Post-Election Violence in Kenya

Watching events in Kenya unfold on the television news this past week or so has been quite frightening. How can this be happening? Do Kenyans appreciate how fortunate they are? A beautiful country, excellent weather and other nations willing to help achieve a better future. Why is this happening?

Yes, there are problems, but when I tell the Somali and Ethiopian refugees I meet in the United States that I am from Kenya, they all nod and look at me with something approaching envy. "In Kenya its good!" they say. That is what other people think! Everyone else values us for our work ethic, our determination, our ambition, our education levels, our sense of duty and our peaceful natures. So why should we then turn around and treat each other so horribly?

In New Orleans, Louisiana, I met 50-year old grandmothers, who still confront the legacy of slavery a century and a half after it ended. They were in rehabilitation for drug addictions and other social dysfunctions. And mothers who had to put their children in 24-hour daycare so that they could work the weekend shift! 24-hour day care! Think about that the next time you take your household help for granted. And the emotional problems! Entire families and peer groups on one psychiatric medication or the other! Women who cannot find husbands because all the men are in prison! And those who do find partners having to stay unmarried so that they can qualify for housing! This is what black people elsewhere in the world are contending with! Do Kenyans know what they have that other people lack? Do Kenyans have any idea how good they have it that they can even consider attacking their own neighbors? For how many more generations will this self-destructive hysteria continue?

The televised spectacle of heavily armed and armored paramilitaries pouncing on civilians who have only street clothes for protection is beyond belief. Where do the soldiers get those padded vests? And that truck they showed barreling down the middle of the street with that gadget spraying water at the crowds! Are they kidding? Is the country going the path of the South American oligarchies? Why does the police force even have such equipment? This is Kenya not the apocalypse! What next, castles, moats and robocops? What sort of a future are the leaders planning for?

Isn't it time for what the Americans call enlightened self-interest? Put all the money that pays for this weaponry into making bricks for decent housing for Nairobi's poor! How many bricks could be made for the money it costs to buy that water spraying truck? Instead of training and armoring the police to attack civilians, the money should be spent on alleviating the conditions that lead to such anger in the first place.

The proprietors of the hotels and businesses that the police are protecting should be encouraged to invest in improving conditions for the poor before the problem gets any worse. If the multinationals charge their guests first-world prices for their hotel rooms, then they should be encouraged to re-invest a percentage of their profits through the sort of community development programs that are common in first-world economies. Their

organizational expertise will go far in creating programs that fund social improvements for those who need them the most. Employ school graduates and let them gain professional experience while directly improving the cityscape. Charge the tourists a social amenities fee that goes directly to improving the quality of life both in the cities and the areas surrounding the game parks.

Leaders should be called on to do everything they can to stop the violence, even if it means that they go to the neighborhoods and villages themselves and stand between the attackers and the victims. The arena of politics has become too hot if people feel that they must attack their neighbors over a vote.

More has to be done to give every Kenyan a stake in the future of the country. How did the Europeans work their way out of the devastation that followed World War 2? Or what about the WPA job creation program that the United States used to restart its economy after millions were left jobless during the Great Depression? Kenya is not the first country to face these challenges! The country already has so much going for it. There is so much international goodwill towards Kenya and its people.

Put people first before politics. Find a way to give the rioters jobs and a role to play in society. A priority should be to devise a system that separates the delivery of government services from ethnicity. Kenyans should not have to feel that the only way they can make progress is if "their" man is in office.

Congratulations to the people in Kiberia who were quoted in the international press as saying let the leaders fight, they would not attack their neighbors because of ethnic differences. That is the future, not just in Kenya but all over the world. How much have we Africans benefited because Westerners rejected racist thinking in favor of global peace and harmony? Shouldn't we cultivate that same tolerance that so many of us take for granted? How many of us benefited from the "Africanization" policies that followed independence and reversed the effects of racism? Can't we approach internal divisions in the same manner and make tribalism a non-issue?

As a Bantu-Bantu half-caste who has enjoyed American hospitality for many years I say enough of this ethnic divisiveness. All over the world, young Kenyans are benefiting from other people's generosity, receiving university educations and job training. Without these opportunities we would be in even worse shape. Why then are we fostering discrimination in our own country? During the 1980s, young Americans demonstrated and protested to bring an end to apartheid in South Africa. Some were even arrested. Now they are organizing against Darfur. How can Kenyans then turn around and carry out ethnic cleansing? It is the twenty-first century! Too many years have passed since independence. Given the levels of education, international development and investment in the country, our determination and industriousness, and the natural beauty and wealth that God has bestowed upon us, Kenyans should be much farther ahead than they are. We have so much. It is time to say enough with all this political confusion! What do Kenyans want out of the future and how will the country get there? Clearly not this way!