

# THE A.N.C. RESURGENCE 1976-1981

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In the five years which have elapsed since the Soweto uprising the African National Congress has re-emerged as the political group with probably the greatest degree of popular support within the black townships.<sup>1</sup> Already in the process of re-establishing a presence inside South Africa before June 1976, its military wing, Umkonto we Sizwe, was able to capitalise on the political exhilaration which was generated by the disturbances themselves in mounting an at times spectacular campaign of sabotage and guerilla warfare. The uprising was succeeded by the exodus of thousands of young men and women to Lesotho, Swaziland and Botswana and many of these were to provide Umkonto with a new army of highly motivated and well-educated (in contrast to the recruits in the early 1960s) saboteurs. By mid 1978 South African security police chiefs estimated that approximately 4000 refugees were undergoing insurgent training in Angola, Libya and Tanzania, most of these under ANC auspices.<sup>2</sup> At the same time the police reckoned that 2 500 people had already been brought to court as a result of their participation in the sabotage campaign.<sup>3</sup> Together with the scale and frequency of Umkonto attacks this makes it the most sustained violent rebellion in South African history and all the indications are that it will develop into a full-scale revolutionary war. A chronology of guerilla activity made in 1981 records 112 attacks and explosions between October 1976 and May 1981.<sup>4</sup> In March 1978 it was reported that one explosion a week had taken place since the previous November.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast to the first Umkonto campaign, the targets, particularly in the 1980 – 1981 phase, have often been ones of considerable strategic or economic importance. They have included the synthetic oil refinery at Sasolburg (June 1980), power stations in the Eastern Transvaal (July 1981), and the Voortrekkerhoogte military base (August 1981). Police stations have been a favourite target, especially those in or near townships; Germiston, Daveyton, New Brighton, Chatsworth, Moroka, Soekmekaar and Booyens police stations were all subjected to grenade, rocket or bomb attacks between 1977 and 1980. As well as this, African security policemen have been assassinated on several occasions. From the events which have been reported in the press or which have emerged from trial evidence a historical pattern is beginning to become evident. 1977 to 1979 seem to have been years in which Umkonto was principally concerned with establishing its lines of communication and infiltration (which have been principally from Mozambique, and, until a clamp-down by local authority in mid 1978, Swaziland), setting up arms caches, as well as forming a cellular organisational structure in the main townships.<sup>6</sup> In consequence the most dramatic incidents were in the form of gun battles in the North-Eastern border regions between guerillas and the police.

In most cases these resulted from police patrols intercepting guerilla units returning from the training camps but in some instances the guerillas themselves mounted attacks on police patrols in what was believed to be an attempt to divert attention from the flow of insurgents to the main urban centres on the Rand.<sup>7</sup> Umkonto groups also tried to establish rudimentary bases and support groups in the countryside of the North-Eastern Transvaal: the attack on Soekmekaar police station was designed to enhance the ANC's popularity in an area recently affected by enforced resettlement.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile Molotov cocktails thrown at policemen's houses and railway bombings predominated in the reports of sabotage attempts.

From 1980, it appears, the aim seems to have been to select targets, the destruction of which would create the maximum popular resonance, first on the Rand, and then, possibly as a result of police pressure in Soweto, in Durban. The avowed purpose of the attacks has been demonstrative; one captured guerilla actually used the phrase 'armed propaganda',<sup>9</sup> On the whole their intention seems to have been to inspire confidence amongst the dominated population rather than terror within the white community. Much of the violence has been directed at targets with a special significance for Africans; incidents which have involved the deaths of white civilians, the 1977 Goch street warehouse shootings or the Silverton Bank siege for example, do not appear to have been preconceived and have rather been the consequence of only superficially trained men being forced on to the defensive. In contrast with the earlier Umkonto campaign much more emphasis has been placed on co-ordinating sabotage efforts with local mass struggles; as well as the Soekmekaar attack in 1980, Soweto bombings were orchestrated with a popular campaign against rent increases. With the exception of the assassination of informers and other people regarded as collaborators (African security policemen, for example), the campaign's strategy has been guided by the principle that civilian casualties should be avoided.<sup>10</sup> In August 1981, however, Oliver Tambo announced that the ANC would in future attack 'officials of Apartheid' (which in fact Umkonto insurgents had never had any inhibitions in doing) and that moreover there might arise 'combat situations' in which civilians could be killed.<sup>11</sup> A few days before Tambo's statement appeared in the foreign press (it was not reported inside South Africa) a bomb exploded in the main shopping centre of Port Elizabeth; unlike earlier inner-city explosions this one took place during working hours. It was seen at the time as a reprisal for the then recent murder in Salisbury of the ANC representative in Zimbabwe, Joe Gqabi. Gqabi, who had played an important role in the first Umkonto campaign, was one of the Robben Island prison veterans who had been chiefly responsible for reactivating an ANC leadership in Soweto in late 1975 and establishing

what ANC links existed with the Soweto Students Representative Council (SSRC). He had gone into exile after his acquittal in one of the first major trials arising from the sabotage campaign.

Apart from the effects of Umkonto's sabotage campaign, the ANC's influence on popular political perceptions<sup>1 2</sup> has been consolidated since 1976 by the re-emergence of open political discussion within the African community. Here the commercial press has played an important role: in 1980, for example, the Soweto daily newspaper, **The Post**, ran a 'Release Mandela' petition form in its columns for several months as well as helping to popularise the Freedom Charter. The Charter was taken up and adopted by several organisations including a new student association, formed in 1979, the Congress of South African Students (COSAS). COSAS stands in conscious opposition to organisations which claim to be inspired by the precepts of Black Consciousness.

Meanwhile the ANC's external organisation has been untroubled by any serious dissension. This is all the more remarkable bearing in mind the huge infusion of new recruits, many of them from a background in which the ANC's leadership had little legitimacy. The organisation was well placed to cope with this sudden expansion; it had the equipment, the financial resources, and the training facilities (located mainly in Angola) required to transform these recruits into a guerilla force. In contrast with the 1960s, training periods have been short, militarily and politically extremely effective, and of course the possibilities of going into action have been for trained insurgents infinitely greater; all this has contributed to discipline and morale in the camps. In consequence ideological dissent within the leadership does not seem to have had much effect on rank and file. In particular there have been two dissident tendencies, both of which have involved dissatisfaction with the role of the South African Communist Party within the external movement. The first involved Okhela, the faction started in Paris in 1973 as a 'white consciousness' group with the apparent encouragement of Tambo who hoped it might counter-balance the influence of communists within the ANC. With the failure of Breytenbach's expedition Okhela had lost favour with the ANC establishment. The vetoing of an Okhela scheme to circulate Afrikaans 'samizdat' literature in South Africa confirmed a growing conviction among the remaining Okhela adherents that the ANC was racist in its attitude towards Afrikaners. Already increasingly antipathetic to the SACP, between 1976 and 1978 the Okhela group made overtures to the ANC African Nationalists then based in Algiers. In 1979 Okhela collapsed in the wake of its most influential spokesman's flight to South Africa and his subsequent admission of being a police informer.<sup>1 3</sup> The African Nationalists were similarly discredited with Tennyson Makiwane's return to the Transkei and his enlistment in the Transkeian foreign service. In 1980 Makiwane was assassinated. Though the Transkeians blamed the ANC it may have been significant that he had been involved in a coup d'état conspiracy by former ANC and PAC men to overthrow the Matanzima administration.<sup>1 4</sup>

The second group of dissenters developed from the new generation of South African marxist academics which had emerged at English universities in the early 1970's. Together with recent exiles who had been involved with the regeneration of African trade unions in South Africa they were gradually to become increasingly sceptical of the capacity of the SACP for creating a proletarian democracy, and in-

creasingly critical of the petty-bourgeois orientation of the ANC's exile leadership. Their criticisms were first of all centred on the work of the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) in which some of them were involved; in particular they disagreed with what they felt to be the dominant perception of SACTU's function — to serve as a 'signpost', directing workers to Umkonto we Sizwe.<sup>1 5</sup> With the expulsion of the principal figures in this group, Martin Legassick, Rob Petersen, David Hemson and Paula Ensor, the ANC effectively cut itself off from a potentially creative source of intellectual stimulation. The rebels subsequently constituted themselves as a 'workers' tendency' within the ANC but because of their isolation from rank and file ANC membership their aim of helping to transform the nationalist movement into a truly working class organisation appears forlornly romantic.

Despite the fresh emphasis on insurgent activity the ANC's leadership has been careful not to neglect diplomacy. Here it has displayed considerable self-confidence and finesse. This is a field in which the Tambo leadership was always rather adept and in the post-Soweto years it has had to contend with several significant challenges. The first of these was posed by the emergence of a third exile force as a result of the arrival in European and African capitals of leaders from the South African Students' Organisation, Black People's Convention and SSRC. The less ideologically doctrinaire of these found little difficulty in joining the ANC but for those who subscribed fully to the tenets of Black Consciousness there were obvious objections to this. At the same time the disarray among the Pan-Africanists made them equally unacceptable. Furthermore there were substantial temptations to maintain a distance from the two exile organisations: European social democrats were keen to patronise a 'third force' free of soviet connections and more vital than the Pan-Africanist-Congress (PAC). From the mid 1970s under the direction of Lars-Gunner Eriksson, the International University Exchange Fund (IUEF) began channelling large sums of money to the Black-Consciousness-movement representatives both within and outside the country. According to a South African security policeman who infiltrated the IUEF, in 1978 through skillful lobbying of the various left-wing and social democrat groupings which financed the IUEF, the ANC was able to put a stop to this. Moreover the ANC succeeded in extracting an agreement from IUEF representatives that in future no South African projects would be funded without their approval.<sup>1 6</sup> By late 1980 many of the principal figures in the Black Consciousness Movement of Azania (which had been formally established the year before in London) were joining the ANC. These included Barney Pityana, one of the founders of SASO in 1969.<sup>1 7</sup>

The episode was an indication of an increasingly determined effort by the ANC to gain for itself 'sole legitimate representative' status in the view of potential allies. Here it has been aided by the faction fighting in the PAC which prevented the latter from fully exploiting the victory of its erstwhile ally — Mugabe's ZANU — in the Zimbabwe elections. The ANC's guerilla units, incidentally, were reported to be fighting alongside Nkomo's ZAPU-oriented forces until the ceasefire. The appointment as the ANC's representative of Joe Gqabi, who like many of the ZANU military leaders was Chinese-trained, and who in addition had not been involved in any previous exile political activity, was tactful and astute.

Meanwhile, in London, Oliver Tambo arranged and attended his daughter's wedding in St. Paul's Cathedral and main-

tained (against strong internal pressure from the left wing of his organisation) discreet links with Gatsha Buthelezi. Even when finally compelled to attack the homeland leader for his behaviour during a Kwa Mashu school boycott in 1980, Tambo was nevertheless careful not to outrightly condemn the Inkatha movement. With the revival in South Africa of legal mass organisations with previous Congress associations the stodgily petit-bourgeois respectability of the Tambo leadership has an important function in ensuring that internal support for the ANC remains as widely-based as possible. The current enthusiasm for the Freedom Charter and the apparent downgrading of the more radical 'strategy and tactics' adopted at Morogoro<sup>18</sup> may also be indicative of a realistic perception of the danger of alienating the steadily growing Black middle class. □

#### REFERENCES:

1. See the finding of the **Star** public opinion survey, 23 - 24 September 1981.
2. **Rand Daily Mail**, 2 June 1978.
3. **The Star**, 17 April 1978.
4. See **Work in Progress**, Development Studies Group, University of the Witwatersrand, no. 18, pp. 22 - 26.
5. **Rand Daily Mail**, 10 March 1978.
6. South African Institute of Race Relations, **Annual Survey of Race Relations, 198**, SAIRR, Johannesburg, 1981, p. 61.
7. **Sunday Tribune** (Durban), 16 April 1978.
8. See report on Treason Trial, **Work in Progress**, no. 16 (February 1981), p. 3.
9. **Ibid.**
10. In November 1980 the ANC became a signatory to Protocol One of the 1949 Geneva Convention which binds it to refraining from attacks on civilian targets as well as treating captured South African soldiers as prisoners of war. The initiative in persuading the ANC to take this step was taken by the International Red Cross.
11. **The Times**, (London), 13 April 1981 and 14 April 1981.
12. See **Star** survey, cited above.
13. Information on Okhela derived from: **Sunday Times**, (Johannesburg), 4 August 1977, 24 November 1979; **The Star**, 2 February 1978; **Daily Despatch**, (East London), 4 November 1977.
14. **Sunday Times**, (Johannesburg), 31 August 1980.
15. Robert Petersen, 'Memorandum to the National Executive Committee of SACTU', London, 8 April 1979, p. 20.
16. See Ken Owen, 'War in the Shadows', **Sunday Times**, (Johannesburg), 19 October 1980.
17. **The Star**, 13 - 14 October 1980.
18. The ANC Headquarters in Tanzania, where in 1969 important decisions about ANC structure and policy were taken (including one that allowed White South Africans to join the external organisation).

#### SATV SIGNATURE TUNE

by Vortex

We plough their houses into the ground,  
leaving just chairs and beds,  
but if anyone voices a protest  
we blame that onto the Reds.

We chop their families in two,  
dividing wife from man,  
but as soon as there's a word of complaint  
that's part of the Russian plan.

We stop them in house or street or road,  
demanding permit or pass,  
but when blacks get angry it goes to prove  
that Western views are a farce.

We deprive them all of citizenship,  
we bully, detain and ban,  
but still the Western world can't see  
the threat of the Kremlin plan.

In the countryside of Namibia,  
SWAPO fights for its rights:  
why can't the outside world discern  
that Brezhnev hates us whites?

What can we do to convince the West?  
We've done almost all we can.  
Perhaps some display of violence  
will **prove** the overall plan.