

December 29, 2007

Kenya Erupts in Violence as Rivals Declare Victory

By [JEFFREY GETTLEMAN](#)

NAIROBI, Kenya — With the results from Kenya's closely contested elections still up in the air, riots erupted across the country on Saturday.

Columns of black smoke boiled up from the slums ringing Nairobi, the capital, as supporters of Raila Odinga, the leading presidential challenger, poured into the streets to protest what they said was a plot by the government to steal the election.

The demonstrators clashed with police in riot gear and tore apart metal shanties with their bare hands. The scene replayed itself in Kisumu, Kakamega, Kajiado, Eldoret and other towns across Kenya, mainly in strongholds of Mr. Odinga.

Just 12 hours before, Mr. Odinga, a flamboyant politician and businessman, had been cruising to victory, leading Kenya's incumbent president, [Mwai Kibaki](#), by about one million votes in an election that was predicted to be the most fiercely fought in Kenya's history and perhaps the greatest test yet of this young, multiparty democracy. But that lead vanished overnight.

On Saturday morning, the gap had been cut to about 100,000 votes, with Mr. Odinga still ahead, but barely, with 47 percent of the vote compared with 46 percent for Mr. Kibaki.

Mr. Kibaki's party said it had simply gained many votes from areas where the president enjoyed strong support.

But the sudden reversal immediately ignited suspicions, especially after results showed that many parliament members close to the president — including the vice president, the defense minister, the foreign minister and more than 10 other cabinet members — were voted out of office in a wave of seeming dissatisfaction with the government.

Kenya is one of the most developed and stable countries in Africa but this election has exposed its ugly tribal underbelly. Mr. Odinga is a Luo, a big tribe in Kenya that feels marginalized from the country's Kikuyu elite that has dominated business and politics since independence in 1963.

Mr. Kibaki is a Kikuyu, and the voting so far has split straight down tribal lines with each candidate winning big in his tribal homeland.

On Saturday, the first signs of a tribal war flared up in Nairobi with Luo gangs sweeping into a shantytown called Mathare and stoning several Kikuyu residents. In Kibera, another huge slum, supporters of Mr. Odinga burned down kiosks that they said belonged to Kikuyu businessmen.

“No Raila, no Kenya!” they screamed with the fires crackling behind them.

The streets were a collage of destruction, strewn with burning tires, broken bottles, fist-sized rocks and fresh shell casings from riot police who fired in the air to scare the demonstrators off. Some men sharpened machetes on the asphalt, vowing to shed blood should Mr. Odinga lose.

Kikuyus responded by forming packs of vigilantes to patrol their neighborhoods. As night neared, the gangs waited on corners, armed with machetes and lengths of wood.

Many residents seemed distressed about what was happening. In Kibera, one man in a suit guided a young girl, her face a mask of panic, through the embers of burning tires.

“Unless they announce the winner soon,” said Lionel Joseph Ochieng, another Kibera resident, “this will only get worse.”

Election officials seem to feel the clock ticking. They say they are trying to count the votes as quickly as possible but have been hampered by logistical problems and a record turnout, possibly upwards of 70 percent.

Both political parties declared victory on Saturday, saying that by their calculations they had won the most votes. But by 1 p.m. on Saturday, the election commission had counted only 8 million votes out of a projected 10 million to 11 million, and the hush inside the heavily-guarded election headquarters was a marked contrast to the raging street battles not far away.

Michael E. Ranneberger, the American ambassador to Kenya, said that difficulties had arisen during the counting process but he urged voters to remain calm. “This is a time for Kenyans to come together,” Mr. Ranneberger said.

The scenario that may be unfolding is the exact one that many foreign diplomats were dreading: a razor thin margin for the president, who had been trailing in just about every pre-election poll.

It is not that Mr. Kibaki, 76, is so disliked himself. He has been in government since independence and is known as a courtly gentleman and economics whiz. But he is seen by many Kenyans as a continuation of an unfair political system that has favored the Kikuyu at the expense of Kenya's 30-plus other ethnic groups.

Mr. Odinga, 62, has been successful in tapping into these frustrations and building a coalition of many other tribes.

Mr. Odinga's team has accused the president's party of withholding votes from its strongholds and then pumping up the numbers at the last minute to swing the election. The president's team denies this and has accused Mr. Odinga's party of using children to cast votes.

The election commission said it planned to release final results on Saturday night.

Copyright 2007 The New York Times Company