PAUL SOZIGWA INTERVIEW

Paul Sozigwa served as the Press Secretary for former President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania. In this interview, Sozigwa recounts Nyerere’s rise to power and fondly remembers the vision that the leader had for a greater Tanzania under socialist rule.

What was your title when you worked with President Nyerere?
I was Press Secretary to the President.

What is the most important thing to understand about Julius Nyerere?
It can’t be one thing. There are several things and it’s up to you to choose what is most important. But I knew him, worked with him. I didn’t apply to join him. He chose me in 1967, just before the Arusha Declaration. I was then the Permanent Secretary to the Ministry of Information and Tourism. And he said, “Just come. And there is a desk and you are my person.” And I said, “Okay. Thank you, Lord.” And I signed in and that was the beginning. I had no knowledge of the ordeals of a press secretary. I’m a qualified journalist. I read in Syracuse, New York and spent a year there after my general degree at the London University. So I was a general journalist but I was not a press secretary then. When I went to the State House to be press secretary, I had to learn it all over. It was very easy to work with Mwalimu Nyerere. He was a good teacher, was very patient with people. He’ll tolerate your ignorance and teach you up. So he made me what I am now. To me, he is a very humble leader -- very, very humble and ready to learn from anybody, anything.

He used to tell me lots of stories about himself when he was a youth. How he was virtually taken from his goats that he was tending to go to school at the age of twelve. Think of that. And he’s one of the many sons of a chief, a so-called chief, with many wives -- I think seven or eight. He appeared to the chief, his father, to be the most brilliant. And when the colonialists wanted somebody from the chief’s family to go to school, they picked him. And he was arrested away from his goats and taken to school. That was the beginning of Julius. He went on doing four years worth of course in three and went to a middle school and a secondary school finishing them very, very fast. He was very, very brilliant. And then he went to University College of Makerere and after that he became a teacher. This is where his politics began. He was a very good teacher, a good teacher in history also.

What did Nyerere do after college?
After college, he taught. He was a secondary school teacher, a very good secondary school teacher in history. One of the students is Ben Mkapa, now the President of Tanzania. You can see how he imparts the knowledge to good people. And Pius Msekw is another. He’s the Speaker now. He’s one of the students of Mwalimu Nyerere. He didn’t teach me in school. He went very much to a Roman Catholic school and I went to a government school, so there’s the difference. Otherwise, he would have taught me also. But I got a lot of lessons
from him in the State House like how to deal with people, how to deal with big people, how to analyze news and look at it from a political angle and so on.

I found him to be a very, very good, humble man. He did not want to be praised like an angel. Actually, he did refuse to be. He wanted to be a common man at all times. I remember one time when he refused to go on a trip to the village because his driver had not eaten. Many people, many leaders, once they've eaten, they want to go away. He asked, “Has my driver eaten?” He said, “He’s not eaten.” “Okay, we’ll wait until he’s eaten.” “We’ll be late.” He said, “Okay, let’s be late. Why didn’t he eat first?” So that’s the type of man he was -- very, very serious, very humble, but one who respects everybody irrespective of his size, his tribe, irrespective of his rank and I enjoyed working for him for ten years, ten plus actually.

I was sad to see him go. He left State House when I also left State House for the party. So when he left office, I felt the vacancy, you know? There’s some gap which was not quite like him. So, that’s him. That’s how I know him.

**What expectations did people have of Nyerere after independence?**

That I know, because I left college when we were not independent yet and I was one of those people who are favored by the colonial government. I appeared to them to be very loyal so they loved me and I left college and they gave me a post immediately to be a district officer. And at that time, Nyerere was a teacher and politician. So I know was the mood was like.

When Mwalimu Nyerere started preaching politics, he started in Dar es Salaam and I was just next-door in Kisaware, some thirty kilometers away. That's where my district was. So I know activities and the mood of the people around here and around my district. It was very simple. He explained to the Tanzanians, to the Tanganyikans one thing they did not know before he came. That Tanganyika was only a trusteeship country to the British. It was not like Kenya, which was a colonial country. So whilst Kenya was there for the British country, Tanganyika was only a trusteeship to be taken care of for some time. And when the time is ripe to be handed back to the people themselves. So he took this angle. And immediately the people of Tanganyika understood this and they rallied behind him very strongly.

Well in no time his party, TANU was almost nationwide to know that the British are here only to look after us and the government had no mandate to do anything, really. So the next move he did was to go and plead to the United Nations organizations that the time of trusteeship is over. And the people of Dar es Salaam and of Tanganyika in total, they made him go to New York, paying whatever little money they had each to get his fare and his keep in New York. This was 1958 – ’59. It was very, very emotional moment. So he went to the United Nations and when he went to the United Nations, another party of the British who were here called the United Tanzania Party, they also sent a delegate to say to the United Nations, “No, the time is not right.” So they met there. And what appears to be the truth is that Mwalimu Nyerere’s arguments were far, far stronger than those of the United Tanganyika Party.
And so almost immediately a delegation from the United Nations came to check which of these was a true argument and they found that Mwalimu Nyerere was right. That’s where the game started to roll, immediately. So the people of Tanganyika had a lot of confidence in Mwalimu because he could talk to the United Nations and convince them. So here is the leader who can take us to where we want to go. So it came very fast. ’59 – ’60 there was already internal government and 61’ there was already independence. In ’62 the governor was out. You see the trend. And so it mushroomed and the people of Tanganyika were mostly TANU -- most of them either TANU or nothing. But there was no other party except the United Tanganyika Party which was made of the Europeans and they were not many. They had money, they had wealth, but they were not many.

So Mwalimu traveled the country telling people how to rally behind him and until today he still commands respect bigger than that of any other person. Every morning on radio Tanzania and every evening some of his statements are heard, every day. And lots of people listen to that, more than to the news. So you see how much power he still has in the country.

Why did Nyerere become the leader of the country?
I don’t want to call it an accident, but it really is. It’s something that has just happened, the right person in the right time and he had the qualities that the country wanted. Nobody else has produced those qualities to date. And this is the truth. So, he could just as well be a Moses in Tanzania. We really respect him on all departments. Diplomacy, in military action, we fought a war against Edi Amin and we won the war without demanding any spoils. We went into Uganda and came out as we went. No building, no money, no car, no plane. We said, “This is your property, we don’t want it.” I mean this was Nyerere where the army very much wanted to have everything. So it’s a good accident that it happened to be him and he took us around in two or three decades very, very nicely and until now, we still find we have to follow his advices.

What was most interesting about Nyerere’s ideas?
We have got to go back if you want to know that, got to go back to Mwalimu after independence.
When we got our independence in 1961, Mwalimu stayed in office as Prime Minister for only three weeks and then resigned and gave his Lieutenant the job of running the country. He went back to the party. And he did that because one: he was not quite sure at the juncture whether the masses he was leading really did understand what independence meant. See? To many of them, it meant everything for free. For some of them, it meant the work is over, now let’s divide the spoils. And only the few people who understood it meant work, and diligent work, too. And nobody else could explain that except the party. So he went back to the party and really did a lot of work in that one year to explain and change slogans. “Freedom and work.” “Freedom and work.” Freedom does not mean sitting idle. That idea came to the people because all the Europeans they saw who were the ruling class, they all were sitting idle.
They had a lot of servants to do work for them and so they believed that when we get independence, we'll be just like them. We'll sit around, get some slaves or some other people to work for us and have less work. So he had to do that first.

He had one year of out of office until full republic in 1962 when he came back. And even when he came back as Head of State, he did not have enough Tanzanians, Tanganyikans to run the government. He had to use British. The Chief Justice was British. The Attorney General was British. The Home Minister was British. You see the difficulty? He had to have his home people trained to look after these things which were very difficult for the Tanganyikans to handle. Anyway we plodded on and managed for the next four or five years. You see, now comes your question. Socialism. Where did it start?

Four years after republic, there arose a feeling among those fortunate Africans, Tanganyikans who were in government that their time of being masters has come. So they developed a master-com-servant attitude, between the have-nots and the poor -- the haves and the have-nots. And those who were in office developed attitudes of forgetting the small people. And Mwalimu saw the danger and said, “Now this is going to be very dangerous. We didn’t demand independence and become a republic in order to do a class society. We wanted everybody to have a share of the wealth of the country and the freedom of the country.” That is basically the source of Arusha Declaration and socialism.

What measures were taken to try to eradicate attitudes based on class?

There was the Arusha Declaration code which refused all leaders from accumulating wealth unless they can explain how they get that wealth by work. That held them for a long time and that was the reason why Tanganyika, later Tanzania, became very close to the socialist countries, Moscow and the Chinese and the Koreans and the Cubans and Czechoslovaks and so on. And it went on. I did a lot of work writing Mwalimu’s speeches on socialism, lots of them. It went on for years until there was the so-called “wind of change” in the socialist camp. That is when the Soviet Union was desegregated and the Czechoslovaks and everybody, and Mao Tse-Tung, the whole set was off. Then that wind of change came to Tanzania also and some sentiments we’re seeing and heard many, some of the leaders not being very happy with the “diehard”, if you want to call, socialist camp, socialist strengths. They would like to be slightly richer. So it started in Parliament. We saw it in the G-55. They were called G-55. Fifty-five people sent a motion in Parliament questioning the union and questioning several other things. And we started to see different thinking from diehard socialist thinking. And Mwalimu is still there. He was not president, but he was our leader anyway. He was still there. And views were circulating that perhaps we should think again about the way we go. Do we go the whole hog socialist or do we go socialist in a different party? And that is what happened. There was a decision taken later to sort of not go the whole hog because if you do, it’s like a dry wood which if it insists on being upright, it breaks. You can break like Soviet Union, like everybody else who was trying to be hardcore.

So we didn’t change the Arusha Declaration but we gave it an interpretation which slightly makes it easier for people to swallow. And many of
those people who were finding it difficult were not in the TANU quarter. They came in later from schools in the U.S., from London, from everywhere and they were given jobs and they were thinking of how to deal with these jobs and international communication with other people, in business for example. So they thought that being too hard won’t help Tanzania at all. So the socialist thinking is still there. It means that we’ll still work on for whatever we have must benefit all. See. And nobody can be called a second-class citizen and nobody can accumulate wealth too much on his own and forget the poor. Bridge the gap between the rich and the poor and do everything possible to get social services adequate for everyone. And that’s the Arusha Declaration as is seen now.

So you have the theories, so many other theories. In the manifesto, we put, for example, denationalization of the big companies. But the intention there is always to get those companies in the hands of Tanzanians. As many of them as possible, you know. Small shares for everybody. And educate the people of Tanzania on how to join up and buy shares and invest in agriculture. You can’t on your own do it well but you can do it inefficient. It’s better as a team of people and that’s the socialism we are thinking of now. We’re sticking roots. It’s good. Many of the companies are now in Tanzanian hands. We haven’t succeeded very much in getting the real peasant to join up to buy shares in factories or anywhere else or airlines or so on. We haven’t succeeded to do that yet because the real peasant wants to see immediate returns. - tomorrow. The rich Tanzanian can do it because he has money to spend today. Each man wants to invest today and get a dividend tomorrow which it’s not possible so we are still going on with that trend. That is the Arusha Declaration as it is. It is still there in the constitution. In the constitution we still say socialism is our policy.

**What was the impact of the Arusha Declaration?**

It has helped transformed society vehemently here. Vehemently. But every transformation, every transformation of society creates new demands which force you to take new steps. For example, we started at independence with only four or five graduates in Tanganyika and three doctors full stop. We have mushroomed secondary schools and primary schools, government ones. There are now hundreds and we have graduates in the hundreds now. You see. Those graduates, many of them, have not trained in Tanganyika or Tanzania. They’ve trained in Switzerland, they’ve trained in America, and their attitudes are still American or South African or whatever it is. So to make them bend to the idea of marking time is difficult. And they hold the most important positions in government and industry.

**What were Nyerere’s impressions of China when he visited?**

Chairman Mao impressed Nyerere very much and the Prime Minister, I forget his name now, impressed him and he marveled, see? The year we went to China, Tanzania was in famine. We got about thirty-thousand tons of maze from the U.S. that year. By that time, we were only fifteen million people. We went to China with one billion and everybody had a full stomach. One billion. Think of it. Why is because they eat everything. Pumpkins, pineapples,
anything and they make it a habit to accept everything as food and everybody in
China was working. Everybody. You wouldn't go to China, anywhere, Shanghai,
anywhere, to find somebody idling. So this is his biggest impress.

He came there very hot about his own people, you see, because there
were so many lazy people, particularly the educated ones, the white-collar
people. They think you should get a degree, you shouldn't hold a shovel or you
should not brush your shoes anymore. So this is the biggest impression and
then they were not fools, the Chinese. They were making their own rails and
they were engineers, building their own houses, building their own roads, you
see. And here we couldn’t even make a bridge. So it impressed him that you
can have a billion people and put them on a discipline that gets everybody to
work and there’s food for everyone.

Tanzania was not there yet. It’s not even, now. If we don’t get the rains
this month, we have it.

After the trip to China, was he inspired to do anything differently?
Well he went on preaching socialism and said it is good, it has been done
in China but people are still lazy in Tanzania. They’re the same, they stay with
an uncle and eat him up. They will stay with a brother and they don’t want work
and they think it is their right; this is the traditional way of living, the grant system.
You could stay with your uncle, your brother and you nobody will ask you to
contribute. And this is a very serious situation.

How bad did life get in the early 80’s for average Tanzanians?
We had famine twice, I remember. One time, Nixon came in to help with a
lot of tons of maze. We had famine also two years before that and Nyerere had
to devise a policy called “Politics is Agriculture”, “Siasa ni Kilimo.” The ruling
party set in Iringa in the middle of Tanganyika and we exploited everything that
would be done to make sure that we are self-sufficient in food including irrigation
or agriculture. We have lots of rivers here. Lots of good rivers. They don’t dry
up at all. And yet people die of hunger. So you see, we discussed that and we
produced a paper and started a program of forcing agriculture into every village
so that every youth would take part. We did a lot of that, a lot of that for a full
three years and it started picking up. And then after that, we went back and
when Nyerere left office that was the end of it.

It’s not the same now. What was worse was that the cooperatives
collapsed. The cooperatives are the instruments that made the villages unite and
do things jointly like agriculture, like animal husbandry and it helped a lot. And
then they collapsed because there was thieving, too much thieving of
cooperatives’ property. So it collapsed and nobody could bring it back to the rails
and until now, there almost is no more cooperative which is really functioning the
way we thought it should.

What was the purpose of forcing people to move to the Ujama villages?
He didn’t force them to. He did not force them to. The activists did force
their people to because they thought in order to please Nyerere you must bring
two hundred or three hundred people together and for the activists, it meant jobs. If you want to be in good books, do it. So there was a lot of cruelty in handling this and I’m a good witness to that. There was a lot of cruelty because it was not an order from the party nor was it an order from Mwalimu Nyerere at all. But the activists, the officials that were told to implement wanted to be seen that they were the first to do it. So people were forced too much against their will. Placed too much against economic areas, see? People were thrown to places where you couldn’t do agriculture. It’s as simple as somebody was told to do it, so he just took them there.

The thought was that people should organize themselves into groups—a cousin and uncle and somebody. If they want to move from a dry area to a rich area, they could find ten, twenty hectare and then borrow a tractor and develop it. That was the idea. And more fundamentally, so that every child should go to school which was not the case before because many people lived in isolation. A family would live twenty kilometers from a hospital and twenty kilometers from a school. The school I went to when I was a kid was ten kilometers from home. So I had to do twenty kilometers a day to and from school. You see. That was hard but my family liked education so they forced me to stomach that. That’s why it give me a lot of health. You know, you run ten kilometers and run ten kilometers back, six months before you get relief. So it was good for me. It was not good for everybody. So many of the children did not get that opportunity, or that will to do ten kilometers a day. So they were conglomeration in places and so there was medical facilities, so there was a school around and every village had to have a school, they had to have a hospital. And a road joining to the middle, you see? And a cooperative union, so that they could sell their produce together.

That was the idea, but ideas don’t make the good things always. Those who implement the ideas appear to be forcing people and they actually did because I saw one case myself where somebody was told to get out of the house and move a village and as he was climbing up to get his thatch out so he could take it to the new area, the operator burnt the house. Yes, I saw it. And the poor man had to just drop down and get his knee twisted. But he was alive. It happened. The idea was not to do that, but always even if you go to war you go and fight a war and the atrocities that are done there it’s just impossible.

Was it difficult to implement socialism?

Well, it’s difficult. Why is it difficult? Because it is human nature to want to have “your things” rather than “our things.” Except the army. You will want to have mine, mine, mine, my goat, my house. The socialism you were talking about wants to have “our things” and to change the attitude from “mine” into “ours” takes a long time, if you succeed that is. Many people don’t succeed because of the winds of change in the way. You know, you are sucked by what is happening in other countries in the world and you do things and you think you are doing the right thing and you find it will not be accepted. You are exhausted.

Did human nature cause the problems with socialism in Tanzania?
It causes the problems, not only in socialism in Tanzania but with all types of life. The ego element is inborn, you see. To admit guilt or to admit fault is very difficult, very difficult. Eve blamed the snake for her own fault and Adam blamed Eve for his fault. This is the beginning of life and we are as human beings. It’s not easy to get people to accept the role of the totality. Except in the army. The army must because if they don’t, they all die. You see? But I can live with my mangos in Dar es Salaam without dying. So it’s okay.

**Was there also a problem with the idea of socialism?**
The basic problem of building socialism, the basic problem is ego because you’ve got to surrender your own things for the good of others and that is not natural. That has got to be worked on very hard with a lot of propaganda to convince people although the results of a totality of people is always better in material thinking than one person doing his own things. If we join up for example, two-thousand of us to start a bank, it’s better for us. We’ll get a better return than if I start my bank and you start yours because of ego. But this is not easy to see. It’s not easy to see particularly in peasant countries like ours. Maybe it is easy for big companies, you know, Mitsubishi teaming up with Toyota. They can understand but otherwise individuals in Tanganyika or Tanzania countries, it’s not easy. But we are still working on it. We are working very hard on it to get there.

**Did you help write a speech for the Arusha Declaration?**
No, not a speech. Mwalimu promulgated the Arusha Declaration at Mnazi Moja just next door to where we were. I was not the press secretary there, at all. But I was the Director of Broadcasting so I taped it all. It was a long thing, lasted two hours. And then I transcribed it and edited it into a book. And that book became the working document afterwards.

**What was unique about Nyerere’s type of socialism?**
Unique in that Nyerere was very unique. You haven't heard it anywhere in Africa where somebody becomes Prime Minister and resigns in a month. Where have you heard that in Africa? He was very unique. He left because he thought his people don’t understand yet so it’s much better for him to leave all the mansions and everything, the trucks and everybody and go to the village and do this work. It’s only him. And his thinking of socialism was like that, for people to sacrifice. He got some but he didn’t get too many to back him up, materially.

**What hope did Nyerere see in Socialism?**
By the time he came to the world, we were being colonized. We were not ourselves. He was son of a chief. Even the chief was being made by the colonialists. So to him, the independence meant getting out of this and being ourselves. You see.

**Did he see socialism as a way to reconnect with the true essence of Tanzania?**
Yes. It was the only way. You couldn’t come out of colonialism and build capitalism because you’d put on colonialists who are black. That’s all. So you had to do something that other people would see is useful and that they can benefit from. That’s exactly how he started and that’s why he resigned and went to the party and came back again. And even after so many years of ruling, he said to himself, “I think the time has come when somebody else must take over.” So he could back to the party. He left when everybody was thinking Nyerere was the only person who could be president of the country, which was actually true. Yes. But he said, “But you know, the people are not yet educated and if we stick to the government, we will not make it.” So he went out. He spent fourteen years as our statesman. After fourteen years unfortunately he died. But we still use his tapes every day, twice.

**What is Nyerere’s most important legacy?**

He preached and practiced self-denial like a monk. There are not many people like that, particularly the leaders. See, the ego is still big. But there are still people in Tanzania who really find the only way to develop Tanzania, and to go on in Tanzania, and to help the Tanzanian is self-denial. Those who have must deny themselves and show other people how to have also. Now in capitalism, the acumen is to deny others the chance of knowing your secrets. Because if they compete with you, you will lose everything. And so you see the difference.