



UNDERSTANDING KENYA

by Garrett Jones

While most Americans were preoccupied with the holidays, Bowl games, and the Iowa caucus, Kenya had a presidential election. As African elections go, it went off pretty well. There were long lines, and a record number of people were estimated to have voted. While there were some reported problems--shortage of ballots, attempted intimidation, etc.--it worked well enough at the local level. Raw results showed that the challenger Raila Odinga defeated the incumbent Mwai Kibaki by about a million votes and that most of Kibaki's cabinet members were voted out in the accompanying parliamentary poll. So far so good.

Somewhere between the local polling stations and the Kenyan Electoral Commission in Nairobi, incumbent president Kibaki simply stole the election and had himself declared winner. It was no more subtle than that. The Election commission hastily met and announced that Kibaki won. No public tallying, poll watchers or transparency of any sort. Kibaki quickly had himself sworn in for his second term as president, and the opposition went mad. There have since been a series of riots, killings and arsons, which have largely paralyzed Kenyan society. The opposition shows no signs of backing down, and Kibaki has indicated no interest in negotiating about the results.

This is the second presidential election since former president Daniel Arap Moi (a member of the Kalenjin tribe, a small tribe distantly associated with the Maasai) was forced to retire in 2002 and give up single-party rule after 24 years in office. Moi had taken over the office as vice president after the first postcolonial president, Jomo Kenyatta, a Kikuyu, died in office. At the time Moi took office, he was considered a placeholder until the Luo and Kikuyu tribes could sort out which of their many political leaders would be next to inherit the presidency. Moi turned out to be a clever political operator, and through manipulating tribal hatred and a liberal use of bribery, stayed in office long after anyone thought possible. He would probably still be in office, but the end of the Cold War had brought demands by the Western aid donors for a fair multiparty election, which Moi had no chance of winning.

The first true multi-party election was held in 2002. Kibaki (a Kikuyu, the largest tribe in Kenya, centered in the Mt. Kenya-Nairobi area), with Odinga (a Luo, second largest tribe, found in western Kenya), combined into a coalition which easily won both the presidential and parliamentary elections. Part of the pre-election platform was an agreement that Odinga and Kibaki would share power and that a new constitution would be written providing more power to the prime minister. (Under current Kenyan law, the prime minister is largely a figurehead; the real power resides in the presidency.) Once Kibaki was sworn into office in 2002, he quickly disowned the pre-election accord and excluded Odinga and members of the Luo tribe from any meaningful positions of power. After removing Odinga as political rival, Kibaki then continued to obstruct the rewrite of the Constitution until the effort largely collapsed in confusion and left him with the powers of the presidency intact.

Kibaki's performance in office has been abysmal. Corruption has spiraled out of control during his tenure, provoking complaints and threats from normally complacent donor countries. (Kenyan political wags note that several of Moi's more notorious "bagmen" have been "rehabilitated" under the Kibaki administration, prompting some of them to wonder if they are being brought back for their experience in "advanced thieving".) The protests about corruption have been led by Great Britain, with the U.S. following along with supporting statements about the need for reform. But no stern measures have been taken by any of the major donor nations, and even the current farce of a "free election" has not resulted in a denunciation, only an expression of concern about the results. (The U.S. State Department had congratulated Kibaki on "his victory" early on, only to quickly back off after knowledgeable observers pointed out that they might want to rethink that position.)

Kenya is usually described by the media as a strategic ally, whose stability is vital to U.S. interests. That is pretty much overblown hype. Kenya is useful but hardly irreplaceable to U.S. policy. It has always had "good press" in the U.S. for two rather odd reasons, one romantic the other logistic. The romantic stems from the many Americans who have been to Kenya. As a result, it is the only African country with which they have any familiarity. Kenyans are a friendly, wonderful people, and the countryside itself is every bit as stunning as the movies portray it, and then some. Americans go there on vacation and have

one of the most memorable and exciting experiences of their lives. They fall in love with the very small and largely orchestrated part of Kenya they are shown by their safari guides. I will refrain from cataloging the number of otherwise hardheaded Americans I have seen come to Kenya and then lose themselves in the romance of “Out of Africa”. The place is magic.

The logistical cause is that living in Nairobi, until now, is a lot nicer than living in Kampala, Dar as Salaam, or any other city in East Africa you care to name. As a result, NGOs, charities and U.S. government agencies have located large numbers of their staff in Kenya and use Nairobi as a regional base. (This diplomatic/NGO economic activity is a significant part of the Kenyan GDP.) Since the various aid and NGO organizations are the best-known voices about Africa, at least in the U.S. political context, their opinions carry weight. Aid organizations are no different from any other organizations. If large parts of your infrastructure are invested in a place; the country suddenly becomes important, nay vital. Unfortunately, these groups are unlikely to risk their “good standing” with the Kenyan government by backing any serious international moves to correct the situation. It seems that those on the side of the angels may have clay feet this year.

Kenya is a useful ally in Africa and a country with which the U.S. should cultivate good relations, but it is neither strategically important nor vital to U.S. interests. Other East African countries can replace the ports and airfields currently available to the U.S. military in Kenya. Kenya has been a useful listening post for events in Somalia, but this role can also be picked up elsewhere. U.S. economic activity in Kenya is minor. The main foreign economic players in Kenya are the United Kingdom and India. So far, the UK has been the only donor country pushing for some sort of power sharing compromise, although the European Union seems to be headed that way. The U.S. has badly fumbled its response to the situation and has confused the average Kenyan. It is hard to puzzle out what U.S. policy is at this point, even for me, and I follow the matter closely.

Who is doing the killing? Most of the deaths and arsons until now are a result of inter-tribal fighting--the majority tribe in an area setting on the minority tribe; Luo in Kikuyu areas and Kikuyu in Luo areas. Americans simply do not seem to understand what tribalism means in an African context. Tribalism is racism just like the Klu Klux Klan was. Kikuyu “know” the Luo are stupid and dirty, and since they are not “cut” (the males circumcised in their early teens), they are not really people. The Luo “know” the Kikuyu are greedy and treacherous. And it goes on, with each tribe “knowing” the subhuman traits of its neighbors. Ascendancy in political office has always been seen in a tribal sense in Kenya and is viewed as the chance for the tribe in office to “eat” (cronyism, patronage, bribery and corruption). The Kikuyu have had their turn under Kenyatta and Kibaki, and the Luo now believe it is their turn to “eat”. This said, it is also true that the sort of confusion Kenya has seen recently brings out the thieves and opportunists in any country. Looting and private score-settling are certainly happening--though sorting the thievery out from genuine outrage over a stolen election and a sense of entitlement betrayed is going to be a matter for history.

What is going to happen next? The two protagonists do not make for hopeful predictions. Odinga leads the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM), an alliance of the Luo and other minority tribes. In fact, it is a one-man show. Odinga acts as the glue holding together the many factions that want to boot the Kikuyu from power. Odinga sees himself as both a politician and a revolutionary. (He was educated in East Germany and named his son after Fidel Castro.) In the past, Odinga has allegedly been associated with several half-baked coup plans, including the 1982 Air Force revolt, though there has never been any concrete proof of his involvement. Odinga has ample reason to distrust Kibaki and his advisers simply because they have repeatedly lied to him in the past. Unfortunately, taking Odinga’s claims to court is simply a non-starter in Kenya. While I would not want to say that any Kenyan judge could be bought, they can certainly be rented for very reasonable rates. Kibaki, with the resources of the presidency, has a much bigger wallet than Odinga.

For Kibaki, this is the last hurrah. He has spent his adult life striving for the presidency and is unlikely to relinquish his second term to an upstart Luo like Odinga, no matter how much the Western aid donors or the Kenyan public howls. He has corrupt but capable advisers (the “Mt. Kenya Mafia”) around him and a firm grip, at least so far, on all the levers of power. There is some question about Kibaki’s health, both mental and physical. He has had some health scares in the past and has been strangely uncommunicative to all parties since the election. At this distance, it is impossible to tell whether this isolation is a problem of some sort or a political tactic. Any compromise Kibaki would entertain will almost certainly be unacceptable to Odinga, and at the moment, Kibaki has stated there will be no discussion with anyone until the protests stop. Odinga is unlikely to abandon his only weapon, street protest, and Kibaki is not going to make a gracious exit for the sake of the nation.

With meaningful negotiations unlikely and outside diplomatic actors either unwilling or unable to shift Kibaki, the current violence can only continue. Odinga will not back down and Kibaki will not give in. The violence will not stop until Kibaki either jails Odinga or drives him into exile. (Odinga had several bouts of exile during Moi’s presidency, and he was singularly ineffectual as an outside agitator.) But while Odinga’s arrest or exile would temporarily calm the situation, in the end it would simply set the stage for escalating inter-tribal violence.

There is some precedent in Kenyan politics for having your political opponents “poisoned while trying to escape”; such an act would set off even worse violence. We can hope something better will happen; the country certainly deserves better.

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NAMES, PLACES, AND PEOPLE TO KNOW

Tribal breakdown by candidate (not all-inclusive--there are many minor tribes in Kenya):

Kibaki - Kikuyu, Meru, Kamba

Odinga – Luo, Luhya, Kalenjin, Coast Swahili/Muslim

Eldoret – town in western Kenya located in the Rift Valley, majority population Kalenjin and associated tribes, site of the reported church burning with Kikuyu victims.

Kisumu – western Kenya Luo heartland

Mombassa – coastal port city, majority Swahili/ Muslim population, site of Swahili on Kikuyu violence.

Mt. Kenya – central Kenya, Kikuyu heartland.

Nairobi – capital and a Kikuyu city, slums around the city are a mix of all tribes now engaged in a free-for all.

Kenyan Police:

Administrative Police – Traffic cops, poorly trained and equipped. Uniform is white shirt and blue trousers.

Regular Police – light blue shirt, dark blue pants, day-to-day criminal police, poorly equipped and led, poorly respected because of their constant extortion of bribes from the average Kenyan. Probably responsible for most of the deaths at government hands up to this point. They present the real possibility of committing panic-induced killings when confronted by violent protests. The Kenyan police consider firing live rounds over the heads of protesters a normal and accepted practice.

General Service Unit (GSU) - well equipped and trained, generally well led. Camouflage uniform with red beret. The “hard boys” of the Kenyan police. They have a well-deserved reputation for cracking heads. They seem to operate on the unofficial directive “If you make us get off the trucks, someone is going to the hospital”. Despite this, they have excellent fire discipline and experience in handling civil disturbances. Despite their fearsome reputation, they have earned grudging respect by the civilian population. The GSU does not engage in the petty bribery of the average Kenyan police officer. The Kenyans might expect to get their heads cracked by the GSU, but they know they will not be robbed. The GSU also has a history as an equal opportunity riot force. They are recruited across tribal lines and will launch a baton charge at any tribe or socio-economic group with equal enthusiasm.

Kenyan Army – Apart from some elite units, which are as good as any in Africa, most of the Army is suitable only for bands and parades. The Kenyan army has no equipment or training to handle civil disturbances. If the Kenyan Army is deployed to the streets in anything other than a support role to the GSU, there is a real possibility of a disaster in the making.

National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) – The external/internal intelligence agency of the Kenyan government, highly trained by African standards. During the Moi presidency, they were highly politicized and employed in brutally crushing political dissent. Reforms under Kibaki seem to have eliminated most abusive practices. They have not been heard from in this crisis, though one can assume they are maintaining a watching brief and have a good knowledge of Odinga’s activities.

Jomo Kenyatta – the first postcolonial president of Kenya, a Kikuyu. Died in office in 1978.

Jaramogi Odinga Odinga (Double O) – First postcolonial vice president and father of Raila Odinga. Luo leading politician and patriarch until his death in 1994.

Nairobi slums (Mathare, Kibera, and Kamakunja) – These shantytowns ring Nairobi and are of mixed tribal populations. They are without exception dirt poor, lacking any infrastructure such as sewer or water supplies. They are flashpoints for violence and at the height of tensions are “no-go” areas even for the GSU.

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