The Struggle for Social Justice is Not a Walk in the Park

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Abstract: Drawing strength from Maina wa Kinyatti, Esther Waigumo Njoki shares her reflections on how we work and organise with others for a common cause. She emphasises the importance of defining the oppressors and the oppressed, of identifying our comrades and enemies, of educating cadres and cultivating their integrity, loyalty and commitment to the cause.

As a young cadre in the fight for social justice, I find the book *Kenya: A Prison Notebook* of so much relevance to our current struggle. There is much that we learn from the book, starting from how we need to organize ourselves all the way to how we relate, even with our oppressors. First, I must admit that I admire the way Comrade Maina wa Kinyatti influenced and collectively worked with a strong network of people - some of who were abroad at the time - for a common cause. In the book, we see his former student coming to visit him in jail. We see his wife and family members all playing a role in the struggle either through encouragements, smuggling letters or books, passing information amongst other things. It is even more interesting how the author made friendship with the prison guards. Maina writes, “We have to realize that not all of the guards are our enemies.” This kind of approach is what we need in our present struggle for social justice as we organize.

Many are the times we have stereotyped certain people as our oppressors simply because they work for the deep state system though in reality, they too are victims of injustices happening around and only need a little ‘jump starting’ by awakening their political consciousness. There is a need to clearly define the oppressors and the oppressed and we can achieve this by actualizing our slogan, “Organize, Educate, and Liberate.”

“You are not my comrade, you are the enemy” is the response Maina wa Kinyatti gives to a police officer who referred to him as comrade Maina. It should be noted that this is the same officer who had ordered his junior officers to torture Maina - including not providing him with food or blankets. The integrity and loyalty displayed here by Maina wa Kinyatti is undisputed. That integrity and loyalty is something that we as social justice cadres need to aspire to have and guard jealously in us. Many are the times that our oppressors want to compromise our collective struggle by trying to compromise a few of our own. Disloyalty should be the last thing we ever witness from one of us! Even if we are to be promised the whole world in exchange for our loyalty to the struggle, we should be grounded enough to, for instance, stay homeless in our own motherland rather than betray our noble cause.

Lastly, the book reminds us that struggle for justice is not a walk in the park. The author suffered for six and a half years in the hands of his oppressors. He was tortured in so many ways
and at some point was lonely in prison. At another point, he asks himself a question “Will I be able to finish this journey under this unrestrained barbarism?” It was worth documenting all these struggles, especially for us as young cadres, as these writings prepare us for the long journey and protracted struggle ahead. When the struggle gets tough, we draw strength from people like Comrade Maina wa Kinyatti who underwent worse experiences, but who never gave up on the struggle and instead remained defiant. His generation always found a reason to keep on fighting and as he confesses in one of the many lines he wrote while in prison “the struggle for democracy demands more stamina and passion; demands courage than tears; it calls for great sacrifices, for blood and death.”

I would really like to thank Comrade Maina wa Kinyatti for this inspiring book which is also very relevant in our current day struggle. Your resilience and commitment to save our motherland will forever be written not only in the books of history, but also in our hearts. Your efforts to make sure that you documented every aspect of the struggle are well appreciated and this has taught us the importance of documenting our daily struggles for the sake of generations that will come after us. I would also wish to thank Comrade Gacheke Gachihi, who gave me this book when I was an intern at Mathare Social Justice Center, a space that inspired me to work for the community and engage in the wider struggle for social justice. Keep on mentoring young cadres, for it is never in vain!
From Right: Kamonye Manje, Prof. Ngotho wa Kariuki, and Prof. Maina Kiongo
Taken at the Nairobi Kenya Club.