

Sanitising Moi in the Age of Kenyatta, and the heroics of official revisionism

Sometime in the early 1980s, my father, who owned a photo studio on Moi Avenue in Nairobi, became a life member of the KANU party. The 1000-shilling membership came with a certificate and pins, the kind worn on coat lapels, with Mtukufu Rais Moi's image on them. My father dutifully framed the certificate and hung it strategically in his studio where his customers could see it. In the studio's window, he placed a large photo of His Excellency sitting at his desk in State House – a photo he had taken shortly after Moi's inauguration in 1978.

At that time, many Kenyan Asian businessmen became life members of Kenya's ruling (and only) political party. It was a way of showing loyalty to a president who was becoming increasingly insecure about his grip on power. For Kenyan Asians, who have always been uncertain about their citizenship, and who have on occasion been threatened with expulsion, demonstrating loyalty to Moi was a kind of insurance, a survival tactic.

In those days, the overriding concern among Kenya's Asian minority was that Kenya could go the way of its neighbours, such as Somalia and Uganda, and become a military dictatorship. The abortive coup staged by the Kenya Air Force on 1 August 1982 had left Asians fearful; many Asian-owned shops had been looted on that day and some of the poorer Asians living in neighbourhoods like Ngara and Pangani had been robbed and physically assaulted by looters who had taken advantage of the chaotic situation.

Barely ten years before the coup attempt, in August 1972,

President Idi Amin had expelled 70,000 Asians from Uganda. There were fears then that Kenya might also “do an Amin” and get rid of its economically prosperous Asian community. So when the coup in 1982 failed, Kenya’s Asians were more than relieved. For them, Moi had averted an economic and political catastrophe that could have adversely affected their business interests, and they were grateful to him for that.

Because Moi had entrenched a patronage system where sycophancy was encouraged, wealthy Kenyan Asian businessmen and industrialists made it a habit of visiting State House and making donations to Moi’s favourite causes. This financial support was often rewarded with government tenders or with assurances that the donors’ economic interests would be protected.

The devastating consequence of this system was that it enabled corruption among some unscrupulous members of Kenya’s Asian community, who began using their close connections to Moi and senior government officials to enrich themselves and their benefactors by using dubious means. Crooked Asian tycoons, like the Goldenberg scandal’s architect, Kamlesh Pattni, and Ketan Somaia (who is currently serving a jail sentence in the UK for fraud) flourished during this period.

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It was, therefore, not surprising that when it became clear that Moi’s reign was coming to an end, a panic set in among many Kenyan Asians. What kind of future would they have in a post-Moi era? Would the new rulers punish them for their past

crimes? How would they secure their business interests? Would the whole community pay the price for the economic crimes of a few? (They needn't have worried: corruption had by then become a way of life in Kenya, and members of the Mwai Kibaki administration, like those in Moi's government, were adept at using Asian businessmen as front men to carry out its own grand corruption schemes, such as Anglo Leasing.)

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After a brief venting period, where Kenyans were allowed to express their anger at what Moi had allowed the country to become, a process of sanitising Moi began. The historical revisionism argued that while Moi had proved to be a dictator, he had in fact been a benevolent one, one who supplied primary school students with free "Nyayo" milk, the one who brokered peace deals with troublesome neighbouring countries, the one who ensured that Kenya remained an "island of tranquility" in a strife-torn region – a line of reasoning that Kenya's Asian business community had also adopted to explain why they supported Moi.

This process of sanitising Moi has been escalating since Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto (both protégés of Moi), assumed power in 2013. President Uhuru makes regular visits to his political godfather in his Kabarak home, and images of the man who held an iron grip over the country for 24 years have begun appearing more frequently in the media. Moi is increasingly being portrayed as a kindly old man who once held the country together. His prophecy that Kenya would disintegrate into tribal factions under multipartyism even appeared to come true after the 2007 elections when the country appeared to be on the verge of civil war. Twelve years after KANU was ousted, on Moi's 90th birthday in September 2014, local newspapers carried glowing tributes to the aging dictator, prompting *Daily Nation*

columnist Macharia Gaiho to wonder whether about the shortness of Kenyan memories.

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This whitewashing reached a crescendo this month when Moi Day was celebrated, albeit amid controversy. The day has not been observed since the new constitution was promulgated in 2010. (The constitution does not recognise Moi Day as a public holiday.) The official reason given for its return was that the day had not been de-gazetted and so technically and legally, Kenyans had no choice but to recognise it. So, millions of Kenyans who had planned to be at work or school on 10 October had to stay at home because the government ordered them to. Many wondered: of all the public holidays that this government chose to recognise, why would it choose the one that brought back painful memories for so many Kenyans?

Younger Kenyans who came of age in the Kibaki era have little recollection of the Moi days and the retrogressive policies that stunted the country's economic growth and development by several decades. I once asked a 30-something what he remembered most about Moi, and his answer was simple: the free milk his school got every Tuesday and Thursday, thanks to Baba Moi. He seemed vaguely aware that Moi had done some bad things, but he was not exactly sure what those things were.

While it is true that Moi allocated a large chunk of the national budget to education, and schools bearing his name flourished, he also entrenched mediocrity and corruption

within the civil service that allowed the country's institutions to decay. The "Kalenjinisation" of all arms of government, the wanton grabbing of public land, the siphoning of public funds through friends and cronies, the looting of Kenya's treasury and other forms of economic sabotage became endemic during his tenure. Moi also oversaw austerity measures imposed by the World Bank and the IMF in the 1990s that led to the deterioration of public services, such as health. By the time Moi left office in 2002, the country was virtually on its knees.

For the people who paid a heavy price for opposing the Moi regime, the declaration of Moi Day as a public holiday was like a slap in the face. Some of these people, like the environmentalist Wangari Maathai (who defied his regime and was beaten black and blue for opposing the construction of a tower at Uhuru Park), my journalist friend, Wahome Mutahi (who spent one year in jail on trumped-up charges of sedition), and opposition leader Kenneth Matiba (who was arrested and tortured and developed a debilitating illness as a result) are now dead, but among the living, there are still those who bear the wounds Moi's government inflicted on them. I am thinking in particular of the thousands of Kenyans who were tortured or illegally detained by Moi's men because they were suspected of being dissidents belonging to underground movements like Mwakenya or because they resisted Moi's authoritarian regime.

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The genius of the Moi system is that it normalised everything. Nyayo House, which housed both the Immigration Department and Kenya's slick new TV channel, KTN, was a site of unspeakable torture. In the torture chambers in the basement, Special Branch officers worked on the detainees. The most dreaded of them was James Opiyo. His name still sends shudders through

his victims' spines. Upstairs, people formed orderly queues for new passports on the ground floor, or read the news on the top floor. They were aware of what was happening in the basement. No one mentioned it or thought it was weird.

'The Nyayo House basement was no ordinary police cell. In the water-logged rooms detainees stood naked for hours on end. One victim, George Odido, told the Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission that he was left submerged in one foot of water for three days without food, and in total silence. Because of the fear of drowning, the detainees did not sleep. Many were crippled for life or suffered severe psychological trauma. Some of these detainees' fake trials took place in the middle of the night, where compromised judges would hand them harsh jail sentences for crimes that they had not committed.

The genius of Moi was that he made everything look normal even when it was not. He turned Nyayo House, which housed both the Immigration Department and Kenya's slickest new TV channel, KTN, into a site of unspeakable torture. In the basement of detainees Special Branch officers worked on them. Those applying for passports or reading the news were aware people being tortured downstairs...no one mentioned it or thought it was weird.

We must also remember than it was during Moi's tenure that the Wagalla massacre in Wajir took place, a shameful "security operation" that resulted in the death of an estimated 4,000 ethnic Somalis in Kenya's north-east. Moi was president when Foreign Affairs minister, Robert Ouko, was assassinated. And despite his rhetoric of ethnic harmony, his leadership saw the killing and expulsion of thousands of Kikuyus in Rift Valley Province prior to the 1992 and 1997 elections. Not to mention the many anti-government protestors who lost their lives at the hands of the police during demonstrations, such as Saba Saba.

There was also collateral damage. There were the mysterious deaths of people linked to Ouko's death, including that of Hezekiah Oyugi, the head of Internal Security and one of the main suspects in Ouko's murder, and Philip Kilonzo, who was the Commissioner of Police when Ouko was killed. One does wonder: if Moi's government was capable of orchestrating the deaths of his own people, people who were loyal to him, then how many of his opponents were also made to "disappear"?

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For all those who suffered physical or emotional torture, illegal detention or financial ruin at the hands of Moi, the reinstatement of Moi Day is a painful reminder of not just what they lost during his rule, but also of how his shadow still lurks over Kenya.