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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: Muthoni Kamau
Location of interview: at her home in Nairobi, Kenya.
Date of interview: December 21, 2005 (2005 is correct)

Transcription by Bob Press. BP = interviewer (Bob Press); MK = respondent (Muthoni Kamau) Bracketed, underlined, or bold research notes or important points are also shown, along with some tape counter numbers.

[Muthoni Kamau, a former youth activist, expresses her disillusionment with the reform movement. She argues it has become professionalized by non-activists and note the Kibaki regime tolerates verbal dissent and ignores it. She sees no new generation of activists emerging, but hopes they will.

In 1995, Muthoni translated an interview I did with Koigi Wamwere's mother, Monica, in the basement of the All Saints Cathedral in Nairobi, where the mothers had continued their strike for a year after police chased them out of Freedom Corner in 1992. Muthoni was an active member of Release Political Prisoners at the time and a youth activist.]

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BP Muthoni, when you look at human rights activists, youth activists, are they still very active today, or have things changed some?

<u>Activism responds to political needs</u>
MK Youth are always active. The question is – if you're asking me as youth in 92 whether I'm still as active now, of course ages are catching up and there is definitely a new generation of youth that is also active. Two, I think also the tempo of activism, the political tempo of activism, of the youth, also depends on the political climate prevailing at particular times.

And more often than not the youth are mostly kind of 'foot soldiers' or youth wings of the older generation. It's so unfortunate because they have more at stake politically than the older generation. And what has been disturbing to me is that unlike our times when we were – I'm still youth, yeah – but not as youthful; I'd have wanted to see another Muthoni very active from the university, be in the streets, a new RPP [Release Political Prisoners; a group formed in the early 1990s in response to political detentions and run mostly by youth activists funded from abroad], a new 4 c's [Citizen's Coalition for Constitutional Change], a new NCEC [another constitutional reform organization: National Convention Executive Committee]. It can only be new if you have youth that are not only winners, political winners, but have political ideas of their own. So accompanying the energy, accompanying the vigor that comes with youth; accompanying the courage – because youth is courageous. Accompanying that should be some political ideas to show that youth also have ideas that they want to sell to the rest of society.

BP You don't see that.

MK I don't see that. I feel so bitter that the generation I left at the University actually came to kill what we had built.

BP You mean the foot soldiers self-destructed?

MK Yeah, they have done that. Not all. You still find some…

BP Why have they lost their energy?

MK It also depends on the political climate that is there.

BP After the 2002 when you had a…democratic election, did the steam go out; not as much need for achieving – I mean the goal used to be: get rid of Moi. Once he was gone, did the steam go out of this thing?

No real opposition

MK Ah, yes. To the populace that attached so much focus on removing Moi but not rooting out Maoisim. So you'd have a new outfit, a new guard. But using the same old tricks. And that also shapes the kind of activism of the youth because they either align themselves with people in leadership or those in the opposition. And **the opposition in this country since 1990 has not been opposition; it's simply the opposite of those in power [laughs softly].** Not opposition in terms of ideology, opposition in terms of even the party manifestos. And it's kind of they've got the same consultant. It's not much difference. In fact if you were to look at those particular manifestos I think KANU's [the long-time government party that lost in 2002: Kenya African National Union] would emerge best.

So you find we the youth, we are drawn, or sucked into this kind of politics; or singing for Raila [Odinga] or singing for [President Mwai] Kibaki, elected in 2002. Either banana or orange [symbols chosen by those for or against the constitutional referendum that failed in 2005], but where is the idea, where is the ideology, where is the difference in terms of political demand? Because at the end of the day, Raila and Kibaki are in the same political boat. And they will retreat and ask themselves, where are we going to lose if we go this way; where are we going to gain if we go this way. Because they are one and the same

BP So do you see – what do you see lying ahead? Where are the foot soldiers today?

Hoping to hand over activism to a new generation

MK Oh [pause] You can't lose a whole generation. You can't say [from] the whole mass of people you will not get – in Swahili we say 'che che ya moto' [spelling??] – a 'spark'. We always get a spark. **I'm pretty sure there are youthful people out there with strong ideas and convictions that they want to push forward**. I'm pretty sure about that.

I'm still an activist; I'm not a former activist; I'm still an activist So much so. What my contribution would be is to go out there before my energy dies, identify these youthful people and share with them, share with them – it's not a question of training – you can't train courage. **You can train tactics but you can't train courage**. So you have to identify youth who are courageous and positive; they don't just want to run in the streets. They want to ask themselves, why am I running in the first place, before I run. Why am I running? We get there. We share

with them ideas of organizing; ideas of how even to participate in these political parties, as equals, not as appendages of the political figures, but as equals. And see whether we can develop, hand over the activism to a new generation of Kenyans. That's the way I look at it.

And I was explaining to you what I've been involved in at the 4 Cs. We have [done] quite a bit. And at 4 C's and through the CRECO ? program, I managed to organize a theater program. It was part of the CRECO program.

BP Tell me what the drama looked like. If I walk in and see your drama, what's it about?

MK It's about the constitution and about people's participation in making the constitution. And what is also interesting is, we had one national team…

BP What do you see as the relationship between youth activists and the power structure here? Is there any connection? Any linkages?

Few links: youth activists and power

MK They are there and yet they are not there. They are there – the structures are so much exclusive; they're not inclusive. **There is very little participation of youth, of women, of minorities. That's a fact**. **There's very little participation of the masses [in] structures of governance; of course there can't be development without proper governance**. That is one.

Activists seen as 'servants' [Kepta Ombata, another youth activist says activists are seen as 'dangerous'] by the 'old guard' that came to power in 2002.

MK Two, the old guards have, they don't look at youth as positive energy to be used in developing society. But they look at them as their servants, so to speak. So the youth will be deployed in the police force. The youth will become the bodyguards, BUT [her emphasis] they will not become ministers.

BP Bodyguards of ?

MK Of the leaders, of the politicians, of the ministers, of whoever has money to pay the bodyguards.

BP They don't become their advisors?

MK Yeah, they don't become their advisors. You talk of youth, you think about the education system. Because youth is a product of the education system. And the education system should be there to serve the society, to developing the youth to be responsible citizens. But look at the education system. It is so disconnected with the needs of the society, the reality on the ground. And children and youth are put through the education system just to pass time, but not in terms of developing them to take over leadership, to take over institutions of government, to take over the processes of development. [They are] not being developed for that.

BP. Alright. If we're looking at 20 years from now, are you going to see the same kind of politics as you do today, with a new generation of leaders, perhaps but not really activists, just people who have been sucked into the system and acting the same way as current politicians act?

MK If the system continues the way it is, if the political temperature and climate continues the way it is, that, unfortunately, will be the scenario. But, I'm not a pessimist. I want to look at the brighter side. And like I said before, I always believe there is a spark; there's an element in the whole basket of youth who are just expending their energies instead of accompanying their energy with ideas. I still believe there's some with greater ideas. And they only need to be channeled; that energy needs to be channeled in the right direction. And if we are still alive – the likes of us –the Keptas, the Cypriens [youth activists] – I think in 20 years we should see a difference in terms of youth politics. We should, really, unless we don't aim to have any impact. But I'm hoping that we'll have some impact.

Professionalization of activist organizations by non-activists

MK The organizations have also changed faces. There was a wave of incoming professionals who are not activists but work, office work-oriented.

BP Starting in the late 1990s?

KM Yeah. You know, going to the streets and taking in that teargas takes a lot of courage. So the idea of demonstrations is a way of pushing change….they don't want to look at themselves as activists going to the streets. They want to look at themselves as workers of RPP or NCC. So that changes the whole aspect.

Two. That time, early 1990s, just being able to make a few steps in whatever streets, especially in Nairobi, was such a big achievement because of how tough the government was. Now it is almost legal to go into the streets. In fact, recently I have seen we have adopted your tactics, your way of demonstrating, coming to picket. People are picketing Parliament and that kind of thing [a demonstration in the 1990s in front of Parliament was met by Moi's dispatched paramilitary troops and police using force and weapons, by contrast]

Institutionalization of protests: demonstrations lose their distinction; become the norm

And the politicians have changed a bit. I think he's a clever politician, Kibaki, as opposed to Moi because he knows he will make more headlines when the police beats you, so he lets you yap and yap without interrupting, but knowing very well he will not listen to whatever you say. But you don't only demonstrate for the President to listen. You demonstrate for the world to know your demands. So for that matter also, you find that **demonstrating also as a tactic has also been watered down**. I mean **everyone is holding processions in Nairobi nowadays**, including church people, holding processions, urging people to attend their crusades.

So it's not like in the [laughs] early '90s when it was such a spectacle to be in the streets. So I think those are factors that contribute to a change of tactics…One: the internal organization of the organizations themselves; they are more office-oriented than activism. Also, the courage of the youth involved in running those organizations…

Non-activists take key jobs in NGOs.

As unemployment rises, people are now more willing to seek employment where they can get it, even if it means working for an organization like that. And when the donors push, those who are funding push to get professionals. Therefore you open your door to anyone who would be willing to work. Therefore you just have to take those people, whether or not they believe in activism, or

not, so long as they come and work. But you do not demand certain characteristics of them as we used to do when we were recruiting for RPP before. You don't demand that, because all you want is people able to work. But when you have an activity on the street, the person says, 'I'm on leave,' or 'I'm in the office,' and you can't push them, because they are not obliged to do that.

BP But, **do you think their activism is as effective today as it was before?**

KO No, no. You might have to inject some new energy…accompanied by understanding of why they are demonstrating. Ideas of what is it that we are demanding., not just falling into the streets. [?]
338 End of interview.