

Electoral Violence in Kenya Joel Barkan January 2013 Council on Foreign Relations Kenya is at risk of repeating the violence that marred its 2007 presidential election, during which 1,133 died and nearly 600,000 were displaced from their homes. Political order in Kenya nearly collapsed.

Ending the crisis required two months of negotiations mediated by former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and supported by the United States and its partners. The negotiations resulted in a power-sharing agreement between the two adversaries in the election, President Mwai Kibaki and Raila Odinga.(...)

Kenya's next elections, to be held on March 4 and April 11, 2013, are arguably the most important and complex since the country's return to multiparty politics two decades ago. If the elections are largely peaceful and viewed as "free and fair," they will bring Kenya's new constitution, adopted in 2010, fully into force and advance the country's progress toward becoming a modern democratic state. Conversely, if the elections are marred by widespread violence and perceived as illegitimate by the Kenyan public, they are likely to plunge the country into a renewed period of political instability and set back Kenya's democratic advance. A breakdown in the electoral process will also do serious harm to Kenya's economy, which has been performing well in recent years.(...)

Since Kenya is the "anchor state" of East Africa, a prolonged political and economic crisis will also harm neighboring countries. In particular, two major U.S. foreign policy goals in the region preventing Somalia from becoming a safe haven for terrorists and nurturing peace between Sudan and South Sudan—could be compromised. The United States, therefore, should work expeditiously with all parties concerned to ensure that the forthcoming elections are peaceful, free, and fair.(...)

The United States should impress upon Nairobi the importance of taking steps to prevent significant and widespread election violence. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit to Nairobi in August 2012 was a positive first step. (...)

The United States and others may have limited leverage over Kenya's domestic politics, but they are not without options that would significantly improve the prospects for acceptable elections and help avert a major crisis. However, with little more than two months before the elections, Washington must intensify its engagement or forsake its opportunity to make a difference.

See the full report

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