

# Understanding Kenya's Violence

*By David Zarembka*

**It's hard to fathom how a rigged election could produce such violence from the youth and such retaliation by the police as occurred after the December 30 voting results were announced in Kenya. Unfortunately, it didn't come as a surprise to me or some others living in the region.**

Some brief historical background may help explain why Kenya has seemed to suddenly erupt into ethnic violence after President Mwai Kibaki was sworn into office following disputed elections. The Kenyan government has estimated that about 500 people have been killed; more than half being youth shot by the police. It is likely that this number of deaths is underreported and will keep climbing. Post-election violence has pitted the Kikuyu ethnic group, whose members support the incumbent Kibaki, against the Luo, (who are in the ethnic group of the opposition presidential candidate Raila Odinga), the Luhya, the Kalenjin and other ethnic groups.

## **British Rule, Kikuyu Functionaries**

The genesis of the current situation has its origin in British colonialism during the early 20th century. The nature of their colonial model was total control from a strong center. The number of British settlers was disproportionately small yet they controlled large estates. To run these estates and enjoy the comfortable life they desired the British needed lots of labor: the cheaper the better. Therefore, the colonial government levied a tax on each adult male forcing him to work six months a year just to pay the tax, which was then used for the benefit of the settlers. The settlers were harsh and cruel to their African laborers.

The "tribe" that was most affected by British rule was the Kikuyu; mainly because they lived on very fertile soil in a small area on Mount Kenya. They

were quickly forced from their small plots of land by the colonialists. Consequently many were forced to work on the settlers' estates. The Kikuyu are known for being very industrious, hard-working people who were quick to see the benefits of education. Many of them became the low-level government functionaries needed by British colonial authorities.

## **Mau Mau Rebellion**

During World War II, many young Kenyan men were drafted into the British army and served across the globe. Their eyes were opened by what they saw and when they returned to Kenya after the war, they were given the same menial, low-paying dead-end work. By the early 1950s their dissatisfaction gave rise to a protest movement called the "Mau Mau rebellion."

The Mau Mau movement was mostly among Kikuyu. They forced people to take an oath to oppose British rule. Perhaps 90 percent of the Kikuyu in Central Province took the oath: willingly and unwillingly. The remaining 10 percent were loyalists who worked for the colonial government. While Jomo Kenyatta, who later became president, was originally jailed as a Mau Mau leader, it was soon realized that he was really a loyalist. Jomo's son, Peter Kenyatta, with his father's blessing, was one of the leaders of the loyalists. Kenyatta was soon separated from the other Mau Mau leaders.

Suppression of the Mau Mau was extremely brutal. A larger percentage of the Kikuyu in Central Province died during the suppression of Mau Mau in the 1950s than Rwandans perished during the 1994

Rwandan genocide. Torture was prevalent. Women and children were put into concentration camps with little food or medical care: as a result a large number of them died. No one should be under the illusion that the British were "better" colonialists than the Germans or Belgians. The technique the British used here was to deny everything with massive cover-ups and much of this history is only now being uncovered.

During this same time, the British implemented land consolidation in Central Province. The result was that the loyalists received nice, large land holdings at the expense of the Mau Mau people who were in jail. When the Mau Mau rebels were released, they returned to find that their land had been reduced to small parcels insufficient to support their families. They were forced to either work for the Kikuyu loyalists or to emigrate to less populated areas of Kenya: many went to Rift Valley Province.

## **Matatu Conductors**

Some of the most successful loyalists went into business, using dispossessed Kikuyu to perform the needed labor. In small towns and villages Kikuyu often replaced Indian shopkeepers. Many more became the conductors and drivers of the *matatus* (mini-buses) that dominate Kenya land travel. By now some of these business owners have become tycoons.

At the time of independence in 1963 the British handed control of the government to their loyalist supporters. The Kikuyu business tycoons and the Kikuyu political establishment had formed strong bonds during Jomo Kenyatta's presidency. When Kenyatta died, Daniel arap Moi, a Kalenjin, took over the presidency and quickly made a deal with the Kikuyu establishment: he would not bother their businesses and they let him on the Kenyan gravy

train – which included pervasive corruption and looting of government funds. Kibaki, the most recent president of Kenya was at one time part of both the Kenyatta and Moi governments.

### **No Moi Joy**

When the Kenyan people, including the Kikuyu elite, tired of Moi, they tried to replace him. In 1992 and 1997, Moi divided and conquered the opposition. One of the techniques Moi used was to promote violence in his homeland of Rift Valley. In 1992, perhaps 1,000 Luo, Luhya, and Kikuyu were killed by the Kalenjins and more than 100,000 became homeless. As happened under British rule, Moi's regime closed the Rift Valley province to everyone and little is known of the details. When it was over, the situation remained tense.

In 2002, Moi was too old for another term and he selected Kenyatta's son, Uhuru Kenyatta, to run for the presidency. The opposition, united under Kibaki, soundly defeated Uhuru Kenyatta. At this point Kibaki had the opportunity to unite all Kenyans as a real nation. Instead he quickly abandoned the non-Kikuyu who had helped him into office. A group of Kikuyu politicians and businessmen became the controlling clique.

### **Orange Democratic Movement**

In 2007 members of the Luo, Luhya, and Kalenjin ethnic groups who felt betrayed by Kibaki, joined together in the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) to oppose Kibaki. Stephen Kalonzo Musyoka, a former foreign minister and a member of the Kamba tribe, stayed out of this coalition and formed his own party, ODM-Kenya.

To summarize, since independence the Kikuyu have directly or indirectly controlled the Government and dominated the Kenyan business community. They have kept and promoted the centralized system

of government handed to them in December 1963 when British rule ended. Under this governing model, the president is all-powerful: controlling the executive, legislative and judicial branches of Government through a hybrid presidential/parliamentary system.

The 2007 election campaign revolved around “devolvement” meaning decentralizing. Naturally, Kibaki and the Kikuyu people opposed this since it would mean giving up their power.

### **Payback Time**

There are 80,000 *matatu* mini-buses on Kenyan roads, most of which are owned and operated by Kikuyu. I spend a lot of time in *matatus* and have ample opportunity to analyze the business. The conductor rents the vehicle, including a driver, for the day and keeps whatever is left after expenses. So the conductor feels compelled to push and push to make sure that he does not lose money. The conductor often tries to increase the price of the ride, stuffs more people into the vehicle, and drives faster.

This leads to amazing antagonism between conductors and passengers. There is no customer service, just customer disservice. The riders continually believe that they are being taken advantage of and abused. This happens almost every time one gets into a *matatu*.

So, unfortunately, the current wave of violence is seen by many Kenyans as payback time. Those at the bottom are taking it out on those whom they perceive are on top. They have no contact with Kikuyu tycoons and politicians so they are taking out

the pent-up rage of 44 years of economic oppression on average Kikuyu in their community. The Kikuyu are then retaliating by killing other ethnic groups that happen to live in their communities. This also explains why Kibaki (read the Kikuyu elite) wished to stay in power to the extent of rigging the election: they would lose control and thereby their status.

At stake here is whether the status quo, with the Kikuyu on top, will prevail or if the essential nature of the Kenyan government will change so that everyone gets a fair share. Should the latter scenario take root, it would remain to be seen whether the Kikuyu would be allowed their fair share or be punished.

### **Plenty of Tinder**

Changing demographics also helps explain Kenya's predicament. Due to the large population increase in recent decades, there are large numbers of youth with few jobs and nothing to do, and who are therefore alienated from Kenyan society. These are the shock troops of the rioters and looters. They see no future so they can easily turn to violence.

Clearly there was plenty of tinder. The spark was the announcement that Kibaki “won” what everyone in western Kenya considers a rigged election. The youth waited until the result was announced on the radio and then immediately attacked *matatus*, and Kikuyu shops and homes.

From this analysis it is clear that while some kind of political accommodation at the top is only a necessary first step and that a complete restructuring of Kenyan society will be needed if the next, likely more violent, cycle of unrest will not occur in a few years. Those who have been excluded from the prosperity of the society need to be included. This is only going to happen when the elites show concern for the average person and share power and resources with them.