

The Black Peoples Convention

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The South African political scene is in a state of flux. There are brisk political developments taking shape among all the racial groups that constitute the overall body politic.

Vorster's governing party — the Nationalist Party — has reverted to a policy of open racialism against the rest of the non-Boer communities in South Africa. In particular there is a spreading hate-campaign against the English-speaking section of the White society. Apparently, the Nationalist Party which has governed South Africa since 1948 has been shaken by a few parliamentary seats which they lost in by-elections as well as setbacks in municipal elections on the Witwatersrand.

The Johannesburg Sunday Times of April 16, 1972, put the reversal of government policy in this way:

"There is a deep crisis and genuine feeling of being 'let down by the English' in 1970, in view of the fact that Mr. Vorster went to the extent of splitting his party and expelling the Hertzog group which was animated by anti-English sentiments, for the sake of a broader South Africanism.

"There is a growing feeling that there is no point in risking a total break-up and fragmentation of Afrikaner nationalism if it does not pay dividends in terms of growing English support at the polls.

"In the new approach, the (Nationalist) Party know that they will inevitably lose some more seats. But they are convinced that it will be limited in view of Afrikaner numerical superiority and the proven success of this recipe in the past. The view is that the Nationalist Party, based on the unmovable rock of Afrikaner nationalism, will retain political power forever."

This mood of Boer chauvinism and an aggressive political stance has further taken the form of arrogance to the Bantustan chiefs who work in the apartheid framework. While Chiefs Gatsha Buthelezi and Lucas Mangope were honoured Government guests at the recent independence celebrations in Malawi, the Vorster regime announced that in future both the movement and political activities of these

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Bantustan chiefs will be subject to the approval of Vorster. In particular, they will not be allowed inside South Africa to address Whites or non-African audiences; and they will not be allowed to visit countries abroad without the express permission of the South African government. This curbs the drive to growing external links which the movements of the Bantustan chiefs tended to foster.

Black Consciousness

In the meantime, the Black communities have also shown some determined stirrings. There is a general revival of public comment on events in South Africa by the Indian, Coloured and African leaders who have emerged. The Natal Indian Congress was re-activated under the leadership of Mr. Chanderdeo Sewpersadh as its President. Its recent conference was opened by the widow of the late Chief A. J. Lutuli, Mrs. Nokukanya Lutuli.

The Coloured Labour Party under the leadership of Mr. Sonny Leon adopted many resolutions at its Conference held in East London in April 1972. The C.L.P. pledged support for the Black Power movement that has taken root among the three oppressed national groups, namely, Africans, Indians and Coloureds.

The only national group that has not had a legal political organisation to act as their mouthpiece are the African people. Since the banning of both the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) in 1960 the African people have waited for twelve years for the return of the leaders and military cadres belonging to these two bodies, both having declared that they are going to wage armed struggle to overthrow the Vorster regime. But the people cannot wait forever. The grinding poverty, disease and political persecution that is their daily lot could not but throw up new leaders.

SASO

The African students at various African universities took up the challenge of apartheid. They formed a new national students organisation which mobilised the African students and gave expression to some of the blatant sufferings of the Black people.

At the end of 1968 at Marianhill, Natal, the inaugural meeting of the South African Students' Organization was held, and in July 1969 they declared in their constitution that:

"We, the Black students of institutions-of higher learning in South Africa have unique problems and aspirations; that it is necessary for Black students to consolidate their ranks if their aspirations are to be realised; that there is a crying need in South Africa for Black students to reassert their pride and group identity; adopt

this constitution in the belief that unity and positive re-awakening will result among the Black students of South Africa."

Many Black students who already belonged to other multi-racial students' organisations such as NUSAS (National Union of South African Students) and the University Christian Movement (U.C.M.) withdrew from these bodies to join SASO. The most significant development was the recognition which NUSAS accorded to SASO. In the past at all international students gatherings, the NUSAS claimed to represent all South African students, but at a NUSAS congress held at Eston, Natal, in July 1970, NUSAS formally recognised SASO. The then President of NUSAS, Mr. Neville Curtis, said,

"While we can keep alive our ideals, we cannot claim to represent Black students except those who choose to participate in the National Union. We must realise that the role of White students is not a primary one. A de facto White NUSAS cannot claim to represent Black students." — (The Johannesburg *Star*, July 25, 1970).

Origins

The origins of SASO are imbedded in the numerous frustrations of the Bantu education system which the late Dr. Verwoerd introduced to downgrade the academic level of African students, to reduce the African intelligentsia, and to increase the African cheap labor market. Dr. Verwoerd said education should not cause the African to want to graze on the green pastures reserved for Whites only. He defined the ultimate objective of Bantu education as follows:

"there is no place for him (that is, the African) above the level of certain forms of labour."

Thus education for the African was to perpetuate the inferior position in society which is still the burden of the Black man in a country that really belongs to him. Within this Bantu education scheme, five university colleges were established for the Black people. Three were for the Africans. Ngoye was established for the Zulu-speaking students in Natal and Turfloop in the Transvaal for the Sotho-speaking. Fort Hare, which was formed in 1916, was now converted into an institution for Xhosas only. The Coloureds have a university college in the Cape at Bellville and the Indians have one in Natal at a place called Sallsbury Island. All these universities are administered by Whites.

In spite of this rigid tribal and racial fragmentation of the Black student community, SASO was born and has assumed a dynamic political role in South Africa. The recent student resistance that drew in the support of White students at the Witwatersrand and Cape Town universities is directly attributable to the militant pressure that SASO

initiated against apartheid. It is this militancy and Black mobilisation of students which for the first time in South African history caused a cleavage among the Boer students at the citadel of Boer learning — Stellenbosch University. The Students Representative Council at Stellenbosch was divided on the student demonstrations, and resisted the injunctions of their own leading body — the Afrikaanse Students Bond (ASB). And this compelled no less a person than Prime Minister Vorster to go to Stellenbosch and address the students on the need to maintain Afrikaner solidarity in the face of all challenges.

Black Power

Soon after SASO was formed the slogan of Black Power came into wide political currency. The SASO leaders were pestered to explain themselves on this question. In an interview with the *Rand Daily Mail*, August 8, 1970, the Vice-President of SASO at that time, Mr. Charles Misibi, said:

"If there was no Black Power movement in America, SASO would still have been born, but the call gave us a psychological advantage and this explains the reasons for the large following we have built up in a relatively short time.

"Not only is the move taken by the Black students defensible, it was a long overdue step. It seems sometimes it is a crime for Black students to think for themselves. The idea of everything being done for Blacks is an old one and all liberals take pride in it, but once the Black students want to do things themselves, suddenly they are regarded as becoming 'militant'".

Past Mistakes

One of the major mistakes committed by the liberation movements in 1960 when fascism banned political organisations was to allow the impression to grow that political activity inside South Africa could be guided from abroad. This is true for both the student organisations and the political bodies that were outlawed. For instance, the African Students' Association, with membership open to Africans only, was formed in December, 1961. It was to organise resistance to Bantu education. It is true that some student actions of a mass character did take place, especially the total African student support for the May 31, 1961, general strike led by Nelson Mandela against the establishment of the Boer Republic of South Africa.

Most of the leaders of this association left South Africa to study abroad. They also got caught up in international student politics and the raging ideological battle between the International Union of Students (IUS) and COSEC (the Co-ordinating Secretariat). The ASA

leadership gradually got isolated from the internal student activities whilst their involvement in the international scene completely obliterated their role as leaders of the Black students of South Africa. For this development, the political bodies such as the ANC and PAC are to blame in no small measure because the student activity was incorporated into the Youth wings of these organisations, thus giving them a partisan limitation.

The Black Peoples Convention

The emergence of SASO and the Black Peoples Convention (BPC) does therefore indicate that in the contemporary political situation in South Africa there was a gaping vacuum which a new leadership had to fill.

When the Communist Party of South Africa was outlawed in 1960 few of the present SASO leaders were born. Others were tiny toddlers. When both the ANC and PAC were proscribed in 1960, the majority of the SASO student body were about ten or twelve years old. They are, therefore, a generation that has grown up in a period where African views were not being expressed through a legal mouthpiece independent of the Bantustan machinery. They also know only one form of government, that of the Nationalist Party of B. J. Vorster and his predecessors.

SASO has grown into a viable semi-political body and has played an active role in the calling and formation of the Black People's Convention. The other constituent elements of the Black Peoples Convention which was formed in Pietermaritzburg, Natal, in the first week of July, 1972, are the Indian Congress and the Coloured Labour Party.

The membership of the BPC is open to Africans, Indians and Coloureds. It is a national body and will organise on that basis. It is said that the main objective of the BPC is to "liberate the Black people from psychological and physical oppression". It will also operate outside the White Parliament and the machinery of racial discrimination set up to divide the African, Indian, and Coloured people into separate and exclusive racial enclaves.

The BPC states one of its aims as being the need to unite and solidify the Blacks. They will fight for "Black Consciousness, Black Solidarity, and Black Radicalisation." These are very subjective values with a high emotive content. Not much is conveyed in them as regards future forms of action to realise these Black Power goals. What is demonstrable from the current events is that the new swing to the right by the Vorster regime will not only mobilise the Boers into a

monolithic group but will run counter to the interests of the foreign and local White investors who are worried by the growing South African inflation; shortage of skilled manpower; shortage of export markets; high production costs and the international monetary crisis that involves gold — of which South Africa is, of course, the Western world's major producer.

The resurgence of Black nationalist feeling in the form of the BPC appears to be a national consequence of the polarisation of political forces in South Africa with the right-wing position being taken by the Vorster regime. The vacuum which the banning of the ANC and PAC left is being filled. The political orientation which the BPC will assume depends to a large extent on the form of activity in which they will engage. That activity will in the immediate be as non-violent as circumstances permit. But the fascist repression of the White students in June this year teaches one lesson only; that the South African regime is no longer going to experiment with non-violent diplomatic formulae such as "Bantustans", etc. They are asserting White power by brute force. The extra-parliamentary Black opposition to Vorster will have to face this reality.

Personalities

The BPC, of course, shows that there is room to combine legal and illegal forms of resistance to apartheid. Violent and non-violent activity against the enemy should not be classified in such a way that the former is regarded as the only revolutionary means while the latter is pacifist and reactionary. Such an approach would simply lead to dogmatic delusions on the real sacrifices that people make when they fight against the fascist monster of apartheid. The events in Zimbabwe, when the African National Council organised non-violent resistance to the Douglas-Home settlement terms, illustrate the validity of finding the means to combine legal and illegal resistance activity in the struggle for liberation.

The personalities of the leaders of the BPC are not well-known abroad. Indeed, the composition of the leadership itself still has to come to light. But among the vocal convenors were the late Dr. William Nkomo, Mr. Drake Morake, Mrs. Sadie Motlana, Mr. Sonny Leon, Dr. Adam Small, and Mr. Chanderdeo Sewpersadh.

The late Dr. W. Nkomo was expelled from the Presidency of the ANC Youth League when he joined the Moral Rearmament (MRA) in the 1950s. Mr. Drake Morake is a journalist. He was once an office-bearer in the now defunct Liberal Party — a group that was dominated by Whites and had as one of its objectives the fight against "all forms of totalitarianism," whatever that means. Mrs. Sadie Motlana was an ANC member until it was outlawed in 1960. Mr. Sonny Leon leads the Coloured Labour Party among whose members there are many former members of the Coloured Peoples Congress (C.P.C.). The C.P.C.

is an ally of the ANC. It is still a legal body in South Africa but seems to have been totally eclipsed by the C.L.P. Dr. Adam Small is a Coloured professor at the Bellville University for Coloureds. He was at one time in favour of apartheid but has now thrown in his weight with the Black Power Movement. He is also a poet of distinction. Mr. C. Sewpersadh has helped to revive the Indian Congress.

The leadership of the BPC indicates the coming together of various political tendencies inside South Africa. The political backgrounds of the leaders are so diverse that the stand which they will take as the confrontation with the Vorster regime sharpens cannot be predicted now. It is also not possible to be definite about what position they will take when the masses of oppressed people resort to armed struggle to meet the ever-mounting brutal terror of the police, army and skietkommandos.

External Influence

In the developing S.A. situation a prominent part is being played by the American lobby. There have been visits to South Africa and Namibia by Congressman Charles Diggs and Judge Booth, Roy Wilkins of the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) has also visited South Africa.

Recently the State Department sent Mr. David Newsom, a U.S. under-Secretary for African Affairs, and Mr. Beverly Carter, an Afro-American, on a tour of Southern Africa. Mr. Carter is now the U.S. Ambassador in Tanzania. Another Afro-American, Mr. James Baker, has been appointed as one of the U.S. diplomats in South Africa.

In the sphere of industry, America too can be found to have initiated a few new moves. The militant action of the Black workers at Polaroid against apartheid has led to some movement on the part of American firms toward better wages and conditions for Black workers in South Africa.

General Motors Corporation is not content only to raise the wages of African workers in their S.A. subsidiaries. They have also embarked on a leadership training programme. In the Daily Dispatch of East London, April 14, 1972, an interview with Mr. Richard Gerstenberg, chairman of the General Motors Corporation, is summarized.

"General Motors gave equal pay for equal work to all its workers in South Africa, regardless of their race. Re-iterating that G.M. had no intention of pulling out of S.A., Mr. Gerstenberg said it had a training programme for Blacks to develop as leaders."

This influence of American interest on the South African political scene takes advantage of a political vacuum left by the ANC and PAC having gone not only underground but also operating mainly from outside South Africa. The direction which the emerging African

leadership will take inside South Africa could be influenced by what the older political organisations **do inside South Africa.**

The stereotyped attitudes of the political hegemony of one or other of the older groups might easily serve to isolate them from the mainspring of current developments. An indication of the mood of the Black youth was spelled-out in clear terms in the speech of Abraham Onkgopotse Tiro which led to the general South African student demonstrations in May-June 1972. He said: inter alia, at his graduation ceremony: —

"We, Black graduates, by virtue of our age and academic standing, are being called upon to greater responsibilities in the liberation of our people. Our so-called leaders have become bolts of the same machine which is crushing us as a nation. We have to go back to them and educate them. Times are changing and we should change with them. The magic story of human achievement gives irrefutable proof that as soon as nationalism is awakened among the intelligentsia it becomes the vanguard in the struggle against alien rule."

Such is the frame of mind of the new leaders of African resistance inside South Africa.