Confronting Dictatorship in Kenya

Abstract:

Since June 1990, a battle has been raging over political pluralism in Kenya. On one side is a movement dedicated to restoring multiparty democracy and freeing a once-vibrant economy that is now staggering under the weight of statism and corruption. On the other is President Daniel arap Moi, a longtime enemy of free political competition who came to power in 1978 and imposed a constitutional ban on multiparty politics four years later. The reform movement is led by an assortment of lawyers, Christian clergymen, and politicians who have concluded that unless democracy is restored, Kenya faces certain disaster, possibly even a bloody civil war. Committed to working peacefully for change, the reformers hope to forestall the possibility of a military coup or sectional rebellion designed to remove the current regime. Africa has seen too many such violent upheavals in the three decades since decolonization, they believe, and few have done much to help the cause of multiparty democracy. The reformers hold instead that the methods used to effect changes are as important as the changes themselves. They want peaceful change like that recently witnessed in Czechoslovakia and Benin, and now promised in the Republic of Congo, where a national conference recently hammered out plans for a transition to democracy. The goal is to restore the constitutional principles Kenya adopted in 1963, with the addition of safeguards intended to prevent the reemergence of one-party dictatorship. Africa has recently seen several countries move either to restore democracy where it was banished or to establish it where it has never been known. In Kenya, however, President Moi has declared that one-party rule will not end, and has threatened to deal "firmly" with those who advocate change. Yet intensified repression is having no effect. The democracy movement continues to press its case, and a showdown with the government is bound to occur soon. The movement has organized demonstrations and other forms of civil disobedience, to which the government has reacted with sometimes deadly force. It seems likely that once the armed forces comprehend how profound and widespread opposition to the current regime truly is, they will withdraw their support from Moi's one-party dictatorship, thus effectively sealing its doom. Although grimmer scenarios remain possible, this writer believes that a version of the Benin model will be followed. In this report, I discuss the current situation, its causes, and how the movement has grown.