



from the January 14, 2008 edition - <http://www.csmonitor.com/2008/0114/p09s02-coop.html>

The real reason for Kenya's violence

Contrary to popular belief, it isn't simply 'tribal' or 'spontaneous.'

By Jacqueline M. Klopp

NEW YORK

Hundreds have been killed and hundreds of thousands displaced in the three weeks since Kenya's hotly disputed presidential elections. Once considered an island of stability in Africa, the country is suffering what the media has called a "shocking outbreak of violence" and "tribal clashes."

The key questions we should be asking are: Who is responsible for this violence? How is it happening? But we will not ask these questions if we continue to see the current violence as simply a spontaneous outburst of anger at the election rigging or "tribal warfare."

The international community must realize that Kenya's violence today is fueled by strongmen on both sides of the political divide. They are exploiting ethnic identity, pitting one community against another, as a means to gain power. It is a practice with a long history in Kenyan politics.

The fury of the violence may look like "tribal warfare" linked to election anger, especially in the worst instances of ethnic cleansing – as in Eldoret, where women and children were burned alive in a church. A common explanation is that members of the Kikuyu community are facing retaliation from others for their longtime "dominance." Like Kenya's first president, Jomo Kenyatta, President Mwai Kibaki is Kikuyu; opposition leader Raila Odinga is Luo.

Part of the violence is not directly organized and is instead linked to confrontations between protesters and police, who have a history of brutality. Many understandably feel rage at the election fraud carried out on behalf of Mr. Kibaki. But much of the ethnicized violence is linked to organized efforts by political strongmen who have experience playing divide-and-rule.

Remember Daniel arap Moi? He was Kenya's president from 1978 to 2002. He and most of his cohorts during this time were Kalenjin. In the 1990s, they faced the probable loss of power in multiparty elections to an opposition that included many Kikuyu. In response, Mr. Moi's men filled their campaigns with hate against all Kikuyu and convinced many that any member of that group, from a child to a poor farmer, represented "Kikuyu domination."

This ploy conveniently shifted blame from Moi and his mostly non-Kikuyu crowd who had been in power for years. It shifted attention away from the massive land grabbing and corruption they continued from the previous government that helped put the poor, including the numerous Kikuyu poor, in slums or sent them across the country in search of a small patch of land to eke out a living.

Sadly, this anti-Kikuyu campaign gained supporters among unemployed youth who learned to project their problems onto a Kikuyu face. Poor men were given weapons and paid to kill and displace. In return, they were promised or sold vacated land. Ultimately, in the 1990s, thousands of people died and almost half a million were displaced. This violence helped Moi's small group of corrupt "big men" stay in power for a decade. In the deeply flawed elections of 1992 and 1997, displacement became a form of gerrymandering.

Not one person has been tried, let alone convicted, for these killings and displacements. The international community at the time seemed quite ready to forget as well.

Since his election in 2002, Kibaki has collaborated in this deliberate forgetting. Part of the reason was that he had brought into his ruling coalition many of the worst perpetrators of violence. They could deliver votes in key areas and were willing to drop their anti-Kikuyu rhetoric once in power.

Mr. Odinga, the opposition leader, has also brought notorious ethnic cleansers into his coalition. Their anti-Kikuyu rhetoric is a useful political tool against the Kikuyu incumbent.

All these advocates of violence have lived with complete impunity. They have learned that they could preach hate, organize youth to kill and displace, and be rewarded with a cabinet post. They could get rid of voters who were unlikely to support them. They could use violence for bargaining power at the national level, something that appears to be happening today. The current project of "ethnic cleansing" in the Rift Valley suggests that some politicians, this time allied mostly with the opposition, have learned these lessons well.

The key lesson for the international community to learn from past violence is that a new government alone, especially if it welcomes perpetrators of violence into its core, cannot fix this deep problem of strongmen politics.

This time we must demand a thorough and independent investigation into all forms of violence. We should demand that those guilty of organizing, funding, or authorizing killings from any ethnic community be, at a minimum, excluded from high office. Let us not forget that this violence has a history and perpetrators and that there are responsibilities to be assigned. This time let us demand justice and not repeat the mistakes of the past. Otherwise, we set more roadblocks on Kenya's path toward a just, democratic, and truly civil society.

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