

# A NATION BEHIND BARS

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## A. ZANZOLO

NOBODY REALLY KNOWS how many political prisoners there are in South Africa. Estimates range from four to ten thousand. For a long time it was thought that the number in the Eastern Cape was over nine hundred. Then the notorious Mr. Vorster, who has now become Prime Minister of South Africa, revealed in Parliament that there were no less than 1,669 prisoners in the Eastern Cape alone! This was almost double the accepted estimate. This could mean there has been under-estimation of the national total. Bearing in mind that the authorities themselves will do everything to conceal the true state of affairs we can expect that the real figures are much higher than generally accepted.

Robben Island. Glamorgan Prison in East London called KwaNongqongqo by the Africans. Leeukop prison on the Rand—already a byword for brutality against prisoners. Port Elizabeth Central. Pietermaritzburg gaol. Pretoria Central. Viljoensdrift. Kroonstad. Umtata. Kokstad. The list is endless.

There has always been a legend about Robben Island. The most persistent was built around the story of the famed war strategist and prophet Makana, otherwise known as Nxele (the left-handed). After the defeat of the AmaNdlambe in the fifth Eastern frontier war in 1819 Makana was sent to Robben Island as a prisoner of the British. Later the authorities let it be known that Makana had died whilst trying to escape from the island. The Africans were naturally suspicious of this version of Makana's death. It was prophesied that one day Makana would arise from Robben Island to lead the people in the struggle against the White invaders.

Later, other famous African leaders were imprisoned at Robben Island including the redoubtable King Cetshwayo of the Zulus and his successor King Dinizulu.

For a long time before and after the present government came to power Robben Island was abandoned as a prison settlement. But as the prisons were filled by opponents of apartheid the island regained

its former role. Simultaneously the legend of Makana has revived. With such famous freedom fighters as Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki, is it any wonder that our people feel that this is what the prophecy meant that in modern times the spirit of freedom would arise to overwhelm the oppressors? With their lack of historical sense the oppressors had forgotten the significance of Robben Island when they re-opened it as a prison settlement.

But then to the prison authorities all over South Africa the thousands of people kept in gaols for political 'offences' are just nameless 'Natives' who have dared to challenge White Supremacy. They do not know and do not care to know who these men and women are—their contributions to the welfare of mankind, their gifts and skills which in other circumstances could do so much for progress. But to the vast majority of the people who support the freedom movement of all races these are not nameless prisoners. They are individual men and women who have made great sacrifices that men may be free. We are not concerned for the moment with the great names of Mandela, Sisulu and so on, but with all those others who are just known as 'political prisoners'.

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## SCREAMS IN THE NIGHT

*(to the prisoners of apartheid)*

*Saliva drooling from their gums  
tearing into you  
like a pack of ravenous wolves  
they rip your naked flesh  
with wild beast fangs.*

*Brothers  
we hear your screams  
your tormented cries  
that split the night  
in half*

*Hold on brothers  
Hold on  
we hasten to your den of desolate hell.*

*Your sun is hidden  
behind a cloud  
of locusts on the swarm  
we come brothers we come  
to rip their wings apart.*

A. N. C. KUMALO

One thinks of men like **MASANGO MAYEKISO**, former chairman of the African National Congress, New Brighton Branch. This is one of the most powerful branches of the A.N.C. in the country. He succeeded Raymond Mhlaba as Chairman when the latter was banned from participation in the activities of the A.N.C. Both are in Robben Island. Masango is so unexpected. A thin, middle-aged man, bespectacled and definitely with no charisma of leadership. Where one would expect a towering personality to lead so militant and powerful an area we find Masango Mayekiso a gentle soft-spoken figure with a monotonous delivery of speech. No one looking at him would suspect that he held an unassailable position as leader of the people in Port Elizabeth.

The answer lies in Masango's consistency and integrity as a working-class and national liberatory leader. Always principled, never personal and concerned only with the good of the organisation. Originally from the Transkei, Masango worked for many years at a textile factory in Port Elizabeth owned by French capitalists. He helped build a strong branch of the textile workers' union and eventually became the leader of the African textile workers in South Africa.

In all the stirring struggles of the fifties Masango played an important role. He went to prison during the historic Defiance Campaign of 1952. In the following two years Masango was arrested numerous times. One never knew whether he would be available for an engagement. On one occasion in 1954 he was charged with incitement to public violence. His offence was that in a speech before an enormous crowd at Veeplaats he had supported the struggle of the Kenya African Union and Jomo Kenyatta. He was defended in the trial by Mr. Sam Kahn. Key witness for the defence was Milner Ntsangani, who explained the background to the Kenya struggle. Milner, a prominent leader of the youth, was imprisoned in 1964 in Natal.

In 1956 Masango was charged with High Treason in common with many others. He was involved in the trial right to the end in March 1961. Shortly thereafter he was arrested again. He is still in prison. There were reports last year that Masango has been beaten so severely in prison that his hearing had been affected. But this physically small man is made of steel. His wife and children always gave him their full support and loyalty despite the fantastic difficulties caused by his frequent absences from work as a result of imprisonment. How long will this fine family man and workers' leader remain in prison?

What about that sensitive intellectual and writer **HENRI-GORDON MAKGOTHI**. The last we heard of him he was detained at Leeukop gaol. This is one of the worst gaols in South Africa where people are often reported dead in inexplicable circumstances. Henri-Gordon,

who is 37 years old now, was always an unhealthy man even during his schooldays. He was educated at St. Peters Secondary School in Johannesburg and then at Fort Hare University College where he specialised in English and History. His contemporaries included Duma Nokwe, Secretary-General of the A.N.C., now in Tanzania. O. R. Tambo, his teacher in Mathematics and Physical Science, first inspired him to fight for his people. After his graduation Henri-Gordon taught in Johannesburg. He hated teaching perhaps because of his essentially withdrawn and shy disposition, perhaps because he is essentially a writer and a very gifted one. In English, Sesutho and Afrikaans he wrote brilliantly. One of his hobbies was to write absolutely ridiculous and hilarious letters under Afrikaans pen-names wherein he posed as an extreme anti-African racist. Despite the absurdity of the letters they were invariably published by the humourless fascist press, providing weeks of merriment for the writer. In political writing Henri-Gordon's pen was very trenchant. Once when a fuss was made by some people in progressive circles at African leaders wearing national dress on the grounds that this was a reversion to 'tribalism', Henri-Gordon wrote a letter to *New Age* pointing out the 'grotesque spectacle of tribalists like Mr. Tshombe sporting the latest creations of Bond Street and Savile Row'.

When Henri-Gordon was arrested for his present term of imprisonment it was not the first time. Although he had recently recovered from a chest disease the prison officials would not give him treatment. He has lost a deal of weight but is bravely bearing the rigours of prison life which for Africans is no joke in South Africa. Writer, artist, poet, physically weak but with tremendous spiritual reserves, Henri-Gordon Makgothi is an example of the indomitable will of the African intellectuals to suffer for the cause of freedom and national liberation.

**WILTON MKWAYI** was born in Middledrift, a member of the famed Gqunukhwebe people. The son of a peasant and one himself, he went to work as a migratory worker in Port Elizabeth. Even in his home village he had made his mark as a leader. This is very difficult to do in peasant society where age and experience are the qualifications for acceptance in leadership. In Port Elizabeth he joined the A.N.C. and worked as an organiser. During the 1952 Defiance campaign he emerged as the top organiser in the New Brighton branch. He served a term of imprisonment in 1952. After his release he helped Gladstone Tshume with the selling of the progressive newspaper *New Age*. Then he started work in the trade union movement where he once more emerged as a first-class organiser. But he remained in many ways a peasant leader with enormous influence throughout the Ciskei area. He was arrested in 1956 with others and charged with High Treason.

During the State of Emergency in 1960 he escaped custody and left the country. The next time he came to public notice was as an accused in 1964 on charges of plotting the overthrow of the South African State. He was alleged to be a member of the High Command of Mkonto WeSizwe (The Spear of the Nation). He was sentenced to life imprisonment and is serving his sentence at Robben Island.

Wilton Mkwai is a tall powerfully-built man with very little or no formal education. He has a peasant shrewdness and confidence in handling men. A superb organiser, Mkwai has the gift of silence which makes him unobtrusive. He owed a great deal to this quality in his numerous evasions of the police.

And so we could go on. Trade unionists, intellectuals, business men, women leaders. Mrs. Frances Baard. Mrs. Florence Matomela. What is happening to them?

These thousands of prisoners in South Africa are not just numbers. They are individual characters with different backgrounds, interests and ideas. They share only their love of liberty, democracy and national freedom. It is the responsibility of those outside prison to ensure that the story of these men and women is constantly before the eye of the world. We must never for one moment forget our heroes or allow them to be just anonymous prisoners. They must be seen for what they are—the cream of South Africa. And it must be remembered that among them are men and women of every national group and race in our country. The oppressors with their powerful instruments for influencing public opinion are trying to denigrate the fighters for freedom in all ways. They must on no account be allowed to get away with it.