

Kenya on edge as citizens await the results of a heated presidential election

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Nairobi: Kenyans waited anxiously on Friday for the results of a heated presidential election earlier in the week that has brought the country to a near standstill.

Bystanders watch as Kenyan police trucks arrive following a protest at Nairobi's Mathare slum on Aug. 11. (Luis Tato/AFP/Getty Images)

Preliminary results showed the incumbent, President Uhuru Kenyatta, leading by nine percentage points with nearly all the votes counted. But those numbers have been rejected by the leading opposition candidate, Raila Odinga, who has alleged major voting irregularities. International elections monitors say they have seen no clear evidence to support such charges.

On Friday, Odinga's campaign indicated it might soften its stance, with officials saying the candidate would accept the official results if his team was allowed access to the electoral commission's computer system, in order to inspect the raw data for themselves. The electoral commission did not immediately give a public response to that request.

In anticipation of the official results being announced, Odinga's supporters staged protest marches in some areas, including burning tires in some of Nairobi's largest slums. By the evening, after multiple delays, the country's elections commission still had not made any announcements.

Even though Kenya has been considered a symbol of political and economic stability in East Africa in recent years, it is riven by tribal loyalties that inject immense bitterness and anger into national elections. In 2007, more than 1,000 people were killed in ethnic violence after Odinga lost that year's presidential election and alleged vote-rigging.

In the days since Tuesday's presidential vote, Odinga has put forth two hazy, loosely related explanations about how he believed the vote was manipulated.

He first alleged that a hacker had gained access to the electoral commission's database and then accused the commission of concealing the actual results, which Odinga said proved he was the winner.

Election monitors, including former secretary of state John F. Kerry, said they saw no signs of a rigged vote and that there was enough documentation to settle any disputes over the results.

But Odinga supporters, many of them members of his Luo tribe or other allied tribes, said they were being robbed of yet another election. The Luo are one of the major ethnic groups in Kenya, but a Luo has never been president of Kenya, and many members of the tribe attribute their socioeconomic troubles to their group's political exclusion.

"We are tired of being ruled by Kikuyus," said Wycliffe Onyalo, 25, referring to Kenyatta's tribe, which has dominated politics since Kenya's independence from Britain in 1963. Three of the country's four presidents have come from the tribe. Onyalo joined demonstrations on the main street of the Kibera slum before the results were announced.

"We are willing to lose our lives," said Steve Omindo, another protester, suggesting that the demonstrations would continue, even as police trucks could be seen in the distance.

A third protester, Eric Omollo, suggested Odinga would bring desperately needed assistance to the slum, if elected.

“Raila will build Kibera into South Korea, into America,” he shouted.

Many Kenyans have left Nairobi in recent days, bracing for violence. Their departure has transformed one of Africa’s most vibrant, dynamic cities into a relative ghost town.

The country was caught largely unprepared for the spasm of post-election violence that erupted in 2007. This time, security forces had fanned out en masse in volatile parts of the country. Analysts expected faceoffs between protesters and police in places like Kibera, but said the violence would not likely consume entire cities and towns as it did a decade ago.

Kenyatta was charged by the International Criminal Court with instigating some of the violence that year. Those charges were later dropped for lack of evidence, and Kenyatta ran for president in 2013, making his defiance of the ICC one of his campaign’s centerpieces.

During his five years as president, Kenya’s economy has enjoyed steady growth and rising foreign investment. But it has been battered by terrorist attacks, including one on an upscale Nairobi mall that killed 48 people in 2013, and another in 2015 at a northern university, which left 148 dead. The military remains mired in a seemingly intractable war in Somalia against the Islamist extremist group al-Shabab.

Kenyatta’s administration has also been plagued by allegations of corruption that many Kenyans see as the reason for the country’s vast inequalities, with well-connected millionaires enjoying luxuries while large numbers of people struggle to afford food and housing. A few miles from Kibera, there are Land Rover dealerships and new glass high rise towers, but the slum remains crime-ridden and poor, much of it without plumbing or electricity.

On Thursday, the U.S. State Department released a statement encouraging a peaceful approach to resolving any electoral disputes.

“If candidates dispute results, it is important that they do so in accordance with the constitution and rule of law and not through threats or acts of violence,” the statement said.

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