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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: Njoroge Waithera

Location of interview: National Executive Convention Council office, Nairobi, Kenya.

Date of interview: November 7, 2002

Transcription by Bob Press. BP = interviewer (Bob Press); NW = respondent (Njoroge Waithera) A?? indicates a point unclear. Bracketed, underlined, or bold research notes or important points are also shown. Some tape counter numbers are shown.

Njoroge Waithera was another of the youth activist leaders in the push for constitutional reform which involved a series of public (illegal) rallies in Kenya that police broke up with deadly force. A number of Kenyans were killed, but the rallies continued. The aim was to obtain constitutional reforms reducing the colonial-era strong powers of the President before the 1997 presidential elections.

Here Waithera discusses some of the tactics and youth (35 and under) agenda vs. middle class ex-Kanu politicians. (Another youth leader was Ndung'u Wainaina, also interviewed.) He also expresses his frustration with the way senior activists got more attention and help than youth activists who took more risks. He argues that real reform will not come with middle-class politicians assuming office but only when the young generation joins the power structure.

Shikuku in his interview describes a third group of activists – his older age group, which he distinguished from the ‘Young Turks’ activists who, actually, were the ‘senior’ activists Waithera refers to here.

BP What tactics worked in bringing about political change in terms of human rights in Kenya between '87 and '97 but I prefer to begin with '97...What tactics made the government change in terms of human rights?

TACTIC – national convention for a new constitution; broad participation

NW...What happened is that there was too much lobbying and advocacy within the civil society, especially with the advent of NCEC, which started as the NCPC, that is the National Convention Planning Committee. In 1997 when people went to Limuru for the first national convention assembly, certain resolutions were made that people –and this ranged from students, educationalist, farmers, matatu touts [fare collectors on mini-buses], jua kali persons [small, often road-side independent mechanics or manufacturers of goods often made from scrap metal], people from civil society and politicians – they made resolutions that they were committing themselves to lobbying and pressurizing the government to respect human rights and human dignity in terms of governance – how it [the regime] governed the country.

This was an activity that happened between 4 and 7th of April, 1997. And people committed themselves that we are going to agree to this plan of action. And the first activity was May 3, a Kamakunji rally at Kamakunji, Nairobi. Part of the slum; part of the slum area. When people made that commitment and the government saw the seriousness within its people to bring

about change, I think that is when it [the regime] started realizing that to avoid bloodshed or further skirmishes and further confrontation with its people; it had to make certain concessions. I will need to say that I was involved in this process as a student – I was a student representative to the National Convention Assembly and at the National Convention Assembly, I was elected, still a student, representative in the Executive arm of the NCA, which is now the NCEC, the National Convention Executive Council as a student representative. I've made the fact that I had been expelled from the University. Students from the University still recognized me that I could stay as a representative in that organ.

BP You said that Moi realized that to avoid more confrontation he'd have to what?

NW He'd have to concede to some of the demands that people were demanding, like to have constitutional reform.

TACTICS – mass demonstrations of 1997

BP OK. Now I'm aware of the various demonstrations. At what point do you think Moi realized that he had to make some concessions? There were a whole series of demonstrations.

NW That was 1997. That May we held the first Kamakunji [Nairobi] rally, on 31 of May we held a second rally, this time at Uhuru Park...And now we continued. It was to be *Saba Saba* {seven, seven in Swahili}, that is the 7th of July, where we adopted the commemoration of people who died [in the first rally??] during the advent of the [demonstrations]. It was very unfortunate. So, during *Kume Kume* [ten, ten in Swahili], that is the 10th of October, Moi discovered a tactic. And this is when he brought in the *Jeshi ya Mzee* [spelling; 'Army of the Old Man'?] These are [creations of Members of Parliament??; he names a government politician]. To me it was a group of political thugs that were under the pay of the government; it was something to try to destabilize...

[Tape resumes after his cell phone call, which caused interference in the recording process]...imported some vehicles, these anti-violent vehicles to splash people with water. They had imported anti-riot gear from South Africa. That was in September. But in addition to using the state machinery on October 10, they also employed these mercenaries, these political mercenaries.

BP Plus GSU [General Services Unit, a paramilitary force]

NW Plus GSU.

BP So he's just building up, reinforcing his effort.

NW Yeah, it is reinforcing. Because now these people would come and intermingle with us. We would not differentiate between the demonstrators and those attending the meeting and those *Jeshi ya Mzees*. But when the police would surge at us, then these people would arrest more. They're just close to you, so they arrest you. You're whisked away. And I remember that happened to Paul Muite, Honourable Paul Muite. Tirop [??] of Release Political Prisoners (RPP) and such other persons. So after that we realized that that was not the right procedure for us to keep following because the government has been able to – infiltrate. It was at that point that we

called for a fourth National Convention Assembly at Ufungamano [meeting venue in Nairobi] to try to redefine how do we approach the constitutional reform issue? We were heading very fast towards elections and we required some minimum reforms. The Youth wanted maximum, comprehensive reforms.

BP So you called for a revival of Ufungamano...

NW - not to draft a bill but to chart a way forward. Now that the government has started using mercenaries, people would not even notice and they would hijack us.

BP You didn't know exactly what to do but you wanted to get together and make plans.

TACTICS of GOVERNMENT to disrupt reform momentum in 1997: (1) force – GSU, police; (2) mercenaries; (3) then when that failed, IPPG or Inter-party Parliamentary Group. So it appears that Moi made his concession of IPPG only after the series of demonstrations were not stopped by his use of force, and mercenaries, and after domestic and international publicity. This indicates the government had no overall strategy other than to stop the move toward a new constitution, shifting tactics as the pressure grew, undeterred by increasing and excessive violence, including beating protestors in the downtown Nairobi All Saints Cathedral, which was captured on film by some journalists]

NW Yeah, we wanted to get together and make plans. It was during this National Convention Assembly that IPPG again came in. So Moi, in addition to using mercenaries, he disorganized us at that level. Then when he saw that we were just about to regroup again and develop new strategies, he invited opposition Parliamentarians to what was now the Inter-Party Parliamentary Group [to propose] recommendations as to what would constitute minimum reforms...I'm sorry to say that very prominent opposition [Members of Parliament] today fell prey [victim would be another term here] to that, including our very own Professor Anyang' Nyong'o [who] fell for that. So after that, the reform movement lost some strength. Immediately the politicians were withdrawn from their fold because now they started negotiating in Parliament [with members of KANU, the ruling party].

BP And you'd already lost the religious leaders. The religious leaders had been pulled out a month earlier, to be mediators and then Moi ignored them.

IPPG pulls opposition MPs out of drive for new constitution

NW. Yeah, there was this process of the religious leaders. But the blow that was dealt was dealt in November when they started IPPG process. That was when we were completely disabled because now politicians were looking for ways to go into elections. We were still left with others like Jim Orendo and Paul Muite who still said 'no reforms, no elections,' but eventually when Moi also realized that without registering Safina – Safina had not been registered by then; so when we registered Safina around the 20th of November, Muite also sought to go for elections. Orendo [who lost in the 2002 elections after reportedly not taking his opponent very seriously given Orendo's long record as an activist] was left alone, and...??. So again now he had to rush back to FORD Kenya and seek re-alliance to run for his seat. So the reform movement was left without politicians who were being under-mobilized??

BP Would you say that Moi was very clever in all this?

NW I would say he was...[to be able] to disperse the political movement, the reform movement.

BP Was he forced to do those things?

TACTIC: push Moi “to the wall” to win concession.

TACTIC: When Moi was “pushed to the wall” he usually did make concessions.

TACTIC: force; violence? (not planned but happened as demonstrations triggered state violence; was such violence planned, quietly, as a way to win sympathy at home and abroad?)

NW Yes. With Moi you cannot negotiate on equal grounds. You can only negotiate with Moi when you push him to the wall. That is when he would want to concede.

BP At what point do you think he was ‘pushed to the wall’ in this process?

Moi’s tactic of force backfires with international negative publicity

[This raises the question of just how much Moi learned from one year to the next about what tactics work. Obviously he had not learned from the negative domestic and international pressures after violence around the 1992 election; he was doing it again in 1997, including suspected involvement in coastal ethnic killings in a constituency targeted for a win by KANU. In terms of “learning,” it does not appear that he learned a lot from 1992 to apply in 1997.]

NW ...I would say...in September [1997] they beat up Rev. [Timothy] Njoya at the All Saints Cathedral; and so did they beat the head of the Secretariat [of NCEC] here, Kepta Ombati in the All Saints Cathedral. And there was an outcry, even from the religious leaders and even from the international community.

BP International community – meaning what?

Donor pressure played a role

NW There were nations like the US...who criticized what they said was excessive use of force by the Kenyan government and that demonstrated human rights violations if you can beat people in a church, who were seeking refuge in a church. So resulting from that there was **internal, internal outcry and external pressure also for the government to start behaving in a civil manner.** So it was at that point that Moi realized he was not heading in the right direction, though he knew right from the beginning. But at least he sought to get some cooperation from the international community – the U.S., Britain...the Germans.

BP So in other words – **what does it take to get improvements in human rights?**

[Reforms come after both “internal and external pressure on the government.”]

NW In tenuous situations, it is **both internal and external pressure** on the government. That is what I would say, given the Kenyan situation.

Generational gap among activists: youth want mass action, not talk

[**Field note:** example of not getting a key point drawn out in an interview unless you are very well prepared and know the background. Here a major youth activist leader had not revealed the split among activists along generational lines. I had to reveal that I already knew that before he confirmed it. He was perhaps not trying to hide it but neither did he raise the issue at any point earlier in the interview]

BP But, let's refine that a little more. Internal pressure. When you first went to NCA, they were talking about all sorts of pressure – petitions, you know, lobbying. Youth, as I understand it, said that isn't going to do it: you can talk, and talk, and talk, and you won't this government to budge; you need mass demonstrations. Am I correct?

Youth vs. opposition politicians on constitutional reforms

NW Yeah, we [youthful activists] told them that. But the politicians would not want to stay away from us. They would want to stay with us so that **at the end of the day they [opposition politicians] would steal the limelight. But I would say most of the push for this constitutional reform in 1997 was majorly [sic] headed by the youth of this nation.**

Because if I would take you back a little bit. The politicians during the first National Convention Assembly were asking for minimum reforms...minimum facilitating reforms, to facilitate a smooth election. But we were telling them there is no way we can have a free and fair election without comprehensively overhauling the constitution of the Republic. So [for] the youth there was that position. **The politicians' position was the minimum; the youth's position was comprehensive.**

BP Tactics and goals?

NW Yes.

BP What tactics did this sort of middle class group within the NCA have to achieve the minimal changes they were looking for. What was their game plan?

NW Well, their game plan was to indulge the larger Kenyan society, [convince] them they were in this process together, to push for these maximum changes that they wanted.

BP Specifically, tactics: how do you “indulge” society?

***STRATEGY of most senior opposition leaders: win and leave strong Presidential powers in constitution [in fact, Kibaki never pushed for reducing those powers after he won them in 2002.]**

NW ... OK, you will be with people who have problems. You will join hands with them and tell them yes, we really want to bring changes. But in your soul, back in your mind, you know you just want to achieve this little thing. So they wanted to go to elections because they said that with a free and fair election we would remove the Moi government, we would get new leadership and

they assumed they wanted us to believe that they are the new leadership that we would get. And that would eventually bring the changes that people are looking for.

If you look at the National Alliance coalition, they're saying yes, we will go to elections with the old constitutional order and then we're giving pledges that within the first six months – [opposition splinter candidate Simeon] Nyachae says 90 days – we are going to enact the new constitution and then we'll move from there. But why aren't they telling us [emphasis] that we're not going to elections until we put in place a new constitution so that we can start right from the word go?

If they had tactics, therefore, we would employ those tactics –

BP –to delay elections?

Opposition are mostly KANU retreads: youth want them out

[Interestingly, this would include President Kibaki, who was Vice President under Moi]

NW – to delay elections. And that is – if they had the will themselves. They do not have the will; **they just want to get to the [President's] office under the same presidential power and do whatever else they want to do.** Because as it has been said, and rightly so,...it has been said that the oppositionists of today have been, were part of KANU, part of the leadership that has emasculated Kenyan society both in terms of resources and intellectually. So now they are on this other side, they want to call themselves oppositionists. *Clearly you can see the mischief here* [his emphasis]. They want to get there [to power].

I do not want to believe that personalities like [William ole] Ntimama [a Maasai political leader], who in 1992 was of the “lie low like envelopes” [a phrase Ntimama used in advising Kikuyus living in mostly-Maasai areas to lay low in order to avoid becoming targets of violence] saying; today he's in the opposition. And he has been adversely mentioned in the Akiwumi [Commission on tribal clashes in the early 1990s – generally blamed on government politicians as a way to win elections] report. I do not want to believe these are the same persons, but unfortunately they are. So this part of the mischief...this ‘opposition’ politics, and that is why some of us are in politics [running for Parliament], because **we want to rid the opposition** or the government, or the Kenyan leadership of some **of these hypocritical leaders.** Because I think that is exactly what they are.

BP And that is a challenge.

186 NW That is a challenge. And we are saying – maybe you might also have talked to my colleague Cyprien [Nyamwamu; another youth activist leader], with or without resources, we want to create a different view of Kenyan politics. That it does not take for Njoroge [the interviewee in this case] to be a millionaire to run for an elective seat, to ask for votes, to campaign for votes, to get to Parliament. We want to give it [Kenyan politics] a new face, that here is where we let ideas compete – a market of ideas, so that now the constituents can elect the best of those persons.

[Both Waithera and Nyamwamu ran unsuccessfully for Parliament in 1997, handicapped by lack of money – and probably lack of name recognition.]

BP While we are on the point, let's continue. It goes beyond what I'm studying but I like Kenya in a long-term way so I will be writing about issues for a long time. Has this new generation of young, political activists got the money and organization to win?

NW Good. We haven't the money, but we have the organization.

BP What kind of organization? How?

NW. Ah-ha. Right from the top we have...coalesced ourselves into a youth agenda which is trying to establish a campaign office - we haven't gotten there, but we are trying to. And I realize this is late.

BP Do you have any offices, campaign offices.

NW We are trying. I think in the next week we are going to establish that. [This interview took place in early November, only about six weeks before the election.] At individual levels – like my constituents right now have got an organization, have got committees in every ward for persons to carry out this work. We may not have the money per se, but at least we have a lot of resources in terms of the other youth who are under-employed, who are unemployed, who are there but they [are] just looking for ways of changing this system so they can have part of their own managing –

BP Volunteers?

NW – volunteers yes. But of course we realize –

BP No, the message you are sending –

Youth want to “take over” and replace old-line, former KANU politicians

NW Yes, that we do not have, we may not necessarily have the resources, the material resources, but we are capable of conducting mature campaigns because **we are determined to take over. What we need in Kenya is a generational change.** It is not just a change of guard. We need a generational change. The thinking of my father and [President] Moi from 1963, at the advent of independence. Forty years down the way, it surely has faded; they're inside, [unclear?]. And we can see that by the resultant, destitute nature of the Kenyan people so that the ideas have not worked. So all they need to do is resign, resign and we can take care of it.

BP [laughs]

Body guards for elite activists; nothing for the youth

NW We need a new generation coming in and even implementing some of these good ideas that we are talking about, the proposed draft, the constitutional draft. It's a very good piece. But I doubt that some of these people have got the political will and even the ability to implement some of those provisions. **It requires a generational change.**

And this will clearly show you what kind of people we had. It was during – we were protesting the reading of the budget in the National Assembly [June 1997]. Then Maina Kia, he

was the Director of the Kenyan Human Rights Commission; Dr. Willy Mutunga [also served as a director of the KHRC, a private organization] was at the 4 Cs at the moment. So he was the co-chair of the [Citizens] Coalition for Constitutional Change. And I asked him why Maina brought in body guards? Bodyguards, you know. Then they retreated at All Saints Cathedral [when police attacked]. Then I asked, really, what is all this? The best thing for us to do – they had hired some people to protect them, Maina and Willy Mutunga.

BP Because they were known targets, I suppose.

NW [Rev. Timothy] Njoya was there; Njoya didn't have any.

BP But Njoya almost got killed in All Saints Cathedral.

Youth activists to the front; senior activists to the rear?

NW Yeah, he nearly got killed. So Maina and Willy have these bodyguards and they retreat [when police come??]. When KANU had their demonstration against ours, opposition politicians were bringing havoc in Parliament, we did not demonstrate in Nairobi because that was the chance for KANU, because our leaders had retreated. So I asked him, why this change of tactics. **He [Mutunga] told me: 'Njoroge, I have got the right to be a coward.'**

BP Change of tactics, meaning change from what to what?

NW 'I have the right to be a coward.' Now what does that tell you? We are saying that we are going to remove the government; we are going to force the government to bring reforms, through demonstrations, so they're just telling the youth: please demonstrate. But when it goes to certain levels, we are going to retreat...

BP Yeah, you know what that is, that goes back to the military tactics where the General sits on a hill, on a horse, and says, 'my troops are doing good down there. They're getting killed but it's for a good cause.'

NW Well, I don't know how to classify it, but that is the sense I got.

[Suddenly he looks out the window] There is some tear gas. [It turns out there was a student demonstration of some kind on campus, near the site of the interview We can smell tear gas during the interview. This is very exciting. This researcher was among activist mothers in Nairobi when they were attacked by police with teargas in 1991.]

BP Yeah, you're right. You're used to that.

NW I'm used to it. [laughs] . So that was the kind of thing we used to experience, and that is why I've always said that – and I do believe – that if the middle class takes over the government [as it did a few weeks later as Moi's hand-picked successor was overwhelmingly defeated in the presidential election], I don't think we'll have the fundamental changes that the youth of this nation is crying for. These persons have been socialized into a certain way of living, and even, I think, into a way of thinking. **Some of the middle class have accumulated some little wealth. They would want to protect that.** They would want to see that one of their own takes over so

that they are also protected. Needless to say, that is exactly what Moi is doing. That is why all these people now are gathering around [then presidential candidate Mwai] Kibaki so that they can also be protected. And of course maybe given good business opportunities.

Youth sacrifices supported senior activists of 1980s.

The foot soldiers of reform in Kenya (the youth) who worked with older activists

But I come to the other angle, the youth of this nation who have sacrificed since 1987... to 97. I do not know who will take that critical role, that critical study of the role of the youth in liberating this country. Because if you go back to 1986, [Maina] wa Kinyatti -Not youthful; ex professor] Tirop Kitur [who became head of RPP], Karimi Nduthu [this shows his first name first] Kangethi Mungai [??] who were arrested. And they were working. They were university students at the University of Nairobi, but they were distributing leaflets, calling for change. This was during the Mwakenya time [of the 1980s]. It is the youth who came out in very large numbers – supporting new, OK, supporting change. Because it was then, exactly after 1982 that Kenya was declared by law a one party state. And then you know a kind of suppression and oppression [followed]. So around 1985, '86, '87, a few academics, Maina wa Kinyatti, [rapidly names a few more but unclear who] Ngugi wa Thiong'o were there and they depended a lot on University students who committed themselves, who even sacrificed their education at the universities. Maina wa Kinyatti, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Michel Mungo??. Dr. Willy Mutunga then. **There was that group of academics. But they wouldn't have done the kind of work they did, what Mwakenya achieved, were it not for the sacrifice of the youth.**

BP What did they do?

NW Information is a very powerful tool in any movement. So they were the editors of -was it the Pa... – I can't remember [starts to mention an underground publication; perhaps he did not want to be specific at a time when such publications were still banned and the regime that banned them was still in power with no certainty it would be defeated].

BP The date of Matiba's [rally with Charles Rubia] was Saba Saba [July 7] 1990. Most of the people who went there were young.

Mostly youth, not middle class, went to rallies, though some middle class turned out in the 1997 rallies, according to activist author Willy Mutunga.

NW Were young; were young persons. Whoever went there was either a politician, the [Martin] Shikukus, the Railas [Railia Odinga] and others; but **you did not find middle classes in Kamakunji**. Those persons [who came] were the – least fortunate in society, most of whom happen to be the youth.

BP And they were not only participating in a rally but they were actually doing specific things in tactics and strategies.

NW Yes, even in terms of mobilizing.

BP What was the major youth group at that time? Was there an organization that brought people together even if was clandestine but still trying to catalyze?

NW No, this is the most unfortunate thing.

BP They were individuals?

Unorganized youth taken advantage of by politicians

NW They were individuals, but they were like some of these individual casts. People would want to crowd around [Kenneth] Matiba and you could easily identify those as Matiba youths.

[The phenomena continued during the time I was doing this research, in the second half of 2002. At one political meeting I saw Matiba walking down a hallway literally surrounded by a crowd of supporters, many of whom were youth, listening to his every word despite his absence from the political scene for the previous few years and his difficulty in speaking due to the stroke he suffered while in detention in 1990.]

NW [There were also] Odinga youths, just like Raila Odinga has his [youth following]. So then from the funding of the political godfather there would spring – nebulous, it's a nebulous group of youth.

And of course these are the people at the top who have always taken that advantage of the hopelessness, the desperation of the youth, to use them for their political ends, for their selfish political ends.

BP How do they use them?

NW You know, when you ask me to mobilize for your political rally or political meeting, and they're asked – you do not recognize that Bob, Njoroge, Cyprien, did ABCD – what you are basically doing is using me. You use me –

BP Just to come to a rally –

NW Cheaply, but for hire.

BP To do what?

NW These people would give money to youth to go and take *changa* [illegally-prepared alcohol], this marijuana. Even this Jeshi wa mzee. [Names a government politician] used those boys, those thugs to come to the rallies drunk so that they would wreak havoc to anyone. That is why I would say it is using the youth of this nation – taking advantage of their desperate circumstances.

BP I hate to be specific, but I don't quite understand. I know how Jezi wa mzee works; it's to disrupt rallies.

NW Yes.

BP But how would a legitimate politician, even though maybe he's like Matiba, an ex-[politician]. How would he use the youth?

NW To use the youth? You would say the Jeshi wa mzee were used to disrupt the rallies. But today when they are going to Uhuru Park, they have the same...people who are being used, influenced by a genuine politician like [names a politician] to make crowds –

BP [Naming the same politician]: I know how he uses them; I'm talking about somebody else –

NW This is what I'm telling you. Then, he used to organize them to wreck political thuggery. But today, since he's not part of the system and he is part of the opposition, he is still using these youth to mobilize for political rallies and attend rallies.

BP Just attend them?

NW Just to attend.

BP So that's the misuse of youth you are talking about. [But Waithera had drawn a clear distinction between the misuse of youth by politicians of the governing party to disrupt rallies and what apparently the new-opposition was using youth for, just to attend.] Just paying to attend rallies?

NW Yeah, its misuse; its misuse.

BP OK. I think I see it. Doesn't sound like a major exploitation: give somebody money to go to a rally, but –

NW This is major. Because what I will do – I [hypothetically in the case of a politician misusing youth] will use [youth] to do a lot of work.

BP What kind of work? That's what I'm asking.

NW The mobilizing.

BP What do you mean, mobilizing [which sounds like hiring campaign workers]?

NW Even political espionage...gathering intelligence and all that. At the end of the day, you do not have the interest of that person at heart. I don't know if you are getting me.

BP I'm sort of getting you: you pay people to go to rallies, or you pay them to go around and snoop on the opposition. And then you drop them; you don't worry about their joblessness.

NW You don't care.

BP You don't care because you are in office.

Youth not represented by lawyers after arrests at rallies; big names are

NW I have seen persons who have been arrested and nobody came up to assist them, even during these mass action rallies. Many of our people got arrested. The Law Society of Kenya, for instance, had promised to provide lawyers who would represent these persons. But we ended up with no representation. It is the Release Political Prisoners group [that tried to help].

BP So you take the risks and when it [arrest] happens, you're on your own because no lawyer shows up.

NW Exactly.

BP When a named politician, a named attorney takes a risk, goes to court, 20 lawyers sign up to defend the person. I've seen that. I never thought about the other side.

NW You see it now. That is the kind of thing.

Youth hired by NCEC.

NW [apparent tape disruption] I joined NCEC at inception. During all the mass mobilization for those political rallies, peaceful meetings, I was like May, June, July, August, before I took up violence monitoring job with the Kenya Human Rights Commission. I was posted at the coast during the Likoni clashes. I was the person who was mobilizing. I was in charge of mobilization – for the NCEC rallies. And all you do is, we'd get a few hired vehicles, we'd get several youth in there; we'd get handbills we used to distribute. I used to coordinate. I used to give each youth who volunteers 200 shillings [a few dollars] for lunch. Then, because you have been fronted by an organization, if maybe then you got arrested, nothing would have happened, we'd have been assisted.

No special help for youth workers/volunteers if hurt

But if we mobilize people from Korogocho ?? and Kariobangi ?? [urban low income neighbourhoods in Nairobi]; get arrested during the mass action day, nobody thinks about it. I [was] a victim one day: I got injured during those skirmishes with the police. And Davinder Lamba, with only a few inhalations of tear gas would go to Nairobi hospital, while you go nursing your own at home. They know you very well. You are a Council member of NCEC, but nobody cares. If that treatment –

BP So he had a little teargas and went to the hospital. What happened to you?

NW You go nursing your own at home. [He said he was injured].

BP What happened, did you go to the hospital?

Prominent activists, not foot soldiers, get medical, legal help

NW No, I was just attended to by the Red Crescent. Nobody cared. So there is this treatment that I'm saying – for our youth. You can get arrested, you can get hurt. We [youth] don't take that into consideration so much. For some professional, they would be taken care of – there was that contrast. There is always that contradiction.

BP Tell me – mobilization tactics; specifically, not generalities: what did you do?

Framing the message via leaflets aimed at specific groups to come to rallies

NW We used to distribute leaflets, we used to call them handbills at that level, which had a message we wanted to pass to Kenyans, as to what sections, maybe of the constitution we wanted to change. Or we generalized the whole thing and say for farmers we want payments for your produce and all that. So we used to distribute these leaflets.

BP So you keyed your message to the groups that you were appealing to. One message, one group.

NW. Yes. One message, one group.

BP How did you distribute them?

Tactic: distribute leaflets. Risky business

NW It used to be a very risky venture because I remember one time we went to the University to distribute...we were detained there for two hours. Kenyatta University. So we used to divide ourselves into two groups. One would go to the Eastlands part of Nairobi; another would go to Kawarangari ??

I remember one [when] we tried to have a nation-wide strike; that was *Nane Nane* ‘eight, eight: August 8, 1997] and I, we had broken up into eight groups, each group handling a Province to distribute the leaflets and all that. These [distributors] were all youth. When it came to insuring that there was adequate security, it was again upon us to shield the **middle class as they attended the rally**. [He said, above, that middle class did not generally attend such rallies]. Nobody cares what happens to you, though. Because one clear instance: even in terms of strategizing, this was that first [rally] in May [1997] when we entered Central Park [next to Uhuru Park, downtown in Nairobi]. We had to go down to River Road [to] buy a lot of pliers and at night, at 2, we had to cut the fence for entry points, all around the Central Park because it had been fenced. You can see the extent to which we used to sacrifice. But we were assigned duties –

BP The police had put up a fence around it?

NW Even now, I think, there is a fence around it.

BP Yeah, a little one; small.

NW Then it was a little tight.

BP You wanted to have escape routes.

Youth took more risks than middle class

NW Escape routes, and even entry routes. So that was **one very clear [example of how youth, not the middle class, took a lot of risks to help advance human rights in Kenya.]**

BP So 2 a.m. in the morning, you're down there, risking your safety, snipping the wires.

NW Yes. Then I also remember, I've always been told that the best way to defend yourself is to attack. [laughs]. So in innocence, we had hired some [people with hand carts] to bring some 'missiles' around the park.

BP What kind of 'missiles'?

Youth desperate for change take risks to advance human rights

NW Stones, so that if we are attacked we can fight back [laughs]. That was the only way out for us. And here I'm putting close to you **the level of desperation: that then we did not care what happened to us.** What we wanted was change. Remember where I am coming from? I'm coming from an expulsion from the university for the same activism, because I was a student leader.

BP What did you get expelled for?

NW We were protesting against the introduction for higher education rules, this was a new scheme where we would not receive direct assistance from the government but would have to apply to the higher education bourse [scholarship] board for assistance.

BP So the 'bang' [scholarship] would be less.

NW Yes, and still, deserving cases were left out. Well someone like – when I was suspended I was quoting one very good case and thus detained [by police??].

BP Do you recruit people who want to help?

NW Who want to help.

BP And is it loosely-organized, sort of distribute some pamphlets and that's all it takes because of the level of frustration?

Details of rally organization

NW No, then we used to [go] around [with] speakers the morning of the rally. We'd go around with vehicles and mounted loud speakers. We used to distribute the handbills a day or two before the day. Then during the actual date we'd come out in the morning and go around with mounted speakers –

BP At that moment you were vulnerable [to arrest]. Right?

NW Very vulnerable. Very vulnerable. And our sincere belief then was that if we got into any problems we would be assisted. If I'm arrested doing this, I know someone would be working on that.

BP Is it true?

NW So we assumed.

BP [laughs]

NW But when it happened at Kenyatta University and we were detained for four hours, I didn't see any help.

[slight disruption on tape; apparently I was turning the tape off from time to time, perhaps when he strayed from the topic too much]

BP Explain on tape just this little section because I want to hear. Explain in your words and not just put it in my words: there are levels of vulnerability.

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Youth activists faced danger

NW Yeah, that's what I was telling you. Our leaders here in the civil society are known by the government. So we'd say that they are exposed to a certain level of vulnerability. But the youth, who participated in mobilizing, we were also known to some extent because of like having come from the University, I'm having someone like Suba Che Che Meshak [spelling??] who was also with me. And we were also marked people.

...there's a time when we had gone to Kasarani [often the site of KANUs political meetings] and **we were receiving threats, death threats**. We'd get telephone calls threatening us. So when we were [out] we were vulnerable. And we're still in the field trying to mobilize. And still the volunteers that [sic] we are going to hire and coordinate also [are] exposed to some – whatever, vulnerability. But again, again, the participants, if you go again to the Kamakunjis [opposition rallies], the police would come. They would beat up everyone. **The leaders [senior activists] would disappear in their jeeps. We'd be left; we'd be all left in the field and trying to find our way home and all that.**

During this time, even if the leaders disappeared, we would re-group and again start marching toward the designated venue of the meeting.

BP Really? After some heads were bashed?

Police disperse youth activists with tear gas, rubber bullets; but they often “regroup.”

NW Yes. We'd always do that. Especially initially, because they had not been given instructions to, you know, beat us. All they would use is tear gas and rubber bullets, shooting in the air and all that. We would even dare them – if you look at some of the pictures [in the NCEC archives]. There are some of the pictures that you would see us, going toward the police. If they dispersed us, we'd regroup after five minutes – [and say]: we are going back to that meeting [even though the speakers may have fled or been arrested]. We used to do that because we were determined.

Ready to die: “I might not come back,” he told his girlfriend when he left for rallies.

I used to leave home, tell my wife – then she was my girlfriend – I might not come back. If I don't come back, be sure to take care of yourself. But if I come back, fine. If I don't come back, I have gone –

BP Do you mean to jail, or being killed?

NW It could be to jail, or died.

BP You're serious?

NW Yes [emphasis]. And we used to go to these meetings in that full knowledge.

Foreign journalists also targeted by police

[I recall times when I had to cover political rallies and dodge police. I, too was afraid and uncertain about the outcome because police sometimes turned on foreign journalists in Kenya. For that reasons I stayed several blocks away from the major Kamakunji rally in November 1991, interviewing people heading to or coming from the rally. A number of foreign journalists were beaten by police at the rally site. Even at my relatively secure spot, working with another journalist, we had to jump in my car, just escaping a truck load of baton and shield-wielding police running up a hill toward us.]

Activists (youth, especially) face death

NW Because these people now reached a point when they [police] would just shoot at people like that. You heard of cases of all those people who died in mass actions [in 1997]. Even at Kenyatta University they shot dead two students; [at] Moi University they shot another. So we are used to these. You cannot rule out it would happen to you. Today you'd even be walking, a very non-partisan person; you'd go between protestors and policemen and you'd have a bullet through your chest.

Motivation

BP Why did you do all this?

NW [without hesitation]. Because **I wanted change, at whatever cost.** If you look at the level – I'll tell you, Kenyans live like destitutes. You find graduates who live in mud houses, have no job, have no food, no money to put on the table in the evening for supper. People live on one meal a day, which happens to be *ugali* and some *sikumu weeki* in the evening. You drink some hot water and get to the streets looking for a job. You understand why [they] will do that [go to rallies; volunteer to help mobilize the opposition]. People are so desperate. You see someone smiling during the day, but [his voice grows low and sad] when he or she gets back home now, it's a sorry state; there's nothing to [eat]. You do not even have a house of yourself. Like in the whole of '97 [when he had national-level responsibilities in opposition civil society groups], I didn't have a house of myself. We used to live with well-wishers. And your welfare would depend on that well-wisher. If he [decides] you are not behaving rightly– and of course some of them may be having pressures from the state – they would say we do not want to [help] you because you are anti-government. Then you'd move from one dwelling to another.

BP Were you just trying to get even with the government that had kicked you out of the university and spoiled your education?

NW I was not trying to get even. What I was trying to do was to bring change so that even the person – the Vice Chancellors who presides over the universities may not be political [emphasis] because their appointments are based on political [qualifications] and not on merits. We wanted to establish – my wish to date. And that is why I have refrained from flying away to Canada or running away to the United States, running away from Kenya. Because I would simply be running away from a problem. I'd not be solving that problem.

[not on tape: He added: "I will go back and finish my education – maybe."]

End of interview

End of side A, tape 1 of 1.

Side B is blank