

Kenya: Social disintegration in country touted as African “success” story

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More than 350 are estimated to have been killed in almost two weeks of violence following the rigged presidential elections in Kenya. The total continues to rise, with no sign that a political resolution is in sight.

The dead are the victims of brutal policing and ethnic clashes. Human Rights Watch has denounced the “excessive use of force by the police and military” against protesters supporting the opposition candidate, Raila Odinga. British Channel 4 News showed police firing live rounds at demonstrators in the slums of Nairobi, with doctors at a local clinic saying half of those they were treating had been injured by the police.

Members of the Kikuyu tribe associated with President Kibaki are being singled out for attacks by shadowy gangs. Alexandre Liebeskind, deputy head of Red Cross operations for the Horn of Africa, told the *Los Angeles Times*, “The level of hatred is very high. Violence of tribal origin is the worst; it knows no limits and is extremely difficult to quell.”

Tribal violence has been unheard of in Kenya for more than a decade. The violence that took place in the 1990s was not on this scale. These attacks are much more widespread.

Vast numbers of people have been displaced from mixed areas. In the western city of Kisumu, an Odinga stronghold, thousands of members of the Kikuyu and other tribes perceived to be supporters of the incumbent president have been forced to leave town on buses.

In the Rift Valley area, scene of some of the worst ethnic attacks, some 100,000 are in need of food. They are sheltering in churches and police stations. In some cases, members of the Luo tribe have taken their Kikuyu neighbours into their own homes to protect them.

Roadblocks have been set up by armed gangs from different ethnic groups. Only vehicles with military escorts can move about.

A large-scale humanitarian crisis is now developing. The International Committee of the Red Cross said that around half a million people required aid and, according to the United Nations, at least 250,000 have been forced to flee their homes and need shelter.

UN World Food Programme trucks carrying 2,500 tons of supplies have been unable to move because of the insecure situation. The medical charity Merlin told the BBC that food and water supplies are “dangerously low,” sparking fears of health risks from diarrhoea, infection and dehydration.

The deteriorating situation has produced a crisis for the United States. Kenya is a key ally in the “war against terror.” The US assistant secretary of state for Africa, Jendayi Frazer, was dispatched to Nairobi to attempt a negotiated settlement. She is seeking to shore up the Kibaki regime and bring Odinga into a government of national unity.

Under US pressure, Kibaki offered a power-sharing arrangement with Odinga but has refused to step down as president. Odinga has rejected taking part in a national government because of this and has called for more demonstrations against the government, threatening to escalate the level of violence.

Odinga’s Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) won nearly half the seats in the parliamentary elections that took place at the same time as the

presidential election. Fifteen of Kibaki’s ministers lost their parliamentary seats.

It is hardly credible that Odinga did not also win the presidential vote. The chair of the Electoral Commission has since said that he did “not know whether Mr. Kibaki won the elections.” He complained that he was “under pressure” to announce the results. European Union observers have serious reservations about the counting procedures.

Kibaki has offered to allow the dispute over votes to be settled in the courts, according to Kenya’s constitution. Odinga rejected this offer. The judiciary is mainly pro-Kibaki. He has removed a number of senior judges he found troublesome during his five years of office.

The present political impasse is an indication of the deepening conflicts within the Kenyan ruling elite. Odinga used to be an ally of Kibaki. He was a key supporter of Kibaki in the 2002 elections.

In return for his loyalty, he expected to be made prime minister. Instead, he found himself ditched.

Previously, Odinga had been allied with Daniel Arap Moi, Kibaki’s predecessor. Moi was president for 24 years. Odinga was briefly jailed in the 1990s for opposition to Moi. But the two patched up a rapprochement as Moi came under pressure from the West to allow free elections.

Odinga hoped that Moi would nominate him as his successor, but Moi reneged on the deal and chose Uhuru Kenyatta to stand in 2002. Uhuru Kenyatta is the son of the first Kenyan president, Jomo Kenyatta. Moi hoped to continue holding the reins of power behind the scenes.

Kibaki defeated Kenyatta, but soon teamed up again with Moi—leaving Odinga out in the cold. Despite the great fanfare about free elections, the three super-rich families of Kenyatta, Moi and Kibaki that have dominated Kenya since independence emerged as the victors.

After this experience, Odinga is reluctant to be brought into a government only to be dropped for a third time. The political impasse seems likely to continue, and with it, the humanitarian crisis can only grow.

Kibaki is gambling on the continued support of Western governments, especially that of the US. He has seen the US and other Western powers continue to support strategically important African regimes after rigged elections.

European Union observers criticised elections in Nigeria last year and Ethiopia in 2005. But the US and Britain accepted the results. Both are strategically important countries in the “war on terror” and the supply of oil.

The economic consequences of the continuing crisis in Kenya are proving to be enormous. Kenya’s main industry is tourism, and the hotels have emptied overnight. Share prices have fallen on the Nairobi stock market, as has the Kenyan shilling.

Mombasa, which is the main port not only for Kenya but for the surrounding countries, is at a standstill. Trucks cannot leave the port for fear of being stopped and looted at roadblocks. Cargoes that include UN relief supplies for Sudan and Somalia are piling up at the port.

Kenya had some of the highest growth rates in Africa in the 1960s and 1970s, but by the 1980s it entered a sharp decline. It was hit by falling commodity prices, as the Kenyan economy depended on tea and coffee.

In 1983, President Moi was forced to accept an International Monetary Fund Structural Adjustment Programme. Globalisation was undermining all possibility of national development strategies on which Kenya and most Africa regimes had embarked. Under 20 years of IMF and World Bank measures, however, the conditions for the majority of the population have steadily declined. Today, up 60 percent live in poverty.

The appalling conditions in Kibera, the slum where about 1 million people live less than 2 kilometres from the centre of Nairobi, are graphically featured in the film, *The Constant Gardener*. There is no paving, little electricity or lighting, and no sanitation in the tiny houses constructed out of corrugated metal. People have to either pay to use communal lavatories and washrooms or use makeshift open sewers.

Since the IMF plan was introduced, huge inequalities of income have opened up. The salary of a member of parliament is about US\$60,000 a year, with allowances on top, compared to a gross domestic product per head of US\$1,500 per year. The official minimum wage is about US\$700 a year, with those who don't qualify for the minimum wage forced to take jobs for less than US\$200 a year.

IMF conditions were imposed for debt repayment and demands made to open up the economy to foreign investors. However, Moi and his clique resisted demands for the lifting of restrictions on investors and stepped up their looting of a declining national economy in order to pay for patronage and thereby stay in power. Billions of dollars have gone missing from the state coffers without any prosecutions taking place.

Kibaki has responded to pressure from the West and the IMF by lifting some restrictions on foreign investment. The result has been an investment boom, with growth rates now up to 7 percent.

Kenya has proved to be attractive because of its cheap labour and deep-water port. The *Financial Times* has warned that the crisis in Kenya will hit profits.

Not only Kenya but its neighbours will be affected. African investment funds raised more than US\$5 billion dollars last year.

The sight of what was regarded as one of the most stable African countries descending into political and ethnic violence will send a chill through the emerging market investment business. It has been one of the few sectors that continued to grow as the credit crunch took its toll of other markets.

Kenya's recent economic boom has had no impact on the poverty that the vast majority of the population faces. But it has whetted the appetites of businessmen and an entrepreneurial layer at the top of Kenyan society. In that way it has played a part in destabilising the political situation.

It is from this venal group, bickering among themselves over the spoils of Kenya's new investment opportunities, that the finance was raised to put together both Odinga's ODM and Kibaki's Party of National Unity (PNU).

Both parties are squabbling alliances of politicians who have been around since Moi's era, together with some new hopefuls. The ODM was put together in 2005 to campaign for a "no" vote in on a constitutional referendum. It succeeded in preventing a constitutional change that would have allowed Kibaki to consolidate his power.

The ODM's main purpose is to demand a bigger share of the profits from economic growth for the elite of the Luo and other tribal groups excluded by Kibaki. Kibaki's PNU is based on wealthy Kikuyu businessmen who are said to run most of Kenya's economy.

Both groups whipped up tribalism during the election campaign. Neither the ODM nor the PNU has any social programme that can resolve the problems facing the majority of the Kenyan population. The only way they have been able to build up support is by scapegoating other tribes. They have brought Kenya to the brink of a civil war in order to advance

their selfish interests.

US Ambassador to Kenya Michael E. Ranneberger and Senator and presidential candidate Barack Obama, who is of Luo origin, both expressed their concern about the growing tribalism in Kenya at the beginning of 2007, according to *Africa Confidential*. Even Kibaki and other government ministers were obliged to speak out against it. The trade and industry minister proposed an all-party visit to Rwanda to "sensitise Kenyan leaders to the dangers of inflammatory ethnic speeches."

When Moi used tribalist politics in the run-up to the 1992 elections in the Rift Valley area, up to 800 people were killed in the ensuing conflicts and tens of thousands forced to flee their homes. The Western governments withdrew all aid for a six-month period, and Moi was forced to allow opposition parties to stand in the elections.

Tribalism has been largely kept in the background in the intervening period. Kibaki received a large majority in the 2002 elections because his rainbow coalition was seen as including all tribal groups that were opposed to Moi.

Now, tribal conflicts have re-emerged on a much wider scale. Fifteen years later, the West will not so easily call a halt. They are reluctant to withdraw support from Kibaki because they face growing competition for Africa's resources. China, India, Brazil, Russia and Korea have all developed interests in Africa. Russia has just signed a huge deal to exploit Nigeria's natural gas. Kenya has potential oil and gas reserves in its territorial waters.

There is growing international concern about the reverberations of the political crisis in Kenya, but it is beyond the capacity of either the Kenyan ruling elite or the Western powers to resolve. The crisis is fundamentally a product of the ongoing imperialist exploitation of the African continent. It bloodily confirms the inability of the nationalist elite to whom the British colonial authorities handed formal power at independence to overcome this economic domination.

Jomo Kenyatta, the first president of Kenya, spent eight years in a British jail during the Mau-Mau uprising. The uprising was brutally suppressed by the British.

Kenyatta took on the mantle of opposition and emerged from prison with widespread support in the country. He adopted the same nationalist policies that most African regimes adhered to after independence, presenting them as a form of "African socialism." As one book puts it, "Kenyatta, whilst wearing the fashionable cloak of 'African Socialism,' adopted most of the prevailing orthodoxies of capitalist development theory." (*)

In return, he earned the praise of the West for his moderation. He proved to be a loyal ally of the West during the Cold War.

The last 30 years have seen the political and economic arrangements the colonial powers put in place during the 1960s break apart, with disastrous results for the majority of the population. The Kenyan elite have plundered the country and have now plunged it into communal violence as they scramble to grab the spoils of foreign investment.

Ever since independence, they have shown themselves incapable of achieving genuine economic and social development because they have been consistently subordinated to the interests of the Western governments and corporations. Whether as a supplier of commodities or a hot investment opportunity, Kenya has remained in the grip of a world market that is dominated by giant corporations and banks.

(*) John D Hargreaves, *Decolonisation in Africa*, Longman, 1996, p. 210.



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