

The tragedy of Robert Sobukwe

MR ROBERT MANGALISO SOBUKWE was an exceptional South African. His qualities are attested to by the tributes being published, in this newspaper and elsewhere, since his death early yesterday.

He is described by Mrs Sally Motlana as the "father of the nation" — a view derived from the widespread admiration which he commanded because of the courage and integrity he displayed in struggling to bring freedom to blacks. It is based too on his status as the fountainhead of modern-day black consciousness; he was the man who enunciated it in the late-1950s and from whom another, younger leader of note, Mr Steve Biko, drew his sustenance.

But it was precisely these qualities which caused the Nationalists to fear him so much and which made him the victim of such extended authoritarian action.

In any normal society, Mr Sobukwe would in the most natural way possible have been drawn into giving of his fullest, to the benefit

of all of us. In our country, however, he was silenced and restricted. That can easily be seen as the tragedy of his life — of a life unfulfilled and talents gone to waste. Yet his dignity and his dedication to his beliefs (whether or not we or others totally agree with them) shine out; it is those who hounded him who are cast into dark shadow.

Through him, the human spirit again proved itself to be invincible.

It is at another level, however, that there is real tragedy in his death. For, coming after the late Chief Albert Luthuli and more recently Mr Biko, this could prove to have been the last chance for white South Africans to deal directly, peacefully and constructively, with a black leader straddling the national scene and enjoying wide populist respect and support.

This will inevitably reduce the chances of South Africa ever being able to reach towards a nonracial, democratic society. Which would be the ultimate tragedy — for the country and for the memory of Robert Sobukwe.

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