

# Kenya Kikuyus, Long Dominant, Are Now Routed

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NAKURU, [Kenya](#) — Kenya's privileged tribe is on the run.

Over the past few days, tens of thousands of Kikuyus, the tribe of Kenya's president, have packed into heavily guarded buses to flee the western part of the country because of ethnic violence. On Sunday, endless convoys of buses — some with their windshields smashed by rocks — crawled across a landscape of scorched homes and empty farms.

It is nothing short of a mass exodus. The tribe that has dominated business and politics in Kenya since independence in 1963 is now being chased off its land by machete-wielding mobs made up of members of other tribes furious about the Dec. 27 election, which Kenya's president, [Mwai Kibaki](#), won under dubious circumstances. In some places, Kikuyus have been hunted down with bows and arrows.

The hospital in Nakuru, a town in the Rift Valley, is full of Kikuyu men with deep ax wounds, fingers cut off and slash marks across their faces.

"It was the Kalenjin," said Samuel Mburu, a Kikuyu farmer with rows of stitches in his head, when asked who had nearly killed him. The Kalenjin are one of the bigger tribes in the Rift Valley, and they have fought fiercely with the Kikuyus before, mostly over land.

Many Kalenjin are unapologetic. Robert Tutuny, a Kalenjin farmer, stood on a hillside on Sunday with an iron bar in his hands and looked down at the charred remains of a Kikuyu village that was razed a week ago.

"We hate these people," Mr. Tutuny said.

The election — and the unresolved battle about who won — has ignited old tensions in Kenya, which in a week and a half has gone from being one of Africa's most promising countries to another equatorial trouble zone.

The political impasse continued Sunday, with Jendayi E. Frazer, the American assistant secretary of state for African affairs, meeting again with opposition leaders and government officials, but no resolution was in sight.

The heavy fighting that claimed more than 300 lives last week has subsided and many people have gone back to work in the capital, Nairobi. There, people from different tribes live side by side and often work in the same office. They are aware of ethnic differences and sometimes joke about them, but it usually does not go further than that.

But out here — where little towns rise from the veld like mirages and where there is so much wide-open space it seems incongruous to fight over land — these differences matter. A tribal war

is shaping up between the Kalenjin, who mostly support Kenya's opposition leaders, and the Kikuyus, who voted heavily — up to 98 percent in some areas — for the president.

Tens of thousands of Kikuyus are camped out at police stations and churches for protection, waiting for buses guarded by military escorts to evacuate them to the central highlands, the traditional Kikuyu homeland. There, amid the lush tea fields and rolling green hills, they are safe because almost everyone who lives in the highlands is Kikuyu.

Ethnic conflict is now threatening the decades of stability that has set Kenya apart from so many of its neighbors, like Congo, Rwanda, Somalia and Sudan. But Kenya has struggled with ethnic violence before. Its rare bursts usually come around election time.

“You have to understand that these issues are much deeper than ethnic,” said Maina Kiai, chairman of the Kenya National [Commission on Human Rights](#).

“They are political,” he said, and “they go back to land.”

The last time the Rift Valley was this violent was in 1992, another election year in Kenya and a time of turbulent transition between dictatorship and democracy. Kalenjin militias, stirred up by politicians who told them that the valley was Kalenjin ancestral land, massacred hundreds of Kikuyus in a bid to steal their farms.

Since then, Mr. Kiai said, “Emotions have been festering, resentments have been building and we sat around pretending ethnicity didn't exist.”

Kenya has more than 40 tribes, but the Kikuyus have almost always been on top. They run shops, restaurants, banks and factories across the country. One reason Mr. Kibaki has engendered so much resentment from other tribes is because many of the top officials in his government — including the ministers of defense, justice, finance and internal security — are Kikuyus.

The Kikuyus are the biggest tribe in Kenya but far from a majority, at 22 percent of the population. The Kalenjins make up about 12 percent.

In the Rift Valley, the anti-Kikuyu grudge goes back to independence, when the British government bought out Britons who owned huge, picturesque farms. But instead of redistributing that land to the impoverished people who had lived here for centuries, like the Kalenjin and Masai, the newly formed Kenyan government, led by Jomo Kenyatta, a Kikuyu, gave much of it to Kikuyus from other areas.

Most of the Kikuyus here are hardly rich. The men lying on bloody sheets at the Nakuru hospital are emaciated farmers with threadbare clothes. The same goes for the Kikuyus who have been slaughtered by gangs of opposing tribes in Nairobi's slums, causing an exodus from there, too. They lived in iron shanties just as their non-Kikuyu neighbors do.

But in many cases, the Kikuyus own kiosks or small patches of land or they are related to someone who does, and that makes them a little better off by local standards.

“Land is very important to us,” said Anthony Kirunga, a Kikuyu, who sells spare car parts in Nakuru. “It's not our fault that other people are jealous.”

This election stirred up anti-Kikuyu jealousies like never before. Raila Odinga, the top opposition candidate and a member of the Luo tribe, built his campaign on a promise to end Kikuyu favoritism and share the fruits of Kenya's growing economy with all tribes.

Early election results had him way ahead and his party winning the most seats in Parliament. But at the 11th hour of the vote-tallying process last Sunday, Mr. Kibaki surged. Election observers have said the president's party rigged the results to stay in power.

Millions of opposition supporters across Kenya were outraged. Not only did their candidate lose, but it also seemed to them that their system, which until the election had been celebrated as one of the most vibrant democracies in Africa, had cheated them.

In western Kenya, where Kikuyus are vastly outnumbered, they became easy targets. In Kisumu, the third-largest city in the country, Luos went on a rampage, burning down Kikuyu shops and ransacking the downtown.

In the Rift Valley, Kalenjin gangs stormed Kikuyu farms. Police officers seemed reluctant to intervene. Dozens of Kikuyus were massacred, including up to 50 women and children hiding in a church who were burned alive. What has kept the death toll from rising even higher is the fact that few people here have guns; most of the clashes have been fought with clubs, knives and stones.

Jeremiah Mukuna, 75, a Kikuyu farmer, was attacked by a Kalenjin mob last Monday while he was sitting on the porch of his shack, his family said. His head was split open with an ax. On Sunday, he lay in a coma in the Nakuru hospital, taking short, shallow breaths.

His wife, Grace, said she was leaving the Rift Valley.

"I will never come back," she said.

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