



The Kenya Crisis: Roots & Ripple Effects

Politics and poverty at the root

While the media is reporting that postelection violence in Kenya stems from tribal rivalries, a closer analysis shows that the real roots of the growing crisis lie in deep economic injustice, a skewed distribution of political power, political manipulation of ethnic identities, and the persistent failure to respect civil liberties and democratic processes. A closer look also reveals long-simmering economic and political problems that have finally reached the boiling point.

Although Kenya is touted as a growing economy (an “economic miracle” with a 5-percent annual economic growth rate), the benefits have largely been concentrated among a small elite. An incredible 60 percent of Nairobi residents live in slum areas, and more than half of the people in Kenya live on less than \$2 per day. Poverty and inequality are a regular fact of life, with Kenyans exposed to enormous vulnerabilities in almost every sphere of life: income; access to education, water and health; and life expectancy. The majority of Kenyans live day to day, earning just enough money to pay for their daily needs. Frustration and hopelessness are the inevitable result of this kind of daily struggle and socioeconomic exclusion.

There were a lot of hopes built around this election. Late last December, on the eve of elections, ordinary Kenyans believed that their vote must be counted, and count. Hard-fought gains won by civic struggles in the 1990s had lifted public hopes, and “this was the best electoral process since independence (1963), whether in terms of registration, campaigns, mobilization of voters, pre-election violence, voter education, or turnout.” Across the country, long lines at voting stations were tolerated because voters were both excited and confident; they were committed to exercising their right and responsibility to vote. Election participation has been estimated at more than 70 percent of those eligible to vote.

But collective expectations for a transparent, democratic process were smashed, unleashing public frustration, when political leaders failed to overcome corruption and respect the will of the people. These dynamics, the true cause of the widespread unrest rippling through Kenya, created a severe humanitarian crisis, with grave ramifications for the entire region.

“Police officers (were) provoked to open fire. At least two female vendors were seriously injured by stray bullets...by late afternoon, public transport in and out the city had been paralyzed, as police had completely sealed off the business district to traffic.”

~Noel Mwakugu,
BBC News, Nairobi
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Intensified economic injustice, trampled civil liberties, and a growing humanitarian crisis

Since the rigged elections, Kenyans have been ignored in their call for new elections and have been denied the right to protest openly. Instead of transparency or rule of law, the government has ordered the police and the military to repress public demonstrations, while intentionally setting loose [illegally armed militias to incite violence along ethnic lines](#).

Zawadi Nyong'o, coordinator at the Association for Women's Rights in Development, comments, "When people stood in line to vote, it was because they believed they had a right to choose their rightful leader. This basic right has been stolen from us Kenyans, and the millions who live in poverty are now saying, 'Enough is enough!' That is why there is total mayhem in the country right now. These people have nothing more to lose and they are desperate for change."

With Kenya's economy and commerce frozen in the wake of the growing crisis, people's already meager livelihoods and general well-being have been devastated further. A representative of one of UUSC's partners in Kenya recounted, "We are being brave, but it's really bad. The nation is so agitated. It really seems the ordinary person, the street vendor, the informal-economy worker, those in low-income settlements have really been destroyed. Their livelihoods are gone...there are a lot of evictions, land grabs, people moved into camps."

UUSC's partners in Kenya and the impact of the crisis

In sharp contradiction to the international media's current spin, Kenya hums with more interethnic cooperation than strife. The country is home to more than 40 different ethnic groups, with intermarriage and diverse peoples working and living alongside each other representing the norm, not the exception. In fact, in the midst of this crisis, many individuals have intervened to protect and stand up for each other across lines of ethnicity, although few of these stories have been reported by the mainstream media.

[In a blog from Nairobi](#), UUSC President Charlie Clemens, who is leading a special UUSC delegation in Kenya to assess the extent and root causes of the crisis, tells of one story of courage and heroism in the face of interethnic violence. He recounts the story of a man who refused to abandon his friend to an angry mob of Raila supporters who had discovered his friend was a Kikuyu. As Clements points out, "There are plenty of villains on both sides of this issue, and heroes as well, but we hear almost nothing about the latter."

KENASVIT

UUSC's partner the [Kenya National Alliance of Street Vendors and Informal Traders \(KENASVIT\)](#) is an example of a broad national coalition that has derived strength, flexibility, and power from organizing workers inclusively, across lines of ethnicity, class, and gender.

KENASVIT is a national network of informal workers organized across seven regions and many ethnic groups in Kenya, with urban alliances in Eldoret, Kisumu, Machakos, Migori, Mombasa, Nakuru, and Nairobi. It aims to improve the rights and working conditions of street vendors and to effect relevant policy in Kenya's urban areas. The work of KENASVIT is groundbreaking and vital because, while street vendors and informal traders are among the most vulnerable of workers, they make significant contributions to their local and national economies. Through new models of informal-worker organizing, an otherwise unrepresented constituency can speak with a unified voice.

KENASVIT's success in organizing street vendors and informal traders – some of the world's most marginalized and diverse workers – is particularly notable in light of simplistic accounts by media that such interethnic cooperation has been impossible in Kenya.

Informal work, such as street vending and trading, plays an important role in a vibrant civil society, providing needed services and goods to a broad public, as well as providing a livelihood for a vast number of people who have experienced difficulty finding jobs in the formal economic sector. It sustains the economic, political, and social health of communities around the world.

Because commerce has been slowed considerably, and in some places halted, street vendors are unable to conduct the business that provides them with the daily income they need to survive. KENASVIT members have suffered evictions from both their places of work and residence; displacement; loss and destruction of property; looting and shortage of goods; insecurity; extremely reduced working hours; inability to access credit and pay council dues; lack of transportation; and halted operations. Sadly, they have also experienced deaths, injuries, and sexual violence. ([Read more.](#))

Women and girls have borne the brunt of this disruption. Women street vendors and their children – and child workers who must work to help put food on the table – face particular challenges, as the vending environment poses serious obstacles to earning a sustainable living with dignity.

Rock Women Group

The growing crisis in Kenya is also having a severe impact on both KENASVIT and UUSC's partner in Nairobi the [Rock Women Group](#), which works to protect the rights of girls and young women workers aged 13-21. The Rock Women Group works directly with child workers to help them gain access to sustainable, healthy alternatives to working in dangerous and exploitative jobs such as domestic work, gravel picking, and sex work.

In the wake of the recent postelection unrest, children participating in the Rock Women Group programs, including orphans and child heads-of-household, have been forcibly evicted from their homes and taken in by Rock Women Group leaders, who already house multiple foster children. The general lack of safety has disrupted the continuity of the Rock Women Group's work. Gender-based violence targeted at women and girls has been severe in this

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crisis, particularly in the low-income communities in which many of the participating members work and live.

A member of the Rock Women Group wrote to UUSC from Nairobi on January 22, “We have had a very difficult time. All our members were totally scattered and all our mothers are quite displaced. They have been badly affected and...we are trying to reach them but we haven’t managed to get all of them.”

UUSC is committed to monitoring the situation and providing ongoing support to our partners in Kenya. UUSC’s Kenya delegation is meeting with community leaders and colleague organizations, as well as with UUSC’s grassroots partners, to analyze what steps are needed to achieve a peaceful resolution and to continue our ongoing human rights work in Kenya.