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# OLIVER TAMBO AND

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# THE STRUGGLE FOR LIBERATION OF SOUTH AFRICA

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# A tribute on his seventieth birthday

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**IN** many colonial and social revolutions, the leaders of the people had to go into exile to guide the resistance or were imprisoned or deported by the oppressive regimes but continued to inspire the people in their struggle for liberation.

The revolution in South Africa is perhaps unique in that the leadership and inspiration has been provided in a protracted struggle by a triumvirate – Oliver Tambo, the President of the African National Congress (ANC), who has been in exile since 1960; and Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu who have been in prison since 1962 and 1963 after short periods in the underground.

The ANC has a tradition of collective leadership and significant

contributions have been made to the movement by many others – such as Chief Albert Lutuli, Moses Kotane, J.B. Marks and Dr. Yusuf Dadoo – but the continuity of leadership provided by Tambo, Sisulu and Mandela has been crucial.

Oliver Tambo, who was seventy on October 27, has borne the burden of guiding the resistance and securing international solidarity for a quarter century but his political life is inseparable from that of his two closest colleagues.

## Quit Africa

The three men began their political activity during the Second World War when the African youth raised the slogan "Quit Africa", in the wake of the

"Quit India" movement led by Gandhiji, and were among the founding members of the ANC Youth League in 1944. The League espoused African freedom rather than a mere mitigation of white racist oppression, and called for mass action instead of deputations and petitions to the racist rulers.

The Youth Leaguers were able, in 1949, to secure the adoption by the ANC of the "positive action programme" of demonstrations and strikes, and even civil disobedience. Walter Sisulu became Secretary-General of the ANC, while Oliver Tambo and Nelson Mandela were elected to the national executive.

The formulation of the strategy of struggle

was, however, not easy. For South Africa was no longer a colony, since Britain transferred power to the white minority in 1910, but a country with a special system of internal colonialism. The whites, the 'Coloured' people and Indians together constituted a quarter of the population. The task was not to oblige an external power to quit the country but to secure the transfer of power from a settler minority to all the people.

## Passive resistance

The small Indian community had carried on a great passive resistance campaign against discrimination from 1946 to 1948. Dr. Yusuf Dadoo and Dr. G. M. Naicker, who had

emerged as its leaders, declared that the freedom of the Indians was inextricably linked with the freedom of the African majority and appealed for united resistance by all the oppressed people, as well as democratically-minded whites, under African leadership. The government of India, led by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, made it clear that it sought no special privileges for Indians and promoted international support for the African cause as much as for the rights of the Indians.

The turning point in the South African struggle came in 1950 when the ANC – and especially its militant leaders – became convinced of the need for a united and multi-racial struggle against apar-

their tyranny. After extensive discussions and preparations, the ANC and the South African Indian Congress jointly launched the Defiance Campaign – a mass *Satyagraha* – in 1952 in which over 8,000 people of all racial origins went to prison. Congresses of 'Coloured' and white people, and a non-racial South African Congress of Trade Unions, were founded and became part of the "Congress Alliance." The alliance organised a multi-racial conference which proclaimed the Freedom Charter, declaring that South Africa belongs to all its people and urging all the people to struggle for the total elimination of racism.

Walter Sisulu, as ANC Secretary-General, played a crucial role in organising the Defiance Campaign. Nelson Mandela was the Volunteer-in-Chief of the Campaign. Oliver Tambo led the campaigns against the forcible removal of African communities and against the "Bantu education" system, and

played a major role in forging the united front.

As the rulers escalated repression to suppress all non-violent resistance, the ANC leadership expected the banning of the organisation and mass arrests of its members. It decided that one of the leaders should go abroad to mobilise international support and action. Oliver Tambo, who had been elected to a newly-created position as "Deputy President" after restriction orders had been served on Chief Lutuli, was persuaded to undertake the responsibility.

Soon after the Sharpeville massacre of March 1960, when the regime introduced the Unlawful Organisations Bill to outlaw the ANC and other organisations, Oliver Tambo escaped from South Africa, together with Dr. Yusuf Dadoo, President of the South African Indian Congress, and Ronald Seegal. The Indian government helped them with travel documents and facilities to go to London in time for the

Commonwealth Conference in May. After the Conference, Tambo and Dadoo visited Delhi for full discussions with Pandit Nehru which led a year later to the exit of South Africa from the Commonwealth.

### Armed struggle

Meanwhile, in May 1961, a national strike against the establishment of the white racist Republic – led by Nelson Mandela from the underground – was suppressed by a massive show of military force. Tambo then organised a secret conference of leaders of the ANC and its allies in the then Bechuanaland and it decided that armed struggle had become unavoidable. The *Umkhonto we Sizwe* ("Spear of the Nation"), a multi-racial military wing, was founded under the leadership of Nelson Mandela, and Tambo had to undertake the additional task of arranging military training for its cadres. *Umkhonto* organised hundreds of

acts of sabotage in the next two years, taking extreme care to avoid loss of life, in an effort to persuade the white minority to rethink and the international community to act.

The Pretoria regime responded with mass arrests of all militants — who were well-known and had little experience of clandestine activity. Through brutal torture and savage sentences under draconian laws, it was able to shatter the underground structures of the movement. Nelson Mandela was captured in August 1962 and Walter Sisulu in July 1963, and both were sentenced to life imprisonment. Chief Lutuli was confined to the Groutville reserve and died in a mysterious 'accident' in 1967.

It now fell to Oliver Tambo not only to promote international action but to ensure the restoration of the

underground structures in South Africa and the revival of the struggle, both non-violent and violent.

### **Leadership and unity**

It is largely due to the respect enjoyed by him, his leadership and his tireless efforts that the unity of the ANC and the liberation movement as a whole was sustained and strengthened despite the severe reverses.

By the mid-1970s, the underground structures had been re-established and secured. Mass mobilisation against apartheid reached unprecedented levels, while armed struggle developed rapidly with thousands of young volunteers. Tens of thousands of people began openly to defy the law and virtually unbanned the ANC.

Nelson Mandela and

Walter Sisulu remained in prison as symbols of resistance, but the movement found ways to enable them to keep abreast of the situation and contribute to the development of the strategy.

Tambo in exile, and Mandela and Sisulu in prison, are the guiding spirits of the revolutionary upsurge uniting people of varied racial origins and ideologies, combining civil disobedience and armed struggle, and at the same time avoiding undue loss of life. The authorities have been unable to suppress this movement despite the State of Emergency, the detention of tens of thousands of people,

mass torture, even of children, and murders and militants by vigilantes.

International solidarity, too, has advanced tremendously, though a few powerful governments continue to block decisive action. But the anti-apartheid movement has become one of the most significant popular movements of our time.

### Friend of India

Oliver Tambo has proved an outstanding leader of his people and has earned respect around the world as a statesman.

I met Oliver Tambo at the United Nations in 1960, soon after he

escaped from South Africa and have been associated with him and his family since I became the secretary of the United Nations Special Committee against Apartheid in 1963. His broad vision, deep attachment to democracy and non-racialism, tremendous integrity and personal warmth have been a source of inspiration to me. He is of the mould of the great leaders of my own national movement in India and is a great friend of India.

A brilliant student, teacher and lawyer, he sacrificed a promising career to lead the freedom movement. His long exile has been painful, with his closest colleagues in prison and he has had to resist the urge to be among his people as they fight a monstrous tyranny. He could spare little time to spend with his family, or to care for his health as the demands of the struggle have given him no respite.

A modest man, he has rejected all honours – and accepted an honorary degree from Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) most reluctantly – while encouraging the world to honour Nelson Mandela. But he has inspired and earned the admiration of numerous friends around the world, from whom symbolises the spirit and vision of the great freedom movement of South Africa. They will find ways to pay tribute to him.



Before arrest – Nelson Mandela at the Houses of Parliament in London