

Communication goes 'underground' in Kenya

The current turmoil in Kenya is redolent of its history. In spite of an ineffective guerrilla war waged largely on white farmers in the Aberdare's and an equally barbaric response from the British to the Mau-Mau rebellion, independence passed generally quietly into the hands of Jomo Kenyatta. But it has been far from plain sailing since then.

Violence at various levels has been reported in Kenya's vibrant print, radio and television sector ever since, albeit with very different viewpoints. Even the regular bread riots in downtown Nairobi between street sellers and formal shopkeepers is enough to produce pictures of machete-wielding men and bloodied victims - and that is usually a Friday sports event.

Tension is never far below the surface in Kenya. These tensions are all based in a highly tribally charged environment. From memory I recall Kenya has about 46 different tribes. Like Nigeria (the Niger Area created in the 19-teens consisted of almost 110 hastily cobbled together to form a country, more akin to a geographical area, rather than a country according to some Nigerian experts).

The Masai complain about business and farmers alienating them from their traditional tribal lands and grazing areas. But they form 1% of the population and are irrelevant until it comes to tourism.

Dominance

The dominant tribes are the Kikuyu, Luo and Kalenjin have been the ones that have generally provided the leadership in Kenya (like the University of Stellenbosch prior to 1994). Patronage in government departments has gone hand in hand and corruption is endemic. Vast amount of aid money regularly go missing, but government corruption commissions are slow to finger the culprits (2002 objections to electoral processes are still being considered by the prosecuting authorities).

The main tribes regularly swap allegiance in their support of political candidate. This time around, Moi (Kalenjin) supported Kibaki (who unseated him at Christmas time five years ago). He handed over graciously and there was some initial evidence of change – the Heile Selassie roundabout had flowers in it. But that didn't last long as Kibaki turned his back on communication and the broad population

Evidence of corruption surfaced once again. Some Bpds200 million in a few inducements, former British High Commissioner Sir Edward Clay told me at a lunch only a few years ago.

From my eyrie on the 17th floor of the prestigious Rahimtulla Towers in Upper Hill Nairobi (the first evidence of what Sandton is to Johannesburg is Upper Hill to Nairobi) where I was group head of media and marketing for the African Lakes corporation and their principal brands, Africa Online and Menanet. The various tribal and religious-turned-gang warfare often made it into the pages of the myriad of national and local newspapers, the most popular circulating 300 000 copies a

day.

So too, did mysterious stories doing the rounds among the communications set as we met at various Kengele's or agency pubs about police death squads hunting down and executing members of these groups and leaving their bodies to be found in remote fields.

Target: media

Kenya was not all as it seemed or was described as by many – the most vibrant East African economy and a model for Africa – one of the powerhouses that would drive success throughout the continent.

What we are seeing now is a reluctant, dubiously elected president, unwilling to admit there may have been mistakes, preferring his doomsayers to challenge the results in the courts - and we have seen the benefit of that. While he may be offering an olive leaf, rather than a branch, he refuses to accept any malpractice.

Such is the arrogance of politicians in Kenya. Such is their reluctance to give an inch or to shake a hand of reconciliation. They do it as well behind a cloak of repression, their first target media. They issue vague warnings which discourage the press from truly reporting on their activities and this is no clearer than from the muted response in the Kenyan media to the violence. Instead they take a philosophical and deeply analytical view, ignoring the horrors that are taking place in confrontations between special forces, armed police and also between residents.

Tensions are always high in a slum like Kibera. It is sprawling rise on compacted layers of plastic bags within a stone's throw of the city centre. Its Somali/Sudanese/Ethiopian landlords (they were given the land for their contribution to the British war efforts in World War One) have set up a hellhole of hovels which is home to more than 2 million people. Congested, filthy, no sanitation and certainly no security, it is a hotbed of opposition in support of Raila Odinga's Orange Party's claim to power.

Underground communications

It is from here that the wake-up message will come to Mr Kibaki should he continue to proclaim his presidency legitimate and continue to intimidate the press with veiled threats, so ensuring that the vast majority remain rather ill informed of developments in the country. But he has forgotten the passion for politics and the awesome underground communications sector – the SMS generation – that drives information.

Odinga's supporters will continue to rile the existing government and state security forces. Should they be able to make their way to Uhuru Park and stage their planned rally, Kenya could be faced with mass murder unequalled in scale to anything recent or as far back as 1991.

Then the press will have no option but to claw back its position and truly report developments. After all, they will have been on blogs, vlogs, sms, mms and many other forms of communication to show the rest of the world the harsh reality of an increasingly oppressive government.

Media freedom has always been a tenuous environment in Kenya. Media laws are stringent, but government and its officials feel they have a right to interfere where they like (in spite of owning newspapers of their own). There have often been altercations in the Nation's newsrooms as the mothers of the nation pitch with henchmen to complain about some element of reportage which has shocked them to their boots.

Government is not that accessible unless it wants to be.

Poll fraud

Tribalism drives everything and this is where the true conflict is being settled as we speak. Old neighbour rivalries, broader

tribal tensions. All have been given an opportunity to play themselves out on the back of a stubborn old man's reluctance to accept he has come to power of the back of poll fraud.

The (Kenyan) shilling has plunged against the dollar. Aid funding will be suspended, tourism dealt a mighty blow and Kenya will sink in what some would suggest may have been its rightful position all along ... one of the also-rans of the African economy.

What a great shame for a country of humble people, filled with humility and eager only to prosper.

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