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It is Poverty and the Police, Not Ethnicity, Behind the Violence in Kenya

Police and Paid Gangs Riot in Kenya

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*The driving force of the election violence in Kenya is not tribalism, but poverty. The police have also done a good part of the killing.*

Kenya has teetered on the brink of disaster since Mwai Kibaki was sworn-in as president on 30 December 2007. Since then, about 500 people have died and more than 250,000 have fled their homes due to ongoing violence and widespread arson.

Prominent news sources, including Canada's *National Post* and the *Washington Post*, have gone little further than to say that the ongoing election violence in Kenya is caused by "tribalism." The "tribalism" analysis conflates the *weapon* that has been used in these skirmishes with the *motives* of the persons wielding it. As poverty motivated many people to vote as a mean to make change, it also made some people vulnerable to manipulation through bribes and racist political rhetoric. Tribalism was the *weapon* of division and diversion. But the desperate attempt to rise from poverty was the *motive* of many of those involved in the killings and arson attacks.

Poverty in Kenya is no small problem. Kenya has been ranked the world's third most unequal society. In a country where up to a quarter of children are malnourished, and where the majority live on less than one US dollar a day, Parliamentarians earn US\$16,000 *a month*.

International election observers described as "irregular" the tallying of votes for the presidential election. Kenyan observers went further to conclude that the president's win was "illegitimate." The apparent rigging led to widespread protest and the outbreak of alarming levels of violence. A stalemate between Kibaki and Raila Odinga, the likely true winner of the December poll, has led the European Union to suspend aid to Kenya.

But was the violence a result of long-simmering tribal animosity? Considering that police last week admitted killing at least 82 persons, and that paid mercenaries carried out an unknown number of further killings, the "tribalism" explanation seems not to hold much water.

The earliest deaths were in Kisumu, and were caused by police who shot at marchers, killing a total of 44, including children, within the first days of unrest. Most of those killed in this hometown of the Luo presidential hopeful, Raila Odinga, were Luos. Tellingly, the Kisumu killings were not the result of "tribal animosity." They were the result of police brutality.

Since December 31<sup>st</sup>, police have killed again in Kisumu, as well as in Nairobi, Mombasa and smaller centres around the country, wherever protests have taken place.

In addition to police brutality, evidence of mercenary gangs has emerged. Eye witnesses who described the violence around much of the country said that attacks were perpetrated by highly organized armed gangs. Not spontaneous eruptions of violence from below, but planned attacks. Elders in Mombasa claimed that youth were paid to cause chaos and destruction at the coast. Residents of Malindi, north of Mombasa, accused the officer in charge of the Malindi police station of organising and sponsoring an armed, clandestine group which had terrorized townspeople perceived to be supporters of Raila Odinga. The BBC reported that youth in Nairobi were paid US\$14 for each person killed and US\$7 for each house torched. In carrying out this “work,” these mercenaries were directed to target people of particular tribes.

Mercenaries such as these, reminiscent of Kenyan politicians’ private militias of the 1990s, were likely to have been responsible for the razing of neighbourhoods in the post-election period. They may also have been responsible for the more gruesome of the murders, such as the decapitations and the burning alive of 50 Kikuyu women and children in an Eldoret church on New Year’s Day.

The operations of the police and the mercenaries not only punished citizens and voters in targeted areas, but also confused and completely occupied the minds and energies of the entire population with the ensuing terror. Retaliatory attacks by members of the targeted communities continued the downward spiral. The disaster has channeled many Kenyans’ attentions away from the serious matter of the stolen election.

There is yet another reason to doubt that the violence hitting Kenya for the last two weeks is tribal in origin. In the hours before the presidential results were announced, as riots and arson began to grip the country, one Kenyan voter commented:

We were tribe-less on that early morning queue on voting day. We all braved the chill to stand up and be counted in a major historic event. We met in the queue — strangers from different parts of this nation. For over five hours, while moving along slowly and in orderly and patient manner, we became friends of the moment, chatting and joking among ourselves about this and that. The discussions were wide and vast, bordering on family, careers and other life issues. We laughed as we waited. We knew why we were there, surprisingly none of us got into the nitty-gritty of the political tempo that was the undeniable reason for our meeting.

Do people who stand in line for five hours, peacefully chatting and avoiding political talk, suddenly erupt into violence against the same people with whom they had stood in line all day?

While Raila Odinga and Mwai Kibaki trade barbs and continue to fail to come to a negotiated settlement, the gang and police violence continues. The politicians have left it to the citizens to find the way towards peace.

In Kibera, a Nairobi slum hard hit by post-election violence, 200 women across ethnic and party lines have joined together in a campaign to restore peace to their area. With the support of the District Officer, Mr Kepha Maribe, the women's group plans to march through Kibera wearing matching outfits branded with messages of reconciliation.

Kibera women are not taking lightly the involvement of police in the violence that has wracked their neighbourhood for weeks. They accused police of indiscriminately tear gassing residents while searching for "troublemakers."

Seventy-year old Trufosa Aleyo asked, "They [police] know that the youths are now not in the houses. Why are they throwing tear gas canisters into the houses where we have our toddlers?"

Not surprisingly it is the mothers, not the politicians, who are leading the way back to peaceful co-existence in Kenya.

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Go to You Tube and view the 3 minute long video showing a Kenyan voting queue on 27 December 2007. The length of the line is incredible. But what is even more telling is the mood and spirit of those thousands who made up the queue. Do these calm and confident citizens look like they are simply keeping a lid on tribal tensions that were set to boil over if the "right" candidate didn't win?

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1jvuuxzLISg>