

On Eve of Vote, Fragile Valley in Kenya Faces New Divisions

By Jeffrey Gettleman

2 March 2013

KIAMBAA, Kenya — After another long day, Joseph Kairuri Mwangi walked back to his farmhouse shack, the late afternoon sun slanting behind him, his strides slow, his shoes muddy with rich, freshly turned earth.

It has been five years since his right hand was nearly cut off, but it still hurts.

“Right here,” he said, gingerly touching the scars. “I still feel pain right here.”

This whole area is a land of scars. On the shanties made from burned-up sheet metal, salvaged from homes set afire by mobs. On people’s limbs and faces. And in their hearts.

Five years ago, the Rift Valley of Kenya, a spectacularly verdant landscape of rolling hills, emerald green tea plantations and quilted farmland, suddenly exploded. A disputed election set off ethnic clashes that killed more than 1,000 people nationwide — more than 30 were burned alive in a church here in Kiambaa — and thousands are still living in shacks and tents, driven off their land with nowhere to go.

This was the seething center of Kenya’s upheaval, and now that the country is about to hold another major election on Monday, the first since the tumult of 2007 and 2008, the Rift Valley is still polarized, though some of the prejudices and poisonous feelings have shifted along with changes in political alliances.

“Those Luos,” said David Wanjohi Chege, a member of the Kikuyu ethnic group, speaking derisively about another one of Kenya’s major ethnic groups. “Those Luos won’t stop at nothing.”

Most people agree that preparations for this election are a vast improvement from the last time around. The creaky manual voting systems that promptly broke down have been replaced with state of the art digital technology, and nonprofit groups have devised social media tools to detect and parry hate speech. [PeaceTXT](#), for example, is a text messaging service that sends out blasts of pro-peace messages to specific areas when trouble is brewing.

Donor nations have been holding Kenya’s hand much tighter this time around, advising election officials and contributing more than \$100 million in election preparation. Investors big and small have shown their confidence that the vote will be all right, with Kenyan stocks [edging up](#) in the past week. “I don’t think this time will be as bad,” said Bidan Thuku Mwangi, who runs a small bridal shop in the Rift Valley town of Londiani. On the floor are seven charred sewing machines, destroyed in the mayhem of 2008, but next to them is a sheaf of papers — an application for a new loan. “I’m waiting till after the election,” he said with a cautious smile. “Just in case.”

According to Human Rights Watch, Rift Valley politicians have been holding secretive night meetings, and more guns may have seeped in. Machete sales are sharply rising, other human rights observers in Kenya said recently, though it is not clear how much of this is fact and how much is fiction.

Some people are beginning to move out of ethnically mixed areas, frightened that there could be postelection reprisals, along ethnic lines, like what happened in 2008.

“All this is the mischief of politicians,” said Dominico Owiti, who lives in a new trouble spot, Sondu, a bushy borderland between the Luos and the Kalenjins. The two ethnic groups were allies during the last election, but because of opportunistic political alliances struck between Kenya’s leading politicians, they now find themselves on opposite sides of a very combustible political divide.

Similarly, two groups that fought so bitterly here the last time, the Kalenjins and the Kikuyus, are now political allies because their leaders have teamed up to run for president and deputy president on the same ticket.

“I don’t like it,” said Mary Macharia, a Kikuyu woman whose daughter was killed in the church fire in 2008, which was set by a Kalenjin mob. “But who am I to refuse?”

Kenya is considered one of the most modern countries in Africa, but ethnically charged politics is an Achilles’ heel. Colonial policies typecast certain ethnic groups — the Masai were the guards, the Kikuyus the farmhands, the Luos the teachers — and ethnicity has continued to serve as a stubbornly important basis of identity.

During elections, politicians use ethnic differences to stir up voters, and already 200 people have been killed in the Tana River Delta area of Kenya in clashes that both sides say have been [inflamed by electoral politics](#).

In neighboring Tanzania, also a mosaic of dozens of ethnic groups, the government has instituted specific policies — like pushing the use of a common language, Swahili, and outlawing ethnically based political parties — to build a common Tanzanian identity. But here in Kenya, many people still speak their “mother tongue,” and interethnic marriage remains relatively rare.

“Everything has always been tribe-based,” said Christine Ololo Atieno, a Luo, who sells secondhand shoes in Kisumu, a big city in western Kenya.

In this election, an old political rivalry is being resurrected. Kenya’s president, Mwai Kibaki, is leaving office because of term limits, and the two front-runners to replace him are Raila Odinga, the prime minister and a Luo, and Uhuru Kenyatta, a deputy prime minister and a Kikuyu. The competition between these two families goes back to Kenya’s independence in 1963. Mr. Kenyatta’s father, Jomo, became the first president and Mr. Odinga’s father, Jaramogi, became the first vice president, only to quit soon afterward, planting the seeds for a feud lasting decades.

Polls show the race neck and neck, most likely headed for a heated runoff in April. But lately, things seem to have been breaking Mr. Kenyatta’s way.

Mr. Kenyatta has been charged by the International Criminal Court with crimes against humanity, accused of bankrolling Kikuyu death squads that murdered dozens of Luos in 2008. But a Kenyan court recently said that it could not block Mr. Kenyatta from running for president, despite legal arguments that he does not meet [integrity standards laid out](#) in Kenya’s new Constitution, passed in 2010.

This past week, officials at the International Criminal Court indicated that Mr. Kenyatta’s trial, which was supposed to start in April, would be delayed until later this year.

In Kenya, elections are often won or lost based on simple ethnic arithmetic. To win the presidency, conventional wisdom here says, a candidate must carry three of Kenya’s five big ethnic groups — the Kikuyu, Luhya, Kalenjin, Luo and Kamba.

Right now, Mr. Odinga is expected to carry two: the Luo and Kamba, the group of his running mate, Stephen Kalonzo Musyoka. And Mr. Kenyatta is counting on two: the Kikuyu and the Kalenjin of his running mate, William Ruto, who has also been indicted by the International Criminal Court. (The two used to be fierce enemies, but analysts say they joined forces because they felt it was their best chance of beating the charges.)

This leaves the Luhya as the so-called swing tribe, with the leading Luhya politician, Musalia Mudavadi, a potential kingmaker.

Many Kenyans are worried about a “Kikuyu Plan B,” in which the Kikuyu-dominated military and intelligence services refuse to accept Mr. Odinga, should he win. In the past few weeks, truckloads of soldiers have appeared in the Rift Valley, maybe as a security precaution or, others say, to intimidate voters. Kenya’s chief justice recently accused the head of the civil service, a Kikuyu power broker, of trying to intimidate him.

Mr. Odinga, who said he was cheated out of winning the election last time, has warned that his rivals may be planning to rig the vote, and in an interview with *The Financial Times* published on Saturday, he was quoted as saying: “I have warned them the consequences may be worse than last time round. The people will not stomach another rigging.”

The Odinga campaign then released a statement saying that he felt “absolutely slandered” by the article and denied that his comments implied a threat of violence if he lost.

At this time of year, the Rift Valley and much of western Kenya is green and alive, smelling of manure, hay and freshly cut sugar cane. It is busy with tractors going to and fro and people swinging hoes in the fields.

“I’m just praying for peace,” said Ms. Atieno, the shoe seller. “Peace.”