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Jomo Kenyatta

Jomo Kenyatta was president of Kenya and guided the country through the difficult transition from British colony to independent nation.

Sometime around 1891, Kenyatta was born as Kamau wa Ngengi into the Kikuyu tribe, which long before the European era had been involved in extensive trade and agriculture. From his father, Kenyatta learned farming and herding, while from his mother he learned tribal customs. In 1909, he entered a mission school at Thogoto, where he studied both academic subjects and carpentry. He was baptized into Christianity in 1914 and took a new name: Johnstone Kamau. Then he worked in Nairobi, the capital, as a courier from 1914 to 1917 and while there, adopted his nickname Kenyatta as his own (he later Africanized Johnstone to make it Jomo).



As a young man, Kenyatta witnessed the return of African soldiers from World War I, men who had seen that European armies were not invincible. Their experience, coupled with land shortages among Africans—particularly galling as European settlers dominated the fertile tracts in the interior—produced protests among the Kikuyu, who in many instances had become workers on the Europeans' farms. In 1921, Harry Thuku formed the East African Association to represent Africans in Nairobi. The following year, colonial officials arrested Thuku for sedition. After his conviction, a demonstration in Nairobi turned violent as police fired into the crowd, killing 25 protesters. Thuku, considered Kenya's first nationalist, endured nine years of exile (from 1922 to 1931) in Somalia. Upon his return, Kenya's political movement had bypassed him and involved new, more radical participants, such as Kenyatta.

Kenyatta became politically involved while working as a meter reader for the public works department from 1922 to 1928 in Nairobi, Kenya's urban center. He joined the Kikuyu Central Association, which had evolved from Thuku's group and demanded tax reform, land rights, more schools, and African representation in the colonial legislature. He became general secretary in 1928, a full-time position, and founded and edited the group's journal, *Mwigwithania* (*Conciliator*), in which he called for tribal unity but refrained from attacking British authority. He journeyed to London in 1929 and again in 1931, petitioning the government for reforms but only obtaining the right of Kikuyus to form their own schools.

Kenyatta remained in Europe for 15 years, from 1931 to 1946, as a lobbyist for Kenyan interests. During that time, he visited the Soviet Union and attended an institute dedicated to Marxist ideology and revolutionary training at Moscow University. Although he wrote some militant articles in England in which he demanded independence for all Africa, he never totally embraced Marxism and remained wedded to his Kikuyu commercial heritage and European capitalism.

Before his return to Kenya, Kenyatta studied English at Quaker College in Birmingham for one year (1931–1932) and did graduate work in anthropology under Bronislaw Malinowski at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He wrote *Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu* in 1938, which criticized colonialism and proclaimed Kikuyu culture as superior to European. He also adopted pan-Africanism and in 1945,

joined Kwame Nkrumah, W. E. B. Du Bois, and others in organizing the fifth Pan-African Congress in Manchester. Upon his return to Kenya in 1946, Kenyatta became vice principal of the Independent Teachers' College at Githunguri and principal the next year. He also obtained election as president of the Kenya African Union (KAU), an intertribal political party, and embarked on building it into a major political force.

In 1948, landlessness and unemployment among Kikuyus sparked a violent uprising led by a secret society, the Mau Mau. Europeans and their African supporters suffered attacks as sporadic waves of violence hit farms and police stations. The uprising ended in 1957, its death toll actually higher among African "British supporters" than among Europeans. While the Mau Mau Revolt stimulated some reforms, most notably more land for Africans, it led to recriminations—the British charged Kenyatta with having fomented the rebellion. Based on the testimony of one witness (who later recanted his story), Kenyatta was found guilty of being a Mau Mau leader and in 1953, was sentenced to prison, where for six years he endured much hardship. His prison term ended in 1959, but the British then detained him in north Kenya.

In the meantime, constitutional changes in 1954 and 1958 allowed Africans on the Legislative Council in increasing numbers. In 1960, an African majority was allowed, and Britain made a surprise announcement of forthcoming independence. Two new political parties then formed. The Kenya African National Union (KANU), organized by Tom Mboya and Oginga Odinga and consisting largely of Kikuyu and Luo and former KAU members, acted in Kenyatta's name, while the Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU), consisting of Kamba and other ethnic groups, competed against the KANU.

In May 1960, KANU's leaders announced that, irrespective of British desires, Kenyatta would be KANU president should their party win in the upcoming elections; it did, and Britain gave in to pressure and released Kenyatta in August 1961. He returned home to an overwhelming reception and the KANU presidency.

In April 1962, the KANU won a close election to the Parliament and formed a coalition government with the KADU. After elections in May 1963, internal self-government began with Kenyatta as prime minister. Kenya gained full independence on December 12.

Kenyatta had emerged as Kenya's dominant political figure. He established a government of highly personal rule that existed alongside the official bureaucracy. Early in his administration, he had to deal with ethnic Somalis who wanted northeastern Kenya to become a part of Somalia. His army put down rebel efforts there in the mid-1960s, after three years of fighting. With his capitalist preferences during the Cold War, Kenyatta aligned Kenya with the West.

By 1964, the KADU had dissolved, and in November, constitutional changes directed by Kenyatta produced a one-party state and created a strong presidency that Kenyatta filled. Kenyatta proclaimed African Socialism for Kenya, but he never strayed far from capitalist endeavors. By 1965, a dispute within his party intensified as Oginga Odinga, Kenyatta's vice president, advocated a more leftist policy and charged Kenyatta with autocracy. Kenyatta subsequently expelled Odinga from the KANU. Odinga formed a new party in 1966, but within two years, Kenyatta had harassed it into oblivion.

As president, Kenyatta portrayed himself as Father of the Nation and treated Kenya as his personal domain. In 1966, he sponsored constitutional changes transferring more power to the central government from the local councils, and he expanded government positions—over which he had full authority to make appointments—in an effort to provide employment and promote loyalty to him.

Then in 1969, Tom Mboya, who had gained a large intertribal following, was assassinated. That provoked riots between the Kikuyu and Mboya's tribe, the Luo. Kenyatta reacted by threatening to destroy all Luo, but after his guards fired into a crowd of Luo protesters and killed 78 of them, he moderated his position and initiated electoral reforms that allowed more competition within the KANU.

Land reform proved important for Kenyatta, and his program to help the landless achieved notable success. With British assistance, some 2,750 estates were purchased from Europeans in the highlands, and by 1973, some 23 million acres of land in Kenya had been distributed to Africans. Many small farmers engaged in raising tea, tobacco, coffee, and pineapples. Although Kenyan agriculture suffered a disruption in production, it had by the mid-1970s diversified with small farms, state cooperatives, and large private plantations (the latter transferred from wealthy Europeans to wealthy Africans, many of them Kikuyu, thus creating another source of elite support for Kenyatta).

Yet Kenya suffered drought, higher oil prices, and rising unemployment, and protests expanded, led by J. M. Kariuki, a wealthy businessman who became an advocate for the poor and headed an opposition group in the National Assembly. As Kariuki's following grew in 1975, he was pulled from his Nairobi hotel room and killed. Protests erupted, and a government investigation never satisfactorily unraveled the murder. Kenyatta reacted to the crisis with power: he arrested several of his opponents as they sat in the National Assembly.

Kenyatta died on August 22, 1978, at Mombasa and left a legacy of strong personal governance that is still a part of Kenya today. His administration displayed corruption and extensive favoritism. His economic development, which heavily promoted multinational corporate investments, stimulated growth but also a high concentration of wealth, including an enormous amount for his inner circle. Yet Kenyatta also produced substantial political stability and important land reforms with a minimum of friction.

Further Reading

Cox, Richard. *Kenyatta's Country*. New York: Praeger, 1966; Miller, Norman N. *Kenya: The Quest for Prosperity*. Boulder, CO: Westview, 1984.

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