

A teacher-turned-leader who endured extreme cruelty in life

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Joseph Barasabas Wekesa Wambukechi, 81, was acknowledged as one of the strongest pillars of the second liberation forces in Bungoma District that helped bring down the Kanu regime.



Joseph Barasabas Wekesa is led to a Nairobi court during his trial in 1995. Photo/FILE

As a teacher who rose to head a number of primary schools in the district, he combined authority, discipline and a no-nonsense approach in whatever roles life bequeathed him.

It was no wonder that when veteran politician Masinde Muliro teamed up with the likes of Jaramogi Oginga Odinga to found the Forum for the Restoration of Democracy (Ford) in the early 90s, Wekesa was one of the elders in Bungoma approached to mobilise for the new party.

For his leadership role, he was detained for three months.

It was a time of great civil turmoil in the country with the infamous land clashes in and around the Rift Valley raging. Bands of warriors roamed the villages killing, raping, pillaging and burning homes with impunity. In Mt Elgon District and in Mzee Wekesa's Sirisia home area in particular, State security agents looked unmoved as houses were burnt and people killed.

But it was in February 1995, when Mzee Wekesa burst on the national scene, but for all the wrong reasons. He was arrested, tortured and jailed for six years after he was framed up for being a key member of the so-called February Eighteenth Movement/February Eighteenth Revolutionary Army, a shadowy group the Government claimed was led by one "Brig" John Odongo out to overthrow it.

Up to his death last month, Mzee Wekesa maintained that FEM/FERA was a creation of Kanu regime which was used as an excuse to silence its critics over the State-sponsored land clashes.

Wekesa could relate with clarity the day State agents went to pick him at his home. It was deep in the night of February 4. He was blindfolded and bundled in the back of a police Landrover.

At Bungoma, Webuye and Nakuru police stations, more blindfolded people were thrown into the Landrover in its bumpy journey to the basement of Nyayo House in Nairobi – the infamous torture chambers of the Kanu regime.

As he would say, "they worked on me for nearly three weeks". At his age, he still had fresh memories of how he was duped into admitting FERA membership on the eve of

his appearance in court.

While at Nyayo House, his tormentors suddenly changed tact and became very civil. Little did he know that a bait had been set. They told him he was an old man and they did not want to torture him any longer. And the decoy was a simple condition; If he went to court the following day and admitted his membership in FERA, he would be released to go back home and join his family. They even served him with pilau after days of starvation.

And so when he appeared before the then Nairobi chief magistrate Pamela Kidullah on February 22, 1995, Mzee Wekesa who looked frail, dazed and frightened had this to say in response to the FERA membership charges: *Ni sawa, ni kweli* (It's correct, it's true).

Prosecuting, the then Deputy Public Prosecutor (DPP) Bernard Chunga, who later became Chief Justice under Kanu, said the accused, whose home was near the Kenya-Uganda border, was recruited into the unlawful organisation sometime between 1991 and 1992.

He said by reason of Wekesa's age, he had considerable knowledge of the border areas and "Brig" Odongo appointed him to spearhead the recruitment of Kenyan youths.

Mr Chunga submitted that Mr Wekesa was a member of FERA's war council and a liaison man responsible for safe passage of recruits to Uganda for training.

He said Wekesa also played host to the recruits in his home while they were on transit to Uganda. During such stay, they would be disguised as farm workers.

Ms Kidullah was convinced with the evidence and promptly sentenced the old man to six years at Kamiti Maximum Prison. The sentence was later reduced to two years on appeal.

Upon his release, Mzee Wekesa helped found the Bungoma-based Mwatikho Rehabilitation Centre for FERA torture victims in 2000.

One of his happiest moments was in 2002 when Kanu was finally removed from power.

But together with his fellow FERA victims, he remained a disgruntled man since the new Narc leadership did not seem to recognise the role his team played in their victory. He was further disturbed that the new regime seemed to be replaying scenes of the old Kanu days.

When his casket was being laid to rest on Saturday March 24, houses in Mt Elgon were burning, people were being shot dead and thousands displaced, scenes which reminded his events before his arrest.

Wekesa could talk with a combination of bitterness and passion. The pains he went through both at Nyayo House and Kamiti were fresh. But he still held his head up with high spirit over the role he played in ending the Kanu regime.

As a leader, he sought to use Mwatikho Centre to seek justice for the FERA survivors, most of who were just victims of the land clashes. In 2003, he was not surprised by the action of the Government he thought was more humane, when it refused to resettle FERA returnees from Uganda.

Leadership role followed him upto his sunset. Rest in peace.