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Black²⁸ consciousness and its origins

FROM the early 1960's, after the suppression of movements like the ANC and PAC, through the Unlawful Organizations Act and Sabotage Act, there was a phenomenal growth of fear in the minds of black people, accompanied by the development of an equally strong resentment.

Overt political activity died down and political discussions in buses and beerhalls became increasingly superficial to avoid outright criticism of the status quo. In the lower courts, where thousands of people were charged, there was also a tendency for magistrates to be particularly severe on people charged with political offences.

At the same time new political impetus was given to the separate development policy in the form of the Transkei Constitution Act of 1963, and there was a plethora of palliative concessions like the establishment of urban Bantu councils and beerhalls.

At lowest ebb

It was clear that these were part of the National Party's answer to the problem of political accommodation of the black majority. These came at a time when black political activity was at its lowest ebb, thus did not meet coherent criticism from black political leadership.

In the meantime, black political activists who had not left the country joined several liberal multiracial organizations which had taken up the role of speaking on behalf of the black man. Foremost among these was the National Union of South African Students (Nusas) which had strong leftist leadership in people like Adrian Leftwich, Jonty Driver, Ian Robertson, Margaret Marshall and John Daniel.

On the non-student front there was the Liberal Party under the leadership of Dr Alan Paton, Prof Edgar Brookes and others. Besides these two there was also the Progressive Party (which was very active, especially through its youth wing, the Young Progressives), the Christian Institute and the Civil Rights League.

During this period, the tone of political opposition tended to take the form of liberal criticism of the undemocratic

THAMI ZANI, Black People's Convention publicity secretary, explains the history and philosophy of a controversial subject.

aspect of the policy of the South African Government. Thus, people spoke heavily in favour of the "rule of law," "academic freedom" and against "bannings without trial". The role of blacks in all this gradually became secondary and there was a dearth of meaningful participation by blacks in the formation of opposition politics.

The only form of direct political expression was to be found in the several so-called university colleges which had been created as a result of the Extension of Universities Act of 1959. There were five such colleges - Fort Hare, Turfloop, Ngoye, Western Cape and Westville.

Besides Nusas, which was reasonably active on all these campuses, there was the African Students' Association (ASA) formed in 1961 and the African Students' Union (ASU) formed in 1962 on the black campuses.

Attempts at uniting these student movements failed because of intense ideological debates that occurred among them - hence a potentially powerful expression could not emanate from these campuses.

Intimidation and victimization of ASA and ASU leadership led to a collapse of both movements. With the death of Ernest Galo in 1965 nobody came up to put ASA together and ASU leadership in people like Sibanda, who was at Natal University, soon fizzled out.

In 1967 the Terrorism Act was passed and in 1968 the Improper Interference Act was billed and this led to the virtual collapse of the Liberal Party. The Progressive Party decided to go complete-

ly white rather than disband like the Liberal Party.

All this, then, set the stage for the development of the now famous South African Students Organization (Saso). The trusteeship role played by organizations like Nusas and the Progressives was bound to irritate blacks who felt they could speak more realistically for themselves.

Saso was ultimately formed at the 1968 Marianhill conference of black student leaders and inaugurated at Turfloop University at the 1969 conference. With the advent of Saso, the black students, for the first time, developed a political outlook of their own, embodied in the philosophy of black consciousness. This was articulated mainly by people like Steve Biko, the first president, Barney Pitso, Strini Moodley, Harry Nengwekhulu, Themba Sono and others.

The slogan on which the whole philosophy was based, was "Black man, you are on your own", which was a call for the black man to "manhood" in the true sense of the word, a rejection by the black man of being seen as an aberration of the normal which is white, and an assertion of the right by blacks to determine their own destiny.

Notions which had led to automatic acceptance by blacks of an inferior status in all facets of life were challenged. Black consciousness was therefore a call to the black man to shed his self-imposed psychological oppression through the inferiority complex which had up to that period been

aggravated by all the forces at play in the political arena. A call to the black man to take pride in himself and his cultural heritage and rely on his own resources for political salvation.

It is not necessary to delve into the reactions both from the system and from liberal circles that the debut of black consciousness evoked, nor to eulogize the phases through which Saso went spreading black consciousness. Suffice it to say that from the birth of Saso, and thus black consciousness, ensued the proliferation of many black consciousness organizations.

With the formation of the Black People's Convention in 1971, the black consciousness movement entrenched itself in South African politics. In fact black consciousness has manifested itself in many facets of the black man's life. Several organizations have been set up to take care of the black man's business and the political mood of the people reflects many aspects of black consciousness thinking.

All-pervasive

This mood is not confined to people who are actual members of any of the organizations, but in a sense it is an all-pervasive mood touching the hearts of black people throughout the country.

Once more black people are feeling that they are people and they are responding to this situation of oppression not in a defeatist way, constantly looking for solutions to their problems.

Gone are the days of the "noble savage," which were characteristic of the liberal trusteeship era. We should not earn our acceptance because we are noble although we are savages.

We are human and we insist on a primary recognition of that humanity.

That is the message of black consciousness to us.

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