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Kenya is not a Rwanda

Kenya's struggle is not about ethnicity; it is about inequity

BY RASNA WARAH

Kenyans ushered the new year not with fireworks but with explosions of another kind. The country was on fire as slum dwellers on opposite sides of the political divide set each others' houses ablaze. Televised images of the charred remains of bodies in a church building in rural parts of Western Kenya evoked memories of the genocide in Rwanda, where Tutsis and moderate Hutus sheltering in churches became the main targets of the genocidaires in 1994.

The international media, not surprisingly, was quick to ask whether Kenya was in the throes of a Rwanda-like genocide and described the post-election violence as orchestrated ethnic cleansing or tribal warfare in which two ethnic groups in the country – the Kikuyu and the Luo – were fighting to secure the presidential seat for their respective tribal chiefs.

Conflicts are the bread-and-butter of foreign correspondents based in Africa. They thrive on them; conflicts make their day. Foreign correspondents who are hooked to war and conflict in Africa, therefore, salivated at the thought of a Rwanda-style genocide in Kenya, or at least an economic meltdown of the kind seen in Zimbabwe. This is because in the cut-throat world of the foreign correspondents, reporters are judged by the number of conflicts they can cover, not by the depth their analysis.

However, the association with Rwanda is not only simplistic, it totally ignores the social, economic and political forces that plunged Kenya into mayhem. Firstly, the main reason for the violence and protests around the country was not because one ethnic group wanted to forcibly take over the presidency from another ethnic group. Kenyans were not protesting against the ethnicity of the candidate who was declared the president, but were protesting what they perceived to be unfair elections. Many Kenyans, including those who voted for the declared winner, believe that because the electoral process was flawed, they cannot accept the results announced by the Electoral Commission of Kenya, which has now admitted that it was subject to political manipulation in the last hours before the election results were announced.

Secondly, Kenya is not neatly divided into two ethnic groups, as is Rwanda. Kenya has more than 40 ethnic groups and no one group is large enough to claim domination over other groups. The 1999 census shows that the largest of these groups, the Kikuyu, represents just 18 per cent of the country's population, followed by the Luhya (14 per cent), the Kalenjin groups (12 per cent) and the Luos and Kambas (roughly 10 per cent each). Together, these five groups represent nearly 70 per cent of Kenya's population. Although each group makes territorial claims over particular regions in the country, migration and urbanisation have ensured that these groups are represented in virtually all provinces in the country.

The struggle for the presidency is not so much an ethnic struggle as it is a political and economic struggle. Historically, presidents have tended to use their powers to decide on which regions will benefit most from public resources. Because the current constitution bestows enormous powers to the executive, various presidents have used their powers to accumulate ill-gotten wealth for themselves and their cronies and to allocate disproportionate public resources to projects and regions of their choice. Past injustices were therefore perpetuated by successive governments through preferences in the allocation of public resources. As there are no provisions in the current constitution to ensure equitable distribution of the country's resources, some regions in the country, therefore, benefitted more from public resources than others. This led to further impoverishment of neglected regions, such as Nyanza, Coast and the arid North Eastern provinces.

More than anything else, this election was seen by the poor and the marginalised as the one that would address these past injustices and regional inequalities. It is no wonder then the most impoverished parts of the country witnessed some of the most violent clashes in recent days.

At the end of the day, the poor in Kenya are united in one fundamental way – in their poverty. Levels of solidarity in urban and rural poor areas neighbourhoods are much higher than in rich neighbourhoods. This is because the survival of poor communities depends on bonds of solidarity. As one woman who lives in Nairobi's Kawangware slum told me, "When we are sick, we don't call our MPs to take us to hospital, we call our Luo or Kikuyu neighbours. In the end, we have to rely on them to save us."

The problem in Kenya is not that of ethnicity as much as it is a question of inequitable distribution of resources and opportunities. It is unfortunate that the international media chose to focus on the ethnic question when the real question is much more fundamentally linked to the issue of equity. The only way we reduce ethnic tension in Kenya is by ensuring that access to resources and opportunities is not linked to ethnicity.