

The rise of Black nationalism

We emphasise that although time and care has been spent preparing this paper, it has been compiled by a committee and is not a work of scholarship.

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AFRICAN protest has a long history in South Africa. Starting with the conflict between Black and White in the 19th century, Africans were gradually forced to come to terms with White power and western technology.

The first attempts at political organisation on a national scale came in the first decade of the 20th century. In the meantime, divergent policies affecting Black/White relations had evolved in the Boer republics and the British colonies.

At the turn of the century there were over 12 000 Africans on the common voters' roll in the Cape Colony. African voters exerted considerable influence in five Eastern Cape constituencies.

Political leaders were drawn from the growing class of westernised Africans — the so-called "school people" as opposed to the "red blanket people". One of these was John Tengo Jabavu, editor of the first Xhosa/English newspaper to express African opinion — *Imvo Zabantsundu*, which was founded in 1884.

The liberal Cape system (non-racial qualified franchise and the right to purchase land outside reserves) offered a means to political adjustment for Africans of the Cape which might have been applied in the two defeated republics after the Anglo-Boer War.

Instead the Treaty of Vereeniging specifically left "the question of granting the franchise to natives" in abeyance.

In 1908 an all-White National Convention met to discuss Union. Far from accepting the Cape system as the pattern, the former republics and Natal insisted there should be land segregation, no equality for Africans in church or state, and that Africans should be governed as a race apart.

As these developments unfolded, so the ferment and sense of outrage in African circles increased. The first protest organisations were local, but were followed in 1909 by a Native Convention in Bloemfontein, attended by delegates from all parts of the country. It was decided to plead for an extension of the Cape tradition. However, neither resolution nor a delegation to London were effective.

In 1912, on the initiative of several young men recently returned from overseas study, an inaugural conference was called and the *South African Native National Congress* (later renamed the African National Congress) was founded.

The Rev. John Dube, editor of *Ilanga Lase Natal* (The Sun of Natal), was elected first president; Solomon T. Plaatje, a writer in English and lawyer from Natal, was treasurer; and vice-chair-

lawyer from Natal, was treasurer; and vice-presidents included the Rev. Walter Rubusana, MPC for Tembuland in the Cape Colony.

Although initiated and led by a mission-educated, westernised elite, the intention was to incorporate the chiefs as representatives of their tribal communities in an organisation embracing Africans of all stations.

Organised largely as a reaction to the exclusion of Africans from the government of South Africa, the positive intention of the organisation was to act as a pressure group, defending African interests. Racial discrimination should be removed and it was hoped that through improved education, economic progress and evolutionary participation in the country's political institutions, common citizenship would result.

The continuity noticeable in Congress's political attitudes over four decades may be attributed to the persistence of certain factors:

Abhorrence of racial discrimination and legislation passed by the South African government, for example: (a) The Native Land Act of 1913, which stopped the share-crop system (whereby an African farmed a portion of a White farmer's land, paying a proportion of his crop as rent) and also drastically limited the right of Africans to own land. It resulted in terrible hardship for those who were forced off White-owned land and severely restricted the quota of land allocated to Africans.

The Hertzog Bills, first mooted in 1925, which became law in 1936. One, the Native Representation Bill provided among other things for the removal of Africans from the common voters roll in the Cape and their representation in Parliament by Whites.

The other, the Native Land and Trust Act, proposed to purchase more land for Africans than provided in the 1913 Act, the projected total confining them to less than 13 per cent of South Africa's land area. (In 1936 that meant 370 acres for every White compared with six for every African.)

● Recognition of the economic interdependence of all races in South Africa. As urbanisation increased the issues of African access to urban freehold and the necessity for improved welfare services were highlighted.

● *Resentment over the pass laws.* Protests against these laws date back to 1913, when Congress approved passive resistance by Free State women who refused to carry passes.

The ANC saw the pass laws and the system of migrant labour as a means of ensuring a cheap

labour force while denying the right to seek advancement on the basis of equal opportunity.

The 1920s provided some stormy industrial conflicts. What in fact was taking place was an industrial revolution in which Black labour played a vital part. The possibility of an assertive mass movement was demonstrated by the phenomenal but short-lived Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union.

Founded in 1919 by Clemens Kadalie, its membership had risen by 1927 to between 50 and 80 000. The ICU successfully negotiated several wage claims, thereby raising serious concern in Government circles. But financial and other problems brought about splintering of the ICU and the gradual waning of its power.

Moderation and conciliation were watchwords of the ANC during the 1920s and 30s.

Congress hoped to check the spread of racial discrimination, to modify native policy and to establish a consensus within South African society which would accept non-racial ideals as a basis for legislation. Its efforts were ineffectual, however, the reasons for failure lying in the political power structure established at Union — Africans having no constitutional leverage; the fears and prejudices prevalent in White politics, especially in the growth of an exclusive, inward-looking Afrikaner nationalism and the weakness of Congress organisation.

The world conflict of 1939-45 was a war of ideologies in which Africans perceived they would not be better off if the Nazi creed prevailed. Prior to this, the imaginations of Blacks in South Africa had been stirred by Ethiopian resistance to Mussolini's forces.

Though the sense of identification, experienced then — with Black men struggling against White aggression — was lacking later, the ANC supported the war effort. Initially Congress considered making its support conditional on Black soldiers carrying arms like their White counterparts, but this condition was opposed by Dr A. B. Xuma, then President-General of the ANC, and others.

In the end co-operation was given along with a plea for full citizenship and equal rights. Africans, who enlisted served by and large in menial and supportive positions.

During the decade of the 40s the ANC was revitalised and consolidated under the leadership of Dr Xuma. It was during this period that a more radical sub-group, the Congress Youth League, was founded.

Initially under the leadership of Anton Lembede, it included Oliver Tambo, Nelson Mandela, Jordan Ngubane, Robert Sobukwe, Walter Sisulu and others now well known.

The League's particular interest lay in eradicating African inferiority and associating the South African struggle with the wider movement for emancipation throughout the African continent.

It has been claimed in fact, that "a conscious

and organised pan-Africanism in the ranks of the ANC may be found in the formation of the Youth League in 1944". At the ANC's annual conference in 1949 the League advocated a total boycott of all elections provided for by the Native Representation Act of 1936, and the adoption of a definite programme to be achieved by methods of passive resistance, non-collaboration and strike action where necessary.

The League's triumph in carrying the Congress led to the resignation of Dr. Xuma, who was succeeded by Dr Moroka. But while the ANC was moving towards a more militant stance, a change was taking place among the White electorate as well, manifested by the victory of the National Party in the election of 1948.

In the 1950s, under the leadership of Malan, Strydom and Verwoerd, apartheid was entrenched by a series of parliamentary acts. The 1950 Suppression of Communism Act had a bearing on the ANC and similar organisations for it legislated not only against communists but against anyone shown to advocate "any of the objects of Communism".

Nevertheless, in 1952 the ANC (by then 40 years in existence) announced that it, together with the South African Indian Congress, would mount a campaign of passive resistance against unjust and oppressive laws.

This Defiance Campaign lasted for many months, resulting in the arrest of 8 577 passive resisters and a vast increase in the membership of the ANC.

It resulted also in much publicity overseas. But from the Government came stricter legislation, culminating in the General Law Amendment Act and the Public Safety Act of 1953, which virtually brought the defiance campaign to a close.

In June 1955 a Congress of the People met at Kliptown outside Johannesburg. Prof. Z. K. Matthews had suggested that the ANC call this meeting, which was attended also by the SAIC, the recently formed Congress of Democrats (a White organisation) and the SA Coloured People's Organisation.

A Freedom Charter, which set out aims in very general terms and concluded with a promise to fight through to victory was drawn up.

Vigorous protests and demonstrations followed, but the Special Branch had also stepped up its activities. In December 1956, 156 people were arrested including Chief Luthuli, then President-general of the ANC, and other Congress leaders.

Although all were eventually acquitted, the legal process known as the Treason Trial took five years. The prosecution sought in vain to prove that Congress ideology was communistic, and Luthuli defended ANC association with former communists saying that to achieve Black emancipation the ANC would work with all others with similar aims.

While the Treason Trials were in progress the most dramatic happenings thus far took place: the Alexandra bus passenger strike in 1957, the

founding of the Pan Africanist Congress in 1959 and, in 1960, Sharpeville.

Robert Sobukwe, a founder member of the Congress Youth League, was the leading light in the PAC which set itself up in opposition to the ANC, stating Africans must work for their own liberation and cease placing reliance on the assistance of Whites.

Both the ANC and the PAC planned anti-pass campaigns for 1960. The ANC approach was that of an orderly, carefully mounted campaign with a deliberately timed climax. Sobukwe, however, called on all Africans to follow him in leaving their passes at home and presenting themselves at police stations for arrest.

Mass demonstrations took place on March 21 at Langa and Sharpeville, with the well-known tragic results. Other demonstrations and more retribution swiftly followed and by April 8 the Government had created new legislation, the Unlawful Organisations Act, by which both ANC and PAC were banned.

A state of emergency was declared, leaders were arrested; Luthuli, already restricted, was fined £100 for burning his pass and Sobukwe was sent to prison on a charge of incitement.

The 50s, fifth decade of ANC activity, had been a period of above-ground political activity subjected to ever worsening repression. Now the political activities of African nationalists took on features of an underground movement, in which Nelson Mandela played a leading role until his arrest in August 1962.

Mandela had remained in the ANC when Sobukwe founded the PAC. Two secret organisations, Umkonto we Sizwe (Spear of the Nation) and Poqo (which means "pure" or "completely") came into being. They advocated the use of violence to force the Government to recognise their demands but the Government countered with the General Law Amendment Act, called Sabotage Act.

Several violent incidents occurred and more than 3 000 alleged Poqo members were arrested. Some link between Poqo and PAC was believed to exist but this was not made clear.

In 1963 the dramatic Rivonia Trial took place, which virtually blotted out the executive of the underground movement. Since then the climate for African political organisations has been so hostile that many leaders, like Oliver Tambo, have gone into exile.

The ANC and PAC-in-exile are said to have a client relationship to Russia and China respectively; however, the aims and tactics of these and other organisations outside South Africa are beyond the scope of this paper.

The political vacuum created during the 50s and 60s has to some extent been filled by the institutions of apartheid, the "homelands", and the growth of several new organisations concerned with Black consciousness. One of these is the South African Students' Organisation (Saso).

Black students were at one time active in both

Nusas and the University Christian Movement, but dissatisfaction with White domination led to the formation in the early sixties of various Black students organisations.

These went defunct because of poor organisation, internal strife and intimidation of leaders. Finally, in 1968, Saso was founded. Its membership grew rapidly and it is accepted as one of the most influential organisations in the Black man's search for identity and liberation.

Saso promotes Black consciousness which it defines as follows:

- Black consciousness is an attitude of mind, a way of life;

- The basic tenet of Black consciousness is that the Black man must reject all value systems that seek to make him a foreigner in the country of his birth and reduce his basic human dignity. The Black man must build up his own value systems and see himself as self-defined and not defined by others;

- The concept of Black consciousness implies awareness by Black people of the power they wield as a group, both economically and politically; and hence group cohesion and solidarity are important facets of Black consciousness;

- Black consciousness will always be enhanced by the totality of involvement of the oppressed people, hence the message of Black consciousness has to be spread to reach all sections of the Black community.

Saso, which stresses self-help and self-reliance, is involved in several community projects such as literacy campaigns, health projects, practical building projects and home educational schemes. There has also been an attempt to establish a Black Press and a Black workers' project.

A second organisation is the Black People's Convention, founded in 1971, to provide a political home for all Black people who cannot reconcile themselves to working within the framework of separate development. Its aims are:

- To unite the Black people of South Africa with a view to liberating and emancipating them from both physical and psychological oppression.

- To preach, popularise and implement the philosophy of Black consciousness and Black solidarity.

- To formulate and implement an educational policy by Blacks for Blacks.

- To create and maintain an egalitarian society where justice is meted equally to all.

- To formulate, apply and implement the principles and philosophy of Black communalism — the philosophy of sharing.

- To create and maintain an equitable economic system based on the principle of Black communalism.

- To co-operate with existing agencies to re-orient the theological system to make religion relevant to the needs, aspirations, ideals and goals of Black people.

Aside from their avowed aims, organisations such as Saso and BPC represent in themselves a

deliberate counter to the divisive effect of the White Government's policy for Blacks.

African nationalists are only too well aware of the unadvertised "divide and rule" factor built into the masterplan of which institutions like tribal universities and tribal homelands form a part. No discussion of African nationalism can, in fact, be complete without reference to the "homelands" policy.

A shift in focus, away from urban areas which are centres of the nationalist movement to rural areas which, by and large, are conservative and tribally based is one feature of this policy.

In effect, tribalism is promoted at the expense of nationalism. Despite this move by the White National Party to check the Black nationalist movement, the impulse to a national outlook persists, and we thought we should ask: to what extent, if any, do African nationalists see the homelands policy as fulfilling their aspirations?

Until recently African spokesmen were virtually unanimous in rejecting the existing homelands policy as the fulfilment of their aspirations. It was from this position of solid opposition that two broad viewpoints emerged.

One view was typified by homeland leaders who worked within the prescribed framework, using their position very often to speak out against apartheid and advance the claims of the people.

As Buthelezi has stated, the Black man's struggle must begin where he actually is and proceed through existing institutions if it is to be conducted by peaceful and not by violent means. At the same time he rejects the "narrow tribal nationalism" which the homelands policy fosters.

The other view has despised all government-created platforms. Saso and BPC have all along rejected both the Bantustans and those who attempt to work through them who, they claim, serve to make separate development look respectable.

Mantanzima's stint as an observer at the UN, the visits by homeland leaders to European and African capitals and the posting of homeland officials on overseas assignments means, according to a Saso spokesman that Blacks are "maintaining a full-time 'cooling system' for the South African Government in the hot international diplomatic chamber".

Such differences lead to bitterness but there are areas where all parties are in agreement, for example concerning land as it has been allocated to Blacks by successive acts of Parliament mentioned before.

We did not discover in very specific terms how African nationalists of the past have thought to tackle the land question, to achieve the redistribution desired.

For example, the Freedom Charter adopted by the Congress of the People in 1955 simply stated: "The land shall be divided among those who work it". Freedom of movement and the right to occupy land according to choice, free from racial restrictions, were mentioned under this heading.

Four years later Verwoerd's homeland policy was launched via the Bantu Self-Government Act, which subsequent legislation has spelt out. The seal seemed to be set on land allocation, with little hope of significant concessions. Nevertheless, African spokesmen have been outspoken in their complaints concerning land.

At a summit meeting at Umtata in November 1973, homelands leaders agreed that they would not go for independence until land far in excess of that promised in the 1936 Land Act had been conceded.

It therefore came as a shock when, before a year was out, Matanzima announced that the Transkei would after all take its independence. Some homeland leaders regretted while others denounced the decision, which caused a break in Black solidarity on this issue. Most commentators saw it as a triumph for the Government's Bantustan policy and Saso agreed, saying it would supply Pretoria with "more diplomatic ammunition".

Blacks would be fobbed off with woefully underdeveloped "countries", denied land rightfully theirs, and cut off from their fair share in the all economy.

How to explain this about-face? Various motives have been alleged but in Black Review one finds the comment: "Seemingly Matanzima's view was that people were anxious to have a free state of their own, without the consolidation issue being thrashed". And when all is said and done this may be the essence of it.

Rationally the problems loom large but emotionally, spiritually — however you care to put it — the desire to escape White domination is overriding. The chance to rule, to exercise the authority hitherto exercised by Whites, lies in taking independence — which is offered on a platter and does not need to be fought for.

In this important sense — the aspiration for liberation — the homelands policy affords an answer for some Blacks.

Bophutatswana has since spoken for independence, but makes certain demands concerning rights and compensation. It will be interesting to see how the negotiations with Pretoria fare, and whether still other homelands will choose this route.

However much yielding to pressure there may be to adopt the homelands route to liberation, it is difficult to imagine that African spokesmen of any stamp — those doggedly nationalist in outlook or those who accept fragmentation in order to rule — will forsake that prime goal of nationalists: a fair share of "White" South Africa's land and wealth.

To sum up, the nationalist movement has been weakened in recent years by the homelands policy as well as by repressive measures against effective nationalist organisations. But though one nationalist aim, to play a part in the governing process, may now be realised piecemeal, other aims concerning land and economic justice remain matters which African nationalists seem unlikely to resolve except by joint action.