3 Kenya: The Mau Mau Insurgency, 1952–60

The Mau Mau insurgency sparked a decades-long debate over the appropriate leadership and ideology for a successful nationalist struggle. This controversy is still unresolved in many sub-Saharan African countries. The issues which military historians and students of African nationalism continue to debate use Mau Mau as the starting point for nearly all post-World War II assessments of independence movements and guerrilla forces. Many of the central issues in the Mau Mau uprising were foreshadowed in the Malagasy revolt. An ethnically based solidarity movement sought radical economic and political reforms as well as eventual independence. Denigrated by elements of an intellectual elite and deprived of the leadership of a radical urban-based faction, a rural cadre of insurgents and supporters came to the fore. This obscure vanguard emphasized traditional religious and cultural themes and found them useful as a means of mobilizing and motivating a large number of combatants. Kenyan veterans of England’s World War II campaigns were instrumental in forging contemporary military precepts with tactics influenced by religious traditions. Despite their eventual defeat, the Mau Mau insurgency was nevertheless implicitly more successful than its Malgache predecessor if only as measured by the extent to which the former became a reference point, albeit an ambiguous one, for subsequent generations of African politicians and insurgents.

THE METAMORPHOSIS OF AMBITIOUS REFORMERS

The roots of rebellion in Kenya can be traced to earlier efforts at non-violent reform. In Kenya, the organizational origins of the insurgency are linked to the emergence of the Kikuyu Central Association (KCA) in 1924. For the next twenty years, the KCA campaigned for reforms in land tenure, education, labor, and other issues. Members of the KCA frequently denounced European and missionary influences on African culture and also fostered the establishment of independent African churches and schools. In May 1940 British colonial authorities declared the KCA illegal and arrested its leaders. The remaining KCA members went underground and the organization was virtually moribund throughout World War II.
Evidently convinced that they posed no serious threat to England’s war effort, British authorities released the arrested leaders from prison in 1944. Between 1944 and 1946 a new political organization, the Kenya African Union (KAU), appeared and soon established a broad base of support. Its membership quickly grew to some 100,000. Although the KCA was still banned by the British colonial administration, its members actively participated in the KAU, which initially functioned as a ‘united front’ for a Kenya-wide ‘congress’. The KAU eventually advocated many of the goals previously espoused by the KCA and ultimately looked forward to African self-rule or outright independence. However, the KAU was initially a moderate, non-violent, reform movement. Radical nationalist sentiments were not a prominent feature in its program during the late 1940s. Like their Malgache counterparts in the MDRM, many of the KAU’s leading members were clearly more concerned with eventually replacing Europeans in the existing political and economic infrastructure than with completely overhauling it.

It was generally assumed that former KCA members were the more radical component of the KAU. Former KCA cadres also were thought to be more militant than most of the KAU’s prominent leaders, surpassing even the charismatic Jomo Kenyatta who had been the KCA’s Secretary General in 1929 before leaving Kenya for a fifteen-year stay in England. In the late 1940s KCA members became more active and influential, although the organization itself was still considered a select and secret movement whose membership was limited to trusted individuals. In the early 1950s, the KCA made a dramatic revision in its membership policies and attempted to become an underground mass movement. The precise reason for this shift was not immediately apparent. Some historians assume that the organization’s changing character stemmed from an assessment that British colonial administrators and settlers would not support democratic reforms and that further efforts to realize KCA goals could probably not be achieved by constitutional means. The increasing intransigence of white settlers, the arrests of Kenyan labor leaders, and the suppression of newspapers sympathetic to KAU aims corroborated this pessimism. Alternatively, it has been suggested that the KCA itself underwent a split between elder and generally moderate leaders and younger, more militant, supporters. The latter espoused a more active and aggressive reform campaign on behalf of a restive Kikuyu squatter population faced with a mounting number of oppressive legal and economic constraints imposed by white settlers and the colonial administration.

The KCA’s shift in organizational and strategic perspectives was paralleled by the emergence of a movement known to colonial authorities as