

## CRISIS IN KENYA: WHAT IT MEANS FOR AFRICA, AMERICA, AND THE HUMAN SPIRIT.

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A cartoon last week in Kenya's leading newspaper, The Daily Nation, said it all. A large dove, a *peace* dove, is flying among the clouds with an olive branch in its beak, but with a disturbed look on its face. A young woman is clutching desperately to the dove's feet with both hands, hanging on for dear life with arms stretched high over her head, and looking down in fright. She is wearing modern dress, somewhat in disarray, and with only one shoe. The woman is bearing the label "Kenya."

Kenya is in the midst of a terrible crisis. A profoundly beautiful country, Kenya has been the leader in East Africa for economic and social development and has been making good progress towards achieving a modern civil society and democratic government. But today, the country is at the very brink of social catastrophe and possibly civil war, or worse.

I want to talk about Kenya this morning for a number of reasons. First, of course, I have a personal interest with my sister living in Nairobi, where as a religious leader and educator she is helping develop leaders for what her church calls "the new Africa." Secondly, what happens in Kenya will be of great consequence for the future of East Africa and for peace in the surrounding region. Kenya has been setting the example for neighboring countries. But the crisis in Kenya also provides important lessons for us here in America in understanding what is required of *us* as citizens and the role that our religious principles play in sustaining healthy democratic society in our own country.

By way of a brief background, Kenya won its independence from Great Britain in 1963 and established a constitution. But the country has suffered dictatorial and corrupt government for many decades as it has struggled to become a modern country. Then, to everyone's great surprise, in 2002, President Daniel Arap Moi, who had ruled for 24 years with a heavy and even dictatorial hand, voluntarily chose not to seek another term and stepped down.

Mwai Kibaki, with the support of a broad coalition, won the Presidency and decisively defeated Moi's chosen successor. I visited Kenya

a few months after Mr. Kibaki's election. There was still great excitement in the country. During the past five years Kenya's economy has grown strongly by as much as 7% a year, universal education has been introduced, and movement towards political reform was begun. But in the old pattern, Kibaki's government began concentrating power to itself, corruption continued, and opposing political parties were marginalized.

Two weeks ago, on December 27<sup>th</sup>, Kenyans went to the polls, as they do every five years, to elect a new government. An opposition party, the Orange Democratic Movement, ODM, under the leadership of Mr. Raila Odinga, had broad and popular support across the country, and especially among the hundreds of thousands of people who struggle in terrible poverty in the massive slums of Nairobi. This opposition movement was a major challenge to Kibaki's government and was expected to win the election. There was great excitement.

Everyone agreed that the polling itself went very well and that it was conducted orderly and fairly. But, as my sister wrote, as the returns began being reported it became quickly evident that something was going very wrong. Polling stations that had reported one result, in the final government tally showed quite a different result. The Kenya Election Commission, in a chaotic event, announced Mr. Kibaki the winner, and one hour later he had himself inaugurated President for another five year term in a private ceremony at the State House. The country immediately burst into flame. Since December 30, at least 486 people have been murdered, a quarter million people have been forced from their homes, and thousands of houses and entire villages have been burned to the ground, including one church with 200 people inside, as many as 50 of whom perished including children.

There is no question that the election results were tampered with. Even the Kenya Election Commission admits to flaws. For example, according to the Election Commission's own report, one district had originally reported Mr. Kibaki receiving 48,293 votes, which had been endorsed by the returning officer. But in the final Commission tally, the original figure had been cancelled and replaced with the number 100,390 votes, and without any endorsing signature. This is just one example. There are many others. Even so, the final results showed a close election, although with Mr. Kibaki winning and Mr. Odinga and his opposition ODM party a close second, although the tallying was so flawed that it is probably impossible ever to know who actually won. (Recall Florida in 2000!)

Understandably, Mr. Odinga is challenging the election. Even, United States Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Dr. Jendayi Frazer, has said in a radio interview on NPR that the people of Kenya have been “cheated” out of their election.

International and national civic and religious leaders, including Desmond Tutu, are calling on the two parties to negotiate a workable resolution. The opposition leaders have repeatedly called for large public demonstrations which the government has banned. The impasse is that Mr. Odinga says he will not meet with Mr. Kibaki as long as Mr. Kibaki insists that he is President. And Mr. Kibaki is not stepping down, nor does he seem willing to consider sharing power. Against requests of potential mediators, Mr. Kibaki has gone ahead and appointed the key cabinet positions and has appointed the third place candidate as Vice President.

The head of the African Union, John Kufuor, President of Ghana, came to Nairobi this past week and met with both leaders separately. But Mr. Kibaki then put him on a plane back to Ghana, saying that Kenya does not need mediators. Kofi Anan, the former Secretary General of the United Nations plans to visit Nairobi tomorrow to encourage the two leaders to negotiate a resolution. in an effort to mediate a resolution. Meanwhile, Mr. Odinga has announced plans for massive country-wide demonstrations for this Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, but which the government again immediately banned. The government has also been banning all live television coverage since the crisis began. Yesterday, the United States gave a diplomatic warning to Kenya that it will stop conducting “business as usual” if the current political crisis continues and said that the two leaders must meet with one another.

This is where things stand as of this morning. As my sister reports, the situation is very serious, and a tragedy. Things are especially dangerous because in spite of all the Kenya has achieved, its social and civic fabric is still very fragile. We have to remember that democracy in America has had the advantage of 800 years of development from at least the time of the Magna Carta in England. We had a shared civilization and civic tradition long before we attempted democracy on our own, and we still have work to do every year.

A little more than a century ago, what today is Kenya was a grouping of some 40 or more tribes living as a neolithic culture, herding goats and

cattle and doing primitive agriculture. In only a very few generations, Kenya has been catapulted into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Nairobi is a modern city, a major financial and commercial center within the global economy, complete with modern office buildings, traffic, cell phones, and internet. When I was in Nairobi 4 years ago, I met young adults in my sister's church who had grown up out in the country in mud huts herding cattle, who are today college educated, urban professionals – teachers, accountants, administrators, medical professionals, government workers, small business entrepreneurs, and so forth. For an individual to make the transition from a childhood in a tribal village in the bush to young adulthood in a modern, cosmopolitan city pursuing a modern professional career – it's hard for me to imagine.

Herein lies the challenge for Kenya and its grave danger. Beneath the surface of constitutional democracy, there are deep currents of tribalism thousands of years old. While the British colonial rulers did much to educate Kenyan people, as they did in many other places they deliberately exploited tribal loyalties to stir up suspicion and keep the native Africans politically divided. The British tended to favor one tribal group, the Kikuyu tribe, which as the largest ethnic group represents about 22 per cent of the population. On independence and with British help, this one tribe ended up owning much of the land and controlling the economic and political institutions. Mr. Kibaki and his party are of the dominant Kikuyu tribe, as was Kenya's first President, Jomo Kenyatta. Mr. Odinga, on the other hand, is of the Luo tribe, the second largest tribal group.

The fact that politics in Kenya, as in much of Africa, breaks along tribal lines is why the political crisis is so dangerous. This is what has happened in other African countries where democratic society broke down in large part because wealth and political power became concentrated too much in one tribal group, so that the injustice and inequity fostered deep resentments along tribal lines without a broader social fabric strong enough to hold things together. The violence in Nairobi's slums has been largely along tribal lines, poor people burning and looting shops owned by Kikuyu's and driving them out of their homes. In Kenya today, there are reports that witch doctors have been employed deliberately to stir tribal passions in outland areas where some of the worst violence has taken place.

Yet, while some observers fear the possibility of the violence becoming like what happened in Rwanda or Liberia, as my sister points out

there may be enough of a middle class, there may be strong enough of a national consciousness, and enough of a social network holding the country together across the traditional ethnic lines that Kenya may be able to weather this crisis and emerge with stronger, healthier and even more vibrant civic life and democracy. This is why my sister is committed to staying there. As a religious leader, as a minister, and as an educator at the university level, she is devoting her life to helping foster a spiritual, civic vision that transcends traditional lines and to teach leadership skills for the emerging, modern country. We want to remember that western democracy took many centuries to mature, has suffered terrible wars and conflicts in the process, including our terrible civil war in the United States, and still requires our active civic engagement today as we have seen in recent years.

There are a number of lessons for us here in Quincy. The first is that the key and most radical idea of democracy is that sovereignty rests with the people, *all* the people, not with one tribe, not with one party, not with one person, be it a dictator or charismatic leader, business cartel, or political elite. Therefore, our work as citizens is always much more than voting. It is constantly to exercise the people's sovereignty, or we lose it – whether to tribal passions or powerful special interests. It is to stay informed and to engage in the civic processes of democratic society. To keep our democratic institutions healthy and strong, we would work constantly to foster and participate in those voluntary civic associations which teach the skills of democracy and which engage to shape public policy. Our church is such an association and a most important one. This is also the reason why our participation in the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization is so important. (I will say more about GBIO in a future sermon.)

At the same time, while democracy is far deeper than simply voting, it is so important that we work to assure that our voting is conducted with the greatest integrity and with the greatest transparency. This is why we ought to be deeply suspicious of any voting system without a verifiable and permanent record. Any citizen, regardless of technical knowledge, must in principle be able to monitor the voting process and examine and count each vote for him or herself. We may feel that the constant news coverage, speeches, and debates of the Presidential campaign are a bit tiring – already – but it is so important that the campaign be as public and as transparent and with as much critique, challenge, polling and commentary as possible. “We, the people,” are sovereign. And we need continually to exercise our sovereignty.

Not all of us have the time or energy to work actively in campaigns or meet with legislators at the State House. This is not my point. The work we each do personally to engage in the life of this church and to give public witness in our lives to the religious principles and ideals we stand for is so very important for sustaining the health and strength of our civil society and democracy. By our very existence we exercise the freedom of association which is so essential to the civic health of any society. The principles of our faith are at the heart of democracy. Our witness to the fundamental worth and dignity of every person, to the importance of justice and equity as well as compassion in all human relationships, and the right of individual conscience is so crucial to well-being and vitality of our country.

These are the principles which are at the heart of the covenant by which we sustain religious community together which transcends all differences of personal belief and identity. This morning we recognized and welcomed new members of our congregation. In so doing, we renew the covenant again in the only way it can be – person by person, over and over again. This is important for our spiritual life as a congregation as it is also for the spiritual life of each of our members. But it is also so important to the health and vitality of our larger society. And we are not alone. There are thousands of religious communities engaged in this same work, just as my sister and her congregation and her students are engaged with this work in Kenya.

As our thoughts and prayers are with the people of Kenya that they may find their way forward, may they also be with this country, and with each of us, that we may engage in the life which keeps us free.