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Ethnic or class conflict? : The politics of conflict in Kibera, Nairobi, Kenya

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Abstract

The aim of this report is to attempt to find out the genesis of the persistent conflict in Kibera informal settlement, Nairobi Kenya. A number of defining factors in Kibera such as religion, ethnicity, economic factors and citizenship are analyzed in an effort to understand the 2001 conflict. One of the salient findings is that Kibera had been a precarious settlement since colonialism and its volatility in post independent Kenya was a perpetuation of what the colonialists established.

There is focus on the theories of ethnicity as a prism for interpreting politics of conflict in Kibera. None, however, could adequately account for the 2001 conflict. The conflict defied the drama of monocausal explanations. However, the prebendary brand of politics dominant in Kibera served to entrench poverty while enriching a select few.

From both historical and archival information concerning land, land had been under contestation in both colonial and post colonial periods not only in Kibera but also in Kenya as a whole. Lack of political will within successive governments to address the land question in Kibera is one of the leitmotifs of this report. From the analysis of data gathered from the field, it emerged that at the core of the 2001 conflict, was a struggle over land ownership and other resources thereto.

Populist politics was largely to blame for the clashes in the area in 2001. The running theme is that as long as there was massive poverty in Kibera, it would be hard to contain persistent tensions in the settlement.