

## Neighbors Kill Neighbors as Kenyan Vote Stirs Old Feuds

By Geoffrey Gettleman

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MALINDI, Kenya — In a room by the stairs, Shukrani Malingi, a Pokomo farmer, writhed on a metal cot, the skin on his back burned off. Down the hall, at a safe distance, Rahema Hageyo, an Orma girl, stared blankly out of a window, a long scar above her thimble-like neck. She was nearly decapitated by a machete chop — and she is only 9 months old.

Ever since vicious ethnic clashes erupted between the Pokomo and Orma several months ago in a swampy, desolate part of Kenya, the Tawfiq Hospital has instituted a strict policy for the victims who are trundled in: Pokomos on one side, Ormas on the other. The longstanding rivalry, which both sides say has been inflamed by a governor's race, has become so explosive that the two groups remain segregated even while receiving lifesaving care. When patients leave their rooms to use the restroom, they shuffle guardedly past one another in their bloodstained smocks, sometimes pushing creaky IV stands, not uttering a word.

“There are three reasons for this war,” said Elisha Bwora, a Pokomo elder. “Tribe, land and politics.”

Every five years or so, this stable and typically peaceful country, an oasis of development in a very poor and turbulent region, suffers a frightening transformation in which age-old grievances get stirred up, ethnically based militias are mobilized and neighbors start killing neighbors. The reason is elections, and another huge one — one of the most important in this country's history and definitely the most complicated — is barreling this way.

In less than two weeks, Kenyans will line up by the millions to pick their leaders for the first time since a disastrous vote in 2007, which set off clashes that killed more than 1,000 people. The country has spent years agonizing over the wounds and has taken some steps to repair itself, most notably passing a new constitution. But justice has been elusive, politics remain ethnically tinged and leaders charged with crimes against humanity have a real chance of winning.

People here tend to vote in ethnic blocs, and during election time Kenyan politicians have a history of stoking these divisions and sometimes even financing murder sprees, according to court documents.

This time around, the vitriolic speeches seem more restrained, but in some areas where violence erupted after the last vote the underlying message of us versus them is still abundantly clear.

Now, the country is asking a simple but urgent question: Will history repeat itself?

“This election brings out the worst in us,” [read a column last week](#) in The Daily Nation, Kenya’s biggest newspaper. “All the tribal prejudice, all ancient grudges and feuds, all real and imagined slights, all dislikes and hatreds, everything is out walking the streets like hordes of thirsty undeads looking for innocents to devour.”

As the election draws nearer, more alarm bells are ringing. Seven civilians were ambushed and killed in northeastern Kenya on Thursday in what was widely perceived to be a politically motivated attack. The day before, Kenya’s chief justice said that a notorious criminal group had threatened him with “dire consequences” if he ruled against a leading presidential contender. Farmers in the Rift Valley say that cattle rustling is increasing, and they accuse politicians of instigating the raids to stir up intercommunal strife.

Because Kenya is such a bellwether country on the continent, what happens here in the next few weeks may determine whether the years of tenuous power-sharing and political reconciliation — a model used after violently contested elections in Zimbabwe as well — have ultimately paid off.

“The rest of Africa wants to know whether it’s possible to learn from past elections and ensure violence doesn’t flare again,” said Phil Clark, a lecturer at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. “With five years’ warning, is it possible to address the causes of conflict and transfer power peacefully?”

Spurred on by Kenyan intellectuals and Western allies, Kenya has overhauled its judiciary, election commission and the nature of power itself. Dozens of new positions, like governorships and Senate seats, have been created to ensure that resources flow down more equitably to the grass roots, an attempt to weaken the winner-take-all system that lavished rewards and opportunities on some ethnic groups while relegating others to the sidelines.

But in places like the Tana River Delta, where the clashes between Pokomos and Ormas have already killed more than 200 people, the new emphasis on local government has translated into more spoils to fight over. And there are nearly 50 governor races coming up across Kenya, many of them quite heated.

“The Orma are trying to displace us so we can’t vote,” said Mr. Bwora, the Pokomo elder. “They have burned our villages, even our birth certificates. How are we supposed to vote then?”

The Orma accuse the Pokomos of doing precisely the same thing, right down to the burning of birth certificates.

On the national stage, two of Kenya’s most contentious politicians — Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto — are running on the same ticket for president and deputy president. Both have been charged by the International Criminal Court with crimes against humanity stemming from the violence last time. Mr. Kenyatta, a deputy prime minister and son of Kenya’s first president, is accused of financing death squads that moved house to house in early 2008, slaughtering opposition supporters and their families, including young children.

He could quite possibly be elected Kenya’s next president and find himself the first sitting head of state to commute back and forth from The Hague, potentially complicating the typically cozy relationship between Kenya and the West.

There is a growing perception among many members of Mr. Kenyatta’s ethnic group, the Kikuyu, and Mr. Ruto’s, the Kalenjin, that they must win this election in order to protect their leaders from being hauled off to a jail cell in Europe, which is raising tensions even higher.

Most analysts here feel this election will be turbulent, though some argue it will not be as bad as last time.

“Things are different,” said Maina Kiai, a prominent Kenyan human rights advocate. For instance, he noted, it was the Kikuyu and Kalenjin who fought one another in the Rift Valley in 2007 and 2008, but now many members of those two groups are on the same side because their leaders have formed a political alliance.

“There may be new arenas of violence,” Mr. Kiai said. “But I don’t think the extent of violence will be the same.”

There is also a keen awareness of how much there is to lose. The Kenyan economy flatlined after the turmoil of the last election. But now it has recovered mightily, spawning a dizzying number of new highways, schools, hospitals, malls, wine bars, frozen yogurt stores, even free samples in the supermarket — evidence of Kenya’s position on this continent as home to a deep and booming middle class.

Many nations in this region depend on Kenya, as demonstrated by the economic chaos caused downstream during the last election when mobs blockaded Kenya’s highways and sent fuel prices spiking as far away as the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Another safety valve may be the courts, which are now considered much more independent, one of the biggest achievements since the last election. Kenya’s new judiciary is led by a former political prisoner and widely respected legal mind, [Willy Mutunga](#), the chief justice, who said he was threatened this week.

The hope is that if any election disputes arise between Mr. Kenyatta and the other front-runner, [Raila Odinga](#), Kenya’s prime minister, who says he was cheated out of winning last time, Justice Mutunga will step in — before people on the streets do.

But the Tana River Delta remains a blaring red warning sign, and there have been suspicions that political figures are deliberately fanning old disputes, in this case over land.

One leading Pokomo politician, who was an assistant minister, was recently arrested and accused of incitement, though the case was soon dropped. The allegation echoed the International Criminal Court cases, which assert that behind the ground-level mayhem in 2007 and 2008 were political leaders who incited their followers to kill for political gain.

Up and down the crocodile-infested Tana River, Pokomo and Orma youth are now patrolling the banks with spears and rusty swords. The result is a grim, sun-blasted tableau of ethnically segregated but parallel villages mired in the same poverty, misery and fear.