

Democracy, Tribalism and Hunger: The View in Kenya

Written by Sara Nics

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SARA NICS, FEB 5 2008

“Sister, please give me some small thing. We are hungry.”

The thin-faced woman was wearing a worn blue polyester print dress. Her hair was covered in a fuchsia headscarf and her feet were dusty in a pair of plastic flip-flops.

“I have nothing. I’m sorry.” The aid worker was helping to unload three trucks of food in one of the poorest villages in the vast Nairobi slum called Eastleigh.

The woman was one of about two thousand people who had come to a municipal office hoping to get food from the Kenyan Red Cross. Like so many other women in line, she was carrying an empty plastic bucket and had a tired look in her eyes.

She and her neighbors are some of the people most affected by the violence that has broken out since Kenya’s December elections.

As in the other five slums in the city, people in Eastleigh are poor. They survive on far less than the average daily wage in Kenya, which is equal to about one and a half U.S. dollars. Lack of food is only one of their troubles. The political turmoil has exposed and exacerbated decades-worth of tribal tensions. While apparent to many Kenyans, for most of the international community, those tensions were hidden under the thin veneer of an emerging democracy with steady economic development and relative state stability.

According to official poll results, in December incumbent President Mwai Kibaki scraped a re-election win past the other major presidential candidate, Raila Odinga. Despite credible reports of vote rigging on both sides, Kibaki was sworn in as President within a few hours of the Electoral Commission of Kenya’s announcement of the final election results.

Kibaki has been in power since 2002, when he won the Presidency in an election that the domestic and international community deemed largely free and fair. Long-term Kalenjin president Daniel Arap Moi was constitutionally barred from running in the 2002 elections. In 2002 Kibaki beat out Uhuru Kenyatta, the son of Kenya’s first president, and the chosen successor to the political old guard. Kibaki campaigned as a president for all of Kenya and garnered votes from across tribal communities.

A prominent Luo politician in his own right, Raila Odinga supported Kibaki’s presidential bid in 2002. Kibaki was looking to widen his support base beyond his Kikuyu community. He sent Odinga into the west of the country, to drum up support from Luo, Luhya and other western tribes. Their relationship soured when, once in office, Kibaki reneged on a promise to make Odinga Prime Minister.

During the campaign for the 2007 election, Odinga again called on Luo and Luhya to go to the polls, this time in support of him. When Kibaki was sworn in as President on December 30, amid many remaining questions about electoral fraud, it is Odinga’s supporters who first took to the streets in protest.

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There are more than 40 tribes in Kenya. Although some tribes are nomadic, the majority are historically linked to specific regions of the country. Since the British colonialists moved in during the late 1880s, Kenyans have been repeatedly displaced from their regional homes. After independence in 1963, under Kenyatta, some Kikuyu bought massive tracts of land once owned by white settlers. That displaced people from many tribes and began the land clashes that have plagued some parts of Kenya for decades.

Such displacement and urban growth have led people from Kenya's many tribes to become increasingly intermingled. As the post-election protests turned to violence that swept across most of the country, neighbors who had lived side-by-side for decades turned against one another.

In Western Kenya, Luos attacked Kikuyus. In the Rift Valley, Kalenjins attacked Kikuyus. In Central Province, Kikuyus revenged the violence by attacking Luos and Luhyas. In January, when Kibaki named Kamba Presidential candidate, Kalonzo Musyoka as his Vice President, fighting began between Kambas and tribes from Western Kenya.

In the great slums of Nairobi, where people from different tribes live together in a crush of mud and tin shacks, these tribal conflicts have meant gross instability. There are reports of countless rapes, forced circumcisions, violent evictions and murder. Under the cover of chaos, people have sought to revenge new and old grudges. All of this is exacerbated by the desperation that is born of living in abject poverty.

The woman in the fuchsia headscarf is, one might say, lucky that her home is all she lost in the violence.

The current official estimate for the number of people killed during the post-election violence is around 900. Many Kenyans say that the final tally is probably more than 2,000. The number of people displaced from their homes is at least 250,000. Like the woman in Eastleigh, they have taken shelter in schools, churches, parks, mosques and police stations.

Kibaki has promised to resettle the people who have been displaced. But many Kenyans are questioning how it will be possible for Kikuyus to move back to their homes in Kalenjin towns, for Luo businesses to re-open in Kikuyu communities. People are wondering, now that these tribal tensions have been exposed and exacerbated, how Kenyans are supposed to get back to life as it was before December 27th.

Kenya has long been the anchor of the East African community. Since the Mau Mau rebellion of the 1950s drove out British rule, Kenya's history has been relatively peaceful. Thanks to a good climate for growing produce for European markets and a thriving tourism industry, this country's economy has been growing steadily over the past ten years.

The December 2007 elections were seen as a test of the mettle of this emerging democracy. The run-up to the elections was characteristically African. There were heated political debates on every street corner. Parties emerged only weeks before polling, splitting along tribal and regional lines, and coalescing under the personalities of two dominant politicians.

Many Kenyans say that in election day poll lines, the atmosphere was peaceful. People waited for six, seven, eight hours to cast their votes. At least seventy-five percent of the Kenyan electorate waited to take part in the democratic process. In line, people who supported different parties told each other, "Whoever wins, wins."

For some, that spirit of democratic goodwill disintegrated when the presidential race was won by a contestable margin of only 2.3 percent of votes. As various domestic and international observers raised credible questions about electoral fraud, many Kenyans rose up in anger at the idea that their democratic rights had been undermined.

Some political analysts say the international community needs a stable Kenya. With the fragile emerging democracies of Uganda and Rwanda as neighbors, with Sudan and Somalia within easy reach, it is not only Kenyans who lose peace and security as the violence here continues. But one professor of African studies says people should expect at least another 10 years of instability in Kenya. He says this turmoil is normal as a country moves from a single- to multi-party democratic system.

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A Kenyan reporter in Nairobi says there may be a silver lining to all the death and destruction of the past six weeks. She says now, perhaps, Kenyans will openly address the disputes, corruption and suppressed tensions that have plagued this country since the colonial era. She wonders if this violence and the international attention it has brought will force an overdue reconciliation. She wonders if this conflict is a sad step on a road to true Kenyan nationalism.

For the woman in Eastleigh, however, it may be difficult to find much hope. On the day the aid worker denied her money, she did not get any food either.

After people waited in line for hours, empty buckets in hand, a few young men stormed the back of the food trucks. Fearing violence, the aid workers fled with their cargo of milk, bread, maize meal and cooking oil.

Food and other staples remain scarce in much of the country. As people continue to struggle, as the economy flounders, there is growing retaliatory violence and hooliganism. Still, at the heart of this conflict are the disputed election results and a belief that an entire tribal community will benefit if their candidate is in power.

International leaders such as Desmond Tutu, Kofi Annan and Ban Ki-Moon have been in the country. They have met with Odinga and Kibaki to try to bring the political stalemate to a close. Annan has called for a South African-style truth and reconciliation process.

It will take a fair resolution to the political dispute to calm tempers in the short term. The old wounds of ethnic divisions this conflict has opened, however, will not be healed by political compromise. It will take years of peace-making and economic rebuilding for the situation to improve for the woman in Eastleigh, and for the country as a whole.

Sara Nics is a Canadian journalist, working and living in Nairobi. Her blog is <http://commonco.typepad.com/8months/>