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Kenyan Opposition Wins a Skirmish

By [JEFFREY GETTLEMAN](#)

NAIROBI, [Kenya](#) — Judging from the opening session of Parliament on Tuesday, it looks like it is going to be a long political year in Kenya.

Parliament members, meeting for the first time since Kenya's election crisis erupted last month, shouted at one another for an hour and a half over how to vote for a new speaker — whether the vote should be in secret — and then shouted some more when it came time to decide where to put the ballot box.

In the end, opposition leaders prevailed in the first political skirmish since the disputed election, installing their candidate in the influential position of the Parliament's speaker.

It took three heated hours. Both sides hurled bitter accusations, with opposition leaders jumping out of their seats to accuse the party of President [Mwai Kibaki](#) of rigging the vote in the Dec. 27 election, and the president's party yelling back that the opposition had instigated the burst of ethnically driven violence that followed it. On Tuesday, Red Cross officials said the nationwide death toll had risen to at least 612.

“You went into the elections with secret ballots, and you stole the vote,” shouted William Ruto, one of the more vocal opposition leaders.

“Genocide!” members of the president's party hissed back at him.

“Can we now proceed, please?” an exasperated clerk asked.

The session seemed a mix of theatrics, stubbornness, genuine outrage and partisan politics, with Parliament members split down the middle, half supporting the president and half supporting the opposition. The president's party, the Party of National Unity, wanted to select the speaker via secret ballot, while the opposition insisted they had the right to show their colleagues how they voted.

The opposition eventually backed down before Kenneth Marende, a lawyer and member of the leading opposition party, the Orange Democratic Movement, won the job of speaker by a vote of 105 to 101, defeating an ally of the president.

The speaker is essentially the referee of the Parliament, controlling the flow of debate and setting the agenda, though the Parliament historically has been weak compared with the presidency, which has sweeping powers.

The posturing in the scarlet-carpeted, wood-paneled Parliament chamber laid bare the political crisis that has shaken Kenya, which until last month was considered one of the most stable countries in Africa.

Neither side has been willing to give an inch, with Mr. Kibaki and [Raila Odinga](#), the top opposition leader, each claiming to have won the presidency. Despite pleas from Western leaders and people across Kenya, the two men have refused to meet.

Indeed, Tuesday's session of Parliament may have been the first time they had been in the same room since the election. Many people here say the tensions — and violence — will continue until the two men sit down with each other and agree on a durable political solution.

[Kofi Annan](#), the former secretary general of the [United Nations](#), was expected to arrive in Kenya on Tuesday to help mediate, but reports on Kenyan television on Tuesday night said he had fallen ill and was postponing his trip.

Meanwhile, opposition leaders vowed to press ahead with their plans to hold protests across the country on Wednesday. Many Kenyans fear that the protests could degenerate into bloodshed and destruction. The last set of rallies ignited fighting in the slums between ethnic groups loyal to the opposition and those loyal to the president.

But the opposition's victory in the contest for speaker may cool things down. It showed for the first time that the opposition controlled Parliament, which could provide an outlet for the frustrations that have been building among opposition supporters.

Mr. Odinga's party has 99 seats of the 210 elected positions, the most of any party, while the president's party has less than 45. Opposition leaders succeeded in getting members of the smaller, independent parties to vote with them, which proved the crucial difference. Each opposition member wore an orange handkerchief, a small square of defiance.

At the end of the session, Mr. Marende, the newly elected speaker, resisted calls by members of his party to change his oath of office to remove any mention of the president.

Mr. Kibaki sat at the front of the chamber, statue-still and silent, for the entire session, which ran for more than nine hours.

Kennedy Abwao contributed reporting.