

Idyllic setting for a tough battle

Some 50km north west of Pietermaritzburg, among the picturesque hills and rock formations near the University of the North, stands the simple, rustic Kransien Stein Lutheran Mission Centre.

The idyllic setting seems an unlikely venue for a congress of people who see their political group as an "above-board liberation movement", whose detractors accuse them of being intellectual elitists and loud-mouthed radicals who vent rage and don't do anything constructive.

But more than 200 delegates and observers turned up at the centre in January 1981 for the annual congress of the Azanian People's Organisation (Azapo).

They were aware that their organisation is under constant surveillance by the authorities, for they are the proponents of black consciousness. Their colleagues have been banned, jailed and detained. Some died or chose exile.

The former Minister of Justice, Mr J.T. Kruger, who declared war on the black consciousness organisations by banning most of them in 1977, described BC as the point where legitimate dissent ended and criminal activity began.

On another front, with the African National Congress and Pan-Africanist Congress operating from exile after being banned in 1960, the only internal, national black political organisation operating overtly in South Africa is Azapo.

Azapo and the black consciousness movement have been careful in their attitude towards the ANC and the PAC. While recognising their historical role, it has neither endorsed nor criticised them.

But for Azapo, another dimension has been introduced, what its members perceive as an attempt at infiltration by white liberals and radicals. One delegate described it as the "total onslaught from the northern suburbs".

It was against this background that Azapo delegates gathered at the mission centre, with a number of important papers on a wide range of subjects up for discussion.

Azapo was formed in 1978 out of the ashes of Mr Kruger's bannings, and immediately ran into trouble. Members of its interim executive were detained, and two members were banned.

In September, 1979, Azapo was formed inaugurated with the chairman of the Soweto Teachers' Action

Committee, Mr Curtis Nkondo, as its first president. Up to the time, BC was interpreted as a philosophy for the psychological and physical liberation of oppressed blacks.

But at the inaugural congress, there was a significant development in the philosophy. Delegates interpreted the black struggle as a race-class struggle, with blacks being oppressed as a class.

Blacks were classified workers, with white workers being rejected because they were regarded as the labour aristocracy which kept the Government in power to protect its own privileged position.

The new Azapo constitution placed strong emphasis on black workers. While the black struggle to repossess the land from whites was described as the rallying point, race was described as a class determinant in South Africa.

And it was this interpretation that was challenged by some delegates at the congress. Led by Mr Vusi Nkumane, chairman of the cultural group Mdali, the group of delegates insisted that the national struggle was solely for the repossession of the land.

Mr Nkumane, Mr Zakes Mofokeng and others gave an indication of the controversy to come when they challenged ideological terms used in a comprehensive, analytical report on education presented by an Azapo commission.

Under the title "curriculum and syllabus", the report said: "The dominant ideas of government and means of enforcement thereof and thus is able to organise society so as to entrench itself and keep in subjugation the other classes."

Mr Nkumane and his supporters immediately challenged the concepts of class in a lengthy debate which overshadowed the commission's full report itself. They objected to "foreign ideology" being used to interpret the struggle.

The debate continued late into the night over the class concepts when the Azapo national organiser, Mr Letsatsi Mosala, presented a paper on "the challenge of labour in the 1980's".

At one point, Mr Mosala accused some people of "seeing communism and Moscow" when they heard the term class.

The sharp differences over interpretation came to a head the next morning when Mr Nkumane presented a paper on "the inroads of

liberals into black consciousness".

The lengthy, controversial paper took most delegates by surprise, for it flew directly in the face of the constitution emphasising the struggle of workers.

Mr Nkumane took the opportunity to reject "Marxist analysis or defining classes". He called for an application to African culture, quoting extensively from students showing that in past centuries, African norms in various fields were well ahead of other continents.

He called for a return to the position prior to 1652, when whites first settled in the country.

But the paper was so lengthy that many delegates lost his thread. He was challenged on various concepts, and one delegate said his paper represented a shift to the "far right".

He was accused of excluding "so-called coloureds and so-called Indians" from his definition of the black struggle. He denied the charge, and said "Africa is for all who owe allegiance to Africa, give expression to its culture and is not confined to blacks."

He was accused of contradicting his own views, but his accusers were unable to cite specific examples because they did not have copies of his paper.

Because of this, and because time was running out on Sunday, delegates agreed to defer further discussion on his paper to a symposium of black consciousness organisations.

All the delegates were agreed on some basic points - that the struggle for land repossession was the overriding factor, that blacks want a socialist set-up, and that there was no place in their struggle for whites.

Mr Nkumane accused white liberals of "telling us to liberate ourselves from themselves", and had a go at Marxists, whom he accused of saying that blacks and whites had to get together to find a common enemy.

How to interpret black consciousness as an ideology for liberation is now the BC dilemma. In the early days of black consciousness, it was more a matter of conscientising blacks about their oppression.

Now it is a question of how to galvanise blacks into a vehicle for liberation, for repossessing the land.

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struggle in South Africa. It has to ensure that the leadership of this struggle remains with it if our efforts are not be deflected into channels of disaster. The black working class has to act as a magnet that draws all the other oppressed layers of our society, organises them for the liberation struggle and infuses them with the consistent socialist ideas which alone spell death to the system of racism and capitalism as we know it today.

In this struggle the idea of a single

nation is vital because it represents the real interest of the working class and therefore of the future socialist Azania. 'Ethnic', national group or racial group ideas of nationhood in the final analysis strengthen the position of the middle-class or even the capitalist oppressors themselves. I repeat, they pave the way for the catastrophic separatist struggles that we have witnessed in other parts of Africa. Let us never forget that more than a million people were

massacred in the Biafran war, let us not forget the danger represented by the 'race riots' of 1949. Today, we can choose a different path. We have to create an ideological, political and cultural climate in which this solution becomes possible.

I believe that if we view the question of nation and ethnicity in this framework we will understand how vital it is that our slogans are heard throughout the length and breadth of our country.

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The BC dilemma was summed up by another delegate, Mr Joe Thloloe who talked of the "onslaught from the northern suburbs on BC".

He said white liberals and radicals accused Azapo and other BC bodies of being "petty bourgeois".

"They have also come up with the slogan that 'the struggle is colourless'. Some years ago, people believed in African nationalism, that their goal was a socialist state," Mr Thloloe said. "It was a clear-cut definition.

"Now we are talking about BC. We have to pick-and-shovel workers, managers and other professionals. We all agree — our goal is a socialist state. But the people who are fighting to create it are the black people of this country. Do we call them a nation or a class?"

He added: "If we say the struggle is between black and white, our goal will still be a socialist State where there are no races or classes."

Those who believe in defining it as a class-race struggle are adamant that it has nothing to do with Marxism or any other theories as such, but merely a categorising of the struggle in line with the "socialist ethic".

Their argument is that the South African situation has to be interpreted along African nationalist and African socialist lines.

While the arguments may seem facile and irrelevant in defining its ideological concept, it has to be understood against the background that Azapo in its present format is aimed at mobilising the black workers.

The differences over ideological interpretations tended to overshadow other developments within Azapo. The education paper, in an appraisal critical of the present system in South Africa, suggested a far-reaching counter-system.

Mr Mosala's paper on labour spoke of the Government's dispensa-

tions being seen in the light of its policy of total strategy, and called for a counter strategy.

He argued that the Government had set out to destroy the political potential of the black labour force into a "semi-white mode of existence".

"By allowing workers to have access to the official bargaining machinery, the Government has succeeded in restrictive control on the worker movement, Mr Mosala said.

A major move which emerged at the congress was the expansion of various secretariats. They will now include health, sport, rural and urban development, youth and culture, education and labour.

By doing so, Azapo is hoping to play a bigger role in the daily lives of black people and countering accusations that it is not interested in bread-and-butter issues.

A controversial move during last year was hardly discussed at the conference — the axing of Mr Nkondo as president. It was touched on briefly when the publicity secretary, Mr George Wauchope, said the national executive had come under fire for the move, and although differences with other BC bodies had been resolved, some organisations had given Azapo the cold shoulder.

Mr Nkondo, before being banned by the Government, was suspended by the executive for "violating principles and policy".

The congress ended on an unexpected note — only one of the outgoing national executive was re-elected. Outgoing officials and the new president, Mr K'hehla Mthembu, insist that the move was aimed at training new leadership, from "preventing leadership from becoming an institution and preventing bureaucracy at all levels".

For some time now, BC organisations have been mindful of getting away from leadership cults and allowing the personalities of their

leaders to become associated with the organisations' image.

The new president, Mr Mthembu, 28, has a youthful "cabinet" under him. His immediate task will be to get the secretariat working, and then to await the direction on ideological concepts which is to come from the proposed symposium.

Personally, Mr Mthembu has made it clear how he interprets the struggle. "I believe in the interpretation contained in our constitution — that it is a national black struggle with land repossession as the all-important factor, but that race is a class determinant in our country."

**Contributions
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issues
welcomed.
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