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# Elections are only part of the story in Kenya's history of post-poll violence

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A woman stands behind policemen during post election clashes, in Nairobi's Kibera slum. Goran Tomasevic/Reuters

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## Disclosure statement

Christina Kenny has previously worked for the Kenya Human Rights Commission as a Research Associate and program officer.

John Ahere does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.

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Kenya's opposition leader Raila Odinga and his National Super Alliance are [contesting the country's general election results](#) in the Supreme Court. Odinga rejected the official results which showed that Uhuru Kenyatta had reclaimed the presidency.

In the days following the announcement that Kenyatta had won, opposition supporters attempted to engage in peaceful protests. International and local media reported on clashes between police and residents in [Nairobi and Kisumu](#).

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Earlier in the year state security forces were also [deployed](#) against opposition supporters [agitating for reforms](#) to the country's election commission.

But media reports often misrepresent the cyclical unrest in Kenya as a typical response to the announcement of election results. It is true that post-election violence has been a feature of many Kenyan elections, specifically those in [1992](#), [1997](#), and [2007](#). But dismissing post-election violence because it is an expected reaction to the outcome ignores the complexities of Kenya's political reality.

Recent events represent a [disturbing return](#) to the [targeted repression](#) of communities in opposition areas by state security forces. The fact that they do this with impunity is often ignored by the international press.

The government-elect has [legitimised](#) the actions of the security forces. It claims that their actions were [justified](#) because they were responding to criminals, looters and violent protesters.

## Marginalised ethnic communities

In Kenya's political culture, the ethnic Luos are generally assumed to be supporters of veteran opposition leader [Raila Odinga](#), a Luo himself. The Luo, and other marginalised ethnic communities, have occupied a position of [credible opposition](#) to successive regimes. As a result, Luo opposition platforms are often perceived as providing political space for other marginalised tribes to have their voices heard.

These platforms of resistance have existed alongside other significant protest movements. This includes the [multi-party democracy](#) in the early 1990s, and [recent protests](#) against excessive pay for members of parliament. Supporters of both also endured state sanctioned violence.

The largest visible Luo populations live in and around the regional [capital of Kisumu](#), and in parts of Nairobi's [informal settlements](#), including [Kibera and Mathare](#).

Community [news networks](#) and citizen journalists like Rajab Bilale Osman and Vincent Achuka, have been reporting on the developments on the ground in these [informal settlements](#).

Their reports include police pursuing unarmed civilians, shooting indiscriminately into informal dwellings, and using live rounds of ammunition and tear gas on unarmed protesters. The veracity of some eye-witness reports has been compromised by a steady stream of [fake news](#) on social media platforms. But credible reports of deaths and police violence have been verified.

The Kenya National Commission for Human Rights reported that by 12 August at least [24 people](#) had been killed by police. Medecins Sans Frontieres East Africa reported [treating 64 people](#), 11 of who had gunshot wounds. The Kenya Red Cross

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[treated another 108](#) people with serious injuries.

And journalists and opposition politicians [were teargassed](#) at a conference in Kibera to [appeal for peace](#). Journalists have also [been arrested](#) for attempting to cover police involvement in the violence.

Under the pretence of suppressing riots, police have been reported to have [forcibly entered](#) private homes to rain terror on the occupants.

There have also been reports of women being physically and sexually assaulted by police. These have been circulated on social media platforms, and in [some local media](#).

These claims of excessive force are being [actively denied](#) by the government. Its denials are fuelled by fake news reports which have [become rampant](#) on social media.

## On-the-ground reporting

Osman's coverage shows the complexity of the security situation in Kibera in the days following the results. Once Uhuru was announced the winner non-violent protests began. In Kibera people went "out onto the street crying, screaming and shouting".

The announcement was also used as a cover for a relatively small number of criminals to loot and damage private property. But those who wanted to exercise their right to non-violent protest were repelled by police with tear gas and live rounds.

Several protesters engaged police in running confrontations. But there were no reports of inter-ethnic confrontations. This in stark contrast to the 2007 post-election clashes in which much of the violence was [premeditated and ethnic](#) in nature.

Rather than pursuing the root causes of election related violence, local media and the non-profit sector have focused on "peace" messaging in a bid to unite Kenyans\_ against *tribalism*, and *\_for* democracy. This has been most visible through the [#MyTribeisKenya](#), and [#MyTribeNiPeace](#) ('Peace is my Tribe') social media campaigns. These campaigns often equate 'peace' with 'stability'.

This can encourage the perception that even legitimate political protest is disturbing the peace despite the fact that many who protested were driven by structural injustices including the [inequitable distribution](#) of land and other [key resources](#).

## Internationally insignificant

The tepid response of international observers to the recent violence has been

interpreted by many Kenyans as being [dismissive of their experiences](#) while [supporting the process](#) of voting.

The focus has been on elections as triggers for violence. But elections are only part of the story. Reporting needs to be grounded in the understanding that violence has [structural causes](#).

*Additional reporting Rajab Bilale Osman, and Vincent Achuka*

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