

HAVE THE TABLES TURNED?

// What to Expect from Kenya's New "Hustler" President William Ruto

Kenya had awaited the presidential elections held on August 9, 2022 with bated breath. The elections were won by William Ruto, who defeated opponent Raila Odinga by just a few percentage points. Ruto succeeds Uhuru Kenyatta, who leaves office having served his two permitted terms. This Spotlight analyzes the reasons for Ruto's success, and, reflecting on his political career, discusses what can be expected from his presidency. We argue that both his success and his career have been strongly influenced by Kenya's political history and the power structures of political alliances—especially in the context of previous elections.



Kenya's new president William Ruto shakes hands with outgoing president Uhuru Kenyatta, as he is sworn into office at a ceremony held at Kasarani stadium in Nairobi, Kenya (Photo: © picture alliance / ASSOCIATED PRESS | Brian Inganga).

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On August 15, 2022, the chairman of the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) declared William Ruto the new president of Kenya with 50.49 per cent of the votes. The announcement was accompanied by controversy: Four of the seven IEBC commissioners questioned the results claiming irregularities. Ruto's main opponent, Raila Odinga, who officially received 48.85 per cent of the votes, followed suit and filed a petition at the Supreme Court seeking to have the results declared void and calling for new elections

to be held. The Supreme Court ultimately ruled that the elections had been valid. Even though Odinga, in his words, still "disagrees" with the court's decision, he has publicly accepted the result and trust in the IEBC has been restored. This finally paved the way for the inauguration of Ruto on September 13, 2022.

The Success of Ruto's 2022 Campaign

Kenya's political landscape is strongly geared toward individual political players and, in his campaign, Ruto was able to effectively establish a narrative portraying him as an economic savior. He styled himself as a "hustler" who had fought his way to the top. The newly elected president aimed at and succeeded in winning over low-income members of the population and identified the demographically significant young electorate as his target group. Even though he has a long political career, considerable wealth, and served ten years as the deputy president, he presented himself as the anti-establishment candidate. Ruto was running for the United Democratic Alliance that was founded in 2020, advocating change in economy and society. Accordingly, during his election campaign, Ruto promised to invest 50 billion Kenyan Shillings (about 420 million euros) into small and medium-sized enterprises, thus promoting a bottom-up approach to development. Although these plans are rather vague and the corresponding development models are hardly promising with regard to sustainable egalitarian growth, the bottom-up narrative surrounding his person resonated in the polls. His opponent Odinga, on the other hand, based his campaign strongly on the political support of former president Uhuru Kenyatta. Even though his election program also aimed at tackling social and economic disparities, this alliance



Nairobi, Kenya: Odinga's supporters wait for their presidential candidate to arrive and file a petition seeking to challenge the presidential election results (Photo: © picture alliance / ZUMAPRESS.com | John Ochieng).

has cost him his reputation as an opposition candidate. As a result, the election race was steered toward economic issues, whereas in earlier years it had been very much centered on ethnic narratives. Nonetheless, more implicitly, ethnicity and political alliances have also been key factors contributing to Ruto's success.

Ethnicity, Political Alliances, and their Influence on Elections

Since independence, ethnicity and political alliances have played a central role in Kenyan politics. This is illustrated by the relationship between the political heavyweights Kenyatta (a Kikuyu by ethnicity) and Ruto (a Kalenjin) who were, at least rhetorically, bitter enemies in the 2007 elections. Election observers declared these elections to have been flawed, highlighting various irregularities. Ruto supported the opposition around Odinga that accused then president Mwai Kibaki (who was supported by Kenyatta), of having falsified the election and its results. This led to an outbreak of extreme violence along ethnic lines which cost the lives of about 1,133 people and resulted in many more being injured or displaced.¹ After several mediation attempts, a coalition government was established. To facilitate reconciliation, inter alia, the *Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Commission* was established and indictments at the International Criminal Court (ICC) against Kenyatta and Ruto followed. However, the latter cases were dropped making the will for sanctions against those responsible unlikely. This was underpinned by a subsequent marriage of political convenience in 2013 between Kenyat-

ta as president and Ruto as his deputy. This should have facilitated mediation between ethnicized voting blocs of the Kikuyu and Kalenjin. Members of both had been strongly involved in the violence of 2007, but it also helped the two politicians to escape the ICC cases. Part of the deal was that Kenyatta would support Ruto's presidential aspirations after his two permitted presidential terms. However, in 2018, Kenyatta announced that he would back Odinga's campaign for the 2022 elections. Once again, this turning point stems from events surrounding an election. In 2017, the now outgoing president Kenyatta had been re-elected with Ruto serving as deputy president, narrowly defeating Odinga. The election process was accompanied by demonstrations and riots. The run-up to the polls saw police violence against demonstrators and opposition supporters, and even the kidnapping and eventual murder of a member of the electoral commission. After Odinga's alliance made allegations of electoral fraud, the Supreme Court annulled the presidential election in a historic ruling and scheduled new elections. However, having no faith in fair elections, Odinga withdrew his candidacy and the protests intensified. Many Kenyans boycotted the elections and Kenyatta was elected as the only remaining candidate. In contrast, in January 2018, Odinga proclaimed himself "president of the people", leading to renewed conflicts. However, to prevent the outbreak of widespread violence, these tensions were ultimately resolved in a reconciliation known as the "Handshake": a planned public handshake between Kenyatta and Odinga that is seen as a declaration of the desire to find a common ground in the interests of the nation. From that moment on, Kenyatta started to support Odinga's presidential aspirations for 2022.

With this support, Odinga, an ethnic Luo, saw himself as being in the best position to win over the voter-rich region of Mount Kenya, which has typically been a Kikuyu stronghold. However, this strategy eventually proved unsuccessful. Kenyatta has not only lost popularity in recent years, but also the trust of many Kikuyu through the alliance with his long-time adversary Odinga—both in the population and among important political associates. Odinga, on the other hand, could no longer base his campaign on the basis of being an opponent of the current political class. Although he continued to serve as deputy president, Ruto was thus able to portray himself as the anti-establishment candidate. Hence, it is open to debate whether Ruto was more successful because of his campaign or because Odinga has lost the faith of his core constituency and close affiliates in light of his alliance with Kenyatta.

Although ethnicity remains a relevant factor in Kenyan politics, the 2022 elections did not result in wide-

spread violence. One reason is that the memories of 2007 remain painful for many Kenyans. Another is that especially in 2022, many citizens protested for peaceful elections demonstrating that they were no longer willing to be instrumentalized by the political leadership. Additionally, although still surrounded by a certain amount of controversy, changes to the electoral and institutional system increased people's trust in political processes. For example, a new constitution adopted in 2010 made institutions such as the Supreme Court less partisan and more functional.

What to Expect from the "Hustler's" Presidency?

Although he has won the elections, Ruto's popularity should not be overestimated. The "mere" 50.49 per cent he received in an election with—by Kenyan standards—low voter turnout of 64.77 per cent will be a major challenge for his presidency. His promise to serve as a president for all citizens behind the slogan of "one Kenya" could become obsolete if his politics do not address followers of Odinga and non-voters. Even more decisive is whether he will tackle longed-for changes in the country. Kenya's political landscape remains marked by historical continuities of favoritism, polarizing alliances, and national debt that leave constant rifts in society. Moreover, for several years, large parts of the country have been affected by drought and other environmental problems.² Although Kenya is one of the economically strong countries,³ the resulting shortage of food, current price increases, and high inflation are widening disparities between a growing middle and upper class and low-income households. This is unlikely to be overcome by the abovementioned vague economic program proposed by Ruto.

Even though the constitution has successfully initiated reforms and elections have become more credible, the political entanglements of the presidential candidates and other influential politicians are diminishing the hopes of change. Since Kenya's independence in 1963, the country's political elite has been closely linked to, and is partially congruent with, the business elite. The Kenyatta family, for example, owns numerous often monopoly-like companies in Kenya, and is considered the richest and most influential family in the country. Both Odinga and Ruto even stated that they would do their best to protect Kenyatta's interests before the elections. However, this wealth has often been earned by dubious means, as, for example, Kenyatta's appearance in the Pandora Papers shows. Although he presents himself differently, Ruto has also long been an integral part of the Kenyan political elite. In the early 1990s, he took the first steps of his political career within the youth organization YK-92. The organization supported the autocratic president of the time, Daniel arap Moi, and was allegedly involved in coordinated violence against Kikuyus. Although the ICC case against Ruto was dropped, he is also accused of having incited and perpetrated widespread violence against Kikuyus in 2007. Furthermore, his political career has enabled him to become extraordinarily wealthy. Though never convicted, Ruto is considered an integral part of numerous corruption cases, including a multibillion arms procurement scandal in 2020 and several incidences of land grabbing. Despite the fact that his alliance with Kenyatta was broken with the Handshake, he remained deputy president of a government that has incrementally restricted civic space and undermined several reforms over the past decade.

Some Key Figures in Kenya's Post-Independence History

Name	Role	Years	Political Party	Ethnic Background
Jomo Kenyatta	President	1964–1978	Kenya African National Union	Kikuyu
Daniel arap Moi	President (vice president)	1978–2002 (1967–1978)	Kenya African National Union	Tugen, sub group of Kalenjin
Mwai Kibaki	President (vice president)	2002–2013 (1978–1988)	National Rainbow Coalition (2002–2007) and Party of National Unity 2007–2013	Kikuyu
Uhuru Kenyatta (son of Jomo Kenyatta)	President (deputy prime minister)	2013–2022 (2008–2013)	The National Alliance (2013–2017) and Jubilee Party (2017–2022)	Kikuyu
William Ruto	President (deputy president)	Since 2022 (2013–2022)	United Democratic Alliance	Kalenjin
Raila Odinga (son of former vice president Jaramogi Oginga Odinga 1964–1966)	Presidential candidate (2 nd prime minister of Kenya)	2007, 2013, 2017, 2022 (2008–2013)	Orange Democratic Movement	Luo

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Hence, many Kenyans do not expect to see the new president to bring major changes but rather anticipate a continuation of elitist Kenyan power politics. "He who pays the piper calls the tune" is therefore a phrase often used in the context of the current elections. It shows how dissatisfied and resigned many Kenyans are when it comes to the political class, which they see as being driven by greed.⁴ In line with this, even before his inauguration as president, Ruto's tactics were dubious: instead of waiting for the Supreme Court's decision on the elections, he had already begun to recruit members from Odinga's camp to support him. His aim is apparently to secure a majority in parliament. Many Kenyan commentators see this as a tactic that he learned from his political mentor Moi, who was able to achieve monopolistic access to power.

What is the Way Forward?

William Ruto, the newly elected president of Kenya, faces many challenges and needs to come up with concrete steps to address the root causes of inequality and hostilities in the country.

The fact that Odinga and many candidates for parliamentary posts have publicly accepted their defeat gives hope that Kenya's electoral process—including a functional Supreme Court—has become increasingly institutionalized in recent years. However, how Odinga and many defeated regional politicians position themselves in the Kenya's political ballet in the future, remains crucial for social cohesion.

More particularly, the struggle for structural political and social change in Kenya remains fierce. Not least

because the last two administrations, in each of which Ruto served as deputy president, constantly sought to reinforce their dominant position in society. This was seen, for example, in the restriction of police and land administration reforms, as well as the shrinking of civic spaces. These practices are part of the postcolonial political structure in Kenya that is characterized by fluid alliances of powerful politicians, advantage taking, and corruption of political elites, which is supported, in particular, by the legacy of the colonial era and persistent global inequalities. Ruto has benefited greatly from these structures and is now serving as the president. Whether the self-proclaimed "hustler" will become "president of the people" is now up to him to prove. His economic growth program is certainly not well developed and it remains questionable whether Ruto, a man who has been so deeply involved in issues such as dubious land distribution, electoral violence, and corruption, can really be expected to come up with genuine solutions.

References and further reading:

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