Kenya: Roots of Conflict & Hope For The Future
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Kenya – shocking mayhem

On December 27, 2007, Kenyans trooped to the polling stations to elect a president as well as civic and parliamentary representatives. The turnout was massive and, perhaps when all data is available, may indicate a historical high in voter turnout.

Opinion polls had suggested a close race between the two leading presidential contenders – the incumbent Mwai Kibaki and Raila Odinga. And what a close election it was!

Prior to the announcement of results there arose controversy regarding the authenticity of the numbers compiled by the Electoral Commission of Kenya for the presidential vote. The opposition protested the release of the results in the glare of local and international media. However, the Electoral Commission of Kenya (ECK) chairman proceeded to announce Mwai Kibaki as having won with a margin of less than half a million votes. Raila Odinga was in second place with Kalonzo Musyoka a distant third position with less than one million votes.

No sooner were results announced than violence broke out; Chaos erupted (especially) in opposition strongholds with fighting targeting communities perceived to have supported the president.

In the Rift Valley (places like Eldoret, Molo, Narok and others) the violence became an all out ethnic cleansing exercise, where some ethnic groups (specifically the Kikuyu and Kisii) were targeted for removal, ostensibly to be sent back to their “ancestral lands”.

The most graphic of this was the incident in a church in Eldoret, where a number of people, including women, children and people with disabilities, had sought sanctuary only to meet brutal fate as all were burnt to death. What makes the incident tragic and horrific is that even those who escaped from the inferno were promptly thrown back into the fire where they perished!

As well, there was fighting in other areas such as Kisumu, Molo, Kericho and more.

In Nairobi there were chaos and mayhem in poor neighbourhoods, especially in the slums of Kibera and Mathare, among others. Kibera, reputed to be the largest slum in Africa, bore the brunt of the chaos, complete with ethnic overtones.

In these areas violence took a graphic, inhuman form with neighbour hacking neighbour using crude weapons such as machetes; and burning what little was left of their simple dwellings that they called home. Dwellings and food kiosks went up in smoke even as angry demonstrators uprooted the railway line that passed through the slums.

One shudders to imagine what would have happened if there were widespread use of guns.

Police responded to the deteriorating situation as the government banned public rallies. In the process of putting down protests, people died; many of them killed by live ammunition. In the age of video
cam coders and instant replay, some policemen were caught on camera shooting unarmed
demonstrators. Reports since indicate that many deaths in western Kenya were due to police shootings.

As the chaos continued illicit militias came into play. Soon revenge attacks were reported in Naivasha
and Nakuru, this time targeting the cleansers and opposition supporters, including members of
Kalenjin and Luo ethnic groups.

In Central Province churches and government compounds provided shelter for Luos and Kalenjins
fearing revenge attacks. As the world watched, thoughts of Rwanda came into mind. World leaders
and Kenyan watchers feared for regional turmoil that would follow the break-up of the country.

There is a Kiswahili saying that baada ya kisa, mkasa, whose English equivalent is that every cloud has a
silver lining. And that silver lining appeared recently in the form of a peace deal between the key
protagonists.

Thanks to the efforts of Kofi Annan and eminent persons, including Graca Machel (wife of Nelson
Mandela) and former Tanzanian president, Benjamin Mkapa, and support and pressure from all over
the world, there is a power-sharing deal that has defused tensions and kindled hope for a return to
normalcy. Parliament has given the pact the full force of the law and Raila Odinga is set to become the
country’s prime minister.

Even then, the impact of the turmoil has been devastating for a once-peaceful country, an island of
stability and one admired by many on the African continent and the world.

The death toll from the post-election conflict stands at over 1000 and with close to 500,000 displaced;
refugees in their own country! There has not been an independent valuation of the associated economic
loss. The country’s projected 7% GDP growth for 2008 is not likely to be attained.

Tourist numbers that had been growing steadily since 2002 have dropped to a trickle! No longer would
visitors be comfortable with the images of brutality they saw on global TV screens, newspapers and the
Internet.

Clearly this is not the Kenya we knew; it is not the Kenya the world knew; indeed, it is not the Kenya
anyone expected. The country has been seen as a model of stability in an otherwise turbulent region.
Like many African countries, Kenyans lost their innocence with respect to violence.

Civil strife would not only affect Kenyans but the entire Great Lakes region, especially the landlocked
countries.

Neighbouring Uganda, Northern Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi and the eastern part of the Democratic
Republic of Congo have been hit by all-time high gasoline prices. Transportation of goods from the
port of Mombasa to these countries was rendered impossible. The full impact regional economic impact
has yet to be fully quantified and documented.

The international impact of the crisis could be far-reaching, given that Nairobi houses the third largest
UN mission after New York and Geneva. As well, Kenya has in the past provided sanctuary for
refugees from Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi. No country in the region has
as well advanced infrastructure as Kenya. It is the reason why many western nations have their regional consulates in Nairobi. The Kenyan capital has perhaps one of the highest concentrations of western journalists and press agencies outside of South Africa. Nairobi has developed into a regional hub!

**The Problem(s)**

It is my considered opinion that the elections were merely a trigger for what happened and that something else could have set off the same reaction sooner or later.

The conflict has been viewed as *ethnic*, especially by western media. Indeed, this is a western preference of terminology that sees Africa as a region populated by tribes (remember tribe and its negative connotation) and where tribal conflict could erupt any time. I prefer to call it *ethnic conflict*. Nevertheless, ethnic conflict theory is only partially true.

The fact is that the Kenyan problem is complex and has social, economic and political dimensions.

That said *ethnicity* remains major problem in the country. Indeed, Kenyans are people of dual loyalties: to the nation and to ethnic group. Leadership, since independence, has only exacerbated ethnic loyalties at the expense of national integration. If one were to ask people what it means to be Kenyan and one would get blank stares!

Ethnicity is one problem, though. There are many others, including skewed income distribution, strong attachment to land as the primary economic source of sustenance, lack of statesmanship in the Kenyan leadership since independence and the debilitating effects of corruption on the national fabric.

Prior to elections it was revealed that an investigation had unearthed *massive corruption* perpetrated by former president, Daniel Arap Moi. The report, commissioned by the government of Mwai Kibaki and done by Kroll Associates estimated that the former president and those close to him bilked the country of close to $1billion. This is aside from several other corruption scandals that took place in Moi’s 24 year rule.

Corruption, and massive corruption at that, has had a devastating impact on the economy, especially where it has been perpetrated by powerful individuals in high places in government.

*Poverty* is rampant with 43% of the population living under the poverty line; although this number has been on a downward trend since 2002, it is not declining fast enough. The degree of poverty is simply intolerable and untenable. *Unemployment* stands at more than 50%! It is notable that violence was largely perpetrated by masses of poor, unemployed youth who hoped that change could possibly bring better fortunes for them.

Kenya is also a country of large *income disparities* with extreme riches displayed amidst a sea of poverty. The connected elite and well-to-do live such lavish lives that few can attain in many western countries. The country has one of the third largest income disparity gaps right behind Brazil. Indeed, as the country’s economic prospects have revived so also have the ranks of the poor swollen.

*Land* remains the country’s dominant source of economic sustenance with close to 80% of the population living directly off the land. It is no wonder that clashes were centred in the fertile Rift Valley; and these clashed pertained to issues of land. And with the claim of land grabbing by political
leaders, this issue will remain explosive for years to come. Indeed, it will remain more so if there is no clear diversification of economic livelihood.

*Centralized Power & the Imperial Presidency* stifles the growth of democracy, and skews national development through inefficient and corrupt resource allocation. Many, including those in opposition, covet the power of the imperial presidency and (perhaps) have no intention of restructuring it should they acquire power. Moreover, this power is dispensed through client-patron networks that arbitrate the distribution of national resources. A powerful position in government means access to largesse that sustains the said client-patron networks.

In Kenya, *visionary leadership* has been lacking. Not a single Kenyan leader has been able to rally the nation into a common vision, strategy and direction. At independence Kenyatta had the opportunity to do so. However, his regime is discredited for entrenching tribalism and ethnic nationalist interests. This is in contrast to Mwalimu Julius Nyerere in neighbouring Tanzania.

There is more. The western *multiparty democracy* is clearly unsuitable and has yet to fully entrench itself in a multi-ethnic nation where ethnic bonds remain stronger than national bonds. Kenya has more than 200 registered political parties, many of which are termed “brief-case parties” that are often activated at the right time. If democracy were to be measured by the number of political parties registered, Kenya would be one hell of a democracy!

The tragedy is that existing parties aren’t born of ideas, agendas of visions. In Kenya, parties are aligned along ethnic lines and are fiefdoms of the political and economic elite from the tribe!

Further, the model of winner-take-all, in an ethnically polarized nation, means that some regions could end up shut out of government! In the most recent example, Kibaki’s Party of National Unity (PNU) hardly won any seats in the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) strongholds and vice versa! Losing out in an election could mean exclusion, politically and economically speaking.

The next logical question is: how did Kenya end up being what it is today? How come countries like Tanzania and Botswana, both with similar colonial legacies, have succeeded where Kenya seems to have failed?

I propose to you that some of the problems outlined above have colonial origins while others have been entrenched by the post-independence leadership.

*Kenya – A Profile*

Many of you may know Kenya from its globally popular safaris; the rolling landscapes, the picturesque terrains, wild life, food and people of varied traditions and culture. It is the place where you can be in deep Maasai country and a few minutes away you can enjoy western-style life in Nairobi; or a place where you have contact with the Mijikenda and a short distance away you are staying at a luxurious western-style hotel in Mombasa. It is a place of contrasting beauty of the Rift Valley, Mount Kenya and Kilimanjaro in the distance.

Kenya is a country of coffee and tea, some of the finest in the world; and home to Akamba wood carvers and Kisii soapstone makers. It is the land of the *nyatiti* from Luo land and *Muomboko* from Central Province. This is a land of long distance and marathon runners, especially from Nandi hills; a
nation of tales from old that speak of brave Maasai warriors that held British incursion to the hinterland.

For some, the memory of Kenya is from “Out of Africa” the movie with its pliant workers that obey *mzungu* orders while for others it is the ancient cradle of mankind.

Kenya is a land of contrasts; it is diverse from the coast to Lake Victoria and the Ugandan border; it is varied from North to South, from the Sudanese and Ethiopian borders to Tanzania. As varied as the terrain is its people, culture, music, dance and language.

The country has two official languages: English and Kiswahili. The former is legacy of colonialism. Kiswahili, an indigenous Bantu language from the Coast, is the *lingua franca* spoken by close to 100 million people along the East African coast stretching from Somalia to Mozambique and extending inland to the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Most Kenyans are multilingual and could easily speak at least three languages: Kiswahili, English and some (out of 41) mother tongue. As we shall see later, many of these ethnicities were really nations in their own rights. Today, they retain elements of nations even as they exist within the Kenyan state.

Talking of ethnicities, there is no major dominant group as happens in countries like Zimbabwe where the Shona are more than 50% of the population. Instead, the largest ethnic groups in Kenya are Kikuyu 23%; Luhya 14 percent; Luo, 13 percent; Kalenjin, 11 percent; and Gusii (Kisii), 6 percent; Kamba 11%, Meru 6%; etc.

As stated before, land remains a contentious matter for Kenyans. The country has a total of 580,367 square km (224,080 square miles) but only 25% of this land is arable. The rest of it is semi-arid, with intermittent rains and a challenge for meaningful agriculture and livestock development. Nearly 80% of the Kenyan population lives off the land.

As we shall see later, close to 75% of this land was in the hands of colonialists at one time.

**Pre-colonial Kenya**

The name Kenya is derived from the highest mountain the country, Mt. Kenya. In the lore of ethnic groups that live around the mountain, their gods lived high up the mountain and it was usual for religious leaders to make pilgrimages up the mountain to offer sacrifices to the gods.

Mt. Kenya was known as Kirinyaga locally. It is said that the White people that heard it pronounced as “Kinyaa” rather than “Kirinyaga” and from then on called it *Kinyaa* which later became Kenya.

There was no Kenya before colonial times. The country came into being following the 1884 Berlin conference. It was first administered by the British East Africa Company, then as the British East African Protectorate and, starting the 1920s, a British colony.

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1 As recently as the 1970s such believers were sited in the mountain by tourists. In one such case, the man in question was scantily dressed when encountered by a tourist crew that sought to help. He promptly disappeared to the gorges in the mountain only to appear several days later in his village where expressed disgust that people could disturb his mission to commune with the gods.
Pre-colonial was a land of different nations, at least 41 of them, that occupied the current territory called Kenya. They had their own diverse governance structures, cultural norms and identities. They have been portrayed as egalitarian societies with their management and internal control.

Granted these ethnic groups clashed from time to time in competition for resources. This is especially so with respect to land and livestock with the latter being a measure of wealth and source of food. Many Kenyan nations were pastoralists while others did subsistence farming. No matter what they did, land remained central to their livelihood; it remained central to conflicts; and remains thus more than one century later.

Here is a citation from the World Culture Encyclopaedia on the Kikuyu organization.

“Political authority in pre-colonial Kenya was decentralized. No kings, chiefs, or bureaucratic institutions existed. For the most part, political authority was collective at every level, and decisions were generally reached by the oldest males of kin groups or political units in council. Although the councils made some important decisions for the group as a whole, their primary role was judicial – the settlement of disputes between kin groups. The collective prestige of the elders in council, as the representatives of tradition and the ancestors, gave their words weight and their decisions authority. Women also had a council, the function of which was to deal with domestic concerns, matters of the farms, and the discipline of female social and ritual life. Women were excluded from politics and were usually prevented from holding rights in land.

“The imposition of foreign rule on the Kikuyu drastically altered their social and political structures and disrupted their traditional ways of life. European settlement policies had an even more drastic effect on the Kikuyu as land was virtually taken away from thousands of resident Kikuyu without adequate compensation.

With respect to land, the concept of the landless was hardly known. Landlessness was rare in any of the nationalities because anyone was entitled to use the land that was available; and no one would be denied use of land. This is despite that in some communities, groups of elders controlled access to the land which was for communal use. Even where there was a concept of land ownership, those that could be termed landless were allowed access to the land for cultivation and animal grazing. It was more like for each according to their needs and nothing more.

When the British first came to Kenya, they placed the territory under the administration of the British East Africa Company led by Lord Lugard. In 1895 Kenya was declared a British Protectorate following the failure of the British East Africa Company to administer it effectively.

The good weather, fertile soil and rainfall made Kenya attractive to colonialists; we live with the consequences to date.

The late Kenyan president Jomo Kenyatta used to remark that before colonialism we had the land; then the settlers came with the Bible and asked us to pray. We closed our eyes to pray and as we opened them after prayer, we had the Bible in hand, they had the land, and a gun over our heads!

The British take over of Kenya wasn’t without resistance. There is the legendary Waiyaki wa Hinga famed Kikuyu leader that was condemned to death following his leadership in resisting the colonialists. Then there the Maasai Laibon and his warriors that held British incursions for a long time. Koitalel Arap Samoei, led his Nandi people to resist the British putsch. In Kisii the movement called
enyamumbo started in response to the British conquest; it aimed at boycotting British rule and protest against forced labour. In Kisii, a famed warrior named Otenyo speared the local administrator named Northcort after being given medicine that he believed made him immune to gun bullets.

**Colonial Kenya**

In Kenya, like most of their colonies, the British adopted a system that came to be known as “indirect rule” where they co-opted local administrators from the community who then carried out the mission and mandate on behalf of colonialists. Despite being part of the colonial administration, these administrators remained inferior to the British counterparts. That said, however, the system was a very effective way to keep local ethnic groups in check for the oppressor they saw was indeed one of them! It was a divide and rule system, a divide and conquer strategy. Here is a quote on indirect rule:

“Primarily, the British used indirect rule to govern their colonies. This system of governance used indigenous African rulers within the colonial administration, although they often maintained an inferior role. Overall, it was a more cooperative model than direct rule. **Lord Lugard**, a British colonial administrator, used this system of government first in Nigeria and later brought it to British East Africa. This system of government assumed that all Africans were organized as “tribes” with chiefs. However, this was not always the case. [...] people in Africa had diverse types of government ranging from highly centralized states to “stateless societies.” As a result, indirect rule increased divisions between ethnic groups and gave power to certain “big men” who had never had it before in pre-colonial history. Consequences of these significant changes in social organization and identity are still being felt today.”

As said earlier, the fertile land, suitable highland climate and ample rainfall were the major attractions for the colonialists to Kenya. The British paid settlers to come to Kenya to take up what came to be known as “White Highlands”. These were Kenya’s best lands, fertile and blessed with cool weather.

European settlement was confined to the highlands for another reason: this was away from the lowlands where mosquitoes and tsetse flies bred. Thus settlers could be away from malaria and sleeping sickness.

It is estimated that the settlers had acquired more than 75% of the country’s arable land by the 1930s. Remember that only 25% of the country’s land is considered arable. This means that indigenous Kenyans had been pushed to roughly 6% of its land with the rest being arid and the other being in the hands of colonizers.

The highlands offered the best land for cattle ranching, wheat and maize farming, tea and coffee growing; and for the longest time Africans were NOT allowed to grow cash crops in the colonial days, lest they compete with the settler companies or become independent and hence cause the settler farms to miss needed labour.

European infrastructure was designed for the exploitation of the country’s resources. Thus the railway line linking Mombasa to Kisumu was completed in 1908. This snaked through the country side and to the shipping port where resources extracted from the interior were shipped to foreign destinations.

As early as the 1920s Harry Thuku, a famed trade unionist was calling for independence. Demonstrations by indigenous Kenyans were ruthlessly crushed occasioning major fatalities. Land

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2 See [http://exploringafrica.matrix.msu.edu/students/curriculum/m7b/activity2.php](http://exploringafrica.matrix.msu.edu/students/curriculum/m7b/activity2.php)
remained the primary cause of conflict as it does today. In 1928, Jomo Kenyatta was drafted by the
Kikuyu Central Association to make presentations to His Majesty’s government for the return of
appropriated lands. Kenyatta, who would later become the country’s independence prime minister and
president, spent many years in Europe, most of it in London during which he made key petitions on
behalf of local populations for the return of stolen lands.

He would later meet with great Pan Africanists such as Kwame Nkrumah and George Padmore as the
agitation for the return of lands turned into calls for independence.

The coming of World War II was a watershed in African history, Kenya included. It came through
African soldiers drafted to fight on behalf of colonial powers. The war exposed the lies of white
superiority perfected by colonial regimes and the Christian Church. Bildad Kaggia, a Kenyan freedom
fighter who went as a conscript to the war says in his book “Roots of Freedom” that he, for once, noticed
white people bleed and die just like the black soldiers they fought alongside. The white soldiers ailed
and succumbed to disease, as did the black soldiers. World War II removed the veil of lies of
superiority that had been perpetuated by the colonialists. This, in turn, emboldened the campaign for
independence.

The Mau Mau movement was an offshoot of this agitation constituted originally as Kenya Land
Freedom Army (KLFA). The colonial government crackdown and summary execution of captured
fighters was one of the most brutal in guerrilla history. The hanging of Dedan Kimathi, the Mau Mau
leader, offers an example of colonial brutality against Kenyans.

Despite this, Kenyan people continued to strive for independence and when it did come, it was a
negotiated compromise. Here the nationalistic Kenyan African National Union (KANU) reached a
tactical compromise with the settler based Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU). No sooner did
independence come than the reactionary KADU dissolved, swallowed by KANU.

Post-colonial Kenya

In 1963 Kenya became independent amidst pomp celebrations from the coast to the hinterland. The
country was awash with hope that came with the independent sweep across the continent. First there
was Ghana in 1957 followed by Nigeria and there after colonial administrations fell like dominoes. In
East Africa, Kenya’s independence came at heels of that of Tanzania and Uganda in 1961 and 1962,
respectively.

As preparations for independence took place, there was panic among White settlers fearing revenge.
This soon dissipated after Kenyatta, who the colonialists had termed “a leader unto darkness”,
addressed a well-attended White farmers gathering in Nakuru. He asked them to stay. He promised to
forgive and asked all Kenyans to do so. However, he told Kenyans not to forget the injustices of
colonialism.

Kenyans, excited by the opportunities that independence brought, set of with pomp to work. They
heeded Kenyatta’s call for “return to the land” and his promise to eliminate ignorance, poverty and
disease. He spoke about the joy of working the land and that every Kenyan needed to get to work in
order for the nation to prosper. However, some choices made at the time have reverberations to date.

The Issue of Land
If land was a major issue of contention in colonial times, the independence governments have failed to address it fully. Part of the independence settlement provided for funds to buy off white settler farms on a “willing-buyer-willing-seller”. The land thus acquired would be distributed to people displaced by the colonial settlements and the independence struggle thereafter.

In its place, the political elite, led by Kenyatta’s inner circle, took advantage of this arrangement to acquire large tracks of land for themselves. Kenyatta himself grabbed tracks and tracks of land across the country. One famed one that was later renamed Gichecha Farm, spanned several kilometres on either side of the Nakuru-Eldoret Road. One drove through the place seeing tracks and tracks of wheat, ranches and the like.

In the neighbourhood is Daniel Arap Moi in his Kabarak Farm, a story that repeats itself in places like Laikipia, Nyandarua, Molo, Uasin Gishu, Trans Nzoia and many other former White highland farms.

A story is told of Mwalimu Nyerere of Tanzania visiting Jomo Kenyatta in Nakuru. The Kenyan president then took his visitor for a tour of the farm and proudly showed how good a farmer he had become and the large stretch of the land he owned. It is said that the trip ended in a sour note between the two leaders. Mwalimu Nyerere, it is said, remarked sarcastically, about Kenyatta being the president of Kenya, asking what happened to the promise to settle the landless and address the needs of the poor!

Kenyatta is also said to have had contempt for others like the late Bildad Kaggia who stood for fairness and transparency on government matters. The latter had joined the late Jaramogi Oginga Odinga in the opposition to Kenyatta advocating for a socialist state in 1966. Kenyatta contemptuously dismissed Kaggia arguing that Kaggia had nothing to show for himself. This is while fellow independence detainees had amassed huge amounts of wealth in land, urban buildings and transportation. [Note that Kaggia was among the famed Kapenguria Six with Kenyatta, Kungu Karumba, Achieng’ Oneko, Fred Kubai and Paul Ngei.]

Where settlement occurred for the masses, the political leadership’s work meant organizing individuals into groups that then took advantage of the programmes to buy land. The 1960s and 1970s saw the mushrooming of large numbers of land buying companies, many of which served as reservoirs of political support. Many targeted settlements were in the former White Highlands which are mainly in the Rift Valley, and places of some of the recent conflicts3.

This meant that those who knew about the programs benefited. Those that did not know about the programs, never benefited. As well, those whose leadership took no active role in organizing groups never formed such companies and as such never acquired land.

The late Josiah Mwangi Kariuki, who had been in Kenyatta’s inner circle, is said to have remarked once that he didn’t want a country of ten millionaires and ten million beggars. To this he accompanied the action of voluntary subdivision of his land to settle the landless.

3 On the land question it is interesting that a lot of it still remains in the hands of foreign multinationals engaged in agriculture. There are companies like Brook Bond, Tetley and Del Monte that still do large scale farming and own the lands they have farmed since colonial times.
Seen as an affront to the Kenyatta regime, the man was hounded and later murdered. His body was found in Ngong Forest just outside Nairobi! Luckily, no hyena had dared touch it, perhaps an omen as he was a good man!

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Political Leadership and Centralized Administration

In colonial Kenya, there was strong centralized exercise of authority, much of it that had no consent of the governed. If centralized authority with a divide and rule approach was an issue in colonial times, the new rulers did little to make it better. They retained the centralized power and in some cases even centralized it more and did nothing about ethnic divisions. An argument was made that the country, given its ethnic diversity and (sometimes) ethnic animosity needed strong central authority as a unifying force.

The president inherited the powers of the colonial governor intact, complete with an unelected bureaucracy in the form of the provincial administration with direct link to the presidency and hence the term “imperial presidency”.

Kenya won independence under a multiparty constitution with upper and lower houses of parliament, and regional governments called jimbos.

A year later, the country adopted a republican constitution that centralized power under the presidency. The legislature became unicameral.

The opposition voluntarily dissolved itself and the county became a de facto one party state. However, between 1966 and 1969 there was an opposition party by the name Kenya People’s Union (KPU) that was proscribed following chaos in Kisumu after the assassination of the brilliant politician Mboya. Kenya remained a de facto one party state through to 1982 when single party legislation was passed in parliament.

Multiparty democracy agitation reached a crescendo in the late 1980s; in 1991 the single party system act was scrapped in the face of resistance by the Moi regime. Even then, Moi correctly predicted the rise of ethnic tensions as he saw parties develop along ethnic lines.

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Ethnicity

If ethnic divide was an issue in colonial era, the political leadership never crafted a strategy for national unity that would see the birth of a Kenyan nation rather than an amalgamation of ethnicities.

In its place, the leadership reinforced ethnicity and entrenched even more. Prof. Ali Mazrui a prominent Kenyan political scientist working in America, once remarked that Kenya would have become a great country. And that Jomo Kenyatta had the opportunity to make the country great. However, the late president never lived to the occasion.
Here is what I wrote a few days ago on reflecting on issues of ethnicity and its entrenchment in Kenya.

‘Kenyatta was substantially instrumental to this culture of ethnic loyalty and tribalism that resulted.

‘I recall a time when a delegation from my place visited the late president Jomo Kenyatta at State House Nakuru. This was around the time the government was under siege following the murder of the popular Member of Parliament for Nyandarua North, J.M. Kariuki.

‘The delegation, as was tradition, proceeded to pledge the loyalty of the Kisii people to the president and his regime. They also presented the president with a series of requests, including new hospitals, roads, schools and the like.

‘When the president stood up to respond, he paraded the ministers from the community - then it was the late Dr Zachary Onyonka and the late Mr. James Nyamweya. The president went on to remark that these leaders had offices and they should take care of the community! The message should have been: present your demands through your leaders; they will be discussed in cabinet and prioritized based on national needs!

‘Kenyatta, like almost all leaders around him, viewed Kenyans as tribes! It is no wonder we remain so – tribes rather than Kenyans.

Unlike Mwalimu Julius Nyerere of Tanzania who started a lengthy civic education campaign (others called indoctrination!); Kenyans lay back and waited for representatives from their ethnic groups to bring home the beef! And these ethnic leaders knew not how to build bridges to other ethnic groups. In the process, the seeds of ethnic loyalties and bonds were firmly planted later to be watered following Kenyatta’s death.

‘Enter Daniel Arap Moi, a professed Christian and church goer. He came meekly promising to follow the late Kenyatta’s nyayo (footsteps); and nyayo he did follow and with that ethnic discrimination to another level of entrenchment.

‘Under Moi, some corporations were reserved for certain ethnic groups as were some government departments and, in some cases, whole ministries. As an example, the defunct Kenya Posts and Telecommunications Corporation (KPTC) was reserved for the Kalenjin. Delegations after delegations from the Rift Valley that went to see Moi emphasized this point: that the corporation management must never pass to another ethnic group.

‘In the Moi era, schools that enjoyed broad national representation is their student population were directed to take students (not less than 85%) from their localities. This had side effects as kids would be sent to their “home districts” just because their parents were born there! I heard of cases of children born in Trans Nzoia, that had never set foot in (say) Kisii, being sent to be enrolled in schools in Kisii!’

Poverty

At independence the government under Jomo Kenyatta, promised to tackle ignorance, disease and poverty. And in the decades that followed independence, there were substantial achievements in education with government funded support; leaps in health care with results showing increased life

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expectancy and reduction in poverty levels as the economy did fairly well: what with favourable coffee and tea prices globally; moreover, the Kenyan legendary safaris attracted tourists in record numbers.

As early as the 1970s the literacy rate had climbed to near 77%! Life expectancy showed good signs and reached close to 60 years from an abysmal mid-40s during the colonial times.

These gains could be nearly wiped in the 1980s with the embrace of poisonous and retrogressive IMF and World Bank policies.

In the 1980s through 1990s, the Kenyan government under Daniel Arap Moi, was a good student of the international Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank. Today the Kenyan nation is paying dearly for the misguided policies from these western-based “lords of poverty”.

Among harmful measures were forced currency devaluations when world agricultural commodity prices were declining (this saw the near-death of the coffee industry); cost-sharing where government withdraws from financing social programs like education and health care, among others.

Devalued currencies never spurred exports as we were told! No! World consumption of exports like coffee and tea hardly increase by leaps and bounds. And in the 1980s/90s, the prices of these commodities declined substantially in part because powerful consumer cartels dictated prices.

In health care, people couldn’t afford even basic consultation fees and ended up either dying or coming to hospital when they were chronically ill! People died from preventable illnesses as they could not afford even consultation fees! Life expectancy that had risen to mid-fifties tumbled down into the forties! In effect it became a more costly exercise than before and we were headed for the dark ages.

In education, school enrollment dropped substantially. Some estimates put primary enrollment in the mid-90% before structural adjustment reforms, which dropped to mid-70% as a result of cost-sharing. It means a whopping 20% of eligible primary schoolers could not attend school! They are now adults and may have not got meaningful employable skills. Given the correlation between crime and education attainment, it is possible that the education cost-sharing policy indirectly contributed to the increased crime levels in the country.

In 2002 with the newly-elected Kibaki administration, more than 1 million kids enrolled in school when primary school fees were scrapped.

It came too late for many!

Corruption

Corruption remains a major culprit in Kenya. It is entrenched and people take it for granted as the cost of doing business. It is interesting that people that have been involved in massive corruption scandals continue to be elected to public office.

How did corruption come to be? A story is told (not confirmed whether true or not) of a minister in Kenyatta’s government that used to seek 10% of a project value in order to provide approval for submitted project proposals. The president is said to have had a whiff of this and promptly called the minister to his office. After berating him and lambasting him for setting poor precedent, the president
asked the minister to explain what happened; moreover, he wanted to know what the minister done with all the money from the 10% bribes.

The minister is said to have indicated that he had invested the money well and that his investments provided security for his family and employment for people that now worked on some of his investments.

Perhaps “impressed” by the “ingenuity” of this minister, the president let him go. Kenyatta, it is said, never asked him to stop what he was doing. Perhaps, grudgingly, he was admiring what the person was doing: acquiring wealth for God’s sake! And providing employment to boot!

Today corruption is grand with scandals in names like Goldenberg, Anglo Leasing and more. And songs are sung about Kenya being a land of corruption where, in some cases, people ask for *kitu yote* (everything) in place of *kitu kidogo* (something small).

It is worth noting that the Kibaki administration promised transparency in its dealings, starting with the wealth declaration by public officials. This task was assigned John Githongo, who came to be known as the government’s corruption Czar. He would later quit in a huff, frustrated by the lack of commitment by government to fight corruption. Githongo has testified how many ministers in government cautioned him to go slow on targeting people involved in government’s worst scandal that came to be known as Anglo Leasing after the infamous name of the company that was behind the scheme.

### Pre-election Agitation & Subsequent Conflict

In 2002 Mwai Kibaki was swept to power at the head of what was called the National Rainbow Coalition, NARC. The party was born out of a union of two forces: the National Alliance Party of Kenya (which had been in opposition in Moi’s time) and the Liberal Party (composed of a section that differed with Moi on his choice of a KANU presidential candidate). The deal to form NARC was sealed in a (now infamous) Memorandum of Understanding (MOU).

Differences emerged once the government was in place with the Liberal Party wing of NARC accusing the president of reneging on the MOU. These differences culminated in the defeat of the government in the constitutional referendum in 2005. A number of ministers, including recent presidential candidates opposed the government in that referendum. Subsequently, they lost their ministerial appointments following the formation of “Government of National Unity” that drew from opposition benches. On the other hand, the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) was born, adopting the name from the symbol used in the referendum.

The political pitch since the referendum harped on ethnic interests that targeted the government dominated people from the Mt. Kenya region, commonly termed the Mt. Kenya Mafia. The Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) evolved into a political party that grouped interests opposed to the government.

The lead up to the elections saw Kenyans line up along ethnic groups. Raila Odinga’s ODM put together a formidable party and movement under what some termed the “Western Alliance” with
massive support in Nyanza, Western and Rift Valley provinces. ODM also had substantial support at the Coast and in Nairobi.

On the other hand, support for Mwai Kibaki’s PNU was largely centred in Central and Eastern provinces with competitive support in Nairobi and Coast provinces.

These alignments along ethnic lines, along with the debate over Majimbo, a form of federalism, attested to the ethnic nature of Kenyan politics. This has been affirmed by many acts that followed the announcement of election results. Perhaps the most glaring examples of these are the ethnic cleansing in the Rift Valley that targeted so called “foreigners”, mainly Kikuyus and Kisiis. In Luo Nyanza Kikuyus and Kisiis were targeted. In Nairobi slums there were inter-ethnic conflicts, mainly pitting the Luo against the Kikuyu. Subsequent clashes, seen in some quarters as retaliatory, in Naivasha and Nakuru also took similar lines. In Kericho where a lot of Kisiis have lived (harmoniously) and worked for a long time, were targeted and evicted, a situation exacerbated by the cold-blooded murder of the MP for Ainamoi in Kericho in the hands of a policeman originally from Kisii; the police termed the murder a crime of passion, even as politicians saw it as political.

Ethnic polarization can also be seen in the media, including newspapers, radio and the Internet. The degree of polarization on the Internet is even more baffling considering that many participants on the Net live, school and work in the Diaspora. That they remain so ethnically inclined makes a sorry state of people that have been exposed to diverse global cultures, systems and democratic societies. It goes to underline the saying that “one can take a man out of a tribe but fail to take the tribe out of the man”.

In a recent article in the Sunday Nation, veteran journalist Philip Ochieng’ marveled at the ethnically partisan nature of debates, even for people with academic achievements. Many of these, Ochieng’ lamented, were quick to condemn reprehensible acts perpetrated by people of other ethnic groups. However, they were not willing to do the same when the perpetrator was one from their ethnicity!

If I could summarize: the clashes happened because of pent up emotions, the need for change and the harped state of ethnicity. This is not only because the people are not happy with the current regime but also the system that perpetuates the current condition. The underlying causes of discontent include pervasive poverty, lack of national cohesion, political corruption and lack of leadership with a vision of building a Kenyan state as opposed to strengthening ethnic nationalism.

The opposition had promised change and identified “the enemy” to be those ethnic groups allied with the president and “his people”, the Kikuyu. It is not surprising that these ethnic groups became targets of and bore the brunt of the post-election violence.

The way forward

What I present here are only ideas on the way forward; I cannot claim to have done justice to the topic in the remaining few minutes of this lecture. However, this synopsis can give you an idea of the options the country should consider.

Grand Coalition
The peace pact must hold lest we degenerate to the chaos that followed the elections debacle. In 1963 the opposition joined the government and thus blunted the agitation for the ethnically demarcated majimbo. In 2002 the NARC coalition won because of its broad national representation. Going by the close presidential vote, neither PNU nor ODM have a majority of the country behind them. They need each other to make any progress in the country.

The Grand Coalition MUST work.

Truth-telling and restitution

There is a need for truth telling for people to understand what happened and its root cause. There is a Kiswahili saying that asiyekujua hakudhamani – he who does not know you will not value you. Kenyans need to know who they are better; they need understand each other; they need to trace the origins of the cause of the problems and acknowledge mistakes of the past; culprits seek forgiveness. And only in an atmosphere of appreciation of the country’s potential, the high stakes of the chaos and most importantly how collective will is needed for national survival.

Ethnicity

Kenya should declare an all-out war on negative ethnicity otherwise known as tribalism. In my view ethnicity should be relegated to culture rather than be used for political arbitration. We need to go back to and implement the unitary vision of the Kenyan state that we had at independence. A new leadership needs to emerge with a national vision of one Kenya, as opposed to a multiplicity of ethnic groups. That said, the country should explore the possibility of legislation that compels compliance to diverse representation in all public institutions and organs of government. Such legislation would require people with public authority to ensure there is national representation in the public entities they manage. The legislation would also punish those who discriminate others based on ethnic origins.

There is also a need for better understanding and communication of Kenyan problems. Indeed, as much as ethnicity is part of the equation, most problems are mainly to do with poverty and the gap between the rich and the poor and perhaps less to do with ethnic polarization. This is because a person of Luo origin in the slums lives the same life experiences as those of Kikuyu, Kisii, Embu, Meru, etc origin in the same circumstances.

Think about this: while the poor people were fighting in the slums and poor areas of the country, Kenyan MPs were being sworn in, peacefully, in parliament. The MPs, part of the elite class, were “fighting” with words and not guns and machetes! There is a need for a class analysis and a class perspective that Kenyans understand.

Moreover, Kenyans need to put things in perspective. The Kiswahili saying that wapiganapo tembo nyasi huumia, meaning that it is the grass that surfers when two elephants/bulls fight should be in all Kenyans’ waking moments. Kenyans, especially the poor, need to understand that they do not need to be pawns the chess game game ofthe fight for political power.

Government policies (as in the case of education) can help with eventual integration. As an example, we need to reverse Moi’s policy that compels the selection of 85% of high school candidates from the school’s locality. The ratios, in my view, should be reversed. That way we can realize greater understanding through elevated interaction.
Constitutional & Government Reforms

There is need for comprehensive reforms that devolves government power to the grassroots. In fact, one such instrument of devolution has had substantial impact on development at the grassroots. Examples include empowering local authorities and urban government to elect their representatives more democratically while making development choices based on their taxes.

Reforms must also include the rights of Kenyans as Kenyans, not as tribes or groups. The unitary state model where any Kenyan could live, work and own property anywhere must hold.

Reforms must also target the multiparty system of elections. It is important to ask whether this is the right model for an ethnically polarized nation, a situation worsened by the winner-take-all where whole regions ethnicities can find themselves out of government. At times, I tend to agree with Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni when he dismisses multiparty system as unsuitable for Africa. Yet, in its place, there is no clear system that can support democracy. Given the gap and challenges Africans face, I would lean towards a hybrid of multiparty system, with proportional representation and guarantees on diverse representation in public institutions. This may be the most progressive resolution and may help us build stronger states.

It is not simply political power that should be devolved. There is a need for economic devolution. The Constituency Development Fund (CDF) is perhaps the most democratic instrument of spending seen in the country since independence. This fund, which allocated to each constituency and to be used for local priorities, has transformed the rural landscape in the country. Despite the challenges of corruption and excessive control by MPs, the kinks in the system can be ironed out. The government should consider increasing the budgetary allocation for this fund.

Corruption

As part of truth telling, Kenyans need restitution. Those that stole public wealth should be encouraged to return it provided they acknowledge and seek forgiveness from prosecution. A good first step would be the Kroll Report to which Moi and company would be asked to return the wealth they stole from Kenyans. Others involved from other scandals should do likewise.

Beyond restitution the country should enforce existing laws against corrupt public office holders. The office of the Corruption Czar (CDF) is perhaps the most democratic instrument of spending seen in the country since independence. This fund, which allocated to each constituency and to be used for local priorities, has transformed the rural landscape in the country. Despite the challenges of corruption and excessive control by MPs, the kinks in the system can be ironed out. The government should consider increasing the budgetary allocation for this fund.

Land Reforms

Land is central to conflict; it needs addressed urgently. Specifically, focus should be placed on idle land, placing a ceiling on land holdings (especially for foreign companies and non-Kenya residents) and availing it for use by others. Land is a national resource and should be used for national good; owners of idle land should allow its use for production under acceptable terms. Moreover, the government should explore schemes to support owners of idle land, that may not be able to develop the land on their own, to acquire the means to put it in meaningful productive use. As well, any land allocation should be based on need and target the most needy, the landless. This would ensure that those that we do not have a repeat of what happened following independence in the Kenyatta era.
Along with this should be minimum size of land for farming purposes. The continued subdivision of land (based on traditional inheritance practices) cannot be sustained. This is because smaller units are inefficient and have no economies of scale.

Land reforms, however, should not lead to anyone's eviction or cleansing. An individual should be free to own land and live wherever they choose in the country. I strongly stand for Kenyans living anywhere they choose to live in the republic. In this respect, there is a need for expedited settlement of the people displaced during the clashes and their protection thereafter to guarantee safety. As well, perpetrators of ethnic cleansing should be brought to swift justice to deter similar future action and ensure the rights of Kenyans are respected no matter which ethnic groups they come from.

Further, there is a need to remove the high level of dependence on the land. Kenya should learn from countries like Canada and Japan where a minority of their population derives livelihood from the land. The need for economic diversification with (say) processing, manufacturing, services, etc. has never been greater!

**Addressing Poverty**

Since poverty is a major cause of conflict, there is a need for massive investment in the country to provide jobs for the masses of the unemployed. Once employed productively they may worry less about killing their neighbours when politicians differ. Indeed, as was seen from the chaos, there were very few clashes in middle and upper class neighbourhoods. Yet the poor were killing each other like hunted prey.

Investment must necessarily focus in other areas of a modern economy: manufacturing, processing, finance, ICTs, infrastructure and the like and take away the central role of land. Kenya needs the equivalent of a Marshal Plan that would make use of the huge pools of (currently) idle labour. Development of alternative sources of income, other than from land, would ease the pressure on land and thus reduce clamour for land.

The country has an emerging microfinance sector that promises to transform rural poverty. More resources and efforts should be directed towards the effectiveness of this sector. Key among these is the creation of business incubation services targeted at rural Kenyans to help elevate their production (and productivity thereof) and marketing their goods and services.

For many years, government have harped on industrialization to achieve economic diversification; it is about time that this dream was realized. In the world where there is competition for investment capital, the country needs to play the game that would attract investment as a means of poverty reduction.

**Education**

Kenya needs to learn from India in order to lay the foundation for a future modern state. India’s network of Institutes of Technology (IITs) and Institutes of Business (IIBs) are largely responsible for that country’s economic resurgence. The orientation of Kenya’s education remains the creation of workers, as opposed to entrepreneurs.

The nation’s education system needs to be revisited and redesigned for the modern economic times.

**International Trade and the Community**
One way the international community can help the country is through fair trade. Like most African countries, access to and being competitive in global markets is hampered by trade barriers and subsidies in (especially) western nations. Lowering trade barriers, removing subsidies and the like would be much better help for countries such as Kenya than donations and the discredited aid industry. Countries like Kenya need fair trade and price for their products such as coffee, tea and others that seem to make more money for middlemen than for the farmers and primary producers.

Leadership

None of the suggestions for the way forward can be realized without leadership. The country needs fresh leadership that has a global view of things. Quite frankly the people in power today have stayed so long even their brains have become stale. They know no other way of leading other than how they have led in the past. Yet that leadership has left us in the quagmire we find ourselves in. They must vacate the scene and allow for new leadership and new ideas to emerge. However, we also know that no person or groups of people or class gives up power voluntarily. They must be forced out along with their old ethnic thinking and make way for a new dispensation suitable for the 21st century.

Conclusion

Let me finish by saying this: the Kenyan problem is complex; those calling it ethnic strife have a partially right answer. The problems pertain to poverty, land, lack of leadership and the like. The problems should be seen in that context and these will not be over in the next short while. A long term strategy is required, under visionary leadership that would take the country to the next level.

Thank you for your patience and God bless you all.

I will now take your questions.

References


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i See World Culture Encyclopaedia at [www.everyculture.com](http://www.everyculture.com) and search for term “Kikuyu”