

# No Country for Old Hatreds

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The New York Times

January 6, 2008

Nairobi, Kenya

THIS thing called Kenya is a strange animal. In the 1960s, the bright young nationalists who took over the country when we got independence from the British believed that their first job was to eradicate “tribalism.” What they really meant, in a way, was that they wanted to eradicate the nations that made up Kenya. It was assumed that the process would end with the birth of a brand-new being: the Kenyan.

Compared with other African nations, Kenya has had significant success with this experiment. But it has not been without its contradictions, though they had never really turned lethal until now.

Our Kenyan identity, so deliberately formed in the test tube of nationalist effort, has over the years been undermined, subtly and not so subtly, by our leaders — men who appealed to our histories and loyalties to win our votes.

You see, the burning houses and the bloody attacks here do not reflect primordial hatreds. They reflect the manipulation of identity for political gain.

So what was different about this election? What brought Kenya’s equilibrium to an end?

Five years ago, we voted for a broad and nationally representative government. Inside this vehicle were the country’s major tribes: the Luo, the Luhya, the Kikuyu, many Kalenjin — all the people now killing one another.

We wanted this arrangement to quickly introduce a new and more inclusive Constitution, deal firmly with corruption and start a process of defining the nation in terms that include everybody.

Tragically, President Mwai Kibaki instead steered a course away from the coalition and cultivated the support of his Kikuyu community. He did a good job rebuilding the civil service and managing the economy, but he did it within a framework that was not sustainable.

When it came time to conduct our most recent election, Raila Odinga had built a movement on the back of President Kibaki’s betrayal of the spirit of 2002. His political party, the Orange Democratic Movement, was the big ethnic tent similar to the one that had first brought President Kibaki to office.

On the day we cast our vote, we thought that our optimism and desire for an inclusive and broad government would prevail. Instead, three days later — after reports that votes were being “cooked” in Kikuyu strongholds, after skirmishes in the room where the results were being

announced, after the news media were ejected — Mr. Kibaki was announced the winner and a haphazard swearing-in took place. And Kenya exploded.

Mr. Odinga and President Kibaki are not really ethnic leaders, but in the days since the disputed election they have stoked tribal paranoia and used it to cement electoral loyalty.

Mr. Odinga and his fellow party leaders are now determined to avenge the wrong they believe they have suffered. Sadly, this leadership now appears to believe that the violence spreading across the country might be a valuable bargaining chip.

My further suspicion is that Mr. Odinga wants to sell to Kenyans and the world a sort of Ukrainian “people’s revolution” — where protesters take to the streets and change the order of things, and are seen to be throwing happy pink petals on television, so America can say, ah, the people have spoken.

But rather than matters leading to a popular but peaceful uprising against a flawed election, we are likelier to suffer an escalation of retaliations and a descent to that special machete place that nations rarely recover from.

Yet all is not lost. Nations are built on crises like this. If there is such a thing as Kenya, it should be gathering energy right now. Two leaders can sit down, form a power-sharing agreement and put together a system to handle elections and transition. A Constitution that names and recognizes the tribal nations within our nation, that decentralizes some power and that includes us all in the process is possible.

For 40 years we have been dancing around each other, a gaseous nation circling and tightening. The moment is now to make a solid thing called Kenya.

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