

## Kenya

THE UNHEALED WOUNDS  
OF TRIBAL POLITICS AND  
ELECTION VIOLENCEUnhappy  
Valley

BY ROBBIE COREY-BOULET

**J**OSEPH KAIRURI, a 54-year-old maize farmer in Kenya's Rift Valley, remembers that the attackers wore T-shirts and bandannas, and that they came armed with blades and stones and arrows. He remembers that some of them had concealed their faces with white clay, but that the young man who ultimately cut him down—slicing him so deep across his right forearm that Kairuri lost use of his hand—had not.

It was mid-morning on New Year's Day 2008, two days after a hard-fought presidential election had been called in favour of the ethnic Kikuyu incumbent, Mwai Kibaki, spurring fulminant violence throughout much of the valley—Kenya's western "breadbasket" of maize fields and vertiginous escarpments. Along with the other men of Kiambaa village—a pocket of Kikuyu families surrounded by the Kalenjin, who had backed the opposition—Kairuri had staged an ill-starred last stand outside the Kenya Assemblies of God church, where more than 100 women and children sought refuge in the hours before the charge.

Overcome by the mob and writhing in pain on the ground, Kairuri could only watch as the women inside the church—which had been doused in petrol and set alight—made what would be, for many, a final decision: stay inside and burn to death, or run out and face their assailants. He said he was not surprised so many chose the former: "Once you see an arrow pointing at you, you go back inside and take your chances with the flames."

That morning, more than 30 people were killed in an attack that lasted barely half an hour. More than three years later, the plot where the church once stood has a decidedly unfinished aspect: plans for a memorial remain unrealised, and nothing but grass lies behind a lone rock wall. There are 36 graves farther back, just before the land gives way to bush, but instead of proper headstones they are marked with wooden stakes, some of which no longer stand upright. Survivors identified 13 of the bodies, but the stakes for the remaining graves read simply: "RIP Unknown."

Between 30 December 2007, when the poll results were announced, and 28 February 2008, when Kibaki and his op-

ponent, Raila Odinga, agreed to a power-sharing deal, more than 1,000 Kenyans lost their lives and hundreds of thousands were displaced.

Attempts to establish a local tribunal to prosecute perpetrators of the violence foundered in parliament. Last December, International Criminal Court Chief Prosecutor Luis Moreno-Ocampo identified six alleged organisers of the unrest and accused them of crimes against humanity. But the Kibaki wing of the coalition government has launched a campaign to refer the cases to local courts, and the suspects themselves have taken to painting The Hague process as an imperialist violation of Kenyan sovereignty.

In broad strokes, this state of affairs—in which the passage of time is tasked with bringing about a reconciliation that would ideally be effected by accountability and reform—is nothing new, particularly for residents of the Rift Valley. Although the violence in 2008 was initially described as an aberration, a blemish on the record of a country generally seen as stable, campaigns and chaos have been inextricably linked here since the reintroduction of multiparty politics in 1991. Indeed, to refer merely to "the post-election violence" in Kenya is to be insufficiently specific: three of the past four presidential elections have led to widespread fighting along tribal lines.

And the valley has been at the centre of these conflicts. It was here—as well as in neighbouring provinces—that British colonialists expropriated land from Kenyan farmers after arriving around the turn of the 20th century. At independence

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in 1963, Prime Minister (and soon to be President) Jomo Kenyatta redistributed newly recovered plots to members of his own Kikuyu tribe. In areas where the Kalenjin had been established prior to colonialism, this policy created a volatile fault line along which new arrivals abutted families that had been displaced.

For 15 years, from 1992 to 2007, Tabitha Nyambura, a 42-year-old Kikuyu, witnessed the resulting turbulence from her two-acre plot near Koibatek district, which lies directly on the fault line. The district was part of the power base of Daniel arap Moi, who succeeded Kenyatta as president in 1978 and shared his predecessor's penchant for using land to shore up tribal support: In the 1992 election, the first multiparty vote since independence, he tried to expel from the valley members of tribes that were unlikely to vote for him, fuelling violence that killed 1,500 and displaced 300,000.

Unfortunately for Nyambura, Moi, who ruled until 2002, is a Kalenjin, meaning that for 10 long years she was on the losing end of the valley's tribal politics. In that first election, as rioting Kalenjin mobs approached her home, she and her family took cover in a nearby shopping centre. They returned to wreckage once the violence subsided. "Everything



ROBBIE COREY-BOULET FOR THE CARAVAN

**Mary Nyokabi, and her 3-year-old daughter, Ann Wanjiru, tidy the grave of Nyokabi's mother who died in a church fire in Kiambaa.**

was looted in the house—mattresses, clothes, even the utensils in the kitchen,” she recalled recently.

Five years later, during an election that was similarly marred by violence, Nyambura and her family decided to remain on their land even as homes nearby burned to the ground. They survived unscathed, but in the years that followed they refrained from investing in their property. “We were thinking that every five years our homes would be looted.”

The election of Kibaki in 2002, however, brought Nyambura a sense of security she hadn't felt in years, and a series of upgrades followed: a two-bedroom stone house replaced the original structure of wattle and daub; cows and goats and chickens were purchased; a timber granary was constructed and filled with maize during harvest time.

When the next vote came in 2007, at the end of a campaign in which candidates again attempted to use tribal division to their advantage, Nyambura went to the polls hoping the valley would remain calm. The first indication that this hope would be dashed came when she saw young Kalenjin men gathering in groups that afternoon, and heard rumours that they intended to drive the Kikuyu all the way east to Central Province. That night, the first of the houses was set afire.

Defeated, Nyambura and her family, which included 11 children at the time, headed for the home of a Kalenjin neighbour willing to shelter them. Their new house and granary burned. Many of the chickens were also lost in the fire. The cows and goats were stolen by the mobs.

The family eventually landed at Mawingu, an IDP camp on the border between Rift Valley and the Central Province. Nyambura has lived here with her husband and children—

who now number 13—for the past three years, their assets reduced to the piles of clothing and cooking utensils that fit inside two tents of 10 feet by 10 feet.

Although the two abandoned acres remain in the family's possession, she said she had every intention of remaining at Mawingu through the next election, expected in late 2012. Asked why she had not been tempted to return, she said, “If we plant on that land, by the time the crops are ripe the Kalenjin will take them from us.”

Nyambura is not alone in her sense that violence next year is inevitable; she could very well be in the majority. To be sure, there are those who disagree, who think the last crisis was so ruinous that no one would think of inciting a repeat. In recent interviews, however, even those residents of the Rift Valley who tried to convey optimism conceded that there had been no substantive effort to stay the forces underlying the fighting.

Joseph Kairuri, for instance, said he had come to terms with the fact that those who carried out the burning of the church in Kiambaa were unlikely to be charged anytime soon. He knew the man who had slashed his forearm—because the assailant had not disguised his face, Kairuri recognised him instantly as a local livestock trader—and said he did not mind that the man continued to live freely. “If he comes and apologises, I will be ready to forgive him,” Kairuri said.

But when asked if he thought an apology was forthcoming, Kairuri, standing on ground where the church once stood, surrounded by the stakes marking 36 graves, smiled, shook his head and said no. ■