

## Ngugi wa Thiong'o's remarkable journey ends at 87

Iconic Kenyan novelist and playwright Ngugi wa Thiong'o, whose sharp criticisms of post-independence elites led to his jailing and two decade in exile, has died at the age of 87, Kenya's president said.

By George Obulutsa 30 May 2025



Ngugi wa Thiong'o has passed away at 87. Source: Reuters.

Shaped by an adolescence where he witnessed the armed Mau Mau struggle for independence from Briti

Thiong'o took aim in his writings at colonial rule and the Kenyan elites who inherited many of its privileges.

He was arrested in December 1977 and detained for a year without charge in a maximum security prison after peasants and workers performed his play *Ngaahika Ndeenda (I Will Marry When I Want)*.

Angered by the play's criticism of inequalities in Kenyan society, the authorities sent three truckloads of police to raze the theatre, Thiong'o later said.

He went into exile in 1982 after he said he learned of plans by President Daniel arap Moi's security service to arrest and kill him. He went on to become a professor of English and comparative literature at the University of California-Irvine.

## Indelible impact

Thiong'o ended his exile in 2004 after Moi left office following more than two decades in power marked by widespread arrests, killings and torture of political opponents.

Kenya's current president, William Ruto, paid tribute to Thiong'o after his death in the US following reports a struggle with ill health in recent years.



FILM

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"The towering giant of Kenyan letters has put down his pen for the final time," Ruto said on his X account.

"Always courageous, he made an indelible impact on how we think about our independence, social justice well as the uses and abuses of political and economic power."

Although Thiong'o said upon returning to Kenya in 2004 that he bore no grudge against Moi, he told *Reute* in an interview three years later that Kenyans should not forget the abuses of the era.

"The consequences of 22 years of dictatorship are going to be with us for a long time and I don't like to see us returning to that period," he said.

Thiong'o's best-known works included his debut novel *Weep Not Child*, which chronicled the Mau Mau struggle and *Devil on the Cross*, which he wrote on toilet paper while in prison.

In the 1980s, he abandoned English to write in his mother tongue Gikuyu, saying he was bidding farewell to the imported language of Kenya's former colonial master.