

NAIROBI, KENYA · 1 AUGUST 1982

THE SIX-HOUR PRESIDENT

*A Senior Private, a Radio Station,
and the Morning Kenya Almost Fell*

ONE MICROPHONE. THREE PILOTS. SIX HOURS.

GRAHAM KASINDO

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“Dear listeners, my name is Leonard Mambo Mbotela from VOK. I have with me here Mr Hezekiah Ochuka, who is now the new president of the Republic of Kenya.”

— Voice of Kenya, about 6 a.m., Sunday 1 August 1982

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Prologue

VOICE OF KENYA, KIJABE STREET, NAIROBI. SUNDAY, 1 AUGUST 1982. ABOUT 6 A.M.

Most of Nairobi was still asleep when the soldiers reached the radio station.

Inside the Voice of Kenya studios, one of the most famous voices in the country, the broadcaster **Leonard Mambo Mbotela**, was put in front of a microphone at gunpoint.

“Dear listeners,” he said, “my name is Leonard Mambo Mbotela from VOK. I have with me here Mr Hezekiah Ochuka, who is now the new president of the Republic of Kenya.”

In English and in Swahili, the message went out across the country: the military had overthrown the government.

The man now calling himself President was twenty-nine years old. He held the rank of Senior Private Grade-I in the Kenya Air Force, one of the lowest ranks in the military.

He would hold power, by his own later account, for about six hours.

It was one of the most dangerous mornings in the history of independent Kenya.

CHAPTER ONE

The Private

Hezekiah Rabala Ochuka was born on **23 July 1953** in Nyakach, in Kisumu District. He was raised by a single mother, the youngest of four brothers.

He went to Naki Kabete Primary and then Mirogi Secondary School. On **14 September 1976**, he was recruited into the **Kenya Air Force** in Mombasa. After eight weeks of basic training at Lanet Barracks in Nakuru, he was posted to **Eastleigh Air Base** in Nairobi.

In **1978**, he was sent to Britain, to **RAF Cosford**, for a training course that ran into 1980. He came home a Senior Private Grade-I.

He was not an officer. He did not command anyone of note. On paper, he was nobody.

By the middle of 1982, he was planning to take over the country.

CHAPTER TWO

The Warning

NAIROBI. LATE JULY 1982.

The plotters were junior airmen. Alongside Ochuka were **Sergeant Pancras Oteyo Okumu**, **Corporal Bramwel Injeni Njereman**, **Joseph Ogidi Obuon** and others.

In the last days of July, Ochuka called a secret meeting at a football ground near **Umoja estate** to go over the plan. He claimed he had support from Uganda, Tanzania, Sudan and the Soviet Union.

The state was not entirely in the dark.

30 July 1982. According to accounts of those days, the intelligence chief, **James Kanyotu**, told President **Daniel arap Moi** that a plot was being hatched. Moi, it is said, preferred to let the military handle it, and on Monday.

Monday would be too late.

CHAPTER THREE

3 a.m.

EASTLEIGH AIR BASE, NAIROBI. SUNDAY, 1 AUGUST 1982. 3 A.M.

The rebels struck in the dark.

At about three o'clock, Air Force soldiers seized **Eastleigh Air Base**. By four, the air base at **Embakasi** had fallen too.

Weapons, vehicles and aircraft were now in the hands of the mutineers. The next target was the one that mattered most in any coup.

The radio.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Voice

VOICE OF KENYA. 6 A.M.

Ochuka and Oteyo took the VOK studios on Kijabe Street.

Leonard Mbotela was made to introduce the new president. The rebels announced that the government of Daniel arap Moi had been overthrown, and that the country was now in the hands of a body calling itself the **People's Redemption Council**. Ochuka was its chairman.

President Moi was not in Nairobi. He was at his home at **Kabarak**, near Nakuru.

For a few hours that Sunday morning, millions of Kenyans woke up, switched on their radios, and were told that they had a new government.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Pilots

The coup needed more than a microphone. It needed to destroy the government's ability to fight back.

At **Laikipia Air Base** in Nanyuki, **Corporal Bramwel Njereman** went for the fighter jets. At gunpoint, he forced three pilots, **Major David Mutua**, **Captain John Mugwanja** and **Captain John Baraza**, to take off in two F-5E Tiger jets and a Strikemaster. According to accounts of the coup, the target was State House.

The pilots took off.

They never bombed Nairobi. They flew evasive manoeuvres, dumped their bombs over the forests of **Mount Kenya**, and came back to base.

Three pilots, forced into the air at gunpoint, had quietly refused to bomb their own capital.

CHAPTER SIX

The City

In Nairobi, the rebellion spilled into the streets.

Rebel soldiers moved through the city. Order collapsed. Shops in the centre of town were broken into and looted. There was shooting in the streets, and many of the people caught in the middle were ordinary Nairobians.

Nobody has ever settled how many died. Official figures ran into the low hundreds. One account puts the civilian dead at “at least 19.” Other estimates speak of more than a hundred soldiers and perhaps two hundred civilians, among them several foreigners.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Counterattack

The loyalists moved from **Kahawa Garrison**.

At their head was the Deputy Army Commander, **Major General Mahamoud Mohamed**. With officers including the Army Commander, **Lieutenant General John Sawe**, **Brigadier Bernard Kiilu** and **Colonel Tom Wanambisi**, they drove on the radio station.

They went in disguised. According to one account, the loyalists dressed a camouflaged Land Rover up as a rebel vehicle, rammed the gate of the VOK compound, and fought the rebels in running firefights near the **National Museum**.

Overhead, a loyalist helicopter pilot, **Major Charles Wachira**, was about to fire on the broadcasting house itself when **Lieutenant Colonel Chris Kitundu** signalled him to abort.

“If he had been a minute late,” Wachira would later say, “we would have destroyed VoK.”

The station was retaken about an hour after the rebels’ broadcast began.

This time, Leonard Mbotela went on air to announce that the rebellion had been crushed, and that President Moi was still in power.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Buffalo

The six-hour president did not stay to fight.

At **Eastleigh**, the coup leaders commandeered an Air Force **Buffalo** transport aircraft. With Ochuka on board, it took off for **Tanzania**.

In Dar es Salaam, the country's leader, **Julius Nyerere**, offered them protection.

It didn't last. Kenya wanted them back. Ochuka was eventually handed over and returned to Nairobi to stand trial.

CHAPTER NINE

The Reckoning

Moi went on the radio to address the nation. Even after his broadcast, shooting could still be heard in the streets of Nairobi.

Then the purge began.

The **Kenya Air Force** was disbanded. It was rebuilt and renamed the **82 Air Force**, after the year of its shame.

The mutineers were tried by court martial at the Army's **Lang'ata Barracks**. More than **900** people were imprisoned. **Twelve** were sentenced to death.

The net spread beyond the military. Jaramogi **Oginga Odinga**, the former Vice President, was accused of financing the plotters and put under house arrest. His son, **Raila Odinga**, was among those detained, along with university lecturers. The University of Nairobi was swept up in the crackdown.

The government blamed foreign communist money.

In 1983, Moi called a snap general election.

CHAPTER TEN

The Rope

Kamiti Maximum Security Prison.

Corporal Walter Odira Ojode and **Corporal Bramwel Njereman**, the man who had tried to force the pilots to bomb State House, were convicted of treason and sentenced to death.

So were **Pancras Oteyo Okumu** and **Hezekiah Ochuka**.

They were hanged at Kamiti, in July. Records disagree on the year: some say **1985**, others **1987**. One account describes the hanging as badly botched.

Whatever the date, Ochuka was in his early thirties when he died.

The men hanged for the 1982 coup are widely recorded as the last people ever executed in Kenya. Courts have gone on handing down death sentences ever since, but none has been carried out.

Epilogue

Daniel arap Moi ruled Kenya for another twenty years.

The morning of 1 August 1982 became one of the defining days of his presidency. After it, the state grew harder. Dissent was treated as treason. Detention without trial, torture chambers and silence became tools of government through the rest of the 1980s. Parliament, the universities, the press and the military all learned what the government would do to anyone it suspected.

Hezekiah Ochuka had wanted to take over a country. He got a radio microphone, a borrowed plane and about six hours.

Three pilots refused to bomb their own city. A radio announcer read out whatever the men with guns told him to read. A helicopter pilot held his fire with seconds to spare.

And for one Sunday morning, a Senior Private Grade-I was the President of Kenya.

THE RECORD

DATE	Sunday, 1 August 1982
LEADER	Senior Private Grade-I Hezekiah Ochuka, 29, Kenya Air Force
SEIZED	Eastleigh (3 am), Embakasi (4 am), Voice of Kenya (6 am)
ANNOUNCED	The “People’s Redemption Council”
BOMBING ORDER	F-5Es and a Strikemaster; the pilots dumped their bombs over Mount Kenya
CRUSHED BY	Loyalist forces under Maj Gen Mahamoud Mohamed
DEATHS	Disputed: from “at least 19” civilians to 300+ in all
AFTERMATH	Air Force disbanded; 900+ jailed; 12 death sentences
HANGED	Ochuka, Okumu, Njereman, Ojode, at Kamiti (1985 or 1987)

Six hours. Twenty more years of Moi.

A Note from the Author

If this story stayed with you, you can buy me a coffee. It keeps the research going and helps bring the next one to you.

LIPA NA M-PESA

PAYBILL	522533
ACCOUNT	8129965
CLICK MTAA TECHNOLOGIES	

Asante sana.

— *Graham Kasindo*