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Kenya one week before the general election 2022

Too close to call, too important to go wrong

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In just a week, Kenyans get to decide one of Africa's most anticipated elections in 2022. Elections are held at all levels, national, regional and local. Nearly 2000 posts need to be filled. Usually chaotic and disputed, each election cycle to date has tested the strength of Kenya's democracy and its institutions. This time will be no exception. The biggest prize up for grabs is the presidency. Amongst the four candidates in the race, Raila Odinga and William Ruto are the frontrunners. While it is hard to predict the winner of this race, the losers will likely be Kenyan voters. Kenyans are not offered a credible choice between competing political visions for their future. Instead, they must decide between unappealing candidates, who seem to be occupied with their own political and business ambitions rather than the interests of the very citizens they aspire to represent.

Much is at stake. Kenya is the economic powerhouse of East Africa. Controversial elections will scare off investors and could weaken the Kenyan shilling, impacting a region still recovering from the economic downturn of COVID-19 and dealing with the economic effects of Russia's aggression in Ukraine. During this volatile moment for the multilateral world order, it would be bad news for the West if one of its few reliable partners in Africa turns inwards to deal with a messy election outcome. Perhaps most importantly, African democracy needs the elections in Kenya to go smoothly. Despite their flaws, Kenyan elections are amongst the most credible in the region and could be a welcomed break from the democratic backsliding seen in many other parts of Africa recently.

Going the extra mile

With just one week to go, the presidential election is still too close to call. According to projections by Trends & Insights for Africa (TIFA), most survey participants preferred Mr. Odinga (46.7%) as the Presidential Candidate, closely followed by Mr. Ruto (44.4%). While Mr. Odinga holds a narrow lead, the survey's margin-of-error is 2.16%, making it an open race. Ipsos Synovate measures a slightly larger lead for Mr. Odinga, projecting that he will secure 47% of the votes, and Mr. Ruto only 41%. Nether polling sees a candidate with the support needed to win the 50% + 1 majority necessary to avoid a run-off.

A run-off looks like a possible outcome as an unlikely third presidential candidate has gained traction. The 61-year-old George Wajackoyah runs on a platform that promises to legalize marijuana, push for snake farming as a way to pay off Kenya's public debt, and suspend Kenya's written constitution in favor of something more like Britain's famously unwritten constitution. According to the most recent findings from TIFA, 1.8% would vote for him, most of them between the ages of 18 and 25. Ipsos Synovate currently sees him at 2.9%. Mr. Wajackoyah will not win the presidency. But in a race as close as this and with the margin of error in mind, 1.8% or higher might just tip the scales towards the run-off.

To vote or not to vote?

The outcome of the elections on 9 August will depend on the ability of Mr. Odinga and Mr. Ruto to mobilize their bases and win undecided voters. The key players hereby are the coalitions of Mr. Odinga (*Azimio La Umoja*) and Mr. Ruto (*Kenya Kwanza*). Unlike in many other democracies, political parties in Kenya form their coalitions months before the elections take place. As a result, the way coalitions are crafted and act on the campaign trail impacts the elections. One impactful difference between the two coalitions is that *Azimio La Umoja* is registered as a coalition party, while *Kenya Kwanza* is an alliance of parties. That means that the parties in Ruto's coalition have more leeway, as will become evident in the following paragraphs. With political parties still mostly formed along ethnic-regional lines, coalitions are multiethnic by design to capture the support of different ethnic groups. Building a multiethnic coalition is about as complicated as it sounds, keeping it together is a constant balance-act.

› Voter Apathy

Often, that balance-act frustrates voters. A good example is the parties' nomination process of candidates. In the spotlight were the two biggest parties, Odinga's *Orange Democratic Movement* (ODM) and Ruto's *United Democratic Alliance* (UDA). One reason voters go missing on polling day is that they do not believe that the parties' nomination process produced the best candidates. Even though no nomination process was perfect, it was especially Mr. Odinga's party ODM that made negative headlines. Voters' motivation to come out and vote for such candidates might be muted. Ruto's party UDA fared slightly better, producing some surprise nominations that won due to grassroots movements. These surprise victories were less a testimony of Ruto's love for direct democracy, but a sign that he did not have the same grip on the processes as Odinga and his allies have within their coalition party. Still, they allow voters to associate with the candidates on a deeper level.

Especially young voters are tired of the backdoor deals that produce coalitions not focused on improving their lives, but maximizing politicians' chances of winning power. Unsurprisingly, voters between the age of 18 and 24 years have the lowest registration rate of all voting age groups. Their number of registrations has dropped since the last General Election in 2017. Kenya's youth is frustrated. They are weary of feeling like politicians woo them and promise them change every election cycle, just to ignore them once they are in office. Close to no politician in the race, and certainly not Mr. Odinga or Mr. Ruto, promises to be fundamentally different. For young voters, only a generational shift can produce credible change.

Perhaps, it is also the reason why some young voters are considering Mr. Wajackoyah. It is not that the legalization of marijuana is a top priority, but it is an attempt to show the establishment that they should not take the youth vote for granted. It is also hard to say which of the front-runners would suffer more if Wajackoyah takes a significant number of the youth votes. The common narrative is that Mr. Ruto is depending on youth votes more than Mr. Odinga. Yet, TIFA found no statistical evidence for it in June. In the end, it will likely be a question of mobilization.

Despite its challenges in mobilizing voters, *Azimio La Umoja* might have a strategic cause for optimism. The political parties making up the coalition party have agreed on a common candidate in key counties to avoid infighting and splitting of votes. *Kenya Kwanza*, though, will not, to the frustration of Mr. Ruto. The uncomfortable truth for Mr. Ruto is that even if the *Kenya Kwanza* candidates get the most votes overall, there is a chance that they will split them amongst multiple parties, and thus can be outvoted by a cohesively organized *Azimio La Umoja* campaign. It is up to Azimio to use this advantage; however, infighting makes it questionable to what extent it can.

› The Undecided

With one week to go, undecided voters are one of the biggest fish left to catch. TIFA estimates that about 5.2% of voters are still undecided. Mr. Odinga might have an edge over Mr. Ruto in his ability to win undecided voters. Mr. Odinga started out with merely 27% of voters supporting him in February. Since then, his appeal to undecided voters was key in making his support base grow to 46.7%. Moreover, *Azimio La Umoja* might have an advantage in more regions with undecided voters. Kenya's elections are not one big, coordinated national campaign, but many campaigns happening at the county level. This reflects the tendency of Kenyans to vote alongside ethnic and regional lines. *Azimio La Umoja* has an edge in a number of regions that have high numbers of undecided voters, most noticeably in Nairobi, and the Western and Northern frontier counties.

Then there is the gender card. The number of undecided female voters is nearly three times that of undecided male voters. At first, this looks like a further cause for Mr. Odinga to be optimistic. His running-mate Martha Karua is the first woman to ever be on a presidential election ticket. Yet, TIFA found no statistical evidence that the nomination of Ms. Karua has significantly increased female support for Mr. Odinga. Actually, the majority of Odinga's supporters are male, while the majority of Ruto's supporters are female.

This election is the first where there is no strong Kikuyu presidential candidate. On top of this, the sitting president is not running himself and is supporting a leader of the opposition. The support of President Uhuru Kenyatta is a double-edged sword. On one hand, it has opened up doors to campaigning in regions he had previously been shunned to Mr. Odinga and provided him with much national media attention. On the other hand, the cost thereof is that Mr. Odinga's image is linked to the debatable performance of Mr. Kenyatta's presidency. It remains to see whether Mr. Kenyatta's approval will help win over some undecided voters between now and elections, or if his smear campaigns of the past elections will continue to undermine Mr. Odinga's credibility among the Kikuyu community.

Manifestos: A manifestation of Kenya's lack of vision?

In an attempt to win over undecided voters and to tackle voter apathy, the coalitions and their parties have continued a tradition of past elections by publishing political manifestos. In them, the parties attempt to lay out their political visions for the country. It goes to show that voters are becoming less susceptible to politicians (mis)using ethnicity as a way to secure their votes.

Mr. Ruto is betting on this trend. Unlike Mr. Odinga, who comes from one of Kenya's most influential political families and is the undisputed leader of his ethnicity (Luos), Mr. Ruto has

a humbler background. He cannot rely on mobilizing voters solely on the basis of their ethnic-regional affiliation. For one, there are too many subgroups among his ethnicity, the Kalenjin. Moreover, as an “upstart,” Mr. Ruto lacks the support that established political families enjoy.

The recent developments unmask a somewhat screwed picture of Kenyan elections. While ethnicity and promises by politicians to secure benefits for their ethnicity has mattered greatly, other factors and especially the economy matter too. That ethnicity plays less of a role this time around is partly due to the fact that the state of the economy is worse than in past years. Kenyans want answers to the high food prices, rising inflation, and crippling public debt. Mr. Ruto recognized that shift in priorities, early on proposing a “bottom-up” economic approach. As a result, Mr. Odinga and his coalition were forced to adapt.

It was thus the *Azimio* coalition, which was the first to launch a manifesto on 16 May 2022. On 84 pages, the manifesto provides insights into how the coalition intends to govern the country. The coalition promises voters that it will lower costs of living, and improve poverty reduction measures, health care, and infrastructure. *Kenya Kwanza* followed suit. The coalition launched its manifesto on 30 June 2022. The ‘bottom-up economics’ approach, is at its heart. It promises to promote investments of ordinary Kenyans, thereby lifting up the poor and strengthening small and medium sized enterprises. Otherwise, voters find many of the same promises made by Mr. Odinga’s campaign.

The manifestos are an important step toward a credible contest of ideas, and thus a better democracy. However, much still needs to be done. What is not explained in the manifestos is often the most telling part. Questions of how the visions laid out in the manifestos could be implemented and financed are left unanswered. The inability of politicians on the campaign trail to promote and explain the content of the manifestos shows a lack of commitment to their promises. Moreover, the great overlap between the manifestos makes it hard to base a choice on substantive reasons. Kenyan politicians still have a long way to go. Hopefully, the generational shift currently underway in Kenya will be able to tackle some of these shortcomings.

What to look out for

The elections on 9 August will provide many answers. It will determine if Mr. Odinga or Mr. Ruto can move into State House, or if there needs to be a rerun. Immediately after, the loser will have to accept or dispute the outcome.

It will also provide insights whether the elections were fair and free. Both Mr. Odinga and Mr. Ruto want to avoid having to enter into a rerun. How far they are willing to go to ensure it does not happen, is unclear. It will be up to the election observers in the country, amongst others from the European Union and the African Union, to report on the events that shed more light on this. Sadly, Kenyans have little trust in their politicians and the system. Recent events have put into question the trustworthiness of the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC). The good news is that despite this a modest majority of Kenyans are still confident that both the IEBC and Supreme Court will perform their election-related functions fairly. The level of support is comparable between supporters of both Mr. Ruto and Mr. Odinga. Kenya’s Supreme Court has proven its ability to be a bastion of democracy when it became the first African court to ever annul an election back in 2017.

There is more good news, alas for an unfortunate reason. There is good reason to believe that the elections will be overall peaceful. Many Kenyans are increasingly indifferent towards politicians and their schemes, which makes them less susceptible to messages of violence. As there are few if any candidates providing them with answers as how they plan on improving their lives, Kenyans are unlikely to take to the streets for them.

The general election will also answer a more strategic question with long-term implications. Will Kenya for the first time have a split government? In other words, could the president be

from the coalition which forms the minority in parliament? Should it occur, it will put the new president in a difficult position. The rationale for a coalition in Kenya is to get one candidate into State House in return for a share in government, and other key positions. Without the support of Parliament, the new president might have troubles delivering on his promises. That could weaken the president's coalition as dissatisfaction grows. Ironically, the winner could be the loser of the presidential election race, who will then most likely be the majority leader.

It is key that the elections go well, given Kenya's great importance in the region and beyond. In the unlikely case of violent elections, Kenya's economy and international reputation would be the first victims. Sadly, Kenyans need more than an election that simply goes well. They need credible political change driven by young informed voters. That task ultimately lies in the hands of Kenya's youth.

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