

Kenya, Known for Its Stability, Topples Into Post-Election Chaos

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KIAMBAA, [Kenya](#) — Daniel Kibigo said he was there, hiding in the burned cornfields nearby, as the mob gleefully stuffed mattresses in front of the church's doors and set them on fire.

He watched women try to claw their way out of the church windows as if they were drowning as the building burned all the way down, with up to 50 people inside.

“We couldn't do anything; there were too many,” he said of the crowd that descended on the church in the paroxysm of ethnic violence that has gripped Kenya since its deeply flawed elections last week.

On Wednesday, Mr. Kibigo slowly picked through the embers, looking for whatever was left — a dented trunk here, a bicycle burned beyond recognition there, a pair of Nike children's shoes 6 inches long.

“The violence will end,” said Mr. Kibigo, a brick mason, “when the politicians want to end it.”

But on Wednesday, the politicians seemed as far apart as ever. Western diplomats, who have been putting enormous pressure on Kenya's government and opposition leaders to negotiate and bring an end to the bloodletting that has killed more than 300 people in the past three days, said the two sides remained locked in a standoff.

“The government is not backing down, and neither is the opposition,” said one Western diplomat on Wednesday, speaking anonymously because negotiations were still under way. “It doesn't look good.”

Within the span of a week, one of the most developed, promising countries in Africa has turned into a starter kit for disaster. Tribal militias are roaming the countryside with rusty machetes, neighborhoods are pulling apart, and Kenya's economy, one of the biggest on the continent, is unraveling — with fuel shortages rippling across East Africa because the roads in Kenya, a regional hub, are too dangerous to use. Roadblocks set up by armed men, something synonymous with anarchic Somalia, have cropped up across the country, in towns on the savannah and in the cramped slums.

Kenya's president, [Mwai Kibaki](#), who was declared the victor by a narrow margin on Sunday despite widespread evidence of ballot rigging, has rejected the opposition's offers for outside mediation.

“Are we in a civil war? Is this Somalia? Is this Darfur?” said Alfred Mutua, Mr. Kibaki's spokesman. “Our problem is with some hooligans. And we can take care of it.”

As for the opposition, its most recent proposal was a joint government for three months and then a new election, which the government roundly rejected.

Adding to the incendiary atmosphere, Raila Odinga, the opposition figure who said he was robbed of the presidency, has vowed to go ahead with a million-person rally in the capital, Nairobi, on Thursday. The government has said the rally is illegal, and busloads of police officers in helmets and padded suits have begun to muster downtown.

“We want to appeal directly to the people,” Mr. Odinga said on Wednesday. Many Kenyans are worried the rally will turn into an enormous brawl.

The Bush administration said that Secretary of State [Condoleezza Rice](#) was calling both sides to urge them to do everything they could to end the violence, and the [United Nations](#) issued a statement on Wednesday saying that [Ban Ki-moon](#), the secretary general, was “concerned with the deteriorating humanitarian situation, as large numbers of people have been displaced by the violence.”

The Red Cross estimates that nearly 100,000 people have fled their homes. Some have even crossed into Uganda. Kenya historically has been a country that accepts refugees, not creates them.

The fighting is especially brutal in the Rift Valley, which is ethnically divided between tribes that support the president and tribes that back the opposition.

In Kiambaa, a village in the Rift Valley about a five-hour drive from Nairobi, the tensions boil down to Kalenjin, the biggest tribe in this area, and Luo, the tribe of Mr. Odinga, versus Kikuyu, Mr. Kibaki’s tribe.

It was Kikuyus who were burned to death on Tuesday in the Kenya Assemblies of God church. The church was simple, made of mud and sticks, and about the size of a tennis court.

Over the weekend, several hundred Kikuyus sought refuge here. The election was on Thursday, and serious trouble started on Saturday, when the first signs of ballot rigging emerged. Members of the Luo and other tribes across Kenya, who had been encouraged by many pre-election polls to believe that Mr. Odinga would win the presidency, began to riot and lash out at Kikuyus as the news spread that Kikuyu government officials had turned in dubious election results.

In Nairobi, the slums exploded, with crowds hurling rocks at police officers and burning down Kikuyu businesses. In the Rift Valley, where the tawny veldt meets lush green farms, and mountains loom on both sides, Kalenjins and Luos began hunting down the outnumbered Kikuyus.

Kenya is a mosaic of some 40 tribes, and for most of its history, they have intermarried and gotten along fine. That is one reason the country has enjoyed decades of stability, avoiding the turbulent fate of neighbors like Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan and Rwanda. But this election, the first competitive one between political heavyweights from different tribes, seems to have cracked open a new divide.

“As soon as we heard about the Kalenjins coming, we brought our people to the church,” said John Njorge, a Kikuyu. “A church is supposed to be safe.”

Most of those who packed inside were women and children. Because it was so crowded, they left their belongings outside. On Wednesday, the mattresses, belts, shoes, pots and pans were still there, strewn in the grass. Their owners were nowhere to be found.

The Kikuyu are Kenya’s biggest tribe at 22 percent of the population. They are concentrated in central Kenya, but because they were the tribe favored by the British during colonial times, they became the privileged class and branched out across the country, running shops, restaurants, banks and factories. In the Rift Valley, many Kikuyus have small businesses and farms.

James Kimemia sells watches. He says he has never swung a machete in his life. But on Sunday, he was recruited by fellow Kikuyus to guard the church. He was given a rusty blade and told to be ready. He is 20 years old and thin.

“But I was ready,” he said.

The men slept during the day in nearby farms and patrolled around the church at night. After the election results were announced on Sunday, they went on high alert. Mobs across Kenya began massacring Kikuyus after Mr. Kibaki was declared the winner, with a 2-percentage-point advantage. In Eldoret, a big town near here, four Kikuyus were beheaded.

On Tuesday morning, Mr. Kimemia, Mr. Kibigo and their fellow guards woke up to screaming. They could not tell if the sounds were war cries or panic. It seems now they were both.

They ran to the church and found it surrounded by a mob, of mostly Kalenjins and Luos, they said.

“We threw rocks at them,” Mr. Kimemia said.

But rocks were not enough. Several witnesses said the mob numbered around 800 people. They were pumped up young men, armed with machetes, slingshots, bows and arrows and thick, 18-inch sticks, sharpened at both ends. Some of the sticks were still stuck in the ground on Wednesday.

“You can use these as a club or a spear,” Mr. Kibigo explained, extracting one from the earth and examining its points.

The Kikuyu guards said they flung themselves at the attackers but were repulsed. Mr. Kibigo said his brother, George, was slashed in the neck and died. The mob closed in. The guards fled. They said they were powerless to stop what happened next.

Mr. Njorge, a bicycle taxi driver, said the mob threw mattresses in front of the church doors so no one could get out. Then the young men set them on fire. The mattresses were made from foam. The fire quickly grew.

As the mud walls began to crumble, Mr. Njorge said, he watched one woman with a baby strapped to her back try to squeeze out a window.

“Her head caught on fire,” he said. She lived, he said, but she dropped her baby behind her.

A disabled man named Mwangi, known in the village as a decent shoe cobbler and a great conversationalist, also tried to escape. He made it out of the window but could not run fast because of a lame leg.

“The mob got him right there,” Mr. Kibigo said, stabbing a finger toward a spot in the cornfield.

Policemen showed up a few hours later. In rural areas, there are few. They helped collect the bodies. The Red Cross said at least 18 people died, but several witnesses said the number was closer to 50.

On Wednesday a truckload of officers escorted some of the Kikuyu men back to the church to collect what was salvageable.

Mr. Kibigo said he still felt scared. “I am fed up with life,” he said.

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