

William Ruto declared winner in Kenyan presidential election amid mass abstention

Kipchumba Ochieng
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Deputy President William Ruto has been declared the winner of Kenya's August 9 election, according to the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC). Ruto, 55, led the United Democratic Alliance (UDA) and received 7,176,141 votes (50.49 percent), beating his rival, Raila Odinga, 77, of the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) with 6,942,930 votes (48.85 percent). Odinga was backed by outgoing President Uhuru Kenyatta, the son of Jomo Kenyatta, Kenya's first post-independence president.

Odinga has vowed to challenge the results in the Supreme Court. Four of the seven IEBC electoral commissioners denounced the week-long count and criticized the result as "opaque," sparking protests in parts of Kenya. "In our view, there is neither a legally and validly declared winner nor a president-elect," Odinga said. He is expected to file the challenge today.

None of the political issues facing masses of Kenyan workers and peasants will be resolved through the conflict between Ruto and Odinga. Whether or not Odinga is successful with his challenge, the incoming president will have nothing to offer to working people. Instead, he will confront an upsurge of the class struggle in Kenya and internationally, amid growing concerns about food insecurity, unemployment, war, and the rising cost of living.

In recent years, mass strikes have erupted among teachers, university lecturers, health workers, port workers and long-distance truck drivers over low pay and precarious conditions. Kenya saw nationwide health strikes in June and August 2020. This January, over 6,000 workers struck against Del Monte Food Processing over inhuman working conditions and poor pay. In March, 400 road construction workers at a Chinese firm struck over unpaid wages. On Tuesday, workers at Kenya Airports Authority, which employs 1,900 staff, issued a strike notice against low pay.

Inflation in July was 8.3 percent, as food prices have climbed 15.3 percent compared to last year, mostly due to the NATO war against Russia in Ukraine. Kenya imports about one-third of its wheat from Russia and Ukraine. Fuel prices have also reached record highs amid intermittent fuel

shortages in Kenya.

Global warming-induced droughts in Northern Kenya have left 4 million people dependent on food aid. Unemployment is also a burning issue, with census data from 2020 showing that nearly 40 percent of young Kenyans were jobless, including many university graduates.

A recent Afrobarometer survey found that the economy is now Kenyans' first priority, in contrast to 2019 when it was sixth on the list. Only a small minority of Kenyans say that the current Kenyatta government is doing "fairly well" or "very well" at creating jobs (14 percent), "improving living standards of the poor" (16 percent), or "managing the economy" (17 percent).

Broad disillusionment with the ruling elite led to massive abstention on August 9. Around 35 percent of the 22.1 million voters did not come out to vote for president, MPs or local elected officials, according to the IEBC. The 65 percent voter participation was a sharp drop from the 78 percent turnout in 2017, and 86 percent in 2013.

Ruto was the undeserving beneficiary of this sentiment. In these elections, Kenya's traditional Kenyatta and Odinga political dynasties united and yet failed to stop him. President Kenyatta's endorsement of Odinga was expected to win the ODM support from the Kikuyu tribe, Kenya's largest community with 22 percent of the population. But support from Kenyatta, a Kikuyu who has presided over a deepening economic crisis, served as a kiss of death.

In Kikuyu heartlands of Mount Kenya, Ruto swept the vote in the ten counties. Ruto's UDA took a majority of the region's parliamentary and senate seats, as well as the governorship, ousting Kenyatta's Jubilee party.

Ruto won the elections on a pro-imperialist, nativist, anti-Chinese demagogic basis, presenting himself as an outsider and a "hustler" against Kenya's ruling "dynasties," contrasting his humble origins with Kenyatta's and Odinga's elite upbringings.

He is no outsider, however, having been in politics since 1992 and in power as deputy president for ten years. He co-founded the ODM with Odinga in 2007. He began his

political career 30 years ago as the treasurer of the YK'92 group that lobbied for the re-election of pro-Western dictator Daniel Arap Moi in 1992 in Kenya's first multi-party elections since independence. Moi had ruled Kenya after Jomo Kenyatta's death, from 1978 to 2002, torturing left-wing opponents and imposing International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity while amassing a personal fortune of over \$3 billion.

Ruto is among the 20 richest people in Kenya, with a fortune conservatively estimated at \$360 million based in hotels, real estate, insurance, and a vast chicken farm. Ruto has been repeatedly convicted of land-grabbing.

Ruto has whipped up anti-Chinese sentiment, exploiting anger over Chinese-built infrastructure projects implemented under Kenyatta, several of which were mainly located in affluent neighborhoods. He pledged to publish state contracts with Beijing, like the Chinese-built Standard Gauge Railway, linking the capital, Nairobi, to the key port of Mombasa, and to deport undocumented Chinese workers. In June, Ruto threatened: "Chinese nationals are roasting maize and selling mobile phones. We will deport all of them."

Odinga, 77, ran as the de facto establishment candidate, with the support of Kenyatta, and the main media stations. He pledged to bolster Kenya's manufacturing sector and create jobs, implement monthly direct cash transfers to needy households, and grant universal health care and free education up to the college level.

Odinga is the scion of a Kenyan political dynasty. His father, Jaramogi Oginga Odinga, was Kenya's first vice president after independence from Britain. Raila obtained his wealth from oil and gas, land, manufacturing and other ventures. His wealth is estimated at \$3.3 billion, though he claims to possess \$20 million.

Odinga's campaign was backed by current president Uhuru Kenyatta, ranked by Forbes as Kenya's richest man and whose family owns a multi-billion-dollar business empire; it is a saying in Kenya that the Kenyattas own half the country. Uhuru's father Jomo Kenyatta was a longstanding ally of US and British imperialism. The Kenyatta and Odinga families have dominated Kenyan politics since independence in 1963.

During the campaign, Odinga similarly incited anti-Chinese sentiment, pledging to renegotiate the terms of Kenya's debt to Beijing. Kenya's debt has surged to \$75 billion (67 percent of GDP), from just \$16.7 billion (40 percent of GDP) when Kenyatta was elected in 2013.

Ruto, Odinga and Kenyatta are longstanding tools of US and European imperialism. They have made Kenya a key base of US-NATO operations in Africa, especially those aiming to control the strategic Horn of Africa. Currently, an

estimated 10 to 20 per cent of global trade—including over 6 million barrels of oil per day—transits along the Horn's shores. This makes East Africa key to a US policy of threatening to strangle China by controlling key maritime trade routes and "choke points."

Washington and London have military bases in Kenya, from which they have launched drone strikes on Al Shabab, an Islamist insurgent group in Somalia. Since 2011, US- and UK-trained Kenyan troops have fought in Somalia to help Washington control the Horn of Africa. Nairobi also serves as a proxy for Washington's regional interests in conflicts in Ethiopia, South Sudan, Somalia and the mineral-rich Democratic Republic of Congo.

The NATO military escalation against Russia and China threatens Kenya with disaster. Its bourgeois parties have until now walked a tightrope, siding with imperialism but relying on China for key infrastructure and Russia and Ukraine for critical grain imports.

Washington is increasingly angry at the absence of support for its war with Russia among official circles in Kenya and across Africa. Kenya condemned Russia's invasion but declined a request by the Ukrainian ambassador to Kenya, Andrii Pravednyk, to address its Parliament. Kenya also failed to sign up for US economic sanctions against Russia.

The workers and oppressed masses of Kenya view NATO claims to be defending Ukrainian democracy by attacking Russia as utter hypocrisy. Britain infamously crushed the 1952-1959 anti-colonial Mau Mau rebellion, killing tens of thousands and detaining 1 million in concentration camps. Once independence was declared, Washington supported the Jomo Kenyatta and Daniel Arap Moi dictatorships.

The force that can be mobilized against war and inequality is the African and international working class. It has been vastly strengthened in recent decades. While Africa's urban population was 27 million in 1950, this figure has now shot up to 567 million people. Fully 30 percent of Kenyans live in cities, and that fraction is set to reach one half by 2033. The decisive question is mobilizing and uniting this mighty force and welding it together with its class brothers and sisters internationally in a socialist struggle to reorganize economic life based not on private profit, but social need.



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