EDITORIAL

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This special issue of the *Journal of African Elections* emanated from a conference on 'Conflict Resolution in Kenya' held at the University of the Witwatersrand in August 2008 at which lecturers and post-graduate students from the Faculty of Humanities reflected on the momentous process of change in Kenya.

While most of the papers dealt with a wide array of questions relating to the causes, course and consequences of the conflict in Kenya after the December 2007 elections, the papers included in this issue speak directly to the politico-economic dimension of the crisis, analysing it from the perspective of democratisation trends in Africa and pointing out the opportunities and challenges of building stable systems of political contestation.

The Kenyan conflict is not unique, it is a quintessential African story in which the democratisation glass is glaringly both half full and half empty.

What is, perhaps, unique to Kenya is the apparent political normality which concealed profound questions of ethnicity, class, and social malaise 45 years after decolonisation and 15 years after the advent of multiparty democracy. This situation is partly attributable to the exceptionalism that has often characterised Kenya's position in East Africa: a relative period of stability and social amity; a vibrant middle class anchored in both industry and agriculture; a cosmopolitan civil society; and contentious media.

As neighbouring countries confronted social turmoil and political decay ruling elites in Kenya exploited this exceptionalism to their advantage, using it to sustain a semblance of nationhood which was clothed in political authoritarianism. It was not until the stirrings of change of the late 1990s that most Kenyans awoke from the slumber of regional uniqueness to realise that they faced challenges similar to those faced by their neighbours. Beneath the veneer of stability and civility was the decimation of social and political institutions, the transformation of the national economy into a privatised realm of fiefs and corrupt cartels, a resurgence of the violent mobilisation of ethnic differences, and the socioeconomic marginalisation of large segments of society.

Multiparty democracy exacerbated the multiple sources of insecurity present in the body politic. Thus, as the regime of Daniel arap Moi sluggishly and reluctantly opened up the spaces of pluralism it confronted a society that was deeply divided.

As in most of Africa democratisation promised political renewal, but the social base for building pluralism was inchoate and brittle. For this reason there was multiparty competition without significant liberalisation of society, while elections were conducted merely to renew the mandate of authoritarian leaders and ward off the prying eyes of Western donors.

Aggravating problems in the first phase of the democratisation era (in the mid-1990s) was the deliberate attempt by the Moi government to militarise society along ethnic lines. The unleashing of ethnic militias against communities that voted for opposition parties became widespread as Moi clung desperately to power.

Equally vital, electoral despotism, which paraded as democratisation, coincided with state control of all levers of power, denying opposition parties the space to mount respectable and credible challenges to the governing elites. Civil society organisations, led primarily by the middle classes, operated on the margins of politics, building new constituencies and contesting new claims, but without the latitude to make much of a difference.

Yet, by the late 1990s Kenyans also demonstrated the power of patience and persistence inherent in political parties and civic organisations. Instead of lapsing into defeatism and despair opposition forces worked creatively to push the political envelope, nurturing new alliances and devising tactics to fight the battle against electoral despotism.

The major breakthrough came during the 2002 elections, when a multi-ethnic alliance ended Moi's rule. But the shift was barely reflected in institutional and behavioural change: instead, old patterns and practices prevailed. The executive continued to resist meaningful democratisation of state institutions, in the name of order and ethnicity. Parliament, the epitome of representative government, remained an elite club of overpaid and underworked legislators. Major actors within the once-vibrant civil society gave themselves over to the comfort of government and vehemently defended the erosion of media freedoms and the onslaught on other independent institutions.

The reversal of democratic gains predictably created new forces and movements, which converged during the December 2007 elections and the subsequent violence, which the contributors to this issue have attempted to address.

Most of the articles seek to place the roots of these events in the post-colonial contest over resources, identity, and dignity. This tripartite structure of grievances is at the heart of Kenya's political economy and informs current debates about institutional change and continuity.

Although the country has been rescued from failure by the meticulous superintendence of the African Union and the international community dark clouds still hover on Kenya's political landscape: stark socioeconomic inequities,

the marginalisation of restless and combustible youths, disengaged elites and leaders, cancerous corruption at all levels of society, and weak institutions.

More worrying is the structure of institutions produced by the compromises negotiated after the post-election violence. Although the establishment of the grand coalition government gave the country the opportunity to find its feet again the new system has the potential to cause paralysis.

Ten months into the grand coalition debilitating differences have emerged over the power-sharing arrangement between president and prime minister, which may, in the long run, impede decision-making. In addition, although there is still a national consensus about the need for constitutional reform the coalition arrangements may lull the previously feuding elites into complacency, postponing the fundamental changes which would establish sturdy rules for posterity.

As the 2012 elections approach Kenya's leaders face a dilemma over whether to create a new constitution that will protect the country from a repetition of the problems that followed the 2007 elections or whether to procrastinate on reform in the hope that the future will take care of itself.

Kenya's emergence from its regional exceptionalism to take its place as a normal African country holds lessons for the rest of Africa. Although elections and democratisation may generate conflicts these conflicts are often a reflection of broad societal fissures and fault-lines that need to be held in check by predictable institutional rules. Weak participation, accountability, and transparency in Africa are the result of the failure of leaders to entrench these rules not of the innate inability of African societies to domesticate and embrace the norms and values that underpin them.