

Remembering Pinto: He was killed for speaking truth to power

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Below: Pinto surrounded by children.

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By CYPRIAN FERNANDES

What you need to know:

Fifty years after the assassination of Kenya's Independence hero Pio Gama Pinto, veteran journalist CYPRIAN FERNANDES weaves his reflections on one of the most important historical figures with excerpts from a hitherto unpublished tribute to the socialist politician by his brother Rosario Da Gama Pinto, revealing a premonition of the February 25, 1965 daylight shooting that marked the first post-independence assassination

Pio Gama Pinto had to die because he was perhaps the near perfect African socialist in a Kenya that was probably 95 per cent capitalist, if only subconsciously.

Trading and bartering were natural to the large majority of Kenyans. Anything else was strange, hence Pinto's socialist ideals threatened to spur on the first revolution.

He was virtually at war with the capitalist conspirators, largely accused of land-grabbing, that included Kenya's first President Jomo Kenyatta and his "Kiambu mafia", and the gods of the Western capitalism led by the US and British governments.

The British government, through the Settlement Transfer Fund Schemes, bankrolled the buying of acres of choice arable and prime coastal land, some of which Kenyatta was then said to have resold to his Central Kenya cohorts at prices below what the government had paid.

Thus it can be said it was the Kenyan nation that paid for the creation of the 10 or so millionaires and 10 million beggars, as another hero, JM Kariuki – assassinated in 1975 – once put it.

Pinto, a Goan, was a member of the ruling Kenya African National Union (Kanu), headed by Kenyatta, but ideologically he was closer to Oginga Odinga, Kenya's first vice-president and later an opposition leader.

I believe that Jaramogi was a true socialist or a closet capitalist. Unlike Pinto, he was not exactly a pauper but socialism did provide the moral high ground and a reasonable opposition position in the face of blatant capitalism.

Pinto, on his part, had almost nothing to his name. His wife, Emma, was the family's breadwinner. Their home in Nairobi's Lower Kabete Road was a gift from an admirer.

After Pinto was assassinated in 1965, Emma was shocked to find that there was no money in the bank account to pay the rent.

Wide-ranging freedom movements

The family was saved a little when Joe Murumbi, a one-time vice-president and close family friend, begged for funds. The Kenya government donated zilch.

With the work Pinto had done in organising and arming the Mau Mau and the wide-ranging freedom movements in Africa, especially those fighting Portuguese oppression, it was clear that he was the strategic brains behind any socialist drive towards power in Kenya.

Tanzania, to the south, had gone socialist and Uganda, to the north, was heading in the same direction as was the Sudan. Whispers of the "communist" threat to Kenya – as opposed to an African socialist threat – were already gaining some momentum and it was not hard to imagine the involvement of the West, mainly Britain and the US.

As early as 1964, it was clear that Pinto was going to be a serious threat to Kenya's capitalist overlords, represented by the amorphous "Kiambu mafia", and US and British interests in the region.

After all, in those early days of Kenya's Independence, most people did not care about the difference between African socialism and communism. Instead, they were led to believe they were one and the same.

Kenya under socialism, it was said, would soon be overrun with Chinese and Russian hardcore communists. After all, the Chinese were already in Tanzania and that country hardly enjoyed the riches of capitalist Kenya – at least for those few that did.

In this scenario, the thought did cross many silent minds that it was a matter of when, and not if, Pinto would be snuffed out.

There was some sentiment that his continuing influence with the last remnants of the Mau Mau would perhaps save him. Wishful thinking, I thought at the time.

Yet, the crystal clear bottom line was: he was perceived to be a threat to Kenyatta in particular and the “Kiambu mafia” in general, and he was viewed as working against Western influence in Kenya.

The Kikuyu were in power, while the Luo – coalescing around Jaramogi – were desperate for power. You did not have to be a rocket scientist to conclude that a simple solution to the situation was the murder of Pinto.

Getting rid of him would neutralise Jaramogi and any opposition to those in power and their Western supporters. It was as simple as that. I am sure even Pinto was fully aware of this.

According to an unpublished tribute by his younger brother, the late Rosario Da Gama Pinto, the killing was impending: “Pio was often threatened and even a month before his death was aware of the plot to kill him by prominent politicians. Although upset about the plot, he carried on as normal until his assassination.”

“Prominent politicians” and “the powers-that-be” is the survival mode language used to camouflage Pinto’s killers.

The then deputy speaker of Parliament, Dr Fitz de Souza, who reportedly witnessed Pinto engaging in a shouting match with Kenyatta in the corridors of the House, said later that Pinto was killed by the “powers that be”.

I suspect that the shouting match was over Sessional Paper No 10, which has been the subject of subsequent revision but at the time virtually legalised capitalism as Kenya’s economic lingua franca.

Pinto, at the insistence of Jaramogi, then vice-president, was going to write amendments which would have been tantamount to a parliamentary challenge to Kenyatta’s leadership.

There has also been an unconfirmed suggestion that the then VP planned to move a vote of no confidence in Kenyatta.

“Improve Kenyatta’s tarnished reputation”

Rosario, Pinto’s brother who died in 1998, seemed to confirm this in the tribute which I have uncovered.

“Pio was murdered to silence him and put an end to his dream to implement socialism, the ideals for which the people of Kenya had formed government. Now that Independence had been gained, and the armed forces’ loyalty had been bought (my words: British soldiers were

still in Kenya to provide further security), those in power considered it a convenient time to assassinate Pinto as a warning to other dedicated nationalists,” he wrote in the tribute titled Pinto, My Brother.

After the assassination no-one really spoke out or pointed a finger in public at the “prominent politicians” or “the powers that be”.

Murumbi knew but said nothing. Instead he wailed at the very thought of his murdered friend. Murumbi was confident that he would have been able to negotiate Pinto’s safety.

Jaramogi knew but said nothing. Neither did fellow Independence hero Achieng’ Oneko or any of Pinto’s Goan confidantes. All except Fitz de Souza.

He at least voiced a little about the war of words between Pinto and Kenyatta.

Pinto was confident that Kenyatta was not capable of killing him. Rosario noted in his writing that his brother had good reason for such faith.

“Pio had worked tirelessly for Kenyatta’s release and had spent his last cent extending and refurbishing Kenyatta’s home. In the process he had antagonised those friends who did not want Kenyatta released.

Some of them went on to become ministers in the Kenyatta government,” he wrote in his tribute.

Rosario further said that Pinto made a great effort to “improve Kenyatta’s tarnished reputation”.

“He (Pinto) knew that the same ‘divide and rule’ policy the British used in India would be used to disunite Kenyans,” wrote Rosario.

Yet, it was unthinkable that anyone could get into a shouting match with the “Father of the Nation” or insult him and live to tell the tale. In those days, no matter who you were, it was unheard of that anyone would insult even the simplest image, such as that on the Kenya currency. A few had already been deported for that very “crime”.

At the outset, Pinto did not want the limelight of a high position, preferring to assign such glory to his trusted and talented friends like Murumbi, Bildad Kaggia, Fred Kubai, Jaramogi, Oneko, Pranal Seth and others.

Pinto felt he could achieve more behind the scenes but changed his mind after realising that the only way to meet his goals was to be elected to Parliament. In 1963, he was elected to the Legislative Assembly and, in July 1964, he was appointed a specially elected member of the House of Representatives.

That was the beginning of the end for Pinto, a dedicated socialist, freedom fighter, journalist and son of Kenya.

His place in Kenya's history can, however, not be erased.

For instance, Pinto broke the apartheid rules by entering European restaurants and hotels in Nairobi and Mombasa in the early 1950s.

He and his friends would be physically ejected or coerced to leave by the police. As a result of his efforts, plus the changing political situation nearer to Independence, non-whites were finally allowed access to such places.

And when the Mau Mau found that they could not hold out indefinitely against the well-equipped British army, they fled into the forests and used Pinto as a go-between to request a ceasefire.

Knowing that the settlers would crush the rebellion, Pinto approached the Government of India via its acting High Commissioner R.K. Tandau and asked that the question of negotiations be taken up at the highest level with the Colonial Office.

The British government's attitude was favourable. However, this meeting was sabotaged by the local settlers who held high posts.

The security forces opened fire on the representatives of the Mau Mau. Pinto was detained under the Emergency regulations as a scapegoat for the failed meeting. He was not allowed a proper trial or hearing and was denied legal aid.

He was held incommunicado and after a few days in Nairobi sent to Mombasa under heavy police escort. Pinto was later moved to Lamu Island and then Manda Island where hundreds of hardcore Mau Mau were exiled for years under terrible conditions.

Pinto was offered better facilities, but declined them on principle. He lived like the rest of his comrades on maize-meal flour, rice, fish etc.

Our family sent him Sh1.50 a month – but he preferred to share the money with the needy.

Pinto was promised an early release if he would confess but refused to give in, even at the threat of deportation. He was offered a one-way ticket to India which he again declined as he wanted a fair trial.

His time in the detention camp has been covered in various publications.

Further, Pinto had opposed Asian participation in the establishment of the Asian Manpower Unit to quell the Mau Mau rebellion, making him a candidate for detention.

The colonial government planned to establish three or four special combat units to bolster the Kenya Police Reserve. Asians who outnumbered the whites six-to-one were barred from participating in anti-Mau Mau activities because the British government feared a threat from their dominance in Kenya. Two units were eventually set up.

The Asian community (minus the Goans who supported the colonial government) was divided. Indian members of the Legislative Council strongly backed the colonialists after an Indian trader, his wife and children were killed by the Mau Mau. Their deaths had a devastating effect on Asians. Others would later be killed but it was not clearly if they were all victims of the Mau Mau.

However, the Asian traders in small towns and villages were accused of exploiting poor Africans and were hated. This situation remains to this day albeit not as blatant as it was in the colonial era – all part of the British divide and conquer plan.

Thousands more would have died but for Pinto's intervention. The Mau Mau and the Kenyan political leadership respected him and valued his organisational and strategic skills. Later he would make a huge contribution drafting important documents and writing speeches.

Pinto argued that these poor Asian traders should not bear the brunt of the attacks as their misguided leaders (some British stooges) were to blame.

Not only did he obtain and channel help to the families of the victims, he also paid for their children's schooling, food and clothing, as far as was possible, out of his own pocket.

Within the ranks of the Mau Mau in Nairobi, it was common knowledge that the Indian trader network (the world famous dukawallahs) carried messages and provided cash to help the fighters in outlying districts. At the beginning of the Mau Mau campaign, there had been strong-arming of the dukawallahs but it stopped quickly after Pinto's intervention.

Pinto is reputed to have received considerable financial and in-kind help from several Indian diplomats to Kenya. His anti-British and anti-Portuguese exploits in India were well-known to the Indian leadership.

In fact, he was in contact and even met then Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Later, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi would also be made aware of Pinto's Indian and African nationalism. Some of Pinto's closest associates were Indians: the illustrious Pranlal Sheth, the academic and author Pheroze Nowrojee, economist Sarjit Singh Heyer and others.

If not for Kenya, Pinto would have dedicated his life to India. I have a strong suspicion that India might have financed the Mau Mau through Pinto. I have no proof of this and it remains only a suspicion.

When the African-American leader, Malcolm X, visited Kenya in 1959, he found he had a lot in common with Pinto. They planned a common strategy to deal with the daily humiliation and indignities suffered by both Africans and African-Americans. Malcolm X was assassinated on February 21, 1965, three days before Pinto. Their murders are linked in that both were considered dangerous to vested interests.

Pinto's was a family with deep roots in both India and Kenya.

Rosario's daughter, Audrey Da Gama, said in a recent interview: "My grandfather, Anton Filipe Da Gama Pinto, worked for the British civil service in Nyeri, Kenya, from 1919 to 1941. Pinto, Seigne and my dad were born in Kenya, but educated in India."

Seigne Athaide, who lives in Mumbai, followed in his brother Pinto's footsteps and carved out an illustrious career in Indian politics, especially in Karnataka.

Rosario worked as an administrator for various companies in Nairobi and London.

"He and Pio attended the Problems of Portuguese Colonies seminar in New Delhi in 1961. They got a chance to ask Indian Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru for some university scholarships for East African-based Goan students. They were invited back for Goa's liberation celebrations," Rosario's daughter, who holds the copyright to the unpublished tribute, said.

Pinto was invited to return to Goa to take a leadership role in the new Goa. He declined, saying that there were enough talented people in Goa and his priorities were in Kenya.

"As you can imagine, some friends and family members distanced themselves from Pio in order to protect their jobs. However, once he was elected to Parliament, the same people were happy to claim him as their own," she said.

But after Pinto's death in 1965, the entire family felt unsafe.

"My father was also quite ... angered by the silencing of his brother. This would have made him a target. In the end, my parents decided to leave quietly. Pio's death changed the course of our lives forever. We spent 10 months in Goa, then moved to the UK," she said.

Her father, she said, was a compassionate and generous man and was probably more driven to throw himself into causes following Pinto's death.

"In later years, he had private audiences with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi of India. His objective was to obtain more scholarships for poor Goans.

He also gave scholarships in Goa in his father's and brother's names. Education as a form of empowerment and love of family and tradition were central to his being," she said. Rosario died in London in January, 1998, and his widow and children relocated to Melbourne, Australia.

Dedication to the freedom of men from India to Kenya

PIO GAMA PINTO was a Kenyan of Goan descent who was intimately involved with the freedom struggle. Born in 1927 of Goan parents in Nairobi, Pinto was educated in India where he had an early taste of politics in the Goan National Congress, then locked in a bitter struggle for Goa's independence from Portuguese rule.

He was only 19 when he returned to Kenya in 1946 and threw himself into local politics, making friends with Kenya African Union leaders, especially radical ones like Bildad Kaggia and Fred Kubai.

An accomplished journalist and propagandist, Pinto put his enormous energies to publicising the cause of African freedom through strident anti-government political pamphlets and press articles.

When in 1952 the colonial government declared a state of emergency and detained most African leaders, he mobilised resources for the Mau Mau in Nairobi.

In 1954, the British authorities arrested and deported him to Manda Island where he was the only Indian. In 1958 he was moved from Manda and subjected to a further year of restriction in the Rift Valley Province.

On being freed in 1959, Pinto flung himself back into politics, joining hands with a number of Indian politicians to marshal support for the African nationalist struggle.

He would later join Kanu and go on to become manager of the party's paper, Sauti ya Kanu. When the paper was expanded and renamed PanAfrica, he became its editor-in-chief. In 1963 he was elected as one of Kenya's representatives in the Central Legislative Assembly of the East African Common Services Organisation.

In July the following year, Pinto entered Kenya's Parliament as a Specially Elected Member.

In 1964 Pinto joined Dennis Akumu and other disgruntled individuals in the trade union movement to oppose the leadership of the American-leaning Tom Mboya. Late that year, Pinto would be involved in raising money from the Soviet Union to set up the Lumumba Institute to train Kanu cadres in organisational and ideological skills.

He was reportedly later told his life was in danger because powerful forces in government were unhappy with his activities, but he refused to flee the country. He was shot in 1965 as he drove out of his Westlands home. Kisilu Mutua (pictured below) was arrested and convicted for the killing.

Pinto's was the first post-independence assassination.

Cyprian Fernandes is a former Chief Reporter of the Daily Nation (1960-1974) and has worked as a senior journalist in Europe and Australia, where he now lives. A full copy of Rosario's tribute to his brother Pinto will be available at this writer's blog: cyprianfernandes.blogspot.com.au

NEXT WEEK: A candid interview with the widow of Pio Gama Pinto with fresh insights on his death 50 years ago and how it changed the course of her life

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