

Kenya: spaces of hope

By Angelique Haugerud ,
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"We cannot stop life for the sake of two people who are not in agreement" said a twenty-three year old Kenyan woman in Nairobi. The two men in question - Mwai Kibaki and Raila Odinga - both claim to have been elected president in the national vote on 27 December 2007 [1]. The incumbent Kibaki was sworn into a second term of office, and Odinga publicly challenges the legitimacy of the vote count.

During their stand-off, more than 250,000 people have been displaced from their homes; police have shot and killed unarmed civilian protesters; vigilantes (some posing as traditional "warriors") have prevented Red Cross food relief from reaching victims; police fired [5] teargas into a hospital; and more than 650 people have died in violent conflicts, including some forty women and children who were incinerated [6] in a church where they had taken refuge (on the background to some of these events, see Jeffrey Gettleman, "Signs in Kenya That Killings Were Planned [7]," *New York Times*, 21 January 2008). Food and fuel supplies have run short in Kenya and neighbouring countries.

A resident neither of an affluent suburb nor one of the "slums" featured in media coverage, the young woman quoted above (to whom I will refer as Muthoni) a few days earlier had visited some of the thousands of women and children taking refuge [8] at Nairobi's Jamhuri showgrounds. She had volunteered, with others from her church, to take them food, clothing and personal supplies. When I asked her to describe the circumstances of these displaced persons, she said they were "still clutching at a straw, still desperate...some were left orphaned or jobless." The day I spoke with her, the government had briefly lifted its ban on live news broadcasts and she and many Kenyans had watched avidly the televised coverage of the new Kenya parliament's nine-hour opening session to elect a speaker (Kenneth Marende from the opposition, Odinga-led Orange Democratic Movement [ODM]).

Also headlined that day was former United Nations secretary-general Kofi Annan's postponement of his mediation visit to Kenya until this week. Preceding him in that role were other notables such as African Union chairman and Ghanaian president John Kufuor and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. It was ironic for Kenya to be in the limelight in this way, Muthoni noted; a stable

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Kenya had assisted other African countries (such as Sudan and Somalia) in peace negotiations and mediation efforts. The shock was personal, deeply felt.

Mapping a crisis

The emphasis of this article is different from those published earlier in **openDemocracy**, where several contributors have offered insightful commentaries on historical, political, and economic dimensions of [Kenya's \[9\]](#) post-election crisis:

* Gerard Prunier argues that the post-election violence should not have come as a surprise, but was rooted in an "explosive mix" of longer-term ethno-political and economic patterns; see "[Kenya: roots of crisis \[9\]](#)" (7 January 2008)

* John Lonsdale probes connections between changes in the post-colonial state and the rise of "politicised tribalism" (as distinct from "ethnicity as a universal human attribute"); see "[Ethnicity, tribe, and state in Kenya \[10\]](#)" (17 January 2008)

* Peter Kimani links the current violence to politically orchestrated "ethnic clashes" between 1992 and 2002, longer-term marginalisation of Luo peoples, and 2007 ODM campaign rhetoric that prepared supporters to assume rigging in the event of electoral defeat and that fanned ethnic tensions by demonising Kikuyu peoples; see "[A past of power more than tribe in Kenya's turmoil \[11\]](#)" (2 January 2008)

* Roger Southall points to lessons for Kenya from South Africa, suggesting that Kenya might curtail politicised ethnicity by shifting to proportional representation in parliamentary elections and moving away from direct election of the president by popular vote; see "[South African lessons for Kenya \[11\]](#)" (8 January 2008)

* Michael Holman argues that Kenya's foreign aid donors - such as the United States, Britain, the IMF, and World Bank - should critically question themselves about how their practices helped to support a corrupt regime and thus enable the present crisis; see "[Kenya: chaos and responsibility \[12\]](#)" (3 January 2008)

* Wanyama Masinde outlines specific questions that must be addressed if Kenya is to identify violations committed (truth), assign responsibility (justice), and reform governance (democracy); see "[Kenya's trauma, and how to end it \[13\]](#)" (9 January 2008).

Here I build on these excellent analyses by shifting the focus to personal experiences of Kenyans I have known through years of anthropological research in east Africa. Their perceptions offer a glimpse of how abstractions such as ethnopolitics and political economy are lived on the ground at this moment of extraordinary flux and tragedy. Their stories illustrate the contingency or historical uncertainty (rather than determinism) of politicised ethnicity, which Lonsdale highlights. They also point to profound challenges posed by disjunctions between political elites and ordinary citizens, the housed and the dispossessed, electoral and substantive democracy.

Ethnic contingencies

A call-in questioner on a [radio programme \[18\]](#) in which I was interviewed wryly identified not only his nationality but also his ethnicity: "I am a Kenyan who is Luo; by the way nowadays we specify, but we never used to until this came up." His comment of course is not meant to suggest that ethnic identity previously

Also in **openDemocracy** on Kenya's crisis: Peter Kimani, "[A past of power more than](#)

was unimportant. Instead it illustrates how the present crisis itself has deepened and broadened the salience of ethnicity in ways Kenyans themselves find surprising, uncomfortable, and perilous. While this Luo radio listener's words presumably put him in no danger, Kenyans in some parts of his home country now risk their lives if their ethnic identity or political party affiliation is exposed (see Sammy Wambua, "Kenya's first real steps to a failed state [19]", *Kenya Today*, 4 January 2008).

Just how quickly fear and suspicion have poisoned once cordial inter-ethnic relations in the aftermath of the election is demonstrated by the experience of a middle-class Kenyan woman in her 30s who lives in Nairobi and is originally from Embu district, a location that marks an ethnic identity that is closely related to Kikuyu. (I have known her since the mid-1990s and I will refer to her here as Wanja).

In a telephone conversation, she recounted how on 2 January, as she was walking on an errand near her Nairobi home, she encountered a woman struggling with a heavy load on her back. The stranger was accompanied by a daughter who appeared to be about the age of one of Wanja's own sons (perhaps 6 years old), and this young girl too was carrying a large bag as well as a baby brother on her back. Wanja assumed that the woman was Luo and that she and her two children were fleeing a troubled part of Nairobi and would face hours of walking to reach their likely destination. So she offered to go back to her house and get her family's car to take them where they needed to go - a kindness that in earlier days would likely have been gladly accepted. However, when Wanja greeted the woman and asked gently if she could help her, the woman refused to engage in any conversation. Wanja - a warm, likable person - could not overcome the woman's apparent fear.

Yet such hardening of ethnic boundaries, even four weeks into the crisis [20], is by no means pervasive or irreversible. 23-year-old Muthoni, for example - a Nairobi resident whose parents are from Embu district and thus again perceived as nearly Kikuyu - traveled with her church group to assist Luo people who had taken refuge at a police station in the nearby town of Limuru, whose population is predominantly Kikuyu. She comments: "we are all Kenyans...it's a mixed brew; we can't live without the other....it's not logical to kill your neighbour; you were in agreement before."

She and many others, however, are caught in a cultural politics that routinises ethnic demonisation and violence - which in recent years has come to include not only disorganised, quasi-spontaneous protest from below but also militia activity instigated by politicians; extraordinary use of force by the police and paramilitary forces; and vigilante groups that variously operate as informal or privatised security forces or as political instruments in electoral politics - suggesting shadow states that compete with the formal state apparatus (see David Anderson, "Vigilantes, Violence and the Politics of Public Order in Kenya [21]", *African Affairs*, 101 [2002], as well as reports of the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights [22]. On 5 January 2008, some two dozen Kenyan organisations - speaking as "Kenyans for Peace, Truth, Justice" - issued a "Statement from Concerned Citizens and Governance, Human Rights and Legal Organizations [23]").)

Indeed, in addition to protesting the lack of transparency in the 2007 vote count, many have attempted peaceful demonstrations against the government's own inability or unwillingness to

tribe in Kenya's turmoil [14]" (2 January 2008)

Michael Holman, "Kenya: chaos and responsibility [15]" (3 January 2008)

Gérard Prunier, "Kenya: roots of crisis [15]" (7 January 2008)

Roger Southall, "South African lessons for Kenya [15]" (8 January 2008)

Wanyama Masinde, "Kenya's trauma, and how to end it [16]" (9 January 2008)

John Lonsdale, "Ethnicity, tribe, and state in Kenya [17]" (17 January 2008)

protect its citizens against violent attacks in their homes, churches, schools, and workplaces. To claim a supposedly atavistic Luo-Kikuyu polarity as the cause of present conflict is to miss entirely its complex historical and political origins. Maina Kiai, chair of the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights [24], terms the crisis a "political conflict with ethnic overtones, not an ethnic conflict" (on 10 January 2008, Kiai participated through a video-telephone link in a seminar on "Kenya: A Post-Election Assessment [25]" at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, DC).

In 1994 - just two years after Kenya's first post-independence multi-party [26] election - a woman in rural Embu district commented to me that the return of multi-party politics "has caused people to hate one another." Her remark came from bitter personal experience, since she is the wife of an assistant chief, whose government position at the time made him a supporter of President Daniel arap Moi's [27] party (the Kenya African National Union / Kanu) in a district that strongly supported opposition political parties. (In the 2007 election, by contrast, this district strongly favored incumbent Mwai Kibaki's Party of National Unity / PNU.)

Embu district was ethnically quite homogeneous; the bitter new divisions emerging in the early 1990s centred on political party competition and patron-client politics rather than local ethnic differences. Shifting national ethnic alliances, however, shaped its patron-client politics: Luo and Kikuyu were often allies during part of the Moi era, and Odinga and Kibaki [28] themselves, who had become opponents by 2005, were allies in 2002 as part of a broad coalition for change. Furthermore, at least as important as mutable ethnic strategies in electoral politics were the increasing use of intimidation and thuggery - partly through the proliferation of political party "youth wings" whose activities eventually shaded into menacing actions, criminality, and violence.

Everyday reciprocities

Wanyana Masinde notes the sometimes harmful role played in this crisis by new communication technologies and media such as blogs and mobile-phone text-messages, which he says "can be the source of prejudice and dangerous rumour as much as (or more than) reliable information." Rumours that city water supplies had been poisoned or that opposition political leaders had been arrested or worse have flown across electronic networks during this crisis. But digital technology and wide Kenyan access to mobile-phone text-messages have also been put to beneficial use - for example, Wanja described to me how she and her husband and friends were quickly organising networks of informal assistance to busloads of suddenly homeless Kikuyu and others brought to Nairobi from the Rift Valley in early January.

Today, as in the past, most Kenyan citizens concentrate on struggles for survival - to produce enough food to feed the family; to make financial ends meet; to gain admission to schools of good quality; to raise money to pay school fees; to obtain land; to acquire a job or run a small business. Accompanying Kenya's public culture of flattery and praise of the wealthy and powerful are debates that have deep historical roots in small-scale communities: about civic virtue, the morality of wealth, and obligations of the rich to the poor or patrons to clients. (On historical continuities and discontinuities in cultural debates about civic virtue, accountability, and moral economy among Gikuyu-speaking peoples of central Kenya, see Bruce Berman & John Lonsdale's two-volume Unhappy Valley [29] [James Currey, 2002]; and Angelique Haugerud, The Culture of Politics in Modern Kenya [30] [Cambridge University Press, 1995]). In spite of today's newly charged ethnic identities and growing mistrust, now (as in the past) mutual assistance and other social bonds soften boundaries of ethnicity, neighborhood, clan, and class.

In Anthills of the Savannah [31], Chinua Achebe writes: "Storytellers are a threat. They threaten all champions of control, they frighten usurpers of the right-to-freedom of the human spirit.... The

story is our escort; without it we are blind." The vignettes offered here are but bare outlines of stories Kenyans now tell one another as they make sense of this historic moment. They craft meaning in crisis and therein lies hope.

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