

Library of Congress

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

Transmitted to LOC February 13, 2011

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

Interviewee: Koigi wa Wamwere

Location of interview: outside the Kenya Human Rights Commission office, Nairobi, Kenya.

Date of interview: November 11, 2002

Transcription by Bob Press. BP = interviewer (Bob Press); KW = respondent (Koigi wa Wamwere) A?? indicates a point unclear. Bracketed, underlined, or bold research notes or important points are also shown

Wamwere was a well-known political dissident, a symbol of resistance to the regime of Daniel arap Moi in the 1980s and 1990s; and a Member of Parliament at different times. He was imprisoned several times in Kenya for a number of years then went into exile in Norway, returning to run for Parliament again in 2002. The interview took place the day he filed his papers as a candidate. (He won.)

Bio:

Secondary school education plus two years at Cornell University (studied hotel management and tourism; did not finish).

Profession: "I don't think I have a profession. I try everything I can do." [Activist fits]

Religion: brought up a Catholic. "I really have been wondering whether we should have exchanged religion. I think we were happier people before Christianity."

Ethnicity; Kikuyu

Marital status: married in 1980.

BP Koigi wa Wamwere, what did you do to try to bring change in human rights between that period of '87 and '97?

[An exiled activist longed to return]

KW Yeah, well let me first point out that '87 was really almost a peak of, how do I put it, like almost the peak of the depth of one of the darkest chapters in our history. I happened to have been forced out of the country into exile the year before. [He was in exile from '86 -] I guess I'm still in exile, somewhat. So '86 found me in Norway with a very big question: what was going to be my contribution. Being in Norway I was miles away from home. When I asked myself this question, the answer was always: if for instance, somebody came to your house, chased you out of it and you ran into the neighbor's house for refuge, do you settle permanently in your neighbor's house or do you fight to get back to your house? And for me it was quite clear.

[Tactic of an exile: seek international publicity about Kenya's "terror"]

KW My business in exile was to continue to fight the Kenyan government; in particular to inform foreign countries, foreign governments what was wrong with Kenya. In fact when we arrived in Norway, the only image most people had of Kenya was that of a tourist haven, a place where they could come, have a good time, see animals and all that. Very few, even correspondents who had worked here,

very few were aware of the violations of human rights of that state of terror that was – that Kenyans were living in. And yet in fact I cannot remember worse terror than the terror I felt right before I left Kenya.

[State tactic: punish those who see exiles; instill fear]

KW In fact it was so bad that **Kenyans seemed** to live in prison and even **to travel outside the country encased in their prison**. So that occasionally when I happened to meet Kenyans in Oslo, they would run across the street to avoid me because of consequences that might befall them as soon as they got back. And this fear was far from – you could not even call it farfetched. Because anyone who was known to meet us outside the country, to meet those of us who were outside the country would be arrested upon arrival and given even long sentences. **I know one Assistant Minister who came to see me – and when he got back here, he was immediately imprisoned**. There was Kenyatta's nephew who was also imprisoned, allegedly because he had met me, when in fact he hadn't met me. I remember meeting Bishop Muge in a church, in some church in London where we could not even afford to be seen by anyone merely because of the risk that he was taking, daring to see me on his way back from Canada.

[Donors – Norwegians sympathetic to Koigi]

KW But fortunately for me, we were given very warm reception by the Norwegian press. We were able to explain to them that Kenya was a dictatorship as bad as the apartheid regime in South Africa, in my view, a view that some journalists did not share with me. But I was convinced that, in some ways even people in South Africa seemed to have more freedom than we did here.

BP It's true. Now I also wanted to give you a chance to specifically tell me the kinds of tactics you used to try to change things – while you were out of jail, basically. There were only a few years in there; you came out – you were in jail several times, around the early '90s for a while when you weren't in jail, what were you trying to do in terms of tactics to...improve human rights?

[Individuals nurtured culture of resistance]

KW First of all to make sure whenever I had a chance to talk to the press, I told the truth as I saw it. I never shied from criticizing the government and I knew that given the level of oppression, the statements that we made had a far, much greater impact than any statement I would make today. I remember even people like Bishop Muge when they came here, slightly criticized this government, the whole country would be on fire, almost, because they themselves could not speak and for them, **the few people who could speak gave them [other Kenyans] a lot of encouragement, they gave them a lot of hope; they made them feel that...things could improve someday**.

[State tactic: block activist's NGO]

Let me finish by saying that when I was not in prison or in exile, for instance, in 1993, after the treason trial, I remember I formed an organization called National Democratic Human Rights Organization (gives acronym). It's an NGO that has never been registered to this day, although I have appealed for its registration even with our Attorney General. In spite of the fact that so many other NGOs have been registered, mine has never been.

BP That was with the help of the Norwegian government.

KW Yes, we got some funding from the Norwegian government.

BP They [the Norwegian government] actually wanted you to be the head of RPP [Release Political Prisoners], didn't they?

KW No, actually what happened was, I came – my – RPP was founded almost by my mother [Monica Wamwere] They founded it in Nakuru. So when I came out of prison – of course they had fought very hard for us. So when I came out of prison, I had a discussion with RPP regarding the possibility of my seeking aid on their behalf. And I also asked them whether they could agree for me to be their Executive Director, or work with them in some capacity, since I, too, needed some kind of opportunity to work in the area of human rights. And we agreed that I could go ahead and ask the Norwegian government to extend some support to them. So I went to Norway; I presented an application on their behalf. And, in fact, some funds were granted. No, before the funds were in fact – there was a promise to give some funding, but before that, somebody from the RPP wrote the Ministry [in Norway] saying I was no longer with them, not even authorized; and I wasn't going to work with them. So I thought, so, having been asked not to do anything on their behalf, and given that I was still interested in working in the area of human rights, I founded along with other people, other persons, we founded NADEHURIO?? And sought funding from the government [of Norway??] But a mistake, a terrible mistake was done by the Norwegian government in the sense that they sent notification of this donation through the post office. So of course the Special Branch opened the letter, they read, and they knew that they had to be [laughs slightly] – they had to come for us. But before they did that, I had already managed – there were the ethnic clashes, you know, taking place in this country, 'ethnic cleansing.'

BP I remember the charges that you were given and all that; very unfounded...but what were you actually trying to do? You've always been working on some angle in some way to try to promote human rights.

[TACTIC – use music to criticize the government over ethnic clashes in the early 1990s.]

KW Actually, what I was saying was there was ethnic fighting going on. The areas where the fighting was taking place had been cordoned off. No one could go there. They had been declared security zones from which people were not allowed. So, we decided – the organization [his non-registered NGO??] decided that we wanted to go into those places and tell the story from the inside. So what we did, we formed – we organized musicians here in Nairobi, a group of them, and we sent them into these areas disguised as residents of Molo, ??, and Burnt Forest. They went in; they would go there a few days. They would observe what was going on. They would come out and they would make music, telling the story of what they saw. So in fact we produced a few records which actually almost set this country on fire. **The government simply went wild, like I have never seen.** And immediately these musicians were arrested. This was in 1993. So they were immediately arrested. I was myself targeted. But these were beautiful songs that were played in matatus. They were in music.

BP What was your intention to have that music done? What were you trying to accomplish?

[Framing criticism of government in terms of basic rights]

KW Our intention was actually to use the subtlest or the simplest means of communication to reach the widest possible audience in Kenya. And inform them of the atrocities that were taking place in these so-

called security zones, in the fighting areas, and educate the people about their rights, that in fact people had a right – people in this country have a right to live anywhere in this land. They have a right to life. They have a right to property. And no one, no one has a right to drive them out from where they are. And so we would talk about the right- we would discuss what was going on in the songs, and they we would talk to people about their rights. And we would urge them to resist.

So the reaction of the government was panic. And they panicked in the direction of seeking the arrest of the musicians. And eventually they also came for me.

BP Did you urge people to resist in the music, or did you give talks to people?

KW No, we just said – no, no, no; at that time we were not talking. We just, it's just the songs, and **I tell you those songs are powerful**. And I've quoted some in my book, *I Refuse To Die*. And they were a power like no book can have. A power like no article can possibly have or no speech can have. Music has an incredible power.

BP Was this produced at River Road [in Nairobi]?

[Activist musicians]

KW It was produced at River Road, that's where we had an office there. The musicians were incredibly cooperative and willing to take incredible risks. But of course you realize this was also – we were all encouraged to do this by the euphoria of the multi-party campaign.

BP What other specific things did you do to try to, as a tactic, to try to break through and improve human rights?

KW For me, other than giving – that was one. The other one that I did at that time, of course, since I was not in politics – the elections had just happened. The other thing I did, every time I was given a chance to address people. I would revisit the question of democracy, so-called multi-party democracy. I would question whether we really had it or dictatorship was still in place. My argument that dictatorship was still in place, that Second Liberation had not come yet, and even if it did, Moi wasn't going to be the midwife of democracy in this country. You couldn't possibly be; that is you could only strangle the infant that was democracy forever, if he was put in charge of the delivery or nurturing it.

BP Did you give this as public speeches or in informal remarks?

KW No, as public speeches. For instance, when we came out, we would be welcomed into churches. This was thanks giving, occasions for us to thank God and the people for fighting for our release. We also did use the occasions to say what we believed about what was going on.

BP You were in detention when?

KW [lists dates of imprisonment, exile, in Parliament]

Detention Aug. 75 to Dec. 78 (3 years, 4 months)

MP 79 to Aug 82

Detention Aug 82 to Dec 84 (2 years, 4) “August has been a very bad month for me.”

Exile June 86 to Sep 90 (4 years, 3 months; mostly in Norway)

Prison Sep 90 to Jan 93 (2 years, 4 months) charged with treason
Arrested Sep 93
Prison Nov 93 to Dec 96 (3 years, one month)
Ran for Parliament and lost in 1997
*Exile 1998 to Nov 2002 (living part of the time in the United States)

In 1998 there was ethnic fighting again, as an aftermath of the elections. I thought I was a direct target of that fighting. I thought it wasn't wise for me to be around. So I left in 1998.

BP How does it feel to be home?

KW Well, it's good; it feels good. I mean (pause) – it's really not. I mean, although we are all men to live on this earth, I guess everywhere, but whichever spot is identified as our particular home, we tend to be very strongly attached to it. So it does feel very good to be home.

My only problem is here, like now, I'm alone. My family is in Norway. So I'm always carrying this 'cross.'

BP You don't like to be separated, do you.

KW No, of course. To be separated from the family is a very big punishment, not just for me, but for the family as well. When I came out of the prison in 1997 and went home to meet my family in Norway, I found my son, who I left in the stomach of his mother, was three years old. He was already a big boy, three years. And there's nothing more tragic than hearing – he would ask his mother, why don't you buy me some papa; I want a papa.

This exile, this 'imprisonment,' some people would tend to see it – we tend to see ourselves as the most direct victims, but often I have wondered whether our children and family have not been worse victims.

BP There's a lot of suffering that's not been told about the activists, even right here.

KW That's right.

BP There's been nervous breakdowns, divorces.

KW That's right. Divorces, pain, anxiety. Image detentions without trial – if your husband is detained, indefinitely.

BP You were detained without trial a long time that one time on treason [charges]

KW That's right. All these were – the treason trial never took off. Before then, all my imprisonments were detentions without trial.

BP During that treason trial, were you trying to use the courts as a political statement there? It seemed like you were.

[TACTIC – use court as platform to defend human rights]

KW Yes. We did decide that in fact ours was a political imprisonment. We were in prison because we had been resisting change, and **the court was a welcome platform. And we made no secret of it. We made our ideas known.**

[Seeking freedom for oppressed and oppressors]

We let the court know that we understood them as arms of an oppressive regime, and they were there to hand to us a punishment for only seeking greater freedom for everyone, including themselves, including the courts.

[Comment: sounds like Martin Luther King talking]

BP So it was a deliberate tactic to try to – others who have been involved in this have said this, but –

KW No it was not deliberate – it was not deliberate in the sense that people might think that we had even sought our own imprisonment to use –

BP No, I didn't mean that

KW Yeah. But once we there, once *we found ourselves in court* [his emphasis], I always believed the best defense I could, **the best self-defense was explaining what the trial was all about: this is a political trial.** We were being, the state was trying to eliminate us because we were its opponents. And we said it clearly, that we had committed no crime – trying to change an oppressive government.

BP You didn't do anything they accused you of? I think it was trying to steal several rifles at a police station?

[Charges denied]

KW No, no. Even before that, they said they had caught us in the streets of Nairobi, carrying guns and Chinese grenades. *OF COURSE it is not true* [spoken with great emphasis]. I always tell people, try to walk around Nairobi with a penknife when you are a government opponent. They'll shoot you down like a dog. They will never give you a chance to appear in court. So for them to say that I was carrying this – some AK47s and some Chinese grenades – is trying Hitler's tactics, where you have to tell a big lie.

BP It's true. I have talked to people who say that you were arrested, actually, in Nairobi. Not Uganda.

KW Yeah, of course. There are people who would want to say that because the government did put out a story that they caught me – the government, as soon as I was arrested, put out a story that I was arrested at Umoja [a residential development in Nairobi]. And of course this story was newspaper headlines. And of course people are free to choose, to believe, either my version, or the government version.

BP Your version is you were across – [the Ugandan border].

KW Yeah. And of course if I – I always ask people: imagine yourself caught with seven AK 47s and grenades at night in one of these residence areas at night as they claimed, at 3 o'clock in the morning.

BP You wouldn't be alive.

KW Obviously. They would shoot you; I don't know how many – anyway –

BP I'm interested in your assessment of tactics that work in terms of in an authoritarian state, tactics that work to change things for the better for human rights. Of course democracy is part of that, but at least focusing on human rights. What works, what doesn't work, in your experience?

[TACTICS – “everything works”]

KW **In my experience, everything works.** I believe in the Swahili proverb that says Ukitupa mshali hapotendi?? It's like 'when you shoot an arrow into a bush, it will always hit something. That arrow will always shoot something.

BP Could you explain that?

[Tactics: you do what you can]

KW [laughs] Meaning that every tactic that people use to fight a dictatorship helps to weaken the dictatorship. Say, for instance, we had the **Mwakenya** people who published underground leaflets that really got this government running up and down, which provoked even the government to arrest people and torture them to death. Often times I was angry with them when they distributed these leaflets near where I lived because I knew that the government would ALWAYS understand for me to be the distributor, and they always came for me. But looking back, I always ask myself, why did they do this? Could they have done better?

I have a friend of mine. We used to be in Parliament together. He's called Rarua Kanja ?? One time he said, when people's mouths are muzzled, that you cannot muzzle people's mouths and stop them from farting. [laughs]. So, you know, observers looking at the tactics that people use might frown at some of them. But if you're in their shoes, you'd probably understand that even some very unpleasant or unacceptable tactics are resorted to because other tactics are not available. People can't speak. People can't express themselves. The press is hostile, is colluding in silencing the nation. People have to start writing underground pamphlets at great risk to themselves, not to provoke the regime. They don't do this to provoke the regime, but the regime always gets provoked. People get tortured; they get jailed, but others always come up. And they apply different tactics.

BP So this is not to provoke the regime, but to raise –

[Activism aim: awareness [consciousness raising]

KW –to raise awareness. Because if you look at the pamphlets, they are always discussing things that would otherwise be discussed by the open press.

BP How do you think people in an authoritarian state, the public, the general public, gets moved from a state of apathy and fear to action?

KW Unfortunately, very unfortunately, let me say – there's two – you know when the regime – if when the regime is provoked into being extremely cruel, brutal – murderers, unfortunately, when it does that, that's when it drives people to fight back. Like, for instance, you take in Uganda where Idi Amin was almost killing someone in every family. People reached a point where they said, what choice do we

have? Life is death, what is there to fear anymore [great emphasis]; there is nothing to fear anymore. So they charge, and they end up getting their freedom.

[Comment: Idi Amin was overthrown with the help of the Tanzanian government.]

[State tactic: create a 'prison of fear' through targeted repression, not general repression. Seems like fascism.]

KW Say our case here. We never got, reached that point. The [state] pressure here was calculated; it never went too far. It was meant to inculcate fear; basically **get people into a 'prison' of fear, total fear; terror**. Not too brutal as to provoke them; always give them a window – kind of give them hope that if they behave these things will not happen to them. That was the state tactic.

[State tactic – allow temporary freedom then trap those who spoke out]

[Comment: Chinese cultural revolution: let a thousand flowers boom, then bang]

And of course people, when there was a bit of freedom, when there was some kind of letup, people would take advantage of it to try to express themselves. The regime would clamp down again – on and off. In fact it reached a point where I felt one should never, never take for granted any opening that the state made available to people in terms of freedom of speech. It was like freedom of speech, whenever allowed, became like a trap; it became a trap. Because it became a means of identifying the disgruntled people. You know, like they would stay for some time; they would let the people talk. But soon after they would crack down. They would come and arrest all the people who had been talking, all the people who had been expressing themselves. So even freedom became a trap. You are afraid of them.

Detentions without trial are *HORRIBLE* [his emphasis]. They are used as scarecrows. You know almost similar to the type of scare crowing that was done by the colonialists – like for instance, if you go to detention and you come back insane, say mad because they broke you. People watch you and they say – you know, people who know you, and when they see one of their own trying to be political, they say: are you crazy, don't you see what happened to so and so? Is that what you want to be? Don't you see the family of so and so? Is that what you want us to become?

BP So you actually got opposition from friends and people who were concerned about you?

KW Absolutely. Some of our – the people who most loved us were sometimes the ones persuading us [to be non-political]. Although, of course...for me I was extremely lucky in the sense that my family always stood by me. My mother stood by me [and helped lead a successful mothers strike in 1992 that won his release and the release of some 50 other political prisoners] My wife stood by me. My brother [Charles??] stood by me. My family stood by me. I had a great family. But we have paid dearly. **My father died of a stroke he got when four of his sons were in prison.**

BP Four at one time?

KW Yeah. I mean it was such a blow that he could not stand it. And imagine when they came – I was in prison; my brother followed me; the third brother and also my brother-in-law, and my cousin, who, according to our kinship relations is actually my brother, so in fact we were five of us.

BP How's your mother?

KW My mother is strong. Of course she has also, I mean pressure. All this pressure has taken its toll, but she's still strong.

KW Remind me to show you my book because it has a picture of her – a big picture [The New Africa: Dispatches from a Changing Continent; University Press of Florida 1999].

BP What were you doing to make you such a big target. I never have understood that.

KW When I was in Parliament [one of the famous 'bearded sisters' who often dissented] I used to tell visitors from outside, MPs from Britain, from America; I used to tell them if you want to know that this is a terrible dictatorship, just look at us. We are not Communists. In Britain we would not belong to the left of the Labour Party. We would not even – some of us would even be to the right of the center. And here we are, labeled Communists, fire-eaters and radicals. A regime that cannot tolerate people who would belong to the right of center, or simply to the center is a terrible regime. [He was a member of Parliament from 1979 to 1982]. So we didn't have to do anything spectacular. You only needed to say: I want to be free. You only needed to frown. You only needed not to clap where everybody else was clapping.

BP Once you were on their list, you stayed there.

KW That's right. And you only needed to say I'm not happy: I don't like this. Sometimes you only needed to be seen thinking, just to be thinking, because they don't want anyone thinking. Sometimes all you needed to do was to survive on your own, not to be begging them for this or that.

[The interview concluded with biographical notes which I have included at the top of this transcription.]

END of interview