

## **Fear and loathing in Nairobi**

*John Githongo*

The carnage that followed Kenya's disputed election in late 2007 shocked the world. A country once considered to be an oasis of peace and stability in a troubled region had suddenly degenerated into disorder and ferocious violence. For many in the West, Kenya, with its Anglicized urban population, modern cities, and relatively well-developed infrastructure, epitomized everything positive about Africa. A highly successful tourism industry in a land of breathtaking beauty and world-class athletes had served to consolidate the image of Kenya as somehow different.

The Kenyan middle class is particularly prone to this sort of exceptionalism. Due to an enduring sense of civic pride, middle-class Kenyans bristle when visitors from neighboring countries commiserate with them over their political troubles. Kenya has always been the African country that pitied others; being the object of pity in countries whose refugees Kenya has hosted is galling.

Kenyan exceptionalism was in many ways a myth waiting to be shattered. Early in 2008, the Ugandan writer and commentator Kalundi Serumaga wrote about the Kenyan middle class' capacity to "normalize the absurd." If anything, the surprise was that it had taken so long for the bubble of normality to burst. Many factors helped foment the violence: rampant corruption from the president on down, some of the starkest economic inequalities on earth, fragmentation of an already corrupt ruling elite along ethnic lines, and a disproportionately young population. The cauldron simply boiled over in 2007.

The failure of the election was merely a trigger for events that would have taken place at some point in the future. There had long been an overwhelming sense of exclusion and alienation among large sections of the populace. For Kenya's alienated youth, the postelection violence was in a tragic way the most significant moment of collective empowerment they had ever experienced. This sense of empowerment explains the total lack of regret among the youths who carried out violent acts across the country.

When the violence abated in February 2008; thousands were dead and over 300,000 had been displaced. Since then, Kenyans from various ethnic groups have quietly and steadily been streaming out of some of the country's most cosmopolitan provinces to live in regions dominated by their kin. This exodus betrays a catastrophic loss of confidence in the state's capacity to protect its own citizens.

The political crisis that followed the election finally ended on February 28, 2008, with a negotiated settlement that brought together the leaders of both feuding parties and formed a single cabinet. The controversial winner and incumbent, Mwai Kibaki, managed to hang on as president, and the opposition leader Raila Odinga became prime minister.

This model of negotiations leading to a coalition government in the wake of a violence-plagued election is being tried in Zimbabwe and has been recommended in Madagascar. The model is an inclusive one, and has been championed in some academic and political circles as the new model for African democracy. It is no such thing. These coalitions are the result of democratic failures, not successes. Throughout Africa, uniting belligerents under one roof has resulted in policymaking paralysis and resentful voters, angry that the governments they have are not the ones any of them elected. Kenya is a case in point.

From euphoria to chaos

In 2002, President Daniel arap Moi bowed out of office after 24 years in power. His candidate of choice, Uhuru Kenyatta of Moi's Kenyan African National Union (KANU) party, was defeated by a hastily cobbled together coalition led by the septuagenarian Kibaki.

A state of euphoria enveloped the country; a December 2002 Gallup poll found Kenyans to be the most optimistic people in the world. And they had reason to be happy after the end of the Moi era, especially considering the massive transformation that Kibaki's coalition government promised at the start of 2003.

In terms of tangible traditional development goals, the Kibaki administration seemed to deliver. A housing boom took off, especially in the larger urban areas; between 2003 and 2007, the Nairobi Stock Exchange grew by 400 percent and 500,000 Kenyans who had never owned shares bought them; within six weeks of the new government's coming to power, 1.3 million children went to school for the first time thanks to a new free primary-education program; within three years, the number of children enrolled in primary schools had almost doubled. The government also dramatically hiked the salaries of police officers and teachers, economic growth averaged 5.5 percent between 2003 and 2007, and by 2008 the government was collecting \$4.2 billion in taxes--almost double the amount from 2001.

Yet most of the benefits of the growth accrued to the wealthiest 25 percent of the population. Poor Kenyans' purchasing power declined dramatically as basic commodity prices rose. Between 2003 and 2007, the inflation rate for middle-income residents of Nairobi rose to 39 percent, but for low-income residents of the capital, it increased to 70 percent. The government did nothing to soften the impact of its policies on the poor, especially in urban slums and areas that had already been marginalized by previous administrations.

The optimism of early 2003 was the result of big dreams, most notably the promise to fight corruption. However, within months of coming into office, the new government was embroiled in huge corruption scandals of its own. Public anger was fueled not only by the succession of scandals but also by the atmosphere of total impunity in which the ruling elite operated. Indeed, it was not so much the loss of money in scams that caused deep-seated unhappiness but the corporatization and spread of graft. Now, outright theft was accompanied by an air of white-collar arrogance and conspicuous consumption. Wrongdoing was excused by the political and business elite as "Africanized enterprise" and dismissed as something only Westerners, with their double standards, complained about.

Viewed from the poorest sections of Kenyan society, the line between graft and enterprise now seemed completely blurred. Within a year of the new administration's coming to power, some of the most influential figures around Kibaki had transformed themselves into ostentatious millionaires. A seething resentment began to infect Kenyan politics.

#### Kikuyu power

In addition to being corrupt, the new government failed to fulfill its promise to form a politically inclusive administration to govern an increasingly ethnically riven country. President Kibaki hailed from the Kikuyu ethnic group--Kenya's largest and historically economically dominant community. Other major groups that were part of the coalition included the Luo, led by the dynamic Odinga, and the Luhya and the Kamba.

The initial instrument of inclusivity was a memorandum of understanding between the different parties that comprised the coalition that won the 2002 election. These political parties represented all the major ethnic groups in the country save for the Kalenjin community of former President Moi, who remained close to the ousted ruling party, KANU. Kibaki and his closest supporters abandoned this admittedly imperfect instrument almost immediately on

assuming office. The toxic perception of an administration that was both shamelessly ethnically exclusive and hostile to the poor spread across the country. As the service and telecommunications sectors boomed, the urban and rural poor got not jobs but inflation. Their resentment was soon politicized along ethnic lines with devastating effects. Kibaki's lieutenants issued hysterical warnings of the dangers of a Luo-led country. Odinga and his allies argued that Kikuyu arrogance, greed, and dishonesty were on display everywhere. The new government had also promised to carry out comprehensive constitutional reform in order to rein in the president's executive powers. It did no such thing.

The result of these broken promises was a fundamental breakdown in the social contract; Kenyans simply no longer trusted their government and its leadership. In an increasingly fragmented political landscape, the bulk of the population that did not hail from Kibaki's region, in central Kenya, became increasingly alienated. Ironically, the public's declining faith in the government also made the excesses of the old Moi administration look good in comparison. Moi's administration was managerially incompetent, but it operated one of the most robust patronage networks on the African continent, which forced it to be crudely inclusive. Now, the perception was that the patronage network served only Kibaki and his ethnic group and allies.

In November 2005, Kibaki faced a constitutional referendum. In an ethnically polarized context, it functioned as a vote of no confidence against the head of state and the elite surrounding him. The resentments, parochialisms, and ethnic grievances of Kenya's more than 41 other ethnic groups were channeled into an energetic campaign led by Odinga that targeted Kibaki--and by extension the Kikuyu and other privileged groups. Kibaki lost the referendum by a landslide: 58 percent to 42 percent. Kibaki fired his entire cabinet immediately thereafter and did not appoint Odinga or his ministerial allies to his new government.

The 2005 referendum became a dress rehearsal for the 2007 election. The behavior of Kibaki and his lieutenants seemed to confirm the worst stereotypes about the Kikuyu elite that already loomed large in the Kenyan political imagination. The forces that mobilized against this elite were crude, simple, and ultimately deadly for poor Kikuyus in particular, who paid in blood for the incompetence and greed of "their" leaders.

The perceived arrogance of the political, bureaucratic, and commercial elite surrounding Kibaki had engendered an overwhelming nationwide sense of alienation--a sense of exclusion and loss of dignity among the majority of Kenyans who were not Kikuyu or from associated communities. In the run-ups to the 2005 referendum and the 2007 election, some politicians from the administration perpetuated this perception by uttering outrageous insults toward minorities--one minister essentially called all Kenyan Somalis a bunch of refugees. In turn, politicians from minority groups rallied support by citing the rhetoric of their opponents and countering with their own tribalist invective. On the stump, they used language comparable to that heard in Rwanda before the genocide, describing outsiders as madodoa (Swahili for "spots"--needing to be removed or cleansed).

It became clear that Kenya could not grow its way out of this crisis economically. After all, the Kibaki administration had successfully delivered improvements in education, health care, access to water, and basic infrastructure in certain areas of the country. But a legacy of broken promises on the governance front, the failure to deliberately and transparently craft an inclusive administration, and the ethnic insults hurled by leaders all served to make dignity more important than development in Kenya.

A government that had succeeded in delivering the hardware of developments--schools, roads, and growth--had failed to deliver on the software of nationhood. Ultimately, although the

former mattered, most Kenyans valued the latter more. Indeed, had the 2007 election been a referendum on development achievements alone, it would not have failed as calamitously as it did.

Instead of entering the polls with the wind in its sails, Kibaki's coalition instead faced a contest of trust. Their opponents in Odinga's Orange Democratic Movement--essentially a union of all opposed to the president and his allies--including some of the most experienced and discredited political figures from the Moi administration, inflamed ethnic passions, and the president's supporters responded in kind. The end result was a failed election and a bloody aftermath that took away a sizable chunk of Kenya's sovereignty, as neighbors and the international community rushed in to negotiate the National Accord and Reconciliation Act and cobble together the so-called grand coalition government that rules Kenya to this day. It is a government that no one voted for and that is maintained only by the collective fear of international donors, the media, domestic civil-society groups, and Kenyans themselves.

Viva the youth

As violence spread across the country in 2007, Kibaki and Odinga realized that they might lose control over their own respective foot soldiers. Indeed, the postelection violence was largely due to Kenya's particular demographic crisis--70 percent of the population is under the age of 30. Many of these young Kenyans feel helpless due to a failing higher-education system, unemployment despite economic growth, and heightened expectations and aspirations driven by the revolution in digital technology and mobile telephony and the spread of television and FM radio. Compounding all these factors was the rampant distrust of government institutions among the young.

The Swahili term for "government" is serikali, derived from the words siri (secret) and kali (fierce). The government in Kenya had always been an institution to be feared. This is no longer the case. In the past, political violence in Kenya was almost always carried out by young men taking orders from political actors. This changed after the 2007 election, when violence served as a hugely empowering event for many poor, young Kenyans.

For the first time in Kenya's history, the youth controlled entire sections of the country without direction from any legitimate authority. The country's rulers had lost control, and the state was totally overwhelmed by the scale of the events. Its helplessness was broadcast live, shared by text message, and blogged endlessly on the Internet.

When confronted by the spiraling violence, the "big men" of Kenya did not call on the security organs of the state they ostensibly controlled to help contain the situation. Instead, they summoned their own armed youth groups, some of which had previously been banned as a menace to national security. Furthermore, there was a widespread perception that the ultimate resolution of the crisis was not affected by national leaders but forced on them by external actors.

All of this served to dramatically delegitimize the state, setting the stage for a massive shift of power from the center of government to the grass roots. The postelection violence devolved power to the youth suddenly, unintentionally, and organically, with implications that Kenyans are only just beginning to come to terms with.

The youth groups involved in the violence--from civil-society organizations to vigilantes--had their confidence buoyed by the violence and their potent part in it. Patronage and violence are the methods by which some of the most influential politicians in the Kenyan government today rose to prominence, and those who have mastered the art have tended to gain fantastic

fortunes--a lesson not lost on the young. Indeed, several individuals implicated in the postelection violence have since been rewarded with cabinet positions.

The magnitude of Kenya's downward redistribution of power since the violence is apparent when one considers the sheer amount of effort the government has devoted to bringing banned groups, such as the Mungiki, under its control. The Mungiki is comprised of members of the President's Kikuyu ethnic group and emerged in the 1990s initially as a self-help movement focused on youth economic empowerment in an increasingly unequal society. By the mid-1990s, it had expanded its activities to include providing protection against criminal gangs and controlling public transportation in the poorest parts of the capital and surrounding rural areas.

The government's current efforts to manage groups such as the Mungiki are unprecedented in Kenyan history. What is clear is that the state still controls the means of violence but is no longer perceived as having a monopoly on it or the capacity to induce paralyzing fear. Also, the power of the state's security forces has been seriously eroded: their legitimacy has been undermined, and they suffer from poor morale, a lack of coherence, political and ethnic polarization, systemic corruption, and a general lack of confidence. Only the military has managed to retain its discipline and command.

#### Paralyzed politics

Despite its ambitious reform agenda, the Kibaki-Odinga coalition government has been undermined by a lack of legitimacy, and policy paralysis has reigned. The government's planned reforms fall under Agenda 4 of the National Accord: constitutional, institutional, and legal reform; land redistribution; poverty alleviation; the redress of inequality and regional imbalances; the reduction of unemployment among young Kenyans; national reconciliation; and greater transparency and accountability in the management of the affairs of state. In reality, Agenda 4 is a laundry list of every developing country's challenges. And in Kenya's case, a host of economic, political, and social injustices have been swept under the rug for so long that the nation now sits atop a mountain of its own unaddressed grievances.

Given these challenges, the coalition government has struggled to deliver change. Western ambassadors often demonstrate greater public enthusiasm for the reforms than do Kenya's leaders. The country simply has too many competing priorities: constitutional changes, reform of the disbanded electoral commission, a review of constituency boundaries, and ambitious judicial, civil-service, land, and parliamentary reforms, to name but a few. Inevitably, some will have to go. A constitutional referendum is due in August, and there is a great deal riding on its success in terms of the government's overall reform program.

Meanwhile, violence as a model of political action has become normalized to a disturbing degree in some of the most cosmopolitan parts of the country, where different ethnic groups are the most intermingled. Kenya's middle class--at home and in the diaspora--has been forced to choose whether to retreat into angry, humiliated ethnic cocoons or to step out of them, abandon hopes of joining a failed-state elite, and contribute to forging a new reality.

Unfortunately, the election and its violent aftermath revealed that some of the virulent ethnocentric views prevalent in Kenya today are held by the members of this middle class--including professionals, entrepreneurs, some sections of the diaspora, and of course the governing elite and its direct beneficiaries. This is not the class that has to do the fighting when things go wrong.

Kenya's middle class will, however, be the key to forging Kenya's future. As the run-ups to the 2005 referendum and the 2007 election demonstrated, the diaspora is now a clear and present

Kenyan political constituency that is capable of both playing a malevolent role and articulating an inclusive vision of what Kenya could be. It has the capacity to do considerable damage by financing violence and promoting hate speech. At the same time, some of the most altruistic and constructive nation-building efforts are emerging from the Kenyan diaspora--particularly in the United Kingdom and the United States.

#### The road to reconciliation

Fixing Kenya is not about building more roads, hospitals, and schools. It is about returning some semblance of confidence in the Kenyan state and imbuing the population with a sense of nationhood robust enough for Kenyans to believe that the current challenges will not overwhelm the country and lead to a gradual implosion as criminality spreads and becomes the norm.

Kenya has embarked on a wide range of governance reforms, but the elite's commitment to them is dubious. Repairing the electoral system and dealing with the corruption that exacerbates perceptions of inequality between different communities are essential. Furthermore, Nairobi must fix its broken security structure--the police and the intelligence services--and ensure the continuing integrity of the armed forces. The latter is essential to ensuring that graft based on ethnic favoritism does not enter the DNA of that proud and solid institution. A key test will be whether the government can gain enough legitimacy to guarantee the security of the hundreds of thousands of Kenyans departing from regions where they are ethnic minorities because they fear the next convulsion of violence.

For the United States, the cardinal principle must be to do no harm. Kenyan and U.S. interests align at the global level: a commitment to democracy with all its warts, a robust private sector, and concerns about the international drug trade, Islamic fundamentalism, and terrorism. Moreover, Kenyans celebrated U.S. President Barack Obama's 2008 election victory more energetically than did the people of any other country in Africa. This Obama mania carries with it great potential for promoting positive change in Kenya. Although his criticism of the Kenyan regime infuriates the elite, Obama has great moral authority in the country because of his Kenyan heritage.

Anti-Americanism in Kenya is mitigated by Obama's presidency and a history of close cultural, military, and political relations with the United States. But this should not be taken for granted. If it is, there is a distinct danger of the Pakistanization of Kenya--its transformation into a country plagued not only by stark economic inequalities and a venal elite but also by broad sympathies for policies and ideas inimical to U.S. interests. The manner in which the U.S. "war on terror" has been prosecuted has already alienated Kenya's Muslim population.

The threat to domestic stability remains as well. As the state has retreated--delegitimized by a botched election and its inability to protect its own people--the appeal of youth gangs and what some would describe as Islamic fundamentalism have grown. No Tomahawk missile can destroy this ideology; Kenyan nationhood must become the more compelling idea. A liberal democracy in the Western mold will not emerge from Kenya's current process of reinvention from below. In the 1990s, Kenyans allowed themselves to think it would, but the failure of the 2007 election exposed a far deeper rot. The sense of complacency among Kenyans has been dented; they are now beginning to craft a vision of what the country could become after the 2012 election. The process will not be neat, but Kenya's people have what it takes to think and work the nation out of its current rut, not only because they want to but also because the consequences of failure have implications too terrible to contemplate.

**Fonte: Foreign Affairs, v.89, n.4, Jul/Aug 2010. [Base de Dados]. Disponível em: <[http://: web.ebscohost.com](http://web.ebscohost.com)>. Acesso em: 3 ago 2010.**