

Disrupting Ethnic Politics and Imagining Alternative Futures in Kenya, 1975:

The J.M. Kariuki Assassination

by

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Abstract

“We do not want a Kenya of ten millionaires and ten million beggars,” J.M. Kariuki, the popular Kenyan politician, famously declared. The statement struck at the heart of President Jomo Kenyatta’s post-independence government and rising economic inequality in Kenya in the 1970s. By March 1975, Kariuki was dead, assassinated with suspected government involvement. News of his assassination promptly sparked protests in Nairobi. This thesis explores these immediate responses to Kariuki’s assassination. Although scholarship has established that ethnic politics was entrenched in Kenya by 1975, this thesis intervenes in this historiography and trajectory of ethnic politics by highlighting alternative means of political mobilization. It points to the agency of ordinary Kenyans who, in 1975, mobilized against the Kenyatta government not through ethnic affiliations, but rather through collective grievance with Kenya’s trajectory since independence. Those involved in this opposition denounced authoritarianism in Kenya, unequal wealth distribution, and what they suspected was neo-colonial interference in their country. In so doing, they highlighted an alternative sort of national political mobilization in Kenya, one built around socioeconomic and political ideals. These events in the spring of 1975 also highlight the powerful possibilities of commemoration and the agency of ordinary citizens. In 1975, in tandem with movements against many of the first independence-era African governments as well as continued struggles against imperialism on the African continent, Kenyans rallied against the Kenyatta government around a memory of Kariuki as a martyr who represented the possibility of a more just future. In defiance of the authoritarian state, they exposed the fragility of the Kenyatta government. Although little ultimately came from these protests in the spring of 1975, they nonetheless remind that Kenya’s post-independence trajectory was not inevitable.

Lay Summary

This thesis examines how Kenyans responded to the assassination of popular politician J.M. Kariuki in the spring of 1975. Scholarship has established that a system of ethnic politics was entrenched in Kenya by the 1970s. However, this thesis intervenes in this established trajectory of ethnic politics by showing how, in the aftermath of Kariuki's death, Kenyans from a variety of ethnic and class backgrounds found common ground in critiquing the Kenyatta government. This opposition did not interpret Kariuki's death through the lens of ethnicity but rather challenged the Jomo Kenyatta government based on their suspicions that the Kenyatta government was responsible for the assassination. As a result, the nature of Kenya's independence, the authoritarianism of the Kenyatta government, and the government's relations with the former colonial power, Britain, were questioned.

Preface

This thesis is the original, unpublished, and independent work of the author, Jake Harms.

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Introduction

On March 12, 1975, news broke in Nairobi, Kenya, that the body of Josiah Mwangi Kariuki, the popular and recently re-elected parliamentarian from Rift Valley Province, had been discovered in the Nairobi City Mortuary. Rumours of Kariuki's fate had been circulating since his disappearance from public life almost two weeks before, but officials assured the public he was on a diplomatic mission to Zambia. Upon the confirmation of his death, hundreds of university students took to the streets of Nairobi. In life, Kariuki had been a prominent, wealthy politician who was unpopular amongst Kenya's governing elites. In speeches in Kenya's parliament and in public, he had openly challenged President Jomo Kenyatta's government, pointing to growing economic inequality within the country. Many of Kenya's youth and landless poor viewed him as their champion. In the days following March 12, students and backbench parliamentarians, who served as an internal opposition to Kenyatta's government within the one-party state, demanded a just and conclusive investigation into Kariuki's apparent assassination.

The public outrage was inflamed by the already lengthy list of political assassinations in Kenya in the twentieth century, nearly all with alleged state involvement, both before and after independence. Figures such as Pio Pinto, Tom Mboya, and Robert Ouko, but also innumerable less well-known victims, constitute what scholars David Cohen and E.S. Atieno Odhiambo have called Kenya's "ledger of dead."¹ This authoritarian violence, as the scholarship of assassinations

¹ David William Cohen and E.S. Atieno Odhiambo, *The Risks of Knowledge: Investigations into the Death of the Hon. Minister John Robert Ouko in Kenya, 1990* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2004), 6; Babere Chacha has identified a lengthy list of likely victims across the Kenyatta through Kibaki governments. See Babere Chacha's lecture, "Scars of Memory and Scales of Justice," YouTube Video, 29:07, November 6, 2017; Joe Oloka-Onyango, in *Battling over Human Rights: Twenty Essays on Law, Politics and Governance* (Mankon, Bamenda: Langaa

in Kenya has demonstrated, was often closely coupled to ethnic politics, which sociologist Jacob Mati describes as the mobilization of ethnic identity by political elites for political purposes.² Following independence, the Kikuyu-dominated Kenyatta state maintained the colonial state apparatus and sought to entrench a system of divide-and-rule ethnic politics to ensure the regime's survival.³ Assassinations with suspected state involvement were simultaneously a product of this form of politics and sustained it, eliminating elites who were thought to challenge the status quo.⁴ Numerous scholars have argued that the public assassination in 1969 of Tom Mboya, one of Kenya's foremost non-Kikuyu politicians, solidified the practice of ethnic politics in Kenya.⁵ The ethnic tensions between the Luo and Kikuyu as a result of the assassination, and the threat of the Luo and other ethnic groups mobilizing against Kikuyu political and economic hegemony in the aftermath, intensified ethnic competition.⁶

For Cohen and Atieno Odhiambo, the assassination of J.M. Kariuki in 1975 fits within this trajectory of ethnic politics, marking Kenya's transition from an "era of international

RPCIG, 2015), 175-178, highlights some of these more prominent assassinations along with brief descriptions of the victims, while also calling attention to lesser-known victims.

² Jacob Mwachhi Mati, "Ethnicity and Politics in Kenya," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Ethnicity*, edited by Steven Ratuva (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019): 265-281.

³ See Westen Shilaho, *Political Power and Tribalism in Kenya* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 4-6.

⁴ For scholarship on these assassinations and their relationship to politics, see Miriam Abraham, "Chris Msando: Year 53 in the History of State Assassination," *The Elephant*, August 4, 2018; Charles Mwaura, "Political Succession and Related Conflicts in Kenya," paper presented at the USAID Conference on Conflict Resolution, Nairobi, March 27-28, 1997; Grace Musila, "Portrait of an Assassin State," in *A Death Retold in Truth and Rumour: Kenya, Britain and the Julie Ward Murder* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, Limited, 2015), 31-62; Wafula Yenjela, "Sycophants in a Cannibal State: Kenya in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Wizard of the Crow," in *Cultural Archives of Atrocity: Essays on the Protest Tradition in Kenyan Literature, Culture and Society*, edited by Muringu Columba, Charles Kebaya, and Makokha Justus Kizito Siboe (New York City: Routledge, 2019), 115.

⁵ William Ochieng', "Structural and Political Changes," in *Decolonization and Independence in Kenya, 1940-93*, edited by B.A. Ogot and William Ochieng' (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1995), 102; E.S. Atieno Odhiambo, "Hegemonic Enterprises and Instrumentalities of Survival: Ethnicity and Democracy in Kenya," *African Studies* 61, no. 2 (2002), 242; Rok Ajulu, "Politicised Ethnicity, Competitive Politics and Conflict in Kenya: A Historical Perspective," *African Studies* 61, no. 2 (2010), 251-252, 261; Shilaho, *Political Power and Tribalism in Kenya*, 4.

⁶ Ajulu, "Politicised Ethnicity," 261.

politics” to “an age of ethnic chauvinism.”⁷ To the present, despite the return of competitive multi-party politics in 1992, “mobilized ethnicity,” as scholar-activist Rok Ajulu put it in 2002, continues to shape Kenyan political competition.⁸ Scholars have shown how ethnic identity and the mobilization of ethnic consciousness by political elites continues to shape contemporary Kenyan politics, an over sixty year trajectory of competitive ethnic politics that originated in the colonial period.⁹ The agency of ordinary Kenyans in the immediate aftermath of the Kariuki assassination disrupts this timeline of elite-led and ethnic-based political mobilization.

This thesis is about J.M. Kariuki, his death, and especially his life after death. It intervenes in the historiography of politics and ethnic-based political mobilization in Kenya by exploring the events in the months following Kariuki’s death. Despite the contemporary saliency of ethnicity as a mobilizing force in national politics, I argue that public responses to the Kariuki assassination highlight alternative forms of political mobilization in the Kenyatta era. In 1975, students, backbench parliamentarians, trade unionists, and other elements of Kenyan society demonstrated the powerful and imaginative possibilities of commemoration by mobilizing against the Kenyan government around the memory of Kariuki – a very sanitized memory, it is important to add.¹⁰ Although they did not form a united faction, they represented an opposition to the Kenyan government built around a shared remembrance of Kariuki as a popular martyr for

⁷ Cohen and Atieno Odhiambo, *The Risks of Knowledge*, 5.

⁸ Ajulu, “Politicised Ethnicity,” 251.

⁹ For example, see Frank Holmquist and Mwangi wa Githinji, “The Default Politics of Ethnicity in Kenya,” *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 16, no. 1 (2009): 101-117; Gilbert Khadiagala, “Political Movements and Coalition Politics in Kenya: Entrenching Ethnicity,” *South African Journal of International Affairs* 17, no. 1 (2010): 65-84; Federico Battered, “Ethnicity and Degree of Partisan Attachment in Kenyan Politics,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 45, no. 1 (2012): 114-125; Michelle D’Arcy and Marina Nistotskaya, “Intensified Local Grievances, Enduring National Control: The Politics of Land in the 2017 Kenyan Elections,” *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 13, no. 2 (2019): 294-312.

¹⁰ This concept of sanitization is borrowed from Grace Musila. See Musila, *A Death Retold in Truth and Rumour*, 58-61.

political and socioeconomic ideals, one who transcended ethnic boundaries and represented the hope of a more just future. In so doing, this opposition sought to subvert the Kenyan state's authority. The immediate effect of Kariuki's assassination was not the strengthening of elite-orchestrated and divisive ethnic-based politics in Kenya, but precisely the opposite.

From a broader scope, the events that unfolded in Kenya in the spring of 1975 lend insight into what scholars Jonathan Fisher and Nic Cheeseman have labelled the "fragile authoritarianism" that characterized many contemporary African regimes.¹¹ They argue that this type of fragility, which existed in many post-colonial states across the African continent, was inherited from colonial rule. It meant that although authoritarian African regimes "could deal very effectively and brutally with sporadic challenges to their authority, they were poorly placed to withstand a broader uprising."¹² In Kenya in the spring of 1975, as in many other parts of the continent at the time, the promises of independence were revisited. The students, backbench politicians, and trade unionists who were questioning what had happened since Kenya's independence were informed by a global economic crisis, resistance movements against white supremacist regimes in southern Africa, and Marxist revolutions in what was then understood as the "third world." They used Kariuki's death to challenge what they called neocolonialism and demand a more just politics and equitable socioeconomic distribution. While the Kenyatta government ultimately endured this challenge, this opposition successfully called into question the legitimacy of the Kenyatta government. What unfolded in Kenya in the spring of 1975 highlights the fragility of even the authoritarian African states that never faced open revolt.

¹¹ Jonathan Fisher and Nic Cheeseman, *Authoritarian Africa: Repression, Resistance, and the Power of Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 16.

¹² Fisher and Cheeseman, *Authoritarian Africa*, 16-17.

The principal sources for this thesis are two of Kenya's foremost contemporary newspapers, *The Standard*, an English language daily, and *The Weekly Review*, an English language political commentary publication founded just before Kariuki's death. Reports from the American embassy in Nairobi, as well as the British High Commission to Kenya, are used to contextualize broader political dynamics in contemporary Kenya, and especially to illuminate the uncertainty of both the American and British governments about Kenyatta's political future after Kariuki's death. This is not a history of popular politics.¹³ However, a reading of *The Standard* and *The Weekly Review* newspapers offer fruitful insights into mainstream politics and the public fallout that emerged after Kariuki's murder. In 1975, both newspapers were two of Kenya's most prominent publications. Their open coverage of the Kariuki assassination and the events which unfolded immediately after, diverging from newspapers' typical subservience to the Kenyan state's interests, is itself evidence of the weakness of the Kenyatta regime in the spring of 1975. They demonstrate the plausibility that this opposition to the Kenyatta government could foster meaningful change.

The first section of this thesis situates Kariuki within the trajectory of Kenya's early independence era politics. Second, this thesis considers Kariuki's funeral. In solidarity, attendees transitioned their memorialization of his legacy into a harsh critique of the Kenyan state and the realities of independence. They articulated an opposition to the Kenyatta government that was not mobilized through ethnic affiliation. The third section of this thesis explores how this varying opposition expanded Kariuki's death into a larger political critique that did have immediate,

¹³ This thesis utilizes English-language sources that were available to me during the COVID-19 pandemic. Other published newspaper sources that would have bolstered this thesis would have included *The Anvil*, a student-run newspaper at the University of Nairobi, as well as Swahili-language weeklies.

material, and lasting effects. Kariuki's assassination did not quell dissent, but rather sparked a new wave of opposition politics in Kenya. The fourth and final section of this thesis turns to the University of Nairobi campus in 1975, where Kenyan students protested Kariuki's assassination. Although the Kenyan government forcefully shut down dissent, the figure of Kariuki both helped link Kenyan students to international anti-colonial politics and opened further space for them to question the nature of Kenya's own independence.

Independence, Kenyan Politics, and the Life of J.M. Kariuki

Kenya gained its official independence at midnight on December 12, 1963. Earlier that day, Jomo Kenyatta, Kenya's Prime Minister and soon to be first President, received Kenya's articles of independence from the Duke of Edinburgh in a ceremony that reflected the friendly political ties between Britain and Kenya's new leader. Kenyatta ascended to power as the head of Kenya's dominant national political party, the Kenya African National Union (KANU). In elections held earlier in May of that year, KANU had triumphed over its national rival, the Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU), winning the right to send the majority of representatives to Kenya's first independent Parliament, modeled on Britain's Westminster system.¹⁴ The independence ceremony and the ascension to power of an African political elite was cause for celebration, but it was not a unanimous moment of national unity. Deep rifts amongst Kenyan politicians preceded December 12; they would carry forward into the post-independence period. Kenyatta and KANU's comfortable victory, triumphing by a more than

¹⁴ This transitioned to a republican system a year later. See Anaïs Angelo, "Independence and the Making of a President," in *Power and the Presidency in Kenya: The Jomo Kenyatta Years* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019): 115-140.

two-to-one margin over KADU in both votes and seats won, promised a future of strong centralized state authority in Kenya. Members of KADU had campaigned on the promise of a decentralized system of power, called *Majimbo*, involving a relatively weak central state with strong local authority involvement.¹⁵ They feared that KANU's triumph would lead to Kikuyu and Luo domination of political power in the independence era.

At independence, alongside a small group of Europeans and approximately 177,000 inhabitants of Asian descent, Kenya's single largest ethnic group, the Kikuyu, accounted for some twenty percent of Kenya's population.¹⁶ The Kikuyu along with the Luo, Kenya's second largest ethnic group, had been the most integrated into the administration and economy of British rule, a relationship that advantageously positioned individuals from both ethnic communities to govern after independence.¹⁷ The Kikuyu had also suffered harshly in the colonial era. From them, the British forcefully seized extensive tracts of Kenya's most fertile land for white settlement, known as the White Highlands.¹⁸ The Kamba, Kenya's fourth largest ethnic group, also suffered extensive land theft. The Luhya, the third largest ethnic group, were composed of several smaller Bantu communities, as were the Kalenjin, the fifth largest ethnic group in Kenya which actually encompassed several small ethnic groups.¹⁹ Both the Luhya and Kalenjin each

¹⁵ David Anderson, "Yours in Struggle for Majimbo". Nationalism and the Party Politics of Decolonization in Kenya, 1955-64," *Journal of Contemporary History* 40, no. 3 (2005): 547-564; Godwin R. Murunga and Shadrack W. Nasong'o, *Kenya: The Struggle for Democracy* (London: Zed Books, 2007), 96; Daniel Branch, *Kenya: Between Hope and Despair, 1963-2011* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2011), 2.

¹⁶ Charles Hornsby, *Kenya: A History Since Independence* (London: I.B. Tauris & Company, Limited, 2011), 24.

¹⁷ Branch, *Kenya: Between Hope and Despair*, 4, 10; B.A. Ogot, "The Decisive Years: 1956-63," in *Decolonization and Independence in Kenya, 1940-93*, edited by B.A. Ogot and William Ochieng' (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1995), 66-67.

¹⁸ Hornsby, *Kenya: A History Since Independence*, 22, 26; Atieno Odhiambo, "Hegemonic Enterprises and Instrumentalities of Survival," 234-235.

¹⁹ Hornsby, *Kenya: A History Since Independence*, 22-23; For information on these groups, also see Ajulu, "Politicised Ethnicity," 253.

identified themselves as a singular ethnic community when it was politically useful to do so.²⁰ The boundaries between all of these communities were often porous, particularly before the experience of colonialism.²¹ For historian John Lonsdale, the years just before independence led to a sharpening of these boundaries. This era was characterized by political tribalism, which Lonsdale understands as the practice of divisive, competitive politics between ethnic groups who see both themselves and other ethnic groups as “bounded constituencies.”²² This political tribalism especially emerged through the Kikuyu’s experience with colonialism and the “Mau Mau” conflict.

Between 1902 and 1915, Britain appropriated some 7.5 million acres of fertile land in Kenya, largely from the Kikuyu and Kamba. By 1948, over 200,000 Kikuyu were informal squatters in and near the White Highlands as labourers on European farms.²³ Kikuyu grievance was articulated in large part through the Kenya African Union (KAU), the first African nationalist political party in Kenya. It was led by Jomo Kenyatta, a Kikuyu from Kiambu district, from 1947 until the party’s ban in 1953.²⁴ This grievance was more forcefully articulated by Mau Mau, which found its roots in the late 1940s.²⁵ Militant Kikuyu led mass oath-taking campaigns, directing Kikuyu, willingly or not, to take action.²⁶ Kenyatta and other KAU leaders were subsequently arrested in 1952 during the British declared state of emergency, known as the

²⁰ Hornsby, *Kenya: A History Since Independence*, 25.

²¹ John Lonsdale, “Kenya’s Four Ages of Ethnicity,” in *From Divided Pasts to Cohesive Futures*, edited by Hiroyuki Hino, Arnim Ranger, John Lonsdale, and Frances Stewart (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 15-16.

²² John Lonsdale, “Moral & Political Argument in Kenya,” in *Ethnicity and Democracy in Africa*, edited by Bruce Berman, Will Kymlicka, and Dickson Eyoh (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, Limited, 2004), 76-77, 79.

²³ Hornsby, *Kenya: A History Since Independence*, 26, 39.

²⁴ Ogot, “The Decisive Years: 1956-63,” 52.

²⁵ Nicholas Kariuki Githuku, “Mau Mau Crucible of War: Statehood, National Identity and Politics in Postcolonial Kenya,” PhD diss., (West Virginia University, 2014), 75.

²⁶ Hornsby, *Kenya: A History Since Independence*, 43.

Emergency, for their suspected involvement in catalyzing Mau Mau.²⁷ Kenyatta, as would become especially clear after his eventual release in 1961, did not support the militancy. Historian Anaïs Angelo argues that his mistaken and politicized arrest, sentencing, and imprisonment would eventually provide Kenyatta an “ambiguous authority” that would position him for national leadership.²⁸

The conflict between Kikuyu Mau Mau militants and British forces and their Kikuyu “loyalists,” whose participation in the Home Guard numbered about 100,000, has been the subject of considerable debate.²⁹ Mau Mau fighters posed a genuine threat to British hegemony and European land ownership in Kenya. Kikuyu loyalists, however, while they fought alongside the British, did not necessarily fight in defense of colonialism. Rather, they were motivated by a host of factors that included pre-Mau Mau intellectual disagreements amongst Kikuyu about social organization, genuine opposition to Mau Mau violence founded on Christian beliefs, forced participation through fear and pre-conflict loyalties, and, in a minority of cases, economic self-interest.³⁰ Over the war’s course, tens of thousands of Kikuyu on both sides of the conflict died due to violence, famine, and disease.³¹ The conflict ended in 1955 with the official defeat of

²⁷ Githu Muigai, “Jomo Kenyatta & the Rise of the Ethno-Nationalist State in Kenya,” in *Ethnicity and Democracy in Africa*, edited by Bruce Berman, Will Kymlicka, and Dickson Eyoh (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, Limited, 2004), 206-208.

²⁸ Angelo, *Power and the Presidency in Kenya*, 2, 67.

²⁹ See Githuku, “Mau Mau Crucible of War,” 8-9, for a literature review; E.S. Atieno Odhiambo, “The Formative Years: 1945-55,” in *Decolonization and Independence in Kenya, 1940-93*, edited by B.A. Ogot and William Ochieng’ (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1995), 41.

³⁰ David Anderson, “Making the Loyalist Bargain: Surrender, Amnesty and Impunity in Kenya’s Decolonization, 1952-63,” *The International History Review* 39, no. 1 (2017), 50-51.

³¹ Estimations of the dead vary. See Angelo, *Power and the Presidency in Kenya*, 14; Lonsdale, “Kenya’s Four Ages of Ethnicity,” 42. Violence was extreme. Over one thousand suspected Mau Mau freedom fighters were hung by the British. During the course of the Emergency, tens of thousands of suspected Mau Mau were held in prisons, detention, and labour camps, where many were brutally treated. See David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (New York City: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005), 6-7, 312-313.

Mau Mau forces, although resistance would continue for years, and produced multiple politicized memories of its purpose and what it had achieved. Historian Marshall Clough says that Mau Mau somewhat defies categorization, having been credibly described by participants as “a nationalist revolt, an anti-colonial war, a resistance movement, a class struggle, a peasant uprising, a movement of cultural renewal, an ethnic revolt, and a civil war.”³² One of the most enduring legacies of the conflict was the emergence of what Lonsdale calls a “successor ruling elite to the British.” As Britain hurried Kenya towards independence, they ensured that their loyalist Kikuyu allies who, during the conflict, “had learned how to use the state’s regressive power,” were best positioned to ascend to political leadership.³³ The ascendancy of these Kikuyu loyalists would directly lead to a Kikuyu solidification of economic, political, and eventually military power after independence.

Both KANU and KADU were formed in 1960. KANU was founded in Kiambu district as a Kikuyu-Luo alliance and the direct successor to the KAU. Its Kikuyu leaders were loyalists, but its ranks included Mau Mau fighters in junior positions as part of a limited Kikuyu reconciliation.³⁴ The party had nationalist aspirations, yet it also lacked ideological unity. It split between a wing friendly to a mixed capitalist model of development and a more radical socialist-leaning faction, evidenced by the politics of its two leading Luo members, Oginga Odinga, who was one of the party’s masterminds, and Tom Mboya, KANU’s most effective organizer who had risen to prominence for his leadership in Kenya’s labour politics. Between 1956-1960,

³² See Marshall Clough, *Mau Mau Memoirs: History, Memory and Politics* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), 241. See pages 241-248 for a broader analysis and literature review.

³³ Lonsdale, “Kenya’s Four Ages of Ethnicity,” 43; Atieno Odhiambo, “Hegemonic Enterprises and Instrumentalities of Survival,” 234-236.

³⁴ Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged*, 334.

Mboya had developed relations with the United States and organized the “African airlift,” dispatching more than 1,000 students to study at American universities. He was looked on favourably by the British and United States for his anti-communist affiliations and approaches to development that were friendly to Western financial and political interests. Concurrently, Odinga arranged for hundreds of Kenyan students to study in Communist countries.³⁵ KANU’s founders intended that Jomo Kenyatta, still imprisoned, would be the party’s eventual president, an elder figurehead who would unite its factions in preparation for national leadership.³⁶ KADU was founded just a month later from several smaller political parties representing smaller ethnic groups. Its leaders, including Ronald Ngala and Daniel Arap Moi, feared Kikuyu-Luo domination should KANU lead Kenya into independence.³⁷ Both parties relied on “local ethno-regional bases” for support. KANU, as the coalition of Kenya’s two largest ethnic groups, almost inevitably gathered more support in the leadup to Kenya’s first elections.³⁸

Kenyatta inherited the leadership of KANU and ascended to the Presidency of Kenya due to the lack of any other viable candidates with national appeal. His imprisonment and detachment from Kenya’s political fray in the 1960s had made him the single most visible national figure. He was capable of appealing to both former Kikuyu loyalists, who Kenyatta surrounded himself with, and former Kikuyu Mau Mau veterans, many of whom held out hope

³⁵ Hornsby, *Kenya: A History Since Independence*, 54, 58; Branch, *Kenya: Between Hope and Despair* 5-6, 41; For the best discussion of the students dispatched to study in Communist countries and the contestation between Mboya and Odinga, see Daniel Branch, “Political Traffic: Kenyan Students in Eastern and Central Europe, 1958-69,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 53, no. 4 (2018): 811-831.

³⁶ Hornsby, *Kenya: A History Since Independence*, 44, 61; Branch, *Kenya: Between Hope and Despair*, 7-8, 48.

³⁷ Branch, *Kenya: Between Hope and Despair*, 12-13.

³⁸ Hornsby, *Kenya: A History Since Independence*, 61.

that Kenyatta was one of their own.³⁹ He simultaneously was seen as a viable leader by the British who, after imprisoning Kenyatta and asserting that he was a Communist sympathizer through the 1950s, reversed their position and determined he would be friendly to British and white-settler interests.⁴⁰ Despite accepting the leadership of KANU in 1961, Kenyatta himself was deeply distrustful of party politics. He preferred a brand of politics based on personal dealings between politicians and the leaders of ethnic groups.⁴¹ His authority was built around collaboration with Kiambu “big men” from his home district, the so-called “Kiambu mafia,” who were advantageously positioned to dominate Kenya’s post-independence economy and political structures through their close integration into the colonial economy around Nairobi.⁴² Kenyatta’s personal presidential power was formally entrenched through a series of constitutional amendments almost immediately after independence.⁴³

Kenyatta did not seek to mitigate the political tribalism which emerged from the colonial era, but pursued what Lonsdale calls a form of post-independence ethnic politics founded on Kenyatta’s long-held personal convictions that there was “no worse delinquency than ‘detrribalization.’”⁴⁴ Kenyatta imagined that strong, distinct ethnic organizations were the

³⁹ See Angelo, *Power and the Presidency in Kenya*, page 2, as well as chapter two, “From Prison to Party Leader, an Ambiguous Ascension (1958–1961),” 66-94, for the best discussion of this ascension; Ogot, “The Decisive Years: 1956-63,” 66.

⁴⁰ Angelo, *Power and the Presidency in Kenya*, 127.

⁴¹ See Jennifer Widner, *The Rise of a Party-State in Kenya: From “Harambee” to “Nyayo!”* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1992), 55, 61; David Throup, “Jomo Kenyatta and the Creation of the Kenyan State (1963-1978),” in *The Oxford Handbook of Kenyan Politics*, edited by Nic Cheeseman, Karuti Kanyinga, and Gabrielle Lynch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 46; Angelo, *Power and the Presidency in Kenya*, 93; Ogot, “The Decisive Years: 1956-63,” 66.

⁴² Shilaho, *Political Power and Tribalism in Kenya*, 43; Atieno Odhiambo, “Hegemonic Enterprises and Instrumentalities of Survival,” 240-241; Widner, *The Rise of a Party-State in Kenya*, 53.

⁴³ Ochieng’, “Structural and Political Changes,” 94.

⁴⁴ John Lonsdale, “Moral & Political Argument in Kenya,” 85, 88-89; Angelo, in *Power and the Presidency in Kenya*, provides a good summary of Kenyatta’s views of tribalism. See pages 47-50 in particular.

appropriate basis for a strong nation.⁴⁵ He sought to patch over the serious tensions that had emerged amongst Kikuyu due to Mau Mau by urging participants, particularly former Mau Mau freedom fighters, to forget the past.⁴⁶ Angelo has explained how Kenyatta used his own ambiguous involvement with Mau Mau to silence veterans who demanded the expulsion of Kikuyu loyalists from land holdings and government positions. This silencing included Kenyatta appropriating Mau Mau symbology to bolster his own authority, as well as either co-opting or, in some cases, assassinating former Mau Mau leaders who posed possible threats.⁴⁷ Kikuyu, particularly those who had been loyalists, dominated key positions in the post-independence Kenyan government. Mau Mau veterans who could have internally challenged this Kikuyu hegemony were repressed.

Ideologically, Kenyatta disdained Communism and distrusted the socialist politics of Odinga.⁴⁸ Within a year of independence, KADU had collapsed and several of its most prominent members, such as Jean-Marie Seroney, had crossed the floor to KANU.⁴⁹ With the collapse of party politics, the regime's primary vulnerability was its post-independence land distribution policies. Upholding pre-independence promises to Britain and to Kenya's white-settler population, Kenyatta never appropriated and redistributed Europeans' extensive land holdings to Kenya's landless poor and displaced Mau Mau veterans, as Odinga proposed.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Lonsdale, "Moral & Political Argument in Kenya," 89-90.

⁴⁶ Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged*, 335-336; Angelo, *Power and the Presidency in Kenya*, 48.

⁴⁷ Anaïs Angelo, "Jomo Kenyatta and the Repression of the 'Last' Mau Mau Leaders, 1961-1965," *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 11, no. 3 (2017), 444-445.

⁴⁸ Angelo, *Power and the Presidency in Kenya*, 53; Throup, "Jomo Kenyatta and the Creation of the Kenyan State," 45-48.

⁴⁹ Ogot, "The Decisive Years: 1956-63," 76.

⁵⁰ Ochieng', "Structural and Political Changes," 94, 98; Angelo, *Power and the Presidency in Kenya*, 97-99; Daniel Branch, "Loyalists, Mau Mau, and Elections in Kenya: The First Triumph of the System, 1957-1958," *Africa Today* 53, no. 2 (2006), 42-43.

Extensive land was distributed as gifts to Kenyatta's Kikuyu supporters and other Kenyan elites.⁵¹ While land was distributed to tens of thousands of Kenyans through a combination of British loans and land abandoned by Europeans who left Kenya at independence, the land issue was never settled during the Kenyatta era and led to radicals within KANU accusing the government of betraying the ideals and promises of independence.⁵²

Throughout the 1960s, Kenyatta countered this critique with the force of an increasingly authoritarian state. The Kenyan "bureaucratic-executive" state, as scholars Daniel Branch and Nic Cheeseman have called it, was built on a system of elite domination which adeptly survived challenges to its authority through its "capacity to demobilise popular forces."⁵³ It was guarded by the inheritance of Britain's colonial-era security apparatuses, which were designed to repress and detain critics.⁵⁴ Within KANU itself, the popularity of Mboya and Odinga, respectively with the Western and Eastern blocs in the Cold War conflict, made them both credible rivals to Kenyatta's leadership, but also ideological rivals with one another. Kenyatta exploited their friction, supporting Mboya's approach to development.⁵⁵ By the mid 1960s, Kenyatta was aligned with the anti-Communist wing of KANU and led an assault on radical politics in Kenya. Based on unsubstantiated warnings from Malcolm MacDonald, the British High Commissioner to Kenya, of an unfolding Communist coup, Kenyatta severed Kenya's ties with socialist states.⁵⁶

⁵¹ For instance, see Angelo, *Power and the Presidency in Kenya*, 190-191.

⁵² Nicholas Nyangira, "Ethnicity, Class, and Politics in Kenya," in *The Political Economy of Kenya*, edited by Michael G. Schatzberg (New York City: Praeger Publishers, 1987), 26-28; Ochieng', "Structural and Political Changes," 94.

⁵³ Daniel Branch and Nic Cheeseman, "The Politics of Control in Kenya: Understanding the Bureaucratic-Executive state, 1952-78," *Review of African Political Economy* 33, no. 107 (2006), 15.

⁵⁴ Oloka-Onyango, "From the Outside Looking In," 179.

⁵⁵ Ochieng', "Structural and Political Changes," 96-97; Throup, "Jomo Kenyatta and the Creation of the Kenyan State (1963-1978)," 45-50.

⁵⁶ Throup, "Jomo Kenyatta and the Creation of the Kenyan State (1963-1978)," 48; Branch, *Kenya: Between Hope and Despair, 1963-2011*, 48-49.

In 1965, Pio Pinto, one of Odinga's closest allies and a leading radical politician in his own right, was assassinated with likely Kenyan state involvement.⁵⁷ In 1966, with the effective death of KANU's radical politics, Odinga helped form the Kenya People's Union (KPU) party, creating a new ideological rival to KANU. Although Odinga's socialist politics were never widely popular with most Kenyans, his calls for land redistribution remained a touchstone issue for the many Kenyans disillusioned with what independence had produced.⁵⁸

Odinga's resignation from KANU also marked the end of Mboya's use to Kenyatta. By 1966, Mboya only represented a threat to the hegemonic power of Kenyatta and the Kiambu clique ensconced around him. In 1969, Mboya was publicly assassinated with alleged state involvement.⁵⁹ Months later, the KPU was banned and Odinga was detained. With both of Kenya's most prominent Luo politicians effectively eliminated, Kikuyu political and administrative hegemony in Kenya was affirmed.⁶⁰ This authority was guaranteed through a new alliance with the Kalenjin, and the naming of Daniel Arap Moi to vice president.⁶¹ The Kenyatta government embraced a system of ethnic politics, centered around political elites mobilizing support from their ethnic constituencies to protect their own interests.⁶² Henceforth, scholar Wanjala Nasong'o argues, "Kikuyu control of the political system became so complete that cleavages in the system only occurred within the ethnic group."⁶³

⁵⁷ Branch, *Kenya: Between Hope and Despair, 1963-2011*, 45-47.

⁵⁸ Branch, *Kenya: Between Hope and Despair, 1963-2011*, 53-54.

⁵⁹ Throup, "Jomo Kenyatta and the Creation of the Kenyan State," 50.

⁶⁰ Throup, "Jomo Kenyatta and the Creation of the Kenyan State," 51.

⁶¹ Branch, *Kenya: Between Hope and Despair, 1963-2011*, 46, 69.

⁶² Mati, "Ethnicity and Politics in Kenya," 273-274.

⁶³ Wanjala S. Nasong'o, "Kenya at Fifty and the Betrayal of Nationalism: The Paradoxes of Two Family Dynasties," in *Kenya After 50: Reconfiguring Historical, Political, and Policy Milestones*, edited by Michael Mwenda Kithinji, Mickie Mwanjai Koster, and Jerono P. Rotich (New York City: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 179.

J.M. Kariuki's own trajectory reflected these developments. Born in 1929 in Kenya's Rift Valley, his Kikuyu parents were squatters on a white farm.⁶⁴ He said he was inspired as a youth to become politically active in Kikuyu and Kenyan politics after hearing Kenyatta speak in 1947, and eventually joined the KAU.⁶⁵ His suspected militant activities led to his seven-year detention in the midst of the Emergency.⁶⁶ After release, Odinga and British anti-colonial organizations funded his education at Oxford. During his brief studies there, Kariuki reflected on his experiences and completed his autobiography, *'Mau Mau' Detainee* (1963).⁶⁷ The memoir was the first of many subsequent memoirs produced by Mau Mau veterans that challenged British accounts of the conflict and argued that Mau Mau were anti-colonial freedom fighters, not terrorists.⁶⁸ The autobiography also declared Kariuki's effusive support for Jomo Kenyatta: "Kenyatta is greater than any Kikuyu, he is greater than any Luo or Nandi or Masai or Giriama, he is greater than any Kenyan, he is the greatest African of them all," Kariuki wrote.⁶⁹ As a prominent, well-off Kikuyu, Kariuki was advantageously positioned to occupy a leadership role in Kenya's post-independence politics. In 1963, he took a post as both Kenyatta's private secretary as well as won election to Kenya's parliament, occupying a seat in Kenya's parliament until his death.⁷⁰

⁶⁴ Josiah Mwangi Kariuki, *'Mau Mau' Detainee: The Account by a Kenya African of His Experiences in Detention Camps, 1953-1960* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 1.

⁶⁵ Kariuki, *'Mau Mau' Detainee*, 17.

⁶⁶ Kareithi Munuhe, editor, *JM Kariuki in Parliament Volume 1* (Nairobi: Gazelle Books Company, 1975), 6.

⁶⁷ Flavio Traoré, "Memory in translation: Mau Mau Detainee and its Swahili Translation," *Swahili Forum* 21 (2014), 43.

⁶⁸ Mickie Mwanzia Koster, "Mau Mau Inventions and Reinventions," in *Contemporary Africa: Challenges and Opportunities*, edited by Toyin Fall and Emmanuel Mbah (New York City: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 33; Clough, *Mau Mau Memoirs*, 241.

⁶⁹ Kariuki, *'Mau Mau' Detainee*, 179.

⁷⁰ Widner, *The Rise of a Party-State in Kenya*, 86-91; Also see Kareithi Munuhe, editor, *JM Kariuki in Parliament Volume 2* (Nairobi: Gazelle Books Company, 1976), 2; Munuhe, *JM Kariuki in Parliament Volume 1*, 6.

From 1963 onward, Kariuki was a beneficiary of Kenyatta's patronage politics that enriched associates of the president. Although he hailed from Nyeri district and was never an insider within Kenyatta's Kiambu circle, Kariuki had actively bolstered Kenyatta's ascendancy to power. Before independence, this included fundraising for Kenyatta to revamp KANU in preparation for its defeat of KADU. After independence, he was rewarded with a nearly one-thousand-acre estate, shortly followed by the two-hundred-acre Kanyamwi Estate.⁷¹ These estates were only a small portion of Kariuki's profiteering. Journalist John Kamau has recently reported that Kariuki's financial interests ranged from holdings in the casino business, even as Kariuki served as the chairman of the Betting Control and Licensing Board, to stakes in the mining industry, to either owning or sitting on the boards of numerous companies.⁷² He actively leveraged this wealth to bolster his own public image. He generously dispensed funds to community projects, and, per reports from the British High Commission to Kenya, created companies to funnel foreign donations, largely from the United States, to Kenyans of all ethnic backgrounds.⁷³

Kariuki concurrently and increasingly denounced this exact system of unequal wealth distribution.⁷⁴ In parliament, he delivered heartfelt speeches calling for government aid to Kenya's poor and appealed to the ideals of Abraham Lincoln in his demands for stronger democratic principles within Kenya. He became popular amongst his fellow Mau Mau veterans

⁷¹ John Kamau, "Mystery of JM Kariuki's millions," *Nation*, March 25, 2017.

⁷² Kamau, "Mystery of JM Kariuki's millions."

⁷³ Confidential, "The Kenyan Opposition: Visit of Mr. and Mrs. Wareham," C.T. Hart to Mr. Wigan, 1 June 1976, BNA, FCO 31/2019, 102; For additional information, see Widner, *The Rise of a Party-State in Kenya*, 86-88.

⁷⁴ Munuhe, *JM Kariuki in Parliament Volume 2*, 3.

for denouncing unequal European land ownership throughout Kenya.⁷⁵ After 1969, with the effective collapse of multi-party politics in Kenya, opposition politics in Kenyan subsequently operated internally within KANU. MPs such as Bildad Kaggia, Martin Shikuku, and Jean-Marie Seroney developed a “backbench group” in parliament, and became known for expressing populist grievances and asserting parliamentary power.⁷⁶ Kariuki eventually joined this internal KANU opposition to the Kenyatta government and became one of its leading voices.⁷⁷ Scholar Charles Hornsby writes that many Kenyans increasingly saw Kariuki as the defender of “socialism, collectivism and the Kikuyu underclass,” a genuine champion of those whose voices were excluded from elite politics.⁷⁸ These robust defenses of the rights of Kenya’s landless and poor catalyzed Kariuki’s fall from Kenyatta’s grace. In 1974, a year before Kariuki’s death, the Kenyan state banned Kariuki from publicly campaigning for re-election. The prohibition, which did not prevent Kariuki’s eventually comfortable return to parliament, demonstrated both Kariuki’s widespread popularity in Kenya, and the depth of the contradiction he embodied. As *The Weekly Review* remarked in 1975, Kariuki was a “fabulously wealthy” man who lived like a member of the “jet set,” yet who unabashedly criticized those who lived likewise.⁷⁹

Kariuki’s stance as a populist champion who transcended ethnic boundaries defined his public legacy following his death. The numerous contradictions he embodied were erased from

⁷⁵ Munuhe, *JM Kariuki in Parliament Volume 1*, 12, 17; Munuhe, *JM Kariuki in Parliament Volume 2*, 3; Angelo, *Power and the Presidency in Kenya*, 255.

⁷⁶ Githuku, “Mau Mau Crucible of War,” 200; For a good discussion of this period of politics, also see Widner, *The Rise of a Party-State in Kenya*, 68, 89-105.

⁷⁷ Hornsby, *Kenya: A History Since Independence*, 206. Githuku, “Mau Mau Crucible of War,” 255-256, 271.

⁷⁸ Hornsby, *Kenya: A History Since Independence*, 281.

⁷⁹ Quoted from Wunyabari O. Maloba, *The Anatomy of Neo-Colonialism in Kenya: British Imperialism and Kenyatta: 1963-1978* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 261; Some scholars have sought to reconcile this contradiction. For instance, see Gene Dauch, “Kenya: J.M. Kariuki ou l’Éthique Nationale du Capitalisme,” *Politique Africaine* 2, no. 8 (1982): 21-43.

public discourse, not unlike that of other deceased Kenyan politicians.⁸⁰ From here, this thesis does not strive to evaluate the worthiness of Kariuki's popular legacy, judging him through a pros and cons list of his deeds. Rather, I examine how Kariuki's achievements and career were memorialized with political ramifications. Like most of the popular responses to assassinations in Kenya, Kenyans remembered Kariuki through claims he had stood opposed to those in power.⁸¹ However, given that Kariuki had been a member of Kenya's hegemonic Kikuyu elite, Kenyans did read his death as an attack on his ethnic community. Nor did the Kikuyu, as a collective, rally around the Kenyatta state that had allegedly assassinated one of their own. In the resulting absence of antagonistic partitions between ethnic groups, Kenyans levied critiques against the Kenyatta government through the lens of class and political ideals, rather than ethnicity.

The Moment After Death: Street Protests and the Funeral

In March 1975, protestors swept through the streets of Nairobi. Although a memorialization of Kariuki, these protests on March 12 and in the days following nearly immediately denounced the Kenyan state for its alleged involvement in Kariuki's death. Public suspicions that the Kenyan state had been involved in Kariuki's death far outraced any firm evidence. Youth marched through the streets of Nairobi announcing, "JM is dead!" and "Our man has been killed!" As students marched, shops and bars closed their doors. By the evening of March 12, as armed security forces entered Nairobi, students and police clashed in back-and-

⁸⁰ Musila, *A Death Retold in Truth and Rumour*, 58.

⁸¹ Yenjela, "Sycophants in a Cannibal State," 115.

forth hails of stones and tear gas.⁸² Protests immediately after the confirmation of Kariuki's death spanned a further three days. Over their course, anti-government songs and leaflets circulated in Nairobi.⁸³ These instantaneous denouncements of the Kenyatta government emerged from political and socioeconomic grievances that had been escalating since independence. Protestors were enraged and energized by Kariuki's assassination, mobilized not by elites appealing to their ethnic constituencies but rather through shared disgust with yet another alleged manifestation of state violence. In the following weeks, the opposition politics they engaged in solidified around a shared remembrance of Kariuki as a martyr who had represented the possibility of a more just future.

This opposition solidified at J.M. Kariuki's funeral, held on Sunday, March 16. It was inflected by a marked sense of righteous anger, inflamed by the dubious manner in which Kariuki's body had been discovered. Since March 3, police at the Nairobi City Mortuary had been aware of an unidentified body discovered in the scrublands of Ngong Hills just north of Nairobi. They had made minimal efforts to identify the corpse. Terry Kariuki, one of J.M.'s wives, made three trips in a span of ten days to the Nairobi City Mortuary before she was able to enter the mortuary and confirm, by chance, suspicions of her husband's death.⁸⁴ The public was made aware over the following days that Kariuki's corpse had been discovered in a badly disfigured state. Suspicions that the government had been attempting to hide Kariuki's body, as

⁸² *The Standard*, 13 March 1975, 5; *The Standard*, 14 March 1975, 1.

⁸³ Gerard Loughran, *Birth of a Nation: The Story of a Newspaper in Kenya* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co., Limited, 2010), 125.

⁸⁴ *The Standard*, 12 March 1975, 1; Also see Kenya National Assembly, *Report of The Select Committee on the Disappearance and Murder of the Late Member for Nyandarua North, The Hon. J.M. Kariuki. M.P.* (Nairobi, 1975), 28, 31.

well as news of the evident gratuitous violence done to his corpse, angered the public.⁸⁵ Between March 12 and March 16 public discontent heightened in pitch.

Kariuki's funeral was a major public event. Thousands of Kenyans lined the one-mile funeral procession from Nairobi's City Mortuary to his residence in the city. Many observers reportedly openly wept as Kariuki's body passed by. From his residence, his body was then carried on its final journey to Kariuki's Kanyamwi estate in Gilgil, some one hundred kilometres northwest of Nairobi.⁸⁶ *The Weekly Review* estimated 20,000 individuals attended Kariuki's funeral, although tallies varied.⁸⁷ From its start, the funeral became a continuation of the street protests. Students were present, despite having struggled to fund their travel to Kanyamwi.⁸⁸ "Kariuki's funeral was one long political ceremony," as *The Weekly Review* later put it.⁸⁹ Attendees at the funeral, primarily politicians, transformed Kariuki's assassination into a tragedy for the nation. They framed Kariuki's assassination as a state attack against the ideals of democracy, freedom, and land equality.

The sociologist Gary Alan Fine has labelled such individuals "reputational entrepreneurs" to help explain how the legacies of deceased individuals are constructed, and how posthumous legacies can be deployed for political purposes.⁹⁰ Many attendees at Kariuki's funeral pursued

⁸⁵ News of Kariuki's defiled corpse spread rapidly, including news that he had apparently been tortured before death. See "Tensions Rise as Body of Missing MP Found," American Embassy Nairobi to Secretary of State, Washington DC, 12 March 1975, TNA, 1975NAIROB02098.

⁸⁶ "Kenya Says Farewell," *The Weekly Review*, 24 March 1975, 14-15.

⁸⁷ "Kenya Says Farewell," *The Weekly Review*, 24 March 1975, 14; The American Embassy estimated a much smaller number, some 5,000 attendees. See "Funeral of J.M. Kariuki," American Embassy Nairobi to Secretary of State, Washington DC, 17 March 1975, TNA, 1975NAIROB02222.

⁸⁸ *The Standard*, 24 March 1975, 1.

⁸⁹ "Kenya Says Farewell," *The Weekly Review*, 24 March 1975, 15.

⁹⁰ Gary Alan Fine, "Reputational Entrepreneurs and the Memory of Incompetence: Melting Supporters, Partisan Warriors, and Images of President Harding," *American Journal of Sociology* 101, no. 5 (1996), 1162-1163; This approach is also shaped by Marianne Wheeldon's use of Fine's concept in *Debussy's Legacy and the Construction of Reputation* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2017).

their own political claims, enabled by the very real belief amongst many Kenyans that Kariuki could have fostered concrete change in Kenya. Negative aspects of Kariuki's legacy were sanitized. No attendee at the funeral commented on the contradiction of Kariuki's funeral being held at his sprawling Kanyamwi Estate.⁹¹ Ngeri Kihoro, a student spokesperson eulogizing Kariuki on "behalf of the University of Nairobi and the youth of Kenya who had idolized him," unironically remarked, "J.M. believed, and told us that it was bad and inhuman for a person to own thousands of acres of land when many *wananchi* ["the people"] go about without even a single acre."⁹²

The opposition to the Kenyatta state that rallied at Kariuki's funeral did not mobilize through ethnic affiliations. Present at the funeral were Kikuyu from Kariuki's home district of Nyeri, but also hundreds of individuals hailing from a plurality of ethnic backgrounds.⁹³ Many of the latter were Kenya's most outspoken political figures. Their numbers included numerous parliamentary Kikuyu opponents to Kenyatta, such as Charles Rubia and Waruru Kanja, and also backbench colleagues such as Jean-Marie Seroney, one of Kenya's most prominent Kalenjin politicians and a staunch antagonist to Kenyatta. Numerous Luhya politicians were also present, including Martin Shikuku and Elijah Mwangale, who was set to soon chair the commission investigating Kariuki's murder.⁹⁴ Tom Mboya's younger brother, Alphonse Okuku Ndiege, was also present. Following Mboya's murder, Okuku had taken up his brother's legacy. In 1974 he

⁹¹ *The Standard*, 17 March 1975, 7. Brief video footage of the funeral can also be seen. See AP Archive, "SYND 17 3 75 Funeral of Kariuki," YouTube Video, 2:26, July 23, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wJQxp0ZWnk4>.

⁹² Kenya Says Farewell," *The Weekly Review*, 24 March 1975, 18; *The Standard*, 17 March 1975, 7.

⁹³ See "Funeral of J.M. Kariuki," American Embassy Nairobi to Secretary of State, Washington DC, 17 March 1975, TNA, 1975NAIROB02222.

⁹⁴ Although he would later become known for a more subdued political stance, Mwangale was at the time recognized for openly defying prominent parliamentarians affiliated with the government. See Aggrey Wafula Mabolu, "A Political Biography of Elijah Wasike Mwangale: 1939-1992," MA thesis (Nairobi: University of Nairobi, 2016), 56.

was elected as the parliamentary representative for a Luo stronghold, Mbita. By the time of Kariuki's funeral, he was the leader of an informal group that sustained Mboya's memory and politics in parliament.⁹⁵ This collection of attendees at Kariuki's funeral, very much a who's who of prominent political figures opposed to the Kenyatta government, embodied the political vision that was emboldened by Kariuki's death.

The speeches at Kariuki's funeral were politically charged.⁹⁶ *The Weekly Review* noted that politicians were each given a turn to deliver accusatory speeches denouncing the government, with their criticisms building on and enabling each other.⁹⁷ "We know of these dirty plans by a certain clique," Waruru Kanja, who was an MP, friend, and ally of Kariuki, said.⁹⁸ Greeted with enthusiasm, he continued on to say that democracy was dead within Kenya and that Kariuki's vision of a more equitable future would live on.⁹⁹ Charles Rubia said an "elimination list" existed within Kenya, which both he and Martin Shikuku were on for their political action.¹⁰⁰ Shikuku, for his part, said that "to be able to live in Kenya today, one is expected to be stupid, a boot-licker, or corrupt."¹⁰¹ Alphonse Oduku Ndiege linked the genealogy of assassinations within Kenya to the authoritarian state.¹⁰² The statements were a public and collectively articulated denouncement of the Kenyatta government. What was not said at

⁹⁵ David Goldsworthy, *Tom Mboya: The Man Kenya Wanted to Forget* (New York City: Africana Publishing Company, 1982), 286.

⁹⁶ "Funeral of J.M. Kariuki," American Embassy Nairobi to Secretary of State, Washington DC, 17 March 1975, TNA, 1975NAIROB02222.

⁹⁷ "Kenya Says Farewell," *The Weekly Review*, 24 March 1975, 17.

⁹⁸ "Kenya Says Farewell," *The Weekly Review*, 24 March 1975, 17.

⁹⁹ *The Standard*, 17 March 1975, 7.

¹⁰⁰ "Kenya Says Farewell," *The Weekly Review*, 24 March 1975, 17.

¹⁰¹ "Kenya Says Farewell," *The Weekly Review*, 24 March 1975, 17; *The Standard*, 17 March 1975, 7.

¹⁰² "Kenya Says Farewell," *The Weekly Review*, 24 March 1975, 17.

Kariuki's funeral was equally important. While politicians, as reputational entrepreneurs, sought to capitalize on Kariuki's popularity, none of their public denunciations were based on ethnicity.

This reckoning contrasts sharply to Tom Mboya's funeral, held six years prior. Like Kariuki, Mboya had cultivated a national focus in life.¹⁰³ However, Mboya's funeral was shaped by ethnic-based political divisions, characterized by anti-Kikuyu sentiment. At a memorial held three days after Mboya's death, mourners met Kenyatta's motorcade with a hail of stones and pro-KPU slogans. Security forces responded with tear gas as a riot erupted. The following day, when Mboya's body was carried to its final resting place, a largely Kikuyu crowd responded to the attack on Kenyatta's motorcade. Both Mboya's funeral procession, as well as Luo shops in western Nairobi, were attacked.¹⁰⁴ The ethnic tension produced at Mboya's funeral intensified in the following months. In October 1969, as Kenyatta attempted to inaugurate a new hospital in Kisumu, Odinga's hometown, he was met with signs reading "Where is Tom?" Days later, Odinga was arrested and detained without trial, along with the leadership of the KPU. These events catalyzed the ban of the KPU and what Mati has called "the death of open contention based on ideological and opposition party politics," leading to a "systematic 'political tribalisation' of the contention."¹⁰⁵

At Kariuki's funeral, by contrast, mourners interpreted Kariuki's murder as an attack by the state on the ideals of Kenya's independence. The diversity of speakers and their rhetoric gave

¹⁰³ Poppy Cullen, "Funeral Planning: British Involvement in the Funeral of President Jomo Kenyatta," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 44, no. 3 (2016), 516.

¹⁰⁴ Branch, *Kenya: Between Hope and Despair*, 80-82; Jacob Mwathi Mati, *Political Protest in Contemporary Kenya: Change and Continuities* (London: Routledge, 2020), 12; David Throup and Charles Hornsby, *Multi-Party Politics in Kenya: The Kenyatta & Moi States & The Triumph of the System in the 1992 Election* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1998), 14.

¹⁰⁵ Goldsworthy, *Tom Mboya: The Man Kenya Wanted to Forget*, 285-286; Mati, *Political Protest in Contemporary Kenya*, 11-12.

a sense that the whole nation was mourning, which Sir Antony Duff, the British High Commissioner to Kenya, said appropriately reflected Kariuki's work "outside tribal boundaries."¹⁰⁶ At the funeral itself, a close friend of Kariuki's stressed that the event must maintain a "national outlook."¹⁰⁷ This national tone was not a concretized vision. It was, however, a moment in which collective anger surpassed ethnic divisions, and individuals who had once participated in and advocated for multi-party politics along ideological or regional lines found an opportunity to exercise their voice. Kenyans across ethnic boundaries nearly instantaneously expanded their political critique following Kariuki's death and recognized the possible power they possessed, well before any investigation or conclusive evidence linking the Kenyan state to his assassination.¹⁰⁸ Little heed was given to Kenyatta's own publicly expressed sentiments that Kariuki was a "fallen angel," a one-time political insider friendly to Kenyatta who had been "going bad."¹⁰⁹ Bolstered by a heroized memory of Kariuki, this opposition presented a serious challenge to the Kenyan state's authority and mode of governance.

This defiance was enabled by the peculiar absence of the authoritarian state. The Kenyan government lacked a meaningful official response to Kariuki's death, caught between public outrage and fears that Kariuki's death would re-open rifts amongst Kikuyu and catalyze revenge assassinations. On March 12, as street protestors turned their suspicions towards the Kenyan state, the Kiambu faction within the government sought personal safety.¹¹⁰ Numerous

¹⁰⁶ Githuku, "Mau Mau Crucible of War," 259.

¹⁰⁷ *The Standard*, 17 March 1975, 7.

¹⁰⁸ "Aftermath of Kariuki Slaying," American Embassy Nairobi to Secretary of State, Washington DC, 14 March 1975, TNA, 1975NAIROB02187. Following Robert Ouko's death in 1990, Cohen and Atieno Odhiambo say that Kenyans similarly also recognized the "powers that might reside in more expansive, continuing, and additional new inquiries" into Ouko's demise. See Cohen and Atieno Odhiambo, *The Risks of Knowledge*, 260.

¹⁰⁹ Quoted from Branch, *Kenya: Between Hope and Despair*, 118.

¹¹⁰ Confidential, Duff to Aspin, FCO31/1883, 24 March 1975, 37; Confidential, Mansfield to Ewans, FCO31/1885, 3 September 1975, 100.

government ministers either went into hiding or chose to maintain a low profile in the following days. The upper echelon of Kenya's government was unprepared for the vitriolic responses to Kariuki's death.¹¹¹ The physical absence of prominent government figures in public was accompanied by no meaningful official government response to Kariuki's death, nor any official response to the public suspicions cast toward it. The only criticism of Kariuki which publicly circulated were rumours, likely government initiated, that Kariuki had been the possible leader of the Maskini Liberation Front, a supposed terrorist organization that may not have even existed. The obvious effort to discredit Kariuki was flimsy and believed by few.¹¹² At the funeral itself, the sole official government representative was shouted down by gathered attendees when he attempted to deliver his official speech.¹¹³ In 1975, Hilary Ng'weno, the founder of *The Weekly Review*, wrote that Kariuki's death threatened to collapse the room for dissent in Kenya.¹¹⁴ The state absence immediately after Kariuki's death was announced briefly produced the precisely opposite effect, however. The lack of an interfering government at Kanyamwi Estate gave the attendees a freedom to express themselves.

Despite their outward boldness, many of the condemnations of the Kenyatta state articulated at Kariuki's funeral were less ambitious than they may have seemed. Shikiku, Rubia, and Kanja were members of the old guard of Kenyan politics. Students, although present at Kariuki's funeral, did not feature prominently amongst those who spoke and did not articulate

¹¹¹ "Funeral of J.M. Kariuki," American Embassy Nairobi to Secretary of State, Washington DC, 17 March 1975, TNA, 1975NAIROB02222; Loughran *Birth of a Nation*, 125; Maina wa Kinyatti, *History of Resistance in Kenya 1884-2002* (Kenya: Mau Mau Research Center, 2019), 328.

¹¹² Amos Kareithi, "When a Special Branch Spy Hid at City Mortuary to steal JM Kariuki's Body," *The Standard*, March 10, 2019; For the American analysis, see "Bombings and Other Disturbances in Kenya," American Embassy Nairobi to Secretary of State, Washington DC, 7 March 1975, TNA, 1975NAIROB01992.

¹¹³ *The Standard*, 17 March 1975, 1, 7.

¹¹⁴ Maloba, *The Anatomy of Neo-Colonialism in Kenya*, 268.

the more radical socialist, anti-colonial politics circulating on the University of Nairobi campus. The men speaking at Kariuki's funeral were not would-be revolutionaries, despite their wide-ranging critiques of the entire contemporary system of Kenyan politics. Some were, like Kariuki, populist radicals in Kenya's parliament who, for the most part, only demanded in speeches a more equitable form of wealth distribution.¹¹⁵ They were not Communists seeking to topple the status quo. In the absence of the sort of factionalism that had solidified after Mboya's assassination, the critical outcome of Kariuki's funeral was the coalescing of an opposition to the Kenyatta government that was not inflamed by ethnic competition, and that expanded and deepened its critique in subsequent months.

Opposition Politics and the Fragility of the Kenyan State

These critiques that emerged in 1975 were not an aberration, and nor were they solely incited by Kariuki's assassination. They were part of a longer trajectory of disaffection with the Kenyatta regime through the late 1960s and early 1970s. This opposition was provoked in 1975 not just by Kariuki's assassination, but by affairs outside of Kenya's borders that conspired to weaken the Kenyan state's authority, economically and politically. The effects of the 1973 global oil and commodity shock had hit African economies especially hard. Countries were dependent on exporting a narrow range of agricultural and mineral products, a paradigm inherited from colonial predecessors. Having taken on debt from foreign lenders through the 1960s in order to fund the modernization aspirations of independence, the joint combination of soaring world

¹¹⁵ Widner, *The Rise of a Party-State in Kenya*, 97.

interest rates and a downturn in demand for African export products was a catastrophe for many African states.¹¹⁶ Kenya was no exception to these trends.¹¹⁷

The full impact of Kariuki's assassination must be understood within this broader context. Kariuki's death, far from quelling dissent towards rising economic inequalities and disappointment with the fruits of independence, which Kariuki, to the government's discomfort, consistently pointed out, therefore catalyzed a fresh wave of anti-government opposition. This opposition built directly on the tone of Kariuki's funeral. It did not have the goal of undoing the contemporary system of politics inflamed by political tribalism, but the waves of critique levied against the Kenyatta government were not directed by an ethnic coalition seeking to undo Kikuyu hegemony and supplant their control of the state.¹¹⁸ Nor were the varying condemnations of the Kenyatta government put forth in the spring of 1975 for its political transgressions and allowance of class inequalities mediated by or interpreted through the lens of ethnicity, as typically occurred in this system of ethnic politics.¹¹⁹ Instead, Kenyans challenged Kenyatta and the Kiambu clique surrounding his government based on mutual dissatisfaction with the trajectory of Kenya since independence. This opposition found spaces for collective dissent and to imagine the possibilities of meaningful change. The end result, Lonsdale argues, would be the

¹¹⁶ Frederick Cooper, *Africa Since 1940: The Past of the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 106.

¹¹⁷ Robert Maxon and Peter Ndege, "The Economics of Structural Adjustment," in *Decolonization and Independence in Kenya, 1940-93*, edited by B.A. Ogot and William Ochieng' (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1995), 151, 153, 163; Gerrishon K. Ikiara, Joshua Olewe-Nyunya, and Walter Odhiambo, "Kenya: Formulation and the Implementation of Strategic Trade and Industrial Policies," in *The Politics of Trade and Industrial Policy in Africa*, edited by Charles Soludo, Osita Ogbu, and Ja-Joon Chang (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 2004), pages 205-213.

¹¹⁸ Lonsdale has contemplated whether, at some future point, there will be a movement to build a "common citizenship against the prejudices inflamed by political tribalism" in Kenya. See Lonsdale, "Moral & Political Argument in Kenya," 81; For this discussion of ethnic politics and ethnic coalitions, see Lonsdale, "Kenya's Four Ages of Ethnicity," 22.

¹¹⁹ See Ajulu, "Politicised Ethnicity," 251-266.

collapse of the legitimacy of Kenyatta's presidency in 1975.¹²⁰ In Kenya, four interconnected case studies of dissent – accusations that Kariuki's death was a manifestation of neo-colonial violence, the Select Committee which investigated Kariuki's murder, the resurgence of Kenya's organized labour, and the Kenyan government's unravelling control over public discourse – highlight the fragility of the Kenyatta government in 1975.

Indeed, the legitimacy of the Kenyatta government was nearly immediately called into question in the aftermath of Kariuki's assassination. After Kariuki's death was announced to the public, some Kenyans understood the murder as part of a larger problem of neocolonialism. Their instant suspicions that Britain was both involved in the assassination and propping up Kenyatta's presidency indicated that, particularly given widespread disappointment with the failure of development promises in Kenya, there already existed public analyses that neocolonial interests continued to influence Kenya, well before Kariuki's assassination. Marching through the streets of Nairobi in the days just after Kariuki's death was announced, Kenyan students chanted "British imperial forces out," brandishing signs reading "British troops go back to North Ireland."¹²¹ Their denunciations became front-page news in *The Standard* newspaper, and the subject of numerous concerned reports from the British High Commission in Nairobi to its government in the United Kingdom. On March 18, Duff reported to London that "we are regarded by the critics as a sinister *eminence grise* and by some members of the Establishment as a kind of scaffolding that keeps the building intact."¹²² These accusations of neo-colonialism first

¹²⁰ Lonsdale, "Kenya's Four Ages of Ethnicity," 50.

¹²¹ *The Standard*, 15 March 1975, 1; Githuku, "Mau Mau Crucible of War," 263.

¹²² Poppy Cullen, *Kenya and Britain after Independence: Beyond Neo-Colonialism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 223.

opened space for Kenyans to articulate their grievances with the Kenyatta government at Kariuki's funeral, and importantly undermined the state's authority.

Suspicious of British involvement, although largely unfounded, were not isolated to Kenyan students. On March 19, the Kenyan Central Organization of Trade Unions (COTU) issued a public statement hinting that the presence of British troops within Kenya "could be interpreted by our people to mean that Britain is a collaborator in the wanton and beastly murder of J.M."¹²³ The COTU statement recounted Britain's colonial-era crimes and demanded, "on behalf of all the working people of Kenya," the immediate withdrawal of all foreign forces from Kenyan soil. Reports of British military forces in Kenya, possibly complicit in Kariuki's death, circulated credibly enough that the British High Commission worried that the *New York Times* possessed a report claiming British and Kenyan forces were clashing in the Rift Valley.¹²⁴ Protests in the streets of Nairobi thus rapidly took on an anti-state tone leveraged against not just the Kenyan state but against Britain and the nature of British-Kenyan relations after independence. Some Kenyans, in suggesting British involvement in Kariuki's death, explicitly entertained the idea that there was a continuity of empire.

Britain and Kenya had maintained close relations after 1964 through both numerous institutional continuities as well as through direct military collaboration, amongst other links.¹²⁵

¹²³ Confidential, Duff to FCO, FCO31/1883, 19 March 1975, 33.

¹²⁴ "The Difficult Job of Keeping a Nation Informed," *The Weekly Review*, 24 March 1975, 11; Confidential, Duff to FCO, FCO31/1883, 19 March 1975, 34.

¹²⁵ See Mumo Nzau, "The Strategic Art of Appeasing Old Lovers while Courting New Friends: Kenya's Foreign Relations in Retrospect," in *Kenya After 50: Reconfiguring Historical, Political, and Policy Milestones*, edited by Michael Mwenda Kithinji, Mickie Mwanjai Koster, and Jerono P. Rotich (New York City: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 145; Daniel Branch, "Violence, Decolonisation and the Cold War in Kenya's North-Eastern Province, 1963-1978," *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 8, no. 4 (2014), 642-647; Cullen, *Kenya and Britain after Independence*, 215-216.

Scholarship has clarified that these linkages, however, were more complex and symbiotic than simple neo-colonialism.¹²⁶ Available evidence indicates that Britain was as surprised by Kariuki's death as the Kenyan public and that the only British troops in Kenya were apparently a couple of hundred road-building engineers.¹²⁷ Suspicions otherwise amongst Kenyans, regardless of their veracity, are deeply important. In suggesting the Kenyan state was propped up by the former imperial power, Kenyans were questioning the nature of independence and publicly doubting the legitimacy of the Kenyatta government. These denouncements also importantly buoyed others opposed to the regime and provided those opposed to the Kenyatta government a certain righteousness.

These doubts spilled over into Kenya's parliament, which enquired into the issue in the middle of March as the Kenyan and British governments each scrambled to provide a response to the rumours.¹²⁸ The assassination provided backbench parliamentarians a newfound authority. Through the 1970s, what political scientist Jennifer Widner has called the battle for "political space" unfolded between populist backbench parliamentarians, led by Kariuki and Seroney, versus the government and its associated frontbench parliamentarians.¹²⁹ By 1975, backbenchers were struggling to defend their ability to freely question government policy.¹³⁰ A Parliamentary committee, officially titled The Select Committee on the Disappearance and Murder of the Late Member for Nyandarua North, the Hon. J.M. Kariuki, M.P, was quickly convened after the public announcement of Kariuki's death. Amongst its fifteen parliamentary members sat

¹²⁶ Poppy Cullen, "Funeral Planning," 514-515; Nic Cheeseman, "Introduction: Political Linkage and Political Space in the Era of Decolonization," *Africa Today* 53, no. 2 (2006), 20.

¹²⁷ Cullen, *Kenya and Britain after Independence*, 223; *The Standard*, 18 March 1975, 5.

¹²⁸ Confidential, Duff to FCO, FCO31/1883, 19 March 1975, 33.

¹²⁹ Widner, *The Rise of a Party-State in Kenya*, 97-98.

¹³⁰ Widner, *The Rise of a Party-State in Kenya*, 100-105.

lawyers, former mayors, and veteran politicians, including several of Kariuki's allies who had spoken at his funeral.¹³¹ Over the next two-and-a-half months the Select Committee formally met forty-six times and conducted 123 interviews with witnesses.¹³² From its inception, the Committee condemned the Kenyan government and all but put it on trial for Kariuki's murder. Its Chairman, Elijah Mwangale, likened his members' task to the U.S. Congress' Watergate Committee, whose investigation had culminated in President Nixon's resignation the year before.¹³³

The Committee was able to operate with relative freedom through the course of its investigation due to the Kenyan public's expectation that it was their best hope of discovering Kariuki's assassins.¹³⁴ Public outrage and demands for accountability after Kariuki's death were otherwise unprecedented during Kenyatta's rule.¹³⁵ In March, the British High Commission determined that the Committee would likely pose a serious challenge to Kenyatta since Kenyans across ethnic boundaries agreed that "Kariuki was murdered at the President's behest."¹³⁶ Several Kenyan newspapers said the same. "If any group of 15 people can get to the bottom of the circumstances surrounding Kariuki's death, this Committee will," *The Weekly Review* wrote, "for it has the determination and the support of the general public behind it."¹³⁷ Other weeklies

¹³¹ Kenya National Assembly, *Report of The Select Committee*, 1.

¹³² Kenya National Assembly, *Report of The Select Committee*, 1.

¹³³ "It Will Not Be Easy" *The Weekly Review*, 24 March 1975, 7.

¹³⁴ In March, *The Weekly Review* said that "the public's hopes for unearthing the truth [...] are now more pinned on the work of the Select Committee than on the investigations of the police." See "It Will Not Be Easy" *The Weekly Review*, 24 March 1975, 7; Branch, *Kenya: Between Hope and Despair*, 115.

¹³⁵ Branch, *Kenya: Between Hope and Despair*, 117; "Following A Middle Course," *The Weekly Review*, 24 March 1975, 12; "Aftermath of Kariuki Slaying," American Embassy Nairobi to Secretary of State, Washington DC, 14 March 1975, 1975NAIROB02187.

¹³⁶ Confidential, Duff to FCO, FCO31/1883, 13 March 1975, 24-25.

¹³⁷ "It Will Not Be Easy" *The Weekly Review*, 24 March 1975, 7.

were even more hopeful.¹³⁸ Over the next months, politicians such as Mark Mwithaga, Charles Rubia, Waruru Kanja, Maina Wanjigi, Chelagat Mutai, and Jean-Marie Seroney mirrored public anger in parliament.¹³⁹ Several continued to echo the harsh statements heard at Kariuki's funeral, causing *The Weekly Review* to write, "Kariuki's death and the public anger and grief it has aroused seems to have brought MPs closer together and given them the courage to make utterances which under normal circumstances they would not dare make."¹⁴⁰ The evidence of the serious challenge these politicians posed to Kenyatta in 1975 was the success of their investigative work. Prior committees investigating alleged state malfeasance of a similar nature had often been little more than puppet bodies designed to clear the state's name.¹⁴¹

The document which emerged in early June from the Select Committee's investigation was notable for a number of reasons. A section of the report recounted Kariuki's spotless ideals and legacy. The bulk of the report itself reflected an impressive piece of investigative work and a brazen political indictment of the Kenyatta government. It asserted that the ongoing police investigation was a sham and that the Kenya Police Force engaged in a "massive and determined cover-up campaign" to protect Kariuki's assassins.¹⁴² It listed numerous individuals, including the commander of the General Services Unit (GSU), a militarized wing of the Kenyan police, as well as the Commissioner of Police, along with many other officials and district-level politicians, as worthy of investigation for either direct participation or complicity in the murder of

¹³⁸ *Baraza*, 20 March 1975, 1.

¹³⁹ Githuku, "Mau Mau Crucible of War," 200; Widner, *The Rise of a Party-State in Kenya*, 68.

¹⁴⁰ "Following A Middle Course," *The Weekly Review*, 24 March 1975, 12.

¹⁴¹ See Cohen and Atieno Odhiambo, *The Risks of Knowledge*, 44, 282; The American embassy in Nairobi initially expected this Committee would be as impotent as its predecessors. See "Aftermath of Kariuki Slaying," American Embassy Nairobi to Secretary of State, Washington DC, 14 March 1975, 1975NAIROB02187.

¹⁴² Kenya National Assembly, *Report of The Select Committee*, 8.

Kariuki.¹⁴³ The initial report, presented to Kenyatta on June 3, also named both Mbiyu Koinage, who was Kenyatta's brother-in-law, closest ally, and Minister of State, as well as Wanyoike Thungu, who was a member of Kenyatta's personal bodyguard, as complicit in Kariuki's death.¹⁴⁴ Kenyatta personally removed the two names from the report before it was tabled before parliament, leaving most of the indictment of his state intact.¹⁴⁵ His allowance of the rest of the report to be published can be understood as evidence of the strong confidence Kenyatta had in the capacity of his government to survive any public backlash. However, especially given the high public interest in the Select Committee's investigative work, his limited response to the condemning investigation can also be interpreted as the uncertain actions of an aging president. Kenyatta limited his overreach to only removing Koinage and Thungu's names in the likely recognition that their publication would mark the death knell of his presidency. The rest of the report's details of likely police and government-official involvement in Kariuki's murder were freely published in Kenyan newspapers in the following days.¹⁴⁶ Nor was word of Kenyatta's erasures well contained. On June 4, although the Kenyan press did not yet hold a copy of the original report, the American Embassy in Nairobi had firm news of the deleted names, and the erasures circulated in the British press by August.¹⁴⁷ The unchecked diffusion of the report's

¹⁴³ Kenya National Assembly, *Report of The Select Committee*, 36-38.

¹⁴⁴ Hornsby, *Kenya: A History Since Independence* 284-285; Throup and Hornsby, *Multi-Party Politics in Kenya*, 15, 20.

¹⁴⁵ A recent *Daily Nation* report, as well as Kenya's 2008 Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Commission (TJRC), have demonstrated just how close to the truth the Committee likely came. See Hornsby, *Kenya: A History Since Independence*, 285; Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Commission of Kenya, "Final Report - TRJC Report Volume 4" (2013), 25.

¹⁴⁶ For instance, see *The Standard*, 4 June 1975, which covered Kenyatta's reception of the report and its details on its front page.

¹⁴⁷ "Kariuki Murder Report Release," American Embassy Nairobi to Secretary of State, Washington DC, 4 June 1975, 1975NAIROB04564; "All the President's Men," American Embassy London to Secretary of State, Washington DC, and American Embassy Nairobi, 13 August 1975, 1975LONDON12518.

content likely spoke to the uncertain capacity of the Kenyan government and its security institutions.

The formal investigation and interrogation of the Kenyatta government ceased at the tabling of the report before parliament. The Kenyan government never pursued the labelled suspects. But the Committee's impact extended beyond just its report. Throughout the course of its investigation, it demonstrated the apparent impotence of the Kenyan state in the aftermath of Kariuki's death, and the possibility for others to express their own grievances without retribution. Through April and May, Kenyatta was ostensibly aware of the possibility for widespread dissent to his regime. He resorted to reminding Kenyans of his personal authority through several public appearances alongside the Kenyan military.¹⁴⁸ The stony silence from thousands of citizens that greeted his presence at a military march-and-fly past in Nairobi on March 21, usually cheered, signaled the blow his personal image had suffered. It also indicated the Kenyan state's declining ability to quell dissent through non-coercive means, typically enabled by the genuine popularity of Kenyatta as *Mzee*, the guiding elder of the nation.¹⁴⁹ In this context, Kenya's organized labour opportunistically chose the spring of 1975 as a moment to assert longstanding demands. In April 1975, Juma Boy, the Chairman of COTU and an MP and friend of Kariuki, publicly announced that the hundreds of thousands of union members under COTU's umbrella would strike unless they received immediate wage increases. His announcement openly flouted Kenyatta's presidential ban on all strikes in Kenya and challenged

¹⁴⁸ "The Death Probe Continues," *The Weekly Review*, 31 March 1975, 7; *The Standard*, 30 April 1975, 1; *The Standard*, 23 May 1975, 1; "Kenyatta Stages Military Demonstration," American Embassy Nairobi to Secretary of State, Washington DC, 21 March 1975, 1975NAIROB02407.

¹⁴⁹ See Branch and Cheeseman, "The Politics of Control in Kenya," 16, 24.

Kenyatta's deferment of wage increases for unionized workers due to the state's narrowing economic capacity in the mid 1970s.¹⁵⁰

Organized labour had once been at the forefront of Kenya's anti-colonial internationalism. Historian Frederick Cooper has demonstrated how trade union activism in Mombasa from the 1930s-1950s expanded the possibilities for change in colonial Kenya. For colonial officials, the organized strikes which occurred in the city in 1934, 1939, and 1947 demonstrated the ability of poor Africans to organize.¹⁵¹ This threat of radical trade union activism hastened decolonization. For British officials across the empire, who felt they "could not control the forces that the rapid change of the postwar era had suddenly unleashed," it encouraged concessions to the likes of Jomo Kenyatta, who went from British detention nearly directly to head of state.¹⁵² In Kenya, organized labour also did more than just accelerate the path to national independence. Historian Gerard McCann argues that labour activism from the 1940s to 1960s took Kenya beyond "inward-looking Kenyan stories of 'political tribalism'" toward "something more worldly in the nation's journey to postcolonial liberty."¹⁵³ Makhan Singh, Kenya's most prominent trade unionist of the 1940s and 1950s until his detention during the British Emergency, connected Kenya's unions to the international radical left and Marxist anti-colonial Afro-Asian solidarity movements.¹⁵⁴ Tom Mboya, who ascended to labour leadership in Kenya in Singh's absence, re-aligned Kenya's unions in the Cold War world towards the West

¹⁵⁰ "General Strike Threatened in Kenya," American Embassy Nairobi to Secretary of State, Washington DC, 18 April 1975, 1975NAIROB03169.

¹⁵¹ Frederick Cooper, *On the African Waterfront: Urban Disorder and the Transformation of Work in Colonial Mombasa* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), 42-113, 269-270.

¹⁵² Cooper, *On the African Waterfront*, 269-270.

¹⁵³ Gerard McCann, "Possibility and Peril: Trade Unionism, African Cold War, and the Global Strands of Kenyan Decolonization," *Journal of Social History* 53, no. 2 (2019), 349.

¹⁵⁴ Singh sought to bring together Indian and Kenyan activists and networks, united by the shared experience of British colonialism. See McCann, "Possibility and Peril," 353-354.

and anti-communism.¹⁵⁵ McCann argues that Mboya and Singh, despite their oppositional alignments, were both “interlocutors in pluripotent global conversations marshaled for African decolonization.” Through them, Kenya’s organized labour had the possibility of ushering the country into a “globalist future spectacularly unrealized after Kenyan independence.”¹⁵⁶

But, the influence and autonomy of Kenya’s trade unions significantly declined following independence.¹⁵⁷ Kenyatta perceived the political activism of organized labour as a threat to the state and engaged in what McCann calls an emasculation of Kenya’s unions. In 1965, Kenyatta created COTU, a state-affiliated umbrella organization that brought all individual unions under state supervision and suppressed the numerous strikes leading up to its formation. Mboya, made Minister of Labour in 1962, participated in this emasculation which was fully realized in the mid 1960s.¹⁵⁸ Before 1975, COTU had become a politically marginalized organization whose leaders could be legally removed by Kenyatta.¹⁵⁹ COTU’s in-built institutional constraints meant that its challenge to Kenyatta in 1975 could only reflect a mere shadow of the influence and possibility Kenya’s unions had once wielded.

In 1975, COTU explicitly attached its wage demands to Kariuki’s legacy. His death provided the organization, much as it had Kenya’s parliament, a unifying spark. Demanding significant increases to Kenya’s minimum wage for non-farm workers and fifteen to twenty percent wage hikes to compensate for past inflation, Juma Boy received the full backing of

¹⁵⁵ McCann, “Possibility and Peril,” 350, 353; For more information on how Mboya’s star rose through his activism and how he redirected the unions, see Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 162-164, 437.

¹⁵⁶ McCann, “Possibility and Peril,” 350.

¹⁵⁷ Githuku, “Mau Mau Crucible of War,” 205.

¹⁵⁸ McCann, “Possibility and Peril,” 352, 365-366.

¹⁵⁹ Eric Otenyo, “Politics and the Lack of Labor Militancy in Kenya: Trade Unionism after Independence,” in *Kenya After 50; Reconfiguring Historical, Political, and Policy Milestones*, edited by Michael Mwenda Kithinji, Mickie Mwanjai Koster, and Jerono P. Rotich (New York City: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 110-11.

COTU's member unions through the spring. Unfolding alongside concurrent parliamentary opposition to the government, a trade union official anonymously informed the American embassy that a meeting held on April 9 between government officials and union representatives was the "stormiest in ten years" of government-labour union negotiations.¹⁶⁰ COTU legitimized its demands through its remembrance of Kariuki as a staunch pro-union advocate. In April, its leaders proposed that their workers should lead a "JMs march" through Nairobi, which they suggested should begin at the Hilton Hotel, a clearly antagonistic choice given that was where Kariuki had last been seen alive.¹⁶¹ According to U.S. embassy documents, COTU officials openly admitted that they were capitalizing on the government's weakness after Kariuki's death, given that Kariuki's name both inflamed labourers' anger and pressured the government.¹⁶² This was the peak of COTU's dissent. The strikes, with the potential the mass protests may have carried, never unfolded. They were settled in May by Kenyatta's hasty agreement to allow negotiations for modest wage concessions over the following weeks.¹⁶³ COTU's actions in 1975 therefore never manifested into a complete resurgence. The main significance of COTU's brief protest in 1975 is how it illuminates Kenyatta's own declining trajectory.

These events, which demonstrated the waning of the Kenyatta regime, were openly covered in several of Kenya's foremost newspapers. Their coverage of these challenges demonstrated the Kenyatta government's slipping authoritarian control as it lost its oversight over official truths and public narratives. Since independence, the government had restricted

¹⁶⁰ "General Strike Threatened in Kenya," American Embassy Nairobi to Secretary of State, Washington DC, 18 April 1975, 1975NAIROB03169.

¹⁶¹ *The Standard*, 9 April 1975, 1; *Baraza*, 10 April 1975, 1.

¹⁶² "General Strike Threatened in Kenya," American Embassy Nairobi to Secretary of State, Washington DC, 18 April 1975, 1975NAIROB03169.

¹⁶³ *The Standard*, 3 May 1975, 1.

Kenya's media through what Atieno Odhiambo has called the "Ideology of Order," in which state repression was justified in the name of stability, order, and development.¹⁶⁴ Part of this project involved state subordination of what Kenya's media published: journalists who deviated from acceptable narratives risked their freedom and safety.¹⁶⁵ In the spring of 1975, newspapers' adherence to this policy unravelled.

In particular, *The Standard* and *The Weekly Review* openly analyzed the aftermath of Kariuki's death. *The Standard* earned widespread public trust, particularly in contrast to its peer English-language daily, *The Daily Nation*. Since independence, and to 1975, *The Standard*, like its peer newspaper *The Daily Nation*, had offered favourable coverage of Jomo Kenyatta. Each was seen, according to scholar George Ogola, as a "partner in the nation-building project," perpetuating and popularizing Kenyatta's personal legitimacy.¹⁶⁶ Kariuki's death broke this pattern of complicity, buoying *The Standard* and proving disastrous for *The Daily Nation*'s credibility due to its continuing support of the regime.¹⁶⁷ After Kariuki's disappearance in early March, *The Daily Nation* had published that Kariuki was alive and well in Zambia. On March 12, when *The Standard* first broke the news that Kariuki was, in fact, dead, student protestors burned copies of *The Daily Nation* along with effigies of its editor, brandishing signs reading "Daily Nation means daily confusion."¹⁶⁸ In subsequent months, the paper was dismissed as an

¹⁶⁴ See E.S. Atieno Odhiambo, "Democracy and the Ideology of Order in Kenya," in *The Political Economy of Kenya*, edited by Michael G. Schatzberg (New York City: Praeger Publishers, 1987), 179.

¹⁶⁵ George Ogola, "The Political Economy of the Media in Kenya: From Kenyatta's Nation-Building Press to Kibaki's Local-Language FM Radio," *Africa Today* 57, no. 3 (2011), 80; Wa'Njogu J. Kiarie, "Language and Multiparty Democracy in a Multiethnic Kenya," *Africa Today* 50, no. 3 (2004), 60.

¹⁶⁶ George Ogola, "The Political Economy of the Media in Kenya," 81, 82.

¹⁶⁷ Loughran *Birth of a Nation*, 118.

¹⁶⁸ *The Standard*, 15 March 1975, 1.

untrustworthy source of information.¹⁶⁹ Declining faith in what, just months before, had been Kenya's most popular newspaper, was more than just a dismissal of *The Daily Nation* for poor journalism. It demonstrated a declining public faith in the Kenyan government, as many Kenyans determined that *The Daily Nation* was little more than a government puppet, complicit in attempting to cover up the assassination.¹⁷⁰

In response to public anger and interest in Kariuki's death, *The Standard* broke from its historically favourable coverage of the Kenyan government and covered Kariuki's death almost more than it had his life. The widespread readership it subsequently earned caused Frank Patrick, the managing director of *The Daily Nation*, to say in 1975 that *The Standard* was now "the paper of the people. We are paying the penalty for becoming too closely involved with the regime."¹⁷¹ The Kenyan state would eventually force *The Standard* to fire its associate editor, but through the critical months in the spring of 1975 the paper provided unchecked coverage.¹⁷² In the absence of control over formal news, associates of the Kenyatta government instead turned to the practice of promoting counter-rumours against those investigating it. This included a formal "campaign against J.M. rumours" headed by the chairman of KANU's Nakuru district branch. It launched several meetings, attended by thousands of Kenyatta supporters, that denounced students, politicians, and unnamed Communists for subversive anti-government activities.¹⁷³

These efforts did not undo the impact of open coverage of these events, nor did they reverse the Kenyatta government's slipping legitimacy. Many Kenyans agreed that the Kenyatta

¹⁶⁹ "The Difficult Job of Keeping a Nation Informed," *The Weekly Review*, 24 March 1975, 10.

¹⁷⁰ Loughran *Birth of a Nation*, 119.

¹⁷¹ Loughran *Birth of a Nation*, 121.

¹⁷² Branch, *Kenya: Between Hope and Despair*, 119.

¹⁷³ "J.M. Rumours Campaign Gathers Momentum," *The Weekly Review* 12 May 1975, 15; Rumours were also levied against members of the Select Committee. See *The Standard*, 10 May 1975, 1.

government was involved in Kariuki's death, well before the Select Committee's report. These suspicions sent Kenyatta's ministers into hiding during the protests in Nairobi after March 12, and then sent the Kenyan state into a longer retreat over the following months. In face of a vocal opposition that understood its dissent against the government as a clash of socioeconomic and political ideals, Kenyatta's "fragile authoritarianism," despite its outwardly strong appearance, became evident in the spring of 1975.

The University of Nairobi and Kariuki's Legacy

Scholars Heike Becker and David Seddon argue that while Africa's 1950s were predominantly a period characterized by liberation struggles, the 1960s became an "exceptional decade of popular protest across Africa."¹⁷⁴ The energy of anti-colonial liberation movements transformed into a wave of new struggles, often spearheaded by African students' discontent with the status quo. Disillusioned throughout the 1960s by declining economic opportunities, authoritarian one-party governments, as well as continued neo-colonialism and imperialism, the 1970s saw many African youths transform into "hardened opponents of the independence settlement."¹⁷⁵ Occurring alongside radical revolutionary politics in the United States, Europe, Latin America, and Asia, some of the first independence-era governments in Africa were overthrown and replaced by professed Marxist governments. In 1972, Madagascar's President was toppled in a popular revolution incited by students. In that same year, the *République*

¹⁷⁴ Heike Becker and David Seddon, "Africa's 1968: Protests and Uprisings Across the Continent," *Review of African Political Economy*, May 31, 2018.

¹⁷⁵ Leo Zeilig, *Revolt and Protest: Student Politics and Activism in sub-Saharan Africa* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 2.

Populaire du Bénin was established following a military coup, transitioning Benin to a leadership that eventually declared its Marxist-Leninist alignment. In 1974, Ethiopia's Haile Selassie was also unseated by a military coup that, at its origins, appeared to be a revolution aligned with the radical politics of Ethiopian students.

Kariuki's death and its aftermath took place within this broader context of dissatisfaction and revolution in Africa. For Kenyan students, Kariuki's death fuelled pre-existing anger with Kenya's own post-independence settlement. Left-wing politics found increasing appeal amongst students as the free education, stipends, and jobs promised in the glow of independence, and that had once made students look favorably on governing elites, collapsed.¹⁷⁶ As occurred elsewhere in Africa, the economic crisis of the 1970s solidified their opposition to the increasingly authoritarian Kenyatta regime and its suspected neo-colonial practices, catalyzing their engagement with forms of opposition politics.¹⁷⁷ The events that unfolded on the University of Nairobi campus in 1975 in response to Kariuki's death were therefore very much in alignment with events occurring elsewhere on the continent. It also meant that the student uprising against the Kenyatta regime in 1975, which was not mobilized through ethnicity, had the possibility of leading to meaningful change.

The Kariuki issue was harshly escalated on the University of Nairobi campus on May 24, after two plainclothes Kenyan police officers infiltrated the campus to observe and report on a student meeting. At the meeting, students organized to peaceably protest the planned creation of

¹⁷⁶ Maurice N. Amutabi, "Crisis and Student Protest in Universities in Kenya: Examining the Role of Students in National Leadership and the Democratization Process," *African Studies Review* 45, no. 2 (2002), 162; Jacqueline M. Klopp and Janai R. Orina, "University Crisis, Student Activism, and the Contemporary Struggle for Democracy in Kenya," *African Studies Review* 45, no. 1 (2002), 48-49; Zeilig, *Revolt and Protest*, 59.

¹⁷⁷ Zeilig, *Revolt and Protest*, 40-41, 44.

a campus branch of the Gikuyu, Embu, and Meru Association (GEMA), a Kikuyu-dominated political organization that was responsible for organizing many of Kenyatta's loyalty rallies.¹⁷⁸ Alert students quickly outed and surrounded the officers. One was locked up in the campus' central catering unit where students questioned him and stole his identification badge. The minor squabble initiated a rapid response. That same day, Kenyan riot squads swept through the campus and engaged students in an hour-long exchange of teargas and stones. Defying intimidation, students reconvened that evening on the campus and resolved to follow, "to a logical conclusion," the "truth about the murder of Mr. J.M. Kariuki."¹⁷⁹ Even as the Select Committee simultaneously pushed towards publishing its final report, students escalated their political intervention and overtly denounced Kenyatta.

On Monday, May 26, after tensions simmered through the weekend, the University of Nairobi campus transformed into something of a battleground. Beginning in the afternoon, students and riot police began a five-hour standoff, motivated by a police desire to break up student meetings on the campus. The police were joined by the GSU who eventually swept through the campus, responding to hails of stones from students with tear gas and warning shots.¹⁸⁰ Over the course of the engagement, dozens of students were injured, and six civilians and over one hundred students were arrested.¹⁸¹ The GSU treated students with a particular brutality.¹⁸² The University of Nairobi itself was closed, and the thousands of attending students

¹⁷⁸ For a description of GEMA's origins and purposes, see Branch, *Kenya: Between Hope and Despair*, 131-134; "Kenyatta Counters Critics with Loyalty Rallies and Police Action that Closes University," American Embassy Nairobi to Secretary of State, Washington DC, 28 May 1975, 1975NAIROB04336.

¹⁷⁹ *The Standard*, 26 May 1975, 1.

¹⁸⁰ *The Standard*, 27 May 1975, 3.

¹⁸¹ *The Standard*, 28 May 1975, 1; "Kenyatta Counters Critics with Loyalty Rallies and Police Action that Closes University," American Embassy Nairobi to Secretary of State, Washington DC, 28 May 1975, 1975NAIROB04336.

¹⁸² Klopp and Orina, "University Crisis," 50.

were ordered to vacate their dormitories by morning.¹⁸³ Closing the campus was a common tactic by the government and university administration. It ensured that no further student protests and physical challenges to government authority could be organized on its premises.¹⁸⁴

These events all unfolded in the midst of what scholar Maurice Amutabi calls the University of Nairobi's golden age of left-wing politics. Amutabi periodizes this golden age between the late 1960s to early 1980s, during which "perceived leftist luminaries," such as E.S. Atieno Odhiambo, William Ochieng', and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o were on campus.¹⁸⁵ In 1969, the Kenyatta government's refusal to let Odinga speak at the University College of East Africa, shortly to be renamed the University of Nairobi, triggered serious protests on the campus, leading to its temporary closure. 1974 onwards became years of direct and occasionally violent confrontation between students and the government. In response to this rising radicalism, the Kenyatta state had circumscribed the institution in the years leading up to 1975. Scholars Jacqueline Klopp and Janai Orina argue that 1969, coinciding with the ban of the KPU, was the beginning of the Kenyan state "repressing student organization and expression" in Kenya. While the University of Nairobi was in name a post-colonial institution in Kenya, it rapidly came to reflect the "colonial logics of power."¹⁸⁶ These developments meant that the events of 1975 were part of a longer trajectory of radical politics on campus that mobilized outside of ethnic affiliations. Shortly after Kariuki's death was announced, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o argued that the assassination forged a new generation of "socially conscious warriors," resurrecting Kenyan anti-

¹⁸³ *The Standard*, 28 May 1975, 1.

¹⁸⁴ Amutabi, "Crisis and Student Protest," 167.

¹⁸⁵ Amutabi, "Crisis and Student Protest," 163-165.

¹⁸⁶ Klopp and Orina, "University Crisis," 48-49; Amutabi, "Crisis and Student Protest," 163.

colonialism and the aspirations of Kenyan liberation.¹⁸⁷ Given the state's presence on campus, these developments meant that the clashes on the University of Nairobi campus were inherently linked to larger questions about the trajectory of left-wing politics in Kenya, opposition to perceived neo-colonialism and the capitalist developmental state, as well as the role of state authority in everyday social and intellectual life.

The violence that occurred at the University of Nairobi was one of the concluding manifestations of large-scale and openly articulated expressions of anti-Kenyatta government sentiment in the spring of 1975. It was also the crescendo of this opposition, marking the moment the Kenyatta regime turned to the explicit threat and deployment of violence to quell this dissent. In May, Kenyatta openly invoked his own supposed leadership of Mau Mau to remind that *pangas*, machetes wielded by Mau Mau fighters, remained in the government's stock "and could be put to use if the need arises" against "those who speak ill of the Government and propagate rumours."¹⁸⁸ This was the collapse of Kenyatta's ability to silence protests against his authority through his popularity.

The student revolt in 1975 ended here. At the beginning of the Kariuki crisis, the thousands of university students represented, in the British High Commission's estimation, a notable group who could foster change in Kenya.¹⁸⁹ Their anti-government protest was also supported by members of the working class and by backbench parliamentarians.¹⁹⁰ Kenyatta's forceful response successfully halted the progress of their protests.¹⁹¹ The failure of this protest

¹⁸⁷ This was argued in a tribute published in *The Weekly Review*, 24 March 1975, pages 18-19.

¹⁸⁸ *The Standard*, 23 May 1975, 1.

¹⁸⁹ Confidential, Duff to FCO, FCO31/1883, 18 March 1975, 4.

¹⁹⁰ *The Standard*, 28 May 1975, 1.

¹⁹¹ Kĩnyattĩ, *History of Resistance in Kenya*, 331.

was, as scholar Leo Ziegler argues, also somewhat typical. Many student protests in Africa in the 1960s and 1970s failed to materialize into more, guided by both elitism and a “lack of socioeconomic stakes” that limited students’ ability to operate outside the boundaries of the university and apply “permanent (or paralysing) pressure” to governments.¹⁹² Ziegler credits the success of student activism in Senegal in 1968 and Zimbabwe in the 1990s with their ability to connect to trade unions.¹⁹³ In Kenya, Duff noted that students at the University of Nairobi, from his observations, did not show “an aptitude for a student/worker alliance.”¹⁹⁴ Despite the trade union politics that emerged after Kariuki’s death, COTU’s challenge to Kenyatta was, by early May, successfully quelled, and students and workers never collectively protested their political and socioeconomic grievances. This moment, in which the collapse of Kenyatta’s presidential legitimacy could have become more, therefore passed.

There were more sustained effects. The immediate aftermath of Kariuki’s death and the actions undertaken by students demonstrated that the aspirations of independence were not quite dead. March 2 became known as “J.M. Kariuki” day on the University of Nairobi campus. It became a rallying symbol that served to inflame further protests in subsequent years. On the first anniversary of his death, a group of students attended a memorial service at the Catholic Cathedral in Nairobi and transformed it into another political event, followed by further clashes with police outside the building. Although the British High Commission noted that the “tough treatment” by the GSU of students the prior year had visibly dampened student activism, those who turned out despite the threats of violence and arrest indicated that, in the High

¹⁹² Zeilig, *Revolt and Protest*, 46.

¹⁹³ Zeilig, *Revolt and Protest*, 46.

¹⁹⁴ Confidential, Duff to FCO, FCO31/1883, 18 March 1975, 4.

Commission's estimation, "Kariuki's ghost still exerts an influence and provides a focus for those opposed to the present government."¹⁹⁵ Students ensured that Kariuki's name continued to circulate in Kenyan opposition politics.

J.M. Kariuki helped Kenyan students connect to international anti-colonialism and to articulate their opposition to imperialism on the continent. In 1977, Kariuki Day marked the beginning of new, unprecedentedly violent and widespread riots on the campus that would last throughout the year. The riots were sparked by a host of injustices: locally, the arrest of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and, more broadly, the South African regime's violent response to the 1976 Soweto riots, the murder of Steve Biko, and the many governments, such as Britain's, who were seen to continue to support the Apartheid regime.¹⁹⁶ Future student rallies organized on J.M. Kariuki Days would continue to be met with state repression.¹⁹⁷ While it existed, Kariuki Day and commemorations of Kariuki helped rally and inspire anti-colonial politics amongst Kenya's youth. It demonstrated the connection between Kariuki's assassination and broader anti-imperialism on the continent. Through these protests in response to and inspired by Kariuki's assassination, Hornsby argues that a new generation of young Kenyan elites was radicalized.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁵ Confidential, C.D. Crabbie to FCO, FCO 31/2019, 3 March 1976, 10.

¹⁹⁶ Amutabi, "Crisis and Student Protest," 167-168.

¹⁹⁷ See Klopp and Orina, "University Crisis," page 50, as well as their footnotes, page 72.

¹⁹⁸ Hornsby, *Kenya: A History Since Independence*, 286.

Conclusion

What unfolded in 1975 allows a reflection on the role of ethnicity in Kenyan politics. After independence, successive Kenyan governments and political elites maintained colonial-era political structures and instrumentalized ethnicity to protect their own interests.¹⁹⁹ However, while ethnicity, as a mobilizing force, has operated prominently in Kenyan politics, Kenyans also possess agency within this system, and alternative possibilities of political organization existed. In 1975, the critiques leveraged by Kenyans against the Kenyatta government were not mobilized by political elites appealing to their ethnic constituencies, but around socioeconomic and political ideals. These critiques were not fully formed class-based politics or a class-based critique of inequality, but this opposition to Kenya's status quo was not fragmented by ethnic divisions. The events of 1975 suggest that class politics could at least be imagined and partially rallied against inequalities in Kenya, alongside, if not against, the system of instrumentalized ethnicity that the Kenyatta government and affiliated elites wielded to protect their interests. The events highlight the agency of Kenyans, and the spaces Kenyans found to protest against authoritarianism.

For the history of African politics, these events also contribute insight into the fragility of even ostensibly strong states who ultimately survived internal challenges in the post-independence era. The weakness of the Kenyatta government in the spring of 1975, despite its firm grip on political power and security structures, points to the limited capacity of authoritarian African governments to quell vocal opposition movements. In Kenya, Kariuki provided a rallying martyr around which Kenyans could critique the Kenyatta government, perceived neo-

¹⁹⁹ See the introduction to Shilaho, *Political Power and Tribalism in Kenya*, 1-28.

colonialism, and the many continuities from the colonial era. Aligning with recent scholarship, the figure of J.M. Kariuki, and the manner in which his name was invoked by many Kenyans after his death, therefore also points to the agency of ordinary Africans, rather than the agency of the state, in forming posthumous legacies.²⁰⁰ Kariuki's legacy was ultimately not shaped by the Kenyatta government, backed by the full legacy-making capacity of the state. The aftermath of Kariuki's death sheds light on the possibilities for those outside elite political competition and governance to shape national politics through bold imaginative and prescriptive efforts.

In Kenya, the formal political opposition to the Kenyatta government stalled in 1975. After biding its time, the Kenyatta government responded harshly to its parliamentary critics. On October 15, both Shikuku and Seroney were arrested in parliament for agreeing that KANU was "dead." Their arrests marked a crackdown on even the limited dissent possible within parliament.²⁰¹ However, the collapsed legitimacy of Kenyatta's presidency in 1975 had resounding effects. In 1978, Daniel Arap Moi ascended to the presidency, fending off challenges from Kiambu elites who had sought to ensure that Moi, who was both an outsider to the clique and not Kikuyu, would not automatically ascend to the presidency should Kenyatta die in office. In defying the challenge and maneuvering for the presidency, Moi benefitted from the Kariuki affair and internal Kikuyu rifts following Kariuki's assassination. Even as the image of the Kenyatta government and senior Kikuyu suffered in the aftermath of the assassination, Moi had successfully distanced himself from the entire affair and received verbal support from those

²⁰⁰ For instance, see Pedro Monaville, "The Political Life of the dead Lumumba: Cold War Histories and the Congolese Student Left," *Africa* 89 (2019), 32.

²⁰¹ Kenyatta Orders Two Mp's Detained," American Embassy Nairobi to Secretary of State, Washington DC, 16 October 1975, 1975NAIROB09069.

investigating the Kenyatta government.²⁰² His presidency would still uphold authoritarian politics in Kenya. The state's institutional structures and the logic of authoritarian divide-and-rule and ethnic-based politics, inherited from the colonial era, held firm. Yet this trajectory was not inevitable. Probing responses to Kariuki's assassination and his martyrdom highlights the imaginaries of alternative futures contained in the past.

²⁰² "Moi apologizes," *The Weekly Review*, 24 March 1975.

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