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'Defying' democratization and environmental protection in Kenya: The case of Karura Forest reserve in Nairobi

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A B S T R A C T

It had been assumed that the rise of multipartyism in sub-Saharan Africa in the late 1980s and 1990s would necessarily lead to better environmental management. Limited studies, mostly based on experiences in southern Africa, suggest that the relationship between the environment and democratization in sub-Saharan Africa still remains an open question. Furthermore, democratization in sub-Saharan Africa has coincided with the implementation of neoliberal-inspired economic adjustment programs. So far, most discussions of the environmental effects of democratization in the region reflect studies of democratization and neoliberalization which tend to treat the two processes separately, failing to recognize their complex interconnections, both in their material and discursive dimensions. This paper is, therefore, an effort to broaden the discussion of the interactions between democratization and the environment in sub-Saharan Africa. Accordingly, the paper investigates the change in the protection of Karura Forest, a key public forest reserve in Nairobi, Kenya, during a period of multi-party politics and election and neoliberal economic reforms in the country in the early 1990s. The paper uses the urban political ecology perspective to help tease out the interactions between democratization and the environment, and highlights how neoliberalism may complicate those interactions. Ultimately, this paper supports cautionary observations about the environmental effects of democratization in sub-Saharan Africa.

Introduction

Sub-Saharan Africa's experience with democratization, which, for most countries, began at the end of the 1980s, and is epitomized by a wave of multi-party elections that occurred throughout the continent, has attracted considerable scholarship over the last decade and half. From an initial focus on questions of to what extent democratization has taken place, what its causes and future prospects are (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997; Osaghae, 1999; Wiseman, 1995), and its impact on the African political economy (Baylies, 1995; Wieland, 1998), this scholarship has progressed to concerns pertaining to consolidation of democracy/institutionalization of democratic governance (Lindberg, 2003; Mbaku & Ihonvbere, 2003; Randall & Svasand, 2002), and to analysis of democratic qualities present in various dimensions of democratization (Lindberg, 2004, 2006). More generally, many accounts in this literature have brought to the fore the social, political and economic consequences of democratization in sub-Saharan Africa. An equally important issue is the impact of democratization on environmental management.

A limited number of empirical studies documents the impacts of democratization on environmental management in the region. Based on case studies from Malawi, South Africa, and Mozambique, Walker (1999) demonstrates that shifts from centralized political systems to relatively democratic forms of governance in the 1990s did not necessarily present significant beneficial changes to environmental protection. Accordingly, although political openness has increased potential for participatory environmental management, lack of adequate local institutions has undermined environmental conservation. Along the same lines, Fabricius, Koch, and Magome (2001) argue that while the wave of democracy that swept across Southern Africa in the 1990s created opportunities for community-based natural resource management, complications in environmental conservation have deepened as new conflicts and power struggles between stakeholders have arisen.

These empirical cases however do not capture the breadth and depth of the realities of democratization in sub-Saharan Africa. For the most part, electoral politics have remained sites of struggle for democratization in the region (Brown, 2001, 2004; Lindberg, 2004). As Osaghae (1999: 6–7) suggests, it is within the realm of electoral politics that "democratization has been approached and fought for by the various 'action-groups', pro-democracy and opposition groups" in the region. Furthermore, democratization in sub-Saharan Africa

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has coincided with the implementation of neoliberal-inspired economic adjustment programs. So far, most discussions of the environmental effects of democratization in the region reflect studies of democratization and neoliberalism which tend to treat the two processes separately, failing to recognize their complex interconnections, both in their material and discursive dimensions (Myers, 1999, 2005). How neoliberalism might complicate the interactions between democratization and the environment requires some attention. In sum, it is necessary to consider the dynamics of democratization in sub-Saharan Africa in a more comprehensive manner to broaden our understanding of the environmental effects of democratization in the region.

In this paper I use the case study of the change in the protection of Karura Forest to investigate the interactions between multipartyism and environmental protection in Kenya, and the effects of the country's neoliberal agenda on those interactions. Karura Forest is a key public forest reserve located in Nairobi. The forest lost a significant portion of its land and vegetation to private development in the 1990s during the regime of President Moi. The succeeding regime of President Kibaki, which assumed power in 2003, reclaimed the lost land and has been rehabilitating the forest. While this single case study has limited generalizability, the issues and questions it raises add to the debates on the relationship between democratization and the environment more broadly but also how the relationship has played out in specific sub-Saharan African settings. Additionally, I recognize that democratization involves more than multi-party elections and politics (the focus of this paper) to include issues of participation and accountability in policy making processes (Garreton, 1995: 146).

This paper is based on a fieldwork carried out in 2005 and 2006 in which 77 interviews with government officials, World Bank officials, environmental activists, city officials, developers and Nairobi residents were conducted and newspaper articles, various government development and environmental planning documents were studied. I proceed in the paper as follows. First, I present a brief highlight of discussions of the relationship between democratization and the environment. I also show how an urban political ecology perspective can help in understanding the interactions between democratization and environmental protection. Second, I briefly discuss sub-Saharan Africa's experience with democratization and its implication for the environment in the region. Third, I illustrate the linkage between the deforestation of Karura Forest and the 1997 presidential election campaigns. I demonstrate in this section that the linkage must also be understood within the context of the history of forestland development in Nairobi and discourses of neoliberal economic reform in Kenya. Fourth, I provide a discussion about the repossession of the lost land and subsequent rehabilitation of the forest by a democratically elected government of Kibaki in 2003. Finally, I conclude the paper with reflections on the contradictory manifestations of the interactions between democratization and the environment in the country.

Democratization and environmental protection

The rise of political pluralism in much of the developing world from the late 1980s was met with great interest by scholars and policy makers alike regarding its environmental effects (see, e.g., Cole, 1998; Congleton, 1992; Kotov & Nikitina, 1995; Silva, 1997). In particular, the rise of political pluralism renewed debates, mostly in the fields of political science and environmental studies, about the linkages between democratization and environmental protection (Lafferty & Meadowcroft, 1996; Li & Reuveny, 2006; Midlasrky, 1998; Payne, 1995; Tang & Tang, 2006). Scholars engaged in these debates have, for the most part, tended to be optimistic about the environmental effects of democratization (Gleditsch & Sverdrup, 2002). This optimistic stance was based on studies comparing environmental management between new democracies and their authoritarian past (Congleton, 1992; Kotov & Nikitina, 1995).

These studies suggest that movement away from authoritarianism potentially has a positive impact on environmental protection. Central to these studies are a number of assumptions about the links between democracy and the environment, including: first, since democracies hold regular free and regular elections, citizens can hold leaders accountable for public environmental agendas; second, democracies are more responsive to new ideas on environmental management than non-democratic ones. Hence, they are more open to what works or does not concerning environmental issues and, by extension, are likely to promote local participation in environmental decision making and management; and third, democracies tend to have a free market economy, which presents the best incentives for environmental friendly policies.

In the 1990s, in recognition of the potential positive environmental impacts of democratization, international institutions and non-governmental organizations, such as United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP), increasingly identified democratization and environmental protection as key policy goals for Africa and elsewhere in the developing world (UNEP, 1997; USAID, 1996). Unsurprisingly, therefore, the advent of democratization in much of sub-Saharan Africa during that period generated a lot of excitement among Western governments (and associated institutions) about the potential for greater environmental protection (UNEP, 1997; USAID, 1996; World Bank, 2007; World Resources Institute, 2003). President Clinton's visit to Africa in 1998 particularly epitomized that excitement. As Walker (1999: 258) points out, while Clinton's visit to the continent centered largely around issues of trade and celebration of historic democratic reforms, high on his agenda for discussion with the 'new generation' of leaders were issues of environment and sustainable development. Thus, it seems Africa's 'new democracy', also, raised the prospects for implementation of 'sound economic' (or in other words, neoliberal reform) policies. It was expected that, in accordance with the notion that free market economy is good for the environment, 'sound economic policies' would promote environmental protection in the region.

This view of linear and positive association between democratization and environmental is conceptually derived from the experiences of Western democracies, which, some believe, offers incomplete insights into the dynamics of democratization in less developed world contexts. As Walker (1999: 263) suggests, in the context of sub-Saharan Africa, democratization is complex, as it "describes diverse, ongoing processes of political change resulting in partial and often tenuous shifts toward more democratic forms of governance." Moreover, as Yeboah (2003) observes, democratization process in sub-Saharan Africa is such that democratic gains can be easily reversed. How these realities complicate the relationship between democratization and environmental management in the region necessitates careful investigation.

As a departure from most literature on environmental implications of democratization, this paper begins to interrogate the complex interactions between environmental management and democratization in sub-Saharan Africa in the context of electoral politics associated with the move to multipartyism. A particular political economy shaped the early dynamics of the move to multipartyism in the region. Accordingly, the urban political ecological perspective, to which I now turn, can help excavate those dynamics and their impacts on the environment.

Framing environmental impacts of democratization

Urban political ecology perspective offers a critical starting point for rethinking the relationship between process of democratization

and the environment. Urban political ecology (UPE) is a recent shift within the field of political ecology, a research area that "combines the concerns of ecology with broadly defined political economy" and, until recently, largely focuses on rural settings of less developed countries (Blaikie & Brookfield, 1987: 39; Braun, 2005; Keil, 2003, 2005). Central to UPE is the notion that complex and interrelated economic, political and cultural processes are, by and large, responsible for bringing about environmental transformation (positive or negative) in cities (Heynen, Kaika, & Swyngedouw, 2006; Keil, 2005; Swyngedouw & Heynen, 2003; Swyngedouw, Kaika, & Castro, 2002). As such, while this perspective acknowledges the importance of ecological processes in producing urban environmental change, it prioritizes the impacts political economy has upon urban environments (Heynen, 2006; Myers, 1999).

Furthermore, at the core of the UPE framework is the idea that "the material conditions that comprise urban environments are controlled and manipulated and serve the interests of the elites", often at the expense of marginalized populations (Heynen, 2003; Swyngedouw & Heynen, 2003: 902). These conditions are, in turn, not independent from social, political, economic and cultural contexts in which they become (materially and discursively) (re) produced (Kaika & Swyngedouw, 1999). Related to this, as Heynen et al. (2006: 6) note, urban environmental transformations or manipulations more often than not "become discursively, politically, and economically and socially appropriated to produce environments that embody and reflect positions of social power". In keeping with this, an important objective of UPE is to excavate the power relations that entangle "the interwoven knots of social process, material metabolism and spatial form that go into the formation of contemporary urban socionatural landscapes" (Swyngedouw & Heynen, 2003: 906) and, thus, help to tease out who benefits and who suffers from urban environmental change/transformation (Heynen, 2006).

These UPE conceptualizations have implications for our understanding of the relationship between democratization and the environment. How might urban environments (forests, in Nairobi's case) be appropriated, transformed, and mobilized in the process of electoral democratization to serve the interests of elites? Related to this, what are the political–economic underpinnings of appropriation and manipulation of urban environments such as forests? How are such appropriation and manipulation an expression of entrenched unequal social power relationships? A starting point in response to these questions is a review of the roots of democratization in sub-Saharan Africa that began in the 1990s.

Democratization in sub-Saharan Africa

Scholars link the origin of the wave of electoral democratization that spread throughout most of sub-Saharan Africa to the end of the Cold War and rise of political pluralism in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s. These events, scholars believe, helped set in motion conditions that contributed to the advent, and to large extent shaped the trajectory, of the democratization wave in the region in early 1990s (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997; El-Khawas, 2001; van de Walle, 2001). In particular, the end of the Cold War ushered a new international political economy, where new global goals focused on issues of economic and democratic reform took center stage (Diamond, 1995). Despotic African regimes became vulnerable to these international agendas. With sub-Saharan African countries heavily dependent on Western financial aid, and with no incentive to reward and cooperate with despotic regimes as during the cold war rivalries, Western powers and their affiliated international institutions were in a position to pressure African autocrats to initiate both economic and political reforms:

> Freed from the perceived need to turn a blind eye to the domestic excesses of cold war allies, and increasingly convinced that the absence of democratic government and political accountability in Africa was a significant contributory factor in economic malaise, a number of Western governments and international financial agencies such as the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) began to insist that aid and investment had to be linked to political reform in Africa (Wiseman, 1995: 3).

The new international political economy, therefore, fundamentally transformed the external environment in which African political systems had operated, helping initiate the advent of democratization in the region. In effect, most of the region's ruling political establishments did not self-initiate the process of democratization. It was, rather, largely 'forced' onto them. Scholars are, however, divided on whether it is the international financial institutions (along with their Western backers) or domestic forces (serious economic stagnation and oppositional civil society) which ultimately 'forced' authoritarian regimes to allow competitive multi-party elections and politics (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997; Brown, 2001; Diamond, 1995; Gros, 1998; Joseph, 1997; van de Walle, 2001; Wiseman, 1995). Nonetheless, there is substantial consensus that most countries in the region experienced a combination of both, but the ratio in importance varied across the region. In the case of Kenya's Moi regime, most commentaries are of the view that, ultimately, "donor conditionality forced Moi to allow multipartyism in 1991" (Brown, 2001: 725, 2004; Gros, 1998; Throup & Hornsby, 1998).

Since the initial process of democratization was, more generally, forced onto recalcitrant regimes, evidence suggests that increasingly insecure state elites actively and creatively devised strategies to counter problems posed to their power (Klopp, 2000; Throup & Hornsby, 1998). As a result, some old regimes ended up winning the first rounds of multi-party elections, effectively becoming what Lindberg (2006) refers to as electoral authoritarian regimes. Commenting on sub-Saharan Africa's experience with electoral democratization in the early 1990s, Diamond (1995: 30) noted how "at least ten (including the one in Kenya) civilian regimes have held multiparty elections so flawed that they do not meet the minimal criteria for electoral democracy." Simply put, many old regimes 'defied' the spirit of democratization and created what I refer to as 'false' electoral democracy.

Kenya's reputation as "one of Africa's most notorious cases of stalled democratic transition" changed with the overwhelming election of President Mwai Kibaki on December 27, 2002 (Ndegwa, 2003: 145). Many believe the triumph of Kibaki's 2002 presidential election had less "underhanded and coercive tactics" that characterized Moi's previous elections in 1992 and 1997 (Bakari, 2003: 280). The 2002 election in Kenya echoed experiences in other African electoral autocracies (including Ghana and Senegal) which had previously "passed power from one administration to another on the basis of successful elections" (Gyimah-Boadi, 2001: 104). These experiences constitute what I might call 'unforced' electoral democratization.

What are the environmental implications of 'forced', 'false', and 'unforced' electoral democratization in sub-Saharan Africa? The existing limited literature on environmental effects of democratization in the context of sub-Saharan Africa suggests that the relationship between the environment and democratization has not been necessarily beneficial. Based on his research in the United Republic of Tanzania islands of Zanzibar, Myers (2002: 158) suggests that democratization in sub-Saharan Africa has had the ability to undermine participatory efforts in environmental management:

> "In the context of transition to democratic multiparty politics, the 'real world' of party tensions mixes with the 'real world' of

> resource conflict and scarcity to make community based conservation-with-development seem an *unreal* dream" (italic in the original)

Along the same lines, Fabricius et al. (2001: 842) note that while democratization has opened up opportunities for community access to natural resources and their management, "politics and tensions associated with political change" in southern Africa has complicated relationships between many groups within communities and within environmental management institutions, weakening efforts at environmental protection. Echoing the above sentiments, Walker (1999) notes that increased political accountability and removal of repressive environmental regulations in southern African countries of Malawi and South Africa in the 1990s contributed to dramatic, unsustainable resource use. He further demonstrates how in other southern African countries, such as Mozambique, lack of political accountability and participation in the period following their first multi-party elections undermined environmental protection.

Given the heterogeneity of sub-Saharan African experiences with democratization (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997), it is necessary to interrogate the interactions between democracy and the environment in more sub-Saharan Africa contexts beyond southern Africa where this line of research has been mostly focused on. Accordingly, it is to the interactions of democratization and environmental management in Kenya that I now turn.

'Defying' democratization in Kenya

Prior to 1992, Kenya was a one-party state led by President Daniel Arap Moi. Moi and the Kenya African National Union (KANU) party had presided over an extremely authoritarian government for over 15 years. His government stifled civil society, advanced political repression, and suppressed popular participation in political affairs. As Kanyinga (1998: 13) observes about Moi's party's obsession with political power: "…KANU assumed a totalitarian image of a communist party with absolute and unmatched powers-supreme even to those of the parliament."

Although early in his presidency Moi displayed considerable concern for protecting the environment, his personalization of state politics and administration had wide implications for environmental protection in the country. Environmental policy making process increasingly became characterized by Moi decrees or public pronouncements that by and large lacked legal or political accountability (Matiru, 1999). Furthermore, the lack of accountability is reflected in Moi's government heavy top-down and inadequate implementation of environmental policies and laws. Unsurprisingly, Moi presided over what some consider as "irreversible environmental degradation" in the country (Mugabe & Krhoda, 1999: 3).

Challenges to Moi's personalization of state politics and administration emerged in the late 1980s. Moderate civil society institutions such as the churches, professional groups, and the progressive print media and disaffected politicians began agitating for introduction of electoral democracy. Unsurprisingly, the Moi government increasingly reacted with intense repression (Klopp, 2000). Western donors who all along had supported Moi's "legitimately elected", pro-Western government also joined with domestic forces in opposing Moi's style and direction of his rule (Throup & Hornsby, 1998: 54).

Accordingly, the Western donors decided to use their financial aid muscle to force Moi to initiate multi-party democracy. On November 26, 1991, Western governments and their affiliated institutions decided to suspend new aid to Kenya until the regime instituted multi-party elections (Brown, 2001; Were, Ngugi, & Makau, 2006; Wiseman, 1995: 4). The decision weakened Moi's position sufficiently that on December 2, 1991, he amended the constitution to allow political opposition to KANU, effectively ushering a new era of multi-party politics and elections.

The move to competitive politics, however, dramatically altered the political–economic terrain upon which KANU elites had operated. It became ever more necessary to vigorously solicit votes to win multi-party elections, first in 1992, and second in 1997. As a senior city official pointed out during my interview, "competitive politics associated with multipartyism led to political insecurity within the ruling clique eager to maintain monolithic power and control" (Personal communication, February 2006). A senior government official in the Ministry of Planning I talked with echoed this point:

> …the fact that we now had a competitive political environment, even though it was still skewed in favor of the incumbent administration, it meant that they (Moi's regime) were beginning to reckon with the fact that they may have to give power away… therefore, there was urgency to do whatever they could (Personal communication, April 2006).

The urgency to win competitive elections created an exponential need for more resources, altering the logic of political patronage as dynamics of patron–clients' relationships at the heart of KANU politics changed. As Klopp (2000) observes, with the introduction of electoral politics, the demand for political patronage resources to win elections escalated significantly. Evidence suggests that KANU clique creatively, but improperly, turned to mostly non-traditional patronage sources to help Moi win elections. This scenario by and large helped sustain Moi's authoritarian rule in a new political dispensation (Klopp, 2000). As illustrated in the following section, Moi's regime handling of the loss of Karura Forest in 1990s contradicts what had been expected about environmental effects of democratization in sub-Saharan Africa.

Karura Forest and the re-election of Moi in 1997

Situated on the Northern edge of Nairobi, Karura is one of the largest indigenous natural forests in the city, described by some as the "lung of the congested metropolis" (Maathai, 2006: 262). Karura Forest is a remnant of dry semi-deciduous forests that once covered the cooler, wet and well drained high elevated northern and western regions of the city (see Fig. 1) (Trump, 1967). The forest provides habitat for rare species of flora and fauna and serves as a catchment for local rivers which support a thriving urban vegetable industry in low-income areas downstream (Ikawa, 2005). Covering an area of 1062.7 ha when it was gazetted as a public forest reserve in 1932, the forest largely retained its original size for close to sixty years, losing about 20 ha of its vegetation to mostly public development, including diplomat homes, international research institutions and primary schools (a gazetted forest reserve cannot be put to any other use unless it is de-gazetted through another government gazette notice). However, a year before the second multi-party general elections, the forest reserve lost significant portion of its land. On August 21, 1996, the Moi regime allocated a section of the forest covering an area of 564.1 ha (over half of the forest) to private developers (see Table 1) (RoK, 2004).

Evidence suggests that the 1996 allocation of the forest was intended to help raise funds for the re-election of President Moi in 1997. As the director of *Kenya Forest Working Group* (a quasi-government organization committed to protection of forests) noted in my interview "…what happened is that during the campaigns for the 1997 elections some key individuals acquired that [Karura] land…it was given out to politicians who campaigned for KANU" (Personal communication, July 2005). The head of Advocacy and Networking for the *Green Belt Movement* (an environmental NGO)

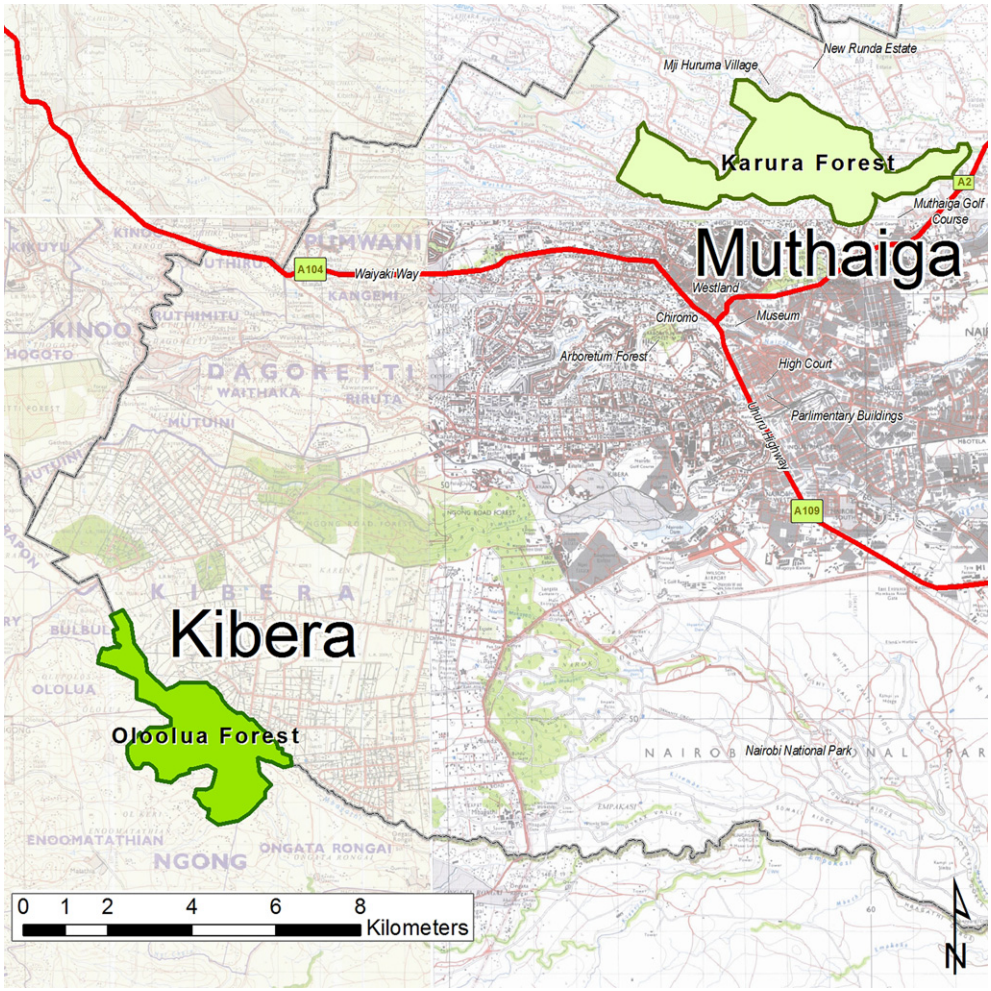

Fig. 1. Situation of Karura Forest reserve in relation to Nairobi City.

echoed these sentiments. She noted, based on her organization's extensive detective work, that: "…the government was looking for money to fund campaigns in 1997 to remain in power…, and the only way to raise money was to sell natural resources such as Karura Forest" (Personal communication, February 2006).

A series of events that followed the public revelation of the private development in the forest support the above sentiments. In particular, the September 1998 widespread publication in the *Daily Nation*, Kenya's most circulated newspaper, of photographs showing massive forest damage was met with great public uproar, epitomized by the reaction of Wangari Maathai, the *Green Belt Movement* founder and leader, and 2004 Nobel Peace Prize winner:

> …in the summer of 1998, I learned… [T]he government was taking public land in Karura Forest to the North of Nairobi and giving it to its political allies for executive offices and private houses…[I] soon learned that as far back as 1996, a vast section of Karura forest which had previously been protected, or gazetted, had been allocated to private developers. I was outraged (Maathai, 2006: 262).

Table 1
Recent history of key Karura Forest allocations.

Year	Size (ha)[a]	Allotees/reason for allocation	Percentage change in the size of the forest
1980	26. 251	Public school development	2.5%
1982	8.1	Diplomats and International Center for Research on Agroforestry	0.8%
1989	2.668	Former cabinet minister	0.3%
1992	1.838	Private developers	0.2%
1994	18.41	Private developers	1.8%
1996	564.1	A group of 64 private developers	55.6%
1997	85.0	Private developers	18.9%

[a] Karura covered an area of 1062.7 when it was gazetted as a forest reserve in 1932. *Source*: RoK, 2004, 225.

In a period of close to three years starting on October 7, 1998, Nairobi witnessed some of the largest acts of civil disobedience concerning an environmental issue in its close to 100 year history. Drawn from a wide cross-section of the Kenyan society, including NGOs like the *Green Belt Movement*, the *Forest Action Network*, the *Kenya Human Rights Commission*, the *National Council of Churches of Kenya*, and the *Law society of Kenya*, and ordinary citizens, the protestors demanded to know who the beneficiaries of Karura were and immediate revocation of the allocations. The protesters showed commitment to reclaiming Karura Forest by marching there to plant trees. The regime responded by sending security forces to stop protestors' entry to the forest, now considered a private property. The government reaction to protests further attracted more pressure from other sectors of the society including the media as this editorial commentary suggests:

> What is it about Karura Forest that makes the authorities so nervous that their only reaction is to use force or threat of force whenever anyone asks questions about it?… [T]he Karura issue

> has become a major embarrassment for the government; it simply won't go away…the sooner the government finds a way to resolve it, the better (Sunday Nation, 1999a).

As pressure on the government intensified, multiple layers of complexity in the manner in which the allocation of the forestland had been conducted began to emerge. On November 12, 1998, the Minister for *Lands and Settlements* tabled in parliament the list of 64 private companies allocated half of the forest but did not reveal the names of their directors (Daily Nation, 1998a). Surprised by the minister's incomplete revelation, a columnist for the *Daily Nation* observed that "for those firms to be allocated land, someone must have signed a letter of application to him, and all companies have directors listed with Registrar of companies" (Daily Nation, 1998b). However, an investigation by a team of *Daily Nation* reporters carried out at the Registrar General's office found that many files were unavailable (Daily Nation, 1998c). Furthermore, the investigation discovered that most of the firms listed were created in a period between 1995 and 1996, as 1997 elections drew close. The *Daily Nation's* findings about the missing files prompted the Secretary General of the *National Council of Churches* of Kenya to wonder: "who are these people that the government seems to be at pains to protect?" (Quoted in the Daily Nation, 1998c). A *Sunday Nation* (*Daily Nation's* Sunday edition) columnist, offered an answer to that question: "although the individual beneficiaries are "private", they may have such vital blood and cash links with the central power group that that group is prepared to use state machinery to protect them" (Sunday Nation, 1999b).

The public protests and commentaries about Karura deforestation did not alter the government position about protecting the forest allotees, they did though force developers to indefinitely abandon their construction activities in the forest. Although he was silent throughout the controversy as his top officials defended the legality of the allocations, President Moi later joined the debate. He argued that the high-income neighborhoods (such as Muthaiga and New Runda Estate) adjacent to Karura were once part of the forest which earlier had been developed without any opposition (see Fig. 1) (East African Standard, 1999). The president's voice energized his officials who further argued that private residential development in the forest was necessary to ease Nairobi's housing problem. The government's forest privatization explanations, however, seemed hollow to most observers:

> The Karura saga, as we have said before, will not just blow away. More specifically, it cannot be explained away in the context of previous development projects which necessitated destruction of similarly protected [forest] land (Editorial Commentary, Daily Nation, 1999a)

The government complexity in the Karura development issue appears to have been intended to mask its use of the forest to generate funds to help finance Moi's re-election campaign. With collaboration from sympathetic government officials, a Daily Nation (1998c) investigation had established that Karura Forest was allocated to firms mostly associated with high power KANU elites to generate funds for the 1997 election campaigns. This information supports the interviews quoted above. The allocation of Karura Forest to private developers must also necessarily be viewed within a historical and political–economic context of forestland development in Nairobi.

Karura Forest's shifting value from a public resource to a privatized landscape

The allocation of Karura Forest to private developers and individuals seems like a pure case of corruption. However, as Klopp (2000) suggests through her extensive work on patronage and corruption issues in Kenya, patronage and corruption need to be understood as conceptually distinct. As such, patronage refers to the use of resources to reward clients, often for political purposes. Patronage generates privileged individuals or groups within the state that undermine the legal order and state capacity to operate in a broader public interest. Corruption is the abuse of public office for private gain, and may provide the material, including trees and land, for patronage reasons. Moi's government's practices in Karura development issue, therefore, more clearly resemble patronage than outright corruption. The reality of electoral politics associated with multipartyism in Kenya, as highlighted by such practices, therefore, point to a 'democratization' process that could be forcefully subverted by the elites to weaken environmental protection.

Karura allocations and subsequent deforestation embody a form of political patronage linked to the politics of multi-party elections. However, it is useful to make a distinction between urban and rural land resources. Why would Moi's regime 'sell' an urban forest rather than key government resources elsewhere in Kenya at that particular period? Evidently, the environmental, political and economic consequences of urban resources vary from rural ones. As urban political ecologists recognize, the rural and urban locales may not be entirely disconnected or distinct, yet they present different frameworks for political–economic operations (Heynen et al., 2006). Karura Forest's attention as a valuable resource to be economically and politically mobilized for elites' advancement of power, under Moi's 'false' democratization, cannot be separated from its materiality or symbolism. Simply put, the trees in Karura and, by extension, its ecological setting, and the social status it reflects on those residing in it helped set in motion the forest's appropriation for Moi's re-election campaigns in 1997.

Although it is a public environmental resource, Karura is part of Nairobi forested areas that have historically been spaces of low-density residential development. The elites have appropriated and propagated those spaces as private landscapes of the affluent and the powerful since the early days of Nairobi's development (Hall, 1988). These upland forested areas stood in stark contrast to the vast, hotter, drier, and poorly drained low plains covering the eastern and southern parts of the city. During the colonial era (late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century), Europeans believed that this ecological setting presented a suitable climate for their settlement. In keeping with this, the forested upland areas, such as Karura, attracted intense interest from European settlers and developers, who claimed exclusive right of ownership (Kimani, 1972). Through zoning, land taxing and social pressures, the European settlers ensured that "the Europeans would get the best – that is, the highest-areas, the Indians the next best, and the Africans anything that was left" (Hall, 1988: 190). Thus, Nairobi forested areas became a symbol of European social power in the city which was maintained by all means including restricting non-European settlement or speculation of those areas as this quote in a land sale advertisement reveals: "although it is open for any person to bid for any of the town or of residential plots in Nairobi, Parklands or Ngong road, Asiatics or natives will not be allowed to reside there" (quoted in Hirst, 1994: 51). Actions such as this insured that the forested uplands remained areas of low-density residential development, accessible mostly to the politically and economically powerful European racial group.

After independence in 1963, Nairobi retained the colonial planning regulations and land ownership meant to serve the European interests. With the end of colonialism, the African economic and political elites appropriated those regulations to defend and enhance their own interests (Lee-Smith & Lamba,

1994). Effectively, therefore, Nairobi forest areas outside the realm of state protection have remained as spaces of low-density residential development. A director of urban planning in the Ministry of Local Government underscored this point in my interview:

> If you consider it from a colonial past, you will find that areas without trees were for Africans. But Karura forest area was for Europeans…so, you see, from the word 'go' that area attracted a lot of attention from the elites… if you look at it also from a climatic point of view, this is a green area, and it is a high potential residential area and all that (Personal communication, August 2005).

To further illustrate this, situated on the southern edge of Karura Forest is Muthaiga, a high-income, low-residential neighborhood and the location of the Kenya president's private residence (see Fig. 1). In a widely publicized incident involving the president's wife and her tenant (the then World Bank Country Director for Kenya), who was hosting a farewell party for himself, apparently upset at some happenings in the party, she demanded it to be stopped shouting that "…this is Muthaiga, not Korogocho" (quoted in the Daily Nation, 2005). By demanding the end to the party and calling for guests to go and continue their party in Korogocho, one of Nairobi's biggest slums, the president's wife drew from a long-established view that Muthaiga is an elitist landscape, despite the fact that the party host was, by all means, elite.

Notwithstanding its location within a predominantly elitist residential area, Karura remained protected as a public forest reserve for over 60 years. Furthermore, the forest continued to serve as a valuable public resource for the urban poor in the surrounding areas. I interviewed residents of Mji Huruma, a slum village bordering the forest to the north (see Fig. 1). The slum has been around since 1979 and its residents have had a close relationship with the forest. Until recently, the slum residents had throughout used the forest in various ways, including for firewood, medicine, and fodder to feed their livestock. The access to the forest resources was often done through some special arrangements with Forest Department officials.

In keeping with the history noted above, the attractiveness of Karura forest as a valuable source of political funds under Moi's 'false' democratization, helped facilitate its shift from a public resource to an elite one. Indeed, the value of the section of Karura forest cleared and allocated for private development was worth an estimated $823 million at the time (Daily Nation, 2000). As an Assistant Conservator of Forests noted in my interview, the attractiveness of Karura forest as a valuable source of political funds was clear to state elites as opposed to other city areas without trees:

> Why does it [development] need to expand towards a forest and not those open areas of Ruai, and other areas?… I mean it is next to Muthaiga, if you put a house here, you know, you will be getting high rates for rent; you will be getting the same rates as Muthaiga (Personal communication, April 2006).

Here the conservator of forest wonders why a 'democratic' government (and its associated agencies) which owns about 50 percent of the city land insisted on developing the forest amid all the protests. In particular, the above sentiments draw attention to the expansive areas to the south of the city, where the government owns most of the city land, but would not have to destroy a forest. As I suggested earlier, the hope had been, particularly among Western observers, that environmental improvement accompanies democratization. Clearly, the relationship between the two is a much more complicated matter requiring careful examination in various places and times.

Neoliberal reforms, discourse of privatization and elite's appropriation of Karura Forest

Paradoxically, the shifting value of Karura forest from public resource to an elite resource was in part enabled by the notion of a free market system which is associated with Western donors and their push for neoliberal economic reform in Kenya. As is true in most of sub-Saharan Africa, the push by Western donors for neoliberal economic reforms (which have largely gone hand-in-hand with call for political reforms) mostly began in the early 1980s in the form of structural adjustment programs (SAPs) (Mensah, 2006). The SAPs reflected ideological commitment to neoliberal capitalism, a key force that has been driving world development in the last three decades (Peck & Tickell, 2002). Among neoliberal capitalism's key features include fiscal austerity, market-based economy, distinct withdrawal or shrinking of the state regulatory responsibilities, endorsement of excludable, private property, privatization and 'commodification of everything' (Harvey, 2005: 165; Jessop, 2002; Peck, 2001). These characteristics have had inherent ramifications for environmental management, among which have been handing over "natural resources, long held in trust by regional, state and municipal authorities" to firms and individuals for economic exploitation, and "the capture of common resources and exclusion of the communities to which they are linked" (Goldman, 1998; Heynen & Robbins, 2005: 2). This apparent privatization and enclosure of public resources constitute what some scholars refer to as "accumulation by dispossession" (Swyngedouw, 2007: 52).

Privatization of state assets or resources in Kenya has been central to Western donors agenda for neoliberal reforms in the country since the advent of SAPs in 1980s (O'Brien & Ryan, 2001) As Ryan (2004) observes, during the Moi regime, implementation of neoliberal reforms was tailored to protect the interests of long-established political elites and to tone down donor pressures. To this end, the privatization process was discursively manipulated to hide its true nature from the attention of the Western donors. My findings echo these observations. The Moi regime creatively used the discourse of privatization (and its associated free market ideology) to mask patronage connections underpinning the selling of the public forest reserve to private interests. Under pressure from protestors, the regime reassured the public that privatizing the forest reserve was within the neoliberal reform agenda. As such, the audience of this discourse also included the Western donors who were also keen on Moi's progress in implementing neoliberal reforms.

The regime's argument was however not convincing. To public protesters and their sympathizers, the allocation of Karura Forest reserve to private interests epitomized the regime's facilitation of 'accumulation by dispossession' of important public resources:

> "…although Karura is important in itself, what is even more important is what the forest symbolizes: All the frustrations felt by a people who are sick and tired of being steadily dispossessed by their own government" (Editorial Commentary, Daily Nation, 1999b).

To those immediately dispossessed of the forest, the ramifications were very clear as discussions I had with residents of Huruma revealed:

> "…It used to help us with trees for building. Those with livestock would get grass from there too. Also, for medical purposes …there are trees that if you have a wound and use its sap you will be healed within a week. Most of us used firewood collected from the forest. Most people here do not have toilets. They used Karura Forest for toilet purposes." (Personal communication, slum resident, November 2005)

The democratic election of President Kibaki raised hopes among the Kenyan public that the privatized sections of the forestland would be reclaimed, a discussion to which I now turn.

Efforts to re-claim Karura Forest under President Kibaki in 2003

The presidential elections of December 27, 2002 ushered a new political dispensation in Kenya. Kibaki, a veteran opposition politician, running on the National Alliance Rainbow Coalition (NARC – a grouping of 15 parties) ticket, swamped KANU's Uhuru Kenyatta (Moi's anointed successor and a son of Kenya's first postcolonial president, Jomo Kenyatta) 62–31 percent. Many commentators considered the 2002 elections free and fair (for more commentaries, see Kenya Elections, 2002).

Unsurprisingly, there was a heightened expectation among the Kenyan public that the triumph of Kibaki and NARC had laid the foundation for "the birth of a new mode of broad-based consensus politics within the rubric of a new coalition government" (Murunga & Nasong'o, 2006: 2). It is against this background that many Kenyans were shocked to learn that, less than three months in power, the Kibaki's newly elected government was considering a proposal by an American developer to build a high-end hotel and apartment complex on a section of land in Karura Forest. The seriousness of the consideration became apparent to the public when reports emerged in the local media indicating that the then late Vice-President, Michael Wamalwa, had led a team of senior government officials, including the Environment Minister, on a tour of the forest (Sunday Nation, 2003). The tour appeared to have been made as a final act of approval as the government had already accepted an environmental impact assessment report that the American developer had made. This prompted Wangari Maathai (the new regime's Environment Assistant Minister, and who appeared to have not been party to the new plans to allow the development of the forest) to remark: "the government seems hell-bent on licensing the investor to start construction, and is only using the assessment report as a scapegoat" (quoted in the Sunday Nation, 2003).

The government's argument was that Nairobi needed foreign investments. But as these editorial headlines in the local print media suggest the Kenyan public was not buying it: "No, not Karura forest again!" (Saturday Nation, 2003); "'No' to proposed Karura hotel" (Daily Nation, 2003). As such, it appeared unfathomable among the Kenyan public that a new democratic government would not only re-endorse questionable private development of an important urban public forest reserve, but also do it in an untransparent manner:

> "Since the Narc administration was installed, we have witnessed a veritable breath of freshness in the way things are done. In Environment Minister Newton Kulundu and Assistant Minister Wangari Maathai, we have seen a religious conviction to repair the damage by the Kanu regime when it comes to reclaiming and preserving our diminishing forest cover." (Editorial commentary, Saturday Nation, 2003).

The public opposition, epitomized by Maathai threat to quit the government if the development of the forest proceeded, ultimately forced the Kibaki government to reject the proposal by the American developer. The ownership of the more than half of the forest reserve, however, remained unresolved until almost a year later after the government had embarked on a program to recover improperly privatized public lands. As a demonstration of his government's commitment to good governance, on June 30, 2003, President Kibaki appointed a commission, composed of 20 prominent Kenyans, to investigate unlawful allocation of public lands, including forests, under the previous regime (RoK, 2004). On July 2, 2004, the commission, popularly known as the Ndungu Commission (after its chairperson Paul Ndung'u) handed a report of its findings and recommendations to President Kibaki. The Ndungu Commission listed Karura Forest reserve among its inventory of all inappropriately privatized public lands. The Commission made wide-raging recommendations, including repossession and restoration of illegally allocated lands to their proper purpose. The government publicly expressed its commitment to fully implement the recommendations.

In accordance with the report, Karura Forest was not only reclaimed, it became strictly protected. The forest was ecologically restored through planting trees on sections whose vegetation had been cleared. Today, virtually no human use of the forest is allowed. To the slum dwellers that have used the forest all their lives, this new arrangement regarding the protection of the forest seemed unfair. In my interview a slum dweller wondered why the *Green Belt Movement* leader, Maathai, who was now part of the Kibaki regime, sided with the government concerning the forest use. Maathai, who at one point during the struggle to save the forest had entertained the idea of the poor being allocated part of the forest for residential purposes, now symbolized an image of a stubborn government regarding any public use of the forest. The dwellers had joined with Maathai in the protest against the deforestation. Therefore, the slum residents failed to understand why a democratic government she was now part of was marginalizing them:

> Wangari Maathai has become too tough. She does not at all want anybody being allowed into the forest…she has not remembered those who helped her for the return of the forests from the rich. She used us, our strength… I helped her cross the river to get to the forest. We wonder what she is thinking about the people here. A lot of us got in trouble. Some were injured by police and private security guards, and one drowned in the river during the fracas (Personal communication, slum resident, November 2005)

Interestingly, when the forest was being developed, the slum dwellers had also feared that they would be marginalized. The dwellers believed that the elite whose needs the development seemed to target would have been less interested in residing side by side with them:

> If they had succeeded [in developing Karura forest], we would have been uprooted from here because the rich would not want to live side by side with the poor. They would think that we are dirty and crooks… there is no doubt that we would have been uprooted…" (Personal communication, slum resident and leader, November 2005)

In sum, the present protection status of Karura Forest calls to question what might be considered 'good' democracy. Clearly, the NARC government's efforts to reclaim public forests can be viewed as 'democracy in action' in a new political dispensation. Paradoxically, the government's decision to strictly protect the forest without participation of the slum dwellers whose livelihood in some respects depended on suggests that the process of democratization can further mask all manner of inequalities. After having protested the 'privatization' of the forest, they now face a different form of exclusion.

Conclusions

In recent years, an important scholarly discussion surrounding the spread of democratization in the developing world addresses what democratization means for environmental protection. Many involved in this discussion hold an optimistic position about the potential positive environmental impacts of democratization (e.g., Kaltenborn, Vistad, & Stanaitis, 2002). Others, however, believe that

the extent to which this potential can be fully realized in some countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, remains an open question (e.g., Fabricius et al., 2001). Both sides of the debate are mostly concerned with understanding the environmental effects of democratization in the period after competitive elections have been held. The focus here is whether or not democratization (once elections have been held) creates political, social, and economic conditions that promote environmental protection.

In this paper, I have taken the position that multi-party elections are one of many dimensions of the broader process of democratization. I have demonstrated that to better understand the interactions between democratization and the environment it is also important to focus on multi-party elections themselves during a period of democratic transition or consolidation. As the case study in this paper demonstrates, in the absence of adequate institutional reforms, politics of competitive elections prior to or during an election season have the potential to serve as catalysts for environmental degradation. The form in which these politics take is shaped by particular political economies. In the Kenyan case, the advent of multipartyism in 1990s altered the dynamics of environmental protection. Under pressure from Western donors, the then regime of President Moi introduced multi-party elections. Pressure to win the elections created a great need for political resources to maintain patronage networks which had helped his regime and other elites to stay in power. Selling key publicly owned forest reserves, such as Karura in Nairobi, offered an important source of political patronage necessary to win in competitive elections. Under Moi's seemingly 'false' democratic practices, selling a public forest resource was couched in a more legitimate neoliberal language of privatization and reform. The Moi's regime use of neoliberal language in this case highlights how democratization might interact discursively with neoliberalism to negatively impact the environment.

According to Lindberg (2006: 122) "there are good reasons for believing that elections in and of themselves, however good as indicators [about the direction of democratization]…[do not tell]… the whole story" (words in parentheses are mine). Therefore, it is also important to make assessments of democratization during the period following elections. In keeping with this, this study supports cautionary observations of a few other scholars who have investigated interactions between democratization and the environment in the context of sub-Saharan Africa (for example, Myers, 2002). In Kenya, after assuming power in 2003, a popularly elected government of Kibaki secretly considered selling to a private developer a section of Karura Forest. This calls to question the conventional notion that political and public accountability in the context of environmental management is necessarily a consequence of democratization. Furthermore, even what might be considered 'good' democracy can also mask all manner of inequalities, including environmental marginalization. Under public pressure, the Kibaki government not only reclaimed the forest, it became strictly protected. Ironically, this new protection arrangement further marginalizes the poor who have used the forest all their lives for firewood and herbal medicine and other uses.

The new arrangement regarding the protection of Karura forest draws attention to the dilemma faced by governments in new democracies: how to respond to conflicting demands (whether relating to the environment or otherwise) from domestic and international constituencies while maintaining their democratic governing capacity (Fabricius et al., 2001; Tang & Tang, 1999, 2006). The government's handling of the protection of Karura Forest appears to be a reassertion of state control over market speculation. This reassertion appears to be an attempt to cement some sort of state–civil society arrangement meant to produce a political settlement that is acceptable to some domestic factions (who have the ability to effectively take advantage of new political freedoms) and Western donors. In other words, the government's strict measure to protect Karura Forest suggests it was more concerned about maintaining good relations with environmental and developmental civil society (of which Wangari Maathai is a prominent face) and their Western supporters than with the marginalized poor. Democratization is certainly desirable, but, as the Kenyan case demonstrates, our discussions about its relationship with the environment need to pay close attention to contradictory manifestations of that relationship in particular places and times.

Certainly, this single case study is limited in making broad generalizations about complex interactions between democratization and the environment in sub-Saharan Africa. Given that the trajectory of democratization (and its interactions with neoliberal politics) in the region is highly uneven and unpredictable (Lindberg, 2004; Myers, 2005; Walker, 1999), it is necessary that more studies be conducted on diverse environmental issues within countries and across the region.

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