Muthoni Garland is the author of the novella, Tracking the Scent of My Mother, published by Storymoja (www.storymojaafrica.com). She is based in Nairobi.

Muthoni Garland - Why bother vote?

A lady who cleans offices in our compound was fortunate enough to be recruited by the ECK to count votes at a rural polling station. On the first day, she tells me the exercise was exhausting, but she left satisfied that at the polling station - one of many in her constituency, the voting, balloting and counting had been done fairly. The tally and associated sheets were taken by the presiding officer to the headquarters. What happened there, "I have no idea' she said, with an odd, frightened giggle.

Yesterday, when I attempted to follow up, she told me it was a waste of time to vote because:
a) She wasn't sure she'd get paid the Ksh 12,000 promised to her as the ECK was so disorganized, 'what with all these problems.'
b) The ordinary person's vote (like hers) didn't mean anything since it is politicians who determine winners.

By such blatant and widespread rigging, politicians on both sides seem to be agreed that we are simply not ready for a democratic presidential election. Not in the prevailing constitutional set-up where the president enjoys such absolute power. The farcical nature of the rigging has exposed the politician's disdain for the wishes of the common man. A louder than words way of saying, 'We cannot afford to have you, ordinary person, make the decision, because you simply cannot understand the enormity of what is at stake.'

When the initial disquiet and reports of violence started during the tallying at ECK headquarters, I was struck by the silence of the church, the lack of visibility of those who'd be expected to rise above the political divide. The ECK chairman seemed isolated - as though he didn't have around him officers whom he could rely on to help him arrive at the difficult decisions. He expressed mistrust of his returning officers. After the announcement and swearing-in, and as the violence mounted, I wondered who could act as the voice of reason. As a foreign pastor visiting in our house said, "Where are your wise and true men? They are the ones to turn to." Even as we (Kenyans) bandied possible leaders, it struck me that there were indeed very few with a reputation for rising above tribal partisan interests – sadly, even those of the cloth.

It is a reflection of our widespread mistrust of each other's willingness or ability to uphold that which is right even if it is against us. We've seen this come into play whenever someone is investigated for corruption - his tribesmen talk about being discriminated; a plea that would seem ridiculous if it wasn't seen to so often succeed. Kibaki and Raila are just symptoms of the disease - the cause needs to be diagnosed. To do that the doctor needs training, tools, and goodwill. People must discuss what ails them even if the doctor diagnoses terminal consequences. Trust in the doctor is half the cure. The doctor is the constitution.

And if the constitution cannot protect our interests, the politicians seem prepared to bend all rules to ensure their voice prevails. The rigging is no less than an acknowledgement, an indictment

even, that the rules of our multi-ethnic society's engagement are inadequate to address our historical grievances and current sharing of resources.

This round has been won by the politicians. A new election, even if scrupulously fair, will not solve the underlying issue. I now think only a coalition, a negotiated settlement is possible, at least until agreement is reached on a new and acceptable constitution. Only then will it make sense for us to vote, and for those in power to protect our right to vote.

Muthoni Garland,

5th January, 2007

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