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Swift Sudden Darkness

Dayo Forster

I met an American visitor during the week – and he said the strangest thing – "I can't get over how quickly it becomes dark here – one minute its twilight and the next minute it is night." We were talking weather. His sentence could equally be applied to what our conversation turned to later – politics. He was visiting Kenya as a tourist for the first time - part of his holiday had gone well, but the second half had been abandoned in the midst of political turmoil.

Two weeks ago, there was widespread optimism. We were all slightly tired of the campaign vehicles with their loudspeakers belching music they hoped would encourage punters, splattering campaign posters on tree trunks, lamp posts, in the middle of the road, or on the walls of residents who had chosen stone fences rather than prickly kei apple hedges.

By Christmas Eve, with the campaigning over, there were tatters of paper everywhere. There were many and varied arguments for and against the two main contenders for the presidential race. The incumbent, Kibaki, was too meek and was letting a cabal of powerful men control him and his government. Odinga on the other hand might be more dictatorial than anyone thought – although he might improve the roads. The people, however, would decide. And whoever won, the opinion polls had shown us that it would be a close race, and that the winner would realize that almost half the country wanted the other person to be in charge.

What we all hoped would be a turning point in Kenya's, nay Africa's, history was a recipe for disaster. We all held our breaths as poll results were announced on radio, and Odinga's lead widened, and then bizarrely contracted and flipped to a narrow loss. With incredulity, we watched the final counts being announced. The Electoral Commission of Kenya's (ECK) chairman being shouted down as he listed results for a constituency for which there was clear documentary evidence that the figures he had just read out were incorrect. The chaos within that hall foretold the chaos that would be unleashed nationwide a few hours later.

And yet we continued to hold our breaths. Surely, someone somewhere, someone in charge – would help us make a sense of all this, expose fraud if it existed, and tell us the truth. Surely, the votes of individual Kenyans counted for something.

Rumours flew. SMSes sprung from one mobile to another. Conspiracies were gilded. The media was muzzled. Trouble in town. Yet the national television station, KBC, was showing joyful voters in Kiambu dancing because the president had won. Raila cried foul. Many agreed with him.

And then the moment that would prove what the candidates stood for – where their hearts really lay – came, and passed. Kibaki's cabal would not tolerate any mention of fraud. They now had the weight of the security services behind them – after a late evening swearing in, with none of the pomp and street joy of Kibaki's last sweet victory in 2002 – and they would exercise that power. Odinga had nothing but the will of the people, angry and ready to go out and protest, even if that anger ended up in burning down their neighbourhoods, widespread looting and violence against people perceived to support 'the other side'.

As poor areas like Kibera in Nairobi smouldered, life simply stalled. No presidential statement. No firm commitment to halt the violence. People stuck in their rural homes were unable to get back to Nairobi for work. Call for a rally. More violence. Displaced people. Kenyan refugees fled to Uganda. No fuel. Banks shut. Fresh food hard to get.

In that single blink of the ECK announcement, the optimism of 2007 shattered. The amazing performance of the stock exchange, the 90% occupancy rates for the tourism industry, the accolades from the World Bank for improvement in financial infrastructure. All swallowed up with the swiftness that twilight turns to darkness.

Lucky for us that a sun exists not too far away, and that it can ensure that the night rolls round – back to daylight. And lucky for us too, that many Kenyans who have enjoyed living in a peaceful country agree that to kill and pillage in the names of politicians won't serve anyone's interest in the longer term. Lucky for us all that the embers of the fire that lit the feet of over seventy percent of the electorate remain. And that as the last electoral posters shed their tatters, we can still be reminded of what has been lost, and what can still be regained.