"Assassination and Political Unity: Kenya."
American Universities Field Staff Reports VIII.5 (1969): 1–13.

EAST AFRICA SERIES
Vol. VIII No. 5
(Kenya)

ASSASSINATION AND POLITICAL UNITY: KENYA

by Norman N. Miller

The assassination of Tom Mboya resulted in open expression of ethnic tensions. Inflammatory rumors, Kikuyu oathings, labor disputes, and dissension within the leading political parties, K.A.N.U. and K.P.U., have charged the atmosphere. National elections, scheduled for early 1970, are likely to heighten controversy over land shortage, trade licenses, and migration of Kikuyu into other districts.

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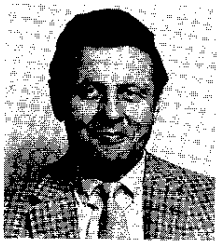
Executive Director



NORMAN N. MILLER has been concerned with East Africa's anthropology and politics for more than a decade. In 1959-60 he travelled extensively in East and Central Africa and subsequently, with research support from the Ford Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation, lived in Tanzania or Kenya on four separate occasions. Dr. Miller has also done research under grants from Michigan State University and has taught at the University of East Africa in Dar es Salaam. Receiving the M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from Indiana University, in 1966 he joined the faculty of Michigan State where he is the editor of *Rural Africana*, a research bulletin in the social sciences. On leave from Michigan State, Dr. Miller is a Faculty Associate of the American Universities Field Staff and resides in Kenya. The author of numerous articles and chapters on local politics in Africa, his interests include documentary film-making, and he has recently completed a 16mm. instructional film entitled *East Africa: Myth and Drum.*

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ASSASSINATION AND POLITICAL UNITY: KENYA

Implications of the Assassination of Tom Mboya

by Norman N. Miller

September 1969

The July assassination of Tom Mboya was called in Europe the prelude to another African tragedy similar to Biafra. Western-style gangsterism seemed all too apparent, particularly just after the young Luo politician was shot down on a busy Nairobi street. Violence erupted at the hospital where Mboya's body was taken, and subsequently in other parts of the country. Four days later, when Kenya's President Mzee (Old Man) Jomo Kenyatta, a Kikuyu, arrived to attend the requiem mass, angry crowds of Luo tribesmen stoned the president's car and shouted "Dume" (bull), the symbol of Kenya's Luo-dominated opposition party, the Kenya People's Union (K. P. U.). In the subsequent mêlée with police, two died, sixty were injured, and three hundred arrested.

As events have unfolded since the assassination, relatively little other violence has occurred. Nevertheless the prospects for the future are clouded. The nation is tense, and the pervading atmosphere is one of uncertainty; there is some disunity within the ruling party, the Kenya Africa National Union (K. A. N. U.), a national election to be contested before June, and open, often bitter, criticism from the opposition party. Kenya's political system has been based on constant bargaining, patronage, and shifting coalitions, with Tom Mboya as a go-between for many factions. He most recently served as Minister for Economic Planning, and Secretary General of K. A. N. U., posts in which he won praise as a brilliant administrator and as the party's chief tactician. His death temporarily jeopardizes the entire bargaining structure. Major factions are polarized, tribal allegiances redrawn, and the unity of the nation impaired. Behind these events the burning issue remains the succession to presidential power when Jomo Kenyatta steps down.

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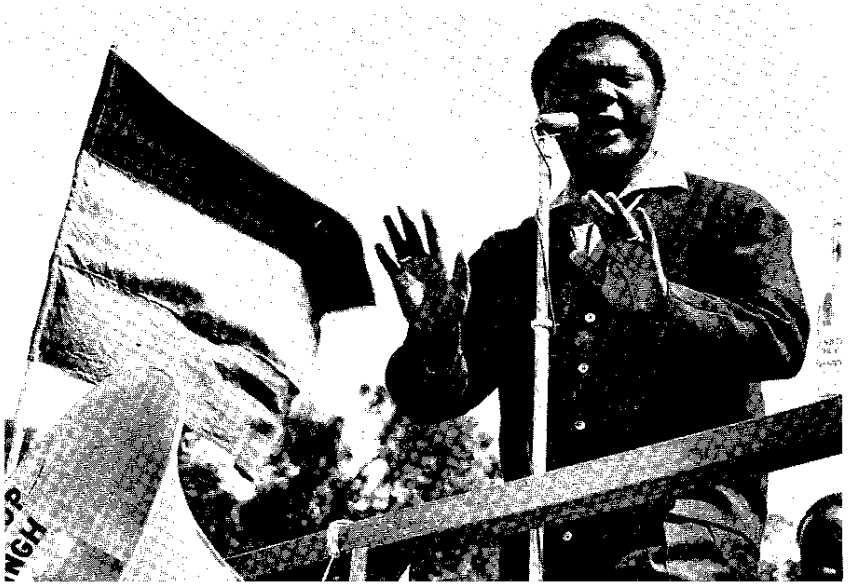
Political Rise of Mboya

Unlike most politicians in Kenya, Tom Mboya did not base his power solely on the allegiance of one particular tribe. His support also came from detribalized Nairobi workers, to whom he preached trans-tribal politics. In this sense he was the most modern and unique political leader in Kenya. One of twelve children, he was born on a sisal plantation near Nairobi. Mboya began his rise to prominence during the detention of Jomo Kenyatta in the Mau Mau Emergency. He soon became known as a shrewd political organizer and an able spokesman for the political rights of Africans. His formal education was in a Catholic mission school and at the Royal Sanitary Institute near Nairobi. At twenty-one he passed tests as a health inspector in the colonial government, and was posted in the capital. From this position he pursued trade union interests, and rapidly became a leading figure in the Kenya Federation of Labor. He helped to turn the K.F.L. into a quasipolitical vehicle which filled an important vacuum during the Mau Mau Emergency, carrying documents, letters, and petitions out of the country, and assailing Emergency regulations. The 1955 Mombasa dockworkers' strike was essentially solved by Mboya, who mollified the strikers and negotiated an unprecedented 30 per cent wage increase. In late 1955 he attended a labor course at Ruskin College, Oxford, and upon his return thirteen months later, plunged into the problems of mobilizing the people for the independence struggle.

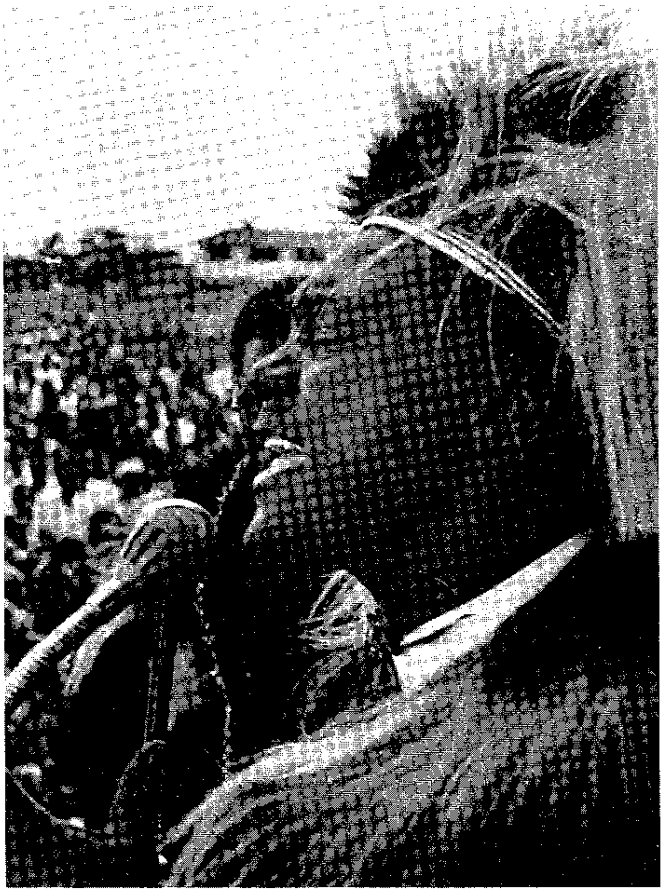
In 1957 Mboya was elected one of the first eight African members of the Colonial Legislative Council. He joined the Nairobi People's Convention Party, but also developed his international contacts. As a pan-Africanist, and on behalf of Kenya's independence, he made countless appearances in the United States, Europe, and West Africa, seeking support and discussing the problems of Kenya's freedom. In April 1959 he organized a protest over Jomo Kenyatta's continued imprisonment, which Kenyans answered by boycotting transport systems and fasting for a day. When the Mzee was finally released, Mboya headed the reception committee.

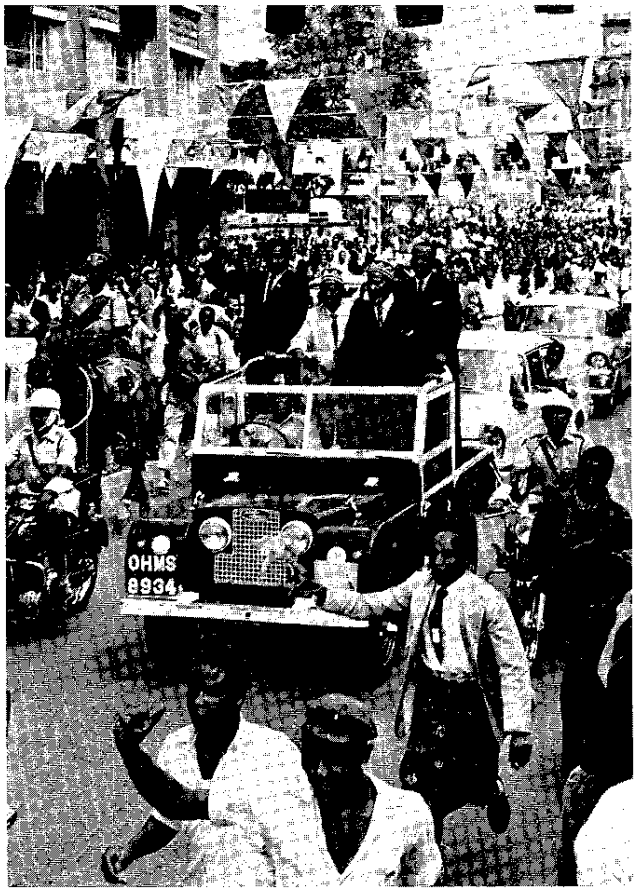
After independence, as Secretary General of K.A.N.U., he survived concentrated personal attacks from within the party. He was chief draftsman of the K.A.N.U. manifesto, insisting it was not influenced by communism. Critics dubbed it "Tommunism." At the same time he was serving as Minister of Labor. In 1963 he became the Minister for Justice and Constitutional Affairs and organized a series of constitutional amendments to remove the regional system which K.A.N.U. had reluctantly accepted in the independence constitution. In his last post as Minister for Economic Planning he is credited with designing many of Kenya's



Left and below left: Mboya speaking at K.A.N.U. party rallies.

Below: Mboya with President Kenyatta and K.A.N.U. leaders, election celebration, 1962.





Left: Mboya with Kenyatta.

Below left: Mboya with Oginga Odinga.

Below: Mboya wearing traditional Colobus skin cape.

Mboya with rural supporters and traditional dancers.

economic successes. He also pushed for economic cooperation within Africa, strongly supported the Economic Commission for Africa, and hoped to establish a regional grouping stretching from Ethiopia and Somalia to Malawi and Zambia.

Internationally Mboya was also well known. On December 6, 1958, a date he calls the proudest day of his life, the twenty-eight-year-old leader was elected to chair the All-African People's Conference in Ghana, a meeting which Nkrumah had called to rally the continent against colonial regimes. In the independence period he played a prominent role in Kenya's foreign affairs, speaking frequently on problems of economic development, foreign aid, and trade union issues. Through his American connections he organized a student airlift to the United States for Kenyan and other African scholarship winners. Some 1,100 students participated, and its success triggered a counterairlift to Eastern bloc nations organized by Oginga Odinga. Prior to his assassination he was mentioned as a potential president or secretary general of the United Nations.

Offsetting these many talents, a number of liabilities worked against Mboya. He was known on occasion to offend those he considered less intelligent and less accomplished. He aroused hostility with his maneuvering within the party, and is believed to have recently alienated several branch officials. In order to play down tribal politics, he often took a position critical of his own tribe. His part in easing Oginga Odinga out of the ruling party is well known, and is one of his actions which caused deep resentment.

Perhaps most germane to his assassination, Mboya was a contender for Kenya's presidency after Kenyatta. The law concerning succession, passed in June 1968, provides that each presidential candidate must be nominated by a political party. As an early K.A.N.U. organizer and Secretary General, many observers believe he had supporters in control of more than 50 per cent of the K.A.N.U. branches.[1]

Events Following the Assassination

Most of the disorder immediately following the July 5 assassination was in Nairobi, Kisumu, the Luo tribal center on Lake Victoria, and

[1] For further literature see Tom Mboya, Freedom and After (London: Andre Deutsch Ltd., 1963), and his Fabian Bureau pamphlet "The Kenya Question: An African Answer." See also Alan Rake, Tom Mboya, Young Man of New Africa (London: Doubleday, 1963).

in parts of nearby Kisii and Homa Bay Districts. At Mboya's Nairobi home some violence erupted when non-Luo government officials tried to pay their respects. Two days after the rioting at the requiem mass, the funeral cortege, on the 250-mile journey to Mboya's Rusinga Island home, unleashed such crowd reaction among mourners that tear gas and baton charges were again necessary.

For the next two weeks rumors added to the air of uncertainty: British commandos had arrived, tribal killings were occurring in remote areas, and, perhaps most vicious, the assassin had been seen escaping in a government car. In London, one Peter Tookes appeared on television to confess being a double agent for Tanzania and South Africa, implicating South Africa in the murder. He was shortly denounced in the press as a fraud. A government spokesman cited Mboya's friendship for the West, essentially exonerating the West in the murder, but suggesting that another international conspiracy may be involved. Oginga Odinga protested the government's right to "clear certain groups," and called cold war politics in the discussion ridiculous. Meanwhile, Mboya's earlier fears of assassination were reported by three American friends in the New York Times. The Minister's letters, some written just prior to his death, stated that his enemies, "were getting nervous and desperate. An attempt is obviously to be made to precipitate a crisis—and there may be an army coup! Security will become more urgent now—things have started and I will take on the new man on arrival." In a seven page letter written the day he was shot, Mboya spoke of Kenyatta's efforts to reduce tensions among his ministers. "Outwardly this will ease matters, but the factions remain."

On July 21, sixteen days after the assassination, a Kikuyu, Nahashon Isaac Njenga Njoroge, was charged in court with the murder of Mboya. In a preliminary hearing some sixty-five witnesses testified. One woman stated Njoroge discussed his assassination plans with her, and a police witness presented evidence that a gun found in the suspect's house had his fingerprints on the cylinder. Testimony also revealed that Njoroge tried to bribe the inspector who searched his house, and uttered words like, "Why don't you get the big one?" He had dealings, so he claimed, with both political parties, K. P. U. and K. A. N. U. The hearing further showed that Njoroge spent time in Bulgaria in commando training. At the end of the hearing in mid-August, the bullets in Mboya's body were shown to have come from the gun found in Njoroge's house. He was ordered to stand trial for murder in the High Court.

President Kenyatta and Vice-President Moi tried to reestablish an atmosphere of calm during the period immediately following the assassination when suspicion and rumor threatened public order. The fact that Njoroge was a Kikuyu jeopardized Kikuyu-Luo relations, but his hearing

actually implicated to some extent both Luo and Kikuyu interests. Luo reactions at this point were negligible; Kikuyu reactions, however, indicated deep fears and suspicions. Mass Kikuyu tribal "oathings" were reported near President Kenyatta's home at Gatundu while the Njoroge hearing was still in session. Truckloads of Kikuyu, believed en route to the oathings, led to open Parliamentary debate.[2] According to K.P.U. member Okello-Odongo, those undergoing the oaths were led to a darkened house, asked to remove their clothes, and tied with rope about the neck. Inside, around a Kenya flag laid on the ground, they were asked to swear loyalty to the flag and swear not to allow any other tribe to lead Kenya. Oath-takers allegedly pledged not to allow the flag to leave the "House of Mumbi" (Kikuyu control) and not to vote for or support the K.P.U. Oaths were supposedly administered with goat meat and blood, and contributions exacted. Some people were allegedly told they must hate Luos and be prepared to fight.

Soon after the Parliamentary disclosures, government spokesmen denied the oaths as such. Vice-President Moi explained that people were simply paying respects to Mzee, and showing solidarity after the trouble at the requiem mass, but this did little to quiet the fears of other tribal groups. For the Kikuyu the immediate effect of the oaths was to close ranks within the ruling party. Within a few days the Kikuyu Vice-President of the opposition party, Bildad Kaggia, and his followers, bolted from K.P.U. and were welcomed back to K.A.N.U. Another K.P.U. leader, Louis Kimani Waiyaki, followed suit.

On September first the trial of Njoroge opened on a dramatic note. A key prosecution witness, Mary Njeri, who asserted that Njoroge told her he would kill Mboya, was reported by the prosecutor to have been convicted of perjury in 1966. Weakening his own case, he cautioned the court on believing her statements. The prosecution recalled essentially the same witnesses who testified at the preliminary hearing. On September 10 Njoroge was found guilty of Mboya's murder, and sentenced to death by hanging. The verdict is to be apppealed. For many the trial opened more questions about the assassination than it answered, and did little to reduce tribal tensions.

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[2] Oathings were reported to have been going on prior to Mboya's assassination, but increased sharply after the requiem mass incident. In mid-September students in Machakos District allegedly refused to attend classes for fear of enforced oaths. Secret meetings in Limuru, Nandi Hills, and Kericho, and tribal clashes between Kikuyu and Kipsigis were also reported.

Unity and Discord

As tensions continued following the assassination, a number of government moves helped to calm the uneasy atmosphere and bind up tribal differences.

Appointment of Luos. To reduce tribal friction, President Kenyatta promoted three Luos to fill key posts. Joseph Odero-Jowi became Minister for Economic Planning and Development, replacing Mboya; Robert Ouke took Odero-Jowi's place as Minister for Finance and Administration in the East African Community; and John Okwanyo was boosted to Assistant Minister for Foreign Affairs. The President's timing was applauded in the press.

Swahili Language. In August the President announced that Swahili could be one of the languages used in Parliament. He emphasized that it was a common currency for all the people, and would permit public debate by those who did not have higher education or a command of English. The action seemed aimed at integrating the ordinary citizen into the nation and playing down the role of the elite. It is commonly predicted that Swahili will eventually become an official language of the country, along with English.

Party Unity. The President stressed that the top K.A.N.U. leadership is anxious to have unity and fair play in the party and particularly during the forthcoming elections. He stepped in to arbitrate the K.A.N.U. Coast Branch internal power struggle by ordering an open-air special election to settle the demands of the two squabbling leadership groups. Ronald Ngala, Minister for Cooperative and Social Service, swept to an impressive victory over Muinga Chokwe, former Speaker of the now defunct Senate.

Public Meetings. In numerous mass meetings and agricultural shows the President and Vice-President have called for national unity, loyalty to the government, and an end to fear, hatred, and tensions.

While the government and many private citizens struggled to maintain Kenya's unity and to eliminate tribal animosities, a number of other factors promoted disunity.

Kikuyu Oathings. The reports of the oathings, probably exaggerated, have led to increased fear and suspicion of the Kikuyu. Whatever the content of the oaths, they have created uncertainty and mistrust, and put the Kikuyu in danger of being isolated by other groups.

Rumor Mongers. In the main cities rumors continue to circulate on a myriad of vicious topics. Speaking in Mombasa, the President attacked such trouble-makers for trying to confuse the masses and poison the minds of people by promoting tribalism and stirring up dissident groups.

Kikuyu Headmasters. At the end of July the Minister of Education, Dr. J.G. Kiano, a Kikuyu, abruptly dismissed or downgraded some twelve long-term expatriate school headmasters. Ten of the replacements were Kikuyu. Critics quickly saw this as not only unfair to the expatriates, but also another example of blatant tribal favoritism. "Kikuyu-ization," they argued, was taking presidence over "Africanization." The action intensified fears of Kikuyu dominance.

Labor Disputes. Conflicts developed after Mboya's assassination between the Central Organization of Trade Unions (C.O.T.U.) and the African Civil Servant's Union (A.C.S.U.) over the right to make policy decisions and to take strike actions. A dispute between Denis Akumu, Secretary General of C.O.T.U., and K.N. Gichoya, Secretary General of A.C.S.U., threatened to disrupt other sectors of the economy.

Minister's Gratuities. In spite of strong opposition, and obvious poor election-year timing, a controversial ministerial gratuities bill was recently pushed through Parliament. Unconfirmed reports indicate that many ministers and assistant-ministers are so deeply in debt that without this aid several politically embarrassing situations could arise. Criticism of the bill in Parliament centered on granting tax-free status to ministers, and justifying remunerations already paid, especially in view of the lack of funds for ordinary county council salaries, and much-needed teacher pay increases.

Teacher Salaries. Rural leaders throughout Kenya threatened protest strikes over unpaid salaries. Shortage of funds in local government councils, and inadequate financial organization are blamed.

Prospects for Unity

Several factors underlie Kenya's problems of unity, not the least of which is political allegiance based on tribal groupings. The Kikuyu, the largest tribe, have outstripped nearly all other groups in economic development, entrepreneural activities, and general aggressiveness. Usually they have been highly receptive to education, to new crops, and to new modes of income. In recent years Kikuyu have migrated into many parts of Kenya as traders and small businessmen. Their achievements put local people in a difficult competitive position, and cause tightening of tribal allegiances.

Tribal groups have gained local political strength because national movements which integrate the people across tribal lines have been slow to develop at the grass roots. During Mau Mau, 1952-59, the Emergency Act prohibited national organizations, and only localized groups could emerge. The ban, at the height of the nationalistic period, encouraged wealthy tribal elders to take up leadership positions based partially on their traditional legitimacy, while younger men without strong tribal allegiances were deprived of influence. As the party structure developed, it grew out of these localized power groups. Bossism emerged in lieu of national or even regional allegiances.

Compounding the immediate problems of unity is the uneasiness surrounding the succession to power after Kenyatta. The President is vigorous and politically very much in control, but he has had one serious illness, and is about seventy-eight years old. His age makes many Kenyans apprehensive of suddenly losing the Mzee, and thereby losing the political dominance that K.A.N.U. has built up. Currently, if the President should choose to step down, Daniel arap Moi, the Vice-President, is considered by many as the strongest candidate. He has received increased exposure by the government information service, and is reported in some circles to be Kenyatta's choice. Although from a small Kalenjin tribal group, he has aligned with top Kikuyu ministers. He usually supports their views and represents an informal alliance between the Kikuyu and Kalenjin peoples. With a strong Kikuyu for Vice-President, this arrangement would be acceptable in many sectors, although the opposition Luo leaders would probably attempt to block the slate.

Elections are expected before next June, when Parliament must constitutionally be dissolved; the contests will certainly air many of Kenya's controversies. For K.A.N.U., Kenyatta has told the nation he is ready to carry on, and the party's governing conference has pledged its loyalty to him. There are no possible rivals within the party. K.P.U. President Oginga Odinga is the probable opposition nominee, and other parties may be registered by election time.[3]

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[3] One new party, the Kenya Democratic Congress, formed by Clement Were, is awaiting clearance by the government's Registrar of Societies. Offering an alternative to K.A.N.U., and K.P.U., Were stated, "There are clear signs that democracy is in danger of dying out, and that the seeds of tribal hatreds are germinating .... The first job of the K.D.C. will be to eliminate the dangerous seeds before they fully germinate." Many of the new party leaders were former members of the Kenya African Democratic Union.

Election regulations are to be approved at the next sitting of Parliament, and primaries will follow. To avoid frivolous candidacies, K.A.N.U. candidates must make a £50 nonrefundable deposit, and before entering the general election must pledge loyalty to the President and the party, and agree to uphold the constitution and the K.A.N.U. manifesto. After election to Parliament, resignations from K.A.N.U. are impossible without the minister standing a by-election for the seat. The stipulation, designed by Mboya, effectively maintains party solidarity.

K.A.N.U.'s solidarity outside Parliament is another matter. Squabbles over control and status have plagued several branches, and some local leaders have come under attack for abusing their powers and attempting to buy support. Grass root party organization is weak, and in some areas nonexistent. Dues have been reduced from twelve to two shillings (24¢) per year to encourage local participation, but thus far without notable success. The controversies at both the local and national levels suggest that K.A.N.U., like many mass single parties, is a façade behind which several factions struggle for power.

Controversial elections—the first national election since independence—which open up many of Kenya's problems could unleash several reactions. A new wave of repressive measures against Asians is possible, and strikes, boycotts, and demonstrations over unemployment may occur. Election discord could fan existing problems of land shortage, trade licenses, teacher salaries, squatter rights, and migration of Kikuyu into other districts. If relations between Luo and Kikuyu continue to deteriorate some observers foresee a Biafran-Nigerian parallel, with the Luo attempting to break away from Kenya. In perspective this seems highly unlikely, because the approximately 1.3 million Luos have few strong allies. Admittedly the neighboring Buluyia and Gusii tribes are potential swing groups, and certain factions in Uganda may dream of new alignments around Lake Victoria which would include the Luo area, but these groups all lack the regional power bases found in Nigerian tribes. Moreover, the strength of the central government and its paramilitary capability make a breakaway movement tactically untenable.

The involvement of the army in any role but that of loyal support to the government is also unlikely. Since the mutiny of 1964 the President has deliberately built a nonpolitical force, composed of three quasi-military groups which effectively offset each other. The 4,700-man army, aided by British advisers, is led by a Kamba, Brigadier J.M. Ndolo. His senior officers are predominantly Kikuyu and Kamba. The specially-trained paramilitary General Service Unit of some 1,200, and the 16,000-man police are both headed by Kikuyu, although vigorous efforts have been made to tribally balance each organization. Any political move by the

military would call for the officers of each unit to crosscut several loyalties and to unite without the government intelligence hearing of it.

Although tribalism continues to be called Kenya's national evil, there is no serious threat to the country's central government. Indeed, localism, clannishness, and parochialism may all be more accurate terms than tribalism for most groups in Kenya. In a rural, agricultural nation, neighborhood and locale are the key political units for the majority of the population. Election-year pressures cause even greater emphasis on local areas. The process is one of redrawing allegiances and closing out nonlocals—a purifying and cleansing process, but not necessarily a tribal one. Politicians are currently emphasizing their grass root ties to the local constituency because that is where their future will be determined. The situation promotes personality cults around the candidates, and overtly calls on the urbanized elite to reidentify with their home areas. After elections the more cosmopolitan civil servants and businessmen may be expected to reopen their friendship patterns and business contacts across nonlocal, nontribal lines. Such cyclical fluctuations around election times can explain a great deal about Kenya's current politics. What is not known is how the assassination of Tom Mboya and the problems of national unity that have followed in its wake will effect Kenya's future.

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[Photographs courtesy of the Daily Nation, Nairobi;
Alan Rake, London (p. 3, lower left.)]