

TOWARDS BLACK WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 19, 1977 AND BEYOND

In June 1977, the Black People's Convention (**BPC**), convened a consultative meeting with delegations from about thirteen organisations of the people attending at St Peter's Seminary, Hammanskraal, to work out strategies on frustrating the pending "independence" of Bophuthatswana from the Republic of South Africa.

The organisations present were: Black Parents' Association (**BPA**); South African Students' Organisation (**SASO**); South African Students' Movement (**SASM**); Association for the Educational and Cultural Advancement of African People (**ASSECA**); Interdenominational African Ministers' Association of South Africa (**IDAMASA**); African Independent Churches Association (**AICA**); Transvaal United African Teachers' Association (**TUATA**); South African Black Social Workers' Association (**SABSWA**); Natal Indian Congress (**NIC**); Union of Black Journalists (**UBJ**); Black Priests Solidarity Group (**BPSG**); and Black Community Programmes (**BCP**).

The so-called "independence" of these Bantustans was seen by the **Black Consciousness Movement** as balkanisation of our country which could not be countenanced. The consultation was a huge success, which demonstrated once more the people's opposition to the Bantustan policy.

The major decisions of the consultation were:

(a). That an open letter be written to Chief Lucas Manyane Mangope, who was waiting in the wings to take over as 'President' of the "independent" Bantustan, strongly stating our opposition and disgust at his attempts at further balkanising our country as Chief Kaizer Matanzima, another Bantustan quisling, had earlier done with the Transkei in 1976.

(b). That the campaign be taken to the people and that organisations be canvassed to fully participate in it. Community-based organisations, professional bodies and traditional leaders were to be visited, informed of our position and their support solicited.

The **BPC** Head Office set about carrying out the resolutions promptly. The open letter was written on the 25/07/77 and was duly signed by the then Secretary General of the **BPC**, Cde **Thandisizwe Mazibuko**. It was promptly dispatched to Chief Mangope and subsequently to the media.

Most of the newspapers and radio reported on the contents of the letter. However, the World newspaper covered the letter in its entirety. The effect of this letter was palpable.

The Editor of The World, Mr Percy Qoboza, was later called in by Jimmy Kruger, then Minister of Justice and the Police, and given a tongue-lashing for his "conduct". He was never given a chance to answer to any of the accusations leveled at him. Kruger had Gen. Prinsloo, Commissioner of the SAP present, uniform, shiny brass and all. Poor Percy, he was thoroughly intimidated. He later said: "If this had been said to me by anybody in the township, I would have beaten the daylights out of them. And to think that this Kruger guy is such a small guy."

Later on, John Vorster, then Prime Minister called him in. He registered his discomfort with the Editor being the only one having published "this threatening and intimidating letter in its entirety." At least he allowed Mr Kwabusa, as he said Percy's surname, to explain why he published the letter.

Chief Mangope, an articulate man by any standards, was unusually inarticulate at the press conference he convened to answer to the charges in the open letter.

Appointments were made with several chiefs to discuss this issue. Some were eager to talk; others scared. In some cases, we ended up just meeting with their wives bringing us catalogues of excuses why they wouldn't meet us. Such was the extent of intimidation within the black community!

The **BPC** Head Office then dispersed five of its members, under the leadership of its Vice-President, the Rev. **Drake Tshenkeng**, to take the campaign to parts of what we now call the North West and Northern Cape.

The team faced general harassment from the system. There were road blocks everywhere, car searches that took a long time and general intimidation.

During this tour, in August 1977, the team met a very progressive chief, Chief Toto, in Kudumane. He confided in us that his cousin brother, who was with the Bureau of State Security (**BOSS**) had informed him that the boer regime was most unhappy with our campaign to thwart Bophuthatswana's "independence". They were particularly alarmed by the incorporation of traditional leaders into the campaign.

They had been tapping our telephones and had transcripts running over five meters of conversations of the Head Office with several of these leaders. The Prime Minister's Office was informed of these developments by BOSS and advised that the Security Police detain members of the Black Consciousness Movement. This was said to be the only way of frustrating an otherwise successful campaign and avoiding embarrassment to Mangope.

So, as early as August 1977 we knew that most of us would be detained some time that year. But, something else happened that made the boers' nightmare more frightening.

On the 12th September 1977, **Steve Bantu Biko** died in police detention. The handling of his death in detention by the government, particularly Jimmy Kruger, was callous in the extreme. This cold attitude boomeranged in the face of international reaction to **Steve's** death.

Biko's funeral was perhaps the biggest thing they had witnessed demonstrating black anger - all 20 000 of us, despite the more than twenty buses and scores of motor cars that they had turned back on their way to the funeral at several road blocks set up in the country.

Almost all whites in **Biko's** hometown, Kingwilliamstown, cleared out that weekend, fearing a backlash. Then, obviously decided on doing something more drastic: banning all **black consciousness** organisations. Perhaps in their view, this was the logical thing to do to save face, to stop the spread and influence of black consciousness.

On the morning of the **19th October 1977**, scores of Black Consciousness activists had their sleep rudely interrupted by the security police in the wee hours of the morning; they were detained under section 10 of the Internal Security Act. Among these, were the President of the **BPC**, Cde **Hlaku Rachidi**, Faith Matlaupane, **SASO** President and all their executive committee members at local, provincial and national level.

In addition to the scores of people detained, about eighteen organisations were banned, and three publications, viz., The World, Weekend World, and Pro Veritate suffered the same fate. Journalists were detained, including Mr Percy Qoboza - Editor of "The World" and the present Editor of the "Sowetan", Mr Aggrey Klaaste. The Chairman of the Committee of Ten, Dr Nthato Motlana, some executive committee members of the Teachers' Action Committee were also detained.

Among the organisations banned were, the Black People's Convention (**BPC**); South African Students' Organisation (**SASO**); Black Community Programmes (**BCP**); Black Parents' Association (**BPA**); Black Women's Federation (**BWF**); National Association of Youth Organisations (**NAYO**) and all its provincial structures; **Medupe Writers' Association**; South African Students Movement (**SASM**); Union of Black Journalists (**UBJ**); Soweto Teachers' Action Committee (**TAC**); **Zimele Trust Fund**; Christian Institute (**CI**); the Association for the Educational and Cultural Advancement of African People (**ASSECA**); Soweto Students' Representative Council (**SSRC**).

For the record, the detention warrants were signed on the 12/10/77, a week before the nationwide swoop. Activists were detained for periods ranging from five (5) to fifteen (15) months and most were banned on their release. An interesting thing about the banning of the people's organisations in 1977 is that the oppressed did not wait too long to resurface, as was the case in the 60's. The ink on the detention warrants had not dried when the **BC** members who had escaped the net went about reorganising and mobilising.

In April 1978, these efforts, spearheaded by the Soweto Action Committee, ably assisted by, among others, Cdes **Letsatsi Mosala, Ishmael Mkhabela, Magauta Molefe, the Rev. Mashea Tema, Mlungisi Mavana** and **Nthibedi Tloubatla**, led to the formation of the Azanian People's Organisation (**AZAPO**), some six (6) months after the boers had told themselves that the **BCM** had been dealt a final and telling blow.

They couldn't possibly achieve that, pitted against a tested and resilient philosophy that had permeated the minds of the people, young and old.

Compiled by Mpotseng Jairus Kgokong

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P.O. Box 4230, Johannesburg 2000