



The Ballot and the Bullet: Violence as an Integral Part of Elections

By Wandia Njoya



A few days ago, the United States ambassador to Tanzania, Donald J. Wright, entertained Twitterville with American hubris when he wrote that [he was concerned](#) about reports of “politically motivated violence and the overall increase in tensions as we get closer to Tanzania’s elections”, and that he was urging all parties to “commit to free, fair, and peaceful elections”.

The irony could not have been more blatant. The tweet was posted a few hours after the United States empire paraded its nakedness to the world with its awful fist fight in the name of a presidential debate. But the exchange of insults and [Trump’s shout out](#) to white supremacist groups were just a culmination of even more horrifying events, such as the presence of white supremacist [militias in the streets](#) and Donald Trump’s indication that [he will not accept](#) a peaceful handover should he lose in November. (Who could have imagined that an American president would be asked that question?)

While it may appear that the upcoming election is a departure from what we expect of the United States, it is important to remember this: election violence has always been part of American politics since the inception of the United States. At the heart of the Anglo-capitalist state lies a fundamental contradiction that is only addressed through the beating down and misery of peoples of colour around the world. The contradiction is this: how does a ruling class maintain its power and

exploitation of people while making the people believe that they have a say in how they are governed?

This question was key in the discussion of the US constitution by its drafters, who included beneficiaries of African enslavement, such as Thomas Jefferson. A much muted aspect of the Constitutional Convention is the concerns of the convener James Madison that the landed elites needed to be protected from the democratic will of the people. He pointed to England where, he argued, [landowners would lose their wealth](#) if elections were to be opened to the majority of the population. Madison is reported to have said: "Landholders ought to have a share in the government, to support these invaluable interests and to balance and check the other. They ought to be so constituted as to protect the minority of the opulent against the majority." A few centuries later in Kenya, these sentiments would be echoed by [David Murathe](#) as he expressed incredulity at the idea of a non-Kenyatta government by arguing that opposition supporters "have no stake in the economy".

Given that enslavers of Africans could claim that "all men are created equal" while disenfranchising African American people, it is inevitable that American elections have always been violent, except that the violence has been denied through racism. The US maintains the fiction of being the beacon of democracy around the world by alienating non-Europeans from elections and making them the targets of violence.

Through the three-fifths compromise, slaveholding states bargained to count the number of enslaved Africans without them actually voting. From the mid-1860s, after the civil war and till the passing of the Civil Rights Act in 1965, African Americans lived under the terror of lynching, segregation and police violence, all which were designed to discourage African Americans from demanding the vote. After 1965, the pictures of physical violence were cleaned up and replaced with gerrymandering, the most blatant of which was witnessed in the [gubernatorial elections in Georgia](#) just last year.

But the US has been generous in sharing this hypocrisy with the rest of the world. It has crudely ousted popularly elected leaders in different countries because their popularity was a threat to American interests. From Patrice Lumumba to Salvador Allende, Maurice Bishop and Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the US government has been invading countries where it could not stomach the choice of the people.

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Therefore, Trump appears to be a thorn in the flesh of the liberal hypocritical establishment because he no longer cares about maintaining the façade. He has no qualms about openly suggesting the use of violence in elections, which is what the US has done all along to non-Europeans within its own territory and in the rest of the world.

The United Kingdom, the inspiration for James Madison's cautious approach to democracy, has sustained [similar contradictions](#), which have become more blatant since Boris Johnson became a major actor in the electoral wrestling ring. The UK has essentially reached an uneasy and embarrassing equilibrium where the ruling class uses traditional media and social media to manipulate the electorate to vote the way it would like it to vote. In other words, the violence may not be openly inflicted with guns in the street, but through psychological warfare using the media.

We witnessed this peculiar agreement with the lies told to the public about the European Union during the [Brexit referendum](#), the bile fueled by [Cambridge Analytica](#), and the tactics adopted by the [bureaucratic arm of the Labour Party](#) against the popularly chosen party leader, Jeremy Corbyn.

The media are a major pillar of the UK's warfare against democracy, a warfare made necessary by the fact that the country remains governed by an unelected head of state whose family consumes British taxes. The voice of the British people is further smothered by the House of Lords, whose members are chosen by peers, rather than through elections, and who have the power to subvert decisions made by the people's representatives in the House of Commons because ordinary British people may be too ignorant to know what is for their own good.

This accommodation of the people's voice, albeit in a subordinate position, is the result of the maneuvering by the British aristocracy of the 19th century to avert a scenario similar to what happened across the channel where the French did away with the monarchy.

An additional asset in keeping up this fiction of the British people having a say in their own governance was Empire. By claiming that it was spreading freedom and democracy to non-European peoples, Britain was able to convince her subjects that their pseudo-democracy was a better version of what non-Europeans were suffering and needed to be redeemed from. The violence that would have arisen from the British people realising they were being conned was channeled through the colonies and through keeping benevolent British subjects preoccupied with campaigning for a gentler and less bloody colonialism. In the early 20th century, leaders like [Winston Churchill](#), who were exercising brutality abroad, were sending young British men to die in the war fields of continental Europe while extoling the virtues of freedom and democracy.

The fiction of British democracy started to decline when revolts in the colonies caught the attention of the media. In particular, the uprising of peasants called the Kenya Land and Freedom Army became extremely embarrassing because it captured the attention of African peoples around the world. The Mau Mau inspired the wearing of dreadlocks by the Rastafari Movement, a poem by Langston Hughes, fiery speeches by Malcolm X, and contemplation of military struggle in the fight against apartheid by the African National Congress in South Africa.

For the sake of Kenyans familiar with the Kenyatta family's manipulation of the Mau Mau memory to justify their wealth and power, I need to make a clarification here. I am not suggesting that Kenya's independence was solely the work of the Mau Mau or that there were no other military struggles against colonial rule in Kenya. Rather, I am suggesting that there were certain local and global forces that brought the Mau Mau to international attention. The post-independence tussles among academics over that memory, and the weaponisation of that memory by the Kenyan political elite, especially the Kenyattas, requires a discussion more complicated than I am able to offer here.

I needed to foreground the political symbolism of the Mau Mau because it provides the background of the British importation of their electoral hypocrisy to Kenya, to the extent that messages of peace have become a pre-election staple in Kenya. In 1957, after significantly weakening the military resistance of the Mau Mau, the colonial government held elections to give an appearance of participatory democracy and to lend political legitimacy to the colonial state. Separate articles by [Daniel Branch](#) and [Justin Willis](#) record the behind-the-scenes manipulation of those elections, through tactics such as drawing electoral boundaries in a way that Mau Mau-dominant areas did not choose representatives, banning political parties, ensuring close police surveillance of candidates, and banning the candidates from the airwaves. This low-level violence was, not surprisingly, ignored when the colonial governor praised the elections as free of incident.

However, the link between elections and the propertied elite became clear when the colonial

government used this period of elections for optics to also create a class of manufactured political elites whose property required their loyalty to the state. Based on this maneuvering, Branch credibly suggests that the longevity of the colonial state was sustained by creating an economic elite, mostly Kikuyu, and legitimising this class formation through the performance of elections.

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To add insult to injury, the British saw these African elites in the same way that the American plantation aristocracy saw poor whites who were committed to maintaining the racist status quo of post-slavery America. Branch quotes a British colonial official referring to the new Kenyan elite as “the anchor of the tribe, the solid yeoman farmer, the land owner who knows that he has too much to lose if he flirts, however lightly, with the passions of his nationalistic friends”.

The racial overtones of elections as a means to maintain a propertied elite went beyond the British using metaphors from reconstruction America. The British government also presented elections as a way for Africans to prove their maturity and capacity to be democratic – a theme that has been replicated by successive Kenyan governments and media houses to this day. Indeed, at the height of the post-election violence in 2008, [a Kenyan journalist lamented](#) not about Kenyans losing their lives, but about Kenya losing its reputation as a mature democracy that had escaped the fate of other loser African countries that confirmed every demeaning idea the West has about Africa.

In light of these events, it is understandable that scholars refer to elections as “[polling booth fetishism](#)”, where the evidence of democracy is not in the actual respect of the people’s will and their democratic participation, but in the holding of elections and in the containment of electoral violence within the control of the state and the ruling elite. Through tactics such as peace messaging, the role of the media is to affirm the ideology that only the state and the police can legitimately exercise violence, and that the acceptance of autocracy is synonymous with peace, or is at least better than open “tribal” war.

Therefore, when a middle-level American civil servant patronisingly proclaims concern about peaceful elections, he is essentially announcing the preparedness of the US to interfere with the result of an election and using violence if necessary. He is confirming the hypocrisy of the Anglo-American state for centuries, where it employs the rhetoric of participatory democracy but uses different forms of violence to manipulate the manifestation of that democracy.

Thus the world is facing an untenable impasse, where elections have been infiltrated by the parasitic violence of the elite, to the extent that it is elections themselves that appear to be the violence. To break this impasse, we have to divorce violence from elections and isolate it as a tool the ruling elite use against the popular will. We the people have to clearly understand and articulate that democratic elections are not in the interest of elites, because the popular will and the welfare of the people intrinsically contradict wealth accumulation and exploitation, which the Anglo-American capitalist state protects.

The rich cannot be wealthy unless the majority are poor and complacent in a system that impoverishes them. The wealthy are also sharp enough to know that banning elections wholesale would be suicidal. It is for this reason that they use different forms of low-level, extralegal violence against ordinary people to produce the elections results that they want, or to negotiate power with each other at our expense.

We have to isolate violence as a tool that the ruling elite use against the popular will. We have to clearly understand and articulate that democratic elections are not in the interest of elites, because the popular will and the welfare of the people intrinsically contradict wealth accumulation and exploitation.

We must not accept the false equivalents of peace with acceptance of autocracy, and of war with refusal to accept illegitimate results. However, the parasitism of the Anglo-American state has so infiltrated our imagination and education, that many Africans, especially those who have received Western schooling, are willing to assign the responsibility for electoral violence to the victims, rather than to the perpetrators and beneficiaries of that violence.

The second lesson is that the fight for freedom and integrity of the ballot must adopt economic tools of resistance. We will never witness an end to rigged elections and electoral violence until we prevent our labour and our spending from enriching those who wage war against us. Once again, the Kenyan people made that mark on the world when they launched [an economic boycott](#) to resist electoral fraud. The boycott may have suffered a setback with the so-called “handshake” between President Uhuru Kenyatta and opposition leader Raila Odinga, but this rapprochement itself is evidence that the boycott was effective enough to make the Kenyan president accommodate his rival, which he did not do in 2013. We must overcome this setback to the boycott and continue to develop economic tools to counter the war that the rich wage against the freedom of everybody else by instigating election violence.

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