

Workers and students rock Moi

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In July battles raged for a week at Nairobi University. Police, armed with tear gas and plastic bullets, fought pro-democracy students. As the demonstrations grew, the students were joined by young workers, unemployed and even middle class businessmen and women. Towns and cities throughout Kenya were soon witnessing similar scenes.

The world was shocked at the scale of the repression on 7 July when at least seven protesters, including two students, were killed and hundreds injured throughout the country. Television pictures of Kenyan police storming the Cathedral in Nairobi and bludgeoning protesters and priests unmercifully led even the IMF to cancel talks and, along with the World Bank, suspend over £100 million in aid.

At the end of July the opposition umbrella group, the National Convention Assembly (NCA), again called for mass actions throughout Kenya. Demonstrators in the second city of Mombasa shouted for the downfall of ?Moibutu?, a clear reference to the overthrown Zairian dictator, Mobutu, a friend and ally of Kenyan president, Daniel arap Moi.

On 8 August a successful one-day general strike in support of democracy took place despite the Labour minister Philip Masinge banning the strike. Throughout August demonstrators again took to the streets to do battle with riot police and government troops. In Mombasa the police headquarters was attacked and weapons taken.

The immediate cause of the political crisis wracking Kenya is the elections due to take place later this year. The ruling Kenya African National Union (Kanu) has just pulled out of constitutional talks with the NCA, which has been demanding constitutional reforms since its campaign started in June.

The reforms demanded by the opposition would strike at the very heart of the monopoly of political power held by Kanu since independence. At the head of Kanu and the Kenyan state sits Daniel arap Moi, 19 years in power and standing again for a fifth term as president.

Like Mobutu, Moi and his followers in Kanu were supported by the West throughout the Cold War. The Western ?democracies? turned a blind eye to the endemic corruption and lack of real democracy in Kenya, in return for Moi?s support against what were viewed as Stalinist-friendly regimes and movements in the region. For all the West?s crocodile tears over the recent heavy-handed repression, the safeguarding of profits and imperialist spheres of influence outweighed any human rights considerations throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

The fall of the Berlin Wall changed all that. The collapse of the Stalinist one-party states in Eastern Europe inspired pro-democracy movements throughout Africa. Corrupt dictatorships no longer had the automatic support of Washington which now wanted free market liberalisation. Kenya held multi-party elections in 1992 but these took place in an atmosphere of state violence and intimidation.

The NCA sees these elections as invalid and is campaigning for an end to the Government's control over the media and the abolition of the rigged electoral laws which make it almost impossible for the opposition to oust Moi at the polls.

The NCA was formed in June this year by a coalition of various opposition parties, journalists and churches. In the violent elections of 1992 the opposition was so split that Moi won a convincing majority. This time around the NCA hopes to be more united in its opposition to Kanu, though political differences have opened up on how to deal with Moi.

While the masses have taken to the streets the leaders of the NCA have been pressing the government for talks over constitutional reforms. Moi replied by saying that there is not enough time to have reforms before this year's elections.

James Orengo, a leading member of the NCA, replied, "without reforms we are not going to have elections". This was taken up by Khalid Balala, leader of the Islamic Party of Kenya who called for the burning of electoral cards. The support of Kenya's Muslims was crucial to Moi's victory in 1992. Paul Muite, an opposition MP, has called for mass action to overthrow Moi.

However, there is a more moderate wing of the opposition such as Richard Leakey, the famous anthropologist and leader of Safina, who has been quoted as saying that he believes that Moi will change and agree to constitutional reforms. In this, Leakey, is no doubt echoing the hopes of the IMF and the World Bank, which want peaceful democratic reform which safeguards imperialist property.

Kenya was an important area of economic stability for imperialist exploitation in the 1960s and 1970s, but its per capita GDP has stagnated since the mid-1980s. Kenya is now the seventeenth poorest country in the world. But even this masks the plight of workers and poor peasants, whose incomes have fallen by 3% since 1991.

More recently, Kenya's middle classes have also become alienated from the regime, as 47% of the country's income is enjoyed by just 10% of the population, as corruption and bribery dominate all financial dealings, especially state contracts, and as inflation rapidly approaches 20%, eating up savings and devaluing investments.

The result of this is not only the masses on the streets. Seeing that corruption and inefficiency in the economy, especially in the power sector, is making Kenya inhospitable to multinationals, the imperialists have also been putting pressure on Moi to reform the economy.

At the end of July the IMF suspended a £130 million loan to Kenya because the Government failed to reduce corruption and reform the energy sector. Even in the capital, Nairobi, only the wealthiest areas have reliable electricity supplies.

The opposition has so far looked to the IMF to help it unseat Moi. Yet the very same pressures used by the imperialists upon the Moi regime would be magnified many times if a new government committed itself to carrying out policies to help the poor of Kenya. The IMF and the imperialists are only interested in the most efficient exploitation of Kenya's resources including its workers and peasants.

The urban and rural workers must not rely upon the imperialists, the people who have propped up Moi and his party for decades. They must struggle to break their hold over the Kenyan economy. While the struggle for democracy is an urgent task, the question of who controls the wealth of the country and how a real onslaught can be made on the poverty of the masses must be central to this fight.

The successful general strike of 8 August shows that Kenya's workers are willing to throw their weight behind the struggle to overthrow Moi. But to bring this struggle to a successful conclusion, the working class must beware of its middle class allies in the NCA, who will side with the multinationals and compromise with the Kanu regime rather than see capitalism threatened.

In an alliance with the poor peasants, Kenyan workers need to forge their own leadership and build a revolutionary party that can settle accounts both with Moi and his capitalist system.

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