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Kenya's elections in August have raised economic, security and political stability concerns across the region, especially in Uganda, Tanzania, and Rwanda.

With less than three months to the August 9 elections, the presidential race is shaping up to be between the current Deputy President William Ruto of Kenya Kwanza Alliance and Raila Odinga of the government-backed Azimio La Umoja One Kenya coalition.

The elections come at a time when the East African Community (EAC) has just welcomed the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) as the seventh member state. Kenya has been a key pusher for the DRC's admission and thus the latter will be looking at the election with keen interest.

When Kenya's fifth president is elected, the individual will have to deal with familiar faces in the region such as Yoweri Museveni of Uganda, Paul Kagame of Rwanda, and Salva Kiir of South Sudan and the newcomers like Suluhu Hassan of Tanzania, Évariste Ndayishimiye of Burundi and Felix Tshisekedi of the DRC.

Kenya is a key anchor state in the region, which at the moment is grappling with immense security challenges. For example, the Tigrayan crisis in Ethiopia remains unresolved. The situation in the Eastern part of the DRC continues to be volatile, especially with the resurgent attacks by the M23 rebel group.

The peace deal in South Sudan between the warring factions within the government of national unity is shaky. And the election stalemate in Somalia has dragged on for a long period.

At the time of writing, Kenya's retiring President Uhuru Kenyatta, as the chairperson of the EAC Heads of State Summit, has been busy trying to broker a peace deal between the M23 rebels and the DRC government.

Kenya's interest in the DRC has been boosted by the green light granted by both the United

Nations and African Union to lead the peace initiatives.

Buoyed by its non-permanent seat at the UN Security Council, Kenya has used that as the opportunity to enter the DRC through the front door, unlike the other EAC states that have in the past been accused of meddling.

Mr Tshisekedi and the DRC will therefore have more than a passing interest in the Kenyan elections. Mr Kenyatta has been one of the biggest supporters of the DRC leadership having been the only sitting president to attend his inaugural after his controversial election.

To Mr Tshisekedi, it is in his interest that a candidate who is supported by the incumbent in Kenya win the election so that he can maintain the status quo. Mr Odinga is also thought to be a personal friend of Mr Tshisekedi.

But a win for Dr Ruto is likely to create unnecessary anxiety for the DRC leader, especially after a near diplomatic fiasco that was necessitated by the former's utterances at a campaign rally that appeared to mock the DRC as a country not having 'a single dairy cow'.

The EAC integration efforts are built on personal friendships among the presidents. Despite the concerted efforts to turn it into a people-centred community, the relationship among the leaders is key to the transformation of the organisation. That is why whoever gets elected in August will have to navigate the friendships with much caution and care.

For Mr Odinga, his dalliance with the opposition parties in the neighbouring countries puts him at loggerheads with the likes of Mr Museveni, a familiar face in the EAC. In the past, the ODM leader has supported change of guard in Uganda by endorsing Dr Kizza Besigye and later Bobi Wine.

It must be noted that there is no love lost between the two going back to 2007 when the Kenyan opposition leader accused Mr Museveni of supporting then President Mwai Kibaki in that year's election dispute.

In the run-up to the 2013 elections, Mr Museveni was at the forefront of castigating the ICC and in turn, was viewed as favouring Mr Kenyatta who was running against Mr Odinga.

Therefore, an Odinga win may require a lot of work to repair the relationship with Mr Museveni as Uganda remains Kenya's biggest trading partner.

The two leading coalition parties contesting the August elections have not yet officially released their manifestos. However, as it has been in the past, the issues of the EAC and regional integration always receive lip service in their policy documents. None of the candidates has articulated what they intend to do in terms of the EAC.

There is a danger that because of the ongoing global crisis necessitated by the Covid-19 pandemic and now the Ukraine-Russia conflict, the EAC governments might be inward-looking to the detriment of Jumuiya.

The EAC is already smarting from a similar inward-looking administration of the late President John Magufuli. If Kenya were to go that route, it will starve the EAC of the much-needed support from a regional anchor state.

Furthermore, the people who will be nominated to the East African Legislative Assembly (EALA) by these parties will be worth watching. In the past, the EALA representatives have been selected based on a reward system for individuals that lost in the internal party nominations.

This gives the impression that they consider the EALA as a dumping ground for political rejects, which does not help in contributing to the improvement of the parliament.

Dr Nicodemus Minde, an international relations lecturer at the United States International University (USIU), says that all countries in the EAC should emulate the Rwanda model of nominating persons of integrity to the EALA who understand their tasks and agenda.

He further proposes a formula where the EALA nominees are subjected to a form of election as this will go in a long way in making the EAC everyone's affair as opposed to the current framework.

*Wekesa has recently completed his PhD at African Leadership Centre, King's College London focusing on the politics of EAC's regional integration*

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