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Kenya: The Psychology of Collateral Damage

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Amidst the descriptions of pro-democracy demonstrations crushed by President Daniel arap Moi's forces on July 7 in Nairobi, there's a recurrent Issue concerning the use of violence. Does the government do better to engage in so-called "surgical strike" operations so that only demonstrators and their supporters are hurt? Or does purposely causing so-called "collateral damage" lead to other population segments turning against the demonstrators and their supporters without whom there would be no crack down. Or does this same collateral damage induce homogeneity out of heterogeneity--resulting in a massive opposition surge sweeping the government from power? These questions merit not only theoretical musings but also empirical research identifying salient and robust variables affecting the consequences of the use of violence. As described previously (IBPP, November 22/29, 1996, Vol. 1, No. 4, "Editorial: An Ethological Approach to Information Warfare"), "real world" events are themselves natural experiments which only need to be collected and analyzed to yield empirically-based postulates. One problem with this approach, however, is--as with research on deception (IBPP, June 27, 1997, Vol. 2, No. 9, "The Political Psychology of Deception Research")--that the very knowledge of results can affect reliability and validity--for both insurgents and counterinsurgents alike. Besides being a fascinating philosophy of science Issue for social scientists and an ethical nightmare for the "Just Say No to Violence" crowd, a vexing problem for ruthless dictators and ruthless freedom fighters alike remains. (See McKinley, J. C. (July 9, 1997.) Kenya's hard line: President gambles on crackdown. The New York Times (<http://www.nytimes.com>.)