

Why did Kenyans elect Ruto as president ?

What looks superficially like a normal election was filled with contradictions, intrigue, double-crossing and surprise shifts in ethnic loyalties

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Kenya's President Uhuru Kenyatta thought he had picked a winner in Kenya's recent presidential election when he backed longtime enemy Raila Odinga. His gamble failed. In a country where ethnic politics has dominated every previous election, Kenyatta, an ethnic Kikuyu, was foiled by his own Kikuyu voters, Kenya's largest ethnic group.

Kenya is an East African country with [five dominant ethnic groups](#) who for historic reasons mostly live in different regions, compete nationally for political power, and tend to vote for their own.

Kenyatta, who has served since 2013, supported Odinga, a Luo from Nyanza who lost four previous elections. He refused to back his deputy president, William Ruto, a Rift Valley Kalenjin. Both candidates chose Kikuyu running mates from central Kenya to capture that region's sizable ethnic vote.

In [last week's election](#), Kikuyu voters abandoned Kenyatta and Odinga, his chosen candidate, in significant numbers and instead elected Ruto by a [small margin](#). This turned normal ethnic voting behavior upside down, as Kenyatta's fellow Kikuyu went against his preferences.

The unexpected result reflects Kikuyu resentment toward Kenyatta over [his economic policies](#) and his backing of Odinga, the Kikuyu's historic Luo rival. It also shows that while alliances change, ethnicity still predicts Kenya's voting patterns, but with surprising twists.

Although Kenya has more than 40 ethnic groups, it has elected only Kikuyu and Kalenjin presidents. To compete, politicians form coalitions. Leaders typically deliver their group's votes in exchange for cabinet posts.

Voting for president in Kenya is often defensive, particularly since the ethnically targeted [electoral violence](#) of 1992, 1997 and 2007. Kenyans have many interests and often dislike their leaders. But most fear them less than leaders from other groups. As a result, they usually vote for one of their own or as part of a safe coalition, to [avoid loss](#) and protect themselves from retribution.

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Strange bedfellows

In 2013, Kenyatta and Ruto [allied to thwart](#) the International Criminal Court. The court had [charged both](#) with organizing violence and crimes against humanity in each other's communities after the 2007 election. They made a deal. Ruto guaranteed the Kalenjin vote to Kenyatta for 10 years; Kenyatta promised to deliver the Kikuyu vote to Ruto for the next 10. [Kenyans obliged](#) to ensure peace and protect their own, defeating Odinga in 2013 and 2017.

The ICC dropped the case against Kenyatta in December 2014 and the case against Ruto in April 2016 when its [evidence collapsed because of witness tampering](#).

The alliance frayed, leading to a new one between Kenyatta and Odinga in 2018, sealed by [a public handshake](#). Why would these former enemies [literally join hands](#)? Doing so enabled Kenyatta to quell the post-2017 electoral unrest in Luo Nyanza by giving Odinga a seat at the political table.

Ruto was not amused. He began holding meetings and supporting leaders in Kenyatta's ethnic heartland. This did not go down well with Kenyatta. His own deputy was attacking him in his home area while prematurely campaigning.

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Campaigning

Ruto appealed to Kenya's voters by framing himself as a successful "hustler," as he put it. Born poor, [he positioned himself as an outsider](#) against Kenya's wealthy dynasties: the Kenyattas and Odingas.

But Ruto is not an outsider. He amassed wealth largely through the state, including land deals and other [questionable ventures](#).

Voters did not care. Ruto is an engaging speaker who connects with crowds and addresses their concerns. Low-income voters liked his attention and his brutal designation of Odinga as "[Kenyatta's project](#)." Kikuyu, politicians and other elites enjoyed his funding and farmers his free wheelbarrows, while others hoped to latch on.

In central Kenya, the Kikuyu heartland, voters responded to Ruto's appeal while delivering a backlash against Kenyatta. Kikuyu voters were angry that Kenyatta reneged on his deal with Ruto. Many worried about political and economic retribution against them and instability if they did not honor Kenyatta's pact and support Ruto.

They also were furious at Kenyatta, believing that his agricultural policies and his crackdown on illegal [Chinese imports](#) dented their incomes. So their votes went to Ruto, who catered to them, while Kenyatta seemed absent and indifferent.

Kikuyu elites stuck with Odinga and Kenyatta. They worried that Ruto would go after Kikuyu power and wealth and would rule autocratically, much as did former president

Daniel arap Moi, a Kalenjin who ruled as a dictator for 24 years. Still others voted for Odinga because of his long struggle for human rights. [Kikuyu elders warned](#) that their “people would soon see the grave mistake they made to sell their souls to Dr. Ruto.”

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Results

When Ruto won, Odinga rejected the results, which he says the electoral commission announced illegally using falsified numbers. He is [challenging the outcome](#) in the Supreme Court.

Turnout was lower than expected, at 64 percent, with only 39 percent of youths registered. Many youths and others did not vote. They questioned the difference between two status quo plutocrats without credible agendas in an election in which both candidates were effectively part of government. They were disgusted by [Kenya's soaring debt](#) fueled by corrupt ventures such as [the Chinese SGR railway](#), believing neither candidate cared about them and that their votes would not matter.

Had the Kikuyus delivered for Odinga, he would have won. Instead, their votes went to Ruto, even in Kenyatta's home area and in that of Odinga's running mate, Martha Karua. Elsewhere, regionalized ethnic [voting patterns](#) generally prevailed. The election was peaceful. No leaders would risk another ICC intervention (with the court [soon to rule](#) on a case implicating Ruto) and voters were not willing to die for them.

In the end, the election was not about ethnicity or class but rather about both, with economic discontent leading to historic ethnic blowbacks against entrenched leaders, including Kenyatta and Odinga, whose turnout fell even in his home area.

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