

Kenya's tragedy

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

Kenya's almost certainly stolen election and the tribal violence that followed are doubly tragic. For Kenya, the rigged vote count and ensuing killing are ugly, heartbreaking steps backward for a nation that had been one of Africa's comparative success stories. For Africa, this is yet another reminder that the long road to better governance, ethnic peace and economic development is fraught with peril and that progress is fragile.

Kenya's president, Mwai Kibaki, claimed a narrow re-election victory in his country's Dec. 27 election. But foreign observers from both Europe and the United States cited numerous irregularities in the vote counting. Irregularities so numerous and glaring that the likely winner was not Kibaki but his chief opposition rival, Raila Odinga.

Kibaki had himself sworn in for a second term immediately after the dubious vote count was announced. That triggered an explosion of popular outrage and tribal violence that, to date, has killed more than 300 people, many of them butchered or burned to death by rampaging mobs.

What Kenya so urgently needs is mediation of this electoral dispute. African, European and U.S. diplomats are calling for just that; a process that can prompt Kenya's own institutions, especially its independent judiciary and electoral commission, to determine the election's true results. Failing that, outside mediation, perhaps lead by the African Union's John Kufuor, may be the only way to prevent further chaos and bloodshed.

President Kibaki's apparent attempt to rig the vote count provoked a horrifying outbreak of tribal violence, a grim reminder of the ethnic tensions that divide so many African states. In Rwanda, those ethnic tensions produced a genocidal bloodbath that killed 800,000 people over three months in 1994. Nothing like that seems in prospect for Kenya, whose peoples encompass 42 tribes rather than Rwanda's two ethnic groups. Still, failing to defuse this political crisis could easily lead to protracted killing and a spreading breakdown of order.

Reason enough, then, for African, European and American diplomats to respond to Kenya's crisis with urgent dispatch.

As noted, this crisis is all the more tragic for occurring in Kenya, until now among the most progressive of Africa's major nations. A booming tourism industry, abundant agriculture, improving schools and a growing middle class have given Kenya an economy expanding at a healthy 5 percent per year. Had Kibaki been willing to cede power peacefully, it would have marked Kenya's second consecutive peaceful transition, a remarkable achievement on a continent struggling to learn and practice democracy's rules.

The important thing to recognize now is that Kenya's crisis can yet be resolved, by mediation and negotiation between the government in Nairobi and its political opposition. Foreign diplomatic pressure is required, urgently, to make that happen.

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