

Pinto editor: My escape from dreaded police

Saturday, October 13, 2018



The late Pio Gama Pinto. 'Pio Gama Pinto: Kenya's Unsung Martyr', edited by Shiraz Durrani, will be launched in Nairobi, Kenya, on October 16. FILE PHOTO | NATION MEDIA GROUP

By SHIRAZ DURRANI

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What you need to know:

- Their reaction was skeptical and implied that I was lying, that they did not believe me.
- They kept saying that I should not think that I will escape their “treatment” just because I was Asian.
- There was a hidden threat of violence to me and my family behind all their questions.

I had two interviews at the Kenya Special Branch Police offices in September 1984, following the publication in two parts of my articles on Pio Gama Pinto in a Nairobi newspaper.

However, in the brief space of time between the publication of the articles and the Special Branch starting to take “special interest” in me, a large number of activists, including many from Mau Mau days, started sending messages of support. The questions that the Special Branch fired at me during interviews at Nyayo House give an indication of how hurt the regime was at my research into the history of publishing and the anti-imperialist struggle in Kenya.

POLITICAL COLLEAGUES

I gave factual information to the questions they asked. But omitted to volunteer information they were indirectly trying to get from me. For example, they asked me to make a list of everybody I knew at the University of Nairobi. Well, I knew many people, but I focused on those who were more likely to be looked favourably by the government and omitted many people (in and out of university) who were my political colleagues.

But overall, I gave truthful answers as the facts could easily be verified. They asked what sources I had used the material for the Pinto articles. I had this ready. They asked me to go with the source material for the next interview — which I never attended. But I had all the material ready as I was not making it up. They asked me if I knew Odinga Oginga and if he had asked me to write the article. I could answer truthfully that I knew Odinga (who didn't in Kenya?) But that I had no contact with him and he had not asked me to write the articles (again truthfully). I focused on academic and professional reasons why I was writing on Pinto — correct again, but did not volunteer my political convictions behind these academic and professional writings. They also asked me to come the next time with copies of all the articles I had written, which were all in public domain, so I had no problems with these.

HIDDEN THREAT

Their reaction was skeptical and implied that I was lying, that they did not believe me. They kept saying that I should not think that I will escape their “treatment” just because I was Asian. There was a hidden threat of violence to me and my family behind all their questions. My concern was not only for me and my family's safety but also that through me they would get to know details of my underground connections and activities.

Following the second interview, I was asked to return to Nyayo House for a third interview in three weeks. People in the know advised that the third time would very likely be the last time as there was no way out of Nyayo House.

CONSEQUENCES

So I decided to flee into exile. But how and to where? I had not planned any such eventuality. The first difficulty was that anybody working at the university needed the permission of the Vice-Chancellor before leaving the country. No prospects of getting this. But that was not enough. To travel overseas, one needs to buy tickets with foreign exchange and none was available without government authorisation. A third hurdle was leaving from the Nairobi airport where the Special Branch kept a list of people required for special treatment.

It seemed hopeless. Best to give up and face the Nyayo interview and its consequences. Without going into further details here, arrangements were made to get the foreign exchange and a “friendly” travel agency provided the tickets for the flight — but from Tanzania as flying out of

Kenya was too dangerous. I went to work in the morning ... and was to cross the border on foot to Tanzania.

COMPRADOR REGIMES

The driving force for the books and articles on the history of Kenya was the anger from an awareness of neo-colonialism and capitalism that divided the country into 10 millionaires and 10 million beggars. The injustice of stealing people's land then treat them as thieves when they protested. But one cannot fight neo-colonialism and capitalism without a strong organisation. I was a member of December Twelve Movement (DTM) — now Mwakenya-DTM — and saw socialism as the only way out for working people. People's theatre, underground leaflets and newspapers, documenting crimes of the comprador regimes, writing historical and other papers — all were part of the activities of DTM in which I was involved. Involvement in this political movement gave me strength in Kenya as well as in London where I landed.

Of course, there was huge sadness in having to leave Kenya. Sadness not only for what I had to endure but for my family. Two young children and wife with a very bright future, all well settled. All had to be uprooted. But my case was not so bad as that of many others. Both of us managed to get good jobs and would eventually live reasonably well in London.

HOUSING NIGHTMARE

Applying for asylum was another huge hurdle. My first application was rejected. My trade union — Unison — supported my application by getting a brilliant immigration solicitor. I wrote a long document challenging the British Home Office as to why they rejected my application. It took six years for the appeal to be heard — a period when one did not know if the Home Office would turn up at dawn and put you on a flight to Nairobi. In the end, the adjudicator asked the Home Office why my application had not been accepted as it was a very strong case for asylum. The Home Office had to accept my case. Thus I got asylum and with it a document which would allow me to travel overseas.

Housing in London is a nightmare, but an African housing association which supported refugees with housing helped us find a home.

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Mr Durrani, who was born in Kenya, is a senior lecturer, Information Management, Department of Applied Social Sciences, London Metropolitan University. He is also an avid writer on the histories of Kenya's armed struggle against colonialism and neo-colonialism.