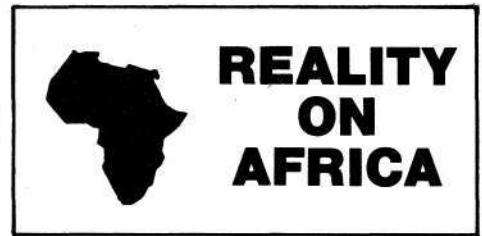


KENYA: FAVOURERED NATION OR NEO-COLONIAL FIEF?



by Kenneth Ingham

To many Western observers Kenya is one of the success stories of the post-colonial era. Critics within the country argue that the government's policies amount to a rejection of the objectives for which the independence struggle was waged and a betrayal of those who sacrificed most in the struggle. This conflict of opinion is not a recent phenomenon. It emerged within months of Kenya's achievement of independence in December 1963. It was epitomised in the treatment of the survivors of the Mau Mau risings who were regarded by some as a tragic, anachronistic embarrassment in a progressive new country and by others as the neglected heroes of the war against colonialism. Many of those who had taken part in the political campaign for independence looked upon the Mau Mau rising as a diversion. At times it had assisted by disconcerting the colonial authorities but there was always the danger that it might distract attention from, or even arouse hostility towards, the legitimate claims of educated Africans to assume the responsibility of governing their country. By contrast, those who saw the independence movement as a stark confrontation between an oppressive alien regime and a too-long subject people could only look upon the forest fighters as the spearhead of the freedom movement.

Whether the Mau Mau rising did, in the long run, delay the British government's approval of independence for Kenya — as seems probable — or whether, on the other hand, without the attribution of the Mau Mau campaign settlers of Kenya would have been more difficult to shift are questions as yet resolved. But the character of the Mau Mau rising and the interpretations put upon it inside Kenya since independence have highlighted the divisions in Kenya society.

DIVISIONS

In the first instance, because of the rising, Kenya became independent after a greater measure of violence than had previously been experienced in any British dependency in Africa. The European settlers, upon whose activities the country's economy had turned for more than half a century, were apprehensive about the future. Many of them regarded Jomo Kenyatta, the leader of the emergent state, not as a national figure but as the evil genius of the Kikuyu people who had until recently been at the heart of the Mau Mau struggle. Their doubts were shared by the supporters of the Kenya African Democratic Union, a party made up of members of the lesser tribes who feared the domination of the two large Kikuyu and Luo peoples who formed the bulk of the ruling party, the Kenya African National Union. The Asians, who for two or three generations had controlled all but the higher levels of commerce and trade, also felt their security threatened by the hopes of Africanisation stirred up by the independence movement. The immediate problem of an independent Kenya was to decide whether to allay these doubts and fears or to adopt a bold policy of Africanisation and of social reform.

The question of the future ownership of the land was probably the most potentially inflammatory issue. It had been the hope of acquiring land which had fired the enthusiasm for independence of many of the Africans of Kenya, and it was the Europeans who owned the greater part of the most desirable land. Some of the country's future leaders, like the passionate Luo politician, Oginga Odinga, would have seized the land and handed it to African cooperatives or retained some of it in government hands to be administered by an agricultural civil service.



Jomo Kenyatta

Kenyatta preferred a less revolutionary solution and his view prevailed. The Europeans who suspected his character and doubted his statesmanship had overlooked two important things. First, he did not belong to the young revolutionary school of African leaders like Nkrumah of Ghana. Kenyatta's roots were bedded in an older campaign which, initially at least, had sought to share power with the Europeans, not to oust them. Second, his trial and imprisonment for allegedly masterminding the Mau Mau rising had made him a martyr for the independence cause — and a living martyr at that. It had also removed him from the scene of action so that he emerged from his incarceration without any taint of failure or compromise. No-one could match his qualifications for leadership of his country. His age, his experience, his education in Europe and his suffering for the cause gave him a charismatic status which enabled him to silence the clamour for the spoils of victory. He chose the line which he was to pursue because it was one he had always embraced, because he saw himself as the heir to the colonial inheritance. His campaign for independence had not been waged on a politically ideological basis. He was purely and simply a Kenyan nationalist. With political power in his hands he tackled his problems pragmatically.

CAUTIOUS APPROACH

Faced with 40,000 unemployed in Nairobi alone and a further 60,000 in the Rift Valley province, he concluded that any sharp change of direction, either in the economic or political fields, might lead to disaster. Stability was what was needed and that, he considered, could best be achieved by a cautious, reassuring approach to the country's affairs. A machinery of government and of economic production had been created by the Europeans. It might not be ideally suited in the long term to the needs of an independent Kenya, but trained manpower was in short supply. The easiest course, therefore, was to take over the existing apparatus of government while leaving the economy as undisturbed as possible, given that some sort of response was needed to the demands of the landless. With British financial assistance those European farmers who wished to leave — most of them in the arable farming region — were bought out and their land divided up and made available as small holdings for the resettlement of Africans. Many Europeans, especially those engaged in ranching, were encouraged to stay. In deference to the prevailing liberation rhetoric the term "African socialism" was added to the vocabulary of Kanu's political platform, but Tom Mboya, Kenyatta's minister for economic planning made it clear in a white paper published in 1965 that nationalisation would only be adopted if individual circumstances made it essential, and if it did take place full compensation would be paid.

FIERCELY CRITICISED

The government's policy was fiercely criticised from within by Odinga. He was angry that large sums of money loaned by Britain should be used to buy off European settlers, leaving Kenya with a large debt and unable to use the loan to finance its own development. He did not believe the land available for resettlement was adequate and he rightly forecast that, under small-scale individual tenure, much of it would revert to subsistence farming and so fail to produce the surpluses necessary to provide the services which the country needed. The whole policy he denounced as the result of neo-colonialism on Britain's part. To his autobiography, published in 1967, he gave the title **Not Yet Uhuru** to emphasise the view that political independence alone did not constitute **Uhuru** (freedom) while the economy was still dominated by external forces and while poverty and inequality remained.

Whether Odinga's alternative of investing the aid in African cooperatives or in government-controlled development schemes would have been successful — or acceptable to Africans, even if Britain had been prepared to see its money used for that purpose — is an open question. The fact that it was never tried still gives it, in the eyes of the government's critics, an aura of desirability.

In the 1960s, however, there was little prospect that Odinga could successfully challenge any policies promoted by Kenyatta. Yet he maintained his criticisms and, as KADU disappeared with the abandonment of any prospect of regionalism, opposition to KANU's policies increasingly centred upon the proposals put forward by Odinga. At first he struggled to convert KANU from within, and with such vehemence that in April 1965 he found it necessary to deny formally that he was trying to usurp the government. He did not disagree with the view that foreign investment was essential — if not to the prosperity at least to the stability of his country. Where he diverged from official policy was in his attitude towards the sources from which aid might be sought and the uses to which it should be put. To Kenyatta

it was clear that the best prospects of aid lay in support from western Europe and the US. Russian aid seemed potentially less generous. It was to Britain, Canada and Australia that he turned in 1966 when drought forced a quarter of a million people to seek famine relief, and his requests for assistance were fully met. With such backing he could afford to treat the representatives of the eastern bloc with less consideration. In any case, he was suspicious of their motives in offering assistance.

RESIGNATIONS

This increasing commitment to the West and to the policies to which the relationship gave rise convinced Odinga that the government had become incapable of adopting an attitude of non-alignment. He therefore resigned the office of vice-president of Kenya and within a few days twenty-nine other M.P.s. resigned from KANU in sympathy.

It has been said that opponents of Kenyatta who sought to abide by the rules of the constitution were at an immediate disadvantage because the president did not hesitate to change the rules to serve his ends. Here was one of a number of occasions on which he earned that reputation. Summoning parliament, he engineered the passing of a law which stated that any member of parliament elected as a KANU candidate who resigned from the party must seek re-election. Odinga responded by forming the Kenya People's Union and campaigning for re-election under that banner. The party organisers of KANU were too experienced to be daunted by the challenge and though Odinga himself was re-elected KANU gained 21 out of the remaining 29 contested seats. Four months later, in October 1966, another restraint upon the powers of KANU was removed with the abolition of the senate and a proportionate increase in the membership of the lower house. Again, in the local government elections of 1968, many KPU candidates were disqualified because, allegedly, they had filled in their nomination papers incorrectly, while other prospective candidates were forced to withdraw when their deposit was suddenly raised from £5 to £10. Such practices did not reflect credit on the government, but they proved effective. A number of KPU supporters, despairing of making any impression in opposition, joined KANU in the hope of obtaining preference.

POLICY TOWARDS ASIANS

If Kenyatta appeared unduly anxious to encourage European participation in Kenya's economy his government's policy towards the Asians of Kenya was less tolerant. In May 1966 Mboya urged non-African business men to speed up African participation in their activities if they wished to escape a take-over by the government, and a few weeks later the government radio station openly criticised the Asian community. The position of the Asians was weak because of the operation of Kenya's citizenship laws. At the time of independence citizenship had been granted automatically to second and third-generation settlers, while first generation Asians were given two years in which to decide their nationality. Many of the latter, knowing they already possessed British citizenship and feeling uncertain about their future in Kenya, had allowed the two years to elapse without taking any action. The increasing pressure to Africanise the lower levels of the business world consequently caused grave consternation to the Asians, many of whom decided to emigrate. They were spurred on by the fear that new, more restrictive immigration legislation in Britain might prevent them from achieving sanctuary there if they did not hasten to take advantage of their British passports. This large-scale movement of people with commercial ex-

pertise threatened to create new problems for the economy, but this possibility neither deterred the government nor evoked any comment from the government's political opponents. The fate of Kenya's Asians appears to have aroused only limited sympathy in any quarter; and, more recently, it was the Asians again who suffered most as a result of the attempted coup in 1982, due, it would seem, to the continuing criticisms of their tenure of jobs to which Africans aspired.

OPPOSITION ALLIANCE

In 1969 a new element made its appearance on the political scene, one which was to attract intermittent but serious attention over the following years. In January Kenyatta ordered the closure of Nairobi's university college after students had boycotted lectures because Odinga had been refused permission by the government to address them. This was the beginning of an alliance between some of the young, educated people of Kenya and the political opponents of the government which was to lead to recurrent friction between the government and the university college, soon to become the University of Nairobi. Initially it was almost certainly concern about the denial of free speech which led the students to act as they did. Subsequently, disappointment at the government's apparent failure to achieve the objectives to which they aspired mingled with ideological opposition to the policies the government was pursuing to produce a commitment to reform which still pervades student politics.

Odinga himself was not silenced, and in August 1969 he inquired in parliament about the oath-taking which was rumoured to have been taking place in the vicinity of Nairobi. This was not, apparently, a question of clandestine opposition to the government but a means of enforcing support for KANU. Odinga complained that, if true, the accounts were proof that the government had failed to win support for its policies and was resorting to illegal pressures to force people into compliance. Members of KANU itself, from the western province, echoed Odinga's fears, and when Kenyatta visited Kisumu in October there were violent demonstrations which led to the banning of the Kenya People's Union. Consequently, when the elections for parliament were held in December only KANU-supported candidates were registered. As a result of the election, however, 71 former M.Ps. failed to gain re-election, five of them former ministers, and five junior officials. When it is noted that 22 members had not sought re-election it is clear that a considerable majority in the new parliament were newcomers. This can be seen to support Odinga's criticisms and to suggest that there was widespread dissatisfaction with the government's performance. On the other hand it may be looked upon as proof that the government's fierce measures against opposition parties had not seriously affected the democratic basis of Kenya's political life; that the country was reverting to a system of government more common in the pre-colonial era when opposition groups did not have any permanent form.

POPULATION INCREASE

In the same way Kenyatta's appeal to the new parliament to abstain from harassing the government may also be viewed either as a threat to free speech or simply as an appeal to national unity in the face of prodigious problems. Indeed, the efforts of the government to introduce further land reforms aimed at increasing the production of foodstuffs firmly underlined the struggle which Kenya faced to meet the needs of a population whose rate of increase, by the 1980s, was to become the highest in the continent.

It was a problem which could be tackled in a variety of ways, according to ideological preference. For Kenyatta the offer of substantial aid from Britain to assist his policies was a reasonable incentive to carry on as he had done previously. Again he emphasised that overseas investors would be welcome and that expatriate skills were essential to the country's future prosperity.

His policy appeared to pay off, for West Germany, Sweden and Denmark all offered financial assistance in support of various farming projects while the Federal House Loan Bank of New York made a substantial contribution in 1975 to the construction of 4,300 low-priced houses. There was further aid from Britain, too, but again £7m. of the additional £17m. offered was intended to assist in the transfer of British-owned land to Africans and consequently became the subject of criticism by the government's opponents.

It was in 1974 that the pressure against the government began to build up more seriously. Continuous drought, coupled with the rapid rise in oil prices, placed an even heavier strain upon the economy. In February 1975 a poor people's movement claimed responsibility for a number of bomb explosions in Nairobi but the perpetrators were never traced. In March, James Kariuki, a leading parliamentary critic of the government, went missing and was subsequently found murdered. Demonstrations by university students and powerful speeches in parliament itself led to the appointment of a committee of inquiry. Some of the students taking part in the demonstration were arrested and a subsequent protest meeting of students was broken up by police. This led to rioting and the temporary closure of the university. When the committee submitted its report the government attempted to postpone a debate, but its efforts were defeated by a parliamentary vote. A minister and two assistant ministers who approved the report were nevertheless dismissed, and later in the year two leading figures in parliament were detained for alleged disloyalty to the government.

FURTHER CRITICISMS

The area of criticism of government policies was further extended when the U.S. secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, paid a visit to Kenya in 1976 which led to an agreement in principle for the supply of twelve jet fighter planes to counter Russian activities in Somalia and Uganda. To the government's opponents this was a sinister move, parallel with U.S. intervention in Zaire and aimed at extending the capitalist grip upon Africa on the pretext of checking Russian military aggression. For the government the U.S. offer constituted much needed aid to counter the incursions of Somali raiders who had intermittently threatened the country's north-eastern frontier ever since independence, and as a warning to the unpredictable tyrant now ruling in Uganda who had recently demanded a portion of western Kenya. Inevitably, it would seem, there was a vigorous debate in parliament in response to criticisms of the government's handling of its relations with Uganda, and again it culminated in an appeal by Kenyatta for greater national unity. Again, too, later in the year, the government took further repressive measures against its opponents. Odinga had been readmitted to membership of KANU in 1961 but had been prevented from standing for election to parliament in 1974 because of a carefully-timed new ruling that only people who had been members of the party for the previous three years were eligible as candidates. He was again thwarted in 1977 when he was banned from competing for the vice-presidency of KANU because Kenyatta claimed he



Ngugi wa Thiong'o

had not been cleared of his association with the K.P.U. Later in the year he was arrested as, also, shortly afterwards, was another prominent critic of the government, Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Ngugi, a distinguished author, had recently published a novel, *Petals of Blood*, in which he had described Kenya as a country whose leaders had allied themselves with foreign investors to exploit the country's resources for their own profit with cynical efficiency. The novel contained all the criticisms customarily levelled against the government by its opponents, including disregard for the rural poor, rejection of the Mau Mau heroes, the imposition of oaths to ensure support for KANU, restrictions imposed upon students who would not comply with official policy, profiteering among party leaders and widespread corruption in the country. That there was truth in Ngugi's accusations is beyond doubt. The question, however, was whether, in the eyes of the Kenyan people as a whole, the allegations merited a complete change of direction or whether the errors were looked upon as the regrettable but excusable by-products of Kenya's efforts to establish itself as an independent nation.

TEST

The test of opinion appeared to be at hand when Kenyatta died in August 1978. The question of who would succeed had been in the forefront of people's minds for some years because of his considerable age. Many considered that the discontent with official policies was so widespread that only Kenyatta's reputation had sustained his government in office. He alone had embodied Kenya's national spirit and there were fears that the divisions he had frequently criticised would become immediately apparent when he was no longer on hand to hold them in check. Clearly no-one could replace him. He was unique in having led the country to independence. His death provided the opportunity for a coup which might reverse the policies pursued since independence. In the

event no such coup took place. The efficient team which, in spite of frequent intervention by Kenyatta himself, had effectively administered the country in recent years continued to do their job. It is true that, four years later, a coup attempt was launched but it failed immediately.

QUESTIONS

Does this mean that parliamentary criticism in Kenya does not imply condemnation of the fundamentals of policy but that it is the healthy expression of democratic discontent at the efforts put into the execution of policy? Was the failure of the coup attempt due to the efficiency of the measures taken by the army, or was it evidence of the limited support which it attracted? Were the leaders of the coup merely a group of disaffected, ideologically opposed intellectuals who could arouse no echo of sympathy in the rest of the country? Was the looting in Nairobi the work of an incensed proletariat, or of opportunists preying upon the longtime butt of every section of the African community, the Asians? It is a moot question whether the sight of Africans acquiring large farms from Europeans and mingling easily with the remaining European settlers arouses a desire for Marxist egalitarianism among the dispossessed. Or is it a cause for satisfaction that some Africans can succeed which creates a spirit of emulation rather than of envy among the rest of the community? Again, are such developments seen to be the result of the machinations of foreign capitalists or as the first fruits of independence which all might in due course share to a greater or lesser degree? The less-involved observer might recognise the difficulties faced by a government striving to restrain the population outburst but lacking sufficient trained social workers to carry their campaign to people who regard their children, in part at least, as a form of security against their old age. Nor is it surprising that an attempt to diversify agriculture so as to avoid over-production fails. There are, after all, not enough agricultural officers to ensure that growers do not en masse abandon the production of maize, after a bumper harvest has brought prices crashing down, in favour of sugar growing. They are not to know that there is only a very limited demand from the sugar cane factories. In any case, can any alternative economic system produce the money needed to meet the ever increasing demand for schools?

The sincere concern of many of the government's critics for the sufferings of the poorer people of Kenya is beyond doubt. Their suspicions of the government can scarcely have been assuaged by the political sleight of hand to which the government has often resorted. One can, however, ask with equal sincerity whether their alternative solutions are not too simplistic. Perhaps the survival of the government after Kenyatta's death and the failure of the 1982 coup indicate that a considerable proportion of Kenya's population believes that, while criticism of the government is justified, a total reversal of its policies is not acceptable. The vigour of the parliamentary criticism of government policies is a healthy sign. The failure of the resort to armed opposition to the government may well be another hopeful indication that Kenya does not believe that a revolutionary approach to political and economic objectives is the panacea which some may claim. □