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## Kenya's Unrest



BACKGROUND REPORT

Posted:

### Ethnic Divides Run Deep in Kenya

The ethnic-driven killings in Kenya -- ignited by disputed elections in December -- are a sign of long-simmering tensions, an term political resolution must address those deep-seated fissures, regional experts say.

Kenya's troubles began when President Mwai Kibaki, a Kikuyu, was declared the winner over opposition leader Raila Odinga, a Luo, in Dec. 27 presidential elections that local and international monitors considered flawed.

The East African nation of 36 million, perceived as being a stable democracy, quickly descended into violence. Over the following months, about 1,000 people were killed and an estimated 300,000 forced to flee their homes -- mostly Kikuyu settlers in the western Rift Valley.

Kikuyus are the largest tribe in Kenya, encompassing 22 percent of the population, and Luos make up 13 percent, according to the CIA World Factbook. Kenya's other ethnic groups include Luhya -- 14 percent, Kalenjin -- 12 percent, Kamba -- 11 percent, Kisii -- 6 percent, Meru -- 6 percent, groups -- 15 percent, and non-African -- 1 percent.



After weeks of on-again-off-again negotiations and scattered attacks, a mediation team led by former U.N. Secretary-General managed to help Kibaki and Odinga reach an agreement on a coalition government. Under the deal, Kibaki would remain p Odinga would become executive prime minister -- a post promised him when Kibaki was first elected in 2002. Many details sorted out following the Feb. 28 handshake agreement, and Kenya's parliament must still ratify the deal.

While the political reconciliation has allowed many to breathe a sigh of relief, several analysts say violence will inevitably er around the next election -- if not before -- if underlying divisions in the country are not addressed.

The recent ethnic violence stems from the reintroduction of multiparty elections in 1992 and political actors vying for position on existing grievances to advance their own goals, according to Dorina Bekoe, who specializes in African conflicts and refo U.S. Institute of Peace.

The grievances include a perceived resource inequity and the competition for land.

When Kenya was under British colonial rule in the early 1900s, white settlers took over land in the lush highlands area. After gained its independence in 1963, President Jomo Kenyatta parceled out some of the land to his fellow Kikuyus -- land the K people claimed as their ancestral home.

Before the 1992 elections, Kalenjins tried to force the Kikuyu off land they believed was theirs, and a subsequent governme showed some members of parliament were behind the arming of the Kalenjin, Bekoe said.

Then, during the 2002 elections, Kibaki, leader of the National Rainbow Coalition, became president with the support of Od actively campaigned for him and was believed to have been promised the prime ministryship in a secret deal.

The ministerial job never came to fruition, and instead Kibaki awarded government posts to other Kikuyu, which touched off the Luo, who felt increasingly marginalized, and pulled other groups into the fighting as well, Bekoe said.

In the 2007 presidential race, subtle messages and use of certain words in campaigns fomented ethnic ill will. When it appeared between Kibaki and Odinga would be close, Kenyans and outside observers knew only a scrupulously run election considered by all candidates would avoid violent outbreaks.

And now that a coalition government appears to be headed toward approval, deeper issues such as resource distribution and power must be reconciled, Bekoe said.

"The political agreement is necessary but not sufficient to stop the recurrent cycles of violence unless more is done to treat grievances," she said.

Makau Mutua, dean of the law school at the State University of New York in Buffalo and director of its Human Rights Center, said deeper reforms are needed than just the sharing of government jobs.

Mutua said Kenya should establish a truth commission -- one that would identify the abuses of the past, who committed them, so that the country can move forward. But so far, all sides have been reluctant to establish such a commission because the country is in trouble, he said.

Nonetheless, "the country must go through a cathartic experience, and put measures in place to make sure those abominations do not reoccur," or the country will be right back where it started, Mutua said.

-- By Larisa Epatko, Online NewsHour

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