By JESSE MASAI

The former Nyandarua North legislator, with whom we begin this reflection, is perhaps the only self-declared Mau Mau member to have rattled the nation to its core.

In life, as in death, he embodied the contradictions of part of Kenya’s earliest post-colonial elite: In the system, but conscious of his humble roots, and the promises made to our people during and after the struggle for independence.
Each year on 2nd March, his family – but much more precisely his daughter Rosemary Kariuki – reminds the nation that JM has gone before us, and that he perhaps perished because he could not for long see the Mau Mau ideals for which he had been detained so brazenly betrayed by his contemporaries.

In Ol’Kalou, what was once a district hospital has now been renamed the JM Kariuki Memorial Hospital, a constant reminder to Nyandarua’s over 500,000 residents that one of their own was once the proverbial healing balm in an African Gilead.

On its part, the Nyandarua County Government continues to invest in the hospital, increasingly a localized attempt at remembering a movement whose adherents the nation has sometimes tried to forget. (See sidebar 1)

Like Dedan Kimathi, the movement’s revered leader, JM now has some visible monument to his memory, though the location of the former’s grave remains a mystery.

But unlike both men, thousands of other Mau Mau veterans had pretty much been forgotten, until the unveiling of a monument at Uhuru Park’s Freedom Corner in the nation’s capital last month.

As the final report of the Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission (TJRC) so well reminds us, that amnesia did not begin yesterday. (See sidebar 2)

While the long and windy road to the monument is now a matter of public record, what may not be so apparent are the abiding lessons it now leaves in its wake.

(a) The arc of history may be long, but it bends towards justice

Only an eternal optimist could have imagined that colonial Kenya would, some day, be free. Only a dreamy-eyed idealist would have further hoped to witness Prophet Isaiah’s world in which opponents “beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks…Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.” (Isaiah 2:4). Yet this is what it has now come to. The British government acknowledges its grave crimes against the Mau Mau, and is making amends. Mau Mau veterans now see their cause vindicated, over 50 years after they lay down their arms. To this victory will be added the footnote that the Kenya Human Rights Commission (KHRC) – a non-State actor – mobilized various allies and neutrals to author what may arguably be one of Kenya’s most significant chapters since independence.

(b) While we might not remember the words of our enemies, we will remember the silence of our friends

The liberation struggle is often conveniently appropriated by various hegemonic interests in Kenya’s contested political square. Perhaps nowhere is this more apparent than in parts of the Greater Mt. Kenya region, where the legacy of the struggle lives on in many broken lives and missed opportunities. On a day when it would have mattered to demonstrate solidarity with the veterans, practically no political leader from the region showed up at Uhuru Park. The liberation narrative might remain sexy for some leaders in coming days, but it will be interesting to see how they account for this moment of silence, and absence.

(c) While their bodies may be wounded or even interred, the Leftist bent of early Kenya’s freedom fighters lives on

The ideals which defined the early fissions between the nation’s capitalist and socialist ideologues rarely find expression in modern Kenya, save for the rare national occasion when the nation’s founders are mentioned in presidential addresses. Now, Kenyans visiting the nation’s capital will be constantly reminded that a people suffered for a cause, which in many ways remains unfulfilled. Land, and its expected re-distribution at independence, remains a deferred promise, invariably blamed for Project Kenya’s inherent contradictions and occasional instability.