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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: Archbishop Ndingi Mwana 'a Nzeki

Location of interview: his church office in Nairobi, Kenya

Date of interviews: October 29, 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; NN = Interviewee: Ndingi Mwana 'a Nzeki.

Biographical information:

Profession – clergy

Highest educational degree: BA in history of political science; St. Johns Fisher College [??] in Rochester, N.Y. Honorary degree of doctor of laws from the same college.

Residence: Nakuru/Nairobi

Ethnicity: Kamba

Religion: Catholic

No party affiliation

BP What did you do to promote human rights in Kenya between 1987 and 1997 and by human rights I'm really talking about the core political human rights, the basic ones...freedom of assembly, the right not to be tortured, not to be killed?

NN First of all I go back to 1981...in that year Kenya Episcopal Conference issued a document on justice and peace and it formed a committee on justice and peace, a national committee. And the Diocese of Nakuru where I was a Bishop formed ...the same commission. And the purpose was to instruct the people on first of all how to be just to one another. And if there are unjust structures all people have to [seek to] inform them so they can change their ways. That document was one of the best we have in this country...From that moment people went ahead and they were instructed on justice and peace. A first thing is to be just to one another. The most important [thing is] to act justly ourselves, to treat each other justly ourselves, and if there are injustices, [seek to] correct them – again, using just and peaceful ways to bring in a change of heart.

BP Unjust structures meaning government laws...

NN Government laws; institutions, actions by the police or by organizations, even among themselves, maybe within the church: one group in a church may be against another group in a church because of the way they want to build a church in a different place, and that type. To meet and discuss things. That group, that justice and peace [commission] has worked extremely well in this country, so much so that when the [ethnic] clashes broke out, tribal clashes broke out

in 1991 and 1997, it was easy to use these offices [of the Commission] to protect the people who were being thrown out to other places.

BP You mean the Justice and Peace Commission was very active [during the clashes].

NN Very, very active

[STRATEGY/TACTIC: Open disapproval; quiet diplomacy with the state]

BP What did you do during those years to try to help promote human rights during those clash years in Nakuru [region]?

[TACTIC: overcoming evil with good?]

NN Yes. First of all we evacuated the people from the place where they were being persecuted, mistreated; brought them to safe places. And their pastor told them they were free to live there. We provided them with food, clothing, and all that, advice, counseling. Ernest Murimbi [spelling??] [of the Justice and Peace Commission in Nakuru] was one of the best, fearless, and also tried to speak to the government and the police so that they would be impartial in treating people. So from that point of view we were very successful.

These commissions have continued to this date. And what they are doing now is like now we are preparing the same committee about the elections, the coming [Dec. 27, 2002] elections.

BP What impact do you think those commissions had on the state behavior in terms of human rights.

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NN Definitely they listened to us. They listened to us. And they acted less violently than they would have done otherwise. Without us there would have been very [much more] violence.

BP Well, there were a lot of people that died during the period, so how do you measure the success of a commission like that?

NN The fact that – we know many people died, but not as many as – if the commission – the people were not – if we didn't speak to the police, [if] we didn't speak to the administration, PCs, DCs, and so on, and call attention to the evil that was happening, things would have been worse. The Bishops met and issued several statements denouncing the violence.

BP And there were several pastoral letters

NN Pastoral letters; a lot of them

[Mental shift: breaking the fear against speaking out: Bishops speak for the people; people quote them; this is like the newspapers quoting court proceedings when activists used courts to speak out.]

BP What effect do you think pastoral letters had, especially when they [were] signed by almost all, or all of the bishops?

NN It encourages the people to speak out against the evil. It was 1992 when we had a mass in the Cathedral here, and we issued a letter when we denounced the crisis at that time. You see, what happens, once the Bishops speak, people can, they say: the Bishops said; so the people are not saying it themselves; the Bishops said. Therefore the government cannot [criticize] them for saying it; they are not saying it. The Bishops said; the Bishops demanded; the Bishops asked we do A, B, C, D. That way they [the people] can't be attacked because they are not saying it themselves.

BP It gives people the courage to stand up –

NN **To stand up and speak out.** That they did, definitely. And people of all ethnic groups, not just one particular group. It was really a political move to get people to [speak] out...

BP That was the main motivation behind them [the 1991/92 clashes]. Was that also [the motivation for] Lakoni in 1997?

NN Absolutely.

BP An electoral campaign of violence?

NN Yes. Yes, Yes, Yes.

BP With the government definitely behind it?

NN Absolutely. There's no question about it; there's no question about it. You can read that Akuwumi [spelling??] report. You can read that. I gave them all my reports. I had about ten appointments. I had about six or ten volumes of my writing from 92 to 97.

BP Tell me a little bit more about your own personal activities. You talked about the Commission, but you as an individual –

NN My own personal commitment – I went to every part where these things [were] rumored to be taking place [the clashes]. I informed the police. I was going I was going there...coming back I informed them what I saw. And I requested [that] they do act to defend the people, to protect the people. And I must say, the ordinary policeman was cooperative. He knew what was happening. But then [they] had to act under fear of being either expelled from their job or being exchanged in positions. So you can understand that.

Fear lessens the degree of guilt. In other words, if you are frightened, you act under fear. In moral theology, my guilt is not as much as if I was free of any intimidation. If I'm threatened to act – once I'm told you must do it, if you don't I hit you, then I act under that fear. My degree of being guilty is less than if I was free to act.

BP Did you feel at any time that your own life was in danger?

[Danger: death threat; he laughs recalling it, like others have recalling their danger as activists]

NN Yes. There was one time when someone telephoned. One of our priests who had a recording telephone machine. And the message was left on the telephone, saying Bishop Ndingi must be killed. We took the telephone tape to the Criminal Investigation Department [CID]. They collected a tape machine, listening machine. They went to prepare it in my offices while my priests were waiting in the sitting room. After an hour they [the CID personnel] disappeared without listening to the tape. So I told them they knew what the message in the tape was.

BP So they never really acted –

NN They never investigated. So I told them, if they kill me – we have a saying in our language [Kamba]: You can live with one enemy, but when there are seven enemies, you don't deal with them easily. So I told them I am only one alone. They kill me; the Lord will raise seven others. You know the story in the Gospel. [He mentions “seven Ndingis, laughing slightly]. So they spared me... [laughs again]. So they left me alone.

Somebody broke into my house. I suspect it was the security people. They stole my pectoral cross. They stole my Bishop's ring, and my graduation ring, and another ring I had gotten from Italy...it was just to intimidate me; to intimidate me. I was away myself in the States...They knew when he [the priest staying in his home while he was away] was giving mass, so they knew when he was out. [Apparently they had keys, possibly from an employee]. So they came in the main door and after taking these things, there was 10,000 [Kenyan] shillings under my reading desk. They never touched it. Going out they opened the door, to pretend they came through the window...but you cannot pull it from outside [the window mechanism]...

***[TACTCS and qualities of activists: Courage counts a lot]**

BP You've been involved at a very critical point in human rights. What kinds of tactics, what kind of strategies are effective against an authoritarian government who is abusing human rights?

***TACTICS: courage; facts; articulation; public challenge**

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NN First of all you need to be very courageous, get your facts...analyze your facts, be satisfied you know the truth and you can articulate it. Then challenge those acting contrary to human rights. Publicly. Publicly. The people will defend you when it comes to that (unclear).

BP And the role of the church. Speaking not just of your own church, but the role of the churches in Kenya in promoting human rights during this rather critical period. What would you describe it as?

NN Wonderful. Wonderful. Both the Catholic Church and the National Council of Churches of Kenya, and even in some instances with the Muslims, we worked together. As a matter of fact we formed what we called Ufungamano...a group consisting of Christians, Muslims, and Hindus. That group has been wonderful, with a very, very committed active and articulated Secretary Mutava Musyimi [spelling??]

BP And you mentioned reducing fear as an important step. Could you comment on the role of the churches in using sermons, such as Bishop Gitari's sermons and Okullu's, and your own in reducing fear and standing up for human rights?

TACTIC: love – including your enemies]

NN Yes. You encourage the people, but you avoid attacking persons, at least I do. **I wouldn't attack people, persons. I attack the policies;** I attack the attitudes; I attack what they said and try to be positive, positive, to show what they should have done instead of that. In other words I avoid – I never attack persons. At the same time you remain very charitable. Should anybody need help [we] ought to be able to receive anybody, friends or enemies, who are in need. That position frees peoples' attitude. If people know you are ready to help – anybody –

BP government people, private people-

NN Yes, private people, even those who think you are foolish: [asking] why are you helping. And we say we are helping these people because following the Gospel, Jesus never returned, never sent anybody away when they looked for help. He never even asked where are you from: whether you are from Galilee or Jerusalem or you're on the tyrant's side, or Pagans, or Greeks...*he received everybody* (his emphasis) without even condition. He only gave a condition afterwards. Like remember the woman who was caught in adultery, he [Jesus] says: you are now healed, don't sin again. The blind man: he said, well wash yourself and eyes and show the priests. And sometimes he didn't want people to know. Remember the man, the crippled person. He healed him and he went and disappeared in the crowd. People said, hey, who is it. Oh I don't know, somebody healed me. Then he went to the temple and people said, hey, that man, the one called Jesus.

BP Did you find at times government officials or policemen came to you quietly and asked for forgiveness?

NN No. But I was very informed. I knew the policemen were honest. And I could understand [their] position; they could lose their job. So I didn't. But I was involved; I was in touch with the police... I [had] my own information network.

Clergy and some others acted as individuals, without institutional support.

BP There were individuals also, including yourself, who in the early 1990s and the late 1980s acted without the support of a lot of institutions, just as individuals.

NN Yes. Yes

BP Standing up on their own, challenging authoritarian rule to forward human rights.

NN Yes, I did

[goes off record; tape stopped]

[on record resumes]

****Motivation: overcoming fear when leaders speak out first]**

BP What is it that encourages people to stand up and take a stand on human rights, ordinary people?

NN (WITH EMPHASIS; VERY QUIETLY SPOKEN BUT EMPHATICALLY) *When they know that people like me in the area where I am a Bishop, they know my stand; and they know I will defend them; I speak for them. Then they speak out. Yes. They do. Leadership.*

BP So the leaders, in your case in the church, have to be willing to take a risk.

NN *And big* (emphasis) risks; then people –

Clashes: government tactics

BP There was talk of private armies [during the clashes]. Were there private armies?

NN No – what they used to do is recruit unemployed youth, give them money. That was no ‘army.’ They may have used – in Mombasa they used the Army; I think they did in Likoni [site of the worst clashes in 1997].

BP In other words they [the government] take advantage of poor people, give them some money to do bad things.

NN In Likoni I think they did use [the Army]. Then people came out immediately. They withdrew immediately. And also the international – embassies and international organizations spoke with them [the government] and they withdrew.

BP I saw the clashes, too. I was out there with [the Catholic Church in Nakuru’s Justice and Peace Commission worker Ernest] Murimi [spelling??], so I know what you are talking about.

Was there coordination between the churches in terms of trying to stand up for human rights in the clashes period?

TACTIC: Bishops stood together – “no matter what”

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NN In 1992, yes, it started. As Bishops we worked together. In some areas there was no cooperation. Some people were afraid, you know. But otherwise we worked together – we stood together. **As Bishops we agreed we are going to support each other no matter what** (his great emphasis). So when a Bishop spoke – at one time I spoke and they [government supporters, presumably] all came out and ‘attacked’ me, my fellow Bishops said: we support Bishop Ndingi what he says, what he has done. One hundred percent. Even though [the Bishops would] have done the opposite, the same thing or used different words, [they said] we support him.

Motivation

BP What was your motivation for taking such risks?

NN (very softly) To protect the people. The good of the people. The good of the people; people’s security, people’s safety, people’s – what do you call it? – people’s freedom. Nothing else. Nobody ever gave me money. No police ever gave me money. We bought food, nobody ever died. We had [thousands] of families in our compound. We fed them daily; we paid school fees

for them, we provided medicine. And on Sunday they were free to worship wherever they wanted. There was no question of what religion you belong to...

[End of tape Side 1, tape 1; end of interview]