

# Mediterranean Basin *In-Brief*

## Politicisation of Ethnicity in Kenya

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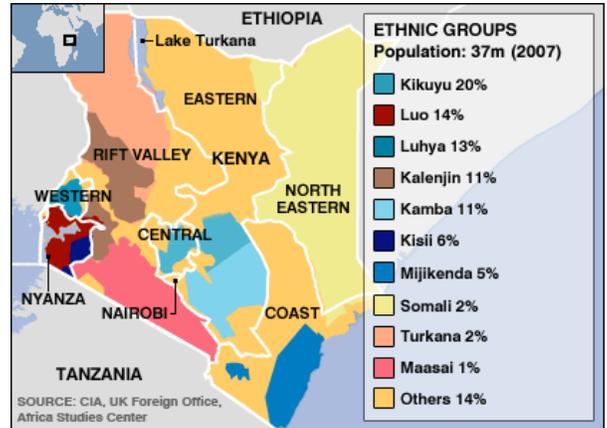
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### OVERVIEW

The Kenyan population consists of 38 million people, representing over 40 different [ethnic groups](#). No single group constitutes a majority. The largest group, Kikuyu, comprises seventeen per cent of the population. During the colonial era, British administrators [capitalised](#) on a complex network of tribal relations to amass land and centralise power, drawing political districts that somewhat mirrored ethnic boundaries. Although headlines often [summarise](#) political conflicts in Kenya as the result of ethnic cleavages and long-standing inter-ethnic animosities, such polarisation is not altogether common. Typically, [coexistence](#) between various ethnic groups is the norm with a significant portion of the Kenyan population residing in ethnically integrated urban communities.

Although ethnic violence is [historically uncommon](#), the practice of [ethnic patronage](#) is an increasingly popular tool by which politicians mobilise ethnic groups. The practice became especially common under the presidency of Daniel arap Moi and the transition to a [multi-party system](#) in the early 1990s. In recent years, the country's elite have connected ethnic identities to [land politics and economic factors](#) while inciting followers to engage in [hate speech](#) and violence. For example, violence between [pastoral communities](#) in the Rift Valley has adopted an ethnic dimension in "highly politicised claims to land". In the Tana River District of the eastern Coast Province, minor [land grabs](#) and cattle raids between Pokomo agriculturalists and the semi-nomadic Ormo communities have resulted in casualties that are tied to 2013 elections. In urban settings, ethnic Somalis submit claims of [marginalisation](#) and brutalisation at the hands of Kenyan police forces.

Ethnic rivalry is often cited as the cause of [post-election violence in 2007/2008](#). Although land disputes or economic disparities were underlying factors, political elites [convinced](#) the population that ethnic divisions were to blame for their grievances. In preparation for 2013 elections, Kenya's robust civil society has taken on a variety of tactics to [ensure](#) a peaceful vote; efforts range from voter education programmes to the development of social media platforms that monitor and deter hate speech. Nevertheless, organisations like Human Rights Watch (HRW) has reported that politicians are still able to [aggravate inter-ethnic tensions](#) which could escalate into riots and bloodshed reminiscent of the 2007/2008 violence.



Source: [BBC](#)

KEY ETHNIC GROUPS	% OF POP	TOTAL NUMBER (2009 Census)
• Kikuyu	17.2%	6,622,576
• Luhya	13.8%	5,338,666
• Luo	12.8%	4,967,328
• Kalenjin	10.5%	4,044,440
• Kamba	10.1%	3,893,157
• Kenyan Somali	6.2%	2,385,572
• Meru	4.3%	1,658,108
• Other	23.5%	9,073,372

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**  
[Open Data Project](#)  
[2009 National Census](#)  
[Kenya National Bureau of Statistics](#)  
[Sporadic Ethnic Violence](#)  
[Upsala Conflict Data Program](#)

### ETHNIC AFFILIATIONS OF KEY POLITICAL LEADERS

Political Leader	Ethnicity	Party
President Mwai Kibaki	Kikuyu	Rainbow Coalition (Kibaki cannot seek reelection)
Presidential Candidate Raila Odinga	Luo	Orange Democratic Movement (ODM); CORD alliance
Kalonzo Musyoka	Kamba	Wiper Party; CORD alliance
Presidential Candidate Uhuru Kenyatta	Kikuyu	National Alliance Party (TNA); Jubilee alliance
William Ruto	Kalenjin	United Republican Party (URP); Jubilee alliance