Anatomy Of A Breakdown - Jackie Lebo

I once read a book on the last days of the Mobutu regime and it spoke of the elite living it up in a posh city hotel while Kinshasa crumbled around them. That oasis in the midst of the destruction seemed incredulous to me at the time. Like many other Kenyans, I was an innocent to the kind of violence and breakdown suffered by many neighboring countries. Not so now. It is a week after the election – at my apartment on Ngong' Road, the children playing outside are loud and boisterous, the caretaker has been by to do some routine maintenance and it looks like any other day till I switch on the TV and see dozens of policemen in full riot gear and hundreds of protesters just down the road. So far the world outside is kept at bay by the walls of our compound, but it is clear it will not remain that way for long.

Upon announcing the disputed result of the presidential election, the ECK commissioner was rushed to State House to hand over the winner's certificate to the incumbent, who was waiting to be sworn in. The whole process was executed with astonishing speed and when completed, the incumbent was installed as president for a second term, ensuring, under the laws of the land, the opposition had to go to court – where there is a loyalist bench and lengthy processes – to resolve any disputes. The hurried swearing-in also meant that the Kibaki administration could wield the full resources of the state – including the police and paramilitary security units – to maintain its hold on power. Over the last few days members of the Kibaki administration have invoked the law in justifying and defending their actions. But Kenyans are more savvy and informed than they have ever been and they see the law has been hi-jacked and is being used to serve the ends of the administration.

On the other side of the aisle ODM is exhibiting righteous anger at being wronged. They will have legislative majority in parliament and have the support of the people. They show no signs of budging: they believe they won the presidential election and they want it all. While both Kibaki and Raila take hardline stances, a proxy war is being fought in the slums. To them the people dying are collateral damage and they are reluctant to make any concessions that will weaken their negotiating positions. At stake is the winner-take-all presidency which centralizes power and controls all national resources.

It is now up to all Kenyans to look at ourselves and the festering issues that this election has brought to the surface. The leaders meeting may cauterize the wounds temporarily, but the issues brought up will not go away. If we ever rubbished tribe as a unit of identity, we need to think again. If we ever thought we had to live and profit at the expense of our neighbor, we need to think again. If we thought we had to fight for the same pie we have always had instead of expanding it to create space for all to co-exist, we need to think again. If blood ever looked like a viable solution, consider this: Kibera is not an isolated area, it is hemmed in on all sides by middle-class Nairobi and that violence will spread from that center, changing it from a proxy war to something very real. Already parts of the Rift-Valley and Nyanza are on fire and once retaliatory violence starts it may be too late.

In the years that have passed since I read that book, I learned breakdowns occur slowly, inevitably while you are clinging to the last shreds of routine that marked your life. Let not these pockets of normalcy fool us. Unless we take vigorous action to preserve stability and peace in our country, we will surely slide over the cliff into war.