I Shall Never Surrender

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Abstract: Lewis Maghanga gives us a timely reminder of how jails and other state institutions have historically and continue to be used to repress and break the Kenyans struggling to change the order of things. He draws similarities between the colonial administration and neo-colonial government, reminding us that the neo-colonial state is an appendage of global imperialism – and that the people of Kenya today still face the task of carrying on with the struggle for full independence and freedom.

Introduction

That present day Kenya is a hotbed of police brutality and state repression is a fact that goes without saying. Characteristic of any despotic system, present day Kenya, through its state apparatus, exhibits immense intolerance to any form of dissent and views that are contrary to its neo-colonial agenda.

A look into the history of ‘independent’ Kenya, right from 1963 when the country attained self-rule, would reveal a pattern of political repression directed against anyone whose ideas seeks to change the present order of things. Throughout the years, many Kenyans have suffered arrest, torture detention and exile on account of being in opposition to the regime. Additionally, many have sacrificed their lives in order to see a better Kenya, in which freedom and liberty are actually enjoyed by the majority. This reflection of Kenya: A Prison Notebook, by Maina wa Kinyatti, seeks to highlight the brutal nature of the neo-colonial state, particularly in relation to its own citizens who take it upon themselves to work towards genuine freedom, liberation and a better future for all. It also seeks to applaud the bravery, commitment and determination exhibited by Kenyan revolutionaries who ended up as political prisoners, such as Maina wa Kinyatti, based on their uncompromising position even in the face of dehumanising conditions and torture.

This diary is an expression of the neo-colonial brutality experienced by Kenyan prisoners. It is also a testimony to courage and fortitude.

Reflections

Constitutionalism and the rule of law is almost always ignored when dealing with political prisoners in Kenya, as well as in other parts of the world. The arrest of Maina wa Kinyatti, as highlighted in the book, began with the unlawful ransacking of his house by six armed plainclothes policemen,
determined to find ‘seditious publications.’

That agents of the state found publications on the Mau Mau ‘seditious’ says a great deal regarding the extent of the falsification of the history of Kenya by the government. Determined to relegate the status of the Mau Mau movement to that of a ‘terrorist’ organization, in conformity with the colonial narrative, the government of Kenya sought to destroy any meaningful material or publication regarding the Mau Mau movement. Any inquiry into the organising done by the Mau Mau, as well as its aims and membership, was strictly prohibited and discouraged by the Kenyatta and Moi regimes.

“Why are you doing research on the Mau Mau movement? Do you know the Mau Mau issue is political and sensitive and would divide the people of Kenya? Secondly, do you know it is a crime to do any academic research in this country without the government’s permission?”

The above questions, asked by superintendent Rono of the Police Special Branch to Maina wa Kinyatti, highlighted the attitude of the government with regards to Kenya’s Freedom struggle. That the government was eager to suppress any information regarding Kenya’s genuine independence movement emphasised the illegitimacy of neo-colonial Kenya’s regime.

Mention is made of the inhumane and degrading treatment accorded to prisoners upon admission in jail. Prisoners in Kenya, in addition to putting up with rough treatment from the police and prison guards, are often made to go without food for lengthy periods of time. Blankets, if provided, are often infested with bedbugs, lice and fleas. They are often stinking food, when provided, was often of the poorest quality. As highlighted in the book:

Breakfast is cold sugarless porridge full of sand, cockroaches and flies.
Lunch is half-cooked ugali (maize meal) with yellow, dirty Sukuma wiki (collard greens).
Supper is half-cooked cold ugali and rotten beans full of worms and stones.

In addition to the poor quality food, sanitation was often non-existent in the prison, with inmates made to live under unhygienic conditions. Clearly, these conditions were meant to break the spirit of the prisoners.

In their interactions with the prison guards, the political prisoners often discovered that indeed some guards empathised with their situation. Some of them even understood the nature of the repressive system of Kenya, and loathed the neo-colonial regime of President Moi and KANU. These guards, forced to be in their position solely due to the problem of unemployment and their search for a better life, stood in support, albeit clandestinely, of the political prisoners. Through these progressive guards, Maina wa Kinyatti, as well as other political prisoners, were able to get access to letters and other material and pass correspondence to comrades in the outside world.

Most of the maximum security prisons, as mentioned in the book, were established by the
British colonialists as detention centres during the Mau Mau uprising. The methods used by the prison personnel to torture the prisoners were used by the British colonialists during the Mau Mau war of independence. That the state apparatus still uses the very detention centres and detention methods used by the colonial administration shows how similar the colonial and the present neo-colonial regimes are. The present regime, far from serving the interests of the African people, simply exists to serve the interests of the former colonial masters. The government officials are mere puppets of Western imperialism. The very methods used by the British colonialists to control the African people, such as dividing the population along tribal lines, are still used to date.

If our state is an appendage of global imperialism, and if our state is merely a representation of the continuation of colonial rule, it goes without saying that the people of Kenya are faced with the task of carrying on with the struggle for full independence and freedom.

The author makes mention of the KANU government blueprint for national development, published through its political manifesto, known as ‘African Socialism.’ Despite its outlook and proclamation as an anti-capitalist program, it in fact led to the entrenchment of exploitation, inequality, pervasive corruption, and thievery. The program was anything but socialist; it was capitalism in disguise. Just as it is impossible to have African capitalism, African Biology, African Physics, African Chemistry and the like, there cannot be a scientific concept based on race.

With so many Mwakenya cadres broken, the Kenya Special Branch Police had succeeded in uprooting some of the movement’s underground cells and disorganising its leadership. Because of the information the police had assembled since February 1986, they were now in a better position to confront any Kenya political dissident they capture. In spite of the arrest and torture of so many revolutionaries, however, more and more Kenyans have been making the decision to join the struggle against despotism and fight for a brighter future for generations to come.

“I shall never surrender. I would rather die than betray my country. My country is larger than life itself.” And rightly so.
Maina speaks. Courtesy of Kenyans.co.ke.