

"Kenya: Stable Democracy or Meltdown?"

On December 27, 2007, there were presidential and parliamentary elections in Kenya. The outside world was largely indifferent. Then suddenly the headlines spoke of ethnic violence on a large scale. The Western press spoke of the danger of a "meltdown" and the pervasiveness in Africa of ethnic conflicts. There were urgent appeals for the two opposing leaders to come together and make a compromise. This has not yet happened and is unlikely to happen.

What took place? If we start with the immediate situation, it seems rather clear that the opposition party - the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) led by Raila Odinga - swept the parliamentary elections, and the government party - the Party of National Unity (PNU) led by outgoing president Mwai Kibaki - suffered a major defeat. The Vice-President of Kenya and over 20 ministers in the outgoing government were defeated in their parliamentary candidacies. The PNU elected 42 deputies, less than a fifth of the seats and the ODM won 99.

It seemed reasonable to assume that Odinga beat Kibaki in the presidential election. But after three days of counting, the electoral commission asserted that Kibaki had squeaked in. The immediate reaction in Kenya was that Kibaki stole the election. His furtive swearing-in on December 30, his refusal to allow any serious outside mediator to review the situation, the open doubts of international observers all seemed to point to his attempt to create a *fait accompli* in the hope that the turmoil will die down. Will it?

For many years now, but particularly in the last five years, Kenya was touted in the Western press and by Western governments as a "stable democracy," unlike so many other African states. One might remember that the other state that used to get this accolade was the Ivory Coast, which has descended into a continuing civil war in recent years. What does it mean to be called a "stable democracy"? It seems to mean a government that is reliably pro-Western and wide open to Western investment. Kenya has fit that bill, as did the Ivory Coast. The Ivory Coast has melted down, and now it seems that Kenya may be doing the same thing.

A look at post-1945 history might explain how naive and unuseful is this kind of assessment. Among the seven states in British East and Central Africa, the only one to have had a serious guerrilla movement was Kenya. It was called the Mau Mau and it took the British many years to suppress it. The Mau Mau were a peasant movement among the largest ethnic group in Kenya, the Kikuyu. The Kikuyu feel they are owed something in return for this insurrection. Mwai Kibaki is a Kikuyu.

Shortly after independence, Jomo Kenyatta, the first president of Kenya and a Kikuyu died. He was succeeded by his Vice-President, Daniel arap Moi, a Kalenjin, who proceeded to establish a kleptocratic, dictatorial regime which lasted quite a long time. The Kikuyu were more or less squeezed out of power. So were the second-largest group, the Luo. The leader of the Luo was Oginga Odinga (father of Raila Odinga). He had a socialist program, and his movement was suppressed.

By 2002, the Kenyan people had enough of arap Moi and his Western supporters thought it might be time to encourage a facade of democracy. The one-party regime ceded place to an electoral contest. Kibaki and Raila Odinga joined together with others to establish a National Rainbow Coalition (NRC), dedicated, they said, to ending corruption and ending as well the freeze on distribution of posts and money to only one ethnic group. Kibaki won the election. The people celebrated.

But 2002 was also the moment of Bush's war on terrorism. The United States recruited Kibaki as a key ally. He was rewarded with much outside money, and endless praise from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. The years 2002-2007 were a period of considerable economic growth on neo-liberal premises. But Kibaki reneged on all his promises. The economic growth did not filter down to the rural poor and the large numbers in the urban ghettos. Kibaki fired the man he had appointed to expose corruption. And he squeezed out Odinga and other allies in the NRC.

So when there were new elections in 2007, the ODM and Odinga won handily. The fact that arap Moi now endorsed Kibaki was of no use. The ODM emphasized the crass inequalities in Kenya. It called for a renewed war against corruption. And it entered into an understanding with the Muslim community in Kenya that they would stop renditions. It was obvious that this program appealed to the voters, but not to Kibaki. So he stole the election. And the United States and Great Britain are trying hard to make this electoral theft work.

Of course, in the face of such blatant behavior, violence broke out. It took an ethnic form. Somehow the Western press seems to think this is an African specialty. Have they never heard of race riots in the United States? Have they never looked at Catholic-Protestant violence in northern Ireland? What happens in such situations is that the poor in the urban ghettos and the rural area hit out at each other, while the upper strata in their gated communities carry on obliviously.

Raila Odinga is no angel and no revolutionary. But he won the election, and the reason he did was because he was opposing the neo-liberal corruption of Kibaki. Odinga is playing a very restrained role, a bit like that of Al Gore in 2000. And he might be no more successful. Kibaki says that he'll hold new elections if the courts tell him to, but Odinga says that the courts are in his pocket.

So much for stable democracies.

by Immanuel Wallerstein