

Kenyan elections take place under threat of crackdown

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Results of polls for thousands of elective offices across Kenya are being announced this week amid threats of social unrest. Nearly every elected office in Kenya has been contested, with candidates for president, governors, the national assembly, women's representatives, and senate and county assemblies.

The hotly contested election for president between incumbent Uhuru Kenyatta and challenger Raila Odinga has been marked by allegations of election fraud and an intensified police state atmosphere.

The Kenyatta government, citing the potential for violence, deployed 180,000 police around the country for the duration of the poll. Protests by Odinga supporters have erupted in many cities, most notably in Nairobi and Kisumu, home to significant layers of opposition to the ruling Kenyatta government.

Preliminary results released Wednesday by the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC), the official body responsible for counting the vote, project Kenyatta the winner, with 54.3 percent of the vote, and Odinga receiving 44.7 percent, a margin of some 1.4 million votes, with 94 percent of the total vote counted. The final results are expected to be announced Friday.

Odinga has accused the Kenyatta government of election fraud, alleging that the election commission's computer servers holding the vote tally have been hacked. In fact, the IEBC admits an attempted hack took place, but claims that it was unsuccessful and not a threat to the integrity of the election.

Former US Secretary of State John Kerry, heading the Carter Center's observer team overseeing Kenya's election, described the poll as credible, telling the media that while observers noted "minor variances", there was nothing that would cause doubt over the poll's integrity.

Overshadowing the election is last month's murder of Chris Musando, a senior election official with the IEBC, the election body charged with counting the vote. The circumstance and those responsible for his death are as yet unknown, fueling a wave of suspicion in the population that the government was behind the killing. It has been reported that Musando's body bore evidence he was beaten and tortured before killed.

A few days later, an unknown man attacked the home of Vice President William Ruto, in which a guard was wounded.

In the midst of these suspicious circumstances social anger has exploded, and protests have erupted across the country resulting in mass arrests and five killings by security forces. A real fear of a social explosion permeates the Kenyan ruling elite as evidenced in the deployment of the 180,000-strong security force at polling stations nationwide. The deployment of these repressive forces is widely perceived by the Kenyan population as blatant voter intimidation.

With a palpable sense of fear gripping the population over a possible government crackdown, many people stayed home the day of the poll. In many areas, streets were empty and shops closed. In the days preceding the poll, large numbers of Nairobi's residents fled the city by bus to escape a possible crackdown.

The presidential contest was between two multi-millionaire candidates jockeying for power under conditions of entrenched official corruption and deteriorating living standards for the Kenyan masses.

Also hanging over the election is the widespread social anger gripping Kenya. The numerous strikes and protests rocking the country in the weeks and months leading up to the poll figure into the state of mind of the ruling class and their fear that Kenyan society is about to come apart at the seams.

While the Kenyan economy has boasted growth of roughly 5 percent annually over several recent years, the benefits have largely gone to the wealthiest layers of Kenyan society, leaving the majority of the Kenyan masses struggling to survive.

The mass of Kenyans live under conditions of social misery, confronting chronic unemployment, hunger and a lack of access to adequate health care and decent housing. Many Kenyans subsist in the informal economy, toiling as maids and scavengers, and other such enterprises for which the remuneration for many is only one dollar a day.

According to a poll released in July by Ipsos, 61 percent of Kenyans said they feel the country is heading in the wrong direction, and unemployment and inflation are their biggest concerns. Kenya's workforce is growing by 2.5 percent every year, and it is expected that by 2025, vast numbers entering the workforce will not find employment.

In Kibera, the largest slum in Nairobi, small shop owner Nancy Obongo summed up the disaffection towards the political class felt by broad layers of the Kenyan population when she told the media, "I hope this ends quickly because we need to go back to work and feed our families. Elections are always bad news for us poor people. I have to pay bills and feed my children. I don't care who wins."

The poll also takes place in the context of Washington's intensification of military operations in Kenya and the African continent as a whole. Kenya is carrying out a bloody war on behalf of Washington against the population of Somalia, with the official claim that it is fighting the Islamist militant group Al-Shabbab. In reality, the Kenyan army functions as a proxy for Washington's imperialist aims for the Horn of Africa in securing the region, which is strategically vital in terms of the oil traffic flowing through the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden.

AFRICOM, the US military command for the African continent, has sharply increased its role and presence in Africa and Kenya in particular. The chief aim underlying this military intervention is to counter Beijing's economic influence on the continent, which has grown rapidly over the last decade. Beijing's One Belt, One Road economic initiative undertaken this year, in which Africa is to play a significant role, represents a threat to Washington's economic and

political dominance over the continent. Imperial strategists seek to neutralize this threat by the increased deployment of military might.

In the background of the elections are the forces pursuing a new "scramble for Africa" consisting of Western diplomats, banks, and corporations which have the aim of carving up the economic resources of Kenya for profit. In the final analysis, both the presidential candidates are vying to serve as the agent of this layer of parasites.



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