

# Memories of Julius Nyerere

By **BENJAMIN WILLIAM MKAPA**

THIRD PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED REPUBLIC OF TANZANIA



**BENJAMIN MKAPA** served as President of Tanzania from 1995-2005 after winning 62 per cent of the vote in the country's first multi-party election. Previously he had served as Press Secretary to President Julius Nyerere. He has also been High Commissioner to Nigeria and Ambassador to the US. As a cabinet member, Mr Mkapa has held several ministerial posts including Foreign Affairs, Information and Broadcasting, and Higher Education, Science and Technology. During his tenure many Tanzanian companies were privatized and the free market system entrenched in the country winning the support of the World Bank and the IMF.

I remember J.K. Nyerere principally as an iconic leader, a man of principle, intelligence, and integrity. That he was a man of principle even his diehard critics would allow. He was first and foremost committed to the principle that every people and nation has the right to self-determination and independence.

Projections were that it would take a generation for the people of Tanganyika, a UN trust territory, to gain independence. He led his party, TANU, and the Tanzanian people to independence in seven years. When elements within TANU during agitation for independence wanted to turn the movement into a racially exclusive one, he convinced them that it had to uphold the principle of racial equality and equal citizenship. He swept the elections.

But he was so committed to decolonisation and unity that on the eve of Tanganyika's independence he offered to postpone it to enable Kenya and Uganda to accelerate theirs in a federated East Africa. He did not succeed in this; but his commitment to African liberation is legendary. And he supported the January

1964 Revolution in Zanzibar against the Sultanate's minority rule.

At the founding of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in Addis Ababa in 1963 he worked hard to ensure that his vision of a totally free African continent was enshrined in the Charter. He welcomed the OAU Liberation Committee to be headquartered in Dar es Salaam. Many liberation movements operated from Tanganyika and he educated his people to support these movements in spirit as well as materially.

The one event that revealed all the three attributes I have noted was the unilateral declaration of independence by the white minority regime of Southern Rhodesia in 1965. Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) was self-governing; but it was a British colony. Independence could only be granted by Britain. At the Commonwealth Summit meeting in June of that year, Mwalimu insisted, to no avail, that the final communiqué include the observation that for Southern Rhodesia independence would be given "on the basis of majority rule". When this demand failed, he dissociated Tanzania from this part of the communiqué.



President Nyerere and  
President Abeid Amani  
Karume of Zanzibar

When, four months later, Rhodesia's rebel government led by Ian Smith unilaterally declared independence (UDI), the OAU met in extraordinary session and resolved that if by 15th December Britain did nothing to reverse the UDI independent, African countries should sever diplomatic ties with Britain. Mwalimu became a passionate exponent and defender of this OAU decision. And when Britain did nothing, Tanzania broke diplomatic ties. He went before Parliament a day earlier and asked for support. He got it; the rest is history. For me Mwalimu's reaction to the act of UDI and his crafted response to it, best serves to illustrate his commitment to principle and also demonstrates his passionate intellectual application to its resolution.

The speech to Parliament in which he argued the case is among his most brilliant. It is entitled: The Honour of Africa. It should be required reading in Tanzania's High Schools. This is how he sets out his objectives. "The policies of Tanzania, and of Africa, in relation to Southern Rhodesia have always had one object and one object only. That was, and is, to secure a rapid transition to independence on the basis of majority rule. On this subject every action we have taken, every speech we have made, has been intended to further that purpose. We have no other".

He pointed out that Britain was responsible for Rhodesia. Under law, Southern Rhodesia did not exist; only Britain and its colony existed. Britain had the duty to settle the matter, and settle it quickly.


As for Africa, it was right to take the courageous step to break relations in the event of failure by Britain to act. Africa had to implement its resolution. He asked: "Can we – the African states – honourably do nothing to implement our own resolution, or would failure to do so not mean that we are improving on Britain's example of using big words and doing in our case – absolutely nothing? ... If we fail to implement our resolution we shall have done nothing – less than nothing".

As for the possible conflict between loyalty to the Commonwealth and loyalty to Africa, he was unequivocal. Loyalty to the Commonwealth, and support for its principles, he said, are impossible without loyalty to the Organisation of African Unity. He asked: "If we are disloyal to the OAU how can we be trusted to be loyal to the Commonwealth – or to the United Nations for that matter"?

There were British citizens then in Tanzania, in public service and the private sector. He was quick to calm their fears in the event of a break in relations. He told Parliament that such a decision was in accord with principles upon which the nation was based. These included opposition to racism. "We are not opposing Smith because he is white; we are not proposing action against the British Government because it is a white government. We are opposing Smith because he is a racist... I am asking that

our people should try to make those [British subjects] who stay realise that we understand their personal unhappiness at this quarrel between two governments with both of which they are involved, and that we appreciate their choosing to continue serving the people of Tanzania. And those, if any, who wish to go must be allowed to go in peace. This is a quarrel between Governments, not between peoples". The next day Tanzania broke relations with Britain.

A similar political and diplomatic skirmish had taken place a year earlier, with the same conclusion: this time regarding relations between Tanzania and the then two Germanys – The Federal Republic (West Germany) and the Democratic Republic (GDR). Immediately after the revolution in Zanzibar, its government recognised the GDR. Tanganyika on the other hand had relations only with the Federal Republic. When the United Republic of Tanzania was born, joining Tanganyika and Zanzibar into one sovereign state West Germany called for it not to recognize the GDR, threatening to sever aid relations. The response? The GDR were allowed to have a Consulate in Zanzibar and the FRG were told to pack up its aid kit. Mwalimu would not let our friends choose enemies for us.

Mwalimu did not use public office to enrich himself or members of his extended family. In retirement he lived on his pension. And he lived in houses built for him by the Party and the Government. That is the full measure of his integrity. May his soul rest in peace. And may his legacy forever endure. 

## Julius Nyerere led his party, TANU, and the people, to independence in seven years

Nyerere celebrating independence on 9th December, 1961

