
Back to "Normal"

Some glances at mid-1964 South Africa

PETER MOTSOANE

EASTER, A PERIOD USUALLY MARKED by racial tension and bitterness; unpalatable parliamentary debates on more restrictive legislation for Africans, saw the first quarter of 1964 pass amidst a climate of uneasy calm, as if everybody was happy under apartheid; as if "relations between whites and blacks have never been better", to quote a famous phrase from Mr. De Wet Nel, B.A.D. Minister.

For it was about Easter 1960 that we experienced the horror of Sharpeville shootings and the State of Emergency. It was during Easter, 1963, that the Poqo suspects were rounded up and 90-day detention became a feature of South African "traditional way of life". In other years, other Easters were marked by strikes, boycotts and demonstrations against passes and other aspects of apartheid.

The police can boast of having smashed "sabotage gangs" and "their satellites" and also having "agitators" (patriotic African leaders like Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu and Govan Mbeki) behind bars. Some leaders are banned under the Suppression of Communism Act. Some have fled.

But the police can't boast of having won over to apartheid the hearts of the millions of Africans who loathe oppression. For the legacies that cause bitterness and racial hatred amongst the races of South Africa still exist and are even driven deeper by legislation. More unpleasant apartheid laws are passed, and more are being drafted.

South Africa is back to "normal" now that the major political organisations of the African people are banned, viz. the African National Congress and the Pan Africanist Congress. Their militant off-shoots, "Umkhonto we Sizwe" and "Poqo" have been broken up by police with the aid of informers. Indeed, "sabotage" (in practice militant opposition to apartheid) has been largely stamped out. The authorities can boast of "calm" and "peace" prevailing now, and the situation being "under control".

But beneath the calm and peace bubbles discontent, bitterness, fear and mistrust. This is a feature of another version of South Africa's "traditional way of life", the other one being comforts "for whites only".

But is the peace prevailing the calm before the storm? Or a sign that white supremacy will last forever? Africans

believe in the former, while whites and some Coloureds believe in the latter.

In the locations there is deep-rooted mistrust and bitterness and fear. Parents have seen their teenage sons (in Pretoria) dragged out of bed in the early dawn, and after being accused of being Poqo members, given long jail sentences. School children never forget the sight of police vehicles at schools coming for their fellow students and brilliant teachers and have often asked the question: "Who will be next?"

So great is the torment that some parents doubt the value of educating their children as most educated people are labelled "communists" and are very much hated by Whites. Moreover, there are almost no commercial outlets for their skills.

THE SABOTAGE TRIALS have created great suspicion among local residents. The anonymity of State witnesses and work of informers make most people look about before saying anything. Some people don't even greet one another or even exchange visits.

"The price of Judas has gone up," they say. "Modern Judas drives a beautiful car, has a fat bank account, has a good job and enjoys pass-law relaxation."

They verify this with the observation that before the sabotage trials, there were very few cars in the locations, and that since the trials, many people seem to have "won lotteries". Also, some unemployed people don't seem to be bothered by police.

With remarkable bitterness, I was ordered to "Voetsek!" when I went to welcome back to "normal" life, an ex-friend who had just been released from detention. On my way home I was accosted by some unknown men, who suspected me of informing.

Another man told me: "I don't want visitors in my house. I discuss nothing with anybody, even my family, who may turn informers under 90-days detention. I know nothing, and I want to stay that way. Now get out!"

Ninety-days detention has changed the once-smiling teenagers into bitter, vengeance-seeking men. They are

CHIEF LUTHULI

oppressed people of South Africa and to the cause of freedom that they should be treated to this unhappy display of disunity by those who should be working rather to bring their fellow-oppressed to their own pitch of militancy and commitment, and should be organising victory against the regime.

Your loss of freedom will not end until this unity is achieved or until the emergence of a movement which will transcend the existing groups, should they finally be rejected because of their inability to get on with the job. Whichever way it happens, your own status, and that of Mr. Sobukwe, is likely to be assured. Your service to South Africa, and to the universal cause of freedom, in the days of your active political leadership, and now, will never be forgotten. Your future participation in our national affairs is confidently looked forward to. ●

PETER MOTSOANE, *free-lance journalist, lives in Pretoria.*

even bitter against people not engaged in any political activity.

Some parents are even pointing fingers and asking: "Why is so-and-so's son not arrested? He used to visit my boy." Yet, some politically-minded people, not engaged in politics and not detained, are very uneasy, wondering if something is yet to happen to them. They fear the sound of cars near their homes.

IT IS DIFFICULT for some people to hide their feelings, even though they try to bottle them in, into their chests. There comes a time when they don't bother who's listening.

Said a frustrated worker in a crowded train: "A teenage white boy works only for six months and can afford a car. I've been working for 20 years and can't buy a bicycle, because I'm black. If I speak I'll be locked up for Poqo."

On the other side of the colour bar, whites seem confident of the *might* of the Nationalist government and its determination to smash "agitators". The complaints and demands of the Africans they brush aside.

The Atteridgeville Poqo trial caused comment from some whites, as it revealed deeper bitterness and frustration. They did not know they lived in a world surrounded by frustration and hostility. The fact that teenagers are jailed seemed to come as a shock. They realise it's not only African adults, but children, too, who need a share in the running of the country.

"What's going on with the school boys in Atteridgeville," some African employees were asked. "Atteridgeville is a municipal location. You have beautiful houses at low rentals. You have your own bars and recreation halls."

Of course, most Africans pretend to be shocked at the "unnecessary bitterness" only to please their employers for fear of being accused of being sympathetic to "agita-

tors". But deep down in their hearts they know, and condemn, the whites for being responsible for the bitterness and racial tension by blocking the advancing Africans from entry into positions of responsibility. Even if they receive blows every day, Africans can still force a smile.

THE PRETORIA TRIAL has provoked another type of thinking amongst whites I overheard talking on Church Square. They can't understand how Poqo grew up since they were led to believe that the mass of restrictive legislation at the moment prevailing was enough to force a "Bantu" to "behave" himself.

They seem to believe that a municipal tenant is "under control" and has much to lose by grumbling. They believed that "Bantu" propaganda hand-outs could help weaken the "agitators' grip" on the masses of Africans, and win them over to apartheid.

With the banning of *New Age*, *Fighting Talk*, and the weakening of *Contact*, it was hoped *Elethu Mirror*, with its pro-apartheid partisanship, would gain mass readership. The closing down of *Elethu* through lack of support pleased many an African. There was rejoicing in their discussions.

Bantu Education, which was meant to produce cap-in-hand "Yes-my-baas" intellectuals, is seen as a failure by some whites.

"Before Bantu Education," said one of three men at Church Square, "we had the harmless A.N.C. with its petitions and protest marches. With Bantu Education the children ignore Luthuli and breed on the poison of Poqo."

The fact that teenagers are alleged to have plotted to massacre whites, poison their food and campaigned for the collection of bombs, is enough to condemn Bantu Education as a failure in its purpose.

Fancy Atteridgeville being the location the late Dag Hammarskjöld was shown as a "happy and prosperous

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township" and the frustration therein being glossed over as the gibes of agitators.

Even the so-called "law-abiding Bantu" (such as teachers, Radio Bantu announcers and police) don't seem to be happy. Listening attentively to a political conversation in the train, a uniformed policeman said: "Hitler's loss of World War II was a big shock to many. He had the world under his thumb, but because his laws conflicted with those of God he failed." He made it clear he was only talking about the Germans but it was clear what he meant.

However, there are some people who cannot stand it any longer. They have seen the smashing of African political organisations, sabotage trials and even Rivonia and feel there is nothing left but to get out. They are the men and women who wish to turn the independent African states into economic giants and world powers by developing the natural resources there, an opportunity they are denied in their own country. They are studying accountancy, agronomy, economics and science. They know that in the Republic job reservation prevents their entry into professional responsibility and respectability.

THE POSSIBILITY OF NELSON MANDELA and others being hanged, is causing concern in the location from people determined to stay here, come what may. They have seen the bitter struggle in Cyprus, the seven-year Kenya emergency and the Congolese battle for united independence.

The late Patrice Lumumba and Jomo Kenyatta saw the final liberation of their peoples. They feel it will come here, too.

The passing of the Bantu Laws Amendment Act is seen as an act of provocation by some Africans. It seems the Nationalists have learnt nothing from Sharpeville and Poqo and are prepared to continue creating bitterness and frustration.

"Bantu Laws Bill shows the whites don't consider us people," said a hitherto anti-P.A.C.-A.N.C. man and pro-Bantustan. "They are making things worse."

"Until the Russians crushed the Hungarian revolution, we hoped to see the end of communism there. That day never came. We had Sharpeville here. The best thing now is to leave South Africa and settle in Northern Rhodesia." So say those who have lost hope.

The mass arrest of militant Africans and the implementation of further apartheid legislation is now posing another question: After Poqo, what next?

The uneasy quiet amongst Africans is not acceptance of perpetual subjection. The bitterness is there, and is increasing daily. It is a fallacy to believe that since the Transkei "self-government" Africans know that apartheid is good.

Maybe something more bitter than Poqo and Umkonto will come to the scene. But one thing is definite, the unwanted apartheid will meet its day. As a Sepedi proverb says: "Nothing lasts forever." Apartheid is no exception. ●

Snowball

a story

BESSIE HEAD

IT IS AUTUMN IN CAPE TOWN. Each day the sunset is new, with a new theme, but the underlying mood is always the same. Always the still, chilled Autumn air controls the earth's scent with a nostalgic sweetness that is unlike any other season of the year. Sharp, and distinct, these scents blend with the yellow-gold sky as it imperceptibly changes to a powdery mauve and then a vivid, splashy orange-red that pulsates and pulsates. Two children pass

BESSIE HEAD is teaching in a primary school in Serowe, Bechuanaland Protectorate, having left the Republic on an exit permit.

by, barefoot, absorbed, with comic red-painted sunset faces. Suddenly the sharp black silhouette of rooftops appear outlined against the glowing sky.

IT IS STRANGE how a scene or a street can evoke pleasant or unpleasant memories. It is strange, too, how one's life is rather like a railway station. People pass in and out all the time and yet so few are of consequence to one's destiny. If the sunset reminds me of "Snowball" it is only because during the time I knew him I was driven by a stronger urge to protect him. He was too passive and peace-loving and life knocked him around an awful lot. He merely took each blow as it came without question or thought of retaliation. I imagine the only peace he ever found was when he was at sea in his small dinghy. I imagine, too, that he was the kind of man who would notice a sunset.

Capetonians have a witty way of giving people queer nicknames. But often these nicknames make sense. Just say all the fingers of one hand may be missing, then they might call you "Vyf" and you would not mind at all because the way in which it was said would bear a tender regard for your defect; even to the point of giving you great prestige in the neighbourhood. But the nickname "Snowball" never really made sense to me because "Snowball" was a man who was quite black all over except for