



**Ethnicity and Violence in the  
2007 Elections in Kenya**

The recent Kenyan elections have given rise to violent confrontations between ethnic communities. During the first half of December, in the run up to the elections, the University of Oxford, in collaboration with researchers from the Michigan State University and the University of Connecticut, conducted a detailed survey of voter intentions, attitudes towards violence, corruption, performance of leaders, political party preferences, ethnicity and socio-economic characteristics. The data are based on a sample of 1207 eligible voters, who were interviewed in 76 of Kenya's 210 electoral constituencies between November 30 and December 7, 2007. Although the survey was designed to be nationally and regionally representative, a number of factors limited the implementation of the survey such that the final sample was to some extent biased towards persons of higher economic status.

The survey gives a good indication of voter intentions immediately before Kenya's December 27, 2007 general elections. Nearly all respondents (93 percent) were registered voters and virtually all intended to vote. We restricted our analysis to likely voters, that is, those who were registered and indicated that they planned to vote. With reference to this sub-sample, we find that if the presidential election had been held on the day of our interviews, Raila Odinga (ODM) would have received 46.5 percent of the vote, with Mwai Kibaki (PNU) receiving 40.1 percent. A third presidential candidate, Kalonzo Musyoka (ODM-K), would have received 8.3 percent. About 2.8 percent of respondents refused to answer, and 1 percent was undecided. Beyond likely voters, most of those who were still undecided on whether to vote at all were inclined to favor Mr. Odinga.

Interpreting voting intentions in the parliamentary election is more complex. Asked about their party of choice, respondents named a total of 25 parties. The Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) was favored by largest proportion of those intending to vote at 42.4 percent. A further 33.4 percent favored the Party of National Unity (PNU) and 6.2 percent opted for ODM-Kenya. It should be noted that many of the other parties were affiliates of PNU and had pledged to support the PNU presidential candidate. Including preferences for these PNU-affiliate parties, the survey results reveal that the ODM and the PNU plus affiliates were in a very tight race. The closeness of the race could have motivated opposing groups to engage in pre- and post-election violence, expulsions of party agents and poll observers, and manipulation of the counting, reporting, and tallying of votes.

Alleged electoral irregularities are unlikely to come as a surprise to the Kenyan electorate: when asked how free and fair they thought the elections were going to be, 70 percent expected some problems, and about half expected major problems or worse. Suspicions were higher among Odinga's supporters, with more than 65 percent expecting major problems or worse compared to

about 35 percent among likely voters for Kibaki. A similar gap between Odinga and Kibaki supporters was evident with respect to the specific fear that the counting and reporting of results would not be free and fair.

Voting intentions reflected a strong ethnic quality. Kenya is characterized by considerable cultural diversity with more than 40 distinct ethnic groups. The largest group, the Kikuyu, accounts for less than a quarter of the population and other main groups include the Luhya, Luo, Kalenjin, Kamba, Kisii and Meru. It is clear that among the Kikuyu, support for Kibaki was overwhelming, while support for Odinga was similarly high amongst the Luo; each enjoyed more than 80 percent support from voters of their own ethnic groups. But together these two groups constitute less than a third of the total population. Some other ethnic groups supported specific candidates as well: the Meru virtually all supported Kibaki; the Kamba overwhelmingly support Musyoka; and the Kalenjin planned to vote mainly for Odinga. These figures imply that at least another third of the population intended to vote mainly along ethnic lines. The Kisii and the Luyha largely supported Odinga, but less exclusively.

But it is too easy to dismiss voting intentions as a serious indictment of President Kibaki's rule in recent years. Economic growth has been relatively robust since he took office in 2002, being above 6 percent in the last three years. Broad macroeconomic stability has been maintained as well. President Kibaki's approval ratings were still very high in late 2007: 69 percent approved or strongly approved of the way he performed in the previous 12 months, while less than 10 percent disapproved or strongly disapproved (the rest neither approved nor disapproved). Unsurprisingly, likely Kibaki voters gave the highest approval ratings at 93 percent. But also among likely Odinga voters, Kibaki's ratings were very positive with 47 percent approving or strongly approving, and only 15 percent disapproving or strongly disapproving. Even among people of Luo ethnic origin, approval of Kibaki's performance stood at 44 percent, well above his disapproval rate of only 14 percent.

People's perceptions of economic conditions in the country reflect their appreciation of the incumbent's record, with 51 percent reporting that the country was doing better or much better during Kibaki's rule, compared to his predecessor President Moi's period in office. Only 28 percent thought that the country was doing worse or much worse. And more people reported improving living conditions than worsening living conditions (45 to 33 percent). Even among likely Odinga voters, equal numbers thought the country was doing better than doing worse, even though more thought that their own living standards had worsened during Kibaki's rule (but a quarter still reporting improved living standards).

It would therefore be wrong to conclude that current political tensions can be traced to objective indicators of rising poverty. Indeed, using a simple standard of living index based on the survey data (a wealth index, based on a score of 13 possible durable assets, such as radio, bicycle, fridge, telephone etc.) there is no difference in the standards of living between likely Odinga voters and likely Kibaki voters. Nor is there a significant difference in average wealth between Luo and Kikuyu. Approximate material equality exists across these main ethnic groups even though Nyanza Province, the traditional homeland of the Luo, has on average lower wealth, and more people with low levels of assets than the Central Province, the predominantly Kikuyu area. The differences between the regional and ethnic patterns can be explained by substantial numbers of Luo and Kikuyu living elsewhere in the country, including in Nairobi. According to our survey, the perceived grievances of the Luo in Kenya do not arise from a generalized socio-economic disadvantage. Nor is there evidence in the data that this is an artificial result linked to the relative bias in our sample to voters of somewhat higher economic status.

Thus, ethnic divisions should not be overstated. We asked respondents what identity they preferred if they had to choose between being a Kenyan and being “from their ethnic group.” Only 10 percent of Kenyans put their ethnic identity above being Kenyan. These results were similar among the Kikuyu and Luo, with less than 9 percent of each putting their ethnic group uppermost. Moreover, more than three out of four of the Kenyans we interviewed (76 percent) claim that ethnicity plays no part in their choice of friends. And almost half (49 percent) assert that the ethnic or regional origin of the party’s leader does not enter into their calculation of how to vote. Thus, while in practice ethnic considerations clearly shape the behavior of Kenyans in the voting booth, they seem to yearn for a society in which such considerations are less relevant.

Before the election, more than half of the Kenyans we interviewed expressed fear of political violence. Only 16 percent of respondents stated that they were unconcerned about becoming a victim of violence or intimidation during the election. Kikuyus were significantly more concerned with 66 percent stating that they always or often feared violence compared with 54 percent of the Luo respondents. Similarly, supporters of Mwai Kibaki were more worried about violence than supporters of Raila Odinga.

Rather than emanating from local communities, violence was perceived as instigated from the top, with 30 percent of survey respondents stating that politicians in their area had openly advocated some degree of violence during the previous year. In contrast, 67 percent of respondents reported that their neighborhood or village had taken a clear stand against violence originated by politicians. Only 16 percent stated that their community’s position toward violence was unclear. These responses did not differ significantly between supporters of Kibaki and Odinga or between Kikuyu and Luo. Equally, 78 percent reported that communities were willing to vote out violent politicians, with supporters of Odinga showing significantly more willingness to take this step.

In terms of actual experience of violence and intimidation, 9 percent of the sample stated that they had been threatened with negative consequences in order to vote a certain way. Threats mainly related to their personal safety, the safety of their family and their property. Supporters of Kibaki and of Raila Odinga had had similar experiences in this respect. Again, there was no significant difference between Kikuyu and Luo interviewees.

According to our sample, the ODM and the PNU were clearly more active in carrying out threats and intimidation than any of the other parties. Of those who had been threatened with negative consequences, 26 percent reported that the PNU had carried out the threat and 33 percent reported that the threat had come from the ODM (interviewees could name up to three parties in response to this question). These figures were significantly higher than for any of the other smaller parties.

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