



Shock the vote: A tale of two countries

The script playing out over Kenya's allegedly rigged election is almost exactly what happened in Mexico in 2006 - but there, the conflict never turned violent. Arno Kopecky considers what Kenyan politicians could learn from their Mexican counterparts

ARNO KOPECKY

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NAIROBI -- Of the many uncomfortable questions posed by the atrocities piling up across Kenya, one in particular is now haunting opposition leader Raila Odinga: How should the loser of a rigged election respond to his defeat?

It's an issue that crops up frequently - and urgently - in most parts of the world. Kenya's experience has been especially horrific, but until it led to the wanton slaughter now making headlines, it was hardly unique. Having spent the past six months watching it unfold, what's striking is the precision with which Kenya is following a script I first witnessed in Mexico less than two years ago.

On July 2, 2006, a highly contentious federal election threatened to tear our North American free trade agreement partner apart. Like Kenya today, Mexico had but recently emerged from decades of one-party rule. Vicente Fox was the president who swept aside the autocratic Institutional Revolutionary Party in a historic 2000 election that promised to usher in a new era of enlightened, liberal government.

Mr. Fox, a straight-talking, Harvard-educated cowboy, brought the same reputation of integrity to his post that Mwai Kibaki carried to Kenya's Statehouse in 2002. Each leader's term saw an expansion of press freedom, human rights and economic development in a country struggling to climb out of Third World status.

Unlike Mr. Kibaki, Mr. Fox could not run for re-election, because Mexican law limits the president to a single term. But his successor, Felipe Calderon, was cut from the same cloth - a hands-off technocrat who liked delegating responsibility, more comfortable in private meetings than the public eye.

Meanwhile, Mr. Calderon's challenger, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, was a left-wing populist with a talent for mobilizing huge crowds and holding them spellbound for hours with talk about raising the minimum wage, improving access to health care and enhancing the property rights of Mexico's indigenous population. It was easy to see why opinion polls gave him a decisive lead.

Yet on July 2, it was Mr. Calderon who won, by a margin of 233,000 votes. (Last week in Kenya, the official tally put Mr. Kibaki 230,000 votes ahead of Mr. Odinga.)

Mr. Obrador and his supporters refused to accept defeat. They stormed downtown Mexico, occupying the city centre and turning it into an enormous campground that shut down business, ruined traffic and cost the economy untold millions in lost output. The military was called in and surrounded Congress for the first time in Mexico's history, manning checkpoints throughout one of the most populous cities on Earth. Televised fistfights broke out between rival politicians in scenes that foreshadowed Kenya's turbulent press conference the night Mr. Kibaki's victory was announced.

The pressure on Mexico's Federal Electoral Tribunal quickly mounted. Mr. Obrador produced evidence of irregularities - discrepancies in vote tallies, constituencies with a suspicious number of cancelled votes, others with an equally suspicious high turnout - that were backed by a number of international observers. Having declared Mr. Calderon the winner, officials were forced to backpedal.

But, as in Kenya now, the electoral commission compounded its mistakes by refusing to correct them openly. While admitting "significant election irregularities and errors," it passed responsibility to the judiciary, which then did nothing about them.

No sooner had Mr. Calderon been sworn in than Mr. Obrador held a million-person rally in the capital's historic central square, where he declared himself president. For his part, Mr. Odinga has spent the past week trying to do the exact same thing - million people and all - in Nairobi's Uhuru Park. He has been frustrated by riot police who have sealed the park off.

In Mexico, Mr. Calderon's advantage proved superior: Having made it first through the gates to power, it became a simple matter of holding on. Whether his victory was genuine or false became irrelevant as Mexicans grew used to seeing him in office. Through sheer force of habit, his legitimacy took root in the public imagination.

The differences between Mexico's 2006 drama and Kenya's today can be measured in blood. Where Kenya's standoff has degenerated into a murderous looting spree that bears little relation to the election which sparked it, Mexico's protest stayed political - and peaceful - from start to finish.

In part that's because Mexico's voters aligned themselves according to class, while in Kenya, it's by tribe. Also, Mr. Obrador's poor supporters were nowhere near so desperate as the slum residents now torching the vast ghettos of Nairobi. But the point remains: Mr. Odinga knows well that the moment he steps back from the brink, his chances of reaching the Statehouse will become microscopic. Yet unless he's prepared to incite a civil war, what choice does he have?

Assuming he can and will rein in the violence being committed in his name, one obvious tactic would be to withdraw his party's sizable majority from Parliament. Such a boycott could bring Mr. Kibaki's government down, though it would need the co-operation of several independents to work.

The question is, are Mr. Odinga's parliamentarians any more faithful than Mr. Obrador's were? In Mexico, the opposition boycott slowly faded into oblivion as, one after the other, politicians gave

in to Mr. Calderon's reasonable-sounding offers. National reconciliation, after all, is a great excuse to get your old job back.

Two years ago, Mr. Obrador pointed out that it was easy to call for peace and reconciliation when it means getting away with a crime. The same bitter pill now rests on Mr. Odinga's tongue, and he doesn't look any closer to swallowing it. Meanwhile, Mr. Kibaki's team can sit calmly back and say that "we are willing to talk," making Mr. Odinga look like a villain for holding back. As the bodies pile up, a villain is what he is becoming.

On the other hand, the international community has been far more vociferous in condemning this election than it was in Mexico. Here, it seems a virtual certainty that the numbers were tampered with. If that happened in Mexico, it was done far more professionally; in any case, the European Union's observation team concluded that it was good enough.

This time around, adding to the EU's all-important condemnation is the fact that Mr. Kibaki is far older than Mr. Calderon; even before the chaos, he seemed a tired man. Now, he seems positively dazed. There remains a distinct possibility that diplomatic pressure could wear him into the ground.

But Mexico's example isn't the only suggestion that history is not on Mr. Odinga's side. Let's not forget another contentious election the whole world watched not so long ago - the one decided in Florida in 2000. Eight years later, distracted by 9/11, a war on terror and another on climate change, who even remembers what the Gore-versus-Bush fuss was all about?

Arno Kopecky is a Canadian journalist based in Nairobi.