

Kenya

Going up or down?

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As the world's group of rich countries discusses aid to Africa, a correspondent who lived in Kenya four decades ago looks glumly at it now—but sees glints of hope

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ONE thing you notice on returning to Kenya after many years is that someone has done splendidly out of selling pea-green, bright red and banana-yellow paint. In village after village, however crummy the shops and muddily rutted the single street, you see a smartly painted green building and an even more garish red-and-yellow one, where you can buy scratch cards to top up your mobile phone either with Safaricom (green) or Celtel (yellow and red), the country's two rival firms.

They are potent symbols of the new Kenya. In 2000 some 300,000 people used mobile phones; now, in a country of 35m-plus, nearly 9m do. As a result, the lives of millions, especially the poor rural majority, have been sharply improved, because they can get round many of the obstacles posed by the decrepitude of the state-run infrastructure: of the 300,000-odd land-lines in the country, probably two-thirds are usually on the blink.

Poor Kenyan peasants wondering whether it is worth spending a day taking a bus to market to sell a sack of onions can find out the prices with just one call. Anyone with cash to transfer across the country can do so by text message, if they use Safaricom, the beefier of the two rivals. Proportionately, more people make mobile-phone calls in Nairobi, Kenya's capital, than they do in New York.

It is notable that both Safaricom and Celtel owe little to the Kenyan state or to international aid for their success—except for their licences and for the start-up use of the network owned by the battered state-run company—and a lot to Kenya's much-needed opening to foreign capital. Though (whisper it softly) the family of Daniel arap Moi, the much reviled former president, is said to have a secret stake in Safaricom, both companies

are mainly foreign-owned: Celtel by a Kuwaiti company, MTC, which bought out its Sudanese founder, Mo Ibrahim; while Safaricom's largest shareholder is Britain's Vodafone.

A big reason for their success stems directly from the failure of the Kenyan state which, typically, proved unable to provide a decent telephone service of its own. This is a theme that resonates across Kenya. Where the country has done well, it is often despite rather than because of the government. When Kenyans have been able to do things off their own bat, they have invariably done better than when they have been locked into state-controlled schemes.

Forty years ago, in the early flush of independence, the government tried to do everything. Now the bits of the economy that have bounded ahead are those, such as horticulture, that owe little to the politicians. Last month the agriculture ministry said it would let the private sector provide "extension services", which help small farmers with all manner of inputs. Parastatal agencies that were similarly supposed to help farmers market their stuff and keep prices stable, but which proved hopelessly corrupt and incompetent, will be "drastically reduced". Once Kenya Airways was sold, it took off to become one of Africa's most profitable and efficient airlines.

In an array of services, from education to health care, from providing security to preserving the environment, the public sector has failed dismally while the private side has picked up the slack. In Nairobi, people trust private security guards—some 100,000 of them—far more than the police for protection. In the remote district of Turkana, churches provide seven out of the vast area's eight secondary schools. Independent outfits such as the Green Belt Movement, created by a Nobel peace-prize winner, Wangari Maathai, have done far more than the government to stop forests being chopped down.

Private charities and lobbies, both foreign and home-grown, have proved more effective than the government in helping to conserve the elephants and other game that are the lifeblood of Kenya's vital tourist industry. Private medical foundations have played a huge part in providing anti-retroviral drugs to stem the plague of AIDS, while state-run hospitals are often pits of misery and incompetence.

The younger generation of Kenyans—more outward-looking, better educated, a bit less tribal-minded, less dependent on the patronage of state and local "big men"—seems sharply aware of all this. One economist talks hopefully of the "cheetah generation" taking over from the "hippos". But the cheetahs have a lot of catching up to do.

Kenya's general state of disrepair is striking. Tens of billions of dollars of aid have been spent, yet in many respects the country's infrastructure is worse than it was 40 years ago. Roads have crumbled away, the rail service has all but collapsed, ports are clogged and some have even closed. Many hospitals and schools are dilapidated. Forests have been cut down, rivers have silted up; grazing land has been eroded, and fencing posts in once well-run commercial farms uprooted and burnt.

The centre could not hold

Kenya often feels like a country that cannot cope. Driving around, in country or town, the sheer burgeoning mass of people hits the eye. The population has exploded out of control—with nothing like the rate of economic growth to sustain it. From around 1m people in 1900, the number of Kenyans had climbed to 4m after the second world war; though fewer than 8m at independence in 1963, Kenyans number more than 35m today. Recent projections suggest that, even taking account of the continuing ravages of AIDS, the population will exceed 40m in 2010, rising to 57m by 2025. Life expectancy went up from 44 years at independence to 62 in 1984, then slumped again, to 49 in 2000 and 52 today. Though the proportion of adults infected by HIV has dipped from a high of 14% in 1998, it still afflicts about 6%, or 1.3m people, says the UN. AIDS has orphaned more than 1m children.



In the western province of Nyanza, one of the most populous parts of the country, edging Lake Victoria, a family's average landholding is 0.8 hectares (less than two acres) and the average number of children between seven and eight; the death rate from AIDS has been particularly high. In one classroom of a school in the western district of Sauri, two-thirds of the children are AIDS orphans. Coffins are for sale at the roadside. Across Kenya, at virtually every road junction, the commonest sign-posts are to churches, mostly of the home-grown African variety, promising solace, guidance and the hope of prosperity.

Equally striking is the new urban sprawl—and the spread of slums. Nairobi is one of the world's fastest-growing cities: at independence it embraced a little over 500,000 people; now it may have more than 6m, three-quarters of whom are reckoned to be squashed into about 2% of its metropolitan area. It is a potent magnet for those millions of country people who can barely live off the measly landholdings available to them. The choice, for many, is going hungry in the countryside or finding a job while living in squalor in the towns.

Four decades ago, the Nairobi slum of Kibera, barely two kilometres (a mile) from the leafy charm of the city centre, hardly existed. Now it houses between 600,000 and 1.2m people—no one knows; for sure, it is one of Africa's biggest slums. It is also one of the most extortionate and violent. There is no paving, scant electricity and so little lighting, no sanitation; people have to pay even to use the rare communal lavatories that often overflow or to take a shower, so their ablutions often take place on sidewalks riven with makeshift drains. When it rains, the sewage spews all over. Wet or dry, the place stinks.

Rising crime is another feature of modern Kenya. It has grown so fast that central Nairobi, once a hive of restaurants and night-clubs, feels almost deserted at night. "Never walk at night in the centre of Nairobi, even for a short distance," says the UN's local [website](#). Many drivers are edgy about going at night from central or eastern Nairobi to the two prosperous villages of Langata and Karen, just outside the city, because of car-jackings. The police are often suspected of involvement.

They certainly cannot cope. Instead, there is a plethora of private security guards. Virtually no member of the middle class, which includes just about all expatriate workers, is without at least one all-night guard. Contracts for professionals working for the UN and many of the smarter NGOs often include no fewer than three guards as part of the package. By some counts, there are more than 100,000 illegal guns floating around.

More recently, a strange bandit sect called *Mungiki* has been terrorising people in the northern hinterland of Nairobi, forcing protection money out of drivers of *matatus* (minibuses) and killing those who refuse. Some politicians have been accused of being behind the bandits. *Mungiki* recently stuck the severed head of one of their opponents on a post outside a chief's office. This week police raided a Nairobi slum and shot dead at least 22 suspects.

The most visible example of Kenya's regression is the roads. In the early 1970s you could drive from Nairobi to Mombasa, the country's Indian Ocean port, in four hours; now, because of pot-holes and diversions and hold-ups, it can take eight. Another main road, north-west to Uganda, which should be one of Africa's great arteries, is pitted with craters often two feet deep, reducing traffic to little better than walking pace for stretches of 15km or so.

Swathes of what should be one of the best tourist roads in the country, leading to the Masai Mara reserve, one of Africa's finest game-viewing sites, are barely better than a rock-strewn, muddily rutted farm track—that was once smooth tarmac. The government says it intends to spend \$1 billion this year on improvements; at present, the road system is a bad joke.

Scambags galore

Why the mess? The answer is misguided economic policies, mismanagement, poor maintenance, sloppiness, tribalism and corruption. This litany of failings is almost entirely the fault of Kenyans themselves: the politicians they have allowed to rule over them and rip them off; the civil servants and road builders (some of them foreign) who have skimmed off contracts or simply not bothered to do the job; and the dishonesty, venality and fatalism that have gripped society at large.

Corruption took hold of Kenya almost immediately after independence, as the regime of Jomo Kenyatta sought, in a hurry, to shift political and economic power from whites and Indians into the hands of a new African elite. After Kenyatta's death in 1978, his former vice-president, Daniel arap Moi, continued this system of patronage, authoritarian rule and personal family enrichment, while tilting the centre of gravity of power away from the Kikuyu to a much smaller cluster of Kalenjin-speaking tribes, of which his own Tugen people is one of the smallest.

The standard method by which this sort of system persists—the distribution of franchises, permits and visas, and the appointments to practically all the key jobs in government, the civil service and parastatal agencies by virtue of loyalty and tribe—helped the economy lose momentum. A new elite corruptly took an ever greater share of the fruits of independence and outside investors became ever warier.

A number of notorious frauds in the past 15 years have taken vast chunks of wealth out of the economy and into the hands of a handful of politicians and their friends. In one racket, known as the Goldenberg scandal, some \$600m was secreted abroad and into the bank accounts of numerous ministers and their friends, thanks to the fictitious re-export of gold and diamonds that purported to come into Kenya from third countries.

The current president, Mwai Kibaki, elected in 2002 on a wave of optimism that he would tackle such corruption and bring the villains to book, has done no such thing. Several prime suspects remain ministers. Not a single top politician has been prosecuted, let alone convicted.

“Corruption is as bad as it's ever been,” says Richard Leakey, an outstanding palaeontologist and conservationist who is also a remarkable campaigner for cleaner government. “Kibaki has made no progress.”

But corruption is not just the habit of top people. Many Kenyans think you have to cheat to survive. After all, the wages of the poor are tiny. Kenyans, as they were in the colonial era, have been locked into a two-tier system whereby professional wages remain on a different planet from those of the rural and urban poor. An MP's salary, for instance, is about \$60,000 a year, rising to about double that amount if allowances are included. By comparison, the official minimum wage is about \$700 a year, GDP per head about \$1,500. The very poorest, who slip under the minimum-wage threshold to take the most menial and casual jobs, earn less than \$200 a year. Not surprisingly, such differentials foster cynical attitudes. For many, the temptation to steal to live even modestly is irresistible. The scam is a Kenyan way of life.

Tribe still beats class, any day

Tribalism, the motor of politics in Kenya, is as potent and prevalent as ever. Mr Kibaki, as a seasoned political operator, has the usual full range of ethnic groups represented in his cabinet. But there is little doubt that his own Kikuyu, who were in the driving seat from 1963 until 1978 under Kenyatta but then got pushed aside by Mr Moi, are back behind the wheel. "It is our turn to eat," goes their refrain.

Several of the other leading tribes are increasingly resentful of the Kikuyu, who are both the most numerous and the richest. The Luo, in the west, have long felt most left out. To cite just one comparative yardstick, the lifespan of a Luo living in Homa Bay, on Lake Victoria, averages 38; a Kikuyu living in the tribal heartland in Nyeri can expect to reach 62. Some 12% of households in the predominantly Kikuyu Central Province have piped water, against just 1% in the Luo province of Nyanza.

Now the non-Kikuyus feel strongly it is their turn next. "A Kikuyu cannot follow a Kikuyu as president of this country", says a former minister, himself a Kikuyu. "We haven't reached that stage yet." Michael Chege, an academic who advises the government, puts it bluntly: "Tribe still beats class." Raila Odinga, the Luos' undisputed leader, as was his father Oginga Odinga before him, accuses the government of being "very tribal." Mr Leakey says "tribal feeling has superseded anti-white feeling."

Yet, despite all this gloom and worry, Kenya is a remarkably resilient country with a vast font of untapped energy and creativity. After four decades of disappointment, including the Kibaki administration, there is undoubtedly a renewal of hope.

For one thing, despite its feebleness against corruption, Mr Kibaki's government is definitely better than its predecessors. Its policy of continuing economic liberalisation has reaped rewards. The economy has grown on average by nearly 6% in the past four years and is still picking up speed—though it probably needs to hit 10% before it really takes off.

Kenya is far freer than it was in the one-party era of Presidents Kenyatta and Moi. The press is vibrant and newspapers like the *Daily Nation* and the *Standard*, not to mention at least 47 private radio stations and lots of bouncy bloggers, air problems such as corruption with admirable candour. Women's rights have also improved under Mr Kibaki, with a benchmark Sexual Offences Act being passed a year ago. The government has brought in free primary-school education for all.

Still, it is plainly time for the ailing, 74-year-old Mr Kibaki and his lumbering, greedy hippos to give way to the cheetahs. They show no sign of doing so. As a result, many of Mr Kibaki's early supporters have peeled away to form the Orange Democratic Movement, echoing other brightly coloured movements around the world that have toppled moribund regimes.

The Orange people tend to be younger and better educated, have a stronger sense of democracy, are keener to decentralise power and reduce the powers of the presidency, and have a better idea of the world outside and how to make a modern economy fizz. But they have bickered endlessly over who should lead them into the presidential and parliamentary elections due in December. Kalonzo Musyoka and Mr Odinga, the two capable front-runners, both say they would happily serve under the other, but few believe either would do so.

Would a new president or a government of another stripe make a difference? Perhaps a bit. But it is remarkable how little debate there is about policy (let alone aid); it is nearly all about personality, patronage and tribal calculations. Ideology is out.



A cheetah in the making?

There are many brave and talented fighters for a better life for Kenyans, especially among Kenya's women. Witness Wangari Maathai, the environmentalist; Esther Passaris, a formidably feisty half-Kikuyu, half-Greek fund-raiser who, among other things, is bringing street-lighting to the crime-infested alleys of Kibera; Njoki Ndungu, the MP who fought to push the Sexual Offences Act through parliament; and Joy Mboya, a relation of

one of Kenya's finest early leaders (tragically assassinated), who runs a vibrant arts and dance centre in the industrial area of Nairobi.

Sachs of gold

In the rural areas, the prospects are often grimmest, as the population swells and landholdings shrink. But a stirring and original experiment is being conducted by the UN, in cahoots with Columbia University's Earth Institute and spearheaded by Jeffrey Sachs, to stimulate a clutch of Millennium villages as models for emulation elsewhere. The early results of Kenya's prototype village, in Sauri in western Kenya, where two-thirds of the people, Luos, live on less than \$1 a day, are astonishing.

With an annual budget amounting to \$50 a head administered by a UN team consisting mainly of bright young Kenyans, the Sauri villagers have apparently seen their rate of malaria go down from 43% to 11% (due to the provision of bednets), while school results have leapt (due partly to proper lunches). Maize production has soared five-fold (due mainly to fertilisers) and receipts for crop sales have steadied thanks to a cereals bank.

The big question is what happens after the projected five-year span of tutelage, when the overseers go away—not to mention the extra help from an American philanthropist, George Soros, and sundry Norwegian and Japanese donors. That fragile and rotten thing, the Kenyan state, will have to help sustain those dramatic improvements, by providing decent teachers, doctors and farm advisers—just what Kenyans have most lacked. Veterans of the aid world tend to doubt whether the locals, even with state help, will be able to keep Sauri successful. Yet it is just such initiatives that the Group of Eight rich countries, meeting this week in Germany, promised two years ago to pay for.

Some aid has helped Kenya; some has not. It has never been crucial to the country's prosperity. What Kenya needs most and has woefully lacked is a fairly clean, energetic government that mends the country's dreadful infrastructure, with help from abroad if need be, and then lets Kenya's many enterprising people get on without too much interference. It hasn't happened yet. One day, perhaps, it may.