

Mob Burns Church in Kenya, Killing Dozens

By Jeffrey Gettleman

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NAIROBI, [Kenya](#) — Dozens of people seeking refuge in a church in Kenya were burned to death by a mob on Tuesday in an explosion of ethnic violence that is threatening to engulf this country, which until last week was one of the most stable in Africa.

According to witnesses and Red Cross officials, up to 50 people died inside the church in a small village in western Kenya after a furious crowd doused it with gasoline and set it on fire.

In Nairobi, the capital, tribal militias squared off against each other in several slums, with gunshots ringing out and clouds of black smoke wafting over the shanties. The death toll across the country is steadily rising.

Witnesses indicate that more than 250 people have been killed in the past two days in bloodshed connected to a disputed election Kenya held last week.

The [European Union](#) said Tuesday that there was clear evidence of ballot rigging, and European officials called for an independent investigation. Kenya's president, [Mwai Kibaki](#), who won the election by a razor-thin margin has refused such an inquiry.

Government officials said Tuesday that they would crack down on anyone who threatened law and order, and they banned political rallies. Meanwhile, Raila Odinga, the opposition leader who lost the election, has vowed to hold a million-person march on Thursday, which many Kenyans fear could become a bloodbath.

The Kenya celebrated for its spectacular wildlife and robust economy is now a land of distress. Tens of thousands of people have fled their homes, and some are so frightened that they have crossed into Uganda.

"We've had tribal fighting before, but never like this," said Abdalla Bujra, a retired Kenyan professor who runs a democracy-building organization.

As for the people burned alive in the church, Mr. Bujra echoed what many Kenyans were thinking: "It reminds me of Rwanda."

While the bloodshed of the past few days in Kenya has fallen far short of the Rwandan genocide in 1994, many Kenyans are worried that it is spiraling out of control.

The violence has been a mix of hooliganism, political protest and ethnic bloodletting. Most of the victims have been Kikuyus, the tribe of the president and Kenya's traditional ruling class. Kikuyus have dominated business and politics since independence in 1963. They run shops, restaurants, banks and factories all across Kenya, from the Indian Ocean coast to the scenic savannah to the muggy shores of Lake Victoria in the west.

They make up only 22 percent of the population and are part of Kenya's mosaic of roughly 40 ethnic groups, which have intermarried and coexisted for decades. But the election controversy has created a new dynamic where many of Kenya's other tribes, furious about the ballot rigging that may have kept Mr. Kibaki in power, have vented their frustrations against them.

"We are easy targets," said Stephen Kahianyu, a Kikuyu, staring at the embers of his home in Nairobi that was burned to the ground on Saturday.

Over the past few days, Kikuyus have fled to police stations and churches for protection.

On Monday night, several hundred Kikuyus barricaded themselves inside the Kenya Assemblies of God church in Kiambaa, a small village near the town of Eldoret. The next morning, a rowdy mob showed up.

According to witnesses, the mob was mostly Kalenjins, Luhyas and Luos, Mr. Odinga's tribe, which makes up about 13 percent of the population. They overran Kikuyu guards in front of the church and then pulled out cans of gasoline. There were no police around, witnesses said, and no water to put the fire out.

Most people escaped. But in addition to those killed, dozens were hospitalized with severe burns. Witnesses said most of the people hiding inside had been women and children.

The Eldoret area has become a killing zone. Residents say that dozens of Kikuyus have been hacked to death, including four who were beheaded on Monday. In Nairobi, a much-feared Kikuyu street gang called the Mungiki seems to be taking revenge. According to residents in a Luo area, the Mungiki, who are said to take an oath in which they drink human blood, were sweeping through the slums and killing Luos.

The government is now blaming Mr. Odinga for the violence.

"This isn't random," said Alfred Mutua, a government spokesman. "This is part of Raila's plan to create hysteria and trouble and make us declare a state of emergency," which Kenya seems to be rapidly approaching, with curfews in several areas and a ban on live news media coverage.

Western diplomats have been urging the political leaders to reconcile, but the lines between those leaders seem to be only hardening.

Mr. Odinga said he would not talk to Mr. Kibaki until the president admitted that he had lost the election.

Still, he urged his followers to calm down. "This is tarnishing our image as democratic and peaceful seekers of change," Mr. Odinga said.

Mr. Odinga and Mr. Kibaki ran together in 2002, in what was considered Kenya's first free election. The tribal alliance they built steamrolled Kenya's ruling party and marked a watershed moment. But the two fell out soon afterward, and diplomats here said that it has been very difficult trying to broker a truce.

"We just want them to meet," said Bo Jensen, the Danish ambassador to Kenya. "But at the moment they're quite far from each other."

The election did not start off badly. A record number of Kenyans, nearly 10 million, waited in lines miles long on Thursday to scratch an X next to their chosen candidate.

Mr. Kibaki, 76, vowed to keep growing Kenya's economy, one of the strongest in Africa, partly because of its billion-dollar tourist trade. Mr. Odinga, 62, ran as a champion of the poor and promised to end the tradition of Kikuyu favoritism.

Voting followed tribal lines, with the vast majority of Luos going for Mr. Odinga and up to 98 percent of Kikuyus in some areas voting for Mr. Kibaki.

Tribes, obviously, do matter in Kenya. But for the most part, the country has escaped the widespread ethnic bloodletting that has haunted so many of its neighbors, like Rwanda, Congo, Sudan and Ethiopia. In Kenya, the Kikuyu elite has shared the spoils of the system with select members of other tribes, which has helped defuse resentment.

This has led to decades of stability and is a reason why most Kenyans, including Mr. Bujra, the retired professor, do not think their country will end up like Rwanda, where nearly one million people were killed. Clearly, Kenya is a long way from that.

"In Rwanda, the conflict was between a small minority and a large majority," he said, referring to the history of Tutsis dominating the Hutu majority. "Here, it is different, because many tribes have a stake."

But election time, especially in a country where politics and tribe are so intertwined, is often bloody. Hundreds of people were killed in tribal clashes surrounding the 1992 and 1997 elections. And this time, passions were as high as ever.

The early results showed Mr. Odinga well ahead and more than half of Mr. Kibaki's cabinet losing their Parliament seats and therefore their jobs.

But when Mr. Odinga's lead began to vanish as further results were announced over the weekend, his supporters suspected that something was amiss. It was slow-motion theft to them, and they began to riot.

Even before Kenya's election commission declared Mr. Kibaki the winner on Sunday, election observers said the president's party had changed tally sheets to reflect more votes than were cast on election day. In some areas, there were more votes for the president than registered voters.

On Tuesday, Samuel Kivuitu, the election chairman, said he had been "under undue pressure" to certify the results.

Western governments, including the United States, are calling for a vote recount.

"It's the only way forward," said Graham Elson, the deputy chief of the European observer delegation.

Kennedy Abwao contributed reporting from Nairobi, and Matthew L. Wald from Washington.