

BACKGROUND TO THE 20th ANNIVERSARY OF REPUBLIC DAY 31st MAY, 1981.

The twentieth anniversary of the establishment of a Republic in South Africa occurs on 31 May 1981. The South African Government has called for nation-wide festivities to celebrate the event but a growing number of churches and organisations have called for a boycott of the event.

The meaning of a republic

A republic is "a form of government without a monarch in which the supreme power is vested in representatives elected by the people" (Chambers dictionary). How does the Republic of South Africa measure up to this definition? In 1960 after Dr. Verwoerd, the then Prime Minister, walked out of the Commonwealth Conference in London, White S.A. voters took part in a referendum. The Republic of S.A. can therefore not be regarded as a legitimate expression of the will of the people nor does the parliament which sits in Cape Town represent the people of South Africa.

A brief survey of significant events since 1961

General Strike 1961

The legitimacy of the Republic was contested right from the beginning. A general strike was called for 28, 29, 30, May 1961 and large numbers of Black workers responded by staying away from work on those days.

Repressive Legislation

In order to contain the opposition and remain in power, the Republican Government has had to introduce scores of repressive security laws during the past 20 years. The Internal Security Act in terms of which many Black and some White leaders have been banned or have been kept in preventive detention without a trial and the Terrorism Act which entitles the police to arrest political dissidents and to keep them in solitary confinement indefinitely and under which several people have died are two of the most repressive acts. During 1980, for example, 956 people, mostly Blacks, were detained without trial.

Labour Unrest

1973 in Durban saw workers beginning to assert their power as 98 378 workers went on strike. Since that time strikes have continued unabated. Workers have begun to understand the power of unity and solidarity in demanding their rightful share in the economic prosperity of the country, improved working conditions and the rights of union membership and representation.

School Boycotts.

In 1976 and 1977 Black students demonstrating against their inferior education system were repressed violently on the Reef, in Cape Town and in Port Elizabeth and hundreds lost their lives.

In 1981 school boycotts occurred nationwide and in all major centres. One of the grievances was the unequal allotment of resources. Since 1961 per capita expenditure gaps between Africans and Whites have increased. In 1980, R 724,00 was spent on White and R71,28 on African education in "white areas". (The R 71,28 is halved if all African children of school-going age are taken into account).

18 Organisations Banned 1977

The urgent need for change in the country's social structure which became so evident in 1976 and 1977 went unheeded by the Government. Instead 17 Black organisations and one multiracial ecumenical organisation which had been working for a just democratic society were banned.

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The Rights of Citizenship.

Since 1977 when the first homeland, the Transkei, became "independent" the citizenship rights of African South Africans have been steadily eroded. When the Ciskei becomes "independent" in December 1981, all Xhosa-speaking South Africans together with Tsuanas and Vendas will have lost their rights as South Africans. The gradual removal of the rights of citizenship from the majority of South Africans is the most notorious feat achieved by the Nationalist Government since 1961 and it is a process which will continue until all 10 homelands gain their "independence".

The Homeland policy has necessitated the physical removal and resulting traumatization of 1½ million people in order to consolidate the 10 homelands. 35% of the population has been squeezed onto 13% of the total landscape. This has resulted in intense overcrowding, poverty and unemployment. In fact the main export and resource of revenue of all the homelands is migrant labour.

By means of the homelands policy, ethnic divisions have been exploited and intensified in an attempt to prevent the growth of African solidarity.

The President's Council which came into existence in 1980 and from which Africans have been excluded is a further attempt to divide the South African population by trying to cut off Indian and "Coloured" South Africans from the African population.

Civil War. The most dangerous development during the years since Republic is that of a civil war as thousands of young South African men are drawn into the S.A.D.F. to fight against their fellow South Africans who have chosen to join the guerilla liberation army. Many lives have already been lost in this civil war and many more will be lost before the Nationalist Government agrees to a negotiated settlement.

Previous Statements.

In the past the Bishops have stated, "Realising that South Africa has entered a critical phase in the rejection by the majority of its people of a social and political system of oppression, we add our corporate voice as leaders of the Catholic Church in this country to the cry for a radical revision of the system.

"People starved of freedom, deprived of their just rights and humiliated in their personal and corporate dignity will not rest until a proper balance of justice is achieved.

"We affirm that in this we are on the side of the oppressed and, as we have committed ourselves to working within our Church for a clearer expression of solidarity with the poor and deprived, so we commit ourselves equally to working for peace through justice in fraternal collaboration with all other churches, agencies and persons dedicated to this cause..

"We again profess our conviction, so often repeated, that the only solution of our racial tensions consists in conceding full citizen and human rights to all persons in the Republic, not by choice on the false grounds of colour, but on the grounds of the common humanity of all people, taught by our Lord Jesus Christ".

During the past two decades the oppression and misery of the majority of South Africans has increased. The vast majority of the membership of the Catholic Church 84%, is Black and does not regard Republic Day as an event to be celebrated

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