

Mass demonstrations rock Kenya as Odinga withdraws from election re-run

Eddie Haywood
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Crowds of protesters took to the streets in cities across Kenya after Tuesday's announcement by opposition presidential candidate Raila Odinga of his withdrawal from the new presidential election set for October 26.

The Supreme Court in late September invalidated the August 8 poll, which declared the incumbent President Uhuru Kenyatta the winner, ruling that the election was marred by "irregularities and illegalities." As part of its decision, the court ordered a new election.

In announcing his withdrawal, Odinga stated, "In the interest of the people of Kenya, the region and world at large, we believe that all will be best served by NASA [the National Super Alliance party] vacating the presidential candidature of elections slated for 26 October 2017."

Protests reached a fever pitch on Wednesday after the parliament passed president Kenyatta's proposed Election Laws Amendment, a measure blocking the Supreme Court from nullifying future polls and granting far-reaching power to the ruling government over nearly every aspect of the electoral process.

Befitting the autocratic character of the Kenyatta government, the changes to the electoral process enshrined in the amendment constitute an attack on the democratic rights of the Kenyan population, with the law stripping the judiciary from presiding over a disputed election, and ensuring future polls are rigged in favor of the ruling government.

The key elements of the amendment include setting the nearly impossible burden of proof on the challenger to establish that electoral fraud took place before the court can hear such a dispute. The law also drops a requirement that the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) chairperson have 15 years of experience as a lawyer, academic, or as a

senior judge.

Most odious is the amendment's granting of autonomy to the IEBC chair to declare the winner before the vote is completely counted when it is perceived by the electoral body that any further counting would not change the outcome of the poll.

As the chair of the IEBC is appointed by the president, the amendment effectively establishes the president as the arbiter for deciding the outcome of an election.

On the news of the amendment's passing, angry demonstrators descended on the parliament building in Nairobi. Police responded with violence, deploying tear gas into the crowd, firing live rounds and beating several protesters.

In other cities across the country, police responded in a similar violent manner to the popular opposition the new law engendered.

Behind the violent crackdown on the mass demonstrations is the ruling government's desperation to quell a growing insurrection of the Kenyan masses, which the regime fears could spill out of its control and threaten the entire political and economic system.

Since the hotly disputed August 8 poll, protests have been met repeatedly with violence by police forces. According to a report released Monday by the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights, 37 people have been killed in the police crackdown, including an infant and two children.

In September, the General Services Unit (GSU) was deployed to the University of Nairobi to quell days of unrest by students demanding the release of a former student and current member of parliament Babu Owino, who was arrested for "insulting the president." Owino reported he had been tortured by police while in custody.

Demonstrations organized by Odinga and NASA took place in the cities of Nairobi, Kisumu, and Mombasa on Wednesday. In calling for the mass demonstrations with the slogan “No reform, no election,” NASA stated that its demands for reform of the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC), the electoral body charged with the election tally, were not met.

Speaking to these circumstances and calling the electoral system biased, NASA filed a case with the Kenyan High Court, asking it for a complete restructuring of the IEBC, pointing to the Supreme Court’s decision nullifying the August 8 poll with its finding of “irregularities and illegalities” committed by the IEBC in the electronic transmission of the tally.

On Wednesday, High Court Justice John Mativo rejected NASA’s claims that the IEBC acted in a criminal manner, saying, “Clearly, the Supreme Court did not indict the first to eight respondents as alleged nor did it find either of them criminally culpable.”

NASA sought the sackings of IEBC CEO Ezra Chiloba and chairperson Wafula Chebukati, as well as five other IEBC senior officials. The party also called for the replacement of companies hired by the IEBC for the printing of ballot papers, voter verification slips, and the transmission of the election results, which NASA allege are biased toward Kenyatta.

As the WSWS has noted, the widespread perception of government corruption surrounding the 2017 elections is entirely justified. However, a government ruled by either Kenyatta or Odinga, both multimillionaire representatives of the Kenyan ruling elite, would not relieve the social misery experienced by Kenyan workers, whose economic interests are the diametric opposite of those represented by Kenyatta and Odinga.

With the hotly disputed election as its catalyst, the broad social anger sweeping the country is in reality the product of years of attacks on the social position of the Kenyan masses by a corrupt ruling clique carrying out the dictates of Western banks and corporations.

On Wednesday, the International Monetary Fund downgraded Kenya’s economic prospects for the near term as a result of the continuing social unrest, illustrating the pessimistic outlook of the Western capitalist elite toward Eastern Africa’s top economy.

Making clear the disastrous economic outlook for

Kenya, on Wednesday Kenyan stocks fell 1 percent, and yields on the country’s Eurobonds fell by five points upon the news of the renewed election chaos.

Kenya’s economic prospects were further darkened by the prospects of the historic famine sweeping the African continent from Somalia to Nigeria, with projections of a food shortage due to low agricultural yields.

Speaking to Bloomberg concerning the impact the election crisis has had on international markets, Ronak Gopaldas, a financial strategist with the Johannesburg-based Rand Merchant Bank said, “It is unclear how much more of a battering the economy can continue to withstand as a result of this election cycle.”

“[T]he continued politicking will sap confidence, while further delaying the urgent need for fiscal consolidation and policy reforms,” Gopaldas warned.

For its part, Washington fears that the chaos surrounding the election will be disastrous to its political arrangement in Kenya, and impact its imperialist designs for Eastern Africa, of which Kenya plays an important role carrying out its US-backed war in neighboring Somalia.

Speaking to these contingencies, US Ambassador to Kenya Robert Godec rebuked both candidates for causing the crisis, saying, “We are deeply concerned by the deterioration in the political atmosphere and the impact this has had on preparations for the election.”



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