

Economic Conditions & British Legacy Precipitating Political Upheaval in Kenya

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In the summer of 2022, Kenya elected William Ruto as its next president. For the first time since 1982, this process occurred peacefully, democratically, and constitutionally. The results of the highly contested election survived a challenge by Ruto's opposition, Raila Odinga, in the Kenyan High Court. The national election of 2022, furthermore, experienced a record degree of political participation, which saw the Kenyan electorate split fairly evenly. More importantly, Odinga represented a system of dynastical repression and collusion between the Kenyan legislature and executive, which recently saw both him, the leader of the opposition party, and former President Uhuru Kenyatta attempt to change the constitution in order to combine the powers of the two branches into a new office of the prime minister.

Vice President Ruto, conversely, represents a recent wave of populism and increased democracy, under the new constitutional system that unites previously, and sometimes, violently divided ethnic groups. Riding recent economic prosperity and solidarity, Ruto championed this rhetoric on his way into office, even though the unpopularity of his predecessors most likely swept him into office.¹ This is obviously a major accomplishment for democratic republicanism in Kenya, but the road here is marred with ethnic, class, and political violence in each national election.

Recent political stability, democratically achieved, was rewarded by the United States with a recent trade agreement, wherein Kenya is attempting to regain economic traction after losses suffered as a result the pandemic and the invasion of Ukraine. The political upheavals of the past, however, grew out of the autocratic nature of the executive branch, an extremely inequitable economic environment, and marginalized ethnic conditions as a result of the British

¹ Peter Lockwood, "Hustler Populism, Anti-Jubilee Backlash And Economic Injustice In Kenya's 2022 Elections," *African Affairs* 122, no. 487 (2023): 205.

imperial legacy. The extent of this even caused extremist terrorism to permeate Kenya, and the East Africa region as a whole, from the Somalian al-Qaeda and al-Shabaab factions.

While the “hustler populism” campaign moniker of Ruto’s 2022 presidential election may not have accurately represented the identity of the Kenyan working class, through whom he secured the election, this slogan channeled the collective grievances of this emerging socio-economic class. Under the consecutive administrations of Uhuru Kenyatta, campaign promises of universal healthcare, affordable modern housing, and the promise of a decline in unemployment went unfulfilled for the working class. Ruto identified the cause for these unfulfilled promises as the greedy nature of Kenya’s premier political dynasty, attempting solely to remain in power.²

While the electorate did not necessarily reflect the “hustler” identity, they did resonate with the dynastical nature of the executive branch, which has been accumulating wealth at the expense of the Kenyan government and people since independence in 1963. This centralization of personal wealth under the executive, while the rest of the populace struggled, has led to political crises and violence at nearly every opportunity for change.

The national election of 2013, which saw Uhuru Kenyatta secure his first term, was the first to occur since the adoption of the new Kenyan constitution in 2010. Under the new constitution, Kenya aligned more with the United States in its structure of government with a bicameral legislature with power separated from the executive, an independent agency for elections, increased civil rights, and a more qualified Supreme Court.³ With the new constitution, the national election of 2013 was filled with of high hopes and goals for the new government to

² Lockwood, 206-8.

³ Gary Bland, “Measuring the Quality of Kenya’s March 2013 Election,” *Election Law Journal* 14, no. 2 (June 2015): 136.

conduct free, fair, and peaceful elections. Thankfully, these elections were generally peaceful, but they have been since mired with problems of corruption and disputed results. Each election of Kenyatta against his opponent, Odinga, produced an extremely thin margin with many issues of potential voter fraud.⁴ While the Kenyan High Court demonstrated its constitutional independency by not favoring Kenyatta explicitly, the extent of Kenyatta's corruption became clear after attempted, but failed, constitutional reforms to restore the executive's dynastical powers and strip the legislature of its newfound pluralist power.⁵

During the earlier 2007 election cycle, ethnic violence defined the Kenyan political crises instigated by political leaders such as Kenyatta and Odinga using economic forces. This violence originated with the rejection of an attempted constitutional reform in 2005 by Kenyan referendum on the basis that the drafters did not consult enough of the Kenyan populace, especially in the non-metropolitan regions, instead isolating themselves with internal politicking and public posturing.⁶ When the 2007 national election resulted in the reelection of President Kibaki over Odinga, the latter called for Kenyans to violently reject the result, especially those that were the victim of executive abuse and neglect and happened to be his voter base.

Odinga used their disdain for the ruling elites and the injustices committed by them on the peoples of the Rift Valley and the southeastern coast, as well as widening economic disparities, gender inequalities, and landlessness to accelerate the violence between the two political sides. Kibaki and his predecessors represented this class of oppressive elites and received the majority of the voter violence. The policing apparatus, corrupt and ineffective as

⁴ Bland, 143-6.

⁵ Ferdinand Omondi, "Kenya's BBI blocked in scathing court verdict for President Kenyatta," *BBC News*, May 14, 2021.

⁶ Karuti Kayinga & James D. Long, "The Political Economy of Reforms in Kenya: The Post-2007 Election Violence and a New Constitution," *African Studies Review* 55, no. 1 (2012): 34.

they were, attempted to repress the ensuing anarchy on behalf of the administration, which resulted in cruel and excessive force on innocent protestors. In the end, approximately 1,100 Kenyans died and another five hundred thousand displaced.⁷ The repression of populist opposition by the elites and the violent resistance spawned the political crises of twentieth century in Kenya.

For the first time in its history, in 1991, Kenya made the transition to a multi-party parliamentary system, away from the single dominant party since independence, the Kenya African National Union (KANU). In accordance with rising oppositional demand and foreign pressure, the long-serving president at the time, Daniel arap Moi, dissolved the KANU-held parliament in October 1992. A rising tide of political opposition during the late 1980s and early 1990s revealed the emerging issues and figures of the 2007 violence and political strife. Upstart political parties that held forth justice for the marginalized and an extension of civil liberties to all ethnicities and classes.

Moreover, these parties featured leaders of both the Kikuyu and Luo people, the former being the ethnicity that represents status and wealth in Kenya and the latter representing the rural, marginalized peoples who together formed the Forum for the Restoration of Democracy (FORD). This signaled a massive divergence in public and political opinion away from the KANU, which originally began as the party of the Kikuyu, founded by Jomo Kenyatta, who combined with Luo leader Oginga Odinga to unite Kenya in independence in the 1960s. This coalition unacceptably challenged Moi's authority.⁸ This effort proved fruitless as KANU swept the election and Moi once again secured reelection. The 1992 election had been rigged to favor

⁷ Njoki s. Ndungu, "Kenya: The December 2007 Election Crisis," *Mediterranean Quarterly* 19, no. 4 (2008): 113-117, DOI 10.1215/10474552-2008-028.

⁸ David Throup & Charles Hornsby, *Multi-Party Politics in Kenya: The Kenyatta & Moi States & The Triumph of the System in the 1992 Election* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1998), 60-5.

the ruling party and its leader in every facet, from the structure of counting and registration to the redistricting of constituencies and intimidating the opposition's electorate.⁹ The aftermath of this election mirrored that of 2007 with thousands dead and displaced in resistance to the reinforced repression of the Moi administration.¹⁰

This administration has solely existed on election rigging and the violent suppression of any opposition. In 1988, the concept of *mlolongo*, or “queuing,” was introduced, essentially ending the secret ballot and igniting of the populist movement in Kenya.¹¹ More significantly, this administration smothered an attempted military coup from within the Kenyan Air Force in 1982, directly causing the “snap elections” of 1983. While the coup failed due to lack of support outside of its leader's own personal ambitions,¹² it prompted an overreaction by the Moi administration. The air force of the military was entirely disbanded and uninvolved opposition leaders, notably the Odinga family, were arrested. This small, insignificant coup shook the confidence to such a degree that Moi ordered national elections a year early, in 1983, to test KANU party loyalty because of worsening economic conditions and fears of true political revolt derived from these led by the Odinga family.¹³ From here, Moi reconstructed a security apparatus to further consolidate executive power and solidify the dynastical, unitary nature of the president,¹⁴ which only invited increased political violence from the opposition and the Kenyan people.

⁹ Throup, 284-5.

¹⁰ Throup, 541-4.

¹¹ Blaine Harden, “Many Voters Stay Home as Kenya Drops Secret Ballot in Parliamentary Election,” *The Washington Post*, February 24, 1988, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1988/02/25/many-voters-stay-home-as-kenya-drops-secret-ballot-in-parliamentary-election/773b5289-1763-4903-b65c-e081311fb998/>.

¹² Jim Bailey, Garth Bundeh, & Carole Cooper, *Kenya: The National Epic* (Nairobi: Kenway Publications, 1993), 266.

¹³ Norman Miller & Rodger Yeager, *Kenya: The Quest for Prosperity, Second Edition* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 100-3.

¹⁴ Rok Ajulu, *Post-Colonial Kenya: The Rise of an Authoritarian and Predatory State* (New York: Routledge, 2022), 99-100.

The rollercoaster of Kenya's economic history goes a long in explaining the political crises of each turbulent administration, from independence through the present day. Under Kenya's first president, Jomo Kenyatta, the economy grew exponentially following independence. That is to say, the gross domestic product grew from nearly nothing at an annual rate of six to eight percent over the entirety of Kenyatta's administration, ending in 1978. During this time, agriculture became the primary industry in Kenya and remains so to this day.¹⁵ Kenyatta labeled the new economic growth process "Africanization," which promoted home-rule economic policies such as smallholder agriculture through land redistribution, public investment in metropolitan retail industries, and incentivized private, foreign investment in heavy industry. These policies were expanded in a sessional paper authored by Kenyan members of parliament, Tom Mboya and Mwai Kibaki, with an emphasis on maintaining neutrality during the Cold War. This paper advocated that Kenya should not commit itself to the politicized economics of capitalism versus communism. Kenya, instead the paper argued, should synthesize a new form of economics called "African Socialism," which called for government control of the higher levels of the economy without public ownership of property and business.¹⁶ After the death of Kenyatta, however, the economy declined under the liberal policies of the new Moi administration and involvement in international politics, which Mboya and Kibaki warned against.

Following Moi's consolidation of power after the 1982 attempted coup, Kenya sought foreign investment from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in the name of

¹⁵ Mwangi S. Kimenyi, Francis M. Mwege, & Njuguna S. Ndung'u, "The African Lions: Kenya country case study," *The Brookings Institution* (May 2016): 10-1, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/african-lions-kenya-country-case-study/>.

¹⁶ Republic of Kenya, 'African Socialism and its Application to Planning in Kenya,' *Sessional Papers*, 1965, No. 10, 16-7, <http://repository.kippira.or.ke/handle/123456789/2345>.

liberalization. Kenya agreed to structural loans from the organizations on the condition that the nation agree to loosen strict government regulations in the economy and begin exporting industrial products. These organizations hoped to stem the rising tide of authoritarianism in Kenya's executive, in which the Moi administration responded by enacting extremely limited reforms, and then abandoning them when immediate issues arose.¹⁷ Finally, beginning in 1988, Kenya started exporting manufactured goods and, using the structural loans from the IMF and World Bank, incentivized the increasingly globalizing American textile industry. Even then, this exportation of garments to the United States remained extremely limited, as only seventy American firms invested in Kenyan labor by the end of the century.

While the nation eventually exported both agricultural and manufactured goods, the lengthy and erratic process to allow this had severe impacts on the Kenyan people.¹⁸ All trade plummeted from the first hint of liberalized reforms, which is the opposite of what liberalization is meant to accomplish, signifying the non-commitment of the administration to opening markets. Import-export profits only recovered slightly after U.S. textile and merchandise investors pried back open Kenya's ports in the late 1980s, just in time for a global recession to hit in the early 1990s. Only after further pressure from the United States, and after the recession lifted in 1992, causing imports to bottom out the next year, did Kenya finally eliminate foreign trade restrictions by the end of the century. As a result, trade profits finally recovered to pre-Moi levels.

¹⁷ Geoffrey Gertz, "Kenya's Trade Liberalization of the 1980s and 90s: Policies, Impacts, and Implications," (Commissioned: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace's Trade, Equity, and Development Program, 2008), 3, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/kenya_background.pdf.

¹⁸ Gertz, 4.

The impact of this reluctance in trade policy reflected erratically in the nation's GDP growth, dipping into the negatives in 1992¹⁹ and sending Kenya into a spiral of agricultural drought, high inflation, and unemployment. This rollercoaster instilled in the Kenyan professional class a lack of trust in formal employment and caused many to flock to informal sectors. These jobs, unprotected by state labor laws, do not have minimum wages, benefits, maximum hours, workplace safety regulations; therefore, the employed faced much higher rates of ethnic discrimination.²⁰

This overcommitment of the Kenyan economy, promoted by the Ministry of Agriculture, into the informal sector left the nation vulnerable to yet another recession spawned by adverse weather.²¹ By this time, American investors froze their textile production due to the lack of consistent labor. Impatient with the growing levels of corruption and the reluctance of Moi to adhere to their loan conditions, the IMF and World Bank suspended all funding. Despite the turmoil, Moi kept winning clearly rigged elections in both 1992 and 1997, but the KANU party in parliament began to hemorrhage seats with the legalization of multiple parties. This set up the mobilization of the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC), led by Mwai Kibaki, to politically force Moi into retirement in 2002. Kibaki secured the presidency, despite Moi choosing Uhuru Kenyatta as his successor, by promising sweeping political and economic reforms. The economic reforms, on one hand, worked so well that the informal sector mobilized to oppose the political ones.²² While economic conditions provide significant context to the political crises of the

¹⁹ Gertz, 6-7.

²⁰ Gertz, 9.

²¹ Hezron O. Nyangito & Joseph T. Karugia, "The Impact of Recent Policy Changes on the Agricultural Sector and Public Agricultural Research in Kenya," In *Globalization and The Developing Countries: Emerging Strategies For Rural Development And Poverty Alleviation*, edited by David Bigman, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: CABI Publications, 2002), 136.

²² Ajulu, 135, 145-7.

twentieth century, one cannot fully explain the context without understanding the legacy of ethnic-based marginalization and repression left by the British empire.

Kenya became a British colony relatively late in the empire's history, with a limited economic protectorate established in the 1880s, then full colony status imposed in 1920. This political distinction, however, had little impact on the level of British influence from the onset. At every level of society, their influence is still present today, mostly in the underlying conditions of the seemingly constant and consistent political upheaval and conflict in Kenya. Because of this, the legacy of the British empire is a systemic issue that ranges from the structure and failures of the economy to societal hierarchy, dictating political corruption and civil liberties.

Following the Second World War, the United States committed to rebuilding Western Europe, with a few conditions. In addition to staving off communism at home, nations such as Great Britain had to develop capitalism in the domestic economies of their colonies so that they could eventually become independent democracies. The British believed that the industrialization of Kenya would develop their economy and wean them off the importation of Western manufactured consumer goods, known as import-substitution. The primary issue with this policy was the lack of a domestic market for these consumer goods in the first place. The only sector of the population that consumed these goods were either European settlers in the highlands or the native Kikuyu elites on the metropolitan coast. This did not justify mass industrialization to replace such a small demand for the products, especially since these were the only manufactured goods consumed across all of the colony, and later, the nation of Kenya during the mid-twentieth century.²³

²³ Henk A. Meilink, "The Effects of Import-Substitution: The Case of Kenya's Manufacturing Sector," *Institute for Development Studies, University of Nairobi, Discussion Paper* 276 (1982): 3, <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/754>.

The mass industrialization called in workers from the rural areas of Kenya, mainly of the Luo people, which diverted labor and therefore profits from the agricultural sector. This left those who stayed even more impoverished and disenfranchised than they already were. Once import-substitution failed and factories began to close in the late 1970s, due to rising oil prices,²⁴ those Luo workers entered the informal sector en masse. As previously covered, this sector of the workforce would be cycled through the half-hearted liberalization effort of the Moi administration. The Luo of the informal economy became the majority of the populist reform movement that frequently, and often, violently fought against the Kikuyu-based dynasty of the early presidents for increased representation in government and socio-economic protections against further marginalization.²⁵ Marginalization, and the subsequent violence toward, groups lower in the social hierarchy is far from new in British Kenya.

The Luo, under the representation of Tom Mboya in Kikuyu power circles, were perhaps the least severe of the marginalized people groups that lacked representation during the transition to independence. This was intentional on the part of the British, as the elite Kikuyu were the preferred group to succeed their control.²⁶ Groups such as the Mau Mau, a breakaway non-elite Kikuyu group, and Somali Kenyans, faced the most violent consolidation and marginalization. In the case of the Mau Mau rebellion, a specific economically repressed group of rural, non-Anglican Kikuyu people banded together with their other marginalized neighbors of the Meru, Embu, Akamba, and Maasai peoples to resist consolidation by the British under centralized rule.²⁷

²⁴ Meilink, 14.

²⁵ Lone Riisgaard, et. al., "Challenging The Formality Bias: The Organization of Informal Work, Working Relations, and Collective Agency in Kenya And Tanzania," *Development Policy Review* 42, e12729 (2024): 13-4.

²⁶ David Goldsworthy, "Ethnicity and Leadership in Africa: The 'Untypical' Case of Tom Mboya," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 20, no. 1 (1982): 113.

²⁷ David Anderson, *Histories Of The Hanged: The Dirty War In Kenya And The End Of Empire*, (New York : W.W. Norton, 2005), 20-1.

The Somalis are a separate issue of marginalization, as their subjugation was initiated by Kenyatta in 1962. A referendum of Somalis in Kenya to breakaway to join the Republic of Somalia, not favored by the new Kenyatta administration, was sent to the House of Lords in the British Parliament to decide on the new boundaries of the independent Kenya. From the assembly's discussions, they sided with Kenyatta's sentiment of societal superiority over the Somali people.²⁸ A legacy of repression has trickled down among these marginalized peoples through the years, manifesting in political violence against their oppressors, typically versus the executive dynasty. Concentrations of Somali Kenyans have remained in the northeast frontier, significantly affecting the national security capacity of the nation against their volatile neighbor of Somalia just beyond that frontier. Specifically in 2011 when Kenya deployed troops into Somalia as a part of the War on Terror, the al-Shabaab militant groups exploited the historical marginalization of Somalis in Kenya by provoking the national security forces into retributive attacks against them. Al-Shabaab conducted transborder guerilla attacks on military outposts in northeast Kenya, using the Somali Kenyans as cover, and then using Kenyan executive oppression of those communities to stir up public resistance against Kenyan forces occupying territory back in Somalia.²⁹

Further consolidation, repression, and marginalization by the Kenyatta regime of minority peoples in the non-metropolitan areas of Kenya is not limited to the Somalis. Those opposed to Kenyan nationalism and the KANU, who typically sided with the Kenyan African Democratic Union (KADU), supported regionalism, decentralization, and self-governance of minority groups. This is better known as *majimboism*, a term eventually used as a slur by

²⁸ United Kingdom, House of Lords, 'Northern Frontier District of Kenya,' *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, 5th ser., vol. 248 (1963).

²⁹ Mohammed Shire, "Provoking an Overreaction: Transborder Guerrilla Warfare in the Kenya-Somalia Borderlands." *African Security* 16, no. 1 (2023): 61.

Kenyatta and the KANU.³⁰ In the eyes of the British, mainly through the Church of England's Church Missionary Society periodical, they opposed *majimboism*, or as they called it, "tribal feeling."³¹ *Majimboism* directly opposed the furthering of evangelism of the Anglican church into rural areas, which would give more control to the centralized authority of the Kikuyu nationalists, of which the Anglican church supported with resources.³² The legacy of *majimboism* has been maintained as an inflammatory rhetoric against the executive dynasty at every major political crisis previously covered, especially in 1990s and culminating with the horrific riots of 2007.³³ The British legacy of marginalization and repression is lengthy and extensive, providing the underlying historical motives of violence against the regimes of autocratical presidents.

The repressive legacy of the British, inequitable economic conditions among the ethnic groups, and the generally autocratic nature of presidents committed staying power long after they have lost popular support, has resulted in a long string of high-fatality political crises. From the more modern repressive tactics of election fraud, legislative manipulation, and neglectful, perhaps abusive economic policies to the lasting legacy of violent ethnic marginalization and class division left by the British empire, the people of Kenya have weathered the storm on the path to democratic modernity and economic prosperity. This internal mess, however, allowed the transnational terrorism of al-Qaeda and especially the transborder guerilla warfare of al-Shabaab to permeate Kenya from the northeast throughout the late 1990s and 2000s. While this progression dragged the nation into the Global War on Terror, Kenya's successes in these

³⁰ David Anderson, "Yours in Struggle for Majimbo'. Nationalism and the Party Politics of Decolonization in Kenya, 1955-64," *Journal of Contemporary History* 40, no. 3 (2005): 547.

³¹ Church Missionary Society, "Diocese of Mombasa," *CMS Historical Record* 1962-1963, no. 1: 65-6.

³² Church Missionary Society, "Diocese of Mombasa," *CMS Historical Record* 1961-1962, no. 1: 81-2.

³³ Robert M. Maxon, *Kenya's Independence Constitution: Constitution-Making and End of Empire*, (Plymouth, UK: Fairleigh Dickenson University Press, 2011), 8-9.

conflicts, the pacification of the electoral process, and stabilization of the economy has attracted the formal attention and trust of the international community, especially the United States.

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