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LEADER PAGE

A tribute to Robert Sobukwe

THE ENDURING relevance of the philosophy of Robert Sobukwe, founder of the Pan-Africanist Congress, is examined by party member **BENNIE BUNSEE**.

LAST FRIDAY, the 19th anniversary of Robert Mangoliso Sobukwe's death, there were ... commemoration ceremonies for the PAC founder all over South Africa. What is there about him that even his foes honour and respect him?

Sobukwe was a multi-faceted person. There was Sobukwe the man of the people, simple and completely dedicated to their interests. He had no time for pomp and ceremony and travelled third class on the trains.

There was Sobukwe the intellectual and academic who made a lasting impression on all who came close to him during his student and teaching days.

There was Sobukwe the dynamic political leader who founded the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) and set it on the road of liberation for his people in South Africa and the African continent. Whereas the Organisation of African Unity and all African leaders are committed to pan-Africanism, he was the only leader with the foresight to found a pan-Africanist organisation, an ideology that millions subscribe to in Africa and the African diaspora.

Sobukwe was regarded as so dangerous to the apartheid state that even on Robben Island he was isolated from other political prisoners and a special law, which came to be known as the "Sobukwe Clause", was issued to hold him in incarceration.

To his last days he was banned and restricted, his every move watched.

Sobukwe was like so many African intellectuals who sacrificed their diverse talents for the political struggle. As a result, his overarching intellectual abilities were lost to the nation.

However, he was more than a politician. He was a philosopher. In him there was a rare, powerful combination of the intellectual and the man of action.

Sobukwe will mainly be remembered as the founder of the PAC and the leader of the events that led to Sharpeville, which was a turning point in the liberation struggle.

Most of the basic documents that constitute the PAC's political philosophy were written by him.

But what precisely is his relevance for us today? It was best summed up by The Times of London on the occasion of his death. It described his political mission to uplift the African people and to make them self-reliant. This sums up the Africanist philosophy, although it stretches in many directions. The current debates between Eurocentrism and Afrocentrism show how important this philosophy is. It marks the nature of our transformation and will last for a long time.

Sobukwe's philosophy emerged from

intense debates within the ANC. It is one in which two contending forces are deadlocked in combat and which, ironically, also constitute a unity of opposites. It is the concept of the rainbow nation and those who wish to see the country assert itself fully as an African country with equal rights for all its citizens regardless of colour and race, as Africans.

It was also rooted in the direction that Anton Lembede and M P Mda were giving to the ANC on the basis of the philosophy of African nationalism as the ideological basis of the liberation of the South African people

as a whole. This led on to embrace the concepts of anti-colonialism, self-determination and national independence of an African-inspired struggle. It put the concept of the struggle on a completely new footing.

Sobukwe went further. He saw the salvation of the African people from centuries of oppression as embracing the liberation of the whole African continent and its ultimate unity.

Only this, he felt, could give the African people the power to stand up to the hostile forces ranged against them.

Liberation of the African people was the key to the regeneration of the country as a whole. Since every group was privileged to one extent or another at the expense of the African, it also buttressed minority and group rights at their expense. However, by

everybody declaring their Africanity and recognising that the liberation of the African people was the basis of the liberation of the whole country, a new united political, social and economic order could be created for all its people.

He emphasised that, in a free South Africa, a white person could be prime minister because, ultimately, there was only one race, the human race.

In our common humanity, we found our oneness in which race did not matter. It was a dynamic philosophy that inspired millions and that showed a clear way forward for all its peoples. He said that the race question bedevilled us and he showed the only way out of it.

When we see the agonies confronting the identities of the Afrikaners, Jews, Indians and the coloured people, we see the relevance of what Sobukwe was saying.

How to create a united nation — taking into account the historical legacy of colonialism and apartheid over the centuries and the fragmentation of a divided nation — is the challenge for all of us and the quintessence of our politics. The whole language of reconciliation and healing revolves round it.

PAC president Stanley Mogoba has been pursuing a similar line of how to unite a "fragmented and divided nation". And he has used the same concept of being African and loving and having a sense of belonging to Africa, its problems, aspirations and struggles.

But Sobukwe went beyond this. He mentioned the full assertion of the material, intellectual and spiritual interests of the African recovery. This placed the assertion of

African rights on higher civilisational and cultural planes that go beyond the civil liberty provisions of our constitution and Bill of Rights. It is where the debate about Africanism is at now.

For this reason, he emphasised the liberation of the African people from centuries of mental slavery that kept them in thrall to the very forces that enslaved them. It is in the clutter and garbage of the mind that our enslavement takes place. Does this not point to the need for democratic discussion and debate on the highest level to cleanse our minds and to confront our problems and difficulties squarely?

Sobukwe had a deep concern for the poor and he ardently embraced socialism. But he refused to belong to any bloc during the Cold War. He believed that Africa had to take its own, independent, path.

The truth of this belief showed itself in the wars of Angola and Ethiopia where the two superpowers used the people of the country to pursue their own ends and ended up creating enormous tragedies in these countries.

His concept of self-reliance echoes throughout the continent. Thabo Mbeki echoed it only last week.

Sobukwe was an incomparable visionary of African liberation, a deep humanist and a man of the people, especially the impoverished and neglected. If he were alive today, he would have shaken the fathers of Parliament with his call for total service to the African cause and social justice for the poor.

□ Bennie Bunsee is the PAC's parliamentary adviser.

His political mission was to uplift the African people and to make them self-reliant. This sums up the Africanist philosophy, although it stretches in many directions.

PUBLISHER:

Publisher:- Historical Papers, The Library, University of the Witwatersrand

Location:- Johannesburg

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DOCUMENT DETAILS:

DOCUMENT DETAILS:

Document ID:- A2618-Cd16

Document Title:- Cape Times: A tribute to Robert Sobukwe (copy of clipping)

Document Date:- 3 March 1997