



# Kenya: The Politics of the Permanent Electoral Cycle

By Nic Cheeseman



We have not yet reached end of 2018 and the [next election campaign](#) has already been underway for a number of months - even though there is still three years until the polls come around. This is the intensification of a long-term trend that began in the 1990s, in which political decisions and alliances are shaped not simply by what would make for good policy, but with a view to winning the next election. Indeed, one could even say that Kenya has been embroiled in an almost continuous election campaign that is recalibrated, but not actually brought to an end, by the elections themselves. This is really important: it means that everyday politics is not about solving current problems, but winning future contests.

It is also exhausting, because it ensures that there is no let up for party leaders, activists, and ordinary citizens. Being in a continuous election campaign means that there is little time to take a break, lick one's wounds, and recover. It is therefore unsurprising that the Kenyan media has seen an upsurge in stories about [election fatigue](#). Despite this, there is no sign that the politics of continuous elections is going to stop any time soon. Instead, the high levels of uncertainty surrounding the next polls mean that early campaigning is likely to be particularly intense this time around. Not only will the country have a new president in 2022, but the political manoeuvrings of the last two years mean that the elections are likely to be contested by a new set of political alliances.

Nothing is more likely to inspire Kenyan political leaders to start mobilizing their supporters than

the prospect of a vacant presidency and an open playing field.

But what kind of election will Kenya have in 2022? As things stand, the country seems to be at the start of a process of political fragmentation that may result in the most complex, messy and unpredictable general election since 1992. Not only are the two broad coalitions that have dominated the last couple of elections coming apart at the seams, but we may well see the first ever presidential run-off. If this comes to pass, it will significantly increase the potential for a divisive and controversial contest.

### **The fate of the Jubilee Party**

For the past few months the political headlines have been dominated by the succession battle within the Jubilee Party. Feeling insecure about the loyalty of some of his supposed allies, and aware that he is not well liked in many areas, Deputy President William Ruto has begun to [criss-cross the country](#) in a bid to strengthen his support base. In turn, this has angered his rivals within the government such as Jubilee vice chairman, [David Murathe](#), who became the latest in a long line of Kenyatta allies to bemoan the fact that Ruto has effectively started campaigning for the next election, when he complained that: *“When you go to an area and all you speak about is 2022, it is upsetting some of us because it will distract the President from achieving his promises to Kenyans.”*

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In response, Ruto’s supporters have accused his critics of being [ethnic chauvinists](#) who want to maintain a Kikuyu in power at all costs, and argue that there is no harm in him campaigning as he is Kenyatta’s natural and chosen successor. After all, many of Jubilee’s rallies during the 2017 campaign explicitly invoked Ruto as the party’s next leader.

The growing tensions between Ruto and his rivals within the Jubilee party may play out in a number of ways. It is possible that this war of words will continue to escalate until a point where the cold war within the government becomes so hot that the Jubilee government falls apart. One development that could trigger this process is the president’s anti-corruption drive, which some Ruto supporters have argued is deliberately being used to [disadvantage the Deputy President’s allies](#), weakening his grip in the party. If the flow of funds dries up, Ruto will become increasingly desperate, and that could provoke a more open confrontation.

A second option is that the current feud rumbles on without a clear resolution until the next election, rendering parts of the government dysfunctional, and leading to a final implosion on the eve of the next campaign. Given that Jubilee would struggle to command authority in some areas without Ruto, this seems more likely. It would also fit with what we know about the president. If Kenyatta’s history is anything to go by, he is unlikely to throw a close colleague under the bus a long time before he needs to. A much more sensible option, and one that fits better with his sense of loyalty, would be to continue to pledge his support to Ruto personally while doing little to further the Deputy President’s campaign and allowing his allies in the party to direct their funding to rival Jubilee candidates.

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The third option, of course, is that the president stays true to his word and not only publicly endorses Ruto but also cajoles his allies into backing him. In this context, the main question that would need to be answered would be whether or not Kenyatta has the personal authority to persuade some of the country's most powerful individuals to do something that they don't want to do, and which many believe is not in their interests. The balance of probabilities suggests that now that relations between the Kenyatta and Ruto camps have deteriorated to such a great extent, a small proportion of leaders and voters in Central Province may follow their leader, but many more will not.

### **Political fragmentation and generational change**

Whichever of these three scenarios comes to pass, it seems unlikely that the political system will coalesce back into the two broad coalitions that have characterised the last few elections. For one thing, Jubilee will be left deeply fragmented. If Ruto stands, drawing some support from within Jubilee and forming new alliances with figures that are currently in the opposition, it seems likely that we will also see a representative of the anti-Ruto faction within Jubilee on the ballot. This may be a prominent governor or one of Ruto's rivals within his own community, such as [Gideon Moi](#).

But we may also see other strong candidates throwing their hats into the ring. Of course, Kenya is no stranger to third party candidates capable of mobilizing their communities. In 2007, Kalonzo Musyoka split from his ODM colleagues and polled just under 9%. Six years later, Musalia Mudavadi also went it alone, although he only managed 4% of the vote. But in both of these cases, it was clear before the election that the third party candidates were bit part players and that in reality the election remained a two-horse race.

This time around, things could be very different. If [Raila Odinga](#) decides to take one more shot at the presidency - something that his supporters such as Makadara MP George Aladwa are already talking about - then Kenya would have three viable presidential candidates for the first time since the 1990s. And that would be without any of the newly empowered governors such as Hassan Joho and Mike Sonko moving into national politics.

Importantly, this may be the beginning of a new trend. If Odinga does stand, it will surely be his last election. Many other opposition stalwarts such as James Orengo are close to 70. On the other side of the fence, Kenyatta will be stepping down and some of the other prominent Kikuyu leaders of the past such as Martha Karua have either suffered a decline in their political fortunes, or have not proved to be popular with voters - as with Peter Kenneth. One consequence of these developments is that all of the main alliances are in real need of new leaders who can take over the mantle and reinvigorate their support base. In turn, this means that the 2022 election has the greatest potential yet to generate a changing of the political guard.

From this election onwards a stream of governors who have served two-terms will be relinquishing their posts. Having served as the heads of counties, they are unlikely to be interested in the positions of MP and Senator. In other words, for figures such as Alfred Mutua (Machakos) and Josphat Nanok (Turkana), the only way is up. The increasing number of governors seeking to move into the national political arena will increase the potential for political fragmentation - especially as these figures will bring with them a support base, patronage network and war chest from their time

in office.

Integrating this new set of ambitious and influential leaders back into two political coalitions – which only have limited positions that can be used to accommodate people – is likely to prove extremely difficult.

### **The prospect of uncertainty**

A three-way election contest between candidates of this stature would result in a very different presidential contest in at least two ways.

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First, and most obviously, with three candidates capable of securing around 30-40% of the vote each, it would be extremely unlikely that any one candidate could win an absolute majority in the first round, making a second round much more likely. Such a development would have two important consequences.

On the one hand, the electoral commission will face a significant challenge to prepare a run-off election in a short period of time – a challenge that it clearly did not meet in 2017. On the other hand, the losing candidate will be placed in the position of “kingmaker”, able to decide who wins the presidential poll on the basis of who they encourage their supporters to back. This would encourage the kind of patronage politics seen in 2007/8, when Kalonzo Musyoka effectively sold his support – and legislative influence – to President Mwai Kibaki in return for being made Vice President.

Second, and perhaps less obviously, a three (or four) horse race would increase the focus on ethnic politics during the campaign. Although many commentators have rightly been critical of some of the consequences of [coalition politics in Kenya](#), the emergence of CORD, NASA and Jubilee has at least brought different leaders together into broad alliances that represent a number of communities. In turn, this has encouraged them to identify election messages that do not only appeal to one community, ensuring that even if campaigns remain grounded in an ethnic logic, it is at least a multi-ethnic logic.

Things will be very different in 2022 if we see a larger number of more ethnically concentrated campaigns. In this case, leaders will face stronger incentives to appeal to a smaller number of more homogenous supporters, and hence to run more divisive campaigns. This development will be particularly problematic if the fragmentation of Jubilee exacerbates tensions between the Kalenjin and Kikuyu communities, ending the [marriage of convenience](#) that helped to prevent political violence in the Rift Valley in 2013 and 2017.

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The combination of a more fractious campaign and greater time pressure on the electoral commission is a potentially dangerous one. Against a backdrop of uncertainty, ethnic polarization and the breakdown of the government, anything other than responsible political leadership and a high-quality process may result in further controversy and unrest.

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