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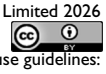
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Housing insecurity and conflict in Nairobi: Comparing the dynamics of low-income urban settlements

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Abstract

Rapid urbanization often fuels the expansion of low-income settlements, where competition over space and scarce economic opportunities can spark violent conflict. Such settlements are characterized by insufficient infrastructure, low-quality housing, and are often built informally on public land; yet in reality, the extent and dynamics of housing insecurity vary extensively, as does the extent to which housing insecurity becomes a focal point of political and intergroup conflict. We argue that the way in which these settlements were established and grew over time, along with local political dynamics, and macro-level government policies condition how housing insecurity intersects with urban conflict. We study these dynamics through a comparative analysis of two settlements in Nairobi: Korogocho and Kawangware. Drawing on rich empirical data—a survey, interviews and focus groups—our analysis advances understanding of how housing insecurity intersects with political and intergroup conflict and contributes to key debates about the impact of informality and formality on urban insecurity and conflict, as well as to the literature on historical claims to land as a central driver of urban conflict. In essence, diverse historical origins of low-income settlements shape local political dynamics and claim-making in ways that create distinct pathways to housing insecurity and its potential to generate collective mobilization.

Keywords

housing insecurity, low-income settlements, Nairobi, political violence, urban conflict

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摘要

快速城市化常常加剧低收入住区的扩张。在此类住区内，对空间和稀缺经济机会的争夺极易引发暴力冲突。此类住区普遍存在基础设施配套不足、住房质量低劣的问题，且大多是在公共用地之上私自搭建而成；但事实上，各住区住房不稳定问题的严重程度与演变态势差异极大，住房不稳定问题演变为政治冲突、群体间纷争焦点的程度也各不相同。本文认为，这些住区的形成与发展脉络、地方政治态势以及宏观政府政策，共同决定了住房不稳定问题与城市冲突相互交织的具体形态。本文通过对内罗毕两处住区——科罗戈乔（Korogocho）和卡旺瓦雷（Kawangware）进行比较分析，探究上述演变态势。本文依托问卷调查、访谈及焦点小组等大量实证数据开展分析，深化了对住房不稳定与政治冲突、群体间纷争相互交织关系的理解，既推进了学界关于非正规与正规建设模式如何影响城市失稳与冲突的核心讨论，也拓展了土地历史权属诉求作为城市冲突核心诱因的相关研究。从根本上看，低收入住区多样化历史渊源塑造了当地的政治动态与民众诉求表达行为，由此形成住房不稳定问题的不同演化路径，也使得该问题触发集体动员的潜力呈现明显分异。

关键词

住房不稳定、低收入住区、内罗毕、政治暴力、城市冲突

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Introduction

How does housing insecurity in rapidly growing cities intersect with political and intergroup conflict? Rapid urban growth often produces overcrowded low-income settlements, where competition for space and limited economic opportunities can, at worst, spark violent conflict (Moser and McIlwaine, 2014). Residents in such spaces face compounding challenges: insufficient infrastructure and low-quality housing, health challenges, economic precarity, and violent crime are all frequent characteristics of low-income settlements in rapidly growing cities (UN-Habitat, 2015). Housing insecurity—understood here as perceived uncertainty about one's tenure rights and/or the risk of forced eviction (Weinstein, 2021)—plays a key role in these dynamics. But among residents lacking formal tenure security, the extent and nature of housing insecurity varies extensively in practice (Boateng and Adams, 2023; Rains and Krishna, 2020; Weinstein, 2021). For instance, structure owners who lack official building permission often obtain informal authorization from powerful local authorities (Joireman and Vanderpoel, 2011); and evictions can be used as a political tool (Mitlin, 2022; Weinstein, 2021), shaping the perceived housing security and actual risk of eviction among different communities.

In this study, we explore the conditions that influence how housing insecurity translates into collective conflict, physical insecurity, and group-based violence. We argue that three key factors shape both the level of housing insecurity experienced among residents, and whether and how conflicts over housing escalate in urban settings and turn violent: the way in which these settlements were established and grew over time, local political dynamics, and macro-level government policies. They do so by (1) determining the symbolic and material value of land in the settlements, (2) creating local incentives for collective mobilization, and (3) activating conflict through top-down land and housing interventions. We draw on rich empirical

data from two low-income settlements in Nairobi (Kenya): Korogocho and Kawangware. Both are opposition strongholds with high poverty and inadequate housing and infrastructure, and mirror UN-Habitat's definition of slums (UN-Habitat, 2015).[1] However, they feature varying levels of informality: Korogocho is an informal settlement on public land, while land in Kawangware is privately owned, but in large part informally developed (McDermott et al., 2021).

Our analysis of these settlements unpacks microlevel dynamics of housing insecurity, and how it moves from an individual-level issue to take on a collective dimension. We define urban conflict as a range of violent and non-violent conflicts over political, economic or social issues taking place in cities (Büscher, 2018; Moser, 2004). It can entail different escalation levels and actors involved, from disputes over issues like land tenure or tenancy arrangements, to clashes between organized gangs over urban control, or even full-scale warfare between rebels and state forces (Glass et al., 2022; Kaldor and Sassen, 2020). We focus specifically on conflict that takes on a collective dimension—for instance, instances where individual-level conflicts over housing become connected to party-political or identity-group cleavages—and conflict that risks escalating into violence.

Our study advances knowledge on housing insecurity and urban conflict in two key ways. First, our comparative lens makes visible the different dynamics of housing insecurity facing settlements within the same city, in turn conditioning its political salience. While much of the existing literature on housing insecurity focuses on informal settlements (e.g., Doshi, 2013; Silva and Pino, 2024; Weinstein, 2021), we find that fear of eviction is high in both Korogocho and Kawangware, despite their varying formal tenure status. Echoing Roy (2009), our analysis underlines that the dynamics of (in)formality encompass complexities that are not frequently considered in existing scholarship, and informality also does not deterministically predict housing insecurity.

Second, contributing to literature that identifies historical land claims as a central driver of urban conflict (Jenkins, 2012; Lombard and Rakodi, 2016; Patel, 2016), our analysis shows how the different historical origins of low-income settlements shape local political dynamics and claim-making in ways that create distinct pathways to housing insecurity and its potential to generate collective mobilization. These processes are dynamic: housing insecurity accumulates over time, with past evictions, demographic shifts, and repeated upgrading cycles layering new forms of precarity onto older ones. Our analysis shows that while housing insecurity is more acute in Korogocho, these issues appear more politically explosive in Kawangware, where they have become intertwined with perceptions of politically and ethnically motivated allocation of rights, related to the settlements' origins as well as how local political dominance has shifted over time.

Housing insecurity and conflict in low-income urban settlements: Setting the stage

Housing insecurity and conflict over land and shelter in urban low-income areas is a topic of high policy relevance in the era of "late urbanization" (Fox and Goodfellow, 2022; Lombard and Rakodi, 2016). Many studies focus on socio-economic dimensions and drivers of housing insecurity, including how it intersects with formal and informal economies, gender, and health (Doshi, 2013; Joshi et al., 2023; Silva and Pino, 2024). Importantly, housing insecurity is identified both as a cause and consequence of poverty (Weinstein, 2021). Research on urban

conflict highlights how competition over urban space produces both interpersonal and more politicized, group-level conflicts (Lombard and Rakodi, 2016; McMichael, 2016). In Nairobi, studies show how group identity shapes land access in informal settlements (Elfversson and Höglund, 2018; Obala and Mattingly, 2014; Obala, 2022), and how poverty, unemployment, and crime provides a foundation for political actors to mobilize support—and sometimes incite hostility—along ethnic identity-lines (De Smedt, 2009; Ondere, 2022).

From a different perspective, research emphasizes the highly political dynamics around housing insecurity. Access to housing in low-income areas is often contingent on local political networks (Dupont and Gowda, 2020; Klaus and Paller, 2017). Poor urban residents rely heavily on such networks when they face state unresponsiveness and corruption; in turn, these networks can be exploited by elites for violent political mobilization (Berenschot, 2011). Several case studies illustrate how electoral politics shape housing insecurity, including in Nairobi where demolitions have been used to punish the opposition and reward supporters by redistributing land during democratization (Klopp, 2008), as well as displacement of urban communities due to power struggles between city and national authorities in Beira (Mozambique; Shannon et al., 2021).

While these studies provide contextualized understandings of housing insecurity and conflict, they predominately focus on specific settlements or interventions, rarely with a comparative perspective. Other studies of housing insecurity focus on individual households, rather than collective dimensions of evictions and mobilization. Additionally, much existing literature on housing insecurity focuses on informality and tenure formalization, neglecting that most urban residents rent their accommodation (Smith, 2017) and the more nuanced political dynamics affecting tenure security (Doshi, 2013; Mitlin, 2022; Weinstein, 2021). To examine these dynamics comparatively, we build on Lombard and Rakodi (2016) who argue that analyses of urban conflict over land should consider both the material and symbolic importance of land and tenure, including how land connects to group identity; the interests and behavior of key actors involved; and the relationships and interactions between actors across scales. We translate this into three dimensions for our comparative analysis: the way the neighborhood originated and developed over time, local-level political competition, and top-down urban governance. We argue that these dimensions will both shape the degree of housing insecurity experienced among residents, and whether and how conflicts over housing escalate and turn violent.

First, the *origins and dynamics of growth* of the settlement have material and symbolic implications for housing politics and insecurity. The growth of cities commonly occurs through in-migration to informal settlements, pitting newcomers against already established communities (Scambary, 2013). Informal settlements also grow due to within-city displacements, for example when areas in the city are cleared for gentrification (Milbert, 2006). These dynamics influence who is able to claim the land, and the narratives they draw on, affecting actual and perceived housing security. When communal ties are connected to territory, control of urban spaces can become intertwined with struggles over identity, citizenship, and ultimately a sense of belonging, forming the basis for collective claim-making (Bandauko et al., 2025; Jenkins, 2012; Klaus, 2020; Klopp, 2008). In such situations, housing security is conditioned by group identity and political alignment (Patel, 2016). When

residents in informal settlements rely on communal identity narratives to make claims to space, groups can be collectively mobilized, sometimes causing housing conflicts to escalate into inter-group tension and violence (Lombard and Rakodi 2016).

Second, *local politics and electoral competition (horizontal politics)* also influence housing insecurity and conflicts in low-income urban settlements. For residents, personal networks and access to local politicians provides an important means to secure livelihood and shelter, and to protect individuals and communities against evictions (Klaus et al., 2023; Mitlin, 2022). For political elites, the residents are often important constituencies for political mobilization (Klaus and Paller, 2017). In Nairobi, political mobilization of opposition supporters has at times provoked intergroup violence by inciting poorer residents—"tenants" — against their "landlords" (Elfversson and Höglund, 2019; Joireman and Vanderpoel, 2011). Low-income urban areas are frequently opposition strongholds (Resnick, 2011), constituting a threat to incumbent control of the city and sometimes leading to government repression (Goodfellow and Jackman, 2023). At the same time, rapid growth implies that local dominance can change over time, creating electoral uncertainty which may incentivize contentious mobilization strategies. The material and symbolic interests at stake also vary considerably between different settlements, shaping the intensity of competition.

Third, we investigate *top-down urban governance (vertical politics)*. Dynamics of housing insecurity are conditioned by macro-politics dictated by central government or city-level authorities. Urban redevelopment and infrastructure projects are often motivated by a concern for city dwellers' wellbeing, but at times, other political motivations intervene in these processes. Incumbent strongholds may be rewarded with improvements in service delivery or access to land, increasing housing security, while opposition strongholds have been subjected to slum demolition as a means to undermine political challengers, as in the case of "Operation Murambatsvina" in Zimbabwe (Bratton and Masunungure, 2007). Aside from such direct repression, urban redevelopment can spur conflict by upsetting local power balances, or the interaction between tiers of government (sometimes occupied by different parties).

Case selection and methodological approach

Nairobi (Kenya) offers a suitable context to analyze the dynamics of housing insecurity in low-income urban settlements. Kenya has experienced violent conflicts along identity lines, including communal conflicts and election-related violence. Since independence from British rule in 1963, Nairobi has grown rapidly, with the number of inhabitants increasing from around 340,000 at independence to 4.4 million in 2019 (KNBS, 2019). More than half of these urban residents live in "slums" (Wamukoya et al., 2020). Some settlements, notably Kibera and Mathare, have been major flashpoints for intergroup violence, particularly during elections (Elfversson and Höglund, 2019; Mutahi and Kimari, 2023; Ruteere et al., 2013).

To analyze housing insecurity and its relationship to other forms of conflict, we use an intra-urban comparison (McFarlane et al., 2017), which highlights shared and divergent dynamics shaping seemingly similar settlements. This comparative approach allows us to be guided by our conceptual framework while also allowing new insights to transpire from the sites we study (Robinson, 2016). We focus on Kawangware and Korogocho, which are among Nairobi's major low-income urban settlements, but are not the

Table 1. Case overview.

Variable	Kawangware	Korogocho
Size[a]	Ca 4 km^2	Ca 1 km^2
Population (2019)[a]	155,047	36,900
Density[a]	38,762/km^2	42,401/km^2
Land status	Private land, varying degree of formalization	Government land
Slum upgrading	No (only infrastructure like roads and sewerage)	Yes, 2008-(ongoing)
Subcity constituency	Dagoretti North (before 2013: Dagoretti, which was divided)	Ruaraka (before 2013: Kasarani)
Party with most votes 2017 election	Member of Parliament: Orange Democratic Movement (ODM), opposition party	Member of Parliament: ODM
Party with most votes 2022 election	Member of Parliament: ODM; Presidential vote[b]: Odinga (ODM), 68%	Member of Parliament: ODM; Presidential vote: Odinga (ODM), 79%

[a]Population figures are from Kenya's 2019 census (Kawangware and Gatina, and Korogocho location; (KNBS, 2019). Official figures, however, often undercount low-income settlements; notably, we have come across much higher estimates for Korogocho from different sources.
[b]Constituency-level data on Presidential vote results are available for 2022, but not 2017.

largest. They share many characteristics, including similar distance from the city center, high population density, and many non-permanent, low-quality housing structures. Both areas are opposition strongholds: In the 2022 election, opposition leader Raila Odinga gained 68% and 79% of the vote in the respective constituencies (Daily Nation, 2022). They host diverse populations, including large numbers of residents originating from Western Kenya (considered to be aligned with Odinga).

Kawangware, located within Dagoretti North Subcounty, comprises Kawangware and Gatina locations (lower-level administrative units and electoral wards). Each location is more informally divided into "villages" which residents commonly refer to when they describe where they live. Kawangware has a more mixed socio-economic profile than many other low-income settlements in Nairobi, blending informal areas with planned and peri-urban areas (UN-Habitat, 2021: 4). While predominantly low income, it also hosts middle-income tenants and relatively affluent landlords and landowners (Ayiera, 2017). Unemployment is high, contributing to high levels of violence and crime.[2] *Korogocho* is in Ruaraka Subcounty, estimated to be Nairobi's third or fourth largest informal settlement, and it is organized in nine villages. Most of the land is formally government land, where people have been resettled or constructed housing with formal or informal permission over time (Kamunyori, 2016). Living conditions are dismal: Korogocho borders Nairobi's largest dump site (Dandora), it features very high population density and poverty levels, as well as poor infrastructure. Table 1 provides an overview of each location; a map is included in our Online Supplemental Material.

Our analysis draws on interviews and focus groups conducted in Nairobi during 2019 and 2023, and a representative household survey conducted in 2023. All

interviews, focus group discussions, and survey interviews were held on condition of informed consent. Questions were designed to capture respondents' perceptions of housing insecurity, local conflict dynamics, and developments in the settlements over time. In total, 86 individuals participated (38 in key informant interviews, and 48 in focus group discussions (FGDs), distributed over six groups). The respondents represented a range of stakeholders, most of whom were local residents.[3] They included local community leaders, practitioners working on peace and police reform, and local administration representatives. Focus groups were held with different group sets: youth, women, elders. The survey covered 400 respondents in each area, and was carried out in collaboration with a local research firm.

Housing insecurity in Kawangware and Korogocho

Kawangware and Korogocho both feature high population density and prevalent non-permanent, low-quality housing. The vast majority of residents are renting their accommodation: according to our survey, 94% of residents in both areas. Most of these tenants did not know if their landlord held a formal ownership deed to the plot. Kawangware is largely built on private land (although not all owners hold title deeds), whereas Korogocho is an informal settlement on state land. Insecure tenure has in turn implied that structure owners have had little incentive to improve buildings (Burugu, 2015: 52); comparatively, Kawangware holds a higher share of more permanent buildings. Only 2% of our respondents in Korogocho, and 3% in Kawangware, reported they own their place of residence and hold an officially recognized title.

Alongside weak *formal* tenure security, in both areas a notable share of the residents *perceive* that they are housing insecure. Fewer than 50% of our survey respondents felt even fairly secure in their current living arrangement. However, housing insecurity is more prominent in Korogocho than in Kawangware: a higher proportion of respondents perceived their living arrangement as very or fairly insecure, and 21% of residents in Korogocho (compared to 12% in Kawangware) worry they may at any time be forced to leave their accommodation. This difference in perceived tenure security is statistically significant.[4]

Our interviews underline that housing insecurity features different, partly interrelated, dynamics. A first relates to forced evictions. In Korogocho, evictions have been commonplace (Korogocho 3, faith based organization (FBO) representative; Korogocho 14, FGD youth; Korogocho 15, FGD women). The fear of eviction is tangible and results from individual households' inability to afford rent, as well as government evictions due to larger-scale projects. Respondents describe a constant fear of evictions: "They will just tell you that one day this house will be demolished" (Korogocho 14, FGD youth) and "definitely you will get evicted, and currently the government has said they want to do away with slums so there is that fear" (FGD youth; Korogocho 15, FGD women). Korogocho has experienced repeated mass eviction as a result of slum upgrading and infrastructure projects (Korogocho 11, Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) representatives; Korogocho 16, FGD elders/community leaders). Even those who hold a title fear that it will be revoked if the government needs the land for upgrading, or for its Affordable Housing Program, which promises to build 250,000 units per year to reduce deficits in housing (Korogocho 15, FGD women; Korogocho 16, FGD elders/community leaders; Korogocho 17, youth

leader). In Kawangware, large-scale evictions are not perceived as an issue in the same way they are in Korogocho. Residents do not generally fear displacement, but widespread poverty makes rent unaffordable for many, and occasionally leads to eviction (Kawangware 11, community leader; Kawangware 14, FGD community leaders/elders). Some residents indicate that police are bribed to look the other way to allow evictions to happen (Kawangware 14, FGD community leaders/elders). In addition, evictions happen in connection to infrastructure upgrading (Kawangware 10, FGD youth).

A second salient issue concerns rent disputes between tenants and landlords. Tenants are sometimes unable to pay rent due to high levels of economic precarity in the settlements, and the terms under which tenants may delay payment tend to be fluid. While some disputes are resolved by local authorities such as the Chiefs (local administrative officers; Kawangware 5, local government official, Kawangware 16, community leader, Korogocho 13, local government official), in other cases landlords resort to forceful eviction (Kawangware 10, FGD youth; Kawangware 14, FGD community leaders/elders; Korogocho 3, FBO representative; Korogocho 18, youth leader). These dynamics are exacerbated by the use of agents, middlemen who collect rent on behalf of absentee landlords: tensions arise because agents need to raise the funds promptly in order to pay the landlord. One respondent notes:

> Especially where there is an agent involved, [residents] feel insecure. Some people will normally tell you, "I'll never rent a house that is managed by an agent." Because it is easier to deal with the landlord than dealing with the agent. (Kawangware 17, NGO representative)

The use of agents increases uncertainty: "You have to be worried because you never know what next. Landlords don't communicate much to tenants, especially if they have rent collection agents" (Kawangware 10, FGD youth). These accounts contrast with the close relationships that often form between tenants and in-situ landlords, where rent delays can be negotiated and disputes resolved amicably (see Smith, 2017). As we discuss further below, tenant-landlord disputes often intertwine with collective identities and political contestation, and can—in addition to housing insecurity—escalate into intergroup conflict. Our survey shows that conflicts between tenant and landlords are a major concern, and equally present in both settlements (about 50% of respondents in both settlements report this to be the most prevalent form of conflict in the area).

Taken together, our survey and qualitative data indicate high housing insecurity in both Kawangware and Korogocho, but with variation in both extent and dynamics. How can these dynamics be understood, and how do they intersect with broader patterns of urban conflict? Next, we discuss how varying historical origins, local political dynamics and land governance shape the relationship between housing insecurity and conflict in these settlements.

Historical origins shape the social and material value of settlement

One key to understanding how housing insecurity intersects with urban conflict relates to the history and development of the settlements. This history forms the basis for the social and material value of the space, and its significance for collective mobilization. Both settlements are home to large numbers of urban in-migrants; in our survey, 80% of respondents in Korogocho and 87% in Kawangware reported they were born outside of Nairobi. However, the way the settlements originated and have developed over time differs.

Korogocho dates back to the 1960s and is one of the older informal settlements in Nairobi. It grew rapidly during the 1970s, with many of its early inhabitants being people who were resettled or displaced from other parts of the city, where slums were demolished (IFRA-Nairobi, 2011; Kamunyori, 2016). They settled in the area that became Korogocho on public land as well as some land which was privately owned but idle (Burugu, 2015). Several villages within Korogocho are named after the neighborhoods from which the original inhabitants were displaced, while Kisumu Ndogo is named after its many in-migrants from Kisumu in Western Kenya. Kamunyori (2016: 96) found little evidence that ethnic identity had conditioned the allocation of land in Korogocho during its emergence. However, over time, the different villages have become perceived through an ethnic lens. One of our interviewees put it like this: "They came from all groups, but when they came here, they began to segregate themselves. It was not that one group was here first" (Korogocho 7, Community Based Organization (CBO) representative). In this sense, while Korogocho as a whole is mixed, and the villages as well to some extent, one ethnic group dominates each village.

Kawangware, situated on Nairobi's outskirts, features a different historical origin. The area became part of Nairobi when the city boundaries were extended in 1963 (Obala, 2011: 101). For geographic as well as political reasons, the original inhabitants of Kawangware were Kikuyu (the ethnic community of Kenya's first President, Jomo Kenyatta) (Omenya and Lubaale, 2012: 8). Following independence, Nairobi grew rapidly and new groups moved into Kawangware. While early settlers became landlords and business owners, most newcomers became tenants. Kawangware has densified through continual subdivision and rental construction on private land, and landlords and business owners typically own the land they use (Kawangware 3, local government official; Kawangware 5, local government official; Kawangware 16, CBO representative). This is in contrast to other low-income urban settlements in Nairobi—including Korogocho—where land is government-owned, and landlords, despite enjoying some tenure security through bribes or political connections, are less powerful (see also McDermott et al., 2021).

These differing origins affect both the economic value of the land, and dynamics of claim-making. In Kawangware, private land has meant more land speculation. The area also hosts a major open-air market, where produce from rural areas is sold (Kawangware 1, NGO representative; Kawangware 7, CBO representative). Kawangware's position as an "entry point into Nairobi" has also fueled an illicit economy including drugs trade, illegal distilling, and gambling (Kawangware 7, CBO representative). By comparison, Korogocho is an informal settlement, and its proximity to the city's largest dumpsite Dandora has further reduced the land's potential value for economic speculation (Korogocho 2, CBO representative). Control over the dumpsite constitutes a very lucrative business (Burugu, 2015: 60; Korogocho 3, FBO representative). While Dandora constitutes a source of income for waste-pickers, it is a major health hazard, and attracts criminal activity (Höök et al., 2012). Slum upgrading has included efforts to privatize the land and award title deeds to residents, partly to stimulate land investment (Nairobi 3, urban planner). As elaborated below, the land-deeds process has been contentious, marked by corruption allegations and resistance from criminal groups and ordinary residents to the upgrading and land allocation.

Many landlords, in both areas, are Kikuyu and in Kawangware this reflects that the settlement grew on formerly rural

land belonging to this community, although people from other communities have also leased or bought plots to build rental housing (Ondere, 2022). These origins have shaped claim-making and local power dynamics: "the first settlers are the owners of the land. The others are tenants. That defines what Kawangware is all about" (Kawangware 7, CBO representative). Korogocho also has many Kikuyu landlords, but the picture is more mixed (Kamunyori, 2016: 96–97). Still, conflicts arise between the first settlers—the landlords/structure owners—and tenants, many of whom have also resided in Korogocho for a long time. As a community leader described: "Here, we have two groups that see themselves equally entitled to this land which is government land"—the original squatters who were resettled here, some of whom gradually managed to build houses and become landlords, and their "tenants who can argue that you don't own the land, so why should I pay?" (Korogocho 7, CBO representative).

The importance of identity-based claim-making is evident in Kawangware. Despite private ownership, many landowners lack title deeds (Kawangware 1, NGO representative; Kawangware 7, CBO representative). Still, our interviewees indicate that landlords and landholders have high tenure security. This underlines that claim-making extends far beyond legal documents (see e.g., Klaus, 2020). The notion of indigeneity—belonging to the community who first occupied the land—is key. In the words of one interviewee,

> Dagoretti is close to Central Kenya [traditionally Kikuyu territory], but Luhya also came to occupy Kawangware that first was inhabited by Kikuyu. Now we have Kikuyu and Luhya as the two main ethnic groups, both see Kawangware as their home … There is a division between those who feel "this is our area" versus "because we settled here, this is our home." (Kawangware 2, NGO representative)

As this quote indicates, housing insecurity is strongly intertwined with historical claims, but also with shifting numerical, and electoral, relevance of different groups.

Local politics shape collective mobilization

In both Kawangware and Korogocho, dynamics of housing insecurity and conflict have been shaped by local electoral politics. For a long time Korogocho has been considered an opposition stronghold, dominated by Kenya's main opposition party, the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM). By contrast, Kawangware was (due to its origins described above) historically government-aligned, but has seen a recent shift in power: since 2013, Kawangware has elected a Member of Parliament (MP) from the ODM. This shift is linked to a changing population composition which, combined with perceived historical exclusion from access to power and resources, has prompted new political alliances. Interviewees point to the importance of the 2013 election, when a politician of Kisii origin became MP of Dagoretti North, Kawangware's constituency, and was later re-elected until 2022. Nowadays, our interlocutors indicated, the Luhya, Luo and Kisii (ethnic groups conventionally associated with the opposition) "come together as one community when it comes to politics. […] There is no conflict between them, only with the Kikuyu" (Kawangware 3, local government official).

According to interviewees, this shift marks "a turning point of the conflict: Kisiis are rising, taking over space. Kisiis teamed up with other communities to choose the leadership in Kawangware" (Kawangware 7, CBO representative). This shifting power balance has intensified local tensions.

Notably, Kawangware experienced significant violence in the aftermath of the contentious presidential election in 2017, where incumbent President Uhuru Kenyatta was returned to power amidst allegations of fraud. Violence broke out in several of Nairobi's low-income settlements, and the police responded with excessive use of force. Kawangware was one of the hotspots, with clashes between ethnic communities affiliated with the different political parties as well as between these groups and police (Amnesty and HRW, 2017; Van Baalen and Höglund, 2026).[5] Kawangware was also the scene of large-scale political demonstrations in the summer of 2023, which again saw police crack down hard on protesters (Amnesty and HRW, 2024). By contrast, Korogocho did not see major violence in the 2017 and 2024 elections (Van Baalen and Höglund, 2026).

Housing insecurity intersects with politics in different ways. Both tenants and landlords form important political constituencies, and political candidates in Nairobi have often campaigned with promises and pledges targeted to these different audiences. Notably, longstanding opposition leader Raila Odinga, who built his political base in Kibera (Nairobi's largest informal settlement), triggered intense ethno-political tensions and violence in 2001 when he campaigned on the slogan that "the government is the true landlord" and that landlords in Kibera should be forced to reduce their rents (Elfversson and Höglund, 2019). Similar dynamics have been present in Korogocho and Kawangware (for example, Kawangware 7, CBO representative; Kawangware 8, CBO representative; Kawangware 16, community leader; Kawangware 17, NGO representative; Korogocho 2, CBO representative; Korogocho 7, CBO representative; Korogocho 8, CBO representative). As one Kawangware resident put it:

> Our leaders sometimes contribute much in [landlord-tenant conflicts]. When you tell the people that all land belongs to the government—so all the houses will pay less money—you know, we have good listeners. They listen to those words, and they go and act on it without thinking. And then it brings up a problem. (Kawangware 16, community leader)

Another respondent in Kawangware recounts how landlords sometimes issue eviction notices ahead of elections, because they anticipate that the tenants may refuse to pay rent should "their" party win the elections (Kawangware 17, NGO representative).

While these respondents exemplify how statements from political candidates can incentivize both tenants and landlords to take contentious action, others underline that biased conflict management institutions compound these tensions. A respondent in Kawangware stressed that:

> The area Chief comes from the tribe the landlords are from. Therefore they are not functioning well in for instance rent conflicts. …When landlords want to increase rent, it is already anchored with local leadership. That's why people turn to the political leadership. If the community of the area outnumbers the tribe of the area Chiefs and the landlords, they go to the MCA [member of county assembly] or MP who is from another tribe. The MP will call a rally, will not speak of peace but of violence—"we need to defend ourselves". [When the Chief colludes with the landlords,] it leaves local citizens with little option but to rally around the politicians, who are stronger than the local administration. (Kawangware 8, CBO representative)

The widely held perception that landlord and tenant "status" extensively overlaps with ethnic identity and political alignment, makes housing insecurity highly salient both as cause and consequence of local political

conflicts. The ethnopolitical dimension increases the risk that disputes escalate:

> It starts between landlord-tenant, but grows to become tribal. Certain areas are dominated by certain tribes. There is the belief that most of the buildings are for the Kikuyu, most tenants Luo. So with a conflict between landlord and tenant, there is retaliation, conflict erupts, (Korogocho 2, CBO representative).

This also connects to broader narratives of how local electoral dominance enables political leaders to favor their support base. According to some of our respondents, previous elected representatives in Kawangware placed "their own" people in local positions and were able to channel development funds to their support base. The MP was also accused of complicity in instigating the violence in 2017, financing some of the vigilante groups involved (Kawangware 6, CBO representative). Interviews in Kawangware reflected a strong perception that politicians fuel violence at election times, partly to show political muscle—"It is the intermediary political leaders who are mainly responsible. The supporters of the top leadership are the top perpetrators" (Kawangware 8, CBO representative). One respondent referred to Kibera, where opposition leader Odinga built up his base, and noted that "some leaders have now identified Kawangware as their basis for starting up their agendas" (Nairobi 2, peace committee member).

Overall, the link between housing insecurity and electoral politics emerges as less evident in Korogocho, at least in recent times. The settlement saw intense election violence in the aftermath of the 2007 election when violence engulfed Kenya; dozens of people were killed in the larger Kariobangi area, where Korogocho is located (ICG, 2008: 9). In this violence, "plot owners here were chased away, and those who chased them grabbed the plots" (Korogocho 11, NGO representatives). Although subsequent election periods in Korogocho are widely described as more peaceful and relationships between local politicians and residents less conflictual (Korogocho 4, community leader; Korogocho 10, local government representative; Korogocho 16, FGD elders/community leaders; Korogocho 18, youth leader), the displacement of landowners during the 2007/2008 post-election violence remains a politically-charged issue that can still spark political conflict:

> Because this area is believed to be an opposition area, and those who were chased away belong to the other side. So maybe one day there will be a very big conflict and people will fight, because they feel that their land has been grabbed and those people are still staying here while others are suffering. (Korogocho 11, NGO representatives)

In sum, housing insecurity in Kawangware has grown more contentious and politicized over time, whereas Korogocho, to some extent, has seen an opposite trajectory. However, interviewees in both areas allude to how ethnic divisions intersect with landlord-tenant conflicts and become activated around elections:

> At election time, people remember the neighbor's ethnicity. There is the instrumentality of ethnicity; politicians can even "make" certain groups connected, by saying "we knew your ancestors", in order to broaden their support base. Politicians start enticing based on ethnicity. Politics is very ethnicized and divided. (Korogocho 7, CBO representative; also Korogocho 16, FGD elders/community leaders)

When landlord-tenant disputes become connected to electoral politics, this also implies that macro-level political realignments affect whether they escalate and turn violent. Several interviewees indicated that the rapprochement between Odinga and then-president Kenyatta in 2018[6] defused tensions at the local level. In Korogocho, a local

administration representative described: "For instance, in Ngomongo, the landlords are Kikuyu, the tenants Luo. Without cohesion [between the two top politicians], tenants refused to pay rent. With cohesion, it has improved again" (Korogocho 6, local government official).

Top-down governance of land and housing activates conflict

In addition to local-level politics, top-down planning and city re-development have affected housing insecurity and its links to urban conflict in Korogocho and Kawangware in varying ways. An important difference is that Korogocho, being an informal settlement on government land, has been the target of large-scale slum upgrading and infrastructure projects, which has led to mass evictions and activated conflicts over the right to space.

Since 2008, Korogocho has been undergoing transformation under the Korogocho Slum Upgrading Program (IFRA-Nairobi, 2011). The program has improved infrastructure and basic services in the area, and an illegal dump site controlled by local gangs has been closed (Korogocho 5, local government official). Cognizant of the sensitivity of housing and possible conflicts over claims to the land, the upgrading was intentionally sequenced, starting with general infrastructure improvement to build community trust and support (Burugu, 2015; Korogocho 1, NGO representative). Respondents testify how these initiatives have reduced insecurity: Street lights make the area safer at night, better roads provide access for fire trucks and police vehicles, and new opportunities have been created for young people, reducing crime (for example, Korogocho 14, FGD youth; Korogocho 17, youth leader. See also Muchiri and Opiyo, 2022 and Höök et al., 2012).

However, the upgrading has also reactivated old tensions and prompted new conflicts. In addition, it has proceeded at an uneven pace. The reasons for the delay are allegedly related to insecurity and corruption (Korogocho 11, NGO representatives), but without clearly articulated reasons (Korogocho 8, CBO representative), rumors and speculation abound. Tensions have revolved particularly around the demarcation of land, which paves the way for formalization and issuance of titles (Korogocho 1, NGO representative; Korogocho 7, CBO representative). Since neither landlords (structure owners) nor tenants have formal rights to the land, who should receive title is contested:

> The bone of contention is that the structure owners say they are the owners of Korogocho and that they should get title deeds. The other side says they are the majority, and many of them born and raised here, which gives right of tenure. (Korogocho 8, CBO representative)

A committee was formed 2008 to represent the residents in the slum upgrading and formalization process, but the proportion of seats given to these respective groups was highly contested. In the end, tenants only had one representative per village, whereas structure owners had two, putting tenants at a disadvantage when plots were to be allocated (Kamunyori, 2016: 120–121). In addition, as mentioned above, there are groups who were displaced during the 2007/2008 election violence but retain a claim to land.

This underlying conflict over plot allocation has generated tensions and violence at different stages of the upgrading process. An official within the local administration recalls that violence erupted when village elders were conducting sensitization about the demarcation and residents were asked to vacate marked places (Korogocho 6, local government official). A local resident

conveyed in late 2023 how the demarcation was still perceived as illegitimate, and that readiness for violence was high:

> They are saying that houses are going to be built where we stay, but we are ready to fight and kill each other because there is someone who is not our neighbor, they are bringing outsiders to claim our land. Tension is high right now, it's the truth. (Korogocho 16, FGD elders/community leaders)

In Kawangware, there has been no major slum upgrading program, only smaller infrastructure projects to improve roads and sewerage. Given that land is mainly privately-owned, governance follows a more neoliberal logic, focused on enabling and incentivizing private investments and upgrading (Kawangware 16, community leader; see also Vision 2030, Government of Kenya, 2007: 150). Respondents note that landholders who cannot back up their tenure with the correct documents (due to land conflicts, or encroachment on public land) can have their property demolished for upgrading. Sometimes, landlords therefore resist such upgrading efforts (Kawangware 10, local youth; Kawangware 14, FGD elders/community leaders). Relatedly, the government has been validating and digitizing title deeds; this has yielded resistance from residents who fear their freehold titles will be converted into leasehold, which enables the government to charge additional tax (Kawangware 16, community leader). Overall, however, slum upgrading represents less of a contentious issue in Kawangware.

Conclusions

Our analysis of Kawangware and Korogocho highlights both similarities and differences in dynamics, scale, and origin of housing insecurity and how it interlinks with urban conflict. In both settlements, unemployment is high and economic precarity contributes to housing insecurity. In line with Roy's (2009) work on the complex dynamics of (in)formality in low-income settlements, we find that informality does not deterministically predict housing insecurity: Despite varying formal tenure status, residents in both settlements fear eviction, and landlord-tenant disputes are prevalent. Simultaneously, the different histories of the two settlements—Korogocho being a squatter settlement, and Kawangware formerly rural private land incorporated into the city—shape the way residents are able to access and claim land, and the power dynamics between landlords and tenants. Our analysis underscores that land status matters beyond the formal/informal distinction, and how historical settlement formation and subsequent growth dynamics condition identity-based and politicized claim-making.

Overall, our comparative study shows that while housing insecurity is more acute in Korogocho, with a higher proportion of residents fearing eviction, these same issues appear more politically explosive in Kawangware, where they have become intertwined with perceptions of politically and ethnically-motivated allocation of rights. Our analysis suggests that this intersection and accompanying escalation relate to local shifts in political dominance over time in Kawangware. By comparison, Korogocho is a longtime opposition stronghold, where landlord/tenant status has not overlapped with political alignment to the same extent. Meanwhile, across interviews, the national-level political divide consistently emerges as a driver of local tensions, rendering the local situation precarious and highly sensitive to national shifts. This mirrors dynamics in other Nairobi settlements (Joireman and Vanderpoel, 2011; Omenya and Lubaale, 2012), but also in cities in, for example, India and South Africa where landlord-tenant conflicts are heavily politicized and often violent

due to their links with incumbent-opposition dynamics (Doshi, 2013; Patel, 2016).

An important finding beyond our framework is that housing insecurity is more likely to escalate into urban conflict when local mechanisms for solving disputes are weak or vulnerable to political interference. Interviews in both areas indicate that when local institutions—such as the area Chief in Kawangware, and the residence committee in Korogocho—are perceived as aligned with the interests of one group, conflicts related to housing security are more likely to escalate along ethnic and party-political lines. Distrust in state security officials, notably the police, further compounds these dynamics. Our study, thus, reinforces arguments that inadequate systems for addressing land and housing conflicts force marginalized urban populations to rely on informal networks that elites can exploit for violent mobilization (Berenschot, 2011; Klaus and Paller, 2017).

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Data availability statement

The survey data will be made available on request. Additional information about the survey and qualitative data is available as Supplemental Material (online).

Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. The concept "slum" is contested, and can be stigmatizing (Gilbert, 2007). Some interviewees rejected the word to describe their settlement. To recognize the varying informality and slum characteristics in Kawangware and Korogocho, we instead refer to them as low-income urban settlements. We use "slum upgrading" for projects officially described as such, and also to situate our study within literature on insecurity in urban slums and informal settlements.
2. This was emphasized in many of our interviews, for example Kawangware 8 (CBO representative); Kawangware 14 (FGD elders/community leaders); Kawangware 15 (FGD local residents).
3. For more information about the data collection, see Online Supplemental Material.

4. Statistical significance for difference in means was calculated in R using the rstatix package (Kassambara, 2023).
5. Reflecting Kenya's post-colonial history of policing, both settlements have experienced police brutality. Trust in the police is low: in our survey, only 28% reported that they trust the police at least "somewhat"; 39% report they do not trust them at all. Mistrust is slightly higher in Kawangware.
6. This rapprochement was publicly announced through the two former adversaries shaking hands outside the President's offices in March 2018.

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