



BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS: OUR ONLY HOPE FOR TRUE EMANCIPATION

This week the Movement of Black people, the Azanian People's Organisation (AZAPO), remembers the crackdown on Black Consciousness aligned organisations by the settler-colonial regime when the junta attempted to stop the people's march to liberation and freedom by banning their organisations on October 19, 1977.



The apartheid regime had sought to restore "law and order" by suppressing popular revolt following the uprising spurred by the murder of Black Consciousness (BC) founding father, Bantu Biko in police custody on September 12, 1977.

The country had not known peace since the BC inspired Soweto student Uprisings that started on June 16, 1976. The Soweto Uprisings smashed the political lull brought about by the banning of the Pan Africanist Congress of Azania and the African National Congress following the Sharpeville Massa-

cre on March 21, 1960. In the aftermath of Sharpeville, many political leaders were sent to prison while others fled into exile. The regime had successfully put a heavy lid on the people's aspiration for freedom and liberation. This heavy lid was partially lifted by the emergence of the Black Consciousness Movement and the formation of the South African Students' Organisation (SASO) in 1968. The political mobilisation and conscientising of the people, especially young people in schools and universities increased under the guidance of the BC organisations. This was a trigger of June 16 in Soweto. The Soweto event completely removed the lid placed by the settler-colonial regime to suppress the people's aspiration for freedom and liberation.

The 1976 generation reignited the flame of liberation. Thousands of young people, inspired by Black Consciousness, left the country to pursue liberation. They had realised that the brutality of the regime could only be matched by freedom fighters who had received military training. The thousands of young BC orientated people who left the country had to join either the PAC military wing, the Azanian People's Liberation Army (APLA) or the ANC's Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK). This was because the BCM had not been established externally. However, some diehard BC exponents such as Strike Thokoane, Ranwedzi Nengwekhulu, Jairus Kgokong, Vuyisa Qunta and many others resisted the temptation of joining the older liberation movements.

They remained true to BC until the formation of the Black Consciousness Movement of Azania (BCMA) in 1980.



A short while after serving his five year jail term on Robben Island, Mosibudi Mangena, who was the first BC political prisoner on the island, heeded the instruction by the organisation to leave the country to head the BCMA. Later the BCMA, under Mangena, formed the Azanian National Liberation Army (AZANLA). The first AZANLA cadres to receive military training were BCMA Secretary for Defence Skaap Motsau and Hlomani Mabasa. They were trained in the battlefield in the war of Eritrea, where the country was in war for independence against occupation by Ethiopia.

October 19 remains an important day in the history of our struggle. Among the organisations banned on 19 October 1977 were:

- ◆ Black People's Convention (BPC)
- ◆ South African Students' Organisation (SASO)
- ◆ South African Students' Movement (SASM)
- ◆ Union of Black Journalists (UBJ)
- ◆ Black Community Programmes (BCP)
- ◆ Black Parents' Association (BPA)
- ◆ Soweto Teachers' Action Committee (TAC)
- ◆ Soweto Students' Representative Council (SSRC)
- ◆ Association for the Educational and Cultural Advancement of African People (ASSECA)
- ◆ Black Women's Federation (BWF)

- ◆ National Association of Youth Organisations (NAYO) and all its provincial structures
- ◆ Christian Institute (CI)
- ◆ Medupe Writers' Association
- ◆ Zimele Trust Fund

But despite the banning, our people refused to give up. A few months later, the Azanian People's Organisation (AZAPO) was formed as a vehicle to advance the struggle for liberation.

Today when people talk about October 19, 1977, they focus on the banning of newspapers and the day is used to promote media freedom. Yes, newspapers were banned including The World, Weekend World, and Pro Veritate publication. But they were banned because they were propagating activities of the BC organisations that were leading the popular struggle for liberation.

According to history archives, Biko's death in police custody threatened to unleash a new wave of protests, and drew the attention of the world to the situation in South Africa. Biko's funeral on 25 September was attended by some 20 000 people, including the American ambassador and 11 other diplomats. A ban on open-air gatherings was extended to March 1978.

The outrage of the US Congress at Biko's death became evident when 128 of its members from both the Republican and Democratic parties sent a letter to the government urging that it allow an international team to go to South Africa to examine laws relating to political prisoners and detention.

According to the archives, by 18 October, the South African Cabinet had decided to crack down on the most prominent Black Consciousness aligned organisations, and the next day, on 19 October, the government went ahead and banned 18 organisations. About 70 activists were arrested, including several members of the Soweto Committee of Ten, and many were banned, including Biko's friend and supporter, editor of the Daily Dispatch, Donald Woods. Two newspapers, The World and The Weekend World, were also

closed down.

International outrage now took a more serious turn. The US, the Netherlands, Great Britain, West Germany and Belgium all recalled their ambassadors for consultations.



Instead of embarking on a process of reform, the apartheid government took steps to clamp down on resistance, and bolstered its means of keeping the Black population in check. One of the most significant of these was the power to curtail freedom of speech and the publication of material it deemed subversive.

By 28 October, the government enforced the Newspaper and Imprint Registration Act no 19, a version of an earlier Act that required that all newspapers be registered and conform to a strict code of conduct. Newspapers were also required to lodge a large amount of money (in the region of R40 000) as a deposit before they could publish. The move was essentially a means to ensure that newspapers toed the line and regulated themselves, lest they be banned, according to South African History Online.

That is history. One can ask. So what? How is that history relevant today?

Yes, it is relevant. This is part of our struggle against forgetting. There is a dominant narrative that seeks to erase the contribution of our movement in the anti-colonial struggle. Some charlatans have almost succeeded in projecting only one liberation movement as the only one that fought for freedom.

This lie of projecting only one organisation as the liberator partially explains the arrogance of some of the leaders when dealing with the people. They create and sustain a view that because they are the ones who liberated South Africa from the shackles of apartheid, they are entitled to rule despite their performance. That is why some of their leaders publicly declare that their party shall rule South Africa until the second coming of Jesus Christ.

And because some of our people do not have access to the history of our struggle, they fall into the trap that South Africa's struggle for liberation was only waged by one organisation, they pose silly questions: "If we do not vote for this party that brought freedom, who shall we vote for?" Some decide to stay away from the elections because in their vocabulary, there is only one liberation movement.

It is important to explode this myth that only one party fought for freedom. It is important to share with the people that the longest serving political prisoner was Japhta Masemola, a leader of the PAC. It is important to share with the public that had it not been for June 16, 1976, there is no telling how long it would have taken the older liberation movements to be revived.

But more than just correcting historical facts, South Africans should be made to realise the fact that BC philosophy has stood the test of time and continues to be relevant, especially in the neo-colonial setup of today.

Black people are in office and in positions of authority in the State but they continue to display deep levels of inferiority and self-hate. After almost 30 years of a non-white government, Black people continue to smuggle their children into white schools for education. For some reason, Black people have accepted that they cannot teach their own children. Children as young as six years have to wake up at 4am to be transported to schools in the white communities because education in the Black townships and villages has all but collapsed. Despite the open racism of white educators who insult Black children and order them to cut their Afro-hair, Black parents have

resorted to extending their levels of tolerance because they have accepted that quality education can only be offered by white people. This is a myth that BC should explode.



Black politicians in office are full of hate for people who look like them so much that when they allocate sites in areas where Black people live, they give them sites that are less than the ones that the apartheid regime allocated to the people of Orlando East.

The Black people in government have accepted that the economy will remain in white hands and they do nothing to change this. Instead of supporting Black businesses, they pass laws that force white businesses to give a minority stake to accommodate Black people. Even these laws do not get implemented and there are no consequences for those white businesses ignoring Black Economic Empowerment.

The Black government has weakened State Institutions and Parastatals, leading to the conclusion that Black people are incapable of running anything. Eskom is on its knees and it is failing to supply uninterrupted electricity. Residents in urban areas are beginning to experience what residents living in rural areas have been experiencing for decades – shortage of water.

There is acceptance that the non-white dominated government is failing to deliver quality service to the people. Public healthcare is in a mess.

Crime is out of control. The roads are in a state of decay. The cities and towns are in ruins. If politicians were baptized in BC, they would know that they should offer quality service. BC will guide them that they should offer superior service to explode the myth that Black equals poor service.

Equally, a population of BC conscious people will refuse to be abused by the government. They will demand better. They will know that their future is in their hands. They will use the power of the vote to change their lives.

But many of our people have been reduced into a shell, to paraphrase Biko. The simple truth is that we can only be oppressed and abused to the extent that we allow. The remedy for this malady is BC. BC is not history. It is the present and the future!