

## THE ROOTS OF CONFLICT OVER LAND IN KENYA

By George F. Ward

Considerable attention has been paid to conflicts in West Africa involving nomadic pastoralists. As recently as 2014, militants linked to the pastoralist Fulani ethnic grouping in Nigeria were the [fourth most deadly](#) terrorist group in the world. Although they have been less lethal than those in West Africa, conflicts involving pastoralists over land in Kenya have also long existed. Recently, these long-simmering conflicts have resulted in [significant violence](#). The most recent violence in Kenya has roots in a complex mixture of ethnic conflict, economic exigencies related to climate change, and national and local politics. The interplay of these elements is worth examining. [more...](#)



A Turkana herdsman in Lokubae, Turkana region, Kenya, during greener times in 2006. Photo courtesy of the author.

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By Sarah Graveline

On August 4, 2017, Rwandan citizens will vote in national elections, where it is widely expected that current President Paul Kagame, in office since 2000, will win another term. In December 2015, Rwandans voted overwhelmingly in favor of a [referendum](#) to allow Kagame to stand for three more terms, meaning he could potentially remain in office until 2034. Under Kagame's leadership, Rwanda's economy and health outcomes have improved, but the country is no longer a "donor darling" due to mounting criticism over domestic repression and Rwanda's record of arming rebel groups in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Despite donor concerns, however, few changes are expected in the 2017 elections. [more...](#)



In this Monday, April 7, 2014, file photo, Rwandan President Paul Kagame addresses the public and dignitaries at a ceremony to mark the 20th anniversary of the Rwandan genocide, at Amahoro stadium in Kigali, Rwanda. (Source: AP Photo/Ben Curtis, File.)

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IDA's Africa team focuses on issues related to political, economic, and social stability and security on the continent.

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Considerable attention has been paid to conflicts in West Africa involving nomadic pastoralists. As recently as 2014, militants linked to the pastoralist Fulani ethnic grouping in Nigeria were the [fourth most deadly](#) terrorist group in the world. Although they have been less lethal than those in West Africa, conflicts involving pastoralists over land in Kenya have also long existed. Recently, these long-simmering conflicts have resulted in [significant violence](#). The most recent violence in Kenya has roots in a complex mixture of ethnic conflict, economic exigencies related to climate change, and national and local politics. The interplay of these elements is worth examining.



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## Herders and Farmers

Although the recent violence in Kenya has been described in the press as between Pokot and Samburu pastoralists and sedentary farmers in the Laikipia region, the reality is more complex. To begin, as Francis P. Conant pointed out in 1965, the Pokot people of west-central Kenya traditionally included [groups of both farmers and herders](#). In their traditional homelands, the Pokot worked out a variable means of describing and managing physical and social space that took into account the needs of farmers and pastoralists and facilitated coexistence. When violence took place in that context, it was usually between pastoralists of different ethnic groupings—for example, between the [Pokot and Samburu](#) or between the [Pokot and Turkana](#). The objective of these inter-ethnic clashes was more often cattle rustling rather than occupation of new grazing areas.

## Pressures of Change

Periodic episodes of drought have long been characteristic of life in northern Kenya. Writing in 1990, J. Terrence McCabe argued that periodic droughts served as a [useful means](#) of keeping livestock populations in check, preventing the overburdening of the land. While that may have been the case in the past, the changing climate of recent years has produced more frequent droughts. At the same time, the populations of the pastoralist groups and their livestock have grown. The result has been greater herding activity and thereby greater pressure on scarce water resources. At the same time, the pastoralists began to move out of their traditional lands in search of better grazing land and water.

## Herders versus Farmers

In early 2015, Kenyan news media began reporting incursions by Pokot herders and large numbers of animals into Baringo County, which lies south of the traditional Pokot territory in West Pokot county. According to the Kenya News Agency, the herders [displaced residents](#) from their farms and destroyed infrastructure facilities such as schools and water points. The Kenyan government responded with a [police operation](#) aimed at forcing the invading herders off the lands that they had occupied. That operation has not stopped the Pokot incursions, but has forced the herders to leave some of the land that they had occupied. In the process, many animals died, and [human food insecurity](#) increased. When 3,000 Pokot herders were [evicted](#) from Baringo county in early 2017, they lost 5,000 animals.

## Herders versus Large Landowners

More recently, a new chapter in Kenya's land conflicts began as herders occupied areas only around a three-hour drive from the capital of Nairobi. In February 2017, reports said that [10,000 herders](#) armed with automatic weapons and driving 135,000 cattle had occupied large private farms and ranches, nature conservancies, and traditional smallholdings in Laikipia county, one of Kenya's most important wildlife areas. The pastoralists reportedly killed wildlife both for sport and

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to reduce competition for scarce water and grazing. Elephants, giraffes, zebras, lions, and even family dogs perished. More tragically, the herders have [murdered](#) around 35 inhabitants of the area. They [killed](#) prominent British-Kenyan rancher Tristan Voorspuy and wounded Italian-born conservationist and author Kuki Gallman, whose memoir had been made into the feature film *I Dreamed of Africa*.

## Politics Aggravates the Conflict

Many of the large farms, ranches, and safari operations in Laikipia are run by the descendants of European settlers. Others are owned by wealthy and prominent indigenous Kenyans, including former President Mwai Kibaki's nephew, George Mwachira Mwai, who was [shot and injured](#) in July. Some of the owners of large farms see the incursions as politically instigated rather than as driven by need. For example, [Martin Evans](#), chairman of the Laikipia Farmers' Association, pointed out, "And when this thing happened, it wasn't a matter of drought. It was a normal rainy season when they came in . . . . They're using the cattle as a tool, a battering ram, to just take over private property."

According to observers, two political factors have helped aggravate the conflict. The first is related to the new constitution that Kenya adopted in 2010, after the post-election violence of 2007–2008. Under the [new constitution](#), authority and revenue were devolved from the federal government to 47 new county governments. The changes brought development to neglected parts of the country, but also created many new local government positions with relatively lucrative budgets and salaries. This has led to cutthroat political competition that may have encouraged violence. For example, in the case of Laikipia, one local politician, Mathew Lempurkel, was arrested for allegedly inciting the invaders who murdered Tristan Voorspuy. Lempurkel's public statements could be viewed in that light. He [told](#) a writer for *Foreign Policy*, "We have historical injustices which we feel should be addressed. There's nothing special the white ranchers are doing that we cannot do. If it's about conservation, we conserved those animals before they came to this country."

The other political factor is the approach of national elections in August 2017. Some observers believe that the national government has been [slow](#) to take aggressive action against the herders because it fears being perceived as supporting white landowners over indigenous populations. Indeed, President Uhuru Kenyatta did not deploy the army to Laikipia to support police efforts until months into the crisis—and after the murder of Tristan Voorspuy.

## Conclusion

The events in Laikipia have brought herder-pastoralist conflicts to the doorstep of the capital. The loss of game reserves and conservancies in Laikipia will probably result in a decrease in revenue from Kenya's tourism industry, a major pillar of a national economy that was already under strain because of concerns over terrorism. Perhaps that factor will incentivize the government to put in place programs aimed at offering nomadic pastoralist communities alternative economic opportunities in an era of persistent droughts. In any event, it will be important for the government to work to avoid the possibility that conflict over land might fuel electoral violence as the August 2017 polls approach.

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In this Monday, April 7, 2014, file photo, Rwandan President Paul Kagame addresses the public and dignitaries at a ceremony to mark the 20th anniversary of the Rwandan genocide, at Amahoro stadium in Kigali, Rwanda. (Source: AP Photo/Ben Curtis, File.)

## The Rwandan Miracle

In the immediate aftermath of the 1994 [genocide](#), in which the Hutu Interahamwe militia and ordinary citizens killed approximately 800,000 Tutsi over a period of 100 days, few could have predicted the positive changes the country would undergo over the next two decades. The genocide ended when the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), a Uganda-based rebel group led by Kagame, occupied the capital of Kigali and pushed Hutu perpetrators and civilians across the border into the DRC. After securing a military victory, the RPF consolidated political rule into a new government that developed policies for transitional justice, economic growth, and development. [Pasteur Bizimungu](#), one of the few Hutu RPF members, was appointed president, although he was ousted in 2000 and replaced by Kagame, who initially served as vice president.

The Rwandan government and international community pursued justice along several tracks. The United Nations (UN) appointed an International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) to "prosecute persons responsible for genocide and other serious violations of international humanitarian law committed in the territory of Rwanda and neighboring States, between 1 January 1994 and 31 December 1994." In addition, the Rwandan government pursued cases through the national courts. The government also established [gacaca courts](#) in which communities tried local cases with the goal of seeking truth and reconciliation. The emphasis on reconciliation means that many perpetrators have returned to their communities and live alongside survivors.

The Rwandan government also pursued aggressive policies to stimulate economic growth and improve national development. The government rolled out a national health care program that has been [credited](#) with lowering rates of maternal death and tropical disease. The government has also pursued policies to jump-start economic growth, developing [infrastructure](#) to help urban areas excel in the IT sector and strategies to move rural society away from subsistence farming. Although poverty rates have [fallen](#) since 1994, the government's rural programming has been [criticized](#) for putting small-scale farmers at risk by mandating centralized production targets.

## Despite Growth, Political Repression Raises Concerns

Over the past decade, Rwanda's reputation as a post-conflict success story has suffered as evidence of government repression surfaced. Speech is tightly controlled, and the state enforces adherence to behavior intended to improve national cohesiveness. Thousands of Rwandans have attended [re-education](#) camps, and the terms "Hutu" and "Tutsi" have been [banned](#). Human Rights Watch alleges that in urban areas street vendors and beggars, viewed as urban blight, are regularly arrested and held in "[transit centers](#)," under poor conditions. Critics of government policies have been [arrested](#) under the justification that they are promoting genocide ideology or sectarianism.



There are also allegations that the government has harassed students and carried out extrajudicial killings to silence critics. In his 2016 [book](#) *Bad News: Last Journalist in a Dictatorship*, Anjan Sundaram recounts his experience teaching a journalism course in Rwanda from 2010 to 2013 and alleges that his students were either co-opted into writing pro-government propaganda or pressured through intimidation, trumped-up legal charges, and extrajudicial violence to stop writing. He maintains a list of Rwandan journalists who have been killed under mysterious circumstances or forced to leave the country because of state pressure.

Political critics have also been targeted. [Amnesty International](#) alleges that between 2010 and 2012, at least 45 government critics have been extrajudicially detained, and some tortured. Rwandan critics abroad have also been targeted. In 2010 Kayumba Nyamwasa, a former army chief who had fled to South Africa after breaking with Kagame, was shot leaving his home. A South African [court](#) sentenced four Rwandans for the shooting, and the judge claimed the shooting was politically motivated. In [2014](#) Patrick Karegeya, a former intelligence chief turned critic, was killed in South Africa, allegedly by Rwandan agents.

Within Rwanda, opposition figures have been marginalized. [Victoire Ingabire](#), a Hutu politician who returned to Rwanda in 2010 to challenge Kagame for the presidency, was arrested and sentenced for threatening state security. Her supporters maintain the charges are political. More recently, nude photos of opposition politician [Diane Shima Rwigara](#) were distributed online days after Rwigara announced her intent to run against Kagame. The source and authenticity of the photos are unclear.

Kagame faces no real challenge to re-election. Besides Rwigara, [Phillipe Mpayimana](#), a former journalist, and [Frank Habineza](#), leader of the opposition Democratic Green Party of Rwanda, have also announced their intention to run. Their chances, however, are slim. In 2010 Kagame won re-election with 93 percent of the vote, and he will likely win in 2017 again by a large margin. An EU official [noted](#) that the EU would not send observers to monitor the polls because Kagame is likely to win, and concerns over vote rigging are low.

## Creating a “Buffer Zone” in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

The international community has long been concerned by [Rwanda's](#) support for a series of predominantly Tutsi militias in the DRC. Rwanda considers the eastern DRC to be within its sphere of influence because of its large Rwandan population, the threat posed by the [continued presence](#) of Hutu militants, and the financial benefits Rwanda receives from mineral [smuggling](#) across the border. Since 1994, Rwanda has sought to influence political outcomes in the DRC, initially [partnering](#) with a Congolese dissident group to ultimately overthrow longstanding dictator Mobutu Sese Seko, and later offering support to armed proxies.

The humanitarian costs of this sponsorship have been high. The UN [alleges](#) that the Rwandan military killed tens of thousands of civilians in the DRC after the genocide. Rwandan-supplied militias have also been accused of committing [violations against civilians](#). Further, weapons provided by Rwanda circulate among armed groups, contributing to the [widespread proliferation](#) of small arms in the eastern DRC.

## Conclusion

The international community has proved hesitant to pressure Rwanda over domestic repression or its involvement in the DRC. Nevertheless, following a surge in violence by the Rwandan-backed rebel group M23 in 2012, the United States [withdrew](#) some military assistance, and the United Kingdom [canceled](#) several aid programs. Otherwise, most assistance continued. Rwanda's involvement in the DRC is now at an all-time low, perhaps due in part to this external pressure, but more likely due to the [scarcity](#) of willing Congolese partners following the defeat of M23. As Congolese militias regroup, the possibility of new Rwandan intervention should not be ruled out.

Preoccupied with violence in Burundi, the Central African Republic, and the DRC, the international community seems unlikely to attempt to upset Rwanda's status quo. In the fragile Great Lakes region, Rwanda's stability and growth remain an important asset. In the absence of forces for change, Rwanda will likely continue on its course of increased growth and decreased political freedom.

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