

The struggle for Kenya's future (2008)

by

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KENYA

The struggle for Kenya's future

It's class and an unresolved colonial legacy that are tearing Kenya apart argues Shiraz Durrani

The elections and subsequent events in Kenya in December 2007 raise important questions about the reasons for the current instability and about the very future of the country. The reality is sometimes seen from Western, strategic perspective or from the point of view of business opportunities. However, a few serious studies see the events as a way of addressing historical injustice so as to ensure the growth of a society based on principles of social, economic and political justice.

The significance of the events in Kenya goes beyond its national boundaries. There are lessons here that are equally relevant in South Africa and Zimbabwe, among other countries. The unfinished work of liberation that education has been pushed out of the picture by means of a strategy of growth with high rise buildings housing transnationals and their local allies as evidence of development. But the reality for the majority of people has remained out of the picture – and now that it has been forcefully brought to the centre stage. The stability that was Kenya was a stability for a small minority to become richer still, while the conditions of the majority of people changed little from colonial days.

It is entirely appropriate to consider the wide-scale deaths, destruction of property and internal exodus of the people in many parts of the country. Efforts need to be made to return to some form of normality as soon as possible. But this cannot be achieved without addressing the underlying problems that were created by colonisation and subsequently exacerbated by the colonial nightmare for independence in Kenya as well as in many other African countries.

Historical perspective

A historical perspective on the situation can provide a better understanding of the reality in Kenya today. A good starting point to understand Kenya is to

look at the motivation and aims of the Mau Mau liberation movement that fought for independence in 1950s and 60s. This is set out in an important policy document widely distributed by progressive forces in December 1961, entitled 'The struggle for Kenya's future', it set out what Kenya needed – and still needs.

Let us, in short, create a new society which allows to each the right to eat, the right to the products of their labour, the right to shelter, housing, and educate their children, the right, in short, to live in dignity amongst equals. In a socialist society we should be struggling to build, a system which, while capitalism, continues to exist with the welfare of the masses rather than with the profits and privileges of a few. (Barnett, 1971)

'The largest landowners in Kenya today are the families of the only three presidents the country has had since independence...'

This search for a new society has continued ever since. (Waweru (2001) shared a similar comment.

For over twenty years, we Kenyans have seen our land and independence mortgaged to foreign interest by the KANU regime under cynical 'philosophies' of 'Blackman and Nyaponi' – the basic means of production, distribution and exchange are owned by imperialist foreigners and transnational corporations... the ruling comprador class acts as an obstacle, impeding the outflow of wealth into Western capitals. Kenya has therefore been turned into a business paradise for foreigners, transnationals and a few rich Kenyans... corruption on a massive scale has seen the national coffers looted. The food production land is owned by private landlords – a few rich Kenyans, individual foreigners and transnational corporations... a large section of Kenyan people live under the most deplorable

conditions deprived of food, clothing and shelter – the gap between the rich and the poor is one of the widest in the world.

McDonal (2008) brings the situation up to date.

More than 60 million people live in Kenya today, a high proportion of them concentrated on the high Central Highlands, Rift Valley and western Kenya. The demand for land has grown because of the scarcity of good jobs. The majority of Kenyans are... scraping a living from the soil. Almost 80% of Kenyans live on less than a dollar a day.

It is the search for a new society that has been the backbone to events in Kenya since independence in 1963. The history of post-independence Kenya has been a struggle between those who sought to create a new society and successive KANU governments which saw independence as an opportunity for searching a new ally to replace the previous colonial ally. They consistently ignored key issues that had made people take up arms under colonialist land and freedom.

There has been consistent opposition underground as well as over ground throughout the post-independence period. For strategic and economic reasons, USA and Britain have supported the Kenyatta and Moi regimes, thus providing them with funds that struggle for change. We had to make changes in the constitution in the early 1980s, as a result of the concerted efforts by Kenyans internally and among the equally opposing Diaspora. This led to Kibaki coming to power. But this change remained largely cosmetic. This was a situation with which the West was happy as it did not fundamentally disturb the setup created at the time of independence.

However, tribal killings and post-election displacement of people to reverse the interest of those in power is nothing new in Kenya. This is well documented, for example in Ujuzi (2008). The Western governments and media were not concerned at that time about such atrocities because the Moi regime was at some 'old

“Waweru Mburu used it word for word on his popular Kiswahili language daily political commentary show, Yaliyotokea, on the widely broadcast Radio Citizen FM. He did a wonderful job of it. So the article has reached a wider audience, mainly working class, in the national language”. - AN. 15 February 2008

The elections and subsequent events in Kenya in December 2007 raise important questions about the reasons for the current instability and about the very future of the country. The reality is sometimes seen from Western, strategic perspectives or from the point of view of business opportunities. However, a few serious studies see the events as a way of addressing historical injustice so as to ensure the growth of a society based on principles of social, economic and political justice.

The significance of the events in Kenya go beyond its national boundaries. There are issues here that are equally relevant in South Africa and Zimbabwe, among other countries. The unfinished work of liberation from colonialism has been pushed out of the picture by success stories of growth with high rise buildings housing transnationals and their local allies as evidence of “development”. But the reality for majority of people is allowed to remain out of the picture – until now that they have been forcefully brought to the centre stage. The “stability” that was Kenya was a stability for a small minority to become super rich, while the conditions of the majority of people changed little from colonial days.

It is entirely appropriate to condemn the wide-scale deaths, destruction of property and internal exiling of the people in many parts of the country. Efforts need to be made to return to some form of normalcy as soon as possible. But this cannot be achieved without addressing the underlying problems that were created by colonialism and subsequently reinforced by the colonial settlement for independence - in Kenya as well as in many other African countries.

Historical perspective

A better historical perspective on the situation can provide a better understanding of the reality in Kenya today. A good starting point to understand Kenya today is to look at what were the motivation and aims of the Mau Mau liberation movement that fought for independence in 1950s and 60s. This is set out in an important policy document widely distributed by progressive forces in December, 1961. Entitled “the struggle for Kenya's future”, it set out what Kenya needed – and still needs:

...let us, in short, create a new society which allows to each the right to eat, the right to the products of their labour, the right to clothe, house, and educate their children, the right, in short, to live in dignity amongst equals. It is a socialist society we should be struggling to build, a system which, unlike capitalism, concerns itself with the welfare of the masses rather than with the profits and privileges of a few. (Barnett, 1972)

This search for a new society has continued ever since. Mwakenya (1987) showed a similar concern:

For over twenty years, we Kenyans have seen our hard won independence mortgaged to foreign interest by the KANU regime under cynical “philosophies” of Harambee and Nyayoism... the basic means of production, distribution and exchange are owned by imperialist foreigners and transnational corporations... the ruling comprador class acts as an overseer, supervising the outflow of wealth into Western capitals. Kenya has therefore been turned into a looters’ paradise for foreigners, transnationals and a few rich Kenyans... corruption on a massive scale has seen the national coffers looted...the most productive land is owned by private landlords – a few rich Kenyans, individual foreigners and transnational corporations... a large section of Kenyan people live under the most deplorable conditions deprived of food, clothing and shelter...the gap between the rich and the poor is one of the widest in the world.

McGreal (2008) brings the situation up to date:

More than 30 million people live in Kenya today, a high proportion of them concentrated on the lush Central Highlands, Rift Valley and western Kenya. The demand for land has grown because of the scarcity of paid jobs. The majority of Kenyans are ...scraping a living from the soil. Almost 60% of Kenyans live on less than a dollar a day.

It is the search for “a new society” that has been the backdrop to events in Kenya since independence in 1963. The history of post-independence Kenya has been a struggle between those who sought to “create a new society” and successive KANU governments which saw independence as an opportunity for enriching a new elite to replace the previous colonial elite. They consistently ignored key issues that had made people take up arms under colonialism: land and freedom.

There has been consistent opposition (underground as well as over ground) throughout the post-independence period. For strategic and economic reasons, USA and Britain have supported Kenyatta and Moi regimes, thus protecting them from forces that struggle for change. Moi had to make changes in the constitution in early 1990s, as a result of the concerted attempts by Kenyans internally and among the rapidly expanding Diaspora. This led to Kibaki coming to power. But this change remained largely cosmetic with which the West was happy as it did not fundamentally disturb the setup created at the time of independence.

Massacres, “tribal” killings and pre-election displacement of people to serve the interest of those in power is nothing new in Kenya. This is well documented, for example by Umoja (1989). The Western governments and media were not concerned at that time about such atrocities as Moi regime was an “asset” in cold war politics and for using Kenya as a regional political and commercial base.

A new situation develops

What is significant about events over the last few months in Kenya is that there is a growth of a new united people power that refuses to accept injustice and rule by dictates of a few “leaders” backed by usurped state power. There is a new demand for change in Kenya, as in other parts of Africa, today. Rigging of elections, using state forces to suppress resistance and imposing a “peace” that favours the elites (local and foreign) is not anything new in Kenya. What is new is that this time the “rulers” are not being allowed to get away with it, not being allowed to suppress popular demand for democratic rights and social justice. And that demand goes far beyond the issues concerned with the election results. It is fundamentally a demand to address historical injustices imposed on working people of Kenya. However the current situation is resolved, the issues of land, employment, people’s rights and justice are firmly on the

table. No government, no external force, no imposed “solutions” will be able to ignore it in the future. It is only in resolving these underlying causes of instability that a firm foundation for a stable future can be laid.

Free flow of ideas

There is an urgent need for free flow of ideas to resolve the current vacuum created by the “Parliamentary democracy” which has reinforced entrenched power relations. Equally important is the need to have easy access to relevant, people-orientated historical material to understand why and how Kenya came to be where it is today. It is only on this foundation that a workable solution to problems created by colonialism and post-independence settlement can take place. This is an urgent need in Kenya today, otherwise personalities and narrow social and local loyalty will return to claim mainstream social and political life and lead to further instability.

It is important to understand the essence of the current events in Kenya: these are aspects of a fierce class struggle going on against the colonial and post colonial settlements which favoured a few against the majority of working people – the same as in Zimbabwe and South Africa. The West-supported “stability”, locally managed by the successive KANU regimes has been stability only for a minority. The majority is now asserting its rights for a stability that meets *its* interests.

Thus the present national struggles in which people from all nationalities are participating needs to be seen as yet another stage in the people’s search for liberation. Given historical experiences, there is always a danger of people seeking solace in local, “tribal” and regional loyalties when political and economic situations are manipulated by a few who stand to benefit from national disunity.

It is therefore important that facts are accepted and used as basis for creating a just future for all. The first fact, as Manji (2008) says, is that “the elections results were rigged – of that there is little doubt”. One cannot talk of the responsibilities of both the main parties in this situation when it is clear that only one side was involved in rigging the election results. The West, and some intellectuals, may not like what the party of Raila Odinga – Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) – stands for. But they have been given a clear magnate,

both in the Parliament and in the Presidential elections, by the people of Kenya. If democracy is to have any meaning, this clear mandate has to be respected.

Secondly, the larger reality as explained by McGreal (2008) needs to be brought to the table:

The largest landowners in Kenya today are the families of the only three presidents the country has had since independence - the Kenyattas, the family of his successor, Daniel arap Moi, and the present president, Mwai Kibaki, who served in the Kenyatta and Moi administrations.

The Kenya Land Alliance says more than half the arable land in the country is in the hands of only 20% of the population. Two-thirds of the people own, on average, less than an acre per person. There are 13% who own no land at all.

Until these issues are openly debated and a resolution found, the struggle for Kenya's future will continue – peacefully if allowed, otherwise “by any means necessary”.

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