

# Chapter Ten

## BLACK POLITICAL ORGANISATIONS

### **The Natal Indian Congress**

#### INTRODUCTION

LAST YEAR'S review of the Natal Indian Congress indicated that this organisation, after being defunct for almost a decade, due to stringent governmental and police action against its leaders, was revived in 1971 by the now banned Mr Mewa Ramgobin. Especially emphasised were the activities of the Congress during the year 1972.

We can now examine the subsequent activities of the NIC in an effort to measure and evaluate its 'progress' in terms of its stated aims and objectives.

#### ACTIVITIES

(a) *Workers:* In his report submitted at the Annual Conference (1973) of the NIC, the secretary, Mr Ramesar, stated that 'the deplorably low wages earned by the mass of South African workers is of major concern to the NIC'.

Early in 1973, it had, in conjunction with the Coloured Labour Party and Natal University Wages Commission, created a 'united wages action' to serve as a vigilante group in protecting workers' rights. Recommendations were made to the statutory Wage Board to determine minimum wages for dock, cement and unskilled workers.

In May, the Congress, in a memorandum submitted to the Secretary for Labour, in reply to a Government Gazette call for comment on the pro-

posed Bantu (Settlement of Disputes) Bill, rejected the institution of works committees in industry, asserting that 'open and free trade unionism' was the only acceptable method of workers' representation.

The Congress's foremost grievance against works committees was that these provide for differential and prejudicial treatment to Africans, alienating them from Indian, Coloured and white workers belonging to similar industries, thus fragmenting workers into ineffectual little groups. These committees were regarded as a 'ruse to allay the aspirations of the African workers'.

During the 1973 strikes, the NIC distributed pamphlets expressing solidarity with the workers quite widely in the Durban-Pinetown area. It was also instrumental in setting up a Relief Committee for victimised strikers. The Committee provided legal aid, assistance in finding new jobs, food and so on.

(b) *Chatsworth Bus Action Committee*: Last year, the role of the NIC in mobilising mass action against the decision of the Road Transport Board to refuse renewal of the certificates of Indian bus operators in Chatsworth, was clearly outlined. Subsequent action was the distribution by NIC officials of 20 000 pamphlets, urging commuters to protest against the stoppage of buses. As regards this issue we are happy to record that the Chatsworth Indian bus owners were successful in their appeal in court against the objection of the Railways to have a bus service operating in Chatsworth.

(c) *University of Durban-Westville*: In May, a mass meeting was held to coincide with the official opening of the University of Durban-Westville, in an effort to voice opposition against the institution of separate 'tribal' universities.

A spokesman for the NIC stated that the Indian community was generally dissatisfied with the administration of the university, the support, by this community, for the massive Black student boycotts in 1972, being symptomatic of this dissatisfaction. Indians, it was said, would prefer the staff of the university, especially the teaching staff, to come from all races, chosen on merit, and not limited to whites and Indians.

(d) *Victoria Street Market*: The NIC, early in 1973, was prominent in its protest against the discontinuation of the Victoria Street Market in Durban, following its destruction by fire. Officials reiterated many times that discontinuation would mean the end of a livelihood for many Indian families whose only source of income was staked in running stalls in this market. A public meeting was arranged with the co-operation of the Durban Women's Cultural Group, where signatures for a petition against the decision to discontinue the market were collected.

(e) *Housing*: At a conference on housing, arranged by the Durban

Child Welfare Society, NIC officials were elected to serve on a permanent Housing Committee then formed.

## RELATIONSHIPS WITH BPC and SASO

Last year, it was pointed out that due, basically, to differences in approach, relationships between the NIC and both these Black organisations had become strained. However, the Secretarial report (1973) of the NIC states: "In pursuit of its stated policy of working with organisations sharing its goals, the NIC has attempted to work in harmony with both BPC and SASO".

Mr. G. Sewspersadh, the lately banned chairman of the NIC, was one of the panel of speakers at the Sharpeville Commemoration Meeting (March 15th, 1973), organised by the BPC. His participation resulted in his being prosecuted on a charge of promoting racial hostility *which failed*. The charge was later withdrawn. (*See section on political trials*).

## CHANGES IN POLICY

Radical changes in attitude over traditional policies of the NIC were clearly manifested at the Annual Conference in June this year.

One of these controversial issues was a statement<sup>2</sup> to the effect that the Congress constitution did not prevent members from seeking positions on local affairs committees and the South African Indian Council (SAIC), traditionally regarded by NIC supporters as 'apartheid' bodies. At the same time LAC and SAIC members were equally welcome to join the NIC.

This statement, as one Indian columnist caustically observed, was a radical deviation from the old principles of Congress. As recently as last year (1972), the SAIC was rejected, and a decision was taken at the Annual Conference to work completely outside this body.

Protoganists of the new 'open' move, felt that it would be more 'prudent'<sup>3</sup> to 'make use' of the SAIC and LAC's, citing the 'prudence' of Chief Gatsha Buthelezi in accepting the 'KwaZulu' idea as a good example. Moreover the 'fact' that more than 50 000 adult Indians in Durban and other parts of Natal 'accepted' the LAC's by registering as voters, was viewed as being a 'certain pointer' to the NIC.

This move has once again opened speculation that the NIC will be able and hopes to participate in an eventual election of the SAIC. If this is a move to 'fight apartheid' from within, that same columnist remarks rather bitinglly, then it is a 'false hope, because according to the rules laid down by Mr Vorster, he can never lose'<sup>4</sup>.

Another issue, seemingly a traditional one, since it was brought up last year, was introduced by the Pietermaritzburg Branch in its call for the NIC to become non-racial, i.e. to drop its 'Indian' label in favour of a 'Peoples'

Congress'. Campaigners for the non-racial stand stated that it was time Indians stopped being exclusivistic, and should regard themselves as part of a broad South African nation.

Arguments against this motion were stereotyped, and were apparently based on the fear of loss of 'Indian' support.

Mr Ramesar, the Secretary, stated that the non-racial stand would 'kill Congress',<sup>5</sup> and bluntly asked delegates to 'get out' of NIC to join BPC. Mr Coovadia, another delegate, while acclaiming 'non-racialism' as a 'brilliant' idea, could not deem its worth if it lost its 'Indian' support.

The outcome of this motion was the appointment of a ten-member committee to examine the call for non-racialism and to report to the NIC in about six months. At this juncture we might add that little is known about the outcome of the investigations of the Executive mandated last year by conference, to look into this same 'possibility' of NIC's becoming non-racial.

## STATEMENTS ISSUED

(a) A claim in Parliament, by the Minister of Indian Affairs and Tourism, Senator Horwood, that the Government was doing everything it could for the betterment of the Indian people in addition to having a 'list of impressive achievements' in regard to them, was refuted by the NIC<sup>6</sup>.

An example of the deliberate attempt by the Government over the past 25 years to hinder the development of the Indian community, was its use of the Group Areas Act to deprive Indians of large portions of valuable land in order to hinder expansion both in the industrial and economic spheres.

(b) *The Dennis Brutus—Buthelezi Issue*: The NIC was accused of creating an 'explosive situation' between Africans and Indians by Chief Gatsha Buthelezi. This was after the NIC had issued a statement expressing its support and admiration for the exiled Coloured academic, Dr. D. Brutus, who accused the Chief of being a 'stooge' of the Vorster Government, during the Chief's visit in America. The statement was apparently regarded by the Chief as implied criticism of his role as the 'true voice of African opinion'. In defence, the Congress stated that it was simply expressing admiration for a man who had worked hard against racial discrimination.

On a further point that the NIC had never supported withdrawal of foreign capital from S.A., the Chief said that an NIC leader had, at a public meeting, claimed that the NIC had called for a withdrawal of foreign investments from South Africa in the name of 10 000 supporters.

A further ramification of this confusion was the statement of the late executive Chairman of the SAIC, Mr Rajab, who said that the NIC had 'little or no support' from Indians, because of its 'consistent failure to

achieve anything constructive for the Indian people”<sup>8</sup>.

He claimed that the NIC represented a small but vocal minority who would soon disappear from the political scene altogether.

### POLICE INTIMIDATION

Two prominent members of the NIC were banned this year. One was Mrs Ela Ramgobin, wife of the former president of the NIC, Mr Mewa Ramgobin, who is also banned. The other was Mr C. Sewpersadh, chairman and president of the NIC. Mr M.J. Naidoo, a Durban attorney, was elected as Acting Chairman.

### CONCLUSION

Opinion on the popularity and support for the NIC varies.

Prior to the opening of the Annual Conference in June, the secretary, Mr R. Ramesar, claimed that the Congress was ‘gaining momentum’, quoting the establishment of 6 new branches from Chatsworth as a sign of its growth.

On the other hand, a leading commentator on the local political front, ‘Politicus’ of the *Leader*, had this to say of the actual conference and NIC:<sup>9</sup>

‘This year’s conference ... appears to have been the non-event of the year. ... During the past year, Congress had failed to carry out its community projects and had failed to identify itself with the aspirations of the people. The leaders were unprepared, not prepared or unable to lead, but were led into almost complete oblivion by a handful of unthinking professional politicians who enjoyed the occasional calamity which gave them the opportunity of making their presence felt’.

References:	1. <i>Daily News</i>	31/5/73
	2. <i>Natal Mercury</i>	23/7/73
	3. <i>Natal Mercury</i>	21/7/73
	4. <i>Leader</i>	27/7/73
	5. <i>Natal Mercury</i>	23/7/73
	6. <i>Daily News</i>	31/5/73
	7. <i>Sunday Tribune</i>	8/7/73
	8. <i>Natal Mercury</i>	7/7/73
	9. <i>Leader</i>	27/7/73

### Black Peoples’ Convention

#### INTRODUCTION

It is obvious that the Black People’s Convention, though a very young and

new Black political movement, has been fast capturing the imagination, interest and support of South African Blacks since its inception in 1971. Working under the banner of Black Consciousness, its potential as a powerful force welding Africans, Coloureds and Indians into a single cohesive Black political front, was steadily being realised. It comes as no surprise then, in a country where a minority group retains power mainly through the devious means of alienating the majority of Black groups from each other, that the Convention has been the victim of singularly harsh governmental legislation, to all intents designed to cripple the organisation.

## ACTIVITIES

(a) *Promotion of BPC*: In accordance with its proposed programme to devote the first half of 1973 to promoting Black interest in and membership of BPC, the organisers of this Black political organisation increased its membership considerably. To-date there exist about forty-one established branches, all evenly spread throughout South Africa. Noteworthy about these efforts is that, unlike the practice of other Black political bodies, smaller towns and suburban areas where Black people live in profusion, have not been sacrificed for a few central urban zones whose names, while affording a superficial glamour to organisations, offer very little evidence of actual contact and work such organisations have made and done with the people they claim to represent.

Another example indicative of the BPC's fairly successful efforts in spreading the philosophy of Black consciousness was, as it claims, 'the successful switchover of some prominent Coloured politicians from the Coloured Labour Party to BPC'<sup>1</sup>. Mr Don Mattera (now banned), former public relations officer for the Labour Party, resigned from this body to join BPC. Such 'switchovers' are regarded by the Convention as ample proof that, as a Black political movement, BPC does offer an alternative to Black South Africans frustrated with working within the system, i.e. arbitrary sectional 'politics' for Blacks.

The opening of its ranks to all by the Labour Youth wing this year, a move precipitated to a certain extent by BPC, is noted by this organisation, as a manoeuvre to bring all Black people together and 'another victory for Black consciousness'<sup>2</sup>.

In March, the Convention called for the setting aside of March 21 as a day of commemoration by Blacks of the 1960 Sharpeville massacre. All BPC branches, Black organisations and campuses were asked to observe this day by wearing black attire or black arm-bands. The intention though, was for Blacks to re-dedicate themselves to the struggle for justice rather than to mourn<sup>3</sup>. A very successful commemoration service, organised by the Durban Central branch of BPC, was held in the Kajee Hall, Durban.

Representatives from various Black organisations addressed a large Black audience.

(b) *Community Projects*: It was intended that community programmes aimed at creating self-awareness and an eventual self-reliance amongst Blacks, would be launched during the latter half of 1973. Scheduled projects were:

- Leadership training
- Literacy training
- Home education service project (Hespro)
- Workshops
- Seminars.

Initial work on some of these projects was carried out on a small scale at branch level (literacy and hespro), but any progress that could have been reported has been seriously hampered by the arbitrary and consistent bannings of BPC personnel. The malicious effects of these bannings are especially notable in the case of projected BPC publications.

(c) *Publications*: Early in the year, work was begun on the BPC newsletter 'Inkululeko' with Saths Cooper as editor. Work on this publication was hampered firstly, by the banning of Saths Cooper in March, and had to be postponed secondly after the banning of the Secretary General, Siphso Buthelezi, who had been elected as editor to replace Saths. Subsequently, the onus of getting the newsletter into print fell upon the shoulders of the new public relations officer, Roy Chetty. During October, copies of articles intended for the newsletter were confiscated from Mr Chetty and to date have not been returned. Apparently, they are still 'under investigation'.

Such incidents, coupled with the reluctance of printers to help BPC after police intimidation, as well as the lack of finances, have prevented the publications programme of BPC from becoming a truly viable one.

(d) *Press Statements*: Early in the year it was disclosed that BPC, acting on a resolution passed on foreign investments in South Africa, at its National Congress in December, 1972, wrote to over thirty overseas companies with interests in South Africa, to withdraw their business, thereby disengaging themselves from the 'white-controlled exploitative system of South Africa'.

Far from contributing to the development of the Black community, foreign investors, claimed BPC, helped in 'maintaining and supporting the economic system of white South Africa a system designed for the maximum exploitation of Black people'.

Also emphasised was the Convention's attitude towards the isolation of

South Africa by overseas countries, from participation in international sporting activities. This isolation was seen, by BPC, as stemming mainly from the fact that South Africa was being 'represented by a minority white population'. Blacks had a 'birthright' to represent this country on international sporting fields.

At the same time the Convention applauded the existence of 'non-racial' sporting bodies which, being normally shunned by whites, either through 'legal' restrictions or as is generally the case, through sheer 'custom', are in practice, Black. In the light of this, claimed BPC, its National Executive had been mandated to make it clear to all international sporting bodies, that Black sportsmen and women should not be penalised for 'crimes being perpetrated by the monolithic white racist regime'. Also rejected was the concept of 'multi-national sports' designed by white sporting bodies to 're-enter and retain their position in the international sporting forum'.

In regard to foreign relations the Convention made the following decision:

to have contact only with states and international organisations that are in sympathy with and support the cause of the Black people. The importance of healthy international relationships was recognised with the realisation that 'some countries have the interests of Black people at heart, but through imperial domination are now forced to maintain trade links with South Africa'<sup>6</sup>

## POLICE INTIMIDATION

Together with the Black South African Students' Organisation and the Black Community Programmes, the Convention has been, as stated previously, the focus of harsh police and state action which has seriously impeded the rate of progress which this organisation might have made in terms of its projects. Four of the five-member executive of BPC have been arbitrarily restricted from any political activity.

These are:

Vice President— Mr C. Mokoditso

Secretary General—Mr S. Buthelezi (see chapter on bannings)

Public Relations Officer—Mr Saths Cooper

National Organiser—Mr M. Mangena (see chapter on political trials).

Also banned was Drake Koka, Secretary-General of the Convention during 1972; Lindelwe Mabandla, chairman of the Lamontville Branch of BPC; and Aubrey Mokoape, a founder member of the Convention.

Five members of the Durban Central Branch of BPC including Saths

Cooper were arrested and charged in Durban early this year during the strikes crisis, for the distribution of leaflets 'with intent to promote feelings of racial hostility' (*See chapter on Political trials*).

Trailing of members of BPC by members of the Security Branch is rife. In the case of Saths Cooper, it has resulted in his prosecution on a charge of alleged assault and the use of obscene language against a security officer.

In October, two members of the Sharpeville Branch of BPC, Messrs. Matsau and Tshabalala, were detained and arrested under the Terrorism Act.

Also banned in October was the highly popular T-shirt worn by BPC members, easily recognisable by its symbolic clenched-fist motif.

For more detailed information on this section, reference should be made to the chapters on bannings and political trials and detentions.

Reference:	1. BPC Report	July, 1973
	2. BPC Report	July, 1973
	3. <i>Cape Times</i>	20/3/73
	4. <i>Graphic</i>	2/2/73
	5. <i>Graphic</i>	2/2/73
	6. <i>Graphic</i>	2/2/73