

Resistance and revolution in colonial Kenya

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Shehina Fazal reviews 'Kenya's War of Independence: Mau Mau and its Legacy of Resistance to Colonialism and Imperialism, 1948-1990' by Shiraz Durrani.

The public relations department of the colonial government in Kenya never referred to the Mau Mau struggles as “War of Independence” during the post-WW2 years in the last century. Rather the struggles were relegated to an “emergency” where the colonial government had to deal with “a frenzy of violence”. Shiraz Durrani’s book sets out to document “the historical resistance of the people of Kenya against colonialism and imperialism during a long war of independence and liberation with many different stages”.

After Kenya gained independence from the colonial power of Britain in 1963, another war was waged which Durrani describes as “the war of economic independence”. In the latter, the resistance was on political and economic fronts “against the comprador regime installed by the departing colonial government as neo-colonialism tightened its grip on Kenya”. The British government, together with the settlers who were offered very favourable terms to put down roots in Kenya, were replaced by corporations from the USA and their allied advisors of the IMF (International Monetary Fund) and the World Bank.

Durrani’s book sets out in four parts to provide an insightful reality on the brutality and exploitation by the colonial regime in Kenya. The British colonial regime used horrific torture methods on activists from the Mau Mau movement throughout the eight years of rebellion. The torture and brutality were usually deployed by the Africans who were either in the police force or in the military (King’s African Rifles).

Kenyan society under the colonial project was “a vastly unequal society” and those who benefited from the disparities in the country were far away from the inhuman practices that were underway to make money for them. For example, Kenyan peasants were controlled by *kipande*, which required all African men to carry a registration card (and were finger printed before the card was issued) under the Registration Ordinance of 1920. The sole purpose of the card was to control and restrict movement of adult African workers.

While African workers were tightly controlled in the colonial regime, the post-independence redistribution of land to the Kenyan workers was contentious. The Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission which reported in 2015 identified that:

“The colonial system created ethno-specific boundaries, which gave the impression that land rights within particular boundaries could only be enjoyed by certain communities, in certain areas. These ethnic ties continue to affect Kenya to date”.

In reality, the African workers lost not only to the colonial regime but also to the post-independence government. The land settlement profited only the Kenyan elite. These elites did not need money to buy farms as they could easily get loans from the governmental bodies that were set up for the benefit of the farmers.

In the pre-independence period, Durrani attributes Mau Mau's success to its communication strategy where the cadres that were recruited by the resistance movement were able to form links with the working classes who provided information as they worked in the domestic service sector as well as the agricultural sectors. Workers in government departments provided the Mau Mau with information from official files, as well as everyday conversations.

While the Mau Mau played a major role in the struggle for independence, who were the other actors in the resistance to colonialism in Kenya?

The role of the South Asians in the struggle against colonialism in Kenya has been overlooked by scholars, until recently. South Asian workers were imported from the Indian sub-continent by the colonial administration. These workers were brought to work on the railways as they had the appropriate skills. But along with their skills for building the railways, they also brought their ideology and experiences of the struggles of the Indian working class against colonisation by the British and the Portuguese in India. Durrani says that the contribution of South Asian workers and their resistance against colonialism in Kenya was significant. The South Asian workers had experience of resistance which enabled them to identify the enemies - which helped to focus the struggle for independence from colonialism, imperialism and capitalism.

Additionally, some of the critical ingredients in the resistance movement were provided by the Trade Unions. The workers, through their experience of organisation and the working class ideology, provided the "behind-the-scene impact of the organised labour movement as an important contributory factor in the War of Independence". The strike action by the workers in Kenya hit at the heart of the "colonial, capitalist economy".

The workers were spread throughout the country where the Trade Unions played a key role by creating a receptive working class that had very little to lose as the colonial administration had taken away their land, properties and livestock. When the livelihoods of people were threatened, the people's resistance with their collective action became a strong force against colonialism.

The women in the Mau Mau movement played a key role, particularly in the transportation of arms and food to the various camps throughout the country. They were also involved in spying and accessing guns and bullets. In the six years between 1954 to 1960, around 8000 women were detained under the Emergency Powers.

The combination of the trade unions and the radical, nationalist movement did impact upon the colonial administration. Concerning the former grouping, Durrani writes that it:

"..provided the spark that changed the direction of the War of Independence. This led to the emergence of the armed resistance movement, Mau Mau, as the new approach to defeat colonialism and imperialism. The trade union movement provided ideological clarity and the national organisational experience; the militant national political organisations provided political structures and mass support developed over a long period. The former brought the working class to the struggle, the latter brought peasants, creating a national movement of all the exploited and oppressed people. Together they formed an iron fist that colonialism fought hard to defeat". (p.110)

The response to the resistance movement by the colonial administration was one of brute force rather than one of seeking political solutions. The acts of brutality are only now beginning to be revealed in the remaining documents on the colonial rule. Some of these documents were destroyed or hidden when the colonial government left Kenya.

The practice of repressing the people's demand for independence with military force was also common in other British colonies like Malaysia. The actions of resistance resulted in the colonial government referring to them as terrorists, thereby masking the colonial government's military ambitions.

Durrani states, at various points in the book, the importance of Kenya's War of Independence as a movement that worked towards the liberation of all the people and not just a few. When the colonial government was in power it manoeuvred towards creating hostilities and divisions between tribal, ethnic and religious groups resulting in tensions among communities which was instigated "to create the impression that the interest of one ethnic group could only be enforced at the expense of another".

The book ends with a discussion on the legacy of colonialism and neo-colonialism with the War of Independence continuing, seeking economic freedom. Durrani makes the case that Kenya is not really free as the forces of international capitalism continue a stranglehold on the country. The political class deploy methods similar to those used by the colonial regime and remain in power.

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