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country report

Country Office Kenya



Kenya mourns Raila Odinga

What does his death mean for political developments in Kenya?

Mathias Kamp, Eva-Maria Okot

„If you die, there is nothing to fear. Why? Because you either go to heaven or hell. If you go to heaven there is nothing to worry about. Even if you go to hell, there is nothing to worry about: you will find many of your friends there.“

(Raila Odinga on 10 November 2023 in his speech at the Konrad Adenauer Foundation's 'Transforming a Nation' conference in Nairobi, Kenya)

Raila Amolo Odinga, former prime minister and long-time opposition leader in Kenya, has died. At the age of 80, he succumbed to cardiac arrest in a hospital in India, where he was receiving treatment. With his death, Kenya loses one of its most formative and influential political figures and arguably its most prominent citizen of the last three decades.

Odinga, who was born on 7 January 1945 in the Kisumu district of western Kenya, came from one of the country's most prominent political families. He was the son of Jaramogi Oginga Odinga, one of the leading activists in the struggle for independence and later Vice-President of Kenya. Affectionately known as 'Baba' (father in Kiswahili) by his many supporters, Raila Odinga not only became the epitome of the Kenyan opposition, but also a key influence on the country's often bumpy democratic development. The news of his death plunged the entire country into mourning and, in some parts, into a state of emergency.

While his supporters saw him as a symbol of resistance against the abuse of power, critics accused him of permanently damaging trust in institutions such as the electoral commission and the judiciary by constantly refusing to recognise election results. These legitimacy deficits continue to have an impact even after his death and pose a major challenge to Kenya's political stability.

In the mourning for his death, criticism of him as a person tends to fade into the background. The president has declared a period of national mourning and a public holiday. In the capital Nairobi and in Kisumu, public life came to a virtual standstill for a time. Even if the impact on political developments in Kenya remains to be seen, one thing is clear to all Kenyans: Raila Odinga's death represents a turning point whose significance can hardly be overestimated.

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V.

Thurid Neumann

Policy Advisor -East Africa and Migration
Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Berlin
thurid.neumann@kas.de



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