

The Normalisation of Violence

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17 July 2009

Writing more than twenty years ago about Idi Amin's Uganda, Ali Mazrui observed that

Everyone was talking about the tyrant. I suggested that more people had died in the second half of the Amin years as a result of anarchy than as a result of tyranny. Many of the killings were not orchestrated orders from the top. Soldiers perpetrated them in night clubs, at road-blocks, in the villages. Yet the cases due to anarchy were not conspicuous political significance. They were cases of a basic moral collapse among those who wielded weapons.ⁱ

While the labels of 'anarchy' and 'tyranny' do not apply to the Kenyan case, Mazrui's underlying argument does. Much of the attention of the media, civil society and donors has focused on the behaviour of elites in the run-up to, and the aftermath of, the 2007 elections. Too little time has been spent examining why it was hundreds of 'ordinary' Kenyans, be they police, members of militias or simply members of the public, perpetrated acts of violence against other Kenyans.

Until sustained fieldwork or investigations are undertaken during which the motivations and actions of perpetrators of the violence of 2007-8 are discussed with the perpetrators themselves, then any inferred motives remain mere speculation. However, recent research into participation in civil wars suggests that any attempt to impose upon a wide and diverse body of individuals singular explanations for their actions is myopic. Participants in political violence, such studies suggest, act for very many more reasons than simply their membership in particular social groups. Indeed, there can be as many combinations of causes of violence as the number of individual perpetrators.ⁱⁱ Identifying just one cause of the violence, be it corruption, ethnicity, inequality, demography or political ideology, is unlikely to capture the complexity or reality of the nature of the violence witnessed after the 2007 elections.

Any debate about political violence and its prevention in future must go beyond a simple discussion of formal politics and state institutions. The emphasis given to the prevalence of violence within the realm of high politics misses a broader point about the prevalence of violence within society more generally. To return to Mazrui's arguments about Uganda, he said that in the aftermath of Idi Amin's downfall, 'we were not, as yet, thinking at all about how to deal with the society's moral collapse. We kept on thinking about how to deal with bad governments. At some stage one has to begin to worry about alternative ideas for the self-discipline of the country.'ⁱⁱⁱ While again Mazrui's exact terminology may not sit comfortably in this case, his argument should provide cause for thought on the part of any individual interested in contemporary Kenya.

Put simply, Kenyans have become accustomed to endemic social and political violence. In the weeks and months prior to the 2007 elections, significant violence occurred on Mount Elgon and in Molo. Similarly, the state and Mungiki became embroiled in a bitter conflict in Nairobi and its periphery. Yet such incidents were generally treated as localised phenomena and caused little of the more general introspection and alarm that greeted the violence that was to come. In this way, the public reaction to the pre-election violence of 2007 resembled that to the long-running insecurity in the

borderlands to the north and west. Incidents of violence there are given barely a second thought by most residents of the more densely populated areas of the country's highlands. They do, however, worry a good deal, and have reason to, about the high rate of violent crime. In 2004, Kenyans respondents to the Afrobarometer were more fearful of crime than any of their counterparts from 14 other countries. Kenyans (with Zambians) were the most likely to have experienced property theft. Moreover, after Nigerians, Kenyans were the most likely to have experienced physical violence.^{iv} That violence is often suffered in the home and frequently in the form of sexual violence. According to Kenyan government statistics published in 2003, half of all Kenyan women were thought to have been victims of sexual violence during their adult lives.^v And violence is clearly visible in other social settings, such as schools, which experienced their most recent bout of recurrent rioting a year ago, and universities.

Generally considered to be distinct from one another, these different forms of violence need to be considered collectively alongside political violence if Kenyans are to enjoy a more peaceful future. Derived from a range of historical causes, which certainly include colonialism, violence has become a well-established means by which power and authority in Kenya is contested in a variety of settings. That it should have been used to dispute or assert the claims to presidential office is not then surprising. Efforts to prevent future recurrences of political violence must then also address the wider prevalence of violence within society at large.

Despite the tone of this piece so far, returning attention to the grassroots provides reasons for optimism as well as alarm. Policy-makers and representatives of civil society should speak to the thousands of Kenyans who chose to not participate in the violence of 2007-8. It is easy to lose sight of such individuals in the rush to establish what happened in those tumultuous weeks. Yet it should not be forgotten that unknown numbers of Kenyans chose not to take up arms against their neighbours and offered assistance of all kinds to those in peril. By a whole range of actions, from donations to the Red Cross through to providing shelter to those made homeless, ordinary Kenyans acted in a fashion that should shame their political leaders into constructive measures to avoid a repeat of the bloodshed in 2012.

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- ⁱ Ali A. Mazrui, 'Is Africa Decaying? The View from Uganda', in Holger Bernt Hansen & Michael Twaddle (eds), *Uganda Now: Between Decay and Development* (James Currey, London: 1988), 352-3.
- ⁱⁱ Stathis Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge University Press, New York: 2006).
- ⁱⁱⁱ Mazrui, 'Is Africa Decaying', 353.
- ^{iv} Michael Bratton et al, 'Afrobarometer Round 2: Compendium of Comparative Results from a 15-Country Survey', Afrobarometer Network working paper no.34, 25 (available at <http://www.afrobarometer.org/papers/AfropaperNo34.pdf>).
- ^v IRIN, 'Kenya: Sexual and Domestic Violence Prevalent', 27 October 2005 (<http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=56856>).