Taming The Beast - Paul Goldsmith Meru, 4-1-08.

In his 1993 book, Pandemonium, Daniel Moynihan's predicted that managing ethnicity, sub-nationalism, and politics of identity will prove to be the greatest challenge facing the world. Kenya, a country the size of France, but whose ethnic, cultural, and economic diversity exceeds that of the continental Europe, is one the world's important laboratories in respect to this problem.

Up to a few days ago, Kenya enjoyed the reputation of being one the more successful nations at managing the task. The deeply flawed outcome left a polarized nation; "The election has turned us into two tribes," a friend of mine in Meru observed, "those of us in Central Province and Mt. Kenya are one—and the rest of Kenyans are the other." Even though events of the past week have brought Kenya to the brink of the abyss, there is still hope that the damage might be undone.

Explanations for Kenya's progress include state and community investment in education, income growth fueled by the commercialization of small-scale agriculture, alliances between state elites and the Asian merchant class, and a difficult to muzzle free press. While independent Kenya has managed to navigate the diverse crises arising over the past 35 years relatively well by African standards, this should not be construed as evidence of an enlightened political dispensation.

Observers tend to see the issues highlighted during the election campaigns, and the explosion of violence that followed it, through the prism of Kenya's divided ethnic landscape. But they are not.

Despite its liberal trappings, the Kenya state has always been a dangerous animal. The state, not the tribes, has been behind most the nation's communal violence, and four decades after independence it remains difficult to tame.

Upon ascending the presidency of independent Kenya in 1963, Jomo Kenyatta restored the top-heavy legal structure of the colonial state. Daniel arap Moi, in contrast to Kenyatta's non-nonsense authoritarian, ruled through a combination of populism and patrimonial machine politics. Despite obvious political frailties that led the Kenyatta elite to dismiss him as a "passing cloud,' President Moi survived in power for 24 years.

During his tenure Moi evolved into a master trickster adept at exploiting the personal foibles and opportunism of Kenya's political class. This induced Kenya's opposition to adopt constitutional reform as their rallying call after Moi prevailed in the multi-party elections of1992, only to see Moi win more convincingly in 1997.

Many Kenyans assumed that the ascent of Mwai Kibaki to the Presidency in 2002 under the banner of the National Alliance Rainbow Coalition (NARC) marked a new political era. They assumed national governance would more closely reflect the dynamic qualities of Kenya society—and that a new constitution would bring them in line.

But NARC fractured along the contours of the submerged but very real power Kenya map that emerged after 1963.

The Kibaki administration revived the economy, reformed the civil service, and can claim many other successes. Before the 2007 elections, one could have argued that despite the ethnicity of many high-ranking appointees and administrators, Kenya was gradually becoming a less friendly environment for ethnic chauvinism and the other demons Moynihan named.

Unfortunately, the elections demonstrated that embedded qualities of Kenya's political culture cultivated during the Kenyatta and Moi regimes—political trickery, fiscal larceny, incitement—are also present in the Kibaki state. The opacity and presumed impunity characterizing the aftermath of the exercise echoed Stalin's brazen adage: "The people who cast the votes decide nothing. The people who count the votes decide everything."   

The crisis engulfing Kenya today stems from the same issues of checks on power, resource tenure, participation and decision-making, and citizenship facing the new republic in1963.

Since Uhuru, politicians have found it expedient to sweep these problems under the carpet. Today, however, Kenyans are too aware, educated, and connected to accept myths like the divine rights of 'tribes' or the prerogative incumbents in Africa must prevail.

The stakes are also too high. Kenya's regional neighbors have the capacity to absorb the capital flight, while prospects for spiraling communal violence militate against the usual behind-the-scenes brokering by political elites.

Problem-solving imperatives have always driven Kenya's political development. In a crucible where conflict and intensifying crisis morph into forces rolling back state power, the indication is that the long-overdue constitutional makeover promised by all the political parties will be intrinsic to the eventual solution.