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GOVERNMENT CREATED POLITICAL BODIES

South African Indian Council

Elections

ON THE 6TH NOVEMBER 1974, for the first time since the South African Indian Council was established in 1968, elections were held to appoint 15 members of the Council according to a compromise plan worked out by the South African Government to have half the extended Council of 30 nominated by the Minister of Indian Affairs, and the other half voted for on a provincial basis through electoral colleges.

Objections arose in the Indian Community at the way the elections were to be conducted. As it is mentioned in *Black Review* 1973, (p.34) the Government had planned it such that only members of Indian Local Affairs Committees (L.A.C.) and Town Boards, in the case of places like Isipingo and Verulam, which are small towns under Indian control, could vote. This system would, out of the whole Indian population of more than 600 000, allow for only about 400 people to elect the 15 Council members.

In Natal, members of Local Affairs Committees called for postponement of elections until a voters' roll had been compiled. Supporting this call, Mr. A. Rajbansi, a member of the South Durban Indian Local Affairs Committee said that if held, the elections would be a farce.¹

Subsequent to the unsuccessful plea for a voters' roll, LAC members called for a boycott of the elections, on the grounds that they had no mandate to take part in the elections on behalf of the people. They

pointed out that they had been elected to look after the civic matters of the communities, and not politics. Supporting this call, Mr. Yunus Moola of the Stanger LAC warned that members should not be used as political pawns in the Government's Separate Development policy.²

The boycott call prevailed through 1974, sponsored by groups and influential individuals, among whom were the Natal University Sociologist, Mrs. Fatima Meer, Lenasia Indian Management Committee and the Isipingo Ratepayers Association, whose secretary, Mr. K. P. Seetaram, wrote to the Isipingo Town Council and said that the election was a blatant insult to the Indian people. His association believed that the support of such an election would betray the confidence of the people as the system ignored the masses. In its call the Lenasia Management Committee, in Johannesburg said, "As loyal citizens, we consider that only direct representation and meaningful participation is valid".³

Disregarding the expressed opinion of the people on this issue the Government went ahead and called for nominations of prospective candidates from all provinces to be received by September 25. Of the 15 elected members, Natal was to appoint 10, the Transvaal 4, and only one for the Cape.

In spite of the fact that there had been such calls for a boycott of the elections, there was a record of 45 nominations for the 15 elected seats.⁴ It is noted that most of the people who objected to the elections, especially members of Local Affairs Committees and Town Management Boards did not in principle object to participation in Government created political bodies, as evidenced by their involvement in such Government bodies as Local Affairs Committees. All they wanted was that every Indian should be able to vote in the election of Council members. Most of them felt that the Council could be used for the benefit of the people. It was in this light that even people who had been opposed to the election plan as it had been presented nevertheless allowed themselves to be appointed to the Council. Mr. A. Rajbansi, who later became a member of the Executive Committee of the Council, is a good example of this category.

Mr. J. N. Reddy, Managing Director of the Indian controlled New Republican Bank, was appointed as the Chairman of the Executive Committee of the South African Indian Council. Mr. Reddy had been acting as Chairman of the Executive since the death of the first Chairman, Mr. A. M. Rajab, in 1973. The composition of the new Executive Committee of the Council was as follows:

Mr. J. N. Reddy	(Durban, Chairman)
Mr. A. Rajbansi	(Chatsworth)
Mr. Ismael Kathrada	(Verulam)

Mr. I. F. H. Mayet (Johannesburg)

Mr. G. Munsook (Cape Town)

Mr. M. A. M. Moola was elected Chairman of the Council, to preside over all Council sessions. He succeeded Mr. Joosub, who declined to stand for re-election.

Some allegations of sectional and language divisions in the Council elections were made in a survey conducted by the Durban *Daily News* among Council members and other leading members of the community. The report claimed most Indians who participated in the elections no longer regarded themselves as members of a united Indian community but as Tamils, Hindus, Bhanians and Muslims. There was also a belief that the Minister of Indian Affairs, Mr. C. Heunis had been advised to appoint the 15 nominated members on a religious and linguistic basis.

During the elections, according to Indian Council sources, 11 ballot papers contained only Tamil names, 7 only Hindu and 3 only Muslim names. There was evidence that candidates had exploited language and religious differences in their campaigns.

Mr. A. Rajbansi, Council Executive Committee member, revealed that candidates had used all kinds of sectionalism to catch votes. Mr. J. N. Reddy, Chairman of the Executive Committee, expressed regret at this outbreak of division. He felt that this was disastrous for the Indian Community. Mr. Ismael Kathrada, also an executive member of the Council, felt that this was a direct result of the system used in the election. He suggested that the solution to this kind of conflict would be the compilation of a voters' roll and the creation of political parties which people would follow for their ideologies and policies rather than language affiliations. He further suggested that a movement like the Natal Indian Congress would perhaps be the solution if it could join the Council, and take part in the elections. In a special interview the President of the Natal Indian Congress, Mr. M. J. Naidoo, reacting to Mr. Kathrada's implied invitation to the Congress to join the Indian Council, reiterated the Congress' stand on Government created political bodies set up to promote racial segregation. Mr. Naidoo denounced the Indian Council as a racialistic body, which the Congress could never support. Referring to it as a dummy institution which would never have any political power, he said such a body had no place in a democratic society.

With regard to the reported polarisation on "tribal" lines the Natal Indian Congress President felt that the matter had been overplayed. He did not think that it could have been as pronounced as was suggested by the *Daily News*. "The people," he said, "even in a dummy institution, still see themselves as one community." He admitted that some

unscrupulous campaigners would try to play on religious and linguistic sentiments, which was something that happened everywhere, even where political parties were concerned, but he asserted that language groups in the Indian Community were dying as distinguishable units.

Issues taken up by SAIC

As has been mentioned above, most supporters of the Indian Council were people who felt that the Council could be used for the benefit of the Indian people. The outgoing Chairman of the Council, Mr. Joosub expressed a belief that it would be the duty of the new Council to ask the Government what the future of the Indian people would be in the political set up of the country.

The Prime Minister, Mr. Vorster addressed the South African Indian Council in November 1974. In his speech, which several Council men were reported to have referred to as "a reiteration of apartheid and discrimination", he had bluntly warned the Council that a policy of confrontation would lead nowhere.⁵ He believed that within the framework of 'multinationalism' there was a bright future for all people in South Africa.

Whilst assuring the Prime Minister of the Council's support in solving South Africa's problems, the new Council Chairman, Mr. M. A. M. Moola called to the Government to remove employment curbs and salary and wage gaps. The new Council made several calls to the South African Government on behalf of the Indian community. These included the question of citizenship rights for all Indians. They submitted that Indians were tired of being regarded as a subservient race without the right to vote in the full sense. They called for the abolition of the Group Areas Act.⁶ The Prime Minister was to be urged not to move any more Indian traders affected by this Act. They called for more agricultural land to be made available to Indian farmers because many of them had lost their land after being affected by the Group Areas Act and other circumstances.

The Council called for the scrapping of Local Affairs Committees for the reason that the Committees were unable to serve a very useful purpose because of their very advisory nature and limited powers. The Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Council, Mr. J. N. Reddy attacked the Durban City Council for the manner in which it treated Indian citizens in the city.

Concessions given to the Indian people of South Africa

The Minister of Indian Affairs, Mr. Marais Steyn, announced in the Assembly that as from the 12th of June restrictions on the movement of Indians between and settlement in all provinces except the Orange Free State and Northern Natal were lifted. South African Indians had

always been unable to settle anywhere in the country without prior approval. The Minister added that if these outstanding areas, viz. Orange Free State and Northern Natal were prepared to lift their restrictions on Indians they would have to indicate this. Indians had been restricted to their provinces of domiciles in terms of an order made in August 1913. Mr. Steyn confirmed that many of these concessions had been made as a response to representations by the Indian Council since its inception in 1968⁷. Despite the latest concessions, provisions of Chapter 33 of the Statute of Orange Free State and also the provisions of the Asiatics in the Northern Districts of Natal Act of 1927 still limited the movement of Indians in the aforementioned areas. Chapter 33 of the Statute of the Orange Free State provided that an Indian could not stay in the province for a period of more than two months without the approval of the State President. The Northern Districts of Natal Act of 1927 with more or less similar provisions was in force in the Northern Natal districts of Vryheid, Utrecht, Paulpietersburg, Babanango and Ngotshe. However Indians could travel freely through the Orange Free State and Northern Natal districts. Speaking on these exceptional areas, Mr. Weber, United Party member of Parliament for Pietermaritzburg appealed to the Minister of Indian Affairs to abolish all restrictions on Indians in the Orange Free State and Northern Natal districts. He said that while he welcomed the concessions in other parts of the country he was sorry that the Minister had not had the courage to "grasp the whole nettle".⁸ While welcoming the new move, Mr. Lorimer (Progressive Party, Orange Grove) said that he understood that there was a "peculiar" legislative background involved in the Orange Free State and Northern Natal areas but still hoped that "this would soon be cleared up"⁹ Mr. Steyn, nevertheless made the point clear that these concessions did not change the position in respect of the admission of Indians to South Africa. There was no question of immigration of Indians from abroad.¹⁰

In the context of the debate on this question, different members of Parliament asked for more facilities for Indians. Mr. Sutton (United Party, Mooi River) urged that the Minister should ensure that hotel accommodation was made available for Indians. Mr. R. Cadman, (United Party, Mhlatuzana) made an appeal to the Minister to improve Indian housing and also provide more land for Indian farmers whose land was being taken for housing and industrial development. Mr. Lorimer, (Prog. Party) also criticised the shortage of land in Indian areas which led to overcrowding in an area like Chatsworth. The Minister of Indian Affairs summarised that the Cabinet was still considering the position of Indian traders in White areas and Indian rural areas following the representation from the S.A.I.C.¹¹ Mr. H. E. Joosub, the only Indian member of the South African Foundation said

in Pretoria that the Indian community rejected the so-called concessions, regarding them as inadequate. He reiterated that to label as a concession the right of Indians to move between provinces except in the Orange Free State and parts of Northern Natal was an insult. Mr. Joosub said that by only partially removing restrictions the Government was doing serious harm to detente.¹²

The editor of the *Rand Daily Mail* said the announcement of the concessions was gravely diminished by two vital qualifications. He said the first was the exclusion of the Orange Free State and Northern Natal which he regarded as inexcusable. This he said perpetuated insulting discrimination. Second, he said, was the fact that the Group Areas policy in any event restricted Asians to specified areas. He further questioned the point of having more free movement if there was nowhere to go to, since Indians had a shortage of land anyway. He concluded that to overcome handicaps and other disabilities of Asians, Mr. Steyn should be devoting himself to having them treated as the citizens of South Africa which they were.¹³

REFERENCES

¹*Daily News* 1.10.73.

²*Daily News* 13.10.73.

³*Daily News* 20.8.74.

⁴*Natal Mercury* 26.9.74.

⁵*Daily News* 28.11.74.

⁶*Natal Mercury* 12.12.74.

⁷*Star* 13.6.75.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹*Rand Daily Mail* 13.6.75.

¹⁰*Star* 13.6.75.

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²*Rand Daily Mail* 16.6.75.

¹³*Ibid.*