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Kenya's unclear mega election

Facing intense economic challenges, Kenyans have little hope that today's election will bring change. This loss of trust jeopardises Kenya's democracy

22 million Kenyans are called to vote today to elect a new president, a new national parliament, 47 county parliaments as well as governors and women's representatives of the parliaments. Four men are running for the highest office of state, only two of whom have a realistic chance of winning: Vice President William Ruto (55) and long-time opposition candidate Raila Odinga (77). After two terms in office, outgoing President Uhuru Kenyatta (60) is not allowed to run again. According to various forecasts, the election will be extremely close, with Odinga having a slight lead over Ruto in many projections. If no candidate wins an absolute majority in the first round, there will be a run-off.

In Kenya, political candidates do not stand for political programmes, but campaign with and for their person. This year it is a little different. Ruto, a Kalenjin, focused the social dimension by presenting himself as a man of the masses who has worked his way up. In this way, despite his considerable wealth, he is trying to distance himself propagandistically from the old political elite, of which he was a part for years, not least as vice-president. Moreover, Ruto is making expensive promises: Minimum prices for agricultural products, subsidies for fertilisers, support for the establishment of micro-enterprises. His main opponent Odinga, as the son of Kenya's first vice-president Oginga Odinga, has been part of the political establishment for decades and had to react to Ruto's coup. He promises work and almost €50 a month from a social fund to the two million poorest families. That is not even half of the minimum wage.

Increasing economic hardship

The election promises have little chance of being fulfilled. Under the Kenyatta/Ruto team, Kenya's mountain of debt has more than quadrupled, half of the tax revenue is used to service the debt, and the government's room for manoeuvre is smaller than ever. At the same time, poverty continues to increase: during the COVID pandemic, well over

two million people lost their jobs. And the cost of living has risen drastically in recent months. The price of cooking oil has doubled in some cases, and milk, household gas and maize flour - the most important staple food in Kenya - have also become significantly more expensive. Since July, the government has been subsidising maize flour, but it is unclear whether this will continue after the election.

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The rise in the cost of living is partly because the government has significantly increased taxes on many products as the country almost desperately seeks more sources of revenue to service its debt. For example, it has doubled the VAT rate on propane gas from eight to 16 per cent. In addition, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) is demanding tough austerity measures, otherwise it would withdraw its support and Kenya would fall into over-indebtedness. Meanwhile, the population in the north and north-east of the country is suffering from a severe drought, the harshest in four decades.

Since February, the consequences of the Russian attack on Ukraine have been added. Before the war, Ukraine and Russia together produced two-thirds of the world's edible oil exports, and one-third of the world's wheat exports. Maize, also an important staple food in many countries, accounted for 15 per cent of exports from Ukraine and Russia. The war has made it much more difficult to export grain and cooking oil from Ukraine, and prices have also risen due to the shortage. The higher fuel costs make the transport of all products more expensive.

A loss of trust in democracy

This is the harsh economic context in which the elections are taking place today. Despite the many economic and social promises of the main candidates, the population is surprisingly uninterested. Especially among the young, many have lost confidence in politics. They see democracy as a project of the elites and believe that the population benefits at best from the election campaign: from the small gifts and cash benefits with which politicians try to buy votes and loyalty. Ruto and Odinga paid people to attend campaign events, media reported up to $15 per event - more than three times the minimum wage per day. Under these circumstances, it is impossible to say what the mood in the run-up to the election actually is.

Disinterest, after all, could guarantee a peaceful transition. In Kenya,

things are different. Not least because rioters are also paid by political candidates. For the elite, the stakes are high and the politicians concerned are keen to protect both their careers and their significant business interests. While there is little social tension in Kenya at present, past elections have seen allegations of electoral fraud spark violence that has killed hundreds and displaced tens of thousands.

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Ensuring that things remain peaceful around the elections, however, matters far beyond Kenya. The East African country is an economic heavyweight and anchor of stability in the region. A prerequisite for Kenya to maintain this role is that it itself remains a stable and functioning democracy. This is also important for the West; since Putin's war of aggression on Ukraine, Kenya's importance for Europe has grown even more. Since February, the geopolitical rift has also been deepening in Africa, the loyalties of African countries are divided. This became very clear when the UN General Assembly voted on 2 March on a resolution condemning Russia's invasion. 28 of the 54 African member states supported the UN resolution, 25 did not (17 abstained and eight did not vote). Eritrea even voted against the resolution. Russia has been expanding its relations with Africa for several years, with a focus on arms exports and military partnerships. Kenya, on the other hand, has reiterated its position as a partner of the West.

Nevertheless, its role is not viewed without criticism. The fact that people of African origin fleeing Ukraine were turned back at the borders while white (Ukrainian) refugees were allowed to enter Europe was seen as racist. The fact that Ukrainian refugees are allowed to move and work freely in Europe, while African refugees are forced to wait idly in shelters for several years for their recognition, is registered with bitterness in Kenya. So, there are enough issues in Kenya, too, from which populists can forge their narratives. They have not yet been very successful. To keep it that way, Kenya not only needs a peaceful transfer of power. Even more dangerous is the people's disenchantment with democracy, expressed through their disinterest in the elections. If the reasons for this are not addressed, Kenya's stability is not guaranteed in the long run, regardless of the outcome of the current elections.



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