

OBITUARY**GOVAN MBEKI****ISITHWALANDWE****1910 – 2001**

GOVAN MBEKI was a warrior – a revolutionary, an educator, a publicist, organiser and leader of our people over many decades. A man who brought with him the rare qualities of selflessness and utter devotion to the cause of the oppressed and exploited millions of our country.

Makings of a revolutionary

Govan Mbeki was born in the Transkei on 9 July 1910. He spent the better part of his early life in the Transkei and came to gain a first-hand knowledge of the conditions and problems facing the majority of the small peasants in the area, a phenomenon which was to be found in most other parts of South Africa at the time.

Mbeki received his early education through mission schools. He passed his high school examinations and went on to study for a Bachelor of Arts degree at the University College of Fort Hare. In 1936 he completed his degree in Politics and Psychology together with a Teaching Diploma. His teaching career was short-lived, as he was repeatedly dismissed for his political activities among students and the local community, and for organising workers and trade unions.

If the conditions in the Transkei made a deep impression on Mbeki, his experiences in Johannesburg, where he moved to early in 1929 completed the picture of the desperate plight of the African working people throughout the country. Earlier, in 1925, he had become interested in the activities of the Industrial and Commercial Worker's Union (ICU), the first mass-based worker's movement in South Africa of black workers.

By 1938 he had abandoned the idea of a career in teaching and back in the Transkei devoted himself to local politics and writing. The first publication was a magazine called *'Territorial Magazine'* later renamed *'Inkundla Ya Bantu'*. In 1939 he published his first essays in book form, *'The Transkei in the Making'*. By 1941 he was actively involved in a number of local and regional organisations such as the Transkei Voters Association, Transkei Organised Bodies, and the Transkei Territorial Authorities General Council, the Bunga, as it was commonly known, a government inspired creation of elected members, such as Mbeki, and nominated chiefs, which had very limited administrative powers in the Transkei. Mbeki was to refer to the latter organisation as a toy telephone: "You can say what you like but your words have no effect because the wires are not connected to an exchange."

Mbeki established widespread contacts during this period and working through such organisations. At the same time, through his writings and his activity, he came to be respected and accepted as "a man of the people". Always the practical revolutionary Mbeki, even in this period, did not confine himself to agitating and organising people politically, but attempted to assist the small peasants by encouraging them to form simple co-operatives, to pool their resources and labour, so as to improve production. He published an easily understood pamphlet on co-operative farming.

The Liberation Press

Govan Mbeki was among those who early on recognised the power of the written word in the liberation struggle. As well as possessing a sharp mind, he had a literary ability which was capable of translating the reality of apartheid South Africa in its social, political, economic and other facets into the written word. His early efforts were mainly due to his own initiative. But in 1954 he joined the editorial board of *New Age* which was to be the only national newspaper serving the liberation movement for the next eight years. Together with Ruth First and Brian and Sonya Bunting and the other members of the editorial board, Govan played an immensely important role in ensuring that the pages and columns reflected the conditions of the black peoples, their demands and aspirations. Mbeki and his staff on

the "Eastern desk" of *New Age* were responsible for opening the eyes of black South Africans, especially the political leadership of the movement, to the fierce and bloody struggles in the countryside between the regime and the peasants from the period 1956 to 1960.

In November, 1962 the then Minister of Justice, JB Vorster, banned *New Age*, a fate which had befallen its predecessor, *The Guardian*, almost 10 years earlier. When the Editorial Board came out with its successor, *Spark*, Vorster went one step further by banning not the newspaper, but its editors and writers – stopping them from having anything to do with the preparation, editing, printing and distribution of the paper. Changing the names of the liberation newspapers had been the name of the game till then. Changing its makers proved impossible. Rather than remain cut off from the movement, Mbeki went underground. The first explosions of the armed struggle had already rocked South Africa on the 16th December, 1961.

South Africa: The Peasants' Revolt

Between 1956 and 1960 one of the fiercest of confrontations between oppressor and oppressed in South Africa took place. The epic of the heroic resistance and violent confrontation is to be found in Govan Mbeki's book "South Africa: The Peasants' Revolt". The book, which was begun on rolls of toilet paper and smuggled out while Mbeki was awaiting trial under the Explosives Act, earned him international recognition and an honorary doctorate of Social Science from the University of Amsterdam.

The height of organised revolt to white domination and its local lackeys was in Pondoland where the people set up their own administration - Intaba - The Mountain Committee. Resistance was skilfully organised, fearless and sustained. The peasants, Mbeki concluded, had demonstrated to the movement in practice what it had always preached in theory, namely, impoverished peasantry, many of them semi-proletarians, constituted a revolutionary force of immense potential, once organised.

Armed struggle

Even as editor of the *New Age* in the Eastern Cape, Mbeki was immersed in the practical politics of mass political mobilisation, organising branches of the ANC, publicising the movement's policies. He was chairman of the ANC in the Eastern Cape, and places like New Brighton became synonymous with ANC militancy. At the same time he was an active member of the underground Communist Party.

When the limits of non-violent struggle were exhausted and the decision taken to continue the political struggle using all means, including armed struggle, Mbeki became one of the key figures of the underground leadership. It was in this capacity that he was arrested at Rivonia and later sentenced to life imprisonment with Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Elias Motsoaledi, Ahmed Kathrada, Denis Goldberg, Raymond Mhlaba and Andrew Mlangeni.

During his time on Robben Island, Mbeki played a central role in the political education of generations of young freedom fighters. The political lessons which he wrote to arm young activists arriving on the island were compiled into a book, 'Learning from Robben Island'.

On June 26th, 1980 the then ANC Secretary General, Alfred Nzo, announced the conferring of the time-honoured title of Isithwalandwe on Mbeki, the highest honour that the liberation movement can bestow on any individual.

Mbeki was released from prison on 5 November 1987, and immediately continued with the work of the African National Congress. After the historic democratic elections of 1994, Mbeki was elected Deputy President of the Senate. He has also published "The Struggle for Liberation in South Africa" (1992) and "Sunset at MIDDAY" (1996).

Govan Mbeki passed away in the early morning of Thursday, 30 August 2001 at his home in Port Elizabeth.

Govan Mbeki, Isithwalandwe. We salute you.

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