

Disputed Vote Plunges Kenya Into Bloodshed

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NAIROBI, [Kenya](#) — It took all of about 15 minutes on Sunday, after Kenya's president was declared the winner of a deeply controversial election, for the country to explode.

Thousands of young men burst out of Kibera, a shantytown of one million people, waving sticks, smashing shacks, burning tires and hurling stones. Soldiers poured into the streets to fight them. In several cities across Kenya, witnesses said, gangs went house to house, dragging out people of certain tribes and clubbing them to death.

"It's war," said Hudson Chate, a mechanic here. "Tribal war."

The dubious conclusion of the most fiercely fought election in Kenya's history has pitched the country toward chaos. The opposition rejected the results and vowed to inaugurate its leader, Raila Odinga, as "the people's president," which the government warned would be tantamount to a coup. As the riots spread, the government took the first steps toward martial law on Sunday night and banned all live media broadcasts.

Western observers said Kenya's election commission ignored undeniable evidence of vote rigging to keep the government in power. Now, one of the most developed, stable nations in Africa, which has a powerhouse economy and a billion-dollar-a-year tourism industry, has plunged into intense uncertainty, losing its sheen as an exemplary democracy and quickly descending into tribal bloodletting.

With the president, [Mwai Kibaki](#), a Kikuyu and Mr. Odinga a Luo, the election seems to have tapped into an atavistic vein of tribal tension that always lay beneath the surface in Kenya but until now had not provoked widespread mayhem.

The news media blackout made it difficult to assess the level of popular outrage. But it was clear Sunday night that the violence was spreading.

In Mathare, a slum in Nairobi, Luo gangs burned more than 100 Kikuyu homes. In Kibera, Kikuyu families loaded their belongings in cars and fled. Almost all the businesses in the country are shut. The only figures in downtown Nairobi, the capital, which is usually choked with traffic, are helmeted soldiers hunched behind plastic shields. Oily black clouds of smoke rose from the slums, smudging out the sun. At least 15 people have been killed.

"It's a sad day for Kenya," said Michael E. Ranneberger, the American ambassador to Kenya. "My biggest worry now is violence, which, let's be honest, will be along tribal lines."

Mr. Odinga's supporters are unleashing their frustrations about the election, which was held on Thursday and initially praised as fair, against people they suspect supported the president, namely Kikuyus. The Odinga camp urged election officials to recount the votes after exposing

serious discrepancies between the results announced on the night of the election versus the numbers that were later entered into a national total.

It had been predicted that the vote would be close, and the final results had Mr. Kibaki winning by a sliver, 46 percent to 44 percent. But that gap may have included thousands of invalid ballots. The [European Union](#) said its observers witnessed election officials in one constituency announce on election night that President Kibaki had won 50,145 votes. On Sunday, the election commission increased those same results to 75,261 votes.

“The presidential elections were flawed,” said Alexander Graf Lambsdorff, the chief European observer.

Koki Muli, co-chairwoman of the Kenya Election Domestic Observation Forum, said she was in the room on Sunday when the election commission was presented with dozens of suspicious tally sheets — some missing signatures, others missing stamps — and most of them were from the president’s stronghold of central Kenya. In some areas, more people voted for the president than there were registered voters. “I saw this with my own eyes,” she said.

Ms. Muli said that 75 of the 210 constituencies — meaning more than one-third of the vote — had serious question marks and that the election chairman initially agreed to investigate. But later on Sunday he changed his mind.

Kenya is a close American ally, and a team of Western diplomats, including the American ambassador, tried for hours to persuade election officials to recount the votes. One Western ambassador said they knew that if the dubious results were certified and the president declared the winner based on them, Kenya would plunge into crisis. But the commission would not budge.

“The government was determined to hold onto power,” said the ambassador, who did not want to be identified because he said he feared reprisals from the Kenyan government.

About 4 p.m., the election commission announced at its temporary headquarters in a downtown conference center that it was ready to declare a winner. The Western ambassadors filed in, looking worn out. Dozens of soldiers lined the walls, some armed with assault rifles and tear gas. Opposition leaders began shouting. The soldiers pounced and the room erupted into chaos, with men in suits fleeing, chairs getting knocked over and the election chairman making a hurried exit, with a crowd chasing him, yelling: “We want justice! Kenya has spoken!”

The commission then reconvened — in front of reporters chosen by government officials — and declared Mr. Kibaki the winner, with 4,584,721 votes compared with 4,352,993 for Mr. Odinga — a spread of about 2 percent.

There were indeed irregularities, the commissioners said, but it was not their job to deal with them. “The judicial system provides peaceable avenues to address these complaints,” said the chairman, Samuel Kivuitu.

The opposition has not indicated if it will contest the results in Kenya’s courts, which are notoriously slow and corrupt. But it announced a swearing-in ceremony for Mr. Odinga on Monday and declare him the “people’s president.”

Officials with Mr. Kibaki's party warned that such a move could bring consequences. "If Raila does this, he will be attempting a coup and he will get what he deserves," said Ngari Gituku, a spokesman for the Party of National Unity, Mr. Kibaki's party.

Mr. Odinga was jailed in the 1980s for several years for plotting a coup in Kenya and was beaten and tortured.

As for the restrictions on the news media, which many journalists said were a severe setback to what had been considered one of the freest presses in the world, Mr. Gituku said: "The only thing the president wants to do is to heal this nation, and the media is not part of that process. The media has been propagating hate."

Mr. Kibaki was sworn in almost immediately after the results were announced. In a surreal scene, as gunfire rattled in the slums, Mr. Kibaki stood serenely with a Bible in his hand. It was as if he were talking about another election.

"We have demonstrated to the world we are politically mature," he said. He called the vote "honest, orderly and credible."

The election did not start out ominously. Kenyans streamed to the polls in record numbers on Thursday. Some waited for hours in lines that were miles long.

The contest was seen as a test of Kenya's young multiparty democracy, with Mr. Kibaki, 76, representing the establishment and Mr. Odinga, 62, a new brand of politics. Mr. Kibaki has been in government since independence in 1963 and was seen by many Kenyans as continuing an unfair political system that has favored the Kikuyu at the expense of Kenya's 30-plus other ethnic groups. Mr. Odinga, a rich businessman who campaigned as a champion of the poor, added to his popularity by tapping into those frustrations and building a coalition of many tribes.

The first batch of results showed a sweeping victory for the opposition, with Mr. Odinga ahead by one million votes on Friday. But that lead evaporated overnight, and by Saturday the race was essentially a tie.

But the sudden reversal ignited suspicions, especially after many members of Parliament close to the president were voted out of office in a wave of seeming dissatisfaction with the government.

Ms. Muli, the Kenyan election observer, said it was clear the government had rigged the election. "This country has come a long way," she said. "And now we have been set back many miles."

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