



Why Kenyatta sent me to jail: A personal account
Lifestyle Sheikh Abdlatif Abdalla, Kenya's first post-independence political prisoner, speaks



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Work cut out for new Coast PC

BY MARK AGUTU
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Threats posed by terrorists, the simmering issue of the Mombasa Republican Council, drugs and the perennial land disputes in the Coast are among urgent issues awaiting the newly-posted Provincial Commissioner, Mr Samuel Kilele.

Mr Kilele, who takes over from Mr Ernest Munyi who has been transferred to North Eastern Province, is expected to hit the ground running as all these issues must be addressed urgently.

STORY ON PAGE 9

The phone call that gave Iranians away

Police trailed terror suspects for eight days after listening in on their conversation with an Al-Shabaab agent leading to seizure of 15 kg of explosives in Mombasa **Pages 4&5**



"We are liaising with other friendly agencies so that we can know their (the suspects') history"
Police Commissioner Mathew Iteere

"After Iran sent its agents to murder the Saudi ambassador on US soil, the country has now engaged in attacks in Azerbaijan, Bangkok, in Tbilisi, in New Delhi, and now we have just discovered a plot for a terrorist attack in Africa."

 June 19 Police arrest the two Iranians at a Nairobi hotel.	 June 21 Police recover 15 kilograms of RDX in Mombasa.	 June 23 US Government closes down all business in Mombasa and pulls out all staff.	 June 25 Mr Ahmad Abolfathi Mohammed (above) are charged in a Nairobi court with being in possession of the explosive substance	 July 03 Israel accuses Iran of planning terror attacks in Kenya.	July 04 Court orders the Iranian suspects be held at the Kamiti maximum prison.
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The road to
death and
destruction
PAGE 3

Why Kenyatta sent me to jail



Kenya's first post-
independence political
prisoner Sheikh Abdilatif
Abdalla tells his tale of
woe in Kamiti where he
was jailed for sedition, and
of his life in exile

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Your fashion
dream
PAGE 7



And then life
happened to
Aurna Obama
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STAFFROOM DIARY: HARAMBEE LEAVES MWALIMU ANDREW HIGH AND DRY **PAGE 12**

Face-to-face with Kenya's first post-

In March 1969, at the tender age of 22, Sheikh Abdalla joined the growing list of political activists in the government's bad books. Indeed, he was jailed for sedition

BY NYAMBEGA GISESA
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Sheikh Abdiatif Abdalla does not look like a man who would be an enemy of the state. A chummy old man – he is 66 – if you told anyone looking at him that he was Kenya's first post-independence political prisoner, they might have some doubts, or just brand him a good actor.

Yet in March 1969, at the tender age of 22, Sheikh Abdalla joined the list of political activists in the government's bad books. Indeed, he was jailed for sedition.

Today, Sheikh Abdalla is a scholar and writer of international repute. He belongs in the league of Prof Nguigi wa Thiong'o, being a celebrated poet, political activist, humanist, teacher and journalist.

Now a retired lecturer at University of Leipzig, Germany, where he had been teaching since 1994, Sheikh Abdalla is back in his home country. And he is happy as he has been in exile since 1972.

"This freedom makes me feel so happy," he told *Lifestyle* at the Nation Centre last week, a broad smile playing on his lips as he pursed his greying beard.

Sheikh Abdalla's activism started when he was a teenager. When Jaramogi Oginga Odinga formed the Kenya People's Union (KPU) in 1966, Sheikh Abdalla, then aged 19, discovered that the government was not giving his party of choice the freedom to sell its ideologies.

The municipal and mini-general elections of 1968 came as a shocker for him when all KPU candidates were disqualified from running on "technicalities".

"I was so enraged by the kind of injustice that our party suffered. That all the 1,800 KPU candidates had not filled in their papers properly while all Kanu candidates had filled in the same papers properly would not make sense even to an insane person," he recalled last week. The ridiculousness of that pronouncement makes him burst out in laughter.

Together with others, Sheikh Abdalla started underground movements to push for the expansion of the democratic space. His assignment was to publish a monthly pamphlet titled *Kenya: Twendapi?* (Kenya: Where are we headed?) in which he questioned the direction the country was taking.

"It was shocking that only three years after independence, it was as if Kenya had a history of mismanagement. Things were not moving in the right direction," he said.



Sheikh Abdiatif Abdalla during the interview at the Nation Centre, Nairobi, last week.

PHOTO | FILE

In *Kenya: Twendapi?* he found an avenue to mourn the shrinking democracy. He condemned the emerging dictatorship and permeation of tribalism in the running of the country's affairs, especially after the banning of KPU and the subsequent silencing of its leadership, including Mr Odinga and Mr Bilal Kagga.

"I felt like the government was denying citizens the right to get the leaders they wanted," he told *Lifestyle*.

Four decades later, Sheikh Abdalla still believes KPU would have overwhelmingly won the municipal seats.

Responding to the "stolen victory" he wrote in the pamphlet: "If the government does this in the upcoming General Election, then citizens should use force to remove it from power because it seems that our government is not interested in peaceful means."

For six months, the publication successfully pointed out that the government was using lip-service to subvert the democratic process. Then he was arrested while distributing the pamphlet.

"It was not possible for somebody to have found out that I was the author were it not for one of my best friends. He was the chief witness at my trial," he said.

His arrest at 22 years thrust him from relative obscurity to the national limelight

in the newly-independent state. The Kenyan media described him as a "revolutionary young man". The *Standard* newspaper called him "a young man full of revolutionary ideas".

In March 1969, he appeared before a Mombasa court facing several charges which included sedition and the more serious crimes of plotting to use force to overthrow the government, which carried a death sentence. The country's lawyers, threatened by the Jomo Kenyatta government, refused to defend him.

Relatives and friends lost hope in him escaping with his life. But, young and determined, he decided to defend himself.

"I come from a family of fighters. My great-great-grandparents fought against the Portuguese when they arrived in the East African coast. When both the Omani Arabs and British arrived, my grandparents battled them. My elder brother Ustadh Sheikh Abdihi Nassir fought for Kenya's independence and he was among the people who started Kanu. I could not betray this history. I decided to fight even when I knew how limited my chances of winning were," he said.

The court dropped some of the charges, including plans to overthrow the government, but the magistrate found him guilty and sentenced him to 18 months in prison

I COME FROM A FAMILY OF FIGHTERS. MY GREAT-GREAT-GRANDPARENTS FOUGHT AGAINST THE PORTUGUESE WHEN THEY ARRIVED IN THE EAST AFRICA COAST. WHEN BOTH THE OMANI ARABS AND BRITISH BATTLED THEM"

Sheikh Abdalla

for sedition.

Despite such a sentence, the Attorney-General was outraged that the term was "too lenient". After a successful appeal, Abdalla's sentence was accordingly reviewed to three years and the government further secured its wish for solitary confinement, a full sentence without the option of parole, and his family was barred from visiting him in prison.

He was moved from Shimo la Tewa GK Prison in Mombasa to Kamiti Maximum Security Prison in Nairobi.

He recalls one of the guards at the gate at Kamiti asking, "Who is this devil?" when he arrived.

Another warder told him: "So he is the one who asked, 'Kenya *twendapi?*' We'll show you where it is heading."

At Kamiti he was led to the isolation block and locked up in Cell No 1 with only tattered blankets, a plastic mug and his lavatory, a plastic container, for company.

And coming from a family of poets, Abdalla's imprisonment unleashed his muse and he used most of his time in prison to write poems.

A few months after serving his jail term, one of his most famous books, *Sauti ya Dhiiti*, was published. In the book, the writer figuratively expressed a wide range of emotions – including bitterness, defiance, confidence, regret and self-doubt – while under conditions of deprivation and dehumanisation in prison.

Prize for Literature

Ironically, *Sauti ya Dhiiti* earned him the inaugural Jomo Kenyatta Prize for Literature in the Kiswahili category in 1974.

The collection of poems is largely his response to what he perceived as the government's criminalisation of dissent. His first poem *Nisishigelo* was a promise to his elder brother that he would not forsake the struggle for democracy and justice.

Recalling the challenges of achieving the literary dream that the book turned out to be, he said: "That book was written under difficult circumstances on toilet paper behind prison walls. An *askari* was placed outside my door tasked to watch what I was doing and report it to his bosses. I managed to cultivate a friendship with one of the guards who provided me with a pencil. I was given two pieces of paper to use when going to the toilet. I saved one of them daily for writing."

One of the outstanding poems *Mirazi: Vuta N'kurute*, depicted the struggle between Badi and Ali for the fruit of the collective inheritance. Badi was seen as representing Mzee Jomo Kenyatta and his ilk who wanted everything for themselves while Ali was Jaramogi Oginga Odinga and his group of Kenyans pushing for reforms. He used another poem, *Mamba*, to meta-

March 1969

The time Abdiatif Abdalla was arrested for alleged involvement in subversive activities, including sedition and the more serious crimes of plotting to use force to overthrow the government

May 2012

The time Sheikh Abdalla retired as a lecturer of Kiswahili at Leipzig University, Germany

independence political prisoner

phorically describe the regime he found wanting, immoral and rotten.

While paying a tribute to Sheikh Abdalla at a symposium in his honour last month at the University of Leipzig, Prof Ngugi wa Thiong'o, who himself was detained in the post-colonial Kenya, said *Sauti ya Dhiki* was similar to his novel, *Petals of Blood*, published in 1975 because both books depicted a class position in the analysis of the Kenyan society.

Ngugi vividly recalled Sheikh Abdalla's cell.

"I was placed in a block not too far from the one where Abdallatif had been held for three years. Some of the prisoners would point to the cell from where he wrote *Sauti ya Dhiki*. I wrote down my prison notes, literally drawing from the same prison air and environment he had breathed," the writer said.

In his footsteps

Scholars credit Sheikh Abdalla for his pioneering role in post-colonial prison literature in Kenya. Evidently, Ngugi followed in his footsteps when he published his memoir, *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary*, in 1981.

"Abdallatif Abdalla is primarily a poet and not a politician; and that his real voice, the enduring voice, the voice that will survive him, is the one infused with the spirit of the words, rhythms and imagery of his poetry, reminding us of the Keatsian words that truth is beauty and beauty is truth. At its best and most powerful, the aesthetic is also ethical," Ngugi described the scholar.

Since August 1972, Sheikh Abdalla has lived in exile as a journalist and political activist. He started out in Tanzania, where he worked at the University of



Dares es Salaam's Institute of Kiswahili Research.

After serving for seven years, despite efforts by Tanzanian authorities to change his citizenship so that he would continue serving (Tanzanian labour laws outlawed foreigners from working for over seven years) he left and joined BBC in 1979 and later on *Africa Events*, an English language magazine.

After the attempted coup of 1982, Sheikh Abdalla forged a political and literary alliance with other Kenyans who were forced into exile in London.

Together with Ngugi, they started meeting at least once a week for seven years with other members of the Lon-

don Committee for the Release of Political Prisoners in Kenya, who included

Wanyiri Kihoro, Nish Muthoni, Yusuf Hassan, Shiraz Durrami, Naila Durrami and Wangũi wa Goro to agitate for democracy and the release of all political prisoners in Kenya.

They formed the committee in July 1982 under the chairmanship of the late

John la Rose and used it to push for the freedom of convicts Manna wa Kinjwari, many university students and those accused of plotting the 1982 coup attempt and political detainees like Kamnaji Wachira, Edward Oyugi, Alann Mazrui

CONTINUED ON PAGE 6

Sheikh Abdalla teaches a Kiswahili class at the University of Leipzig in Germany. He retired from the university last May and has come back to Kenya.

PHOTO/ZMO WEBSTER

PROFILE

I was born a poet

Sheikh Abdallatif Abdalla was born in Mombasa on April 14, 1946. When he was just three years old he accompanied his grandfather, Ustadh Ahmad Bashaikh to Tanganyika. His grandfather, a teacher, had been transferred to the neighbouring country. But by the time he joined primary school in 1952, his grandfather returned to Kenya and was stationed in Faza, Lamu. They were later to be transferred to Takaungu in Kilifi, where Young Abdallatif continued with school. He returned to Mombasa in 1968 following the death of his grandfather.

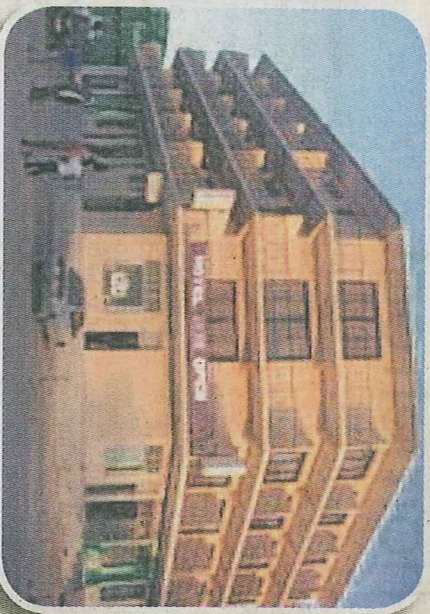
Sheikh Abdalla ended his formal education when he failed his Class Seven examinations. "After that I started reading any helpful books. Even the famous Irish playwright and a co-founder of the London School of Economics ended his formal education while in his teens."

At a tender age, Abdallatif discovered his talent in poetry. "My grandfather was a poet, a teacher of religion and an activist," he told *Taifa* last week. "He used to compose poetry which would be read on Sauti ya Writia radio. The station was closed down after independence."

He is married with seven children and 17 grandchildren. His eldest four children live and work in London. He lives with his wife in Hamburg, Germany.

-Nyambéga Gissea

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Kenya's first post-uhuru political prisoner

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5

and Willy Mutunga, the current Chief Justice.

Through his efforts while working at the BBC, Sheikh Abdalla is celebrated for doing his best to inform a sceptical world about the 1984 Wagalla massacre. When the news started spreading, he was among the members of the London Committee whom the Moi government denounced as dissidents and traitors that year.

Together with Nguji, Kamukuni MP Yusuf Hassan, Mr Kihoro, Wanjiru Kihoro and Shiraz Duran, they started *Mwakinya*, a publication that was proscribed by the government.

Failed exams

Sheikh Abdalla says he failed his primary school examinations, but he has read widely. He is a self-taught scholar.

He served at BBC in London from 1979 to 1986. He was employed as a Kiswahili lecturer at the University of London, where he taught from 1987 to 1994. He then joined the University of Leipzig where he worked until his retirement last month.

Sheikh Abdalla is recognised as one of the greatest poets of the Kiswahili language, in the League of Fumo Li-yongo, Mnyaka bin Haji and Shaaban Robert.

He is also celebrated as a central figure in the modern Kiswahili renaissance, which has led to the rise of novelists such as Mohamed Said Abdulla, Said Ahmed Mohamed, Kimani Njogu and Rocha Chimerah. He has written 17 books and says four more will be published soon. "I plan to write more books in my retirement," he said.

The one rule for lasting marriage

Being committed to your spouse, even if you don't feel like it, will make your relationship richer

Life is all about the choices we make, so if you make choices well you'll succeed. It sounds like stating the obvious, but it isn't.

Because few of us really believe how much control we have over our lives. After all, sometimes it really does feel like the whole world is against you. Your PC crashes and everything's lost? Traffic makes you late? But the truth is that it's your decisions that determined what happened. Like you could have backed up your PC. Or set off earlier ... So it's worth thinking about the choices you make. Because they become the habits that define who you are. Like the child who endlessly skimps on her homework — and eventually misses out on going to college ... Later decisions are even more important. And the biggest one of all? Deciding to be committed to your spouse. Believe me, it is a choice, and the one that makes or breaks your marriage.

It's not easy though, in these days of quick results and instant gratification. Tempting you to put career, social life and glibby possessions ahead of your family. And to move on anytime things get tough.

Partly it's because all that marketing hype creates such high expectations. And makes us feel things should be effortless. So whenever your partner seems less than perfect, it's easy to believe that there's

Successful couples do work hard of course — but they set limits to it.



chris hart

MEY AND WOMEN

Take the time to spot a keeper on the homefront



carol mandi

ONE OF MY favourite TV sitcoms was *The Jeffersons* in which George Jefferson and his wife Louise had moved up into the big league, or more aptly, a luxury apartment. Such a move brought with it new affluent neighbours who George loved to hate, and more importantly a housekeeper, Florence. Only Florence was no ordinary

housekeeper. She could shoot her mouth at her employers (she liked to call George, "Shortie") in a way that should have earned her the sack. Apart from that, she never did exactly as she was told, or what she was expected to do. Florence could have been the housekeeper from hell. Instead she was a much-loved part of the cast.

Florence reminds me of the battles I have with my house manager, who many people prefer to call househelp. It usually happens when she goes on leave. I descend on my house and re-arrange everything, putting it just where I like it. Which is blissful because for once, I know where everything is. Unfortunately nirvana is usually short-lived because when she comes back, she re-arranges it where she likes it. I watch her work, a look of consternation on her face that begs, "Now why would any person put this there?" You see, we have boundaries and I usually overstep mine when I get into her territory. She has been with us for over 10 years and is practically a member of the family. I have eventu-

ally come to accept that not every battle is worth fighting. So I let her place my things as she pleases. Most of my friends marvel at our relationship and its longevity. It hasn't been without its rough patches, but over the years we have settled into something that works for us.

Do I trust her? The answer is generally yes, and many are the times we have left our children in her care when we travel. And trust, I tell my friends, has to be a deal maker or breaker of any person we allow into our homes.

It's amazing that when we hire

GET THE RIGHT SKILL SET. THE GREAT COOK IS RARELY THE BEST NANNY. DON'T HIRE A JACK OF ALL TRADES"

— Carol Mandi

someone else out there who's exactly what you're missing. And so you only "conditionally commit" to one another. Until a better option appears ... We'd all be a lot better off if our expectations were more realistic. So before you decide that your partner's not "giving you what you want", ask whether anyone could!

It's sad how often marriages struggle when really what's happening is that you've set your hopes too high. So anytime your partner is driving you nuts, ask yourself whether you're being fair.

And make sure you're meeting their needs before you start complaining that your own aren't being met.

Like always doing what you say you're going to do. Your word is everything to your spouse! So don't let your work take priority, for example. Because your partner's needs must come first. Like if you say you're go-

at the workplace, we tend to go through rigorous interview processes, reference checks and even personality profiles.

But when we hire at the homefront, we do so quickly so that we can return to our day jobs the very next day. In the past, I too have been guilty of hiring someone in the morning, giving them a half day orientation and turning over my children to her care by the afternoon. Knowing what I know now, I shudder at my naivete.

So how do you nail a keeper? Here are a few suggestions.

Don't pay minimum wage. Always pay the best you can afford. This person is not just responsible for your possessions, children, but also your very life. How much do you value that? If it will be reflected in your insurance package, let it be reasonably reflected in your house manager's package.

Are they a good fit? Sure they can clean like a whiz and whip up delicacies but if you have small children, you need someone who loves children. This is important because if

ing to be somewhere, be there. On time. Successful couples do work hard of course — but they set limits to it. They're focused and professional, avoid bringing work home, and live simply to reduce financial pressures and working hours.

Putting your relationship first may mean you'll never be the wealthiest people around, but you'll certainly be leading the richest lives.

So if you want to reduce marriage to one simple rule, it's this: Be committed! And live a life that says you are, every single day. Because the song's wrong. It's not love that makes the world go round. It's commitment. And why's that? It's because the love that lasts forever only starts growing when you both know you'll always be there for each other.

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your children occasionally exasperate you, how much more someone who is only being paid to look after them?

Get the right skill set. The great cook is rarely the best nanny and the best housecleaner may be lousy at cutting your hedge. Don't hire a jack of all trades. Choose someone based on the competencies that you need at a particular time.

Do they have positive energy? You may be thinking, "Really?" However, some people are good at their jobs but so dark that the lights dim when they enter a room. A happy, cheerful attitude should not be a bonus but a pre-requisite.

Trust your instincts. If a small voice tells you something doesn't add up, it doesn't. Life is hard enough, you shouldn't have to wonder if someone slipped some poison into your dinner.

And finally, be patient. People rarely come to you ready made or perfect, but if they are willing to grow with you through your life's many seasons, then that's a keeper.

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