

Kenyan elite manoeuvre as war looms in Middle East

David Rowan
5 November 2002

The Electoral Commission of Kenya recently announced that presidential elections have been set for December 27. The announcement follows weeks of political infighting within the ruling Kenya African National Union (KANU) government that led to a split in the party.

Political tensions in Kenya, and especially within KANU itself, have been heightened due to a number of factors.

President Daniel arap Moi is obliged by the constitution—set up after the introduction of multi-party elections in 1991—to step down after two consecutive five-year terms in office. He was re-elected president in 1997, having previously been elected in 1992.

Political volatility surrounding the nomination of KANU's presidential candidate in the upcoming elections increased when Moi announced that he was backing 41-year-old Uhuru Kenyatta as his successor. Moi said that his choice of candidate would be put to a “voice vote” of up to 4,000 delegates who were to attend a KANU conference set for mid-October.

Uhuru Kenyatta is the son of Mzee Jomo Kenyatta, who ruled the country from 1963 until his death in 1978. According to reports, Kenyatta is viewed by his rivals within the KANU government as a malleable political apprentice whom Moi will manipulate from behind the scenes.

A BBC report states that Kenyatta only became involved in politics in 1997 when he was elected chairman of his hometown branch of KANU. In the general election of the same year Kenyatta contested the Gatundu parliamentary seat that was once held by his father. Although he was expected to win the seat comfortably he lost to a little known political figure and vowed to quit politics altogether and return to his extensive family business enterprises.

In 1999, with the tacit approval of President Moi, Kenyatta was appointed chairman of the Kenya Tourism Board where he worked with Nicholas Biwott, who was, according to the BBC, a “close confidante” of Moi. In October Kenyatta was nominated to parliament and then progressed smoothly into the cabinet. In March 2002 he was elected—along with four other leading KANU government ministers—vice chairman

of KANU.

Some reports have raised the possibility that one factor in Moi's backing for Kenyatta is that the president wants a loyal successor who will “protect him and his family from legal action once he leaves office.”

According to the *Washington Post*, political analysts view Kenyatta's election as a way of allowing the outgoing president to continue a “thriving system of patronage” that will “shield Moi from any prosecution over allegations of widespread corruption during his 24 years in power.”

Moi has stated that he has no intention of disappearing from the political scene in Kenya and told reporters, “I am not retiring from politics and will remain KANU's leader.”

At press conferences Kenyatta has stated that he represents a new generation in Kenyan politics determined to tackle the country's deepening poverty and reputation for corruption. One statement by Kenyatta read like an indictment of the policies and perspective of the government he represents, when he told reporters that Kenya was “faced with a number of critical challenges, including high poverty levels, serious unemployment, crippling domestic debt, poor infrastructure and failing institutions.”

He made no suggestions on how to tackle these major problems if he were elected, but instead called for an amnesty for those accused of corruption under Moi's government and stated that he was sending out a message of “reconciliation, forgiveness and reform.”

In August a number of leading KANU ministers—who each viewed themselves as a potential successor to Moi—openly criticised the president's choice of candidate and called for the presidential nomination decision to be reached through a secret ballot.

Energy Minister Raila Odinga and former vice president George Saitoti have, together with a number of government ministers, formed a faction within KANU named the Rainbow Alliance and have begun discussions with opposition parties. Saitoti declared that he was going to stand as a KANU presidential candidate against Kenyatta and was subsequently sacked by Moi, together with other

leading KANU figures who accused Moi of “foisting” the Kenyatta nomination on the party.

The sacking of government ministers and Moi’s determination to push through his choice of political successor led to a number of defections from KANU and the development of closer ties between the Rainbow Alliance and opposition parties.

The Rainbow Alliance, led by Raila Odinga, renamed itself the Liberal Democratic Party and joined the newly formed National Alliance Party of Kenya (NAPK) led by Mwai Kibaki, which was created through a coalition of opposition parties, including the Democratic Party, Forum for the Restoration of Democracy-Kenya (Ford-Kenya) and the National Party of Kenya.

The new amalgamation was renamed the National Alliance Rainbow Coalition and selected Mwai Kibaki as its presidential candidate for the 2002 elections. Kibaki pledged to introduce a new constitution that would create the position of prime minister and severely reduce the role of the president. He also called for the revival of an Anti-Corruption Commission to fight widespread corruption within the government.

He directed his attacks towards the outgoing president and sought to portray all of the problems confronting Kenya as being the responsibility of Moi alone. He told reporters that under a government headed by him corruption would be fought from the top and “the top is obviously the president.” He revealed more than he intended about the corruption endemic throughout the ruling elite in Kenya, saying, “The new government will not need to be bribed to do what it should.”

Kibaki, 71, was a leading KANU government functionary serving as finance minister from 1969 to 1982 and vice president of the party from 1978 to 1988. Despite opposing the introduction of multi-party elections while still a member of KANU at the beginning of the 1990s, he went on to found the Democratic Party in 1991.

Raila Odinga merged his National Democratic Party (NDP) with KANU in March 2002, seeing the merger as the best means to enhance his political career. According to *Africa Confidential*, Odinga saw his move into KANU as offering the opportunity to grab a “plum job” after concluding that he could “beat KANU only by joining it”.

When it became clear that Moi and a section of the Kenyan ruling elite had made up their minds who was to replace the president, Odinga jumped ship and put himself forward as NARC’s candidate for prime minister. Under constitutional changes demanded by the opposition coalition this would place power in the hands of Odinga, leaving Kibaki as merely a figurehead.

On October 25, two days before a convention was due to

begin work on the proposals of the Constitution of Kenya Review Commission (CKKC) for a drastic reduction in presidential powers, Moi dissolved parliament. The president then stated that the CKKC would have to halt its work, given that the parliament that created it had been dissolved.

It is possible that Moi is acting with the tacit approval of the Bush administration. The *Washington Post* report emphasises the importance of Kenya within the Horn of Africa region and its strategic importance in the US government’s planned war against Iraq. What the Bush administration needs in Kenya in the coming period is a smooth transfer of power and relative stability. “The future of this East African nation has become increasingly important to the United States because Kenya is a relatively stable American ally in a neighbourhood that includes the warring nations of Sudan, Somalia, Rwanda and Congo. It may also be crucial if the United States decides to attack Iraq. Under agreements with the United States, Kenya could lend its Indian ocean bases,” the *Post* states.

None of the individuals or parties that are to stand in the December elections speak in the name of the vast majority of the population of Kenya. None of the issues facing the workers and masses of Kenya are addressed by any party and the political climate is dominated by the squabbings of the ruling elite as it thrashes out how best to defend its privileged position at the expense of the impoverished majority. All talk, whether of new constitutions or the tackling of corruption, is directed towards the institutions of the Western powers.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact