

# The demons of a troubled priest

**John Kaiser was an obstinate man who clashed with his missionary bosses and stood up to Kenya's government. An FBI investigation of his death also turned up more personal problems.**

By Christopher Goffard, Second of Three Parts  
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**Reporting from Nairobi, Kenya** -- Within the vaulted basilica where he lay in a glass-lid coffin, the transformation was already underway.

In life, Father John Kaiser had been a troublemaker, an obstinate and single-minded man who railed against church passivity and clashed with his bishops, his missionary bosses, his fellow priests. Now, it was possible to ignore the rough edges and complicated history. Now, Catholic leaders were declaring him a martyr to the faith, a man whose crusade against his adopted country's dictatorial regime had ended in his assassination.

Outside the basilica, thousands crammed the streets of Nairobi in mourning and in rage that day in August 2000. Among masses of Kenyans, Kaiser had become an instant byword for the cruelty of President Daniel Arap Moi's police state.

After 22 years of Moi's misrule, Kenyans were ready for such a symbol. The president's face stared from every shilling note in their pockets and the wall of every shop they entered, and they had no trouble envisioning his hand steering the American priest to his grave. On everyone's lips was a litany of political murders, unexplained car wrecks, implausible suicides.

After the funeral Mass, a church van carried Kaiser's body onto the bad roads that led through the grasslands and into the remote western parishes he had served for decades. Villagers streamed forth from their farms and mud-walled huts, waving verdant branches -- a sign of peace -- as they ran alongside the procession.

## **John Kaiser's last days**

**Father John Kaiser, who had challenged the brutal Kenyan regime, had received death threats. In his last days, colleagues said, he seemed unhinged and displayed mood swings. FBI profilers discerned a "manic cycling from high to low."**

Finally, the coffin traveled to the priest's last home, to the hilly green country near the Serengeti Plain called Lolgorien, where Masai warriors in bright red wrappings leaned against their spears and watched as the hole was shoveled out, 12 feet deep to deter the beasts of the veldt. Children of the parish who used to swarm around the priest now climbed into a big ficus tree overhanging his grave, squeezing side by side until it seemed impossible that the branches could support so many of them, to see him sent into the clay.

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For Johnnie Carson, U.S. ambassador to Kenya, the priest's death was a tinderbox. As he told his staff, it might "change the normal orbit of U.S. and Kenyan bilateral relations."

Carson prided himself on his patience and discretion. Though some in Kenya's pro-democracy crowd considered him unduly cozy with Moi, Carson believed that his approach gave him access to the top when he needed it.

Now was such a time. The dead man was an American citizen and a leading dissident -- a former U.S. Army paratrooper who lived without electricity in one of Kenya's poorest corners, survived on game meat and had come to regard himself, after 36 years on the continent, as an African. He had not only denounced Moi but had fought to bring rape charges against one of his top ministers, Julius Sunkuli.

And so late on the afternoon of Aug. 24, 2000, the day Kaiser's body was found, Carson marched into the stately Nairobi offices of Kenya's attorney general.

Let the FBI help investigate, Carson urged. The FBI had forensic expertise, he argued, and its presence would show that the Kenyan regime had nothing to hide.

The FBI's agent in Kenya, a former Marine pilot named Bill Corbett, was in the room that day and recalled Carson's words: "The bureau has to be able to follow the facts wherever they go."

The attorney general said he would need to consult. Of course, His Excellency the President would have to approve.

Soon, just as the ambassador was boarding a plane for Washington, Corbett received a letter on official Kenyan letterhead inviting the FBI's assistance. He chased the ambassador to the airport, onto the tarmac and onto the plane to hand him the envelope.

Carson was pleased. Whatever the truth proved to be, the FBI's involvement would allay suspicions of a coverup, he reasoned. In this, he was mistaken.

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Three FBI agents joined Corbett in Nairobi and fanned out across the country, accompanied by plainclothesmen from the Kenyan police. It was to be a joint investigation. The Kenyans would translate the words of Swahili-speaking witnesses. They would provide helicopters to reach remote villages. They would sit close during interviews.

This presented an obvious problem. Who would risk telling the Americans anything in the presence of Kenyan cops, for decades an integral part of Moi's apparatus of fear? As Kenya's minister of internal security, Sunkuli himself oversaw the very police charged with investigating the case, including the rape allegations against him.

Back in the United States, in September and October 2000, both houses of Congress

passed resolutions condemning Kaiser's "assassination." Paul Wellstone, the senator from Kaiser's home state of Minnesota, cited the slayings of five other Catholic clerics and human rights workers in Kenya.

Secretary of State Madeleine Albright promised Congress that she would monitor the investigation. "Clearly, there are questions that we have about various aspects of how Kenya operates, but it is a country with which we deal," she said.

Her remark encapsulated the U.S. government's attitude toward Kenya. It was impossible to ignore Moi's reliance on brutality. And yet the country was the commercial hub of East Africa and was perceived as a key partner in the battle against Islamist terrorism. This point had assumed greater urgency after an Al Qaeda cell bombed the U.S. Embassy in Nairobi in August 1998, killing more than 200 people, including 12 Americans.

The accused bombers were to stand trial in federal court in New York in a few months. An internal FBI memo described the Kenyan police as "vital partners in our aspirations to succeed with what the U.S. attorney general refers to as the most important DOJ [Department of Justice] prosecution of 2001."

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At the nexus of the two cases stood Corbett, who had forged tight professional friendships with Kenyan police during the bombing investigation and was now central to the Kaiser probe.

A Catholic, Corbett admired the priest's willingness to give up a safe, soft life in the U.S. to ease the suffering of a troubled country. He had closely followed accounts of Kaiser's duel with the regime. Still, Corbett would say, his job was to remain at arm's length, dispassionate, guided only by the evidence.

It was crucial, first, to reconstruct Kaiser's last days -- the circuit that led the 67-year-old priest from his parish house in the bush to a ditch about 50 miles northwest of Nairobi, where he was found with the back of his head blown off.

In interviews with church associates, villagers and others, the jagged outlines of the story came into view.

On Aug. 19, 2000, Kaiser had been summoned to Nairobi to meet Giovanni Tonucci, the pope's representative in Kenya, on an unspecified but important matter. The priest, who had ignored repeated church pleas to leave the country for his safety, feared he would be ordered out of Kenya. He wept at Mass and asked for prayers.

On Aug. 21, he made the long drive from his parish house in Lolgorien to his bishop's compound just outside Nairobi. To some fellow churchmen, he seemed unhinged and fearful. He spoke of being followed. He said he hadn't slept in three days. He read in the newspaper that one of the women who had accused Sunkuli of rape -- a case Kaiser had been pushing for months -- was withdrawing her complaint.

On Aug. 22, over breakfast, Kaiser said he hadn't slept again. "Why do I feel so paranoid?" he asked. As a missionary brother drove him to his appointment with the

papal nuncio, Kaiser slumped low in the back seat, his jacket covering his face. He told the brother he felt "close to a breakdown."

At their meeting, the nuncio asked for Kaiser's views on a successor to a retiring bishop. Contrary to his fears, Kaiser was not being exiled.

Relieved, he went to his missionary order's walled compound in Nairobi and socialized with friends and colleagues. He played a cheerful game of croquet. That night, a nun saw him in the chapel, bent on one knee, his head in his hands.

On Aug. 23, he dropped off a thin envelope with the nuncio -- its contents would never be made public -- and declined an offer to stay and chat. He left a note at a priest's quarters nearby, thanking him for teaching him Swahili six years earlier.

Over lunch at the missionary compound, he wept silently. A worried missionary brother, wanting to keep him close, took him to visit a church construction site. Kaiser buoyantly greeted every worker he saw. Later that day, Kaiser approached an old friend, Father Paul Boyle, and shook his hand, saying, "I don't know if I will be alive tomorrow."

Though he was expected to spend the night at the missionary compound, he left without explanation and drove to the bishop's house, arriving about 6 p.m. He was brusque. He asked for a room. He needed rest.

Another priest watched Kaiser head upstairs to a second-floor room, and, after a while, heard footsteps descend the stairs and Kaiser's truck rumble away into the darkness. He found Kaiser's room empty and the bedding stripped.

Retracing Kaiser's trail from there became increasingly tricky. Kaiser supposedly had been spotted at a remote homestead north of Nairobi. When the FBI and Kenyan investigators arrived with their notepads, villagers told a strange story.

It happened about 8:30 that night, they said. It was suppertime and solid dark. They heard a truck pull up and went out to look. They saw a white priest remove "a long gun" from the truck and carry it up a knoll, where he stared into the night. A villager asked whether there was any trouble. *Hakuna shida*, said the priest. No problem.

Then came the oddest part. As a village elder approached, the priest offered him the shotgun. Like a gift.

When the elder refused, the priest apologized in Swahili. *Pole sana*. He carried the gun back to his truck, pitched the vehicle into reverse, and backed past the house so hurriedly that he scraped a downspout and struck a hedge. Then he sped off "like he was trying to escape something."

What was Kaiser doing there? Why would he attempt to give away his gun? Did he sense himself spiraling into despair and worry that he would use it on himself? Or, Corbett wondered, did a delirious, sleep-deprived Kaiser think he was surrendering his gun to a pursuing assassin? "Maybe he's tired of running and thinks, 'They're here,' " he said.

Other witnesses added glimpses of Kaiser's last night. About 11:30, employees at a gas station in the Rift Valley town of Naivasha reported seeing him pull up in his pickup and

hack off a loose mud guard with an ax.

At a pecan farm nearby, a few hundred yards from where Kaiser's body was found, a guard recalled hearing the rattling, thumping sound of a passing vehicle. The guard, fearing attack from one of the area's armed gangs, became hyper-vigilant. The vehicle passed again, and again. Then he heard a bang.

As Corbett recalled, the story had "the flavor" of truth.

The crucial part was what was missing. There had been no sound of a struggle. No voices. No cars in pursuit.

If assassins had targeted Kaiser, how would they have followed his erratic, hours-long route from Nairobi to Naivasha -- what Corbett called a "bumblebee trail" -- without being spotted?

"The real world doesn't work like that," Corbett said. "There wasn't a lot to suggest this was predator and prey. What there was to go on was his behavior."

In that behavior, FBI profilers discerned a "manic cycling from high to low," as Corbett put it, a mind unmoored. His fear that he'd be kicked out of Kenya had been a "life stressor," and the collapse of the rape charges against Sunkuli had been "a significant disappointment," according to the FBI's report on the case. His body was failing too -- prostate cancer, arthritis, bone spurs in his neck.

Agents saw an uncommonly tough man whose fortitude had nevertheless raveled out over too many hard years.

Interviewing those closest to Kaiser, they uncovered a side of him that few had known.

In 1969, the priest had been committed for psychiatric evaluation during a brief stint at the Albany, N.Y., quarters of his missionary society. As told by Kaiser's sister in Minnesota, Carolita Mahoney, he had argued with an older priest, who complained that Kaiser was mentally impaired and possessed a gun.

A Minnesota priest named Bill Vos told the FBI about a later episode. Kaiser was staying with Vos in St. Cloud in the early 1970s when he fell into a serious depression. At the dining table, Vos recalled, Kaiser sat with his head down, tears filling his eyes. Vos arranged for him to see a psychiatrist, and he was hospitalized again.

In the early 1980s, there was a third hospitalization, this time after a confrontation with his brother Joe during a visit to Minnesota. A doctor at St. Joseph's Hospital in St. Paul treated him with lithium.

Kaiser suffered from manic-depression, his sister told the FBI. The episodes began with sleeplessness, followed by a state of extreme agitation. He said he did not need his lithium in Africa.

Examining Kaiser's years in the U.S. Army, the agents learned that he had been demoted from sergeant in the 1950s. The military could not find the records to supply the details. As his brother Francis told it, Kaiser had refused to back down from racist

townsfolk in Ft. Bragg, N.C., who had objected when black soldiers were assigned to guard a barracks housing white nurses.

Given Kaiser's refusal to duck confrontations, the scene where his body was found presented a riddle. If attacked, wouldn't the priest -- a former paratrooper and expert shot -- have put up a fight? Yet there were no signs of struggle. Sheets had been spread out on the ground, as if for a bed, and left undisturbed.

Two independent pathologists -- one enlisted by the church, the other by a human rights group -- studied the entry wound close-up. Their conclusion: The shot that obliterated the back of Kaiser's head had entered behind his right ear from a distance of at least 6 inches and as much as 3 feet. Since it seemed impossible for Kaiser to have pointed the long-barreled gun at himself from such a range, murder was the only explanation.

The FBI enlisted its own independent expert, Vincent DiMaio, based in Texas. He was an authority on gunshot wounds. Studying blurry photographs and an autopsy report, he found that the barrel could have been touching Kaiser's head when the shot was fired. DiMaio noted that there was blood spatter on the priest's knee and lower leg, but none on his lap. In his view, this suggested Kaiser had placed the shotgun butt on the ground, with the barrel angled behind his right ear, and had folded his body forward to reach the trigger, thereby shielding his lap when blood sprayed onto his legs.

In weighing the evidence, Corbett recalled what a prosecutor once told him about the nature of proof. Picture yourself at the edge of a precipice, with a 10-foot gap separating you from the other side. To get there, you need a plank at least 10 feet and 1 inch long. Two 5-foot planks won't do, nor will five 2-foot planks.

Murder theories abounded, but did the assembled evidence bridge the chasm? Maybe a simpler explanation would.

And so on April 19, 2001, FBI agents stood at a news conference at the U.S. Embassy in Nairobi alongside Ambassador Carson, Kenyan police and the country's attorney general. The Americans praised the Kenyans for their cooperation and gave their verdict: An emotionally troubled Kaiser had killed himself.

The Kenyan government wasted no time declaring itself exonerated. A front-page story in the Kenya Times, the state mouthpiece, announced that the FBI's verdict "drove the final nail" into the coffin of "a sick man."

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Whatever else people said about Kaiser, there was one point of consensus: His Catholicism was the "terribly old-fashioned" kind. Heaven and hell were not metaphors, but actual locations, and certain sins were inexpiable.

Kaiser liked to quote from G.K. Chesterton's "Orthodoxy," a defense of classic Catholicism in which the author assesses suicide as "the ultimate and absolute evil."

"The man who kills a man, kills a man. The man who kills himself, kills all men; as far as he is concerned he wipes out the world," Chesterton wrote. "There is not a tiny creature in the cosmos at whom his death is not a sneer."

By that logic, Kaiser had tumbled from martyr to suicide, from heaven to hell, at the stroke of the FBI's pen.

Few who knew him could bear the verdict. David Durenberger, a former Minnesota senator who went to high school with him, was in disbelief. "There's something about 'The FBI says,' 'The FBI declares' -- it's pretty hard to overcome that one," he said. "You can't change the gravestone once you've carved it."

The only apparent remedy lay in a vestige of British colonial law, which provided for an inquest -- an inquisitorial proceeding in open court -- in the case of mysterious deaths. To the church and Kaiser's family, it represented the best hope of casting light on evidence the FBI might have missed or ignored. But Moi's attorney general refused to grant one. Neither the Kenyan nor U.S. governments wanted the matter reopened.

As the 2002 Kenyan elections approached, there was fear that Moi would again use violence to preserve his rule. Then a shocking thing happened. After Kenyans jeered the aging president and trounced his party, he surrendered power peacefully.

Armed with more than 100,000 petition signatures, Catholic bishops met with the new president to urge an inquest into Kaiser's death. In April 2003, after two years of limbo, Kaiser's family and supporters received word: The inquest could proceed.

They had four months to prepare.

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