

Kenya on the brink

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Protests at a stolen election in Kenya have turned into a wave of inter-ethnic pogroms. Keith Spencer shows how only working class politics, not rival 'tribal' elites, trying to get their snouts in the state trough, can liberate the poor

The past weeks have seen the political protests at a stolen election in Kenya turn into savage killings, as gangs of Kalenjin youth picked on Kikuyu, and then Kikuyu youth attacks Kalenjin and Luo communities. More than 250,000 people have fled their homes and hundreds have been killed. At the end of January, violence erupted again in the city of Nakuru in the western rift valley; houses have been burned and many killed.

The conflict started a month ago when President Mwai Kibaki stole the election. Since then Kibaki's supporters have battled with supporters of the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) led by their losing presidential hopeful Raila Odinga.

The ODM originally called for mass protests in early January before calling them off after threats from the military. It then organised three days of mass protest in mid-January to coincide with the beginning of the new parliament. The ODM and its supporters narrowly won leadership of parliament but squandered an opportunity to build a coalition of forces to isolate Kibaki's Party of National Unity (PNU); the smaller parties that had been in power earlier in the decade rallied to the new President and his offers of cabinet posts. Outside of parliament, the ODM lead the movement nowhere.

Then Odinga called for international sanctions and trade boycotts of Kenya. The leadership of the ODM courted international envoys such as head of the African Union Ghanaian president John Kufuor or former UN chief Kofi Annan. While Annan has recently recognised that there have been human rights abuses he also called on 'all Kenyan leaders, government as well as the opposition to avoid any measures or steps that would further compromise, the search for an amicable solution to the country's crisis'. Which is a clear signal for the opposition to end its protests.

And now a month after Kibaki cheated his way into the presidency, Odinga is meeting with him to come up with a deal while the pair issue joint statements calling for peace.

This timidity has allowed Kibaki to announce his cabinet, Odinga and his allies to hope for some governmental jobs, while the masses live in poverty.

Elections

The parliamentary election on 27 December dealt a crushing blow to Kibaki. His PNU won only 37 seats (against the ODM's 100-plus); 20 ministers lost their seats (out of about 27 posts); the vice-president was voted out; three members of former president and kleptocrat Daniel Moi's family were defeated. This was a popular uprising at the ballot box against those tainted with the 'old regime' of corruption, big business and neoliberalism. The workers and peasants voted in their majority for a new direction and an end to

poverty.

However, the presidential election delivered a different result; a victory by more than 200,000 votes to Kibaki - despite exit polls predicting a win for Odinga. A few days later, the head of the 'independent' electoral commission admitted he didn't know who'd won, and that there were some irregularities, including one constituency recording a 115 per cent voting turnout! Protests against the stolen election immediately followed

Kibaki replied with brutal crackdown by the army and police, a curfew and a media blackout.

In the west, the media has been replete with tales of inter-ethnic conflict, and how Kenya is sliding into tribal warfare and civil war. But in truth, state forces have carried out a large part - perhaps most - of the violence. Police and army have operated a shoot to kill policy; one BBC journalist spoke of seeing more than 40 dead bodies in a mortuary, all with bullet wounds in the pro-ODM city of Kisumu.

The polls before the election showed that Kibaki was running at 40 per cent, which is more than the 22 per cent of Kenyans who are Kikuyu, while Odinga had about 45 per cent, substantially more than the 12 per cent of Kenyans that are of Luo origin. Kibaki's support is derived from the Kikuyu elite and parts of the old regime based around the Kenyan African National Union, while Odinga is supported by large numbers of people who have failed to benefit from the Kenyan economic boom. Former President Moi and his family support Kibaki, but members of his ethnic group, the Kalenjin, have burned down his house, demonstrated against Kibaki and fought the police.

Politicians on both sides have stoked most of inter-ethnic violence in the run-up to the elections and their aftermath.

Kenya since independence

Kenya won independence from the UK in 1963 after the Mau Mau war in the 1950s, which saw the British kill 10,000 Kenyans and intern between 80,000 to 100,000, mainly the Kikuyu. After independence, the country was led by president who were good friends of western governments and big business.

In the 1990s, the World Bank and IMF pressured Moi into adopting a structural adjustment programme that saw some liberalisation. Yet this wasn't enough, in 2002, Mwai Kibaki trumped Moi's successor in presidential elections. In power, Kibaki has continued privatising the economy - last year the railways were sold off - and courted new business, such as finance, banking and the IT sector. Under his rule, Kenya has seen growth rates of more than 5 per cent compared with a stagnating economy in Moi's last presidential term.

But Kibaki has continued Moi's corruption practices. He was finance minister under Kenyatta and Moi, and so was no doubt aware of the sacking of the country's wealth by multinationals and the Kenyan elite. In power, despite an abortive investigation into Moi and his family, which found millions of dollars in Swiss bank accounts but led to no action, Kibaki and his government have overseen scandals, involving bribery from companies, such as, Goldenberg, Anglo Leasing and Safaricom.

The government also produced its Vision 2030 document, which called for Kenya to be the pre-eminent capitalist economy in Africa by 2030. Kenya is already seen by international capital as a staging post for further investment in the continent. The fruits of its agriculture (still dominated by white landowners) can be seen in supermarkets throughout the UK, and accounts for a quarter of the country's wealth, the rest being made up of tourism and the service sector.

Yet despite these growth rates, many Kenyans have faced only greater hardships. The per capita Gross

National Income is about \$550 a year; the average annual wage for the poor is around the \$200 mark, while even Kibaki has admitted that 46 per cent of the population lives in poverty. And the country has been wracked by several years of drought and famine this decade. The UN children's agency, Unicef, said that malnutrition was already affecting one in three children under the age of five. Meanwhile MPs earn \$60,000 a year making them possibly the most affluent parliamentarians in the world.

Despite the poverty and the growing inequality, Kenya is strategically important to world capitalism, and is also a partner in George Bush's war on terror. This accounts for the USA's early recognition of the Kibaki government, and its recent statement that there was ballot rigging on both sides. And while the EU and other international observers have spoken of irregularities, they have only done in Kenya as much as they did over the stolen election in Nigeria last year and the one in Mexico in 2006 - that is nothing.

Working class and resistance

The Central Organisation of Trade Unions (the Kenyan TUC) has played a lamentable role. It has called on Kibaki to start talks to resolve the crisis (despite his being the cause of it) and demanded greater safety for its members. It has refused to intervene politically into the crisis.

The Kenyan African National Union has historically dominated the trade unions. In government in the 1990s, it banned unions in the civil service, interfered in union elections, appointed officials and nurtured a pliant bureaucracy. There have also been accusations of corruption. Rank and file pressure finally forced union appointees to withdraw from the governing board of the National Social Security Fund in the late 1990s because they refused to fight for workers' interests.

Yet during the same period, there were also several important struggles over wages and jobs, so much so that the IMF tried to blame the workers for the stagnating economy.

During the current crisis, young people (the average age of Kenyans is 18) have taken to their streets in their thousands. But Odinga and the people around him are part of the Kenyan political caste, and will do nothing to challenge the rule of capital, which is behind the misery and poverty of the masses. Instead socialists should take to the streets and argue for:

? Committees of action in the towns and the country to coordinate the struggles against the stolen elections. These committees should be open to all workers and peasants whatever their ethnic background. They must also distribute food and water and organise transport.

? Workers and peasants militia. The committees should unite the masses in struggle and organise defence of demonstrations against police and army attacks. Militia should be multi-ethnic and also guard against conflict between various peoples.

? General strike. The country's two million workers can use their power to prevent the government from ruling, by doing so they can come to the head of the protest movement. Form a national rank and file movement to oust the reformists and the corrupt leaders. Fight for a general strike to paralyse the country and organise armed picket lines around banks, firms and at ports.

? Workers and peasants' government. The struggle against Kibaki should not stop at the election of Odinga or a deal between the two sides. Instead, we need a government for the workers and the poor. A government that can take over the banks and the stock exchange, expropriate the white-owned farms and big businesses, including the imperialist multinationals, and use the wealth of the country to improve the lives of the poor, rather feed the bank accounts of a few rich Kenyans or capitalist companies.

To implement such a strategy the masses must break from any illusions in Odinga and build a class-based

party, which can lead the poorer sections of society, such as the peasants or the youth in the shanty towns.

Workers should also reject the help of the non-governmental organisations, which reinforce ethnic divisions or populist politics by their regional influence and campaigns for reforms within capitalism. It was the NGOs that so disgracefully priced poor Kenyans out of attending the World Social Forum last year in Nairobi - until the last day, when the forum was stormed.

The situation in Kenya shows that as elsewhere in the world the masses are hungry for change, are deeply dissatisfied with the corrupt elites who have exploited them since independence from colonialism. Africa is seething with rebellion, especially in the vast shanty towns that have sprung up around the major cities.

The Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky wrote in his Permanent Revolution (1928), that in the epoch of imperialism, democracy if it is to include solving the big questions, land for those who work it, the right to free speech and organisation, a living wage, healthcare, free education for all, can only be achieved if the workers take power and go on to adopt socialist measures. Bourgeois democracy- the alternation of parties with identical neoliberal policies, have to play on personalities and ethnic rivalries to mobilise the voters. This 'democracy lite' will always disappoint and enrage the electors when they realise how empty of results it is for them. The danger is that without a class explanation, that it is the rich elites and the foreign multinationals that rob them not their poor Kikuyu or Luo neighbours, then the sort of pogroms we have witnessed in Kenya will continue with every election.

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