made, a revolt would take place in the US. If tweets, including such inflammatory language, had come from an African leader's phone at 3 am, it might well end up as exhibit A at International Criminal Court proceedings.

There is a further wrinkle when addressing the political leaders engaging in tribalism: they often skate on with impunity, above the fray that they're helping to create, outside the fire that they're stoking and without real consequences for their statements and actions. That is the case with Trump currently; even as he's preyed upon the pre-existing divisions within the US for his own personal exploitation and "all coverage is good coverage" political PR strategy, nothing concrete has stuck to him. He still holds the office, he still wields power, he's consolidated his political base around him to the extent of commanding the highest ever approval ratings among his base, all the while pushing the left further away and across the void. No charges have been made against him. There has been no formal announcement of impeachment. The powerful political figures in his party have largely fallen in line. During the run-up to the 2016 presidential election, there was an outpouring of violence at political rallies. It is yet to be seen if the continued toxicity of the last three years will bleed over into the ramping up of the political season, and if that dye has already been cast.

In 2007 it did in Kenya and in the aftermath of it all, no one was really held to account. Those who suffered the most were far away from the lush compounds in Lavington or Karen; far away from jetting out of the country for an extended holiday or a jaunt in Zanzibar, and that, more than anything, is the inherent tragedy of tribalism; that those who champion division, rile the sides to rattle sabers against one another and possibly incite actual violence never end up holding the water for anyone below them.

The real answers, however, aren't in the lofty political bourgeois debate and scramble for influence, but down at the street level, where Americans are forming their own ranks among the citizenry.

The likes of Donald J Trump have the capital to stay away from it all and to give the same sleazy statements feigning outrage at the very notion that they should somehow be held to account for their words and actions on media platforms, on the campaign trail, and within the very halls of power. Floyd Mayweather has nothing on the ability of a tribe-stoking politician to duck a punch. No lessons have been learned in the US, not from our own recent election, not from Kenya's past and not from any international voice or citizen of the "political bubble". The problem is that in a nation so driven to the extreme of division, in this far out of the actual depths of election season (and the actual ballot day of Tuesday, November 3rd, 2020), the bottom is very hard to see. After all, the Democratic Party is still a year out from picking a champion and it is yet to be seen if any in the Republican Party would dare to challenge Trump (a move which would inevitably push him to consolidate his base by bringing them closer into the fold).

The real answers, however, aren't in the lofty political bourgeois debate and scramble for influence, but down at the street level, where Americans are forming their own ranks among the citizenry. Just the other week, on the steps of the state capital of Wisconsin in Madison (itself an incredibly divided so-called "swing state"), a protest against the recent anti-abortion measures passed in Alabama took place, and I joined in the ranks of those protesting against the recent ban. I watched as in front of me members of the two sides yelled into each other's faces over the shoulders of police ranks formed to keep proceedings calm. Nothing was resolved, but in that exchange I saw a microcosm of such confrontations that can only increase in frequency and vehemence in the months and years to come. But to what end is impossible to say. Neither side is willing to give an inch at this point, a

precarious position to take when at the precipice.

If ever there was a time for America to listen, for once, to Kenya, it is now. For the people in the Rift Valley, nothing was resolved despite all the posturing and promises. Those who lit the fire in Kenya stood back and watched the flames rise. Right now in the United States, it seems, that some in power are willing to flick the matches.

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