



Daniel arap Moi and the Politics of Kenya's Release

By Paul Goldsmith



The death of Daniel Toroitich arap Moi on 4 February triggered a predictable avalanche of contradictory responses. The national media has led the canonisation campaign while a range of other Kenyans sniped at the “Professor’s” poor human rights record and state corruption. BBC correspondent [Dickens Olewe](#) reported that Moi left a legacy that will be vigorously debated in the wake of his death, underscoring that “Kenya has changed a lot since Mr Moi left office but his influence will continue to be felt for a long time”.

The resurrection of the Kenya African National Union has already proved to be one of the former President’s most durable achievements. Moi revived the moribund party that brought Kenya independence as the vehicle for his patrimonial rule. The observation that KANU is still ruling the nation is one of the truisms of Kenyan political exegesis. The names and slogans have changed, but the political monoculture that was seeded by Jomo Kenyatta and watered by Moi has held sway over each successive government.

Moi himself was a more elusive phenomenon. His generous and magnanimous persona masked his political acumen. Moi’s two terms under the multi-party regime complicated the enigmatic leader’s profile considerably, adding another decade to the President’s long conversation with the nation. Most of this conversation occurred on the stump where for decades he reiterated his mantra of peace, love and unity with metronomic consistency.

Heavy-handed and despotic after the chaotic 1982 coup attempt, his two terms under the multi-party

system allowed the President to sharpen his skills and play the political trickster exposing the opposition's motivations as no different from those of his own KANU sycophants.

The political monoculture that was seeded by Jomo Kenyatta and watered by Moi has held sway over each successive government

"You Kenyans," he once berated a large assembly of wananchi, "you Kenyans are a very difficult people to govern!"

The constant succession of schemes, gambits, and political gimmicks served up by his cronies and opponents alike validated his credentials as a mariner in a turbulent ocean. Moi kept the ship of state moving forward at a time when a mix of internal and external forces deemed African governance to be more a case of good seamanship than the neoliberal navigation advocated by the country's Western partners.

All of this makes sorting out the Moi legacy a highly cautionary exercise. People who were not around for the grand political trope Moi set in motion may not understand what the fuss is about. He was a corrupt and long-serving autocrat who cracked heads. But it is nevertheless important to recognise how the death of a leader serves to crystallize a nation's perception of itself, and how it got to where it is now.

Political History as System Cycles: Exploitation and Conservation

History comes in different packages. Sometimes it tells the story of empires and civilisations, other times it focuses on the life of great individuals. In recent times, scholars have focused on the social and cultural life of communities and nations to fill out the frame. Scientists have produced works of history detailing how soils, climate, and epidemics have molded life on earth across the eons.

More recently, the study of system dynamics has seen the ecological concepts reproduced across various disciplines, leading in turn to the rise of trans-disciplinary analyses of complex systems. The science of complexity defines decision-makers influencing how a given system behaves as agents—actors subject to larger forces that determine how the games they play are decided.

It is important to recognize how the death of a leader serves to crystallize a nation's perception of itself, and how it got to where it is now

It follows that systemic influences shaped the landscape that Daniel arap Moi in turn shaped over the course of his 95 years. Much has been written about the man, and his death uncorked a litany of previously hidden details and insights into the Shakespearian drama he presided over while in office. But how do we evaluate the legacy of Moi's agency during his time in office?

Kenya has undergone several transitions beginning in the run-up to European intervention. Models of ecological cycles provide one method for analysing the developmental dynamics underlying these transitions. Sanderson and Hollings, scholars associated with the resilience movement, have proposed that their model of ecological succession cycles is applicable to social systems.

The cycle encompasses four phases: exploitation, conservation, creative destruction or release, and renewal and reorganisation. These phases are best regarded as ideal types that unfold in an uneven manner with significant overlap. They nevertheless provide a useful backdrop for assessing the

evolution of a given system, which in this instance is Moi's Kenya.

The exploitation phase corresponds to the decades bookending the colonial interlude. Imperial intervention created a new political economy in Kenya based on large-scale agriculture and its state-based support structure dominated by a small ethnic elite. Kenya was both redesigned and reimagined from above as an aggregation of communities distinguished by linguistic and cultural markers and separated by territorial boundaries.

Colonialism instigated a new cycle of far-reaching change for the now politically and spatially bounded territory. In another historical iteration, the region's borders could have followed different criteria. Left to its own devices, for example, the regional process may have lumped the decentralised societies of the Kenya highlands together with other Bantu speakers to the south and east, or a greater Cushitic nation could have emerged out of the vast rangelands of the Horn of Africa.

This may still happen over time. But the fact of the matter is that history conspired to merge an amalgamation of communities into a nation more variegated and diverse than the population of Europe. These communities share a space the size of France. The mix of ecologies and economies the new colony encapsulated made Kenya unique, even by the standards of this culturally diverse region. The British colonisers controlled the territory by simplifying the equation.

Exploitation was consolidated through the importation of institutions of governance and protocols adapted to the European experience. For the colonial administrators who found indigenous production systems in varying states of crisis and recovery following the disasters of the 1890s, the practical issue was generating the economic output necessary to finance the protectorate and soon-to-be colony. They built the railroad to Uganda, and most of the investment and change over the next eight decades occurred in the agricultural highlands it served.

The inhabitants of these areas bore the brunt of European occupation, which is not to say that the neglect of other communities was not exploitative. The incorporation of the indigenous population into the capitalist economy accelerated with the Swynnerton Plan of 1954, which shifted the role of the indigenous households from labourers to semi-autonomous producers.

This, and the inevitability of political independence, marked the beginning of the conservation phase. Jomo Kenyatta's agency focused on the preservation of the post-colonial status quo, presided over by his ethnic cohorts with an element of power sharing incorporating a new caste of tribal power brokers into the ranks of the new elite.

Exploitation was consolidated through the importation of institutions of governance and protocols adapted to the European experience

Where other African leaders sought to move directly into the release phase and liberate their people from the political and mental dominance of external hegemonies, President Kenyatta opted to conserve the country's economic configuration. "I cannot experiment with the lives of my people," he told his fellow East African heads of State, the socialists Julius Nyerere and Milton Obote.

Conservation also involved expanding new avenues of accumulation within the post-independence economy. For over a decade Kenya achieved a combination of diversified economic growth and political stability. But the template remained the same: in 1975 coffee, tea, and petroleum products still provided 75 per cent of Kenya's export earnings. Most Kenyans still derived their livelihoods from agriculture.

The development of the conservation phase reached its apogee during the coffee boom of 1977-78, prompting displays of conspicuous consumption. Ordinary Kenyans were treated to the spectacle of the highly publicised shopping trip to London of a group of coffee planters and their wives; they chartered an extra Boeing 747 to convey their purchases back to Kenya.

The country's state capitalism reinforced large-scale production, formal sector enterprises, exchange controls and import substitution, a provincial administration controlling preferential access to resources and services, and an elitist education model. Although Kenya was a paragon of stability, there were cracks in the façade. Corruption was increasing and the one-party state had become a no-party state run by Kenyatta's Kiambu kitchen cabinet.

Coffee came to symbolise the pinnacle of the development of the conservation phase. The industry's subsequent decline is an interesting exemplar of release phase transitional dynamics. The shift from Kenyatta to the Moi regime described a similar arc of boom and decline. Kenya's colonial blueprint had reached its natural limit as a small ethnic cabal controlled the government, and large swaths of the country were ruled as an internal colony.

Land ownership was a volatile manifestation of Kenya's dual economy and structural inequality. In the 1979 census Kenya registered a 3.6 per cent population growth rate, and jumped to an unprecedented 4.1 in the 1989 census, guaranteeing decades of increasing pressure on the already hard-pressed economy and land resources. This configuration could not be sustained.

The transition from conservation to release was already underway when Moi took office in August of 1978. The vice president's limited ability to grow his wealth despite his privileged position in Kenyatta's government set him apart from Kenyatta's inner circle. They regarded him as, "a passing cloud" although Mzee Kenyatta had rejected their assessment. They believed that Kenya needed a hard-nosed capitalist who could keep in check the unruly masses and the Marxist agitators who made a point of drinking their beer out of cow horns.

Two plots to remove Moi from the line of succession brought the fault lines into clear view. One involved amending the constitution, the other was the Ngoroko Squad, ostensibly an anti-poaching unit clandestinely created to remove the vice president and his key allies in the event of the death of the ailing Kenyatta.

The former failed following the intervention of the Attorney General, Charles Njonjo, and the other backfired when President Kenyatta died in Mombasa, allowing the Coast Provincial Commissioner to set in motion the swearing-in process before the Ngoroko Squad could intervene. Moi was to face many other threats over the course of his tenure.

Kenya's Release Phase Political Dynamics

Forest succession is a commonly cited example of the ecological model featured here. The establishment of tree species corresponds to the exploitation phase, the maturing of trees supporting the greater arboreal ecology corresponds to the conservation phase, and destruction, usually by fire, triggers the release phase, which eventually gives way to reorganisation in the form of whatever similar or new ecological system follows in its place.

Ecological release is similar to [the creative destruction of capitalism](#), a concept derived from Marx and popularised by the Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter. The impact of ecological release, however, considerably exceeds the influence of Schumpeterian innovation in the business cycle. Release, in contrast, proceeds by breaking up the rigid conservative order, which takes the system into the more liquid, chaotic regime of complexity science.

Kenya needed a hard-nosed capitalist who could keep in check the unruly masses and the Marxist agitators who made a point of drinking their beer out of cow horns

Release rearranges established linkages, leading to a more fluid but turbulent state system, facilitating what Robert Kaufmann refers to as spontaneous internal organisation, a process strongly influenced by the system's initial conditions. Reorganisation inevitably generates varying degrees of violence. Conflict, in the context of this case study, is a function of agents within the system pursuing different strategic objectives.

This is an important caveat qualifying the role of human agents, especially in a complex system like Kenya where the potential for political violence is always close to the surface. The criteria in this context is not based on ethical or moral considerations, but on how conflict affects the capacity to adapt and to navigate the system from release to the reorganisational phase.

When Kenya's release cycle began to erode the post-independence order, most Kenyans attributed it to disruptive developments reverberating within the political arena. At the time, no one was able to anticipate the directionality of these developments and the trajectory that was set in motion. Most Kenyans hoped a blend of continuity and incremental change would prevail over the radical agenda of the Kenyatta state's critics.

The new president was well aware of his vulnerable position when he took over. Kenyatta's death generated a temporary mood of political reflection similar to the one we are currently witnessing. Moi took advantage of this by declaring he would *fuata nyayo za Mzee*, follow in the footsteps of Kenyatta. Most Kenyans were not familiar with the Swahili term for footstep (*nyayo*) when he made the declaration tethering the new regime to the conservative policies of the first government.

The idealistic goals of the post-independence neo-Marxists were fading across the continent. Nyayo governance became a form of adhococracy predicated on Moi's vision of national unity, but otherwise unencumbered by any ideological orientation. The missionary Christianity of Moi's upbringing only partially filled the space that it shared with the anti-intellectual biases and suspicion of external blueprints Moi displayed once he was in the chair. His intimate familiarity with the Kenya landscape and the behavioural proclivities of its inhabitants became the theory behind the trial and error process that characterised most of Moi's time in office.

The prospects of a fresh start—Moi famously stated that sleeping in a bed of gold will not guarantee a good night's sleep—reassured the body politic. But the sponsors of the change-the-constitution plot were unrepentant. They saw Moi as a soft target, an unsophisticated church-going country lackey who could be dealt with in due course.

Moi quickly adapted his low profile *modus operandi* to deal with the threat. The new Moi emerged as a master of ambiguity and unpredictability, sowing uncertainty to offset his weak power base. He began by instigating the pro-Nyayo and anti-Nyayo debate, which allowed him to cull his opponents in the Kenyatta network of high-ranking administrators and regional power barons.

This was the first in a series of often theatrical ploys played out in the public sphere. These tactics required no small amount of public acrobatics and reverse spin by the new coalition of political travellers and opportunists hitched to the Moi caravan. It was later extended to high-ranking civil servants, cabinet ministers, ambassadors, and other members of the Moi nomenklatura in the form of unexpected announcements on the state broadcaster's 1 pm news bulletins.

Most Kenyans hoped a blend of continuity and incremental change would prevail over

the radical agenda of the Kenyatta state's critics

The 1977 spike in world *Arabica* prices had boosted Kenya's domestic income by 14 per cent. The boom gave way to a precipitous reversal of the sector's fortunes, exacerbated by widespread use of counterfeit agro-chemicals in 1979 that resulted in catastrophic crop failures.

The problems affecting coffee production soon spread to other areas of the estate sector such as sisal, maize and wheat, and livestock farming. But Kenya's commercial smallholders absorbed most of the pain. Moi used their marginalisation to increase small-scale producer cooperatives' representation in institutions like the Kenya Producers Cooperative Union (KPCU) and otherwise exploited smallholder grievances to further counter the influence of the estate sector's entrenched elites.

The financial buffer protecting the Kenyatta elite planters concentrated around Thika and Nakuru was wearing thin, decreasing the clout of another set of anti-Nyayo actors. But the powerful kingmaker behind the Moi succession, Charles Njonjo, was the real threat. Njonjo tipped his hand when he attended a Kiambu church where the pastor's sermon referred to "the lead sheep who cannot lead his flock to good pasture."

Moi outflanked him by announcing that Western governments were grooming "a traitor in our midst". Kenyans added another previously obscure Swahili term, to their vocabulary as speculation over the unnamed *msaliti* mounted over the days, sending an array of possible saboteur candidates running for cover.

One of the president's allies eventually named Njonjo. Parliament shouted him down when he tried to defend himself. Removed from office and isolated, a commission of enquiry that was high on entertainment but low on hard evidence finished the job, sending the pardoned but disgraced Njonjo into retirement in 1983.

The institutional entropy overtaking Kenya's public sector was less amenable to political quick fixes. The endemic discontent in Luo Nyanza spread to other communities, encouraging a cabal of non-commissioned Air Force officers to plot a Samuel Doe-style military coup on 1 August 1982. The poorly executed takeover was symptomatic of the creeping disorder underpinning popular opposition to the Moi state. This coup redirected the subsequent course of events. Moi called snap elections, trusting the electorate to undertake another culling operation.

Some of the problems fueling the decomposition of the old *status quo* were internal and some were external, such as the donor-dictated structural adjustment policies and the privatisation of state assets that followed in their wake. Others were a mix of environmental factors and the government's limited capacity to manage contingency arrangements, like the maintenance of strategic grain reserves during the boom-bust maize production cycle of the early 1980s.

They saw Moi as a soft target, an unsophisticated church-going country lackey who could be dealt with in due course

The food security problem became a full-blown national crisis when the 1984 long rains failed. Even though the government response to the famine was efficient, the narrative from below blamed the government for the stomach cramps and diarrhoea caused by the American yellow maize distributed as relief food.

The redistributive logic behind Moi's patrimonial politics fed the spreading corruption of the post-1982 period. Where Kenyatta's corruption was elitist, Moi presided over a more inclusive government that partially mitigated the backlash against his populist gravy train. Regardless of the motive and the contribution of the collinear neoliberal policies to the public sector meltdown, the corrosive impact on social services was the same.

In the meantime, Kenya's reputation for stability was now more a function of the growing chaos raging across the greater region than of the nation's internal equilibria. The consensus abroad focused on the need for programmatic policy-based solutions to address Kenya's faltering progress. If Moi's gospel of peace, love, and unity appeared homespun and quaint, his by-the-seat-of-his-pants governance style came across as reactionary in contrast.

Moi had, by that point, no patience with any form of political critique however constructive or patriotic. When the government massacred several thousand ethnic Somalis quarantined without food and water at the Wagalla airstrip in Wajir in February 1984, the opposition remained silent. The double standard applied to Kenya's minority communities provides a backdrop for the number of brave and principled critics of the government who also paid a heavy price over the years.

The fire that started as a bush-clearing exercise was raging out of control.

Razing the Forests

In 1989 I returned to Kenya to undertake a PhD on the commercialisation of small-scale agriculture, and all was not well. The Ministry of Agriculture's Land Rovers were running out of fuel by mid-month, cooperatives and local authorities went into remission. The purchasing power of civil service salaries continued to decline, agricultural output stagnated, the new American Ambassador ratcheted up the criticism, and Kenya's traditional allies diverted their developmental funding to the country's emergent civil society.

Disenchantment with the government had increased apace with the impact of donor conditionalities. For KANU's primitive accumulators, the Bretton Woods policy reforms turned out to be very good news. The political machine had to be fed, and the privatisation policies provided a new entry point. Kenya's public lands became a source of new fuel. Privatisation released Moi's State House to unleash a wave of environmental degradation.

The narrative from below blamed the government for the stomach cramps and diarrhea caused by the American yellow maize distributed as relief food

The Nyayo tea zones carved out of the margins of highland forests had signalled the Moi government's position on Kenya's dwindling forest cover. Forested areas of the Rift Valley like the Enosopukia watershed and the Mau escarpment were opened to smallholder settlement. Local compradors used their State House connections to target other local forests, urban real estate, riparian border zones, and communal land reserves. Excisions in Nairobi's Karura forest, a stone's throw from the United Nations Environment Programme headquarters, became the stuff Nobel Prizes are made of.

A 1990 profile published in the New Yorker portrayed Moi as a paragon of Africa's Big Man syndrome. Previous to this, one of my former students had published a similar exposé in the International Herald Tribune. However correct these critiques may have been on the surface, they did not factor in the larger dynamics at work, including the effects of International Financial Institutions' policies on African policy.

Privatisation in Kenya reminded me of Victor Borges' short story, *The Gospel According to Mark*. A Christian missionary goes off to a remote atoll to share the good news with its primitive inhabitants. He spends the better part of a year preaching in a simple wooden church. The natives duly attend, but remain dull-eyed and show no sign that they comprehend the import of his sermons. Then, early one Friday morning in April, his pupils come to his house *en masse*. They are uncharacteristically excited and babbling in their language, which the missionary has yet to master. He only recognises some localised words from the scriptures. Their joy and enthusiasm increase as they escort him to the church. Perplexed, the missionary turns the corner where, with smiles and gesticulations, they point to the cross and the nails they have prepared especially for him, their foreign saviour.

Local compradors used their State House connections to target other local forests, urban real estate, riparian border zones, and communal land reserves

Cannibalising parastatals and running down other state corporations and using the purloined resources to buy the assets back at throw-away price became standard procedure. Prime land was privatised only to be sold back to the government at inflated prices. The plot-grabbing mania snowballed until schools, churches, private property, and even the dead in their cemeteries were fair game for the grabbers and their accomplices in the hallways of the Ministry of Lands. Like the bodyguard who stole the President's gold KANU cockerel from the bedroom of his Kabarak farm, one especially bold privateer obtained a title for a Nairobi plot that actually belonged to Moi.

While politicians and activists incited their constituents against the Moi government, angry peasants targeted their local patrons, co-op officials, and corrupt civil servants. The seizure of cooperative factories, the burning of tea and cane fields, and the revolt of rice growers forced state marketing bodies to raise producer prices and in some cases cancel farmers' loans. Smallholder producers launched lawsuits against managers of cooperatives, others attacked officials or burnt down their houses. The reform of the Cooperatives Act side-lined the front-line ministry of rural development, leaving producers at the mercy of local mafias and a new class of brokers and middlemen usurping their role.

Powerless to stop the forces they had set in motion, the IMF mandarins turned off the taps and left capitalism in Kenya to sort itself out without them. Elsewhere in Africa the turbulence released by their neoliberal medicine was claiming many of Africa's Big Men: how was Moi to avoid the same fate?

Published by the good folks at [The Elephant](#).

The Elephant is a platform for engaging citizens to reflect, re-member and re-envision their society by interrogating the past, the present, to fashion a future.

Follow us on [Twitter](#).