

THE WAY TO UHURU

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Kenya is renowned for its safaris, the recreational tracking of lions and herds of elephants and giraffes, during which tourists strain to see all they can through binoculars propped atop a roving vehicle dodging thorned umbrella trees. Many foreigners have also discovered, mostly in the pages of magazines and in documentary films, the Maasai of southern Kenya in their beads, colorfully patterned clothes, and pierced earlobes as they guide cattle from one arid hillside to the next. Yet others know Kenya as a major producer and consumer of tea, a legacy of British colonialism.

These days, Kenya makes the news when bad things happen. Ethnic tribes clash. Violence erupts after national elections. Drought and famine strike at the heart of agriculture and commerce, leaving villagers and urbanites alike to wonder what struggles might lay ahead. But up until 2007, Kenya had been one of the most stable countries in the region, even as neighboring nations underwent serial unrest. Having gained independence from Great Britain in 1963, brought about in part by the violent Mau Mau rebellion of the preceding decade, Kenya had just two presidents during the first 40 years of its existence. Such stability enabled the country to develop as the region's commercial and communications hub and host many international nongovernmental organizations, including major United Nations offices and programs. Unfortunately, this stability

may well have come at the cost of a hampered democracy. A single-party constitution propped up these presidents until reform brought about multiparty elections in the early 1990s.

In 2007, disputed presidential elections led to widespread violence along ethnic lines, leaving at least 1,000 people dead and forcing hundreds of thousands to flee their homes. Since then, national leaders have regularly imprisoned political opponents, and ethnic battle lines continue to create problems for the country. In the southern coastal region, a recent increase in ethnic clashes among semi-nomadic cattle herders has left houses burned and dozens of people dead. Ensuing revenge attacks have been fueled by an influx of weapons from Somalia, according to BBC News. Cattle raids and land and water disputes seem to be at the heart of these clashes, though some analysts believe the violence is related to parliamentary and presidential elections slated for March 2013. In Kenya, voting often falls along ethnic lines and candidates have been known to whip up support by fomenting discontent among their own and other targeted ethnic groups.

Compared to its neighbors, Kenya is enjoying fairly healthy economic development. Recently, its per capita income exceeded \$800 US for the first time. Nairobi, the capital, serves as a major regional center for finance, communications, shipping and other services. Many companies, both Kenyan and international, have offices in this city of three million. Major infrastructure projects include a new mass transit system to be built in cities throughout the country.

Still, the challenges remain formidable. More than one-half of the population lives below the poverty line. The country remains heavily dependent upon agriculture, which employs 80 percent of all workers, many of them laboring as subsistence farmers living from one uncertain crop to the next. In addition, poor infrastructure and inadequate foreign investment obstruct further development.

So what does the future hold for Kenya? The government's Vision 2030 development program is designed to help Kenya become a "middle-income country" by addressing concerns



within the three "pillars" of social, political and economic development. This comes on the heels of a successful economic plan implementation that enabled Kenya to benefit from annual economic growth as high as 6 percent. Meanwhile, the recently reformed Constitution and Bill of Rights provide real legal means for improving human rights.

Judicial reform is also underway. So for many, visions of Kenya's future is characterized with some semblance of hope.

In the middle of downtown Nairobi, you'll find a green expanse with walking paths coursing past palm trees and a pond. This is Uhuru Park, the main public recreation area in the city-center. In Swahili, Uhuru means "freedom." The new constitution and other recent reforms, affecting most every area of governance, from legal proceedings to education, may provide more Kenyans with the real "freedom" that enables them to flourish. Uhuru may well become more than just a park or some abstract aspiration.

Mark Kramer is author of Dispossessed: Life In Our World's Urban Slums and a freelance writer. Mark is based in Pittsburgh, PA, where he lives with his family, teaches creative writing, and helps manage a community center. He is a long time supporter and has championed the work of LIA for many years.

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