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Rigging is just rigging - Muthoni Garland 5th January, 2007

At a coastal tourist hotel, I listened to the much awaited press conference in which President Kibaki finally addressed the nation about the ongoing violence resulting from the disputed general election. Waiters and other hotel staff paused their beer distribution and reception duties to crowd around the television. It was a short conference and when it ended, they left abruptly. From their dismissive attitude, I surmised that his words had not caused the tiniest ripple on the surface of their pre-held opinions. He might as well have been speaking to the sky because when I looked up, I noticed the stars were not moved. As they dispersed, I overheard one interpretation of our president's words.

"Ati he will only negotiate when there is peace? Basi si aongee na maiti. (Then let him speak to the dead)" This spoken in Kiswahili. A few others laughed with him. Their bitterness was palpable. The coast is largely sympathetic with ODM, and I could well imagine that their off-duty remarks amongst each other would be about how Kibaki had confirmed he was not interested in 'hearing' their point of view. That they were expected to not only accept that Kibaki was now their legal president, but also swallow the continuing arrogance and impenetrability of his leadership.

In Kikuyu sotto-voce, another waiter later said to me, "Aya ado mareshiria thirikari ni muthako?" Do these people think government/power is a game? I think he meant that the rules can only be determined through power. A sentiment echoing Mugabe's infamous rhetoric, "How can you lose an election that you yourself have organized?" By 'these people', the waiter clearly meant tribes other than Kikuyu and since he knew by my name that I was Kikuyu, he was certain I felt exactly the same way. I understood his need – we were geographically isolated in a place where Kikuyus had to hold their tongues and gain courage by whispering in each other's ears.

But this isolation of Kikuyus did not begin at the coast during an election held in 2007. And will not end until we have a new generation of leaders, who because of exposure, have not perfected the art of tribal myopia. After all, our post-independence politics have always been fought on the lines of tribal alliances. Lessons learnt at the knees of Kenyatta and Moi were about ruling tribe grabbing the largest share of the national cake by whatever means necessary. Thus each tribe gravitates to the party chosen by their key politician in the hope that he will have enough power within government to grab its share (rightful or otherwise). Thus the vote for ODM's Raila was actually a vote for the non-Kikuyu alliance of tribes. And to the Kibaki pro-Kikuyu alliance, Raila was viewed as the head of a snake determined to bite them.

The fear and suspicion by both sides is skillfully exploited by politicians and partisan media – each interpreting 'facts' to promote their cause. Thus, when a government vehicle is reported to have been found full of machetes, the ODM team claim it as proof

the government is out to unleash violence. When a vehicle with petrol bombs is reportedly found in the city, the pro-Kibaki team claim it as proof that it was the opposition was out to cause violence. No police investigation has been completed in either case. That these might have been arranged by two isolated fanatical followers, or by thieves, or even mentally deranged drivers acting on their own steam is not even considered a possibility. The politicians are not interested in ascertaining the truth, only in amassing 'facts' that support their case so as to keep their tribal followers onside. And we listened. The endless hate messages sent on mobile phones, the hate leaflets found in the Rift Valley, and the tribally coded political talk fed the cycle of fear to the point where what seems at stake in a general election is no less than tribal survival.

The block-voting of candidates by most tribes demonstrates how successful politicians were in blinding us voters to the issues, and worse, in deafening our hearts to the humanity of the voters of the other tribe(s). Any wonder then that we have such blatantly rigged elections and violence?

We've come to a place where the danger lies not in what actually happens, whether Kibaki continues to lead government, or Raila somehow finds a route to leadership, but in our personal interpretation of what it means in regards to our survival, our fight for our beloved country's limited resources. It is bad enough to rig an election. What we cannot afford is to allow politicians of either persuasion to then persuade us that the rigging is another 'fact' that proves how terrible the other side are. Rigging is rigging, whether by pro Kibaki or pro-Raila, or both. Rigging is just rigging. We must all speak out against it, and demand mechanisms be put in place to guard against it. Let's fight for truth – it is the only clarity. Only truth will enable us to work out rules of engagement that allow us to put in place systems and processes that allow fairer distribution of resources. Without an attempt to get at the truth, there can be no justice.