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# Chemchemi Ya Ukweli: A Wellspring of Truth to Promote Active Nonviolence in Kenya

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## **Chemchemi Ya Ukweli: A Wellspring of Truth to Promote Active Nonviolence in Kenya**

On December 27, 2002, Emilio Mwai Kibaki was sworn in as the new president of Kenya, ending 40 years of post-independence autocratic rule by Jomo Kenyatta and his handpicked successor, Daniel arap Moi, who had reigned for the last 24 years. Moi's Kenya African National Union party (KANU), which dominated Kenyan politics for 40 years, was reduced to a minority opposition party in the National Assembly and lost a number of posts in local governments. As the political scientist Stephen Ndegwa wrote, the electoral change of 2002 marked "a measure of progress to what had been one of Africa's most notorious cases of stalled democratic transition" (Ndegwa 2003, 145). During the 1990s, many developments, national and international, played a role in bringing about this change, and among the important actors was an array of groups and organizations that comprised a genuine social movement working to change the regime and reform the political system. One faith-based group, Chemchemi Ya Ukweli (CYU), which in Kiswahili, Kenya's national language, means Wellspring of Truth, was founded during the tumultuous years of the late 1990s with a commitment to Active Nonviolence and social change. Chemchemi helped to make the Kenyan transition to democracy a relatively peaceful one and continues to promote nonviolence, peacebuilding, and human rights.

### **From Autocracy to Democracy**

During the mid-to late-1990s, Kenya experienced a degree of political liberalization, the first phase of democratic transition, after increasing domestic and international pressure pushed then-President Moi to make some reforms. After a long history of one-party rule by KANU, Moi legalized opposition parties in 1991. Multiparty elections were held in 1992 and again in 1997, both of which were won by Moi and his KANU party largely because of election rigging, violent intimidation, and a divided opposition (see Adar and Munyae 2001; Barkan and Ng'ethe 1999). In spite of these limited reforms, governmental repression and political violence still marred the country as Moi and his regime tried to remain in control. Reports by various human rights groups such as the Kenya Human Rights Commission and Amnesty International, ably summarized by Korwa Adar and Isaac Munyae (2001), document the many human rights violations by the Moi regime through the last days of his rule.

The 1990s also saw serious ethnic violence in Kenya. Human rights groups and others have provided evidence that the major episodes of ethnic violence during this period were government-initiated, presumably because Moi wanted to clear from their territories certain ethnic groups that did not support him and to provide "proof" that multiparty elections would only lead to ethnic competition and violence and were therefore to be avoided (Adar and Munyae 2001; Human Rights Watch 1993). Nevertheless, in the autocratic and violent environment of the 1990s the number of non-governmental organizations working for peace, democracy, and human rights grew, including organizations such as Chemchemi (see Jenner and Abdi 2000; Schmidt 1999).

In 1997, after the regime-manipulated election and the violence that followed it, concerned religious leaders founded Chemchemi to work for peace, justice, and democracy by promoting the spirituality and practice of Active Nonviolence, which they saw as exemplified by the lives and work of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. (CYU, 1998, 24). That Chemchemi emerged out of religious networks should not be surprising; though the Moi regime made efforts to silence or co-opt them, major segments of the religious community had been a "central locus" of

opposition to the Moi regime since the 1980s, largely because secular opposition groups were repressed and silenced (Aboum 1996; Adar and Munyae 2001; Oded 2000). Initially a group within a regionally oriented Catholic organization called *People for Peace in Africa*, Chemchemi had developed by 1998 into an independent interfaith organization (Kariuki, 2003).

As has occurred in many countries undergoing democratic transitions, political liberalization led to the "resurrection of civil society" in Kenya (see O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986; Pagnucco, 1996b). Public activism led to increasing violence, however, that eventually led to the founding of Chemchemi. Chemchemi describes the pattern as follows:

[S]ince the elections of 1992, Kenya has seen increasing public pressure to make reforms, particularly constitutional, legal and administrative. Calls for these reforms increased as the 1997 elections drew near. When it became clear that the government wanted to call elections without meaningful reform, the opposition political parties and civic society came together to form a lobby group called the National Convention Executive Committee (NCEC). The NCEC spearheaded the call for reforms that resulted in mass action which at times turned violent. Public rallies called by the NCEC were met with brutal violence by the GOK.[...](The violent clashes) which erupted less than one month after the elections caused a lot of anger, confusion and sadness. The clashes are most certainly politically instigated and the government is not accepting the responsibility for putting an end to them. More than ever there is need to channel people's energies onto nonviolent action for change (CYU, 1998, 1-2).

More and more Kenyans openly discussed the need for change during the 1990s. However, the democratic transition in Kenya was stalled. Moi reacted with measures of violent repression to the upsurge in opposition activity and struggled to maintain power, making as few political reforms as possible. According to Chemchemi, the opposition seemed to believe that the choice facing them was either "to be passive or to react with violence" (CYU, 1998, 3). Chemchemi's conviction was that nonviolent action could move the transition forward and channel the opposition's energy and anger in a constructive direction.

Chemchemi's tasks, however, went beyond working nonviolently for democracy. As scholars of social movements have noted, groups often have different interpretations of the social and political situation, or different frames. Many factors, such as the political and cultural context and the group's interaction with allies and opponents, influence the group's construction of a frame (see McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, 2001). A group's frame defines and describes the problems in the society, who or what is responsible for the problems, and how the problems can be solved or ameliorated. Like many other religious peace and justice groups (see Pagnucco 1996a; Holsworth 1989), Chemchemi's frame was broad and deep. It defined many aspects of Kenyan society, culture, and politics as problems, and it proposed major and far-reaching changes beyond politics to solve them. For Chemchemi, not only did the Moi government have to be changed, but a more pervasive culture of violence that affects interpersonal relations had to be transformed as well. Chemchemi's frame includes the increasing number of street children, economic injustice, neocolonialism, lack of development, disharmony with nature, consumerism, and widespread corruption in society as well as in politics (CYU, 1998, 2, 6, 18).

According to Chemchemi, the problems in Kenya are many, and major changes in Kenyan society, culture and politics are needed to solve them. For Chemchemi, disseminating the principles

and practices of Active Nonviolence (ANV) is the way to bring about a transformation of Kenyan society.

### **Active Nonviolence (ANV)**

From its founding in 1997, Chemchemi's vision has been to work for a "society that embraces the spirituality" of Active Nonviolence (ANV) and "a sustainable culture of peace in Kenya." Chemchemi defines ANV as "a system of personal, social and international change based on the force of truth and the power of love" to overcome evil, obtain justice and bring about fraternal relationship and reconciliation' (CYU, 1998, 9). Among ANV's other basic assumptions are the following:

- a. The goal is not to win or to prevail over the other but to arrive at the truth of the situation.
- b. Both the victim and the aggressor share a common humanity.
- c. ANV appeals to the humanity of the aggressor in the hope of triggering a reciprocal response from him/her.
- d. ANV seeks to destroy enmity, not the enemy. The [nonviolent] person is willing to accept the consequences of his/her actions (CYU, 1998, 10).

Though Chemchemi supports the electoral process, it was not founded to be a conventional, partisan political entity seeking to democratize the regime and then possibly take power in it. Its goal is much broader and deeper: the transformation of society. For Chemchemi, the primary way to achieve this transformation to a nonviolent society is through promoting the principles and practices of ANV, a means consistent with the ends. The key element in Active Nonviolence is that it is a way of life, not just a social change tactic, and it requires change in the individual (CYU, 1998, 23).

### **Promoting Nonviolence Amidst Diversity**

Chemchemi faces special challenges as an interfaith organization promoting non-violence in a culturally and religiously diverse country. Kenya has a population of about 30 million people, and some 39 ethnic groups (Sayer 1998). Roughly 62 percent of the population is Christian (32 percent Protestant and 30 percent Catholic), and 28 percent Muslim, while the remaining 10 percent are African Traditional, Hindu or other. Chemchemi tries to work with all of these religious communities (CYU, 2000, 7).

In its Active Nonviolence basic seminar handbook, Chemchemi tries to show how Active Nonviolence has a basis in the traditional Kenyan social and cultural context. Concepts and texts that support nonviolence in the religious communities and traditions found in Kenya are included, and seminar participants are asked how Kenyan songs, literature, symbols, rituals dances, stories, real life experiences, history, and beliefs help promote Active Nonviolence (CYU, 1998, 10).

Among its many activities Chemchemi has devoted special attention to promoting inter-religious dialogue and cooperation between Christians and Muslims. Chemchemi's newsletter regularly carries a column, The Non-Violent Crescent, which offers a Muslim perspective, and the group works with the Muslim Consultative Council, among other organizations. The Muslim community, which has been in Kenya for centuries, is a relatively large, diverse, and moderate minority, and while Muslims have had largely peaceful relations with the predominantly Christian

Kenyan society and government, there have been some serious tensions (see Mohammed 2001; CYU 2000; Nnyombi, ed., 2000; Oded 2000).

After the American Embassy bombing in 1998, which was carried out by a small group of Muslim radicals associated with Al Qaeda, tensions increased (see Hyder 2002). Drawing on its Muslim associates and contacts, Chemchemi is in a good position to try to help reduce the tensions. For example, in February, 2003, Chemchemi and the Young Muslim Association organized an interfaith dialogue conference with 40 representatives of Muslim, Christian, and Bahai organizations from Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania (see Catholic Information Service Africa, 2003). Many of the organizations represented at the conference, such as the Christian-Muslim Commission for Peace, Development and Conflict Resolution in Tanzania, are themselves interfaith organizations. Chemchemi and the Muslim Student Association plan to hold more such conferences. Similarly, in August, 2003, Chemchemi organized a Muslim-Christian dialogue in Isiolo, a region of Kenya that has experienced inter-religious conflict. With the collaboration of an interfaith group there - one of its 11 affiliated base groups - Chemchemi plans to open a peace resource center in the region (Ombok 2003).

Inter-religious dialogue is one way Chemchemi promotes nonviolence, but it also engages in other activities. It provides nonviolence training for leaders in various groups and organizations who are expected to train others in Active Nonviolence. Currently, Chemchemi has a network of 100 trainers in various parts of the country. Chemchemi also provides general training in ANV for interested individuals and the leaders and grassroots members of various organizations throughout the eight provinces of Kenya. Since its founding, Chemchemi has trained more than 5,000 "civil society, government (teachers and police) and religious leaders" (CYU, 2003a, 1). When a training workshop in Active Nonviolence is action-oriented, it includes an exploration of the principles and tactics of ANV, the selection and analysis of an issue of concern to the participants, the development of a plan of action, carrying out the action, and then evaluation of and reflection on the action (Ombok 2003). As is shown in their reports, Chemchemi works with and conducts training for a range of rural and urban groups involved in a variety of issues, including land disputes, pasture and water rights, and violence in schools (see CYU, 2003b, 3). Chemchemi also works to reduce the serious problem of violent crime, especially in Nairobi, and to improve community-police relations, which in many cases have been antagonistic. Chemchemi organizes Community Policing forums in an attempt to reduce tensions between the police and community members and to help them collaborate in reducing crime and increasing security. Although Chemchemi uses protest and nonviolent confrontation as a tactic on some issues, it is promoting a collaborative, win-win approach to police-community relations in the belief that both sides need each other and have much to gain (Ombok 2003). This illustrates the care with which Chemchemi strategically chooses tactics.

Chemchemi's activities are many and varied, and the organization works with a range of groups in various rural and urban settings. It continues to be involved in the constitutional reform movement and is an advocate of the establishment of a Truth, justice, and Reconciliation Commission in Kenya patterned after the South African Commission (CYU 2003c). Chemchemi organizes civic education projects and hopes to provide paralegal training for low-income people so they will have access to legal advice in their communities (Ombok 2003).

## **Structure and Networks**

Although Chemchemi is currently restructuring its Board and Council, the core of its activities emanates from its cadre of five full-time paid staff and several volunteers. Recently, interns have begun working with the staff as well. It has a network of eleven base groups, community organizations that have integrated Active Nonviolence into their program activities. Among their strongest base groups are the Nairobi Youth Network for Peace and a slum-dwellers organization called the Kibera Youth Program for Peace and Development. Chemchemi works with various other groups, such as constitutional reform coalitions and the Del Monte campaign, and it is a member of several standing coalitions, including the Kenya Peace and Development Network, the Kenya Land Alliance, and the Kenya Debt Relief Network. As is indicated in the training reports cited previously, Chemchemi provides Active Nonviolence training and other assistance to a wide variety of groups involved in a range of peace and justice activities throughout the eight provinces of Kenya.

Like other groups in the Kenyan peace and justice movement with transnational ties (see Schmidt, 1999), Chemchemi has contact with various organizations outside of Kenya, such as Catholic Relief Services (U.S./Kenya); Misereor-Germany; the Mission Office of the Catholic Diocese of St. Cloud, Minnesota; Pax Christi-St. Cloud; Pax Christi-Netherlands; and the International Fellowship of Reconciliation. Chemchemi has utilized these transnational ties in various ways. For example, as it did in Argentina (see Pagnucco, 1997), the International Fellowship of Reconciliation sent trainers to Kenya to conduct Active Nonviolence training for Chemchemi. In another instance, when Otieno Ombok of Chemchemi was arrested in a demonstration, U.S. organizations such as Pax Christi-St. Cloud and the Maryknoll Office of Global Concerns showed transnational support by organizing the sending of messages to the Kenyan government requesting his release. Chemchemi participates in international meetings on such topics as peacebuilding and nonviolent action. As can be seen, Chemchemi is embedded in Kenyan as well as in transnational networks from which it draws and to which it contributes various forms of support.

### **Conclusion**

Chemchemi Ya Ukweli has much to show after only six years of existence. Its short life has spanned an historic period in Kenya's history as the country has moved from autocracy to democracy. Indeed, Chemchemi made its own unique contribution to that transition by sharing with opposition groups the principles and methods of non-violent social change. But with democracy, other problems have come to the fore (see Barkan 2004). The newly elected coalition government strives to maintain unity in the face of the difficult challenges of governing Kenya. Human rights violations and other crimes by members of the old regime must be addressed in a way that will heal and not hurt the country. Corruption must be rooted out completely. The economic well-being of the people must improve. Crime and everyday violence must be diminished, and the AIDS crisis must be resolved. Relations with the Muslim community must be strengthened. The challenges of terrorism must be met. Chemchemi could name more problems facing newly democratic Kenya, but Chemchemi is ready for the challenges. It has well-thought-out programs (CYU 2003a), a committed staff, many friends at home and abroad, and a strong interfaith base. And its message of Active Nonviolence seems to have struck a responsive chord with many Kenyans in their culturally and religiously diverse land. Chemchemi will continue to help Kenyans explore the benefits of Active Nonviolence as the story of Kenya continues to unfold. We all will watch with hope.

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