

# **Urban Violence in Kenya's Transition to Pluralist Politics, 1982-1992**

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**Résumé:** Dans plusieurs parties de l'Afrique on note une escalade de la violence urbaine. Les études théoriques à ce sujet n'abordent principalement que les manifestations de violence dans les quartiers pauvres, et la criminalité urbaine avec ses actes de violence. Il y a un besoin urgent de focaliser l'attention sur les causes historiques de la violence urbaine en rapport avec la gestion des affaires publiques. Ce document examine les causes et la manifestation de la violence urbaine dans le cadre de la transition vers une politique pluraliste au Kenya entre 1982 et 1992. La violence survient entre deux réalités liées: l'évolution de la nature de l'Etat et les dures réalités économiques nées de la mauvaise gestion économique interne et des conditions économiques externes liées aux Programme d'ajustement structurel. Ce processus a entraîné une répression qui a provoqué un mécontentement au sein des masses urbaines. Selon toute vraisemblance, la détérioration de la situation économique des citoyens a jeté de l'huile sur le feu. Au cours de cette période, les manifestations d'une violence urbaine se lisaient déjà dans la demande accrue de pluralisme politique au Kenya.

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## **Introduction**

This paper examines the origins and occurrence of urban violence in the context of Kenya's transition to pluralist politics between 1982-1992. It examines the causes of urban violence and its impact on democratisation in Kenya, using case illustrations from Nairobi, Nakuru and Kisumu. The question of management implied in the term governance also calls for an analysis of the occurrence of violence during the period of transition in Kenya. Governance is generally understood as the art of managing public affairs, and politics is central to this. Politics involves the mediation and arbitration of diverse and

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divergent opinions about the running of public affairs. In a word, politics is conceptualised as the art of negotiating conflicts related to the exercise of power (Ibrahim 1997:57).

In Kenya, the urban mass constituted a particularly highly politicised category of the populace. Its political activity was heavily influenced by its socio-economic situation. The people in this category ranged from the rich and active participants in policy formulation and decision-making to the lowly placed petty traders, the unemployed and unemployable. It is to the latter category of people that most attention is given in this discussion, although their reactions were heavily influenced by other categories. They suffered further from the acute class juxtaposition evident in most towns in Kenya. This aspect of urbanisation might have had a decisive influence on the occurrence of violence. The class dichotomies were so acute in most urban centres that stingingly rich people lived in extreme opulence, while the extremely poor lived in very great wretchedness. They constituted a very vulnerable and malleable group, often dismissed in criminal jargon as malcontents. This dismissal is inadequate if the issue of violence is to be properly understood. Their malleability ought to be set in their socio-economic situation, the nature of the state and their needs and aspirations as a politically informed constituency.

It has to be emphasised in this introduction that urban centres have historically been hotbeds of political activity and dissent. Politics is at the centre of urban life. Urban centres are crucibles of decision-making and social policy formulation. They constitute diverse strands of interests and needs that require harmonising. They can also be centres of moral decay, cultural dislocation and insensitivity (Albert 1994:14-15). Urban centres present contradictions and paradoxes in Africa as in the rest of the world. What is inescapable is that violence is notoriously common in political history while urban areas are the locus

of political power. In the context of political transition, urban centres constitute very volatile areas.

In the late 1980s, Kenya presented a mix of political authoritarianism and economic backlash. The World Bank/International Monetary Fund (IMF)-inspired Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) were at the heart of this scenario as was internal economic mismanagement. As economic prophylactic, the SAPs had both economic and political conditionalities. Some neo-liberal doctrines had extremely impoverishing effects on the urban masses. In particular the arguments of Michael Lipton and later Robert Bates concerning the rural/urban dichotomy were at the root of rationalising this impoverishment. This study will therefore locate urban violence in Kenya between the nature of the state and the emerging vagaries of SAPs. This will enable us to examine the initiatives the urban masses took to adjust to the autocracy of the state and to the poverty resulting from repressive economic policies and mismanagement. It is contended that the two had a brutalising impact on the urban masses which consequently conditioned their reactions to authoritarian tendencies. This, it is argued, sparked off sporadic instances of urban violence. These lacked sufficient force to lead to a dangerously high level of mass conflict. The paper will examine how the state worked to reduce the impact of this violence.

### **Background to Pluralist Politics, to 1988**

1992 was not an exclusive instance of the demand for political pluralism in Kenya. Pluralist politics date back to the colonial era when, in the negotiations for independence, the colonial government recognised both Kenya African National Union (KANU) and Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU) as political parties. The approach to decolonisation saw competitive multi-party politics in which various interests were fought out and resolved. The colonial government showed bias in promoting the federalist interests of KADU as opposed

to KANU. KANU was seen by the colonial government as radical and anti-white settler. Kenyatta, KANU's leader, was thought of as a leader unto darkness, given the colonial assumption that he was the leader of Mau Mau. He was in the category of western educated Africans, described by Lugard as socially displaced persons and thereby degenerates, who by being detribalised, were liable to challenge violently existing European forms of control.

Mau Mau in the colonial government's eyes was the epitome of brutal primitive savagery. The colonialists loathed Mau Mau for its embrace of extreme violence. It was accused of fronting for both anarchy and anomie. Its leaders were seen as bloodthirsty hoodlums, not fit for decent living and treatment. They were initially bundled into detention, and when that did not end Mau Mau and related urban violence, they were allowed to engage in guided party politics in anticipation of independence. Guided participation, because liberal colonial wisdom assumed that Africans were practically at the genesis of civilisation and needed time and discipline to gain the strength of character to develop their better instincts. KANU emerged as the initiator, organiser and dispenser of violence in colonial Kenya. Since KANU was dominated by large communities in Kenya, especially the Kikuyu and Luo, the colonial government supported KADU, which fought to sustain the interests of minority communities through federalist oriented politics.

The rural-urban dichotomy in the approach to independence was first initiated through institutionalised racism by the colonial order. There were 100 ordinances passed by 1956 in colonial Kenya differentiating between people because of race (Werlin 1974:45). These determined access to land, education, transport etc. In rural areas, the customary law of the chief was applied, guided by the institutionalised legal frame of the constitution. Racism justified neglect of urban Africans. It was assumed that the presence of Africans

in urban areas was merely temporary. Having left their families in rural areas, they would periodically return and eventually retire there (Ibid.). These laws left the urban-based 'native' in a juridical limbo (Mamdani 1996: 19).

But many Africans did not respond to the alleged stimulus of being treated, through tax and other means, as migrant labour. Some remained in urban centres, whether in employment or not. They were not strictly a proletariat in the sense of having nothing but their labour power to sell (Ake 1981: 14). They would occasionally receive food from friends, relatives and immediate family members who came visiting. They had small pockets of land at home and a few head of cattle to rely on. The colonial government blundered in not supplying such Africans with the necessary facilities for life, because they embraced the militant nationalist doctrines of their respective parties as a response to the colonial policy of neglect.

Members of KANU communities allegedly dispensed violence in rural areas of Central Kenya and Rift Valley. Sporadic instances of violence were also witnessed at the Coast and in Nyanza. The Western Province of Kenya was, with the exception of Dini Ya Msambwa activities, conspicuous for its aversion to violence. This could be because the planning of violence had little impact there. The colonial government also did its best to prevent such violence filtering into remote areas. The impact of violence was felt in Nairobi, Mombasa, Kisumu and Nakuru, because of the relatively high levels of rural-urban mobility and interaction.

In the urban areas, violence against the colonial government took on a sporadic nature and was aimed at immobilising the system. It could not be sustained because of the presence of the administrative security networks. The urban areas were also very divergent because of racial and ethnic differences, which also implied economic and political differences. The African population was largely semi-proletarianised in

nature, while the Indian and other races lived with relative economic advantage, though below the European level. Europeans were better endowed, having been selectively allowed into the country on condition that the poorest of them must live above the level of the richest African (Dudder 1993). Such sharp racial distinctions were backed by repressive colonial laws that legalised the urban social structure.

When KANU emerged as the victor from the decolonisation process, the white population in Central Kenya, Rift Valley and all those dotted across the Kenyan urban centres were alarmed. Many returned home, fearing massacres by KANU and Mau Mau 'hoodlums'. The sharp racial distinctions in urban centres were a cause of alarm too. In colonial days, the line between production and the welfare of African workers was clear (Cooper 1983:22; Van Zwanenberg n.d.:14). The colonial state and employers were concerned mainly with production. Their care for the African worker applied only at the work place. Any other needs of the worker were not their concern. Urban centres therefore emerged as a hotchpotch of contradictions emanating from contradictory colonial racial and economic arrangements.

In the absence of food, shelter and adequate remuneration, sexual immorality, alcoholism and poor sanitation took root in urban centres, which were the only places where African workers could refresh themselves for work the following day (Cooper 1983). In Nairobi, for instance, housing, education and health were provided through racial quotas. Prof. Simpson had laid down the need for sanitation on a segregated basis. Housing was also denied to Africans, so that many lived in the corridors of houses. In 1941, about 6,000 Africans (40 per cent) of those seeking housing in Nairobi had no accommodation. Overcrowding became an issue, as a house with a permitted occupancy of 171 was illicitly sheltering 481 persons. By 1953, there was an estimated shortage of 20,000 bed spaces in Nairobi (Werlin 1974:50). The question of legality in urban areas was better left to gather dust on

the shelves because space for leisure was generally illegal. The colonial urban setting produced a mushrooming of slums and an urban mass that was impoverished but socially enlightened (Van Zwanenberg n.d.:18). This mass occasionally became very significant in planning and executing violence both in the rural and urban areas.

The independent Kenyan government inherited this legacy from the colonialists. Van Zwanenberg associates colonial urban policy with the spread of urban poverty, squatting and unemployment, with related incidents of violent crime, all of which reached endemic proportions in the post-colonial period. The urban mass was, therefore, an important category in independent Kenya (Holmquist and Ford 1992:98). It had witnessed colonial exploitation and repression, its sharp class and racial differences and above all disparities in wealth. It expected a lot from the independent state and voted overwhelmingly for KANU (Anyang' Nyong'o 1989:236), hoping that KANU would address these disparities. Kenyan urban dwellers emerged out of colonialism with great expectations from the new Kenyan state.

### **The Changing Nature of the State**

Kenya attained independence in 1963 as a multi-party state. Certain rights necessary for democratic governance were guaranteed in the independence constitution. Human and civic rights relating to segregation, shelter, food, freedom of speech, movement and expression were new acquisitions celebrated at independence. It was then believed that pluralist politics were necessary, though not sufficient to guarantee these rights. The government, when put on its mettle over transparency and accountability, would not turn autocratic or corrupt. The role of KADU in independent Kenya was tied to this prudent premise. Class considerations did not then enter into the politics of the state, given that independence leaders came to power essentially as ethnic bosses (Aseka 1989). KADU seems to have concerned itself more with safety for the ethnic minorities than with

national considerations. This provided Jomo Kenyatta with the leeway to institute the presidential authoritarianism that came to characterise his reign (Anyang' Ngong'o 1989).

In Kenyatta's tenure, thirteen constitutional amendments were passed, some of which are central to the current quest for pluralist politics that has led to urban violence. New rules that concentrated power in the executive presidency, stifled free and competitive electioneering, constricted civil rights and generally reduced the democratic space were instituted (Anyang Nyong'o 1988; Ochieng' 1995). It is foolhardy to fix the traces of the authoritarian history in independent Kenya in Moi's era, as Barkan (1992) has done. Under the sometimes welcome pressures of the Cold War, Kenyatta's powers grew enormously, with the backing of William Attwood, the American Ambassador to Kenya.

Pursuing a 'firm', frank, friendly, and fast foreign policy in Kenya, Ambassador Attwood developed a diplomatic strategy aimed at bolstering Kenyatta and curbing the influence of militant nationalists who were critical of Western domination in the country (Nasong'o 1997:9).

These people, labelled as communists, were to be purged from the centre of power. Jimmy Carter, a former US President admitted this in May 1977 when he said 'we are now free of that inordinate fear of communism which once led us to embrace any dictator who joined us in our fear' (Makinda 1996:563). Between 1965 and 1966, Pio Gama Pinto was assassinated while Oginga Odinga was ejected from KANU at a stage-managed American and British sponsored convention known as the Limuru Conference in 1966. It ought to be remembered that in 1964, Kenyatta had expressed enthusiasm about making Kenya a one party state in the hope that Kenyans would thenceforth speak with one voice (*Daily Nation* 24 March 1964). One voice was to turn out to be one man's directive: Kenyatta's directive. It is no wonder that Kenya became a de facto one party state at the end of 1964 when KADU members joined KANU.



These developments went a long way into strengthening Kenyatta's personal rule (Ochieng' 1995:106). On the economic front, Kariuki J. M., self-styled as a man of the people, gave a succinct summary of developments:

A small but powerful group of greedy, self seeking elite in the form of politicians, civil servants and businessmen has steadily but surely monopolised the fruits of independence to the exclusion of the majority of the people. We do not want a Kenya of ten millionaires and ten million beggars (quoted in Ochieng' 1995:103).

It was Kariuki's honest belief, together with that of other leaders like Seroney J. M., Martin Shikuku and George Anyona, that KANU and its leaders had failed to meet the challenge given by the people when they rallied behind it in 1963 (Ibid.).

Personal rule had been initiated and political activity was always stage managed while freedom of expression, movement and speech were being slowly constricted. Economic monopoly had slipped into the hands of multinational companies in league with a small comprador class (Leys 1975). The Africanisation policy implied deracialisation without decolonisation and detribalisation, a process which encouraged tribal bosses, who promoted and relied on patron-client networks of political control. Economic power was evidently skewed in a tribal and class manner.

Daniel Arap Moi was schooled in Kenyatta's politics and mode of governance. As his Vice President for 12 years, Moi had learned a lot from Kenyatta about Kenyan politics. It was wrong for anybody to underestimate his ability as a leader. For justice to be done in assessing urban violence, the Kenyatta pedigree of Moi's reign must be understood. Indeed, when Moi took over in 1978, he arrived with the philosophy of *Nyayo* which insisted on following the footsteps of his predecessor. It was a philosophy of continuity with limited change. And this continuity was clear in the political and economic realms. Only the actors were different from Kenyatta's.

President Moi was, however, gradual in implementing policies central to his *Nyayo* philosophy. Up until the early 1980s, political observers and analysts lauded his rule as reconciliatory, peaceful and developmental (Jackson and Rosberg 1986:54). Moi gave his foes of the Kenyatta reign time to make their own mistakes (*Sunday Nation* 28 December 1997). Many who belonged to the Kikuyu community did indeed make their mistakes, and these were epitomised in the attempted coup of August 1982. Slowly, most of these people were ejected from the centres of power, allowing Moi to centralise his control and to institute one-party rule (Khapoya 1988:57-59). In May 1982, Kenya became a de jure single party state and all those supporting political pluralism were arrested. Thus George Anyona was detained without trial while Oginga Odinga was put under house arrest.

The 1980s witnessed growing coercive centralising of power by Moi. This was done by curtailing freedom of speech and the press. There was also the criminalisation and persecution of opposition groups after Kenya had become a de jure one party state. The freedom of the judiciary was reduced, and the electioneering process was closely controlled (Ross 1992; Sabar-Friedman 1997:27). It became taboo in the 1980s to mention the name of the President in certain contexts, given the heavy network of special branch spying (Khapoya 1988:62; *Africa Watch* 1991:25). The irony was that as Moi intensified his autocracy, the US aid to Kenya increased (Makinda 1996:563).

Moi's grip on electioneering first relied on a law instituted during Kenyatta's reign, which put the Electoral Commission under the Executive President. The President selected the Chairman and Commissioners and thereby curtailed their free running of elections. With the institution of the detention without trial law in 1966 under Kenyatta, those people that were not liked could not be accepted as election nominees. KANU also became more dictatorial, using the unpopular KANU Disciplinary Committee to purge members. Given

that KANU was the only party and that no one could hope for election without party sponsorship, people expelled from KANU could no longer aspire to positions of leadership in Parliament. Such people were effectively locked out of leadership and had only one avenue left: to develop a constituency outside KANU and outside Parliament. The urban mass came in handy.

The 1988 elections compounded this scenario of isolation by KANU. The polls were widely rigged and led to the most unpopular Parliament in Kenya's history. They witnessed intimidation and corruption, which ensured that party faithful went to Parliament. The queue-voting method employed in these polls proved more susceptible to rigging than the secret ballot (*Africa Watch* 1991:21). The voters were threatened and cajoled into the 'politically correct' lines of people. The longest lines lost while the short ones won. The implication was that popular candidates, who enjoyed wide respect and following, 'lost'. They began to develop constituencies outside Parliament, with followers who spread over more than a single constituency and indeed across the nation. Inevitably, they based their agitation in urban centres, especially Nairobi and Kisumu. It takes such a disaffected group of leaders with wide support to create violence against the state.

### **The Urban Processes**

The urban context provided structures through which state legitimacy was to be questioned. At independence, the Kenyan government took over leadership structures which, it was hoped, would address racial disparities in infrastructural facilities and their accessibility to Africans. Employment rates, it was hoped, would increase and housing would improve. When the law against rural-urban migration was repealed, the rate of rural-urban mobility far outweighed the reverse flow. Urban overpopulation became obvious, with extreme poverty, crime, slum development, and an increase in unemployment. Urban infrastructure

was stretched to its limits and could not accommodate the increasing urban sprawl (Van Zwanenberg n.d.; Macharia 1992).

Petty crime and violence fed on slum development and unemployment, all these being products of growing poverty (Obudho and Aduwo 1989). Crimes relating to pick-pocketing and shoplifting turned into bank robberies with extreme violence. The police force in Kenya failed to control this situation, since its manpower was poorly remunerated and apathetic. Its energy was also diverted to the political concerns of the state. It was easier for the state to use the police force to deter Kenyans from holding unlicensed political rallies than it was to deploy them in strategic places for security reasons. Consequently most urban areas in Kenya remained enclaves of despondency, insecurity and fear. The state's ability to check urban crime declined, as it became easy to rob a bank, shop or any enterprise in town (Karimi and Ochieng' 1980).

Following the attempted 1982 coup, demobilised soldiers and police also entered the labour market, without any possibility of future gainful employment. Many of these soldiers were highly qualified and could not be reduced to a life of misery for long. In some city estates in Nairobi, such as Eastleigh it became easy in the late 1980s to acquire cheaply guns that were much more sophisticated than those of the police force. There was speculation that some police or army personnel, with their low pay, shared in the proceeds of such robberies. Suggestions of complicity between the police force and robbers added to the growing culture of corruption in Kenya. Among the youth, there developed a culture of celebrating wanted criminals as heroes who suffered under state repression.

A concomitant development in urban areas was the increased number of 'parking boys' and street children, whose history goes back as far as 1969 in Kenya. These are to be mainly found in Nairobi, Mombasa, Kisumu and Nakuru. Recent research shows that the number

of street children is lower in towns with rural connections. Thus the bigger towns in Kenya have more of them. Nairobi has become the street child capital in Kenya (Ngau 1996: 1). Street children (some are in fact adults) are those who live, roam and work full time in the streets and have little or no contact with their parents, as well as those who live and work on the streets by day but return to their homes and families at night — mostly to the sprawling slums of the city (Ngau 1996: 1). Some may be orphans. Those with families may not be staying with them and may even have lost touch with them. They live in extremely poor conditions on the streets, begging, pick-pocketing or forcibly snatching valuables from tourists or other Kenyans and in turn selling them at cheap prices. Some may even be employed as pick-pockets, giving what they snatch to their 'employers' to sell. Street children also engage in scavenging for food, and thus the dirty streets of Nairobi and Nakuru in particular, with their dumped garbage, are good places for them.

There can be no gainsaying that street children contribute to the increased criminal activities and violence in many Kenyan towns especially, Nairobi and Nakuru. The contagion factor between these two towns is higher because of greater accessibility between them. Many of the so-called street children grow into adults very quickly. They engage in illicit behaviour ranging from sniffing glue (mixed with petrol) to taking drugs and from prostitution to petty thefts. Some even traffic in firearms (Ngau 1996:2) These activities harden them to the realities of life. Street children, too, experience regular 'visits' to prison, where they meet hard-core criminals and learn about criminal activity from them. Jails in Kenya, rather than rehabilitating, become training centres for hard-core criminals.

Research among street children indicates that although many can be rehabilitated, some cannot and prefer street life to any rehabilitation centre. Such people are highly malleable and form good subjects for political dissent and violence. They too support parties and popular

leaders. Many of these children, adults and the urban unemployed suffered from the impact of government repression and later the unpopular SAPs. Those who stayed in slums were particularly targeted in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Macharia 1992). The unemployed people blamed government policies and corruption, while the unemployable thought those living in extreme opulence to be their oppressors. The logic of haves and have-nots cannot be denied.

The class juxtaposition was therefore perpetuated in independent Kenya. The classes spanned ethnic boundaries. Patron-client relations promoted very few to positions of advantage. It always remained in the interest of a particular patron to keep his clients (tribal or otherwise) in subservience, in order to manipulate them further. A network of patrons emerged who identified their interest in political and economic privilege. Under Moi, these people had continually to sing Moi's song and celebrate the banality of his alleged wisdom at political rallies. With Moi's increasing intolerance of criticism, this class of leaders were expected without question to follow Moi's footprints (Nyayo). A widely quoted phrase illustrates this:

I call on all ministers, assistant ministers and every other person to sing like parrots. During Mzee Kenyatta's period, I persistently sang the Kenyatta tune until some people said: 'This fellow has nothing to say except to sing for Kenyatta. Therefore you ought to sing the song I sing. If I put a full stop, you should put a full stop (See *Daily Nation* 14 September 1984; *Weekly Review* 21 September 1984; Anyang Nyong'o 1995:29).

In this way, the interests of this class of leaders were protected against those of the urban poor, unemployed, unemployable and poorly remunerated working class.

Towards 1990, the have-nots became tired of a system that encouraged opulence amidst wretchedness. Their experience showed them to have nothing but their misery to lose in case of violence or death. Some had grown beyond the human values of decency. For example, street children in Nairobi occasionally used human waste to

threaten people to part with their valuables in streets or to defend themselves against mob justice which had become common in Nairobi. These people have been brutalised in life and can easily externalise this to their perceived enemies. The governmental allocation of resources constituted part of their problem.

### **SAPs, Political Pluralism and Urban Violence in Kenya, 1988-1990**

The combination of forces at the time of the general elections of 1992 included external forces — the end of the Cold War and the enforcement of SAPs — besides the growing disillusion in the country with the political repression that characterised the Kenyan state. The economic recession generated a lot of political pressure which manifested itself from the late 1980s in continued agitation for political pluralism. Pluralism may have been wrongly equated with democracy, without any consideration of what ensures sustainable democracy.

The SAPs draw their wisdom from the theoretical school of New Political Economy (Aseka 1997; Leys 1996:82). This entails neo-liberal perspectives adopted by the World Bank and IMF and borrows extensively from analysis by Africanists of the economic and political situation in Africa. There is evidence that these Africanists, mainly based in Euro-American Universities and institutions, misread the African situation, and analyse Africa from outside the African context. Thus, the economically punitive policies of SAPs and their attendant political conditions have contributed to a violent urban backlash (Mkandawire 1995:83). SAPs provided a framework for state control to be reduced both in the economic realm and also in terms of governance.

In particular, SAPs demanded the rolling back of the state from economic activities. The Bank vouched for a free market economy in which people would be free to make choices. It argued that this was

necessary given the failure of the independent African state. The state was described in this neo-liberal discourse as corrupt and inefficient and as promoting policies biased towards the town and against agriculture. It was therefore held necessary for economic activity to be liberalised and even privatised. This would enable the rational citizen to make choices and maximise his opportunities.

What is faulty in this formulation is the description of these adjustments as people-oriented in their approach to rational choice. Intellectual legitimacy for this new hegemonic economic agenda abounded in the works of scholars associated with the University of California series on Social Choice and Political Economy and the Emory University, Governance in Africa Programme at the Carter Centre. These programmes were to generate interesting research, some of which formed the basis of the 1989 World Bank report on 'Sub-Saharan Africa: From Crisis to Sustainable Growth'. It should be noted that the World Development Report of 1986, devoted to agricultural policy, relied heavily on the work of Robert Bates (1981).

Robert Bates had been influenced by Michael Lipton (1977) in his analysis of the urban-biased policies of the Third World states. The two scholars, adopting a rational choice approach, were in agreement that biased policies, which benefited the small interest groups (of which the urban coalition was identified as a part) were central to poverty in the Third World. African governments were presented by both these scholars and by the World Bank as having fallen captive to urban coalitions, which led them to advance unproductive, parasitic and consumer urban interests at the expense of rural interests (Obi 1997:7). The effective way to delegitimise resistance to SAPs was to dismiss the interest groups opposed to SAPs as narrow self-interested coalitions.

The Bank seeks to undermine the legitimacy of the opposition by belittling, discrediting, and ignoring it. The 'vested interests' are pitted against rural poverty. The dichotomies distort and obscure the



nature of the social and political conflicts precipitated by SAP (Beckman 1991:67).

One cannot deny Beckman's (1991:69) conclusion that:

It is resistance to SAP, not SAP itself, that breeds democratic forces. SAP can be credited with having contributed to this development, not because of its liberalism but because of its authoritarianism.

The political conditionality associated with SAPs was narrowly designed. Rather than promoting democracy and justice, it was authoritarian and the elements of justice in it were inconsequential. It equated justice with multi-partism, freedom of expression, speech and movement, but it failed to consider such fundamental human rights as the right to decent living, shelter and food. The urban coalition, identified above, fought to defend these rights. It was wrong to assume, as the Bank did, that there was a homogeneous urban coalition with common interests, which received equal rewards from the state by the fact of being urban. It is important in assessing resistance to SAPs (to which urban violence is partly due) to differentiate between the various categories constituting the urban mass in Kenya.

Various social cleavages emerged in response to the growing economic repression of SAPs. The urban community, in its diversity, did not accept the argument that SAPs needed sacrifices in the short-term to produce benefits in the long-term (Obi 1997:9). The urban community was badly hit by SAPs given its reliance, directly or indirectly, on wages and on imports. To some of the urban youths, SAPs entailed a complete loss of their means of livelihood, thereby shattering their hopes for the future. As Jean-Marc Ela has argued (1997:8) urban violence can be seen as 'an expression of the disarray lived by social groups which have been made fragile in front of a world which is being structured without and against them'. The crisis generated by the World Bank and IMF adjustment programmes has sacrificed the future of youths whose prospects have probably been shattered or darkened for ever (Ibid.). Urban violence consequently emerges as an expression of the realisation that street life is a misery in which death is neither loss

nor gain. People who are deprived have nothing but their misery to lose by death from crime and violence.

### *The Informal Urban Economy*

Some social groups in Kenyan urban areas sought new survival methods, using the informal economy to engage in trade or crime, so as to insure their lives against harsh economic realities. The proliferation of street hawking, petty trade in kiosks, the selling of roast maize and potatoes on the streets, shoe shining and repairs on corridors, newspaper vendors, the increase in the number of *matatu* (local name for private public transport vehicles) conductors were all aspects of the growth of the subterranean economy. According to one author, this originally emerged as small enterprise activities in response to the problems of survival in developing countries associated with rapid urbanisation and unemployment (Anonymous, n.d.:1).

The informal economy, of which the subterranean one became a part, grew out of increasing unemployment, poor sanitary conditions, the retrenchment of workers and infrastructural breakdown in cities, which also saw increased transport costs for workers. Slum development became a pressing problem, as people who initially lived in better housing moved to lower level housing estates, because of increased rents in their former places of residence. Many participants in subterranean economic activities therefore lived in slums such as the former Muoroto and Kibagare (Macharia 1992). However, these informal activities were judicially defined as illegal, because the participant neither paid taxes nor operated in locations that had been zoned for their establishment (Ibid.). The informal economy was thus criminalised, despite its potential for Kenya's development.

Given the legal position, the informal economy, good as it was as a strategy of survival in the urban areas, was open to political manipulation. Criminals, especially in Nairobi, took advantage of this

environment to rob banks and loot shops, but at times also to engage in political talk, which in the late 1980s and early 1990s, was defined by the Kenyan state as subversive. The opponents of the state, and activists for reform and political pluralism targeted this economy to direct popular revolt against the state. An adamant government, as the Kenyan one then was, refused to listen to the language of dialogue or persuasion. The slum dwellings of those engaged in the informal economy became vulnerable to political repression in the form of slum demolition. The demolition of Muoroto and Kibagare in May 1990 is a case in point (Macharia 1992). This hardened popular opposition to the state, seen in this case as an agent of political and economic repression. The World Bank and IMF SAPs were unknown to this category of urban dwellers.

### ***Urban Violence in Nairobi, Nakuru and Kisumu***

Slum demolition was just but one cause of urban violence in Kenya. Nairobi and Nakuru were two cities that experienced demolition of slums, resulting in the death of unknown numbers of people. For instance, on 25 May 1990, the Nairobi City Commission (NCC) guards and workers arrived at the Muoroto slum, which was located near the country bus station, popularly called 'Machakos airport'. They came with bulldozers to raze the shanty village of Muoroto and the illegal kiosks that were dotted around it. According to the NCC official in charge of the operation, the structures that were constructed in Muoroto were 'illegal and the kiosks therein unlicensed' (*Weekly Review* 1 June 1990:30). The Muoroto area was also described correctly as 'a nest of petty thieves and pickpockets who prowl daily at the country bus station on Landhies road' (Ibid.). This was alleged to justify the demolition of the shanty village, to open the way for the construction of a shopping complex and an extension of the bus station (*Daily Nation* 26 May 1990:1).

Apparently, the procedure for planning the slum demolition and eviction exercise was fraught with bureaucratic confusion. The Director of City Inspectorate, Hassan Keitany, planned and executed the demolition without adequately informing the other departments concerned. Little did Keitany and his deputy, John Wahome, realise that the slum dwellers, hawkers and kiosk owners would resist their eviction with a passion not previously witnessed. The slum dwellers' determination was expressed in the words of one squatter who vowed to fight the city askaris (police) to the end (*Weekly Review* 1 June 1990). Barely a week after the demolition, the slum dwellers rebuilt the makeshift slum buildings that had been razed. By 1 June, 'much of the shanty town was back again on its feet' (*Weekly Review* 1 June 1990).

There was public outrage, not so much over the demolition itself, but because of the brutality and violence that was employed in the process. The NCC used bulldozers that indiscriminately razed what little these dwellers had. No adequate warning of the demolition was given. The earlier eviction notice seems to have reached only a few people, though it is true that it might have been ignored by many, even if it had reached them (*Weekly Review* 8 June 1990:5). As the demolition began, groups of youth, hawkers, bus station conductors and kiosk owners all ganged up to fight the city askaris (guards). They wielded stones, knives and all sorts of weapons that were hurled indiscriminately at the NCC staff. As the Director of the City Inspectorate had underestimated the strength and resolve of their target, the slum dwellers overpowered the NCC staff, until police reinforcements were despatched from the nearby Kamukunji police station.

What was intriguing about this event, apart from the violence employed by the NCC staff and Kenya Police was its political outcome. This emerged first from the way the violence began and its subsequent politicisation. According to Keitany, the target for demolition was not

Muoroto but a neighbouring 25 acre plot belonging to the Commission's Savings and Credit Society. When the NCC askaris began to evict the hawkers who had built in the plot, the Muoroto villagers panicked and started engaging the NCC staff in stone throwing. General chaos and disarray led to violence spreading far and wide. These violent confrontations were further fuelled by the police who beat people indiscriminately, including bystanders from the neighbouring Muthurwa railway quarters. It was also observed that it was not so much the dwellers of Muoroto but the 'hawkers and idlers who proliferate the area who were battling it out with the commission contingent'. 'These people', it was further argued, 'have their own bone to pick with the commission over what they claim is unnecessary harassment and arrests' (*The Weekly Review* 1 June 1990).

The areas affected as the violence intensified were the bus station and Gikomba open air market. Bus conductors and stage boys, kiosk operators and street hawkers, idlers and street boys all joined in the battle. Eventually, Kariokor, Kamukunji, and parts of River Road and Tom Mboya streets were affected (*Daily Nation* 26 May 1990). Seven people were rumoured dead, although this was never explicitly confirmed from any quarter. However, approximately 40 people were injured, some so seriously as to require hospitalisation. While this kind of violence was deplorable and was condemned by the President, the Minister in charge and by all well-meaning Kenyans, it was not lost to objective analysis that evictions were normal, as the NCC attempted to rid the city of illegal structures and dwellings. Thus, it was only the violence which caused a stir, leading to the sacking of the area Member of Parliament, Maina Wanjigi, from his Cabinet post as Minister of Agriculture.

The Muoroto demolition led to the loss of property and dealt a psychological blow to the evicted. The inhumanity and brutality evidenced was a sign of a decadent society that privileged the rich few

at the expense of the downtrodden. Maina Wanjigi equated it to the 'Operation Anvil' that the colonial government unleashed in 1952 (*Daily Nation* 31 May 1990). As he further observed, 'the incident was hooliganistic and ... was designed to drive a wedge between the people and the government'. Both the Director of City Inspectorate and the deputy were interdicted while the area Member of Parliament lost his cabinet job. About 1,300 hawkers and residents temporarily lost their dwellings though their spirit and hope remained unbroken. Muoroto continued as a beehive of activity as residents rebuilt their shattered dwellings and business premises (*Weekly Review* June 8, 1990:17). This was evidence of the dwellers' resolve to continue unhindered with their lives. The event, however, revealed the government's inability to manage the informal economy. The political consequences of this resonated in the quest for political pluralism.

The government response to the Muoroto eviction was a poor approach to the problems of urban poverty and unemployment. These were the root causes of the misery that left those concerned open to political manipulation, especially with a rising tide of demands for political pluralism. The Kenyan government was aware of this. In his Madaraka Day speech, President Daniel Arap Moi blamed the violence on the Deputy Director of City Inspectorate, John Wahome, whom he accused of having gone to the slum area in advance to warn the dwellers to prepare for a fight. Although Moi did not give any evidence to support this claim, the political implication is clear.

President Moi knew that the Muoroto violence could contribute to mass chaos and the subversion of the government. Although the tide of demands for pluralism did not concentrate on the problems of poverty, shelter and unemployment to rally support, the level of discontent in Nairobi and Nakuru was such that a consensus existed that political change was desirable and necessary. Proponents of reform and multi-partism attacked the state and led the urban crowd to believe that

the cause of their misery was the corrupt and repressive government. Many stood on an ethnic pedestal to appeal to their listeners. Economic problems were thus left on one side, as the more immediate political issues relating to freedom of speech, expression and movement took centre stage. Just as the World Bank did, the Kenyan political elites left the fundamentals of shelter, food and decent living to the penumbra of political discourse. They preferred to exploit the situation to gain political capital, and still they appealed to the urban crowd.

Moi's worries were not unfounded. Prior to the Muoroto incidence, the death of Robert Ouko, Kenya's Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Co-operation, on the night of 12-13 February 1990 had led to such violence that state legitimacy was threatened. His charred remains were found on 16 February, six kilometres away from his home. He had a bullet hole in his skull and broken limbs. Foul play was immediately suspected, especially when a government statement suggested suicide (*Weekly Review* 23 February 1990). It was asked, following this statement, how someone could burn himself so efficiently, and at the same time shoot himself in the head before smashing his legs (*Weekly Review* 23 February 1990:4).

There being no space for independent expression, spontaneous demonstrations broke out in Nairobi, Nakuru, Eldoret and Kisumu. In Nairobi, Nakuru and Eldoret, university students demonstrated to urge the government to reveal who killed Ouko. In Nakuru, students from Egerton University, Njoro barricaded roads and caused mayhem, as did Moi University students in Eldoret. In Nairobi, students of both the University of Nairobi and Kenyatta University (where the author was a student then) joined the demonstrations. These were peaceful, and the administration of the University of Nairobi emerged as capable of managing a peaceful demonstration (*Weekly Review* 2 March 1990). However, violence erupted at the Kikuyu campus of University of Nairobi, where vehicles were stoned and a female student was killed in

a motor vehicle accident. The Vice-Chancellor, Prof. Phillip Mbithi, described this demonstration as an expression of the students' grief. He urged the students to mourn peacefully.

The student demonstrations continued for a number of days. The long period of peaceful demonstrations was correctly attributed to the students being allowed to express their grief and anger, without molestation, especially from the Kenya police. However, students were alleged to have pelted the Nyayo monument at Uhuru park with stones and other missiles. University authorities blamed this on a mob that had 'hijacked' the student demonstrations. Emphasising the peaceful nature of the student demonstrations, the university authorities blamed isolated incidents of violence on infiltrators, probably non-students. Some students confirmed this. The fact that police were absent from these peaceful demonstrations indicates that the presence of police can contribute to the eruption of violence at demonstrations.

At the funeral service held at Pentecostal Church, Valley Road, violent confrontations erupted when the crowd was denied a chance to view the body of Ouko.

The cordon of riot policemen that had ringed the church tried to push the crowd back. When this failed, the police panicked and began throwing canisters of teargas into the swirling mass of people, which then retaliated by throwing stones and other missiles at the police (*Weekly Review* 2 March 1990:18).

The violence spread as the dreaded General Service Unit police personnel moved in. Trouble extended to the city centre, and a lot of property was destroyed. Shops were looted. By late afternoon, the City Centre streets were a deserted battle field (Ibid.). At least six shops were destroyed, while a bank and a Kenya Airways sales office extensively damaged.

On 23 February, when the remains of Ouko arrived in Kisumu, more violence erupted. Kisumu was Ouko's home area, which he had represented as a Member of Parliament since 1988. This was the area



where Oginga Odinga and Tom Mboya also hailed from. With the death of Ouko, the Luo community, from which all three came, felt betrayed for the third time in Kenya's history. After the government's suicide theory, and the apparent attempt to conceal information relating to Ouko's death, violence seemed an easy way to show concern and grief. As one reporter observed, 'violence was caused by spontaneous anger at the nature of Ouko's death and the lack of information from the government on this matter' (*Weekly Review* 2 March 1990:20).

Ouko's body arrived in Kisumu at 1.30 p.m., a time when the otherwise busy streets of the town were virtually empty. Many people had gone to Moi stadium in Kisumu to welcome Ouko on his final journey. Unfortunately, many were locked out of the stadium and there was a heavy presence of the dreaded General Service Unit personnel, the Kenya Police and National Youth Service men. When the body arrived, those who had been locked out moved into the stadium by force. The armed personnel retaliated by throwing teargas canisters and charging at the crowd with batons, sticks, dogs and horses. In response, the crowd went wild, and responded with all manner of missiles.

In the other parts of Kisumu, rioting mobs barricaded the two main roads leading to Kisumu town, i.e. the Kisumu-Nairobi and Kisumu-Kakamega roads. Motorists could not enter or leave Kisumu. Three residential estates in Kisumu were affected, Manyatta, Nyalenda and Kondele. At Nyalenda, a mob attacked the police with stones, sticks and other weapons. Telephone booths and poles, bus stands, road signs, billboards and dislodged boulders were uprooted and used to barricade the roads. Eventually, a lot of property was destroyed, including vehicles and a petrol station which was partly burnt. Battles were observed in poor residential areas where anger and grief were exploited by all manner of mischief makers (*Ibid.*). It was not until the next day that the police retreated, 'leaving behind a trail of destruction as the aftermath of the pitched battles with rioters' (*Ibid.*).

Between the Ouko saga and the Muoroto eviction, the rumour mills went into top gear as the role of the government was seriously questioned. President Moi himself said that rumours were in the air from disgruntled rich individuals who sought to take advantage of the national tragedy for their own selfish interests (*Weekly Review* 9 March 1990:9). What worried Moi was not so much the rumours as the connection with the quest for political pluralism. Proponents of political pluralism and their disgruntled supporters would soon take advantage of these two incidents to intensify their campaign. It was because of this that the KANU Review Committee began in June 1990 to address some of the issues in the campaign for multi-partism (Muigai 1993: 27).

The Review Committee must have started work too late because the calls for reform intensified and culminated in the Saba Saba riots. Earlier on 3 May 1990, Kenneth Matiba and Charles Rubia, both former members of KANU who had been expelled in 1989, had issued a statement calling for an end of one party rule in Kenya (*Weekly Review* 11 May 1990). This was supported by the U.S. Ambassador to Kenya, Smith Hempstone. In the midst of these developments, the government intensified its criminalisation of political dissent, banning a rally at the Kamukunji grounds that would have been held to explain the rationale for political pluralism in Kenya. Matiba and Rubia's intention to apply for a licence for 7 July was rejected, even before they had submitted the application (Muigai 1993:27). Matiba and Rubia insisted that the rally would go on as scheduled, with or without government approval.

The stakes before the 7 July rally, popularly called 'Saba Saba', were as follows. KANU equated multi-partism with anarchy. They argued that multi-partism would engineer ethnic strife because Kenya was a multi-ethnic society. They vowed to maintain law and order, arguing in a Presidential statement that it was the prime duty of the government to maintain security.

The most fundamental duty of any government is to maintain law and order. A state of law and order, which protects not only the lives and property of all citizens but their rights under the constitution, cannot be maintained without security of the state (*Weekly Review* 6 July 1990:9).

Thus, the President maintained that neither the issue of security nor the maintenance of law and order was negotiable. He promised to deal with the utmost severity with any overt attempt to undermine law and order (*Daily Nation* 4 July 1990, *Weekly Review* 6 July 1990).

President Moi took an opportunity to defend the record of the police who were seen in Kenya as enemies of the people. He insisted that those

who carry out acts of violence or hooliganism against any citizen, no matter what his/her station in life or stance on public affairs, will be dealt with by the full might of the law. The constitution of this country gives wide ranging powers to the police for precisely that reason (*Ibid.*).

Moi included in his warning those bent on perpetrating criminal activity. Destruction of other people's property, he warned, would not be tolerated. He claimed KANU at that moment to be synonymous with peace and the opposition groups to be the equivalent of violence.

On the other hand, proponents of pluralism knew that violence was the only way for them to get back to the mainstream of political activity. The pressure on Moi was great and support in the towns for pluralism was assured. The Public Order Act, which Moi invoked in his warning, was an archaic law in a new global political dispensation. The proponents of pluralism realised the advantage that disobeying the law could bring them. Violent repression by the government would internationalise the agenda of pluralism, to the disadvantage of the government.

At this point, the informal economy began to serve as a medium of disseminating information on political pluralism and the expected 'Saba Saba' meeting (*Weekly Review* 6 July 1990). There was a quick

rise in the sale of music cassettes in Nairobi's River Road that contained political messages mainly in the Kikuyu language. (River Road is in a low class business area characterised by clandestine, illegal and criminal dealings.) Such music commented on political issues including the death of Ouko, the Muoroto evictions and the tribulations of Matiba, and implored Kenyans to pray for their country. The music vendors did booming business as some of the tapes sold over a thousand copies in a week. This activity, however, went on in a clandestine and unauthorised manner and it was soon declared illegal. The authorities declared the cassettes to be seditious and inciting! However, the matatus in Nairobi and Nakuru continued to play the songs in the city and its environs, thereby making the 'Saba Saba' message clear and popular to Kikuyu speakers.

In a crack down on what the authorities said was seditious music, police impounded not only the cassettes but also the recorders and dubbing machines. This further infuriated the vendors against the government. Some were annoyed because the impounded facilities were their only means of livelihood. Those cassettes already in the market were banned to no avail. The rise in the number of cassettes of Mzee Jomo Kenyatta's speeches, issued to inspire this crusade, escaped the machinery of the state, since his speeches were assumed to be in the national interest. By the time 7 July approached, the tension was evident. The fact that the government chose to detain such people as Matiba and Rubia added to the people's disposition to violence (*Daily Nation* 5 July 1990).

When Matiba and Rubia were picked up by police on the night of 5 July, their wives issued a statement that encapsulated the rationale behind the potential Saba Saba violence. They said any gathering 'would be due to people's reaction to repression and denial of licence (to their husbands) to hold a meeting' (*Daily Nation* 6 July 1990). Saba Saba became a day of riots because it was the culmination of the

people's hatred of repression, silence and manipulation. It revealed that the informal political space was going to be exploited to challenge the repressive laws. Despite the stern government warning for Kenyans to avoid the Saba Saba rally, people came to Kamukunji in large numbers ready for any eventuality. Violence appeared inevitable as the logical consequence of the KANU habits of canalising political talk in a particular mould and of criminalising dissent. Kenyans were tired of singing the banality of the government's alleged peace, love and unity (this being the Nyayo philosophy of Moi). Violence erupted and continued for three days.

The many people who went to Kamukunji on 7 July waved green tree branches symbolising the need for peace (Muigai 1993:27). A heavy presence of GSU and Kenya Police personnel was intended to intimidate the crowd. The worst violence in Kenya began and continued until Monday 9 July. With all the chaos and violence that followed, it is difficult to place responsibility on any category of people. A combination of origins for the violence in Nairobi can be found.

A section of the crowd in Kamukunji was largely peaceful until the police intervened. This sparked off violent running battles between the police and the demonstrators, not only at Kamukunji but in nearby markets and estates, including Gikomba, Kariokor and along Landhies Road. In other places, the crowds turned violent without provocation, barricading roads, stoning innocent motorists who refused to flash the two-finger multi-party salute, and generally engaging in lawlessness. Some bystanders were forced to flash the two finger salute and were then told to part with their wallets (*Weekly Review* 13 July 1990). I don't think there is any relationship between political pluralism and a wallet other than sheer criminality.

It is noteworthy that violence was marked in 'low-income and heavily populated residential areas', prone to violence and other social ills. The Saba Saba riots provided an opportunity for drug addicts and

criminals to cause fear and despondency (Ibid.). In estates like Dandora, Kangemi, Kawangware and Uthiru, most of the violence had no clear relation to politics. People just engaged in 'mindless acts of violence' (Ibid:6). Perhaps the only relationship between that violence and the demand for political pluralism was that the stalemate diverted police attention to the riots, leaving room for looting and mindless crime (*Daily Nation* 10 July 1990).

About 15 people were reported dead while 63 were injured (*Daily Nation* 11 July 1990). Hospital sources noted the injuries were mainly related to motor vehicle accidents, mob justice and gunshot wounds (*Daily Nation* 9 July 1990). The riots continued until Monday, 9 July, and left Nairobi a ghost city. Violence spread to Nakuru, Murang'a, Thika and Nyeri. Other parts of the country remained relatively quiet as the toll of violence was assessed in Nairobi. There is no doubt that this violence impelled the government to reconsider its restrictions on freedom of expression, press and assembly. The KANU establishment was forced to review its policy on disciplinary actions, on elections and on the party's policies in general at a special KANU Delegates Conference on 4 December 1990. These were the ideas behind the June 1990 KANU Review Committee.

Between July 1990 and the 3 December 1991, when the government conceded political pluralism, KANU started to reduce its monopoly of the legal political space and slowly accepted the reality of the times. KANU was bombarded both by internal pressure and external conditionalities. The pre-1991 violence showed the government that the undercurrent of political discontent was irresistible. It is the contention of this paper that urban violence was one of the main ways in which the state was made to realise its misdeeds. Deplorable as this violence was, especially when criminals hijacked the agenda, the state seemed ready to respond only to violence. Indeed, one reason why the freeze on external aid to Kenya forced Moi to concede

was not the act of freezing aid in itself, but the internal political consequences of the freeze. These were particularly dangerous in urban areas where people relied on imported items and on daily or monthly wages. It is, therefore, a distortion of reality to put undue emphasis on the aid freeze.

## **Conclusion**

The process of transition to pluralist politics in Kenya witnessed three main episodes of violence: the violence following Ouko's death, the Muoroto eviction violence and the Saba Saba riots. These incidents were a product of growing poverty and unemployment in towns, the criminalisation of personal and private initiatives for survival and the increasing state repression. This paper, using a historical perspective, contextualises the origins of violence in the growing transformation of global realities and internal socio-economic processes. It argues that several factors impacted on the urban masses and disposed them to violent activity.

In particular, the stalemate between the government anti-reform stance and the opposing pro-reform groups provided the tension which encouraged open confrontation. The Kenya Police were as much an encouragement to violence as were criminal elements in Nairobi, Nakuru and Kisumu. The state was also an accomplice to igniting violence given its record of criminalising dissent and free expression. Indeed, the state encouraged undercurrents of political discontent by its repressive policies and brutal instincts. It is worth concluding with the suggestion that more research is needed to understand how and why the instances of urban violence failed to burst into more intense conflict engulfing a majority of Kenyans. This might indicate how violence and conflict can be minimised in the African continent.

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