

Greatness Is Demonstrated At Times Like This

The current situation in my country, Kenya, is shocking and dangerous. We must act now to end the violence and senseless killings. We have all watched with horror and deep sadness as the devastating events of the last week have unfolded. The situation continues to escalate and all Kenyans of good conscience must continue to urge our two leaders, President Mwai Kibaki and Hon Raila Odinga, to engage in dialogue and urgently bring an end to displacement, killings, and destruction of property.

The genesis of the current violent ethnic eruptions is the announcement by the Electoral Commission of Kenya (ECK) to the effect that President Kibaki had won the 2007 Presidential elections. It is important, however, to understand that there has been longstanding underlying discontent and mistrust between some ethnic communities that has been fed by generations of politicians, and which is easily ignited when an opportunity presents itself and serves as the trigger. The announcement by ECK was such an opportunity.

To understand the current impasse, it is necessary to revisit the evolution of the current opposition over the last 5 years. It dates back to when then President Moi stepped down due to the constitutional requirement in 2002 and anointed Uhuru Kenyatta as his successor and leader of the ruling party Kenya African National Union (KANU). Promptly, senior politicians who had hoped to inherit him decamped from KANU and created a new party – Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and joined Hon Mwai Kibaki's team with Hon Kibaki as the 2002 Presidential candidate for the then Opposition, National Alliance Party of Kenya (NAK). Together, they created a new party - the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC). That move changed the fortunes of NAK and eventually contributed to the defeat of the ruling party, KANU and the victory of NARC with Kibaki as the President.

Prior to the formation of NARC, the two constituent parties (LDP and NAK) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to share political power when victory was secured. Victory was secured but unfortunately, that MoU was not honoured and almost immediately, deep disappointment and discontent was registered publicly. This resentment transformed itself into the division that was experienced during the constitutional conference that was mandated to give Kenyans a new constitution. Subsequently, the same division was expressed during the Constitutional Referendum which saw a defeat of the government backed draft constitution.

During both processes the two parties of NARC were sharply divided and this division finally found its way into the 2007 General Election. The Kibaki-led camp campaigned under Party of National Unity (PNU) while the Raila Odinga-led camp campaigned under the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM). The two parties entered the campaign sharply divided with the major players being strongly backed by their ethnic communities and a deep sense of accumulated mistrust on both sides of the divide.

Before the Presidential election results were announced, protests and claims of rigging and irregularities were being raised by the ODM and at least one ECK commissioner. Subsequently, Hon Odinga declared that he had won the election and asked President Kibaki to concede defeat.

ECK made the official announcement and declared President Kibaki the winner of the 2007 Presidential Poll. Shortly thereafter, the President-elect was being sworn in at State House in the presence of a few guests and Ministers, including many who had lost their parliamentary seats. So hurried was the swearing in ceremony that even the National Anthem was forgotten. The hurriedly organized swearing in only served to deepen suspicion that rigging had indeed been widespread.

Even after the ECK had declared President Kibaki the winner, election observers (local and international) and other interested parties, including other ECK commissioners and its Chairman admitted that there were irregularities in the tallying process of the Presidential votes. The ODM protested and claimed that they had been robbed of their victory.

They wanted President Kibaki to admit that the process was flawed and to step down. However, the President had already assumed power, been sworn in and considered himself duly elected. This deeply angered and frustrated ODM and its members.

Almost immediately, members of communities which mainly supported the ODM, turned their anger and frustration at members of communities perceived to have voted for President Kibaki. The targeted communities have included especially the Kikuyus, the Kisiis and the Luhyas. Hundreds of people have so far been killed, thousands displaced and properties destroyed especially through burning and looting.

So where do we go from here? I suggest a 4-prong approach:

1. As a matter of urgency, we must address the need for truth and reconciliation with respect to the just concluded Presidential Elections in order to chart the way forward.

I know that there is frustration and pain among ODM and its supporters especially because they believe that victory was denied them. We now have a great divide in the country that can only be resolved through truth and reconciliation. Given the admission from the chairman of the ECK, 5 ECK commissioners and local & international election observers that the election tallying process was irregular, we should explore the following: a re-tallying of the votes by an independent body using the authenticated Form 16A is one option. Another option could be a re-run of the elections within 6 months to a year. True healing will only begin when the truth is established. To expect Kenyans to accept the admittedly flawed results would be unfair, unjust and undemocratic.

2. An equally important step is for the two leaders to engage in dialogue. They can do this directly or through a mediator. I am aware that it is challenging for some to exercise restraint at this time, but greatness is demonstrated at times like this. The future of this country depends on how the ODM leadership shapes its reactions and how the government responds. We appeal for political maturity, justice, patriotism and respect for the laws that we have created. We appeal to both sides of to guide this Nation forward towards peace, healing and reconciliation. We also appeal for respect and humility.
3. Alternatively, part of the way forward could also be the creation of a power sharing arrangement. This in many ways will remind us of the original unfulfilled intention of the MOU of 2002. To eliminate any fear, on the part of ODM this arrangement should be constitutional and can be put in place by parliament. If acceptable, such an arrangement would be sustainable, cost effective and would allow the political and economic affairs of the country to return to normalcy within the shortest possible time.
4. Even as political leaders play their role, citizens should refrain from acts of violence and destruction. It is tragic that while leaders are fighting over power and influence, *wananchi* are venting their anger and frustration on each other. All 42 communities in Kenya are bound by geography and history to live in this country as neighbors. Unfortunately killing, destroying property and displacing our brothers and sisters creates a curse and a legacy which will haunt our children and their children for years to come. Let us break the cycle by bringing violence and destruction to an end. Let us stand up for each other, irrespective of our ethnic background.

Therefore, in our situation and irrespective of our political persuasions, it is very important for all Kenyans to stand up for justice and fairness. Injustice to one, is injustice to all of us. If we, individually and collectively are not the conscience of our country, then who is? We must speak truth to power.

At a time like this, I wish to remember the words of Pastor Martin Niemoeller, who in defiance of the situation of Nazi Germany reflected and regretted:

In Germany they first came for the communists, and I did not speak because I was not a communist

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak because I was not a Jew

Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for ME, but by then there was no one left to speak up.

Signed:

Wangari Maathai
Nobel Peace Laureate, 2004