



Saba Saba and the Quiet Re-emergence of Youth Resistance Politics

By Yash Pal Ghai



On the 7th of July 28 years ago, the opponents of President Daniel arap Moi's tyrannical regime, having built some unity in the aftermath of the Cold War and the West's diminished support for him, gathered together, illegally of course, to denounce the oppression of his regime at Kamakunji grounds in Nairobi. The promoters of the gathering, Kenneth Matiba (now deceased) and Charles Rubia, were arrested and severely beaten up three days before the Saba Saba event, giving Moi's opponents additional incentive to gather. Historian Charles Hornsby [remarks](#) that the detentions and Saba Saba riots were critical moments in the fight for multi-party democracy led among others by Jaramogi Oginga Odinga. Saba Saba became the most important day in the Kenyan freedom calendar, observed every year. Some steam went out of it after the end of tyranny in 2002, but freedom fighters continued to celebrate the 7th of July.

This year's Saba Saba commemoration, however, took a very different turn - symbolic of the critical change in our politics and social structure. Politicians and their parties that used to play the central role in the event were nowhere to be seen. Did it mean that they thought that they had managed to solve all our problems of democracy, social justice, human rights, national unity, good governance, integrity and accountability? Indeed, there were photos in the next day's newspapers of several senior politicians, including Raila Odinga who has paid a heavy price in the struggle for justice, celebrating the construction of a villa/hotel in Kitui by Prof. Makau Mutua, a distinguished scholar

and freedom fighter. Superficially, given these leaders' long dedication to justice, it might be read that Kenyans had indeed achieved the promise of the 2010 Constitution. Perhaps, they might think, the handshake has solved our problems, so that there was no need for the people to remind themselves of the atrocities and inequities that had hitherto marked Kenya. But the point of my remarks is not to criticise the politicians but rather, the press, which completely ignored this year's Saba Saba, though *the Star* and the *Standard* did carry articles on its origins 28 years ago. With the exception of *the Star*, the media is obsessed with politicians and has little time for civil society.

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In numerous parts of the country, for millions of Kenyans, the promise of the Constitution remains a fantasy. I was deeply touched when I read the statement of a 91-year old Kenyan, George Nthenge, still working, who had so looked forward to Saba Saba. He said that he retired from politics in 1997 because Parliament had become a place for wealth accumulation. He believes Kenyans have become too docile and should wake up and start demanding answers on why the country is still mired in corruption, ethnicity and exclusion. Nthenge's general analysis is right but he is wrong to think that all Kenyans are too trusting of politicians. In the last few weeks I attended some meetings at the Samosa Festival (especially in areas where the rich don't live) where the major theme was not the trust of their leaders, but acute anger at their greed and violence. They emphasised the unity of the disadvantaged so they can use the Constitution to secure their role in politics and their constitutional entitlements, denied them by politicians and "public servants". It is a long time since I have seen Kenyans so angry; the anger must transform into action. The Saba Saba activities on the 7th of July were an important step towards that transformation.

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It was a unique Saba Saba, organised by young people most of them living in Nairobi's slums. The youth of Kenya who suffer the most of all the inhabitants of the city's informal settlements are organising themselves around social justice, focusing on protecting their rights. They have established organisations, known as social justice centres, in Dandora, Mathare, Kayole, Githurai, Kamkunji and Mukuru. It took these centres close to five months to organise the Saba Saba activities. Their efforts were heavily supported by the mothers, wives and families of victims of police killings, from Mathare, Korogocho and elsewhere.

The centres organised marches all the way from their areas to Kamkunji. The turnout was most impressive—almost a thousand people. Apart from the hundreds of Kenyans who marched to Kamkunji on 7th July from different parts of Nairobi's slums, few people are aware of what could

become a major social and political movement. The 20 or so mothers moved the crowd to tears with their accounts of the killing of their children. One particular police officer was mentioned by several of them. Will the Inspector-General, who must know this culprit and others, stop this violence which is completely against the Constitution—if not, they should be dealt with, and punished and sacked in accordance with President Kenyatta's new policy.

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The meeting lasted many hours, the programme consisting of music and songs (sad and jovial), wonderful, exhilarating dances by very young students (who could only go to school with the support of the Mathare Centre). Towards the end the three main guests made a few remarks. The first was Esther Passaris, the Nairobi Women's Representative, who encouraged justice centres to continue their work and commitments and emphasised the importance of human rights. She promised to continue her support to them. The next speaker was ex-CJ Willy Mutunga, a long time champion of social and political rights, who reflected on the 1990 Saba Saba (which struggle has led to the new Constitution). His enthusiasm for rights and justice remains undimmed, well demonstrated in his association and co-operation with civil society. I was the final speaker, reminding the audience that the aspirations of early Saba Saba had been included in the new Constitution, but also cautioned the audience that the Constitution has still not been fully implemented—indeed vigorous opposition to it has come from the government and parliament. My generation had failed to protect the Constitution and it was now up to the younger generation as represented in the social justice centres to ensure its implementation. I deplored the police killings and urged the state authorities to protect the lives of all Kenyans, against police brutality.

The enthusiasm and commitment of the young people who organised the Saba Saba event and have already established social centres where they live, and co-operation with centres elsewhere in the pursuit of the Constitution is most encouraging. Meetings under the Samosa Festival about the future were also very heartening. In all cases the analysis of what has brought such misery to so many Kenyans was unerringly accurate, based more on class than ethnicity, corruption, favoritism, and violence. Their understanding of the Constitution is very heartening. The elders among us must work with this generation — and fight those who have stolen the state's resources. If the President is sincere in his assertions that he is now committed to the Constitution, the contribution of the younger generation would be invaluable.

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