Jomo Kenyatta

INTRODUCTION

Jomo Kenyatta (1894?-1978), first prime minister (1963-1964) and then first president (1964-1978) of Kenya. Kenyatta was Kenya's founding father, a conservative nationalist who led the East African nation to independence from Britain in 1963.

EARLY YEARS

Kenyatta was born in Gatundu in the part of British East Africa that is now Kenya; the year of his birth is uncertain, but most scholars agree he was born in the 1890s. He was born into the Kikuyu ethnic group, Kenya's largest. Named Kamau wa Ngengi at birth, he later adopted the surname Kenyatta (from the Kikuyu word for a type of beaded belt he wore) and then the first name Jomo. Kenyatta was educated by Presbyterian missionaries and by 1921 had moved to the city of Nairobi. There he became involved in early African protest movements, joining the Kikuyu Central Association (KCA) in 1924. He quickly emerged as a leader within the KCA, and in 1928 he became editor of the movement's newspaper. In 1929 and 1931 Kenyatta visited England to present KCA demands for the return of African land lost to European settlers and for increased political and economic opportunity for Africans in Kenya, which had become a colony within British East Africa in 1920. Kenyatta had little success, however.

Kenyatta remained in Europe for almost 15 years, during which he attended various schools and universities, traveled extensively, and published numerous articles and pamphlets on Kenya and the plight of Kenyans under colonial rule. While attending the London School of Economics, Kenyatta studied under noted British anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski and published his seminal work, *Facing Mount Kenya* (1938). In this book, Kenyatta described traditional Kikuyu society as well-ordered and harmonious and criticized the disruptive changes brought by colonialism. *Facing Mount Kenya* was well received in Great Britain as a defense of African culture, and it established Kenyatta's credentials as spokesperson for his people.

RISE TO POWER

Following World War II (1939-1945), Kenyatta became an outspoken nationalist, demanding Kenyan self-government and independence from Great Britain. Together with other prominent African nationalist figures, such as Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Kenyatta helped organize the fifth Pan-African Congress in Great Britain in 1945. The congress, modeled after the four congresses organized by black American intellectual W. E. B. Du Bois between 1919 and 1927 and attended by black leaders and intellectuals from around the world, affirmed the goals of African nationalism and unity. In September 1946 Kenyatta returned to Kenya, and in June 1947 he became president of the first colony-wide African political organization, the Kenya African Union (KAU), which had been formed more than two years earlier. Recruiting both Kikuyu and non-Kikuyu support, Kenyatta devoted considerable energy to KAU's efforts to win self-government under African leadership. KAU was unsuccessful, however, and African resistance to colonial policies and the supremacy of European settlers in Kenya took on a more militant tone. In 1952 an extremist Kikuyu guerrilla movement called Mau Mau began advocating violence against the colonial government and white settlers(*see* Mau Mau rebellion). Never a radical, Kenyatta did not advocate violence to achieve African political goals. Nevertheless, the colonial authorities arrested him and five other KAU leaders in October 1952 for allegedly managing Mau Mau. The six leaders were tried and, in April 1953, convicted.

Kenyatta spent almost nine years in jail and detention. By the time he was freed in August 1961, Kenya was moving towards self-government under African leadership, and Kenyatta had been embraced as the colony's most important independence leader. Shortly after his release, Kenyatta assumed the leadership of the Kenya African National Union (KANU), a party founded in 1960 and supported by the Kikuyu and Luo. He led the party to victory in the pre-independence elections of May 1963 and was named prime minister of Kenya in June. Kenyatta led Kenya to formal independence in December of that year. Kenya was established as a republic in December 1964, and Kenyatta was elected Kenya's first president the same month.

IV PRESIDENCY

As president, Kenyatta, known affectionately to Kenyans as *mzee* (Swahili for “old man”), strove to unify the new nation of Kenya. He worked to establish harmonious race relations, safeguarding whites’ property rights and appealing to both whites and the African majority to forget past injustices. Kenyatta adopted the slogan *“Harambee”* (Swahili for “let’s all pull together”), asking whites and Africans to work together for the development of Kenya. He promoted capitalist economic policies, encouraged foreign investment in Kenya, and adopted a pro-Western foreign policy. Such policies were unpopular with radicals within KANU, who advocated socialism for Kenya. However, Kenyatta isolated this element of KANU, forcing radical vice president Oginga Odinga and his supporters out of the party in 1966. Odinga formed the rival Kenya People’s Union (KPU), which drew much support from Odinga’s ethnic group, the Luo. Kenyatta used his extensive presidential powers and control of the media to counter the challenge to his leadership and appealed for Kikuyu ethnic solidarity. The 1969 assassination of cabinet minister Tom Mboya—a Luo ally of Kenyatta’s—by a Kikuyu led to months of tension and violence between the Luo and the Kikuyu. Kenyatta banned Odinga’s party, detained its leaders, and called elections in which only KANU was allowed to participate. For the remainder of his presidency, Kenya was effectively a one-party state, and Kenyatta made use of detention, appeals to ethnic loyalties, and careful appointment of government jobs to maintain his commanding position in Kenya’s political system. Kenyatta was reelected president in 1969 and 1974, unopposed each time. Until the mid-1970s Kenya maintained a high economic growth rate under Kenyatta’s leadership, due to a favorable international market for Kenya’s main exports and external economic assistance.

After 1970 Kenyatta’s advancing age kept him from the day-to-day management of government affairs. He intervened only when necessary to settle disputed issues. Critics maintained that Kenyatta’s relative isolation resulted in increasing domination of Kenya’s affairs by well-connected Kikuyu who acquired great wealth as a result. Despite such criticism, however, no serious challenge to Kenyatta’s leadership emerged. Kenyatta died in office in 1978 and was succeeded by Kenyan vice president Daniel arap Moi. Moi pledged to continue Kenyatta’s work, labeling his own program *Nyayo* (Swahili for “footsteps”). Kenyatta was revered after his death as the father of modern Kenya. His published works include *Suffering Without Bitterness* (1968), a collection of reminiscences and speeches.