

THE CONGRESS OF THE PEOPLE

DAWN Interview with Comrade Joe Modise



Dawn: The convening of the Congress of the People (COP) at which our people adopted their programme, the Freedom Charter on June 26, 1955 at Kliptown was the most representative congress ever held in our country. Would you give us an account of how preparations for this tremendously successful congress were made?

Cde Joe Modise: Naturally, the convening of the Congress of the People in South Africa was one of the most important events that has taken place during that period of our struggle in our country. It came shortly after the Defiance Campaign which was also another very important event in the history of our struggle. The African National Congress together with its allies decided that the people of South Africa should be consulted in the type of government they would like to have. This included all the people of South Africa. Even the ruling circles were invited. The invitation was not only confined to the oppressed groups in our country. It was extended to all our people. Guidance was given to the members of our organisation and members of the allied organisations. At the time the allies of the ANC were South African Indian Congress, Coloured People's Congress, Congress of Democrats, South African Congress of Trade Unions and the South African Communist Party.

All these bodies formed what was then and what is still regarded as the allied movement of the people of South Africa.

These Congresses were under the leadership of the ANC, and the ANC together with its allies decided that a Congress of the People should be convened where the demands of the people should be put forward and then once those demands have been put forward, the people led by the organisations must struggle to make these demands a reality. In other words to attain a situation where these demands could be implemented.

The directives that were given by the ANC and its allies to all its supporters were to the effect that people in all corners of South Africa must organise themselves into groups, collect the demands of the people throughout the country and explain to the people what the aims and objectives of the COP were.

AIMS

Firstly, these aims are, as I have already discussed to you: to collect the demands of the people, to find out from the people exactly how do they want to be governed in the land of their birth. The directives were that in the urban areas people should divide themselves into various groups, for instance, I will give you an example about the area where I was and where I participated. At the time of this campaign I was in a place called Sophiatown which has now been demolished having been declared a black spot and Africans having been removed and it was set aside for whites. But at the time we were still there and our directives were to the effect that we should divide the whole of Sophiatown into blocks. A number of streets comprised a block. In our area for instance, three streets comprised a block and the streets ran throughout the township. The number of families in that block was well over 600. We were to go from house to house meeting the people, explaining to the people what the campaign was all about and collecting the demands of the people, instructing the people, after we had collected the demands, that the same demands that they had given to us they will give to their delegates. We told the people the methods of electing a delegate that was going to represent them at the COP. So the procedure was as follows: that this block will then come together, convene a meeting and at that meeting they will elect their delegate and their delegate will be provided with their demands and these demands were to be forwarded to the Congress which was going to take place on June 26, at a place called Kliptown, in 1955.

This method of organising the people was employed in the whole of Sophiatown which was New Clare at the time and New Clare proper, a place beyond Western Native Township. Those were the western areas. We also know that the same methods were employed in all the other urban areas, places like Alexander township, Orlando East, Orlando West, Pheseni, Pimville and places like Kliptown itself. The same method was employed throughout the country, Cape, Natal, Orange Free State and the Transvaal. We were also told that in the rural areas people on the farms were brought together and there the ideas of the convenors of the COP were put forward to the people. People were told to organise themselves and that they had to put forward their demands and elect their own representatives who were going to be sent to the COP to present demands. In short, this process was carried out throughout the country.

Dawn: What was the response of the Pretoria racists and their coercive apparatus, the police for instance?

Cde Joe Modise: I must point out here that this process did not go unhampered. In various areas there was police harassment. In the rural areas, particularly, where our people are working under Afrikaner farmers, there was a certain amount of intimidation. But in spite of this people did organise themselves. They did put their demands on paper and presented them to their delegates whom they had elected and who in turn brought them to the COP which was convened in Kliptown. The number of delegates who managed to arrive at this Congress amounted to 3,000. It is evident that much more would have come to the COP.

DELEGATE

At the time of the Congress delegates coming from Natal, from the Eastern Cape, the Western Cape and some from the Orange Free State were stopped on the way by the police and prevented from coming to the COP. We received telegrams and some managed to send individual representatives who came to the COP. Some of them arrived late but they came to report that their delegations were stopped en route to the COP and they in turn were sent to forward these reports to the COP, and to report that people in their areas were prepared to come and forward their demands to the COP. Unfortunately this could not be achieved because of the activities of the police. But the COP which lasted 5 days where these demands were put forward was representative of all the people of South Africa. At

this Congress you found African people, White people, Indian people, the Coloured community, including a sprinkling of members of the Chinese community, which is a very small community in South Africa. In short all our people were represented at this Congress except the ruling circles which deliberately stayed away from this Congress, because they were aware of the fact that the demands that were going to be put forward by the people were demands which were not going to be in their interests because we all know that their interest is to exclude the people from the organs of power and obviously at the Congress where people are asked to put forward their demands those demands will definitely go against their interests. In spite of their absence the COP proceeded and it was a success.

POLICE

One fact has got to be pointed out here, that although this Congress was a success it was not easy, it was not smooth-going all along the way. The whole area was surrounded by police, some of them mounted on horses, some of them on foot, some of them on troop-carriers, all armed to the teeth. There was a lot of provocation on the part of the police. In fact the intention was to provoke the people at this Congress into acts of violence. A few people were violently manhandled by the police themselves and by so doing they hoped that the people would retaliate violently and if this had happened at such a Congress it would have given them an opportunity of breaking up this Congress and drowning the entire Congress in a blood-bath. This was the aim of the police. Fortunately for us, our people saw the intentions of the police and they responded very well to the instructions of the leadership. I must say we owe this success, in so far as the conduct of our people is concerned, to the campaigns that preceded the COP. Our people had gone through the Defiance Campaign which was a non-violent campaign and throughout these campaigns a lot of acts of provocation had been carried out against our people. During those campaigns and when those acts of provocation were carried out our movement educated our people never to allow themselves to be diverted from their objective by these acts of provocation. Our movement spent hours educating our people on the tactics employed by the enemy, particularly when the enemy realises that it is at a disadvantage and that the people are making determined progress. This process assisted us in having an orderly Congress in spite of the provocations.

ARGUMENTS

I have said to you earlier on that these demands were then put forward. They were not accepted automatically. After all these demands had been put forward to the Congress, delegates started discussing them. Arguments were put forward in favour of people's demands. There were counter-arguments from various circles within the delegates. At the end of the three-day Congress, people then agreed unanimously to adopt the demands that they had put forward. In short, these demands ran into thousands from various areas. In the final analysis the Congress arrived at a conclusion and all the demands were formulated into ten points that you see in the Freedom Charter. This conclusion was arrived at after a very strenuous debate, people putting forward certain demands which they thought should come into the Freedom Charter. Some positions were not really in the interests of all the people but after lengthy debates they themselves came round to accept the position that in some cases their positions were wrong. The positions that were in the interests of all the people were those which were eventually adopted. This is how the Congress of the People was convened and how the Freedom Charter was formulated.

Dawn: What kind of response did you get from the people when you were going from house to house collecting their demands in the campaign leading up to the Congress of the People?

Cde Joe Modise: It is true that members of the ANC played an important role in this campaign, that is, going from house to house and getting the people's demands, but I must also point out that it was not only confined to members of the ANC nor the allies. People who were not affiliated to the organisation also took part in this campaign, because there were street committees, and block committees which took part in this campaign, but there were certain homes where we went and found a negative response. Sometimes out of fear people would not respond favourably, sometimes these were homes of people who were connected with the authorities, homes of policemen, and so forth. But on the whole the majority of the people, after the aims and objectives of the Congress of the People were explained to them, responded very enthusiastically. But the point I want to underline is this that it would be incorrect for anybody to say that that task was easy. It was not, because here we were going among the people some of whom were not associated at all with the ANC. In some instances we came across certain people who had affiliated to other organisations, obviously

some of them did not respond positively but it suffices to say that the majority of the people responded very well.

PEOPLE'S MOOD

Dawn: Finally, what was the mood of the people after they had adopted their programme - the Freedom Charter?

Cde Joe Modise: I have said to you that when this campaign was conducted we went to all our people, not necessarily members of the ANC and some of them asked us: "How do you hope to achieve these demands because those who are denying us participation in the affairs of our own country are armed, they are an armed force and are using that armed force to prevent us from participation and you don't have an armed force? How do you hope to achieve these objectives?" Our response to these questions was that we have got to unite and that the process of our going to the people asking for their demands and to participate in putting forward these demands, and struggling for them, is a process that covers the entire country and if we can achieve this unity, we will succeed in forcing the enemy to accept our demands. We explained to the people that it's not a struggle that begins today and ends tomorrow and that it is going to be a struggle that will continue for a long time.

Immediately after these campaigns were carried out and people were persuaded to participate in presenting their demands, the mood of expectation rose among the people. The people felt that time had come for change in the affairs of our country and naturally by going to them and asking them to make these demands, we had provoked that feeling among the people.

In 1960 the pass campaign was decided upon by the ANC. This was scheduled to be sparked on the 31st March. This was still one of the ANC's campaigns to mobilise the people, to get the people united and to get the people to use their united force in order to bring about change in that country. I think what the ANC had in mind was the fact that if we had achieved maximum unity among the people, non-violent resistance would be used to force the government to make change, for instance, questions of withholding their labour was one of the methods of struggle envisaged. The Defiance Campaign had already taken place and immediately after the convening of the Congress of the People, strike action was in the minds of the people and a

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presence, which filled the air with croaking and blood. The only defence you had against them was the firm faith that they would not escape justice in the end, even if they murdered every last witness to their crimes.

At the same table with these types sat men who sought in justice to be written with a capital M - Men. Those who used prison rules to protect the prisoners, who helped build the prison collective in Number 400 and belonged to it with all the more, since they were not Communists; on the contrary, they may have worked against the Communists as agents of the Czech police. But they realised the significance of the Communists for the whole nation when they saw us battle against the invader, and from that moment assisted each of us who held true and loyal even on those prison benches.

Many of our soliders outside would have wavered had they had any conception of what awaited them once they fell into the hands of the Gestapo. These loyal men inside had the horrors before their eyes every day, every hour. Every hour they lived with the expectation of being set among the prisoners and being tested worse than they. But they didn't waver. They helped save the lives of thousands and tempered the suffering of those whose lives they couldn't save. The name of hero belongs to them. Without them Number 400 could never have become what it was to thousands of Communists: a spot of light in a black building, a trench in the rear of the enemy, the centre of the battle for freedom right in the den of the invader.

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number of people were basing the future struggle and campaigns on this kind of actions.

It is true that at the time, the people had made their demands and said they would struggle for their realisation. A number of people even at that time were already talking of a violent struggle against the enemy but then at the time it was not possible for the ANC to entertain this kind of thinking, but the fact of the matter is that the people's expectations were sparked off by the Congress of the People and the people expected more. It was now for the African National Congress to chart the way forward.