

Report from abroad

Kenya teetering

Still scarred from last year's election violence

Last Updated: Saturday, February 21, 2009 | 5:15 PM ET [Comments](#)[3](#)[Recommend](#)[9](#)

By David McGuffin [CBC News](#)

At a nationally broadcast prayer event, Kenyan President Mwai Kibaki and Prime Minister Raila Odinga squirm visibly as, one by one, the country's religious leaders stand up to criticize them.

The subject of the criticism is their performance since forming a coalition government almost a year ago now, part of the deal that ended Kenya's surprising and bloody period of post-election violence.



Kenya's power elite: From left, Prime Minister Raila Odinga, former president Daniel Moi, President Mwai Kibaki, Vice-President Kalonzo, and Rev Grace Mwangi, at a prayer meeting in February 2009 for victims of the fire involving the exploding oil tanker. (Associated Press)

"When you joined hands to sign the National Accord, Kenyans expected the best leadership ever," observed Bishop Boniface Adoyo of the Evangelical Alliance of Kenya. "Instead, Kenyans are concerned to see we are getting the opposite. Kenyans are discouraged, ashamed, disillusioned and angry."

In an overwhelmingly religious country, this attack by the leaders of the Catholic, Protestant and Muslim faiths is perhaps the most significant sign yet of the grim mood of the nation.

On February 28, it will be a year since rivals Kibaki and Odinga reluctantly agreed to form a coalition government to end the nearly two-months of ethnic bloodletting that left some 1,500 Kenyans dead, and forced 300,000 more from their homes.

And the fact that there does not appear to be any real accommodation between them is clearly starting to wear on a country that, not long ago, seemed to be one of Africa's great success stories.

The blame game

President Kibaki worked quickly to defend himself at the prayer meeting, telling the clerics, "Let us stop looking for someone to blame. Ladies and gentlemen, that is not the sensible approach."

But it is growing increasingly clear that Kenyans do believe their leaders are to blame for a grocery list of problems that seems to grow every day.

At the top of that list is rampant corruption. The event the president and prime minister were attending was a prayer meeting in memory of victims of two local catastrophes that claimed over 100 lives.

At one, a broken-down oil tanker exploded as hundreds of people were siphoning its fuel. The police have been accused of not only failing to keep the crowd away, but of taking bribes to allow people access to the tanker.



A scene from the Kenyan city of Kisumu during last year's post-election violence where gangs of mostly young men have driven members of different tribes to leave what was once a thriving multicultural environment. (Associated Press)

A more far-reaching scandal involves corn, or maize as it's known here, the staple of the Kenyan diet.

Hundreds of tonnes of maize were imported into Kenya in recent months to make up for dramatic food shortfalls caused by drought and the political upheaval a year ago.

But instead of being sold at subsidized prices to the Kenyan public as was planned, the maize was sold on by middlemen to other countries at considerable profit.

'Snouts in the honey'

The maize scandal has touched on the office of the prime minister as well as the minister of agriculture.

Adding to its impact, it broke as the government was asking Western nations to donate almost a half billion dollars to help feed 10 million Kenyans on the brink of starvation.

Perhaps not so coincidentally, a new book about President Kibaki's former anti-corruption czar, John Githongo, is being serialized in Daily Nation, Kenya's leading newspaper. (*It's Our Turn to Eat: The story of a Kenyan whistle-blower*, by Michela Wrong.)

Githongo was forced to quit his job four years ago in the face of death threats and feels now that the problem has only become worse.

"The kind of free-for-all graft that is being reported about is what keeps everyone at the feeding trough," Githongo told the Nairobi daily The Standard. "This is honey badger season and all the badgers have

their snouts in the honey."

In Githongo's view, "corruption is the glue holding together the coalition" because the competing factions do not appear to have anything else in common.

Businessmen here say the problem is now worse than it was even under the famously corrupt regime of ex-president Daniel Arap Moi.

"At least under Moi," one Kenyan businessman told me, "all the corruption went through him. But you knew if you had to pay for something, like getting your product through the port, that it would happen.

"Under this government you are being asked for bribes from both sides. You have no idea of who can get things done for you. And often nothing does get done."

A question of justice

After last year's post-election violence, Kenyan Justice Philip Waki held an inquiry into who was responsible for planning what became a near civil war drawn along ethnic lines.

That violence followed challenges to the legitimacy of the presidential election on December 27, 2007 in which Kibaki claimed to have won a second term despite widespread charges of ballot rigging from the opposition and independent observers.

On one side were supporters of Kibaki, mostly drawn from his traditionally dominant ethnic Kikuyu tribe; on the other, Odinga was backed by his Luo and several other tribes.

The result was weeks of slaughter the likes of which Kenyans hadn't seen since the days of the battle to gain independence from Britain.

After nationwide hearings, Waki presented coalition-broker Kofi Annan, the former secretary general of the UN, with the names of the key perpetrators of the violence.

Waki's recommendation was that a criminal tribunal be set up in Kenya to try the accused.

But if this tribunal wasn't holding hearings by March 1, 2009, Annan was to present this list to the International Criminal Court at The Hague.

That date has now been extended to May 1, as there is no sign yet of a Kenyan tribunal. In fact, a bill last week to bring the tribunal into being was overwhelmingly voted down by opposition MPs who felt the government was trying to manipulate the process.

The bill's failure is attributed to the belief of many MPs, and Kenyans, that those accused of orchestrating the post-election violence will be let off easily by a local tribunal.

"Let (them) go to The Hague," says MP Gitobu Imanyara. "This is the first time we stand a real chance, a real opportunity, of arresting the culture of impunity."

Shining example

If Kenya, once a shining example of peace and democracy in Africa, joins the likes of Sudan, Serbia, Bosnia and the Democratic Republic of Congo in being held up to world attention at The Hague, it could be enough to make an already tottering coalition crumble.

Not surprisingly, all this has caused huge strains in a government that was forced together by circumstance and foreign pressure in the first place.

Cabinet ministers are constantly waging a war of words against each other in the media. There are regular accusations of corruption and even demands for resignations from within the government itself.

One upside is that, so far at least, there appears to be little evidence of any appetite in Kenya for a return to the violence that shocked this country and the world a year ago.

But then few predicted that upheaval before it happened.

- [Post a comment](#)
[3Comments have been posted](#)
- [Recommend this story](#)
[9People have recommended this story](#)

Story comments (3)

Sort: [Most recent](#) | [First to last](#) | [Most recommended](#)

[SundayDriver](#) wrote:Posted 2009/02/24

at 9:03 AM ETIs there one "government" in Africa that doesn't have "government forces" and rebels fighting?

[3Peoplerecommendedthis comment3Recommend this comment](#) [Policy Report abuse](#)

[Ortona](#) wrote:Posted 2009/02/23

at 7:11 PM ETWhen Kenya gained independence from Britain in 1963, it had a higher per capita income level than South Korea along with many other favourable social and economic indicators. Ah, Africa.

[4Peoplerecommendedthis comment4Recommend this comment](#) [Policy Report abuse](#)

[ShehbazDeol](#) wrote:Posted 2009/02/23

at 8:21 AM ETWhat's terrible about this is that the society has regressed.

[6Peoplerecommendedthis comment6Recommend this comment](#) [Policy Report abuse](#)

- [Previous](#)
- [1](#)
- [Next](#)

Post your comment

Note: The CBC does not necessarily endorse any of the views posted. By submitting your comments, you acknowledge that CBC has the right to reproduce, broadcast and publicize those comments or any part thereof in any manner whatsoever. Please note that comments are pre-moderated/reviewed and published according to our [submission guidelines](#).

You must be logged in to leave a comment. [Log in](#) | [Sign up](#)

Comment:



Post

[Submission policy](#)