

# Election Aftermaths – What They Never Bargained For

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In a post-monarchical world in which safe, free, and un-tampered elections are the hallmark of successful democracies, life seems more complicated than ever. Yes, we're not in Russia. There, contended election results guaranteed Putin ongoing influence. But even in the United States, a long series of close-call outcomes are piling up. It's hard to re-unite afterwards.

Our Democratic presidential campaign has definitely heated up. Even with Hollywood's writers' strike resolved, viewer ratings are doubtless going to break all records in the increasingly acrimonious face-off between Senators Barack Obama and Hillary Rodham Clinton. So too will the expenditures.

But for now, it boils down to delegates. As of the most recent primaries, Obama's overall delegate lead stood at 1,567 to Clinton's 1,462. To win the nomination, 2,025 are required. So we can count on more intense (and probably more confrontational) polemics as the remaining states hold their primaries and caucuses. This very civil campaign may become uncivilized.

But this is nothing compared to what goes on around the world. How many divisive elections in the past fifty years have yielded to bloodshed?

For Palestinians in January, 2006, Hamas' win by a close margin led not only to greater internal divisions but to a near-complete rupture with the West. According to the *New York Times*, Hamas won 44 percent of the popular vote to Fatah's 42 percent, but due to Hamas' stronger strategy, the militant party took 56 percent of the seats to Fatah's 34. Doubtless moderate Palestinians wish that the historical vote had never taken place.

Next weekend, Palestinian Christians will once again sell hand-crafted olive-wood articles at our parish, in order to send something home to their people in the impoverished area of Bethlehem. Over 500 military checkpoints now make passage and trade between the West Bank and Israel nearly impossible. The Palestinians who still deserve our financial support and markets find themselves caught between warring political systems that, at least for the time being, are doing very little to rescue them.

For me, Kenya's post-election bloodshed is a particularly painful reminder of how quickly civilized people can become anything but. Today marks 70 days since violence erupted, following the disputed presidential vote. Over 1,500 people have died, some at the hands of their own neighbors.

My mother, nearly 80 now, had just left East Africa when the December 27<sup>th</sup> elections unleashed a campaign of ethnically-motivated terror. As I did in 2003, she had been visiting my brother Douglas in Tanzania. Little did she know that she'd leave the country just on time to avoid a nightmare

When I flew, alone, from London to Nairobi in June of 2003, all British Airways flights to Kenya had been cancelled. Terrorist threats appeared to be mounting at the time. The embassies in the capitals of both Kenya (Nairobi) and Tanzania (Dar es Salaam) had been bombed in August, 1998.

Fortunately, I had elected from the start to fly on a Kenyan carrier. But it was a bit disconcerting not to see any evidence of Americans on the jet.

My cousin was living only a mile or so from the rebuilt embassy. Then, it must have ranked among Kenya's most fortified buildings. This trip would take me to Kisumu in the west near the shores of placid Lake Victoria.

There, I reunited with a nun I'd met 20 years ago beside the Sea of Galilee.

But following last December's elections, western Kenya became a very dangerous place to live. So too did certain sectors of Nairobi. Without relating my Tanzanian experience, I'd like to feature some messages from a young man in Nairobi. Haru was a teacher in Kisumu when I visited the boarding school in which he worked. I was so impressed with his theatrical talent, his character, and his zeal to help his people (that is, the people of Africa, not just his tribe), that eventually I committed myself to sponsor his university education. For those of you who can continue reading, here are some of his emails, giving a chronology of the events:

“Dear father, praise the Lord! It's been quite long, but I trust you are doing fine in the name of Christ. Am doing alright, college is also fine. The rest of the team that made a repeat data collection visit to Rwanda is back and judging from the data they have brought, the 1994 war-torn country is now back on its two strong feet!” (Haru had participated in a delegation researching economic progress and the AIDS epidemic impact.)

“Like I was saying, college is OK. It's actually been a rigorous semester characterized with a lot of theory application and experience sharing visits.

“...My Continuous Assessment Test performance in the eight academic units for this semester has been remarkably good...[But] apart from the normal classes, there is political heat that is that has engulfed the whole campus with several camps based on the policies and manifestos of those

they support. Kenya being a multiparty state, the statehouse war has taken shape with three major contenders: Raila Odinga, President Mwai Kibaki and Kalonzo Musyoka (I hope you been following our politics). (12/4/07)

“According to the latest political opinion poll conducted by Steadman, Raila Odinga is leading with 45 % percent, followed by Kibaki, incumbent at 41%, Musyoka with a paltry 11%. The polling day is on December 27<sup>th</sup>. I’m a sociology and a political scientist student, so I take a lot of interest in politics, and am also doing a little bit of campaigning for Raila.” And later:

“Father, Hi, thanks a lot, I received the wire without any hitch. Am registered for the first semester which runs from the 21<sup>st</sup> of January 2008 to June...I trust God to give you good health and, if possible, later, should your tight schedule allow, to make a visit to Kenya again. My people will be more than happy to receive you.” And then Haru looks to the future:

“My prayer is to commence a masters program immediately after my first degree. Thank you very much. I wish you in abundance, Gods blessings.”

“Dear father, praise the Lord and happy 2008. It has been considerably long spell from my side. Am doing alright despite the grave post election violence that has claimed considerably large numbers of innocent lives.

“Actually this explains the reason why I could not write to wish you Merry Christmas. To say the least father, Kenya has witnessed unrest that majority of us only sees or hears of over the radios happening in countries such as Rwanda, Somalia, DRC... to mention but a few such war-torn Africa states. Over 700 people, men, women and children alike hacked to death and over 6,000 people displaced and indiscriminate destruction of billions (in Kenyan Shillings) worth of properties...Perhaps the most outstanding and shocking out of all the occurrences is the torching of 45 innocent civilians in a Church in Eldoret town.” (January 12, 2008)

“I bet you have heard much from BBC, CNN, AL JAZEERA maybe VoA but the root cause of the problems lies far deeper than meets the eye.

“It all started on the 27<sup>th</sup> of December 2007 when [we] Kenyans went to the ballot to elect civic, parliamentary and presidential candidates, the later being the ultimate gist of the whole process and contested by the incumbent, Mwai Kibaki and the people's favorite Raila Odinga. Tension started building up by the 28<sup>th</sup>, midnight, when the presidential results could not be announced. Reasons? Very unclear to decipher! Results?

“Pro-Raila group went to the streets to demonstrate as they were convinced that Kibaki machinery had started manipulating the votes in the incumbent favor! The situation was made more fluid when the Electoral Commission Chairman announced that votes from constituencies in Central and Eastern provinces (from where Kibaki hails) had not been received and that returning officers cell phones were conspicuously off...‘Am convinced the votes are being cooked somewhere’, he said.” (Haru is quoting Raila here.)

“The long and short of this is that there is a strong feeling from Raila’s side, the electoral commission itself, European Union observers and several others that Raila (the people’s favorite) actually won the elections with sizable majority, but due to the power of the incumbent, manipulated poll results favored him (Kibaki).

“Due to unrest and the thick tension that engulf the country to this date, several attempts are being made to have the two main men dialogue, aimed at bringing justice and peace, but this has been collapsing, the latest being the talk led by Kuffour (the Africa Union chairman). As a result of the violence, there is great tribal distrust, especially so between Kenyans’ 42 tribes and Kibaki’s tribe – the Kikuyu. Kenyatta University and other public universities were to resume studies on the 7<sup>th</sup> of January. But this has since been pushed back to the 21<sup>st</sup>. God bless you so much, father, please pray for Kenya. I will write as soon as I report back to campus.”

“Dear father Dean, Praise the Lord. I hope you are well and that God continues to take good care of you. In my country life has not been normal since the eruption of civil strife - over the seriously disputed election results started. Many of us are living in constant fear as neighbors have turned against each other based on political inclination! Food prices have sky-rocketed -- almost becoming unaffordable, not to mention the gunshots that rend the air in attempts to calm disperse rioters. (February 2<sup>nd</sup>)

“Nearly all the campuses in the country are not officially open as a result of the anarchy being experienced. I am still in Kisumu volunteering with Kenya Red Cross Society assisting in offering humanitarian aid. Pray for my family. Otherwise be blessed...”

“Dear father, I hope you are well, I am. At least now Kenyans can give a sigh of relief that things have started normalizing except for pockets of killings and arsons here and there. (February 11<sup>th</sup>)

“The calmness has prompted our campus to open its doors to students - the first public university to brave the Storm!! We are expected back on the 18<sup>th</sup> of February. But father I am in dire need...Due to the violence and general souring of food prices, the out of pocket that I was being given at Red Cross was used to feed my siblings. I trust in God that you will help.”

“Dear Haru, I've been keeping you all in prayer. My mother was in Tanzania, returning just before your elections. You all have us very worried. It all happened so fast, and no doubt made your desire to improve the conditions for your people all the more difficult to achieve. Thank God things are improving, and yes....God bless you all. Fr. Dean.”

Dear Readers, I include Haru's messages, not to draw attention to anything I can do for him, but rather to celebrate what he is doing for his people. In spite of the post-electoral tensions, Haru plans to continue his education and to make a positive impact in the life and history of his people, the people of East Africa. Given his example, that of the Palestinians who come here to support their Christian brothers and sisters in the West Bank, and that of so many others who promote human dignity in the midst of the most conflictive situation, I feel inspired to dedicate my energies to what is positive and life-giving as well. May we Americans emerge from the long political process now engaging our attention as a nation, not more divided, but rather more decisive in working toward solutions that benefit everyone.

Partisan politics are unavoidable in election years. But once the dust has settled after November's vote, I pray that our leaders can unite around the critical issues that face us all. We can only lead the world if we do so as a viable democracy. And what makes democracy work is a commitment to the values which make participatory governments function. Fundamental to these values is the conviction that every human being has an intrinsic dignity, borne of the image of the One who gave us life. The freedom we crave and celebrate can benefit the world only if it is based in mutual love and respect. In the face of so much corruption and greed, so deeply woven into the fabric of so many governments, we Americans should thank God daily for the relative peace and security we enjoy. Whoever wins next November will do well to remember that, to be one, we must be under God.

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