

Kenya sweeps corrupt ruler out of power
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Kenyans revelled in a day few dared to dream of in four decades, as the preliminary results yesterday from Friday's elections suggested a landslide victory for the opposition, sweeping away many crooks and cronies of a ruling party that has terrorised and impoverished them since independence.

With about a fifth of the poll already counted last night, Mwai Kibaki, a veteran opposition leader and former Vice-President, had won around 70% of the votes. Uhuru Kenyatta, the candidate of the outgoing President Daniel arap Moi's Kanu party and son of Jomo, Kenya's founding father, had won less than 30%, offering Kenya the chance of one of the most peaceful and democratic transitions from 'Big Man' rule in history.

'We are cruising to a fantastic and historic victory,' said Kijana Wamalwa, a key member of Kibaki's National Rainbow Coalition (Narc).

'The mood here is very sombre,' said an official at Nairobi's State House, the centre of a kleptocracy which has forced some 60% of Kenyans into wretched poverty.

Fearing a repeat of the violence that claimed thousands of lives before previous elections, Nairobiens barely ventured out over Christmas, except to vote. But as radio stations broadcast the unofficial results from polling stations around the country, small, disbelieving crowds emerged. 'No violence and no more Kanu, no more Moi - it's too much, a gift from God,' said Josiah Owade, one of a group of youths hunkered round a radio.

After 24 years of misrule, Moi was constitutionally obliged to step aside. Yet many Kenyans feared that he planned to rule on through Kenyatta. 'Choosing Kenyatta was all about self-preservation for the old man and his family,' said one diplomat in Nairobi yesterday. 'But the trick hasn't paid off, because Kenyans wouldn't be fooled.'

Even more remarkably in a country where every vote has traditionally had its price, many of Moi's most notorious cronies lost their seats. They include Vice-President Musalia Mudavadi; Justice Minister Julius Sunkuli; Moi's crony-in-chief Shariff Nassir; and John Haroun Mwau, a Kanu vice-chairman.

'This is a glorious day for Kenya,' said John Githongo of Transparency International, the watchdog which ranks Kenya among the world's most corrupt nations. 'All the evidence suggest Kenyans have taken bribes across the country, and then voted with their consciences.'

At a military parade yesterday morning to mark his passing, Moi shrugged off the first results. 'That's democracy,' he said. 'As long as Kenyans are united, I am satisfied.' At the time, Moi's thuggish son Gideon -- one of the most feared men in Kenya and Kenyatta's likely choice as Prime Minister -- represented Kanu's only victory. He stood unopposed after opposition candidates mysteriously withdrew.

Narc's likely victory took on added significance in western Kenya where the sun wore a halo on Friday. Meteorologists said the phenomenon was caused by light refracting

through ice. But the Luo tribe, one of Kenya's poorest, celebrated it as propitious and more than 90% of them voted for Narc.

As Kenya's likely new government, Narc looks only fairly auspicious. It was formed when many of Moi's leading cronies deserted Kanu, after being passed over for Kenyatta. United only by hatred of Moi, it has no ideology, no concrete policies and could crumble over the division of spoils.

With many of Kanu's most violent politicians now in Narc, Kenyans have been spared the politically stirred tribal clashes that claimed more than 3 000 lives before two previous elections.

On polling day, the threat of rioting lurked in Nairobi's slums, where Narc's candidate -- and likely Prime Minister -- Raila Odinga claimed two million voters had been disenfranchised (though Narc had insisted on the regulation that caused this), and threatened to lead a million-man march on State House.

But Narc's campaign was better characterised by Kibaki, virtually bedbound for the past three weeks after a car crash. On Friday, the man who promises he will 'Save Kenya' was so frail he had to cast his vote from the back of his Mercedes. Narc's campaign was mostly peaceful, disjointed and lethargic, counting entirely on the poor's desperation for change. Indeed it was they -- and not Kibaki's slick London PR consultants -- who supplied Narc's real slogan: 'Unbwogable' -- the made-up title of a hit pop song, meaning 'unstoppable'.

Narc also boasts Kanu's most accomplished thieves, so Kibaki's promise to fight corruption rings hollow. Yet Narc is also introducing a handful of distinguished activists to politics -- notably Wangari Maathai, a celebrated environmentalist -- and, most importantly, since Moi began constructing his patronage network Kenya has changed.

High rates of literacy and an energetic press are closing many of the tribal divisions Moi abused to divide opposition.

The Western donors who allowed Moi's cronies to steal their loans during the Cold War demand change too. Kenya's aid was frozen four years ago because of the corruption. If Kibaki wants the half billion pounds pending to restart Kenya's shrinking economy, he will need to offer stiff guarantees. Already he has promised to pass two anti-corruption Bills. One ensures that all politicians declare their wealth. - Guardian Unlimited © Guardian Newspapers Limited 2001