

Working Paper: Background to Republic Day Celebrations - opposition to the Republic.

Introduction

Opposition to the 20th anniversary celebrations of the RSA is rapidly mounting, as numerous organisations throw themselves behind the "anti-Republic Day" call. It is important that we situate this opposition in the context of a history of resistance and examine the specific acts of resistance which have centered around the declaration of the Republic and its anniversaries.

The working paper does not attempt to provide a detailed history of this resistance. It is rather a brief examination of activities that took place in 1961 and 1971 and will hopefully provide a useful background to the events of this year. It is important to note that this paper is not in any final form. The information can be adapted into other forms, serving as material for discussion or for use in other media.

1961: The Peoples stay-away

1960 was a very dramatic year in South Africa's history. Following the events at Sharpeville and Langa in March, at which over 70 people were killed by police, South Africa entered a general crisis period. Large numbers of workers went on strike and participated in a national stay-away. At the same time, communities in the western Cape went on the rampage, burning Bantu Education schools and public buildings.

The answer of the Nationalist Government was two fold:

- Firstly, it unleashed an enormously repressive series of actions. A state of Emergency was declared and, at the same time, scores of political and trade union leaders were detained, banned and imprisoned. The premier political organisation of the period, the African National Congress was banned, together with the newly formed, breakaway group, the Pan African Congress.
- Secondly, the Nationalist Government tried to consolidate its own position by rallying the white population and particularly the Afrikaner Nationalists, behind its attack on the mass political organisations of the time.

It is in the context of this attempt at rallying support that the declaration of the Republic in May 1961 must be viewed. In late 1960, the government called for a referendum amongst the (whites only) electorate, to decide whether South Africa should break its links with Britain and become an independent Republic. In a 90% poll, 850 000 whites voted for a Republic, whilst 775 000 voted against. As a result, the RSA Constitution Act was passed in 1961 and the 31st May set as the date for the official declaration of the Republic.

The unbanned organisations of the Congress Alliance did not hesitate in condemning the plans for a Republic. They met in December and called for the government to suspend its plan and rather to call for a "National Convention" at which all sectors of the population would participate in forming a new constitution for South Africa. A leader claimed:

"We do not recognise this republic. Some people, like me, are republican at heart. But we do not want a Fascist republic. We want a democratic peoples republic".

Early in 1961, ex leaders of the banned ANC and PAC got together with members of organisations such as the Liberal Party and called for an All-In African Conference to be held in Maritzburg. The aim of the conference was to formally launch the campaign calling for a National Convention. Unfortunately, before the conference took place, the PAC and LP members withdrew and not only undermined unity, but publically discouraged people from participating in the "National Convention" Campaign.

The All-In African Conference was held in March 1961. Over 1500 delegates attended and passed a resolution calling for:

" a national convention of elected representatives of all adult men and women on an equal basis, irrespective of race, colour, creed or other limitation ... to determine in any way the majority of representatives decide, a new non-racial, democratic constitution for South Africa."

The Conference resolved that if the government failed to respond to this call, they would stage "countrywide demonstrations on the eve of the proclamation of the Republic in protest against the undemocratic act".

A National Action Council was established with Nelson Mandela, now operating underground at its head. When the government failed to respond to the call, Mandela and Sisulu secretly toured the country, organising a national stay-away to coincide with the Republic Day celebrations of May 31, 1961. The stay-away centered around various issues, including demands for:

- * An end to pass laws
- * One-man-one-vote
- * A national convention

The Nationalist Government mobilised all the means at its disposal to squash the national stay-away. Measures included the mobilisation of the police and military troops, the ban of public meetings, the arrest of the organising committee and the introduction of a new law, allowing for 12 day arrest without bail. Managers also issued harsh threats discouraging workers from staying away from work. At the same time the press and radio systematically announced the stay-away's failure, even before most factories had opened for the work-day.

Despite these measures, the stay-away was particularly successful in certain areas. Newspapers estimated that in Johannesburg and Port Elizabeth up to 75% of workers stayed away from work. At the same time "Black" schools and universities boycotted the celebrations and students at Wits and Rhodes staged demonstrations. Although the activities were definitely successful to a significant degree, it was decided that they were not adequate to be sustained for the full 3 days originally anticipated. The worker stay-away therefore only lasted for two days.

"Official histories" of South Africa present the formation of the Republic as a slightly controversial, yet essentially smooth process. It is important, therefore, that we do not overlook the extent to which it was actively opposed. Despite a period of acute state repression, the majority of South Africans were prepared to make sacrifices in order to illustrate their rejection of the political system being imposed on them.

The activities surrounding RC in 1961 were exceptionally important. They represented the final attempt by the majority of South Africans to pressurise the government into changing its repressive system. The activities centered on a call for a National Convention in which all South Africans would be represented in drawing up a non-racial, democratic constitution for the country. (We must not confuse the 1961 National Convention call with the rather hazy call from various liberal groupings today. The 1961 call was for the full participation of all the peoples of South Africa, on the terms of the representatives of the majority of the population. Today's call sees the National Convention occurring on the terms laid down by the current ruling group and establishing certain "conditions" for the participation of various organisations and individuals). The repressive response of the government only served to further frustrate the desires of the population. The notion of "pressurising" change was now eroded, as people realised that change would not be handed down to them- it was something that would have to be won.

1971: Students take the lead

In October 1970 the South African government announced that large-scale celebrations would be held in Cape Town, during May of the following year, to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the RSA. Whilst the declaration of the Republic in 1961 had followed a decade of enormous mass mobilisation against Apartheid, the 10th

anniversary followed one of the "quietest" periods in the history of that system. Opposition to celebrations was therefore equally "quiet" and in no way matched that of 10 years earlier.

In retrospect, although a relatively large number of organisations vocally supported the anti-RD celebrations, it was only NUSAS that managed to successfully mobilise people around the call. Although the celebrations did not, therefore, go unchallenged, they were easily able to publically overshadow the opposition to them.

It is useful to briefly examine which organisations did support the Anti-RD moves, and how they planned to put their opposition into practice:

*The newly formed South African Students Organisation (SASO) called for a complete boycott of the celebrations. There is, however, little information on the extent to which they organised around the call.

*The Labour Party called on "Coloureds" to boycott the celebrations. Although in certain areas "Coloureds" did not participate (eg. in Port Elizabeth only 10% of "Coloured" school pupils participated) it is doubtful whether this was in response to the Labour Party call.

*The Black Sash organised a series of "state of the nation" demonstrations against the celebrations.

*The South African Institute of Race Relations published a series of articles on the 10 years of the Republic.

*Numerous Indian political figures in Natal opposed the celebrations, saying: "How can we be called on to support an event in which we have no say". There were various incidents in Natal where people were detained or charged for damaging RD property or painting anti-RD slogans.

The government used two methods in an attempt to undercut the anti-RD move. Firstly various political personalities were detained and severe warnings issued against attempts to "incite" people into boycotting the celebrations. Secondly, various "concessions" were granted by the government, in an attempt to diffuse the dissatisfaction. The most prominent of these was the amnesty granted to 30 000 prisoners. Political prisoners were notably excluded from this amnesty.

The NUSAS campaign was implemented under the theme "Republic Day: What is there to celebrate?". The campaign had three specific objectives:

- 1) To rally anti-Apartheid opposition
- 2) To generally educate the students and the public
- 3) To reveal the "hollow myth" of the celebrations.

Various issues were chosen to "expose" the real nature of 23 years of Nationalist rule and 10 years of the Republic.

These issues included:

- racism
- apartheid
- terrorism

NUSAS media focus: The media concentrated on these areas and claimed that the situation was continuing to deteriorate. They also focussed on the growing use of force by the state. The following article was written at the time:

"We should face these facts: the Republic Day celebrations, and the Republic for the whole of South Africa that night will be a tragedy. The United Nations holding its breath in the company of the rest of the world."

Jan Theron, UCT 1960-61

"I am not prepared to believe that the end of the injustices of this system will bring about the survival of the Republic. It is an effective implement of the system."

NUSAS activities: The following are some of the activities:

*Exhibitions on the history of the struggle against Apartheid

*Low-key educative talks

*Mass meetings for students and the public, using speakers such as Rick Turner, Beyers Naude and David Thebehali.

*Distribution of pamphlets to both the public in general and white school students

*Public pickets.

The state did not remain oblivious to MUSAS activity. Examples of state activity during the period included the confiscation of thousands of pamphlets and the ban of a march through Johannesburg. White school teachers also took on the "responsibility" of assaulting Nits students who were distributing pamphlets to school pupils.

Conclusion

Numerous lessons can be learned from both the activities of 1961 and 1971.

It is important to focus on the events of 1961 to illustrate the fact that people did actively oppose the formation of the RSA. The establishment of the Republic was a fundamentally anti-democratic act and one which cannot be evaded or overlooked by history. Organisations that oppose the Republic today, do so with a history of such resistance.

Although the activities of 1971 show a substantial degree of creativity and courage, they are unfortunately notable more for their inadequacies than for their successes. The key lesson of 1971 is that a Broad front of democratic forces is required to present a significant counter force to the Apartheid propoganda machine. Although not every democratic organisation can afford to take up the anti-RD call, it is necessary for all the groupings who can do so, to unite their opposition. Vocal and public support for the call is in itself inadequate. Successful opposition to RD celebrations requires careful planning, substantial education, and most importantly, thorough organisation.

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