

The silent triumph of a black South African

1975

A new sign has just been painted on the window of a small shop just inside the boundary line of Galeshewe African Township on the outskirts of Kimberley. It says quite simply, "Robert Sobukwe, Attorney". The sign represents a personal triumph for one black South African over myriad restrictions on his freedom that would have lowered a lesser man long ago.

Last week Mr Sobukwe, former President of the banned Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC), who along with Mr Nelson Mandela of the African National Congress (ANC) is South Africa's best known political detainee, set up his own legal practice.

Appropriately his office is right opposite the white government-run "Aid Centre", which is supposed to provide assistance to African pass law offenders. It was because of Mr Sobukwe's own civil disobedience campaign against the pass law system, which he regards as the lynchpin of apartheid, that he has spent the past 15 years in prison or living under a maze of restrictions as a "banned person".

Mr Sobukwe was arrested hours before Sharpeville when, as part of his campaign against the pass laws, he voluntarily handed in his own pass to the police. He was found guilty of unlawful incitement against the pass laws and sentenced to three years' imprisonment.

When his sentence expired in 1963 he was held in detention on Robben Island for a further six years, under a special amendment of the Suppression of Communism Act. In mid 1970 he was taken to Kimberley where his wife, Veronica, and four children were allowed to join him and where he became articulated to an African attorney.

Mr Sobukwe does not know why the authorities chose to send him to Kimberley, with which he had little previous acquaintance. Perhaps it was

only the political situation in Southern Africa but also Mr Harold Wilson's brand of socialism and the historical background to the Northern Ireland problem, with quotations from Dr Kwame Nkrumah and the Reith Lectures.

He talks about the early days of African nationalism, when there seemed a real chance that the wind of change would blow as far as Pretoria. He coolly analyses the differences that developed between the all-African PAC and the ANC which, he felt, was too dependent on its white left-wing supporters. He still sees a need for an all-black nationalist movement but is worried that black racialism—a charge of which he used to be incorrectly accused—could develop if Africans continue to be denied political rights.

He speaks with sadness of the homeland leaders, many of whom he admires but who, he feels, have made unacceptable compromises. Chief Gatsha Buthelezi is an old friend, a man of intelligence and ability. But he no longer speaks on behalf of Africans as a whole, only one tribe—the Zulus. Inadvertently Chief Buthelezi has become identified with the government's policy of separate development rather than the African unity he once stood for.

Mr Sobukwe is not impressed by the changes said to be taking place within South Africa. The whole apparatus of apartheid not only remains intact but has been strengthened. But he does detect a modification in white attitudes and this, he believes, could be of great significance. The "monolithic arrogance" of the ruling Nationalist Party seems to be starting to crumble.

Small changes have struck him. Whites are now more respectful towards Africans. He has received dinner invitations from white lawyers who had never previously communicated with him. White South African journalists have suddenly "rediscovered" him and ask

acquaintance. Perhaps it was because Kimberley is a long way from anywhere else, or because the local black population has a reputation—not entirely justified—of being more politically docile than in other parts of the country. But in the six years there he has earned the respect and friendship of the town's black people, many of whom now turn to him for advice.

As a banned person, Mr Sobukwe is confined to his home at night and to the Kimberley magisterial district by day. He is prohibited from entering any school, factory or workers' compound, and cannot receive visitors at home apart from members of his family, a doctor or a priest. He may not be quoted publicly in South Africa and is kept under close surveillance by the security police. He is also prohibited from preparing anything for publication, and indeed my discussion with him was completely informal.

He drove with me to the boundary of his "kingdom", about one mile from the centre of town. A patch of scrubland a few hundred yards from a drive-in cinema is the only countryside he is able to visit. But he does not complain; that is not in his character. Nor does he criticize the police, with whom he now enjoys a cordial relationship. They have a job to do, so why should he make it difficult for them?

Although he is permitted to be with only one person at a time (outside his legal practice) he receives a steady stream of visitors who make the long pilgrimage to Kimberley to meet him or seek his advice. Arthur Ashe, the black American tennis player, declared after one such meeting that Mr Sobukwe was "the real leader of the African people", comparing him to Martin Luther King.

United States Congressman Andrew Young was equally impressed and is now helping to have two of Mr Sobukwe's children educated in the United States. Everyone remarks on his courtesy, good humour and lack of bitterness.

Mr Sobukwe is a man of great intellectual vigour who possesses three degrees (one of which was obtained by correspondence from London University while he was on Robben Island). A conversation with him covers not

journalists
"rediscovered" him and ask for audiences. He invariably refuses because he thinks the change in attitude has been dictated by the government rather than coming from the people themselves.

He also notices a shift in emphasis from politics to economics in discussion about South Africa, inspired no doubt by the government, which constantly stresses the need to develop a middle class among the blacks. People now appear to be more concerned with economic development rather than political freedom. For instance, critics of the government's homeland policy tend to attack it because the homelands are seen to be not economically viable, rather than because the whole policy is politically and morally abhorrent.

He accepts that it is important for people to have full stomachs, but would personally prefer to have fewer meals and more freedom.

Mr Sobukwe talks about freedom with an idealism that has not been dulled by years of repression. He wants people, both black and white, to be consulted, not just told what to do. He describes himself as a socialist but believes in consensus politics; he does not want to see one form of totalitarianism replaced by another.

His critics believe that it is already too late for his type of idealism; that the days when blacks and whites could have engaged in constructive dialogue have long since passed. But Mr Sobukwe is more optimistic. He senses that the youth of all races wants to see change. He considers that the collapse of the Portuguese regime, which most Africans thought was indestructible, has raised hopes that the nationalist government is itself not totally impregnable. He remains confident that the inexorable advance of African nationalism will manage to reach its goal in South Africa within his lifetime.

While men like Mr Sobukwe are around there is still hope that real change may take place in South Africa without recourse to violence and bloodshed. The tragedy is that as long as he remains a "banned person" he is inaudible to the people who ought to be heeding his words.

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