

By Congressmen David Price and David Dreier -

In this season of record-high temperatures and overheated political campaigns, one could be forgiven for overlooking the positive news emanating from East Africa today: 2 and 1/2 years after a disputed election pushed it almost to civil war, Kenya took a major step forward in its postcolonial history by formally installing a new constitution approved in a groundbreaking national referendum this month. The result holds the promise of a new era of stability and prosperity for this nation of almost 40 million, addressing many of the endemic problems that gave rise to the deadly violence in 2007 and 2008.

Why, in a time of thorny military engagements abroad and persistent economic challenges at home, should Americans care what happens in a country perhaps most famous for its safaris?

First, Kenya is the political and economic linchpin of a region that is fast becoming a major front in the fight against global terrorism. Across Kenya's eastern border in Somalia, the al-Shabab organization has made clear its terrorist ambitions are global in scope, as the recent World Cup bombings in Uganda and the indictment of 14 al-Shabab supporters in the United States - not to mention its savage attack on a hotel in Mogadishu this week - attest. Beyond Somalia lies the Gulf of Aden and Yemen, where al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula and the American-born terrorist Anwar al-Awlaki plot attacks on U.S. soil and spew jihadist vitriol. Compounding these terrorist threats, Somali pirates patrol the East African coastline for victims, while festering civil conflicts in Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo threaten to spill over into their neighbors.

Kenya serves as a bulwark of stability in this otherwise volatile region and has been at the forefront of regional and international efforts to confront terrorism, bring pirates to justice and broker peace in Sudan and elsewhere. Should Kenya, too, fall into civil conflict and instability, the repercussions could be catastrophic.

Second, and in contrast to many of its neighbors, Kenya has firmly embraced democracy after a period of undemocratic rule during the 1970s and 1980s. While other aspiring East African democracies such as Ethiopia, Rwanda and Uganda have become increasingly autocratic, Kenyans have stood stubbornly by their democratic institutions, even as their leaders have

failed to address corruption, land rights and other intractable issues. While it will not be a panacea for the country's ills, the new constitution - which voters approved by a margin of 69 percent to 31 percent - represents another landmark for Kenya's progression toward a modern democratic system. The referendum was peaceful, despite turnout of over 72 percent and a nasty campaign of intimidation by some opponents - a fitting contrast to the events of 2007-08.

We have witnessed Kenya's democratic development personally, as the chairman and ranking Republican member of the House Democracy Partnership, a bipartisan congressional commission working to strengthen democratic institutions in 14 countries. Since 2006, we have partnered with colleagues in the Kenyan National Assembly to build capacity in key areas such as budget oversight, constituent relations and public hearings. During a visit to Nairobi last month, we spent hours discussing the implications of the new constitution for Kenya's parliament, and we came away impressed by our counterparts' commitment to successfully implementing the reforms.

Third, 50 years since a wave of independence swept across Africa, Kenya serves as a poignant example of the challenges facing the continent and the mixed legacy of colonial rule. As many as 2 million Kenyans live with HIV/AIDS; more than 40 percent of the population is under 15; the government, still largely a product of the colonial system, fails to meet the needs of too many of its citizens.

By finally casting off Kenya's colonial vestiges and addressing the underlying problems that brought it to the brink of civil war, the new constitution holds the promise of a new era of stability and prosperity for East Africa's linchpin. Americans should welcome Kenya's progress and reaffirm our commitment to its success.

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