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Youth Politics: The Political Role of AZANYU in the Struggle for Liberation: The Case of AZANYU Thembisa branch, 1980s to 1996.

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Chapter Six

Was it worth it?

> I definitely hold the view that it was worth joining AZANYU. It enriched my life in many ways. It gave me a sense of self-respect. It conscientized me on the well-being of mankind in general [and] enhanced my love for Afrika. I do not have any regrets about joining AZANYU.[1]

> I don't regret joining AZANYU. I think I made the right choice because I don't think the leadership of the ANC is serving the people. Here I see people who have taken a capitalistic role when the society was down. And the problem of housing, the problem of unemployment cannot be solved. We have to have a socialistic thing … like nationalize things …[2]

The dawning of democracy raised immeasurable hopes among the previously disadvantaged people of South Africa, more particularly among the youth, especially the youth that were actively involved in the struggle for liberation in the 1980s and early 1990s. The newly elected ANC-led government had promised, through its Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) 'base document', among other things to, provide basic needs, economic growth … and a democratized state geared at servicing the needs of all citizens.[3] It further promised through its new economic policy, Growth Employment and Redistribution (GEAR), to "increase annual growth by an average of 4,2 per cent, create 1,35 million new jobs by the year 2000, …".[4] Sadly, ten years of democracy has passed by with many of the youth activists still living under abject poverty. Most of them are unemployed; and many are unemployable because of lack of education and skills.

Isaac Mogase, cited by Marks, laments:

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[1] Interview with Ali Hlongwane through electronic mail, 24 March 2004

[2] Interview with Simon Mashishi

[3] See Marais, H. *South Africa: Limits to change: The political economy of transition,* (London, Zed Books, 2001), p.237

[4] ibid. p. 163

> …Some of them are drop-outs in school and nothing was done for them, you know, in terms of development or anything. Some of the youth of the '80s because of their experiences are now a lost generation.[5]

It is against this background that this chapter intends to explore whether the youths' involvement in the struggle for liberation has borne any fruits for them under the new dispensation. It will focus primarily on what the former AZANYU Tembisa branch's activists are engaged in now; whether they regret having being part of the struggle for liberation; and what their views of the new government are.

6.1 AZANYU Tembisa branch: The Way Forward

The first non-racial, non-sexist and democratic national elections came and past in 1994. Yet the socio-economic conditions of most of the youth that actively participated in the struggle for liberation has not changed. One of my interviewees exclaimed "it has worsened now". Most of these youth are unemployed and are still living at home with their parents in small matchbox houses. To illustrate this point it is worth studying the career of Mandla Matlala in some detail:

Matlala was born in Tembisa in 1968. He lived with both his parents and three siblings in a matchbox house in Tlamatlama section. Of the two parents, only his mother worked as a domestic worker. He started his school at the Siziba Lower Primary but soon left because of corporal punishment. He explains, "do you still remember the corporal punishment and all those things, and the distance of the school, I had to leave Siziba, which was at eNdulwini section and come to Tlamatlama Lower Primary School in 1975 or 1976".

Not long after that, he left Tlamatlama because of the language problem. In Tlamatlama, according to him, they taught in Sepedi, which he did not understand. He went on to attend at the Egcaleni Lower Primary School in Khalambazo section, but soon deregistered because, he recalls, "I failed to attend properly so I had to go to Nigel, Springs". In Nigel he attended at Ezimvini Lower Primary where he passed his standard two. He claims that because of the problems he experienced

[5] See Marks, *Young Warriors,* p.80

while living with his relatives in Nigel he decided to return to Tembisa. But he had lost interest in continuing with his studies. He left school in standard two.

His political involvement began during the student uprisings in Tembisa in 1984. He remarks, "I started to be active in politics. During 1984 we were active in politics of which by that time we were not knowing which political organization was leading them until 1986 when I met George Nyanga and Abbey Pheko". The two were organizing for AZANYU in Tembisa. He recounts: "Nyanga, Pheko, Mduduzi Zungu, and another guy called Malakia Lenono and another guy called Jabu Mdunge, well they gave me the direction. You see they gave me the 'political line' of the PAC and ANC. That's how I came to join AZANYU".

In the late 1980s Matlala, like many of his comrades in Tembisa, left the country via AZANYU Tembisa branch to join APLA in exile. Besides receiving military training he also trained as a truck mechanic. He recalls, "Before we came back we were given a certain sponsor from the Italians. They said, 'guys take this sponsor and do skills training with another training centre called Changombe Training Centre in Dar es Salaam'. We did truck mechanics for one year. That was from 1993 to 1994". In 1994 he returned to South Africa, and in 1995 he was integrated into SANDF. However, not long after that, he encountered problems which in the end forced him out of work. He remarks, "unfortunately in the same year, 1995, when I was deployed in my unit then started problems. After training then started problems whereby whites at Lenasia were telling us that this army still belongs to them. I decided that this was not right".

His problems in the army were further compounded when he wanted a transfer from Lenasia to Pretoria. In his words, "I felt that Lenasia was too far than Pretoria. And when I registered there I told them that I wanted to work in Pretoria. But that side (Pretoria) they sent me this side (Lenasia) and said you can work there in the meantime to close the space for those who are not there and that if there was space they would place another group and [I] would go to Pretoria".

He also had a problem concerning the job he was doing. He wanted to change jobs and do the job that he was qualified in. He remarks, "I am a qualified mechanic and I

wanted to do that job, but instead they placed me in Recovery. Recovery was to collect cars anywhere, which I was qualified in repairing these cars". He continues, "they can collect them and when they come I will repair them. But they refused to do that. Then I decided that it was not necessary for me to keep myself there. I left the army in December 1995".

Currently, Matlala is unemployed and lives at home in one of the backrooms. He has since tried to establish a carpentry business, but without success. In an interview he bemoaned *'ke bolowa ke tlala'* (I am starving).[6]

Sadly for Matlala, and many of his comrades, he does not possess the necessary academic qualifications that would enable him to get a job to support himself and his girlfriend and child. However he has not lost hope because he intends to be involved in community development projects.

Matlala's experience is one of the many that I have heard in Tembisa. Johannes Mahluza, a former member of AZANYU in the township and APLA cadre, is also unemployed and living at home. Mahluza was born in Tembisa in 1969. After his grandfather, who was a businessman, had bought a house in Natalspruit in the early 1970s he moved to Natalspruit to live with him. While in Natalspruit he attended school at Monde Lower Primary until 1976. In 1977 he returned to Tembisa to live with his mother. In Tembisa he attended school, first, at Thuthuka Higher Primary, and after completing standard five he went to Thuto Ke Matla High (TKM).

He remembers that it was while he was attending at TKM that he got involved in politics following the student uprisings which had erupted in the township in 1984. He remarks, "I could see that the kind of life we were living was not right; I couldn't take it. [I got] involved in student uprising in 1984. Remember that there were mayors at that time. We used to fight them because they were enriching themselves. I can still remember the Mayor used to [stay] down there we burned his shop".

[6] Interview with Mandla Matlala

Mahluza claims that at this stage he had developed a negative attitude towards school, and this resulted in him deciding to abandon his studies for politics. He recalls:

> One of the problems that I encountered, since I told you that my grandfather passed away, was that I had to walk to school – I couldn't catch a taxi because I didn't have money. So I would arrive late at school. Just imagine I had to walk from here in Makhulong to Emfihlweni [section], it's a long distance. So when I get there I would find that the school had already started. Then the teachers would punish me. Hey, son of the soil, they used to punish us with sjamboks, sticks from the trees, sometimes they would place pens between our fingers and press our fingers against them … And you would find that that day turns to be the worst day for me. So those are some of the things that made me to have an attitude towards education. I mean this resulted in many of us to hate the school which was created by [Hendrik] Verwoerd and his gang. You see, I did not attend for too long [maybe it was] for two or three years then I left school and got involved in underground military activities of APLA [and this was after] I had met APLA political commissars in Tembisa in 1985 [and that was when] "I became drawn to the Africanist politics.

Mahluza's involvement with APLA operatives resulted in him skipping the country in the late 1980s to receive military training in countries like Tanzania and Uganda. His interest and dedication in military activities earned him a promotion to become a political commissar within APLA. He recalls "because of this I was elected to train others". In 1994, after the elections, he returned to South Africa and was integrated into SANDF. While working for SANDF he was promoted to a rank of a sergeant. However, because of differences which arose within the military establishment between certain APLA cadres and the White officials he resigned from the force in 1998. Since then he has not worked.[7]

Unemployment seems to be a common problem facing former AZANYU activists in Tembisa, and by extension in other parts of the country. Tebogo Mphahlele, a former AZANYU activist in the township remarks [my] "primary concern is the high level of unemployment among AZANYU activists".[8]

[7] Interviews with Johannes "Joe" Mahluza; Mandla Matlala

[8] Interview with Tebogo Mphahlele

Letlapa Mphahlele narrates his first-hand experience of the hard conditions that some of the former APLA cadres are living under in the country. To throw light on this unfortunate situation I reproduce here a passage where Mphahlele writes about one of his many visits to see how some of his fellow combatants were living. He notes:

> I visited a cadre in his shack in Pretoria. He sat in the car with me, and introduced himself as Selby. I'm S'khulu, I said and firmly shook his trembling and sweaty hand. You might have heard about me outside. Mo-Afrika, I want to see inside your *mokhukhu* (shack), I said, and headed towards the cluster of shacks. 'No, comrade, not today I haven't swept'. …A paraffin stove stood in the middle of the shack, and a clumsily made bed that sagged in the middle hugged the corrugated iron wall. The smell of dagga hung thickly in the air. I picked up the stove and shook it. There was no paraffin in it. How do you cook, comrade? I asked, with the stove still in my hand. 'There's no food to cook', Selby said, lifting a cardboard box and turning it upside down to demonstrate that his pantry was empty. How do you survive without food? I asked, as I put down the stove. *'Bakhona abafowethu'* – my brothers are there. Like the one who stays next door. He works and he and others share their food with me. …I gave Selby thirty rand from the hundred rand that remained in my fast-drying coffers.[9]

However, not all former AZANYU activists in Tembisa are unemployed, and some have acquired jobs. For instance, among the working activists, Mashishi works as a Police Officer for the Ekurhuleni Metropolitan, Julian Mohlala is a trade unionist, Malakia Lenono works as a computer programmer, and Jorro Segabotle works at the Kempton Park Municipality as a councillor. Others work for the SANDF because AZANYU operated closely with APLA as fighters and couriers. And some work in various other sectors of the society.[10]

Nevertheless the rapidly worsening socio-economic conditions, coupled with the prevailing differences within the organization, left many of the AZANYU activists in the township demoralized and dejected. According to my interviewees, some of their comrades stopped participating in the branch's activities, while, others remained members of the branch only in name. Tebogo Mphahlele remarks:

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[9] Mphahlele*, Child of This Soil,* pp.145-146

[10]. Interview with Hlongwane, Electronic Mail, 28 January 2005. I am indebted to Hlongwane for highlighting this point to me

> I was saddened when I attended a meeting called by the PAC Tembisa branch in 1995 to see a low turnout. Activists have lost interest in the organization. There were about 30 people in that meeting.[11]

It appears that the Tembisa AZANYU branch lost a substantial number of its members and this paralyzed its activities. To garner support for this branch, the local PASO branch played a significant role. Nyandeni recalls:

> A few people were active in AZANYU. Most were not active because they did not attend meetings. This led to the dual membership between AZANYU and PASO. This was done to create more support for AZANYU.[12]

At this stage the local AZANYU and PASO branches participated in community campaigns. Nyandeni remembers, "we engaged in the anti-crime campaign, the Tembisa Health Forums … We volunteered to do police work and health work".[13]
For Mahluza the primary reason that caused many of the of AZANYU activists in the township to loose interest in the organization's activities was the PAC's decision to suspend the armed struggle. He observes:

> I think what made Africans to pull out of the PAC or to have a [negative] attitude towards it was the suspension of the armed struggle, because they wanted a total overthrowal of the system.[14]

It was at this stage, when AZANYU's role was no longer clearly identifiable, that some of the organization's youth activists began to think about the future of the organization, and the Africanists' organization in general. In 1995 they initiated a campaign to bring back harmony, stability and focus in the organization. Tebogo Mphahlele recalls that towards the end of 1995, Radinku and S'thembele Khala came up with the idea that [all the Africanist] activists should be contacted to come back.[15] They organized the Africanist Convention which was held in September in the same

[11] Interview with Tebogo Mphahlele

[12] Interview with Bheki Nyandeni

[13] ibid

[14] Interview with Johannes "Joe" Mahluza

[15] Interestingly both Radinku and Khala were in the Revolutionary Watchdogs faction. See Mphahlele, *Child of This Soil,* p. 140; interview with Nhlanhla Lebea

year at Vista University, Mamelodi Campus, Pretoria. Reflecting on this convention, Tebogo Mphahlele remarks:

> Towards the end of 1995 Mpuka Radinku and S'thembele Khala initiated the [campaign] to contact all the AZANYU activists, including those who were in the Revolutionary Watchdogs camp, to come together. That's when PASO [suggested] that a consultative conference should take place. A steering committee which was made up of Ike Mafole, Mpuka Radinku, S'thembele Khala and Ignatius Molapo was established and tasked to act as facilitators of the conference. The conference was opened by Stanley Mogoba. It was a fruitful conference because a resolution was taken that we should go back to our branches to revive them.[16]

In similar vein, Hlongwane remembers that:

> Among a number of issues dealt with were the divisions and labels among PAC members. I can safely say the label 'Revolutionary Watchdog' was buried at that conference, so are the labels against those who participated in the negotiations process.[17]

Hlongwane further notes that at the Convention "a number of papers were presented on the challenges facing the organization in the post 1994 period". "Some of the papers", he recalls, "outlined policy directions on key social and economic issues whilst others focused on organizational challenges".[18]

The Convention was important for two reasons. First, the PAC (together with its structures) defined its role in the post 1994 period to "…remain as a liberation movement because the African masses were not yet liberated". Second, it debated the issue of leadership. On this issue "the Convention adopted a resolution to hold a special congress where a new leadership would be elected to guide the organization to the 1999 national elections".[19] This transpired when a special congress held in Thohoyandou, Venda, in 1996 elected Stanley Mogoba, a Methodist Priest, as the president of the organization.

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[16] Interview with Tebogo Mphahlele

[17] Interview with Ali Hlongwane, Electronic mail, 28 January 2005

[18] Hlongwane, Unfinished Autobiography. P. 70

[19] ibid. p. 70

Tebogo Mphahlale believes that "Mogoba was elected as the president of the PAC because he was not linked to any of the factions within the organization (and its structures) that held opposing views; therefore, it was believed that he would bring the organization together".[20] To cement a new start AZANYU was renamed the Pan Africanist Youth Congress (PAYCO). The differences between the RW and *Amazabane* were resolved. Some of the RW members rejoined the PAC. For instance, the president of the RW faction, Mohloai, rejoined the "main" PAC, and was subsequently elected as the organization's national organizer under the presidency of Motsoko Pheko. Whether the PAC's youth wing's role under the presidency of Mogoba, and later Pheko improved is not known. This is a topic for further research.

Despite the internal differences within AZANYU, which in some occasions turned into bloody confrontations; and caused a poor performance by the PAC in both the 1994 and 1999 national elections; and the dire conditions that the former AZANYU activists are living under, the former members of the PAC's youth wing maintain that they do not regret having participated in the struggle for liberation, and most importantly, for having being committed members of the organization.

Mashishi explains:

> I was a youth confronted by apartheid and colonialism [I had to participate in the struggle]. I would regret it if I did not participate.[21]

In similar vein, Tebogo Mphahlele remarks:

> No I do not have regrets. What is important is that AZANYU groomed us from the streets. [If it was not because of AZANYU] maybe we would have been alcoholics. But because of it we are leaders. My only regret is when I see some individuals benefit themselves out of the movement.[22]

[20] Interview with Tebogo Mphahlele

[21] Interview with Simon Mashishi, Telephonically

[22] Interview with Tebogo Mphahlele

Notwithstanding this noble stance, some believe that if they had not participated in the struggle they would not be in a predicament they find themselves in now. Matlala laments:

> I have no regrets. But the way things are now I think my involvement in politics have wasted my time because if I did not participate in the struggle I would be in a position to make a living today and be a respected person. But things need to change.[23]

6.2 View of the new government

Allister Sparks in his book 'Tomorrow is Another Country' gave at least ten reasons why he believes South Africa will not slide to disaster as other African countries have done. He observes "… precisely because this is the last country to go through the liberation process, it can learn from the mistakes of the others …; and most importantly, South Africa is by far the most developed country in Africa, the only one which has undergone a full-blown industrial revolution, which has a sophisticated economic infrastructure, and whose people are accordingly at a higher level of development …".[24]

It is probably because of these reasons, and many more, that the new government managed – in a brief period in power – to bring about fundamental changes in the country. Marais commends it for the astounding progress it has made particularly at the superstructural level: the constitution, new legislation, new policies and frameworks, overhauling the state structures and refurbishing state systems.[25]

Notwithstanding the progress made by the government, it is also faced with the problem of meeting people's basic needs, particularly among those who were previously disadvantaged. It has been vehemently criticized for example, for failing to provide sustainable employment, to deal with the Human Immune Virus (HIV) and

[23] Interview with Mandla Matlala

[24] Sparks, *Tomorrow is another country,* pp.233-234

[25] Marais, *South Africa: Limits to Change,* p.305

Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) epidemic, and to reduce high levels of crime.[26]

Former AZANYU activists have offered more or less similar views about the new government. For instance, they view the government's progress as satisfactory, particularly when it comes to the fundamental political changes and its role in both continental and international affairs. Mashishi remarks:

> The Mbeki government is faring better in several positions. For instance, [it] foster[s] peace in the African continent. This will lead to South Africas' development. In all honesty when it comes to the governments' foreign policy this country is leading. Take for instance the example of NEPAD (New Economic Partnership for Africas Development), the establishment of the African Parliament, [the] change of OAU (Organization of African Unity) to AU (African Unity), in all these developments the Mbeki government has played an important role. However, the country's national economy is a problem. There is no redistribution of wealth. What the government has tried to do with the BEE it has created small elites. This is not benefiting everyone.[27]

However, not everyone is optimistic, Tebogo Mphahlele observes:

> There are certain changes, but they do not meet our expectations. For us change is social change. Fundamental changes are not there. Social life is still the same – in fact it is worse. There are no houses, roads are still not tarred, toilets are not functioning, rent tariffs are high, old laws of evictions are still there – and this time around are enforced by our own people. There's no free education as promised. I think the government is happy to promote [the culture] of illiteracy.[28]

Mphahlele went on to suggest that if the government intends to deal effectively with the growing problem of illiteracy it must establish more schools that mainly deal with adult education, such as Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET). These schools, according to him, should cater for the over-aged students. In conclusion, he remarks, "instead of dumping our youth the latter should be taught in these schools".[29]

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[26] For a more detailed account about the challenges facing the government, see Marais, *South Africa: Limits to change,* pp. 298-308.

[27] Interview with Simon Mashishi, Telephone, 30 January 2005

[28] Interview with Tebogo Mphahlele

[29] ibid

Some of the former members of AZANYU also hold the view that even though they accept the new government as a legitimate government it has failed to address fundamental questions like land redistribution and the plight of former political fighters languishing in the country's prisons. Hlongwane remarks:

> The PAC [and its structures] accepts the current government as a legitimately elected government by the majority in our country. But there are issues the [the PAC] are critical about. For example, the continued imprisonment of former APLA forces, the land claims should begin in 1913 when the process of conquest and land dispossession began, the notion of a 'rainbow nation' is a return to multi-racialism which the PAC [and its structures] called racism multiplied …[30]

These views suggest that the former AZANYU activists have no regrets for having participated in the struggle for liberation. However, what is poignantly clear is that inasmuch as they accept that the ANC-led government has made significant strides in addressing the fundamental political changes in the country, they also believe that it is still faced with problems particularly those that relate to the economic development of the country and its people. Their views accord with Sparks when he forewarns, "yet for all the new South Africa's advantages, there is one overriding challenge facing it. Apartheid has left the country with one of the world's widest gaps between the rich and poor. This must be closed or it will become politically dangerous".[31]

[30] Interview with Ali Hlongwane

[31] Sparks, *Tomorrow is another country,* pp.234-235