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Kenya Research project by Robert M. Press [see: Press, Robert M. (2006) *Peaceful Resistance: Advancing Human Rights and Civil Liberties*. Aldershot, U. K.: Ashgate.]

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Interview conducted by Robert M. Press (bob.press@usm.edu; press.bob@gmail.com)

Interviewee: Kepta Ombati

Location of interview: Nairobi, Kenya

Date of interviews: November 8, 2002

Transcription by Press includes research notations by the interviewer in brackets or parentheses; some emphasis is added in bold or underlined. Double ?? indicates unclear transcription, spelling or unverified point. BP= interviewer Bob Press; RO = Interviewee: Raila Odinga.

**Kepta Ombati Nov. 8, 2002 in the NCEC office in Nairobi

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Summary points:

Youth, not politicians, backed and mobilized public support for mass demonstrations of 1997

“Generals” and “foot soldiers” in civil society

Organizational resistance; not individual (NYM was key)

**1997 – demonstrations by civil society, not politicians

KO I can't say that that was the genesis of demonstrations in this country. The difference is this; that the previous demonstrations had been organized by politicians. But these were demonstrations organized by ordinary Kenyans. The leaders of NCEC [National Convention Executive Council] were ordinary Kenyans.

[comment: Not exactly: they were urban, educated “elites.”]

What we're saying is that people were empowered. When they saw that ordinary people can organize and make the government do what they want – not politicians: you don't have to be a politician to do it. That was the big difference

BP And part of the [element??] was, there was a whole infusion of youth coming into it.

KO That's right.

Youth back mass demonstrations of 1977; politicians were reluctant

BP In fact, you forced the hand of NCEC to have demonstrations anyway; I don't think it was a popular issue to begin with.

KO No, it wasn't. **The whole idea of mass action was an idea of the young people. It was youth driven.** People at the first plenary session were these politicians and others who are very conservative were very opposed to the idea. But the young people are very focused.

Tactics of youth for demonstrations of 1997

...in charge of those people who physically mobilized for mass actions throughout that period. I can tell you that the people who were doing this work were students and young people, most of them who were either political activists or who were unemployed. They are the people who got into these slum areas and the estates and so on. We were distributing leaflets; we had megaphones and we were going around calling people to turn up [for the 1997 rallies] and we were physically helping move the people, marshalling the people.

What the 'commanders' – we used to call them **the 'Generals' [politicians] used to...come and grace the occasion; give speeches. But the actual work, the planning and all that was done by young people.** There is another young person you actually ought to talk to who was my colleague at the Secretariat, and he's called Suba Churchill [??]. Suba Churchill?? was a student at Edgerton?? [University??]; I was a student leader at Kenyatta University. So we came...to the movement with that competence because with student politics and activism, we used to organize the students, which is one of the reasons this task was given to us. I was the Secretary General of the Kenyatta University Students' Organization [title??] for two years from '93 to '95.

BP People don't always serve for two years; sometimes its one year.

KO Yeah, its' one year, but...the Association was banned. I served in the first year as a formal Secretary General; I resigned voluntarily, if you go to the record. And for the first time had an election and handed over in the same year. But when we came back, the University had disbanded the Association. So the students demanded that I should be there. So that's what happened anyway.

BP Generals would make the speeches; what do you call yourselves then?

KO We used to use the derogatory term – **we are the footmen, we are the foot soldiers, we are the infantry; we are the people.** You know we –

BP That's the term I've been using. There's nothing derogatory about it. They're the guys who win the war.

Tactics of youth

KO So, that's what we used to do. And **even in terms of organizing for security, intelligence, and all those things, it is us young people who were doing it.**

BP I want you to tell me more about that; we still haven't got it. That was my number one question: what are the details about that. I think that's essential.

Networking with friends

KO Oh. You see what we used to do with the mobilization is, many of us have our own networks. We have informal settlements like Kibera [a large slum]. So we would identify those teams, our networks, our friends; people we've been with either in school or – and we would identify them. And those would become our focal points, our contacts there.

Framing the message – based on what people say on the street

Then when we would come here [to the NCEC office] – draft – all these messages- we used to draft all these messages – we would come here. There were teams here. There would be a whole team here sitting down and getting the written message, messages which is derived from what we

picked [up] from the street, what are people talking about. So we would convert that into one liners, into brief messages and take them to those contacts. And those –

[interrupted by my own mobile phone]

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KO (continues) We formed early on, before the first plenary session, what we called the National Youth Movement. This was formed at the National Youth Convention which was held in March [1997], a month before that convention [of the NCEC?? Or NCA??] That is the one that designed the program of mass action. So the National Youth Movement became the vehicle through which we organized all these activities. And we, I told you once our people used these contacts in these informal settlements where we have most of the people who [did the work].

Youth activists: students and unemployed from the slums

BP In other words, most of the volunteers are coming from low income areas.

KO That's right. The other ones were students...Having contacts within the student community, it was very easy to get the students involved. And they, themselves, were very keen to get involved.

BP Did the politicians also call on their sort of supporters, too, or were –

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KO What we used to do is organize like pickups; we would organize pickups and vehicles. **We have politicians go around, OK. Because we must admit that they also – they are crowd pullers.** Like if we would have [James] Orengo, [Paul] Muite in a pickup, you know, going around, that would bring the people. We would organize for a press conference. That's what we used to do – all those things; and we would organize...for a press conference when they bring these people together. So that information would go out, and so on.

We used to organize for security because security was not guaranteed. We had to protect our 'Generals.' We used to organize a security and we used to have the intelligence. Now intelligence basically meant we had people who are very close to KANU and KANU militias who would tell us what they would be organizing, what they would be planning to do and so on. So that would help us reduce – take precautions and reduce the casualty. All those things mostly young people used to do. Of course we used to get some information from the older people, but the people who were full-time on this were young people.

End of interview