



## IS AZAPO A LIBERATION MOVEMENT OR A POLITICAL PARTY?

The senior leadership of the movement of Black people, the Azanian People's Organisation (AZAPO), held a two-day Retreat in Diepkloof, Soweto, to plan the National and Provincial Elections scheduled for next year.



One of the issues that occupied the minds of the delegates at the meeting was the question: Is AZAPO still a liberation movement or a political party? Some delegates argued that the answer to that question will guide AZAPO to successfully contest the elections. Others were of the view that AZAPO appeared to be too focused on liberation politics and was not well positioned to respond to the current issues faced by the voters.

In order to adequately deal with the question, we

should start from the beginning. Why was AZAPO formed? It should not escape us that ours is primarily and fundamentally a struggle against colonialism. AZAPO is therefore first and foremost a movement to fight against colonialism. This is important clarification because we may confuse AZAPO with the other strand in the liberation movement, whose primary focus was a struggle for civil liberties. Having accepted that South Africa belongs to all those who live in it, this section of the liberation movement wanted to create a society where there were equal rights. All shall be equal before the law. There was to be housing and security. The doors of learning shall be open to all. The focus was on civil liberties.

This is not AZAPO. AZAPO is a champion of anti-colonialism. Our struggle began with the arrival of three ships – Dromedaris, Reijer and Goede Hoop. The team leader of the Dutch settlers was Jan van Riebeeck. He was accompanied by 82 men and eight women, including his wife, Maria.

The original mission of the Dutch settlers was to establish a station in Cape Town that will offer fresh vegetables and meat to the sailors travelling to the Eastern countries such as India where they wanted to acquire spices. The first settlers had been working for the Dutch-East India Company, which was commonly known as the VOC.

The original plan of a mini-station in the Cape was changed when the settlers realised that they could conquer the land and its people. The settlers decided to establish a colony in the Cape. It is the formation of that colony, or colonisation which is the primary cause of the conflict between the settlers and the Indigenous people. The conflict was between the land invaders from Europe and the local land owners. That conflict gave rise to many frontier wars in the Cape. Different battles were led by traditional leaders and warriors such as Hintsa, Dingane, Cetshwayo, Sekhukhune, Moshoeshoe, Makhado and many other traditional leaders. In some battles, such as the battle of Isandlwana and in Schoemansdal outside Louis Trichardt, our forefathers defeated the settlers. But in the broader scheme of things, they lost the war. Their defeat meant the rise of the colonial government in South Africa. Our people never accepted colonial rule and continued to resist the occupation of the settlers.

The Dutch settlers were joined by British settlers in the colonisation project. As British colonisation expanded in the country, it gave rise to the Anglo-Boer war. As one historian puts it, the Anglo-Boer war was like two dogs fighting over a stolen piece of bone. None of the warring factions had a legitimate right to ownership of the land, but each of them wanted total control of the land.

The warring factions of settlers – the Dutch and the British – agreed to end their war in 1902. They would later build the Union Buildings to cement that union whose foundation was to keep Afrikans politically oppressed, economically exploited and without land.

Some educated Afrikans such as John Langalibalele Dube, Pixley ka Isaka Seme, Sol Plaatjie, Walter Rubusana and Josiah Tshangana Gumedede founded the South African Native National Congress in Bloemfontein on January 8, 1912. The organisation later changed its name to become the African National Congress (ANC).

The ANC continued the struggle against the colonialists but employed peaceful means. Although peaceful, the demands were radical in that they demanded the return of the land to Afrikans

through their chant: Mayibuye iAfrika! The non-violent approach of the ANC continued and the party also attracted white liberals and communists, leading to the adoption of the Freedom Charter in June 1955. Africanists in the ANC led by Mangaliso Sobukwe saw the adoption of the Freedom Charter, which in part declared that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, as a betrayal of the anti-colonial struggle which had as its objective the return of the land to Afrikans and to end European domination and colonialism.



Sobukwe and other Africanists in the ANC such as Zephania Mothopeng and Muneri Josiah Madzunya left the ANC to found the Pan Africanist Congress of Azania (PAC) in April 1959. A few months later, the PAC organised an anti-pass protest, a massive campaign which saw thousands of men surrendering themselves to the police stations to demand to be arrested for refusing to carry passes. The PAC called for a peaceful protest on March 21, 1960 as part of the anti-pass campaign. It was during that march that the apartheid police opened live ammunition onto an unarmed crowd, killing 69 people and wounding hundreds of others. That act of unmitigated savagery put paid to all aspirations that the political conflict in South Africa can be resolved through peaceful means. To add salt to the injury, the apartheid regime banned the PAC and the ANC in the aftermath of the March 21 massacre that occurred in Sharpeville.

Hundreds of leaders and activists were arrested and others fled into exile. The settler colonial regime had managed to silence those agitating for liberation. The political lull, created by the sending of struggle leaders to Robben Island and exile, came to an end with the rise of the South African Students Organisation (SASO) in 1968. Led by the charismatic, visionary and dynamic Bantu Biko, SASO breathed a fresh breeze into the politics of the country and reignited the fire for liberation.



The creation of SASO later led to the formation of many other organisations, including the Black People's Convention (BPC), which advanced the struggle for liberation. As mass mobilisation intensified under the influence of Biko's Black Consciousness, the youths of Soweto revolted in June 1976. This revived the struggle for liberation as thousands of young people were forced into exile following the massacre of more than 700 students in the country by the apartheid security forces.

The moribund liberation movement in exile benefited greatly from the influx of the thousands of the young people of the 1976 generation. The following year, in 1977, Biko was murdered in police custody. After murdering him, the regime realised that it was also crucial to silence his organisations. The apartheid junta then banned 17 BC aligned organisations, including the BPC. AZAPO was formed in 1978 as a continuance of the BPC.

The actors may have changed. But the script is the same. Since the arrival of Jan van Riebeeck on

April 6, 1652, Black people have been fighting for their land and to end European colonial rule.

This is the mission of AZAPO. The reason for the existence of AZAPO is to end colonial rule. This is why AZAPO was formed as a liberation movement. It was formed to liberate Black people from the yoke of colonial oppression.

But there were elections in 1994 that resulted in the dawn of democracy. A section of the liberation movement, the ANC, became the government. The question is: in a democratic system, can AZAPO continue to call itself a liberation movement? If the majority of people voted for the ANC in a free, but unfair election because of unequal distribution of resources, is there still room for liberation politics? If AZAPO continues to call itself a liberation movement, it wants to liberate Black people from who?

Again, a bit of background is necessary. AZAPO refused to participate in the first all-race elections in 1994 and urged Black people to boycott them. The argument by AZAPO was that the election will bring democracy but not liberation.

AZAPO's argument was that the so-called negotiations for political transition to democracy was a done deal concluded behind prison walls between ANC leader Nelson Mandela and the apartheid regime. AZAPO argued that negotiations between a prisoner and his jailers would produce an outcome that would favour the jailers. It warned that should people participate in the 1994 elections, they would be legitimising their position of landlessness and economic subjugation.

AZAPO was swimming against a strong tide and it lost the argument. The elections continued and the call to boycott elections was largely ignored. AZAPO had to accept that reality and felt that waging a war against a democratically elected government would reduce AZAPO to a rebel movement in the mould of RENAMO in Mozambique or UNITA in Angola.

AZAPO then decided to participate in the subsequent elections.

Almost thirty years after the elections that AZAPO pleaded with the people to boycott, the majority of people can now see that democracy is not the same thing as liberation. People can now realise that they vote every five years but they still do not have land. They vote but they do not control the productive assets that drive the economy. They can see that they have been short-changed. Those who had the land under apartheid, continue to be the owners of the land. Those who controlled the economy under apartheid still control it under democracy. It is clear that the propertied class duped the leaders of the struggle into accepting a Constitution that will ensure that power resides with the Courts and not with Parliament, where publicly elected representatives are housed.



Through the Constitution that is universally admired as the best in the world, the propertied class still rule the country. The elected government has been reduced to a Matshingilane that protects white wealth. That is why it was possible for the Marikana massacre to happen. Had the striking mine workers in Marikana been white and the company owned by Blacks, the police would not have shot the strikers. But because the current government has a responsibility to guard white wealth, it had to act the way it did.

In all this, what is the role of AZAPO today? Should AZAPO call itself a liberation movement or a political party? Perhaps it should not matter what AZAPO calls itself. As Deng Xiaopeng of the Communist Party of China once observed, it should not matter whether the cat is white or black as long as it catches mice.

As Samora Machel of Frelimo in Mozambique once said: "The struggle continues ... but against what?" He then answered himself by saying that the new struggle was not about Portuguese colonial rule but against the ills that confronted the Mozambican people such as tribalism, poverty and hunger.

This should be the pre-occupation of AZAPO. The majority of Black people remain in poverty because they have no land. Many of them remain unemployed. Many of them live in mikhukhu without water, without electricity and still use the dehumanizing bucket system. The state of Black people is the legacy of colonialism. Colonialism has assumed a new form and has taken the posture of neo-colonialism. But it remains. A section of the liberation movement has been sucked into the system to domesticate colonialism but the structure of keeping Black people poor remains as their natural wealth is shipped to former colonial powers in the West.

AZAPO's mission remains to end colonialism and its legacy. In modern day, the struggle has shifted to parliament. But the primary objective remains: Get back the land from the settlers and their descendants and use it and its wealth to restore the dignity of Black people. Remind Black people that they alone can finally liberate themselves. A vote is thus the most effective weapon at their disposal at the moment.

The title of the liberation movement matters little. What is more important is to change the material conditions of the Black people and finally end colonialism and its ugly legacy.