

# KENYA information sheet

Produced by [www.watchingthewarmakers.org.uk](http://www.watchingthewarmakers.org.uk) for Hands Off Forum 28/2/08

## Basics

### Size

582,650 sq km (two and a half times bigger than UK)

**Population** 32 million (half UK)

**Ethnic Groups** Kikuyu 22%, Luhya 14%, Luo 13%, Kalenjin 12%, Kamba 11%, Kisii 6%, Meru 6%, other African 15%, non-African (Asian, European, and Arab) 1%.

**Religion** Protestant 45%, Roman Catholic 33%, indigenous beliefs 10%, Muslim 10%, other 2%

**Labour force** 9.2 million (1998 estimate)

**Unemployment** 50% (1998 estimate)

**Labor force by occupation** agriculture 75%-80%, nonagriculture 20%-25%

**Industries** small-scale consumer goods (plastic, furniture, batteries, textiles, soap, cigarettes, flour), agricultural products processing; oil refining, cement; tourism



The scene was thus set for racial and tribal tensions over land and political power.

## Struggling for freedom

From the beginning of imperial domination Africans fought to regain their land and to gain political control. In 1921 they formed the East African Association to struggle for political rights and the return of Kikuyu land. This was suppressed in 1925 but its members immediately formed the Kikuyu Central Association. Three years later a young Jomo Kenyatta became the general secretary and leading figure in the association.

A letter written by Kenyatta to the London Times in March 1930 outlined the main KCA demands

1. Security of land tenure and the return of lands allotted to European settlers
2. Increased educational facilities
3. Repeal of hut taxes on women, which forced some to earn money by prostitution
4. African representation in the Legislative Council
5. Non-interference with traditional customs.

## Enter the British

European interference in East Africa began with the Portuguese in 1505, but it was the imperial rivalry at the end of the nineteenth century which led to complete European dominance.

In 1885 German gunboats demanded that the Sultan of Zanzibar cede his mainland holdings in East Africa to Germany. The British immediately responded and in 1886 a compromise between the British and Germans, accepted by the other major colonial power France, divided the area at latitude 1° south. The British sphere of influence was to the north of this line (modern Kenya) and the German to the south (Tanzania).

## The seeds of a crisis

Over the next half century the British made a number of decisions which were significant for the future of the country. Most centrally:-

a) to raise money for a railway to Lake Victoria, they established a 'white highlands' policy under which the best agricultural land was sold to white settlers. The main losers were the Kikuyu, the largest tribe, who were dispossessed and settled onto reserves. The majority of settlers came not from Britain but from South Africa and, short of labour, established a system of forced labour common in the south. Forced labour was not abolished until 1920.

b) to construct the railway Britain brought in indentured labour from India and, once the railway was completed, Indian traders moved from the coast to the interior. The Indians, with greater economic strength, were able to demand greater political representation and in 1929 were granted 5 seats on the colony's legislative council. The remaining 11 places were reserved for Europeans.

He concluded by saying that the lack of these measures “must inevitably result in a dangerous explosion - the one thing all sane men wish to avoid.”

Progress was slow with one African member accepted by the Legislative Council in 1944, rising to a total of 8 by 1951. The African representatives, however, were token figures appointed by the colonial governor.

### **The Land & Freedom Army**

By 1948, 1.25 million Kikuyu were restricted to 2000 square miles, while 30,000 settlers occupied 12,000 square miles. The most desirable agricultural land was almost entirely in the hands of settlers. Many Kikuyu migrated to the cities – Nairobi’s population doubled between 1938 and 1952 – where there numbers were swelled by conscripts returning from the second world war.

In May 1951 the British were presented with a list of demands ranging from the removal of discriminatory legislation to the inclusion of 12 elected black representatives on the Legislative Council. Instead, they proposed a Legislative Council in which the 30,000 white settlers received 14 representatives, the 100,000 Asians got six, the 24,000 Arabs one, and the five million Africans five representatives to be nominated by the government.

This was the final straw for many Africans who moved to armed struggle. The core of the resistance was formed by members of the Kikuyu along with smaller numbers of Embu and Meru. Although sometimes called the Mau Mau Rebellion the name Mau Mau for the rebel movement was not coined by the movement itself- they called

themselves *Muingi* or, in English, the Land and Freedom Army.

The struggle continued until 1960 with widespread human rights abuses by British troops and settlers. Although the ferocity of the British response, and their superior weaponry, gave them the advantage militarily they were confronted with a rising with mass popular support.

In addition, while the settlers remained intransigent, they owned less than 20% of the assets invested in Kenya. The remainder belonged to various corporations who were prepared to deal with an African majority government as long as stability returned.

As a result the British were forced to make a number of political concessions culminating in a London conference in 1960 which gives the majority of seats on the Legislative Council to Africans.

By 1963 Kenya has gained independence.

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*“And for all the six percent annual gross domestic product growth achieved in the past two years under Mr Kibaki, the gap between the haves and the have-nots is widening. To see the crisis only in terms of tribal allegiances and ethnic clashes is to miss a vital element in the Kenyan picture. The population has doubled in 25 years to 31m. Unemployment is growing, and the number without land is growing. For these people there is nothing to lose by taking to the streets, driven by frustration and fury that transcend their tribe”*

*Financial Times 1/1/08*

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### **An independent Kenya**

Despite having initially denounced the uprising Kenyatta was arrested in 1953 and remained in prison until 1961.

He became Prime Minister of an independent Kenya in 1963, and was President from 1964 until his death in 1978. He led the delegation which negotiated independence in

1962 where under pressure he agreed to British demands for white settlers to remain on their farms if they wanted and for land only to be transferred through a “willing buyer-willing seller arrangement”.

When white land did become available it was not returned to the landless Kikuyu, who were instead settled in the Rift Valley on land that had belonged to the Kalenjin. The land in the white highlands was distributed amongst a pro government elite.

As a result the largest landowners in Kenya today are the families of the only three presidents the country has had since independence. A little further down the scale are a residual group of white settlers, senior politicians and businessmen with political connections.

A familiar pattern was thus set. A post-imperial elite with close ties to the west, a failure of real social reform, and increasing inequality despite a much lauded stability and economic development. In the words of Caroline Elkins, author of *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain’s Gulag in Kenya*.

“The undemocratic historical trajectory that Kenya has been moving along was launched at the inception of British colonial rule more than a century ago. It’s not hard to discern similar patterns -deliberately stoked ethnic tensions,

power-hungry elites, feeble democratic traditions and institutions - in other former British colonies such as Pakistan, Zimbabwe and Iraq that share similar imperial pasts.

In retrospect, the wonder is not that Kenya is descending into ethnic violence. The wonder is that it didn’t happen sooner.”