

New presidential election in Kenya overshadowed by political crisis

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On Monday police in several cities across Kenya used tear gas and live rounds to disperse protests called by Raila Odinga and his National Super Alliance party (NASA). The demonstrators demanded a change in leadership of the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) and to stop the ruling government from changing voting laws, before a new presidential poll takes place on October 26.

With the atmosphere of a siege, scores of police were deployed in the cities of Kisumu, Nairobi, and Mombasa to quash the demonstrations, leaving one dead and several injured, with many others beaten and detained.

The social unrest arises against the backdrop of the September 1 Supreme Court decision that invalidated the August 8 presidential election result, which named incumbent president Uhuru Kenyatta the winner over his challenger Raila Odinga, citing that “balloting had been tainted by irregularities.” As part of the court’s decision, it ordered a new poll to be conducted within 60 days.

The protesters’ demands called for IEBC head Ezra Chiloba to resign, with many chanting and holding placards bearing the slogan, “Chiloba Must Go!”

The IEBC, in a bid to quell social anger, agreed to a meeting on Tuesday with both presidential candidates, stating on Twitter, “We look forward to meeting with the presidential candidates. We hope to create a common understanding on the 26th October poll.”

Kenyatta skipped the meeting, leaving only Odinga and a contingent of NASA officials to attend, in which the group failed to reach a consensus with the election commission on Odinga’s demand of “irreducible minimums,” a reference to Odinga’s and NASA’s demand that IEBC chief Chiloba and other officials resign from the commission, as well as the revocation

of contracts from the printing companies NASA suspects of aiding the rigging of the August poll.

After initially praising the decision of the Supreme Court overturning the election’s result, Odinga stated that he “will not let Kenyans participate in another election that will be bungled by the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission as presently constituted.”

Coming after an election season overshadowed by suspicious circumstances, which fueled the widespread perception that the vote was rigged in Kenyatta’s favor, many Kenyans have little faith in the outcome of a new poll overseen by the IEBC. The IEBC is widely perceived as corrupt and biased toward the ruling Kenyatta government.

For his part, President Kenyatta condemned the demonstrations, saying “the protesters’ demands are unrealistic.”

In an attempt to prevent future election nullifications by the Supreme Court, Kenyatta and his ruling Jubilee party introduced into parliament the Election Laws Amendment, a bill that would completely curb the judiciary from intervening in an election.

The crisis shaking the Kenyan ruling establishment has reached a fever pitch, and the widespread corruption surrounding the election is fueling fears that the crisis will provoke broader popular outrage against the government. To assuage these fears, the Kenyatta government is conducting a violent crackdown on social opposition.

The measurement of the rising social tensions threatening to boil over, of which the October 26 election is a catalyst, is the shutting down of the University of Nairobi for an indefinite period, as a result of what administrators called a “deteriorating security situation” following days of student

demonstrations on the campus.

The closure came after students protested the arrest of Babu Owino, a former student and member of parliament who was detained for allegedly “insulting the president” and assault. Summoned by the administration to break up the demonstration, the General Services Unit (GSU), a paramilitary wing of the Kenyan police, entered the university compound and beat and detained several students.

Angel Mbutia, a deputy chairperson of the student union behind the protest, told the Voice of America, “Students right now are not happy with the situation. What we planned was to have a demonstration to ask for answers and to find out why our vice chancellor ordered the GSU to get into university hostels and use excessive force on our students.”

Speaking on the broad opposition to the establishment felt among the students, Mbutia added, “The country is a bit unstable right now, and it has been reflected in our university because now politicians are running into the university to get a share of the votes they can get from there and influence everything they can, so that is what is coming in and dividing students in such a magnified way.”

For Washington and the European imperialist powers that extract profits from Kenya’s economic resources and vast working class, the chaos surrounding the election represents a threat to their economic operations.

The uncertainty over the new election is unnerving markets and investors in Kenya. Amid a sluggish economy, Western capitalists are clouded by pessimism for the economic prospects for the country, fearing that the political chaos will disrupt the flow of their profits.

The Kenya Private Sector Alliance, a private entity organized by Western and Kenyan capitalists to promote a “favorable” business climate in Kenya, issued a statement regarding the threat to its members’ profits: “Our super-heated political rhetoric and hardline positioning by politicians, accompanied by threats of chaos and implied violence, are now a serious threat to the continued economic well-being of this country.”

Moving to assuage the apprehension of Western banks and corporations, a coalition of Ambassadors from the US, UK, and EU embassies in Kenya issued a statement sharply rebuking both Kenyatta and Odinga

for “not demonstrating the required leadership to ensure [the October 26 election re-run] proceeds smoothly.”

Speaking on the threat to capitalist operations presented by the election conflict, the statement added, “If the upcoming election devolves into chaos, the economy, businesses, jobholders, and families—all Kenyans—will pay a heavy price.”

The US Ambassador to Kenya, Robert Godec, stated, “We are deeply concerned by the deterioration in the political atmosphere and the impact this has had on preparations for the election.”

The eruption of conflict over the election constitutes an embarrassment for Washington and Europe, who unanimously certified the election as “free and fair.” The suspicious instances surrounding the poll, together with the Kenyan Supreme Court’s ruling and the violent crackdown on protesters, have exposed these certifications as a fraud.

Additionally, Washington is deeply concerned that any chaos resulting from the election could threaten its imperialist operations in the region, namely the US-backed war conducted by Kenyan forces against neighboring Somalia.



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