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## Kenya at the brink of collapse

By Makau Mutua | January 30, 2008

In December, President Mwai Kibaki of Kenya was controversially declared the winner in a rancorous election against Raila Odinga by a margin of several hundred thousand votes. Odinga has refused to concede defeat, charging that the election was stolen. In the last three weeks, gruesome violence has erupted in Odinga's strongholds, leaving more than 750 dead and 300,000 displaced. Kenya stands at the brink of collapse unless Odinga and Kibaki can accommodate each other.

Kenya, a country regarded in the West as a beacon of hope and stability in a turbulent region, is now gripped by genocidal violence for the first time since independence from Britain in 1964. Although the immediate trigger for the killings and pillage is the contested election results, the violence has deep historical roots. Kenya is an incoherent collection of some 40 ethnic groups that the British coerced into one state in 1896. It is the failure of those groups to forge a common Kenyan national identity that has come back to haunt East Africa's most powerful country.

Successive governments have either been unwilling or unable to imagine how one builds a nation out of disparate, previously independent groups. Kenya's presidents - Jomo Kenyatta, Daniel arap Moi, and now Kibaki - have been men of limited ability and vision. They preferred to exercise power through ethnic cronyism and tribal manipulation. Each deeply tribalized the state by openly favoring their ethnic elites at the expense of others.

Kenya's political class, which is lazy and opportunistic, has failed to nurture a democratic, rule-of-law state in which meritocracy rather than identity is the most important variable. That is why most Kenyans have not transferred their loyalties from the ethnic group to the state. Kenyan political parties are either personal vehicles for tribal barons or coalitions of ethnic elites. Neither Odinga's Orange Democratic Movement nor President Kibaki's Party of National Unity are driven by ideology or philosophical platforms. Rather, they are receptacles for their respective leaders and the ethnic groups supporting them.

Odinga cobbled the Orange Democratic Movement from the Luo, his ethnic group, the Kalenjin, who dominate the Rift Valley, and the Luhya - three of Kenya's largest five groups. Kibaki's Party of National Unity drew fanatical support from the Kikuyu, his own group, which is also the largest in the country. Historically, there has been bad blood between the Kikuyu and the Luo and the Kalenjin.

The Kalenjin, who have committed many atrocities against the Kikuyu in the Rift Valley, supported Odinga because he promised a quasi-federal government that would have given them control over land and the Kikuyu settlers. The Luo, who have a psychosis of victimization, had widely expected Odinga to be the first among them to lead the country.

These ethnic pathologies burst open in the aftermath of the elections that was conducted by mobilizing tribal anger and deep-seated grievances. Both the Orange Democratic Movement and the Party of National Unity made naked appeals to ethnic passions. The post-election violence has pitted the Kikuyu against the Luo and the Kalenjin, with the Kikuyu bearing the brunt of the casualties.

Some of the attacks - such as the one in which scores of Kikuyu women and children were burned in a church in Eldoret - have taken genocidal dimensions. But ethnicity alone cannot explain Kenya's descent into chaos.

Although New York-based Human Rights Watch says the attacks were planned by ODM leaders, it is the poor, unemployed, and marginalized youth who are most susceptible to the violence. Virtually no one in the middle class is directly carrying out the attacks. Kenya's history of uneven development in which half the country lives on less than a dollar a day has come to haunt the country.

Former UN secretary general Kofi Annan appears to be the last hope for Kenya if the country is to avoid a civil war. Annan must secure from Odinga, Kibaki, and their respective supporters a political settlement to end the violence. They have three options: a recount of the ballots to establish the true winner, a rerun of the election, or a power-sharing agreement in which Odinga becomes the prime minister and Kibaki retains the presidency but cedes substantial powers to the Legislature. Unless the two principals respond to Annan, one of the most beautiful places on earth will be left in the ruins of a biblical catastrophe.

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