



KENYA UPDATE

by Garrett Jones

Unfortunately, since I wrote on the situation in Kenya last month, the prospects have not improved and the country appears to be headed off a cliff. A series of mediators have failed to achieve any productive talks between the two parties. Neither South African Bishop Desmond Tutu nor the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Africa Jendayi Frazier could even bring the two parties together to meet in the same room. Former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan managed to arrange a largely meaningless joint meeting between opposition leader Raila Odinga and President Mwai Kibaki, at the end of which Kibaki used his closing statement to assert his legitimacy as the “duly elected president of Kenya.” This was followed by howls of protest from Odinga’s camp; Odinga then issued a statement rejecting any political compromise and demanding a new election. Meanwhile, Kenya burns and the mediation continues.

After hijacking the presidential election in late December, Kibaki has gone on to fill most of the major cabinet posts with his political cronies and has co-opted the head of the number-three political party into becoming his vice president. Not everything has gone Kibaki’s way, as Odinga and his followers have captured the important post of Speaker in Kenya’s unicameral parliament. While this was a significant victory for the opposition, in a savvy political move, Kibaki “prorogued,” parliament the same afternoon. While this is normally an administrative tool to allow a new parliament to reorganize and carry over pending legislation, Kibaki is technically not required to recall parliament for twelve more months. If Kibaki sticks to his guns, the opposition has lost a powerful platform for keeping its grievances in the political dialogue.

Odinga has shown no interest in backing down from his stated position that he won the December presidential election, and has so far rejected serving as Kibaki’s prime minister. So far, the opposition has largely held together in a political sense. There have been no signs that Kibaki has been able to buy off senior members of the opposition, as has been the case many times in Kenya’s political past.

The countryside is now consumed with violence. The Rift Valley is a no-go zone for Kikuyus, who have responded by burning the Luo sections of Naivasha. Both sides have erected roadblocks on all the main east-west highways and ripped up the rail lines running from Mombassa to Uganda, Kenya’s inland neighbor. This has brought commercial shipping to a halt. Uganda is facing mounting prices and severe shortages as most of its trade passes through Kenya by rail or truck. The tourist trade, Kenya’s economic engine, has disappeared. Most major travel agencies have refused to make bookings until April and the Mombassa resort economy has collapsed. A collateral victim of the crash in the tourist trade has been Kenya’s flower and fresh produce industries, which until the election fiasco had been doing a booming trade to Europe. The cargo holds of the aircraft carrying tourists back to Europe had been filled with locally grown fresh flowers and produce, high quality items with a stiff premium attached during Europe’s winter months. With cancellation of most tourist flights, the airfreight business has crashed. In effect, all the main industries in Kenya have ground to a halt.

So far, the government’s response to the violence has been inept and ineffectual. While the GSU (General Service Unit) seems to be holding the lid on in Nairobi, the Kenyan police have been trigger-happy and overwhelmed in the rest of the country. The only reported intervention of the Kenyan Army, which occurred in Naivasha, was poorly done and ineffective until units of the GSU showed up to reinforce the Army. Clearly, neither Kibaki nor his advisers anticipated the level or the scale of the protests over his theft of the presidential election. Kibaki has stayed out of the media; his strategy seems to be to wait until the protests run out of steam. It does not look like that is going to happen anytime soon.

On Friday, February 1, the first set of mediation talks hosted by Kofi Annan wrapped up after being interrupted the day before by the second killing of a member of Parliament. (One was clearly an assassination; the second may have been a domestic dispute turned deadly.) The net agreement reached on Friday was that killing people is bad and we should continue talks. The following three days produced another estimated 70 deaths as clashes and police reactions continued unabated in the west of the country.

While all this is taking place, the U.S., Britain and the European Union have only harrumphed from the sideline and wrung their hands. The U.S. reaction has been particularly confused, with the ambassador, the Department of State and the Assistant Secretary for African Affairs all contradicting one another at one point or another. While expected, the reactions of the major international aid and charitable groups to the Kenyan situation have been particularly disappointing. Most have pitched in to help refugees, but none to my knowledge has protested the stolen election or has threatened any repercussions to the government for failing to negotiate. The African Union and United Nations have no influence in Kibaki's camp without real sanctions from the main Western aid donors; hence, their statements of concern are simple posturing.

There seems to be some confusion in Western circles about whether the violence is tribal or not. The people being beheaded by the mobs are most assuredly not selected based on their shoe size. It is tribe against tribe. Westerners might devise some tortured logic if they are determined to assign the true cause to historic socio-economic problems, but to a Kikuyu being chased by a machete-wielding mob of Luos, it is a distinction without a difference. Perhaps the most degrading argument I have read is that the current violence can be blamed on the British colonial experience.¹ After forty-five years of independent government, whatever problems Kenya may be experiencing are Kenyan-made. Kenyans are also the only ones who will be able to resolve these problems. Incidentally, the Western term "ethnic cleansing" is diplomatic speak for rape, robbery, arson and murder. The "cleansing" part makes the phrase entirely too antiseptic.

In addition to poor political leadership, Kenyans are not receiving much help from their religious leaders. The influential Anglican Church appears to be split down the middle along ethnic lines. The Catholic Church is not as large or influential, but its position is equally confused. As for the evangelical and missionary groups that are spread across the Kenyan landscape, they have almost without exception fled for cover.

The future does not look promising. Odinga and the opposition appear unwilling to back down, Kibaki is not going to step down, and frankly, he may be playing Kofi Annan for a fool. Kibaki will try to stretch the negotiations out as long as possible and in the end either repudiate them or throw the opposition a meaningless political bone. Kenya does not have that kind of time. The violence seems to be gaining its own momentum as each tribe begins enforcing its own version of "apartheid" on its geographic homeland. The mass movement of people is already underway, and as refugees recount the horrors they have seen and contemplate what they have lost, we can expect the retribution killings to increase in numbers.

Outsiders have begun to call for the military to become involved. President Paul Kagame of Rwanda flatly advised the Kenyan Army to take to the streets. The British Deputy Foreign Minister soon chimed in with similar ill-timed advice. Odinga asked on Feb. 3 for African Union peacekeepers because he claims the Kenyan police are biased in their efforts to protect the various tribes--that is, the police are on the side of Kibaki's Kikuyu tribe. Kibaki will never agree to any outside force in Kenya. Any attempt by him to introduce such a force would provoke a reaction from the until now quiescent Kenyan Army. If the Kenyan Army comes onto the streets under orders, it will be in support of Kibaki. The appearance of the Army under any other circumstances would probably mean civil war as the Army also breaks up along tribal lines.

Garrett Jones is a senior fellow of FPRI. A 1993 graduate of the U.S. Army War College, he served as a case officer with the CIA in Africa, Europe, and the Middle East. He retired in 1997 and now lives in the northwestern United States.

FPRI, 1528 Walnut Street, Suite 610, Philadelphia, PA 19102-3684.

For information, contact Alan Luxenberg at 215-732-3774, ext. 105 or email fpri@fpri.org or visit us at www.fpri.org.

¹ See, e.g., Caroline Elkins, "To Understand Kenya's Woes, Think Britain," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Jan. 11, 2008.