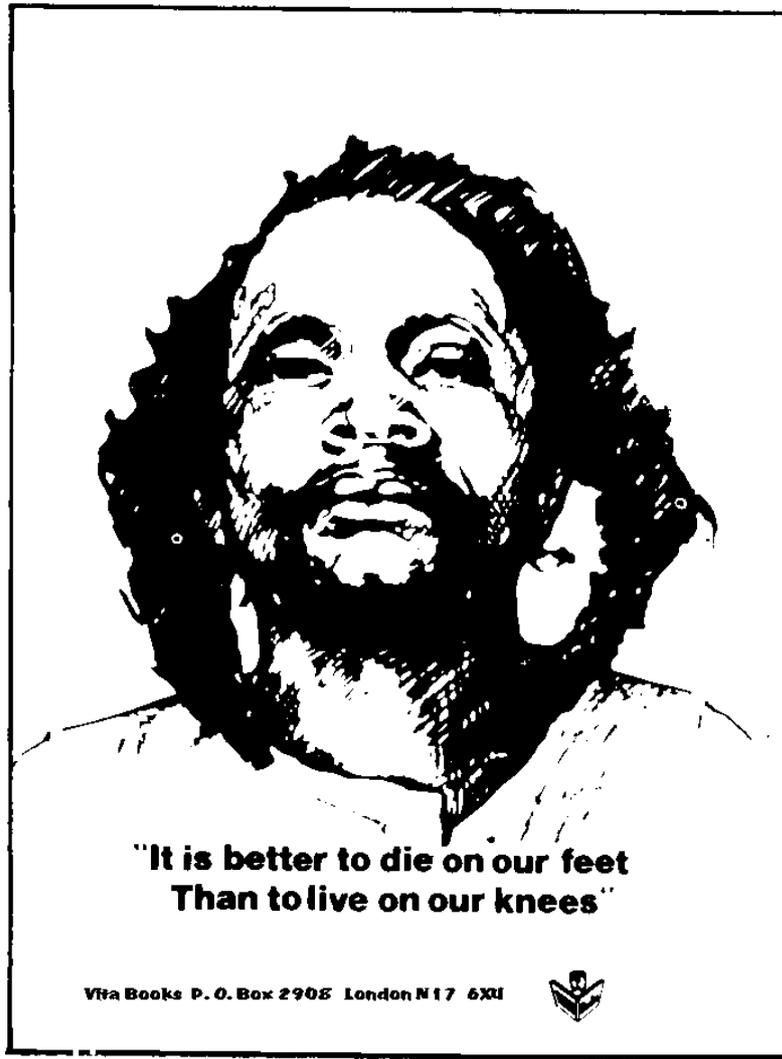


# **Kimaathi**

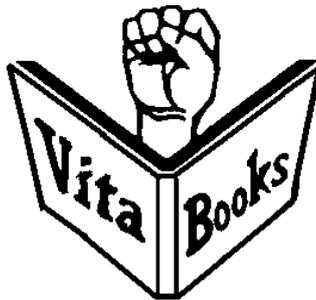
## **Mau Mau's First Prime Minister of Kenya**



**Shiraz Durrani**

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## **THE KENYA LAND AND FREEDOM ARMY AND ITS LEADERS**

The name Kimaathi wa Waciuri has dominated the political scene in Kenya for over thirty years. In the early 1950s, he was active in the Kenya Land and Freedom Army as an organiser in the Rift Valley. Later, he led the guerrilla army fighting the British colonial occupation army and rose to its highest military rank, Field Marshal. With victories on the battlefield, came the need to consolidate the political authority of the Kenya Land and Freedom Army. This was done by the establishment of the Kenya Parliament which was the first legitimate African Government of Kenya. On 6th March 1955, Kimaathi was elected the first Prime Minister of the Kenya African Government.

Kimaathi's name arouses the greatest admiration even today among millions, not only in Kenya but around the world. They are the ones who uphold the ideals of Kimaathi and the Kenya Land and Freedom Army - land and freedom for the workers and peasants who took up arms and formed a powerful guerrilla movement which waged an incessant war against colonialism and neo-colonialism. These ideals continue to inspire patriots in a struggle for a just and democratic society free from exploitation and foreign domination.

Kimaathi's role in the revolutionary war against imperialism cannot be understood fully without examining the whole movement that came so closely to be associated with his name - Kenya Land and Freedom Army, also known as Mau Mau. The leadership played a crucial role in the achievements of KLFA. The leaders reflect the ideology of a Movement and a Movement articulates its political stand through its leaders. The one cannot exist without the other. Both influence each other and resolve the contradictions existing in the society. Since the Kenya Land and Freedom Army represented the class interests of the workers and peasants, its leaders in effect were the representatives of these classes in their struggle against the comprador, the foreign imperialist bourgeoisie, and finance capital whose economic interests required the colonial and neo-colonial exploitation of Kenya.

### ***Reasons for KLFA Successes***

The success of the Kenya Land and Freedom Army in the political and military fields was due to the fact that it correctly represented the economic, political and cultural interests of the Kenyan working people. It presented a world outlook that was totally opposed to the one imposed on the Kenyan people by the worldwide system of exploitation known as imperialism. This outlook is summed up in the very name - Land and Freedom. Land (and all other national resources) for the people of the country and Freedom to enjoy the products of their labour and to decide their own destiny. The term 'Army' emphasises the method to be used in achieving Land and Freedom - through an armed revolutionary struggle.

Another important reason for the success of the Kenya Land and Freedom Army is that it was a dynamic movement that changed its ideological and tactical bases in keeping with a changing reality. It was born, it grew and developed in direct response to the concrete conditions. Thus, faced with the reality of colonialism, it produced an ideology, its corresponding organisation, and activities which would combat

colonialism. When the military offensive of the Kenya Land and Freedom Army made independence inevitable, imperialism acted behind the scenes to ensure the presence of neo-colonialism in Kenya. But the leadership of the Kenya Land and Freedom Army soon saw the treachery of the enemy. In quick response, realising the changed nature of the reality, the patriotic forces gave rise to an anti-neo-colonialist ideology together with its corresponding organisations and activities. This, in essence, has been the basis of the history of anti-imperialist struggle in Kenya for the last forty years. It also explains the continuing popularity and relevance of the ideological and practical principles of the Kenya Land and Freedom Army even today.

Today, with attempts being made to distort the real history and achievement of the Kenya Land and Freedom Army, at a time when official media and the education system have been quiet about this period of Kenya's history, the people have yet managed to circulate the ideology and the tactics that evolved over the period of armed revolution. The debate about Kimaathi and Kenya Land and Freedom Army is even more intense today.

As the material conditions of life of the working people in Kenya become worse under intensified exploitation from multinational companies, foreign financial institutions and the World Bank working hand in hand with the comprador class, the people look back for guidance to the ideology and methods used by the Kenya Land and Freedom Army, a movement which promises a just, democratic society free from exploitation and foreign domination. It is in this context that Ngugi wa Thiong'o says that the 'Mau Mau is Coming Back' in his book "Barrel of a Pen".<sup>1</sup>

As we saw above, one of the reasons for the success of the Kenya Land and Freedom Army was its dynamism which resulted in its quick response to changing enemy tactics. This changing response can be noted at three levels: first at the level of *organisation* where new organisational forms are evolved in keeping with changing circumstances; secondly at the level of *ideological and theoretical understanding* of the situation which itself was changing; and finally, at the *tactical level* which ensured that correct methods of struggle were used to defeat the enemy at different times and situations.

This was possible only on the basis of resolving the theoretical and practical contradictions of different situations using different and appropriate methods. In this, the leadership played a crucial role. Kimaathi, both as the Commander and Field Marshal of the Kenya Land and Freedom Army (that is, in the military aspect), as well as Prime Minister of the Kenya Government (that is, in the political aspect) stood as the foremost leader. His total commitment to the struggle and his understanding of the needs of the revolution ensured that the Kenya Land and Freedom Army kept up its offensive at the enemy throughout the period. Although it did not succeed totally in its struggle against neo-colonialism, it laid a firm theoretical foundation for

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<sup>1</sup> NGUGI WA THIONG'O: Barrel of a pen. London. New Beacon. 1983. pp.7-31: Mau Mau is Coming Back: The Revolutionary significance of 20th October, 1952 in Kenya today.

its defeat. In addition, it has left behind a legacy of struggle which is a lasting example to the youth and struggling masses today.

## **THE KENYA LAND AND FREEDOM ARMY AND ORGANISATION**

The Kenya Land and Freedom Army waged anti-imperialist war from about 1948. The armed stage began in 1952. It maintained over 35,000 active fighters in the forests, and many thousands more in urban areas. It maintained friendly relations with thousands of peasants and workers. Its influence extended over a large part of the country, from Mombasa on the Coast to Kisumu in western Kenya. It even extended over parts of Tanganyika (now mainland Tanzania) where the British authorities were forced to declare a state of Emergency in Northern Tanganyika at the same time as it was declared over Kenya.

As one of KLFA struggle songs, "we are everywhere" made clear, the presence of the guerrilla forces was felt everywhere:

If you go to Nairobi  
We are there.  
If you go to Mombasa,  
We are there.  
And if you go to Kisumu  
We are there.  
We are so many  
That we are everywhere <sup>2</sup>

These facts indicate that the Kenya Land and Freedom Army must have had a vast organisational network to be able to keep the large British military machinery on the run. It is necessary to understand the historical background of the Revolution in order to understand how and why it was organised the way it was.

### ***Early Struggle Against Colonialism***

From the earliest time when colonialism set foot on the Kenyan soil, people of every nationality always took up arms at one time or another to overthrow this intrusion. Thus, for example, the Portuguese were forced to build a massive fort in Mombasa in order to protect them-selves from the wrath of the Coastal people and the struggles led by MeKatilili, Koitalel, Waiyaki. Later on, the British found themselves in a similar position and had to defend themselves in every part of the country. It was only their brutal use of superior firepower and other inhuman measures such as imprisonment, concentration camps, torture, forced labour and confiscation of land and livestock that enabled them to maintain their bloody rule over Kenyan people.

The Kenyan people's struggles of the earlier periods had taught them valuable lessons. Some of the early struggles for national liberation had been waged along constitutional lines: peaceful petitioning and asking the colonial authorities to grant

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<sup>2</sup> MAINA, PAUL: Six Mau Mau Generals. Nairobi. Gazelle Book Co. 1977. p.23.

people their rights. This line of struggle was abandoned by all except a few after the murder of Kenyan workers following the peaceful General Strike of 1922, the so-called Harry Thuku Massacres.

### ***Preparations for an Armed Revolution***

From that time, it took almost twenty five years of struggle at various levels before the revolutionary line of armed, organised people's war emerged. The lessons of the past struggles were clear to the advanced workers: that the only way to dislodge imperialism from Kenyan soil was through an armed struggle. This realisation began to be put into practice by around 1948, by which time both the subjective and objective conditions were ready for an organised and armed confrontation with imperialism. These conditions found their expression through the Kenya Land Freedom Army.

When the second Imperialist War ended in 1945, conditions became ripe for an armed Revolution to be started. The need at the beginning was to organise secretly. The need for unity was paramount among the active combatants. One of the ways of achieving unity at a time when the colonial authorities made even casual meetings difficult was to have an oath for the active fighters. Thus thousands of people began to take the unity oath for Uhuru. By the end of 1950, over one hundred and forty had been prosecuted in colonial courts on charges related to oath-taking. The colonial Government realised the strength behind the new organisation and banned 'Mau Mau' on 12th August, 1950.

Makhan Singh explains the aims and organisation of the Kenya Land and Freedom Army in those early days thus:

A major development in the period following the general strike (of May, 1950) was the rapid progress of a secret mass organisation. The organisation, which previously had been in existence for some time, could be joined by persons of any (Kenyan nationality) who took an oath according to their customs, traditions and beliefs, pledging themselves to secrecy, dedication and sacrifice for the cause of land and freedom of Kenya. The aim of the Uhuru-oath organisation was to unite and mobilise the African people of Kenya in the struggle for independence and to resort to armed struggle against the colonialists if and when it became obvious to the organisation that there was no other way of achieving independence of Kenya.

In the course of some court cases, which took place during and after June, 1950, the Uhuru-oath organisation began to be called Mau Mau. Later, when the Organisation had to resort to armed struggle against the colonialists it began to be called the Kenya Land and Freedom Army. <sup>3</sup>

Thus at the beginning the need was to organise secretly. The colonialist regime had kept Kenyan nationalities in isolation from each other by banning Kenya-wide nationalist movements. This had been overcome at one level by various nationality-

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<sup>3</sup> MAKHAN SINGH: History of Kenya's Trade Union Movement to 1952. Nairobi. East African Publishing House. 1969. pp.288-289

based organisations working closely together. But one of the first tasks of the Kenya Land and Freedom Army was to develop new communication links with all people of Kenya, and to do it secretly.

This problem was solved by the Kenya Land and Freedom Army using its organisational network which was based at Mathare Valley, a working class residential area in Nairobi. Since the largest concentration of workers was in Nairobi, communications and organisational networks reaching all parts of the country were organised from here. Workers of various nationalities were recruited from here. It should be realised that there were close links between the militant trade unions and the central command of the Kenya Land and Freedom Army. The- advanced workers recruited in Nairobi acted not only as cadres in the city but they helped to set up powerful links with the peasants.

Workers of different nationalities became in effect links between plantation workers and peasants in the rural areas and urban workers on the one hand and the Kenya Land and Freedom Army on the other. It was this factor that enabled the revolutionary movement to establish deep roots in the peasant areas, without which the whole revolution could have easily been crushed by imperialism in a short time.

A study of the differing forms of organisation of the Kenya Land and Freedom Army reveals that different conditions at different stages of the struggle gave rise to different organisations and ideologies which then resolved the particular problems of the day. Thus the organisation of the revolutionary movement was quite different in its early years (that is before October, 1952) from that which evolved after 1952, which again was different from that which came into being by 1955 and again by 1960.

In the early years, new cadres were recruited and given political education in preparation for the time when they would become fully active in the revolution. Prospective members were placed under observation, then given the first oath, that of unity. They were then given specific tasks to test their commitment. At the same time, they were being placed in an underground cell structure and assigned to work at a democratic level in legal organisations.

The task of military preparation was not being ignored even at this early stage, although the time for armed struggle was not considered ready yet. Many cadres were being given military training in the forests; and the procurement of arms and ammunition was going on. As early as 1948, arms were being captured from enemy forces and kept in readiness for the time when conditions were ready for armed struggle.

The particular form of organisation of the Kenya Land and Freedom Army during this period reflected these early conditions. A somewhat decentralised organisation was necessary so as to allow maximum security and room for building up leadership and organisational qualities among new recruits by allowing greater opportunity for local initiative. At the same time, it was still possible to operate without much harassment

from the colonial armed forces as they were not really aware of the extent of the preparations being made.

### ***The War Begins***

A new situation developed under the increasing activities of the organised trade unions and Kenya Land and Freedom Army. The colonial Government was fast losing its control over events and people. It reacted by arresting the trade union leaders, such as Jesse Kariuki. The working class replied by staging a boycott of colonial buses and foreign beer in protest against colonial repression. The KLFA forces also began to attack traitors, homeguards and other enemy targets. Fearing it would soon become totally ineffective, the colonial government declared a 'State of Emergency' thus acknowledging its inability to govern without open military suppression. Immediately about one hundred and eight political and trade union leaders were detained. British battalions poured into Kenya and the British ship "Kenya" docked at Mombasa. As Makhan Singh said, "A new chapter had begun. A new imperialist colonial war was now on against the people of Kenya".<sup>4</sup>

How did the Kenya Land and Freedom Army fare in this new period? It had already started preparing for the armed stage of the struggle. It still had to adjust itself to this new situation and prepare for active resistance. It was no longer possible to be active in the above-the-ground movements. Although many of its activists had been detained, it had prepared well for such an emergency. Every responsible cadre had a second in command who would take over the work if the former were detained. This enabled the KLFA to continue its work in this new period.

The military aspect became the principle one in this period. All activities were geared to serve this new demand of the time. This included more urgent procurement of arms and ammunition; a new network of cadres to ensure the safe conduct of cadres and supplies to the new forest headquarters; the supply of intelligence on the strength and movement of enemy forces; the acquiring of technicians and technologies to establish armament and other factories in the liberated areas in the city and in the forest headquarters, and the establishment of underground hospitals for the treatment of wounded guerrillas. All these and other urgent tasks demanded a close-knit organisation which could function efficiently. In addition, the presence of a heavily armed enemy military occupation force made it essential that security of cadres and organisation itself were given priority.

The conditions reflected themselves in the organisation that grew as the basic unit of the Kenya Land and Freedom Army. At the lowest level were the small cell-units with a few members who, for security reasons, did not know members of other cells or any higher levels. A number of such cells, represented by one of its members formed the next higher unit. A number of these formed a locality unit which again sent representatives to the District Committees. At the head came the Central Committee which oversaw the whole struggle through various committees.

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<sup>4</sup> MAKHAN SINGH: History of Kenya's Trade Union Movement to 1952. Nairobi East African Publishing House. 1969. p.320.