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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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2006-11-16T11:18:44Z
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Chapter Three

The emergence of students and youth organizations in Tembisa

In the 1980s most of the South African townships witnessed the re-emergence of students and youth organizations which had been severely suppressed by the NP government in the late 1970s. They played a vital role in the mobilization of students and youth around educational, civic and national grievances in general. The chapter will, first, trace attempts by various political activists in Tembisa during the 1970s to introduce young people to the politics of resistance. Second, it will focus on the formation of students' organizations in the township during this period.

The chapter will show that young people in Tembisa were introduced to the politics of resistance in a variety of ways. These included, contact with an ex-political prisoner from Robben Island; the safe environment that schools provided for political discussions and debates; and the fostering of political consciousness, mainly through the BCM. It will also suggest that young people in Tembisa were assimilated into the struggle through their participation in youth clubs of both church and community kind.

The chapter will further suggest that the students' and youth organizations were formed as a result of the changing tempo of political struggle in the country. An attempt will be made to show that following the launch of the Congress of South African Students (COSAS) in 1979, students' involvement in the political struggle was revived. Most significantly the chapter will illustrate that students in Tembisa played a vital role in the formation of youth structures in the township, specifically the Moya Youth Movement (MYM) and TEYCO. Although the chapter will primarily focus on Tembisa, reference will also be made to other townships in the country.

3.1 The origins of students' organizations in Tembisa from the early 1970s to 1980

Overt political resistance by youth became most visible from1983 in Tembisa. However, this does not mean that young people living in the township were politically inactive prior to this year.[1] On the contrary there had been a number of earlier attempts to both mobilize and organize young people dating back to the early 1970s. Young people in Tembisa were drawn into the struggle through various political routes. The release of political prisoners, especially those from Robben Island, played a vital role in the political conscientization of young people in Tembisa – and in many other townships.[2] Ramogale observes:

> When I came back to Tembisa from Robben Island in 1969 I was very much involved in helping students in their school work. They'll come to me and I'll help them in Mathematics; help them in Biology; and in Geography, and all those things. Guys like Shezi, Chicco Mphahlele I used to have lots of discussions with. They knew me that I am a guy that every Saturday I'll be coming from school – from Wits because that's where we were having our lectures or at SACHED. And that's when I started to have a rapport with the students. I wouldn't say I politicized them but if they wanted to know about politics I used to tell them. I would tell them about my understanding of the PAC. PAC was doing this and that. But I would not say go and become a member of the PAC, no![3]

However, as time went by the rapport that Ramogale had with the students based on "school work" grew. This eventuated in political work. He became involved in recruiting and assisting young people from Tembisa to leave the country in order to proceed for military training in exile. In his words:

> In 1974, 1975, 1976 the channels were being opened outside because that was when the first wave of the Robben Islanders were released. Ja, in 1969 it was us; 1970s it was [those who]

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[1] In this chapter the term 'young people' instead of youth is used to connote the category of protesters which were involved solely in students' organizations or activities. To read more about the comparison between the youth and young people, see Seekings, *Heroes or Villians*, pp. xii - 50

[2] For the role played by Zephania Mothopeng in 1974 when he secretly began the work of reconstructing an internal PAC cell in Krugersdorp, see Steven M. Davis *Apartheid's Rebels: Inside South Africa's Hidden War*, (London, Yale University Press, 1987), pp. 31-33

[3] Interview with Simon Ramogale. According to Ramogale, Shezi was killed in Germiston in the early 1970s – he was pushed in front of a train. Also see, interview with Mongezi Maphuthi

> had spent seven years. Then it was agreed that we had to get the channels of getting the youth out for [military] training. This was discussed while we were on Robben Island. And mostly it was the result of those who came [late on Robben Island] – who came around 1967-68. [In] 1967 we had [John] Pokela there. Then we said, guys look the situation is now like this and that outside, we need to follow this and that; work with the trade unions, go and create channels with the outside countries like Lesotho, Zambia and other independent African states. So now we had to get people in those places to go and organize. And people internally had to get the guys out to go and be trained. That was the time when the lull of the 1960s was getting to an end in the late 1960s and early 1970s.[4]

Ramogale's instruction – when he was released from prison – was to "work" with the students. He recalls:

> In Tembisa I was supposed to be involved in the formation of trade unions and, as well, in the students' movement because of my studies. They said, 'you will have a cover for being [involved] in students' discussions because you are a student.[5]

According to him the aim of the (PAC) leadership on Robben Island was to target people who were about to be released, assign them to be involved in trade unions, in students' organizations and church activities. He notes that "the idea was to make sure that people do not just come out (of prison) without a duty to perform". He continues, "it was a process of implementing what was contained in the disciplinary code of the PAC".[6] Clause 8(c) of the PAC Disciplinary Code states that "it should be the duty of each and every member to strive to convert people to the ideas of the PAC and into the movement itself".[7]

Responding to a question whether young people in Tembisa adhered to the PAC's call that they should flee into exile to receive military training, Ramogale remarks cautiously, but emphatically:

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[4] ibid

[5] ibid

[6] ibid

[7] Robben Island Museum Mayibuye Archives Historical Papers Section, Political Organizations, Box 1-35, *The basic documents of the Pan Africanist Congress of South Africa, March 1965*

> Yes, yes, they went out. But now going out the problem was [that] the political structure of the PAC abroad was in disarray. Remember that that's when there were those internal fights. So if the organization was not properly organized outside [then people would find it difficult to join]. Many of them left under the name of the PAC. The only thing they could do was to go and join the ANC. There are people that I transported to certain points and they'll be taken from there to other points. [I even transported] some those who were coming back. They'll come and I'll get a call that the boys are somewhere please get them a safe house.[8]

His observation is confirmed in Letlapa Mphahlele's autobiography, *Child of this Soil*. Mphahlele recalls that when he arrived in exile in Botswana, still trying to figure out which political organization to join he was attracted to the PAC. He writes "I knew my home was in PAC. … It was only the infighting within the PAC that kept me from joining the organization then".[9] Amongst those he helped flee the country to join the PAC, Ramogale remembers the son to Maleka. He remarks "I think he died in Tanzania because his father even died not knowing where his son was".[10]

Ramogale's interview highlights two key points. First, that at this stage some of the young people's political awareness had developed to an extent that they had decided to leave the country to receive military training in exile. Second, the PAC was determined to oppose the government militarily.

Despite the PAC's exile history, which Lodge describes as "… an unusually troubled one"[11], the PAC managed, in the mid-1970s, to recruit volunteers to its military wing, APLA. Lodge notes that "gradually the PAC replaced the Basotholand Peoples Congress (BPC) members with its own men, as from 1975, APLA ranks started being replenished by the first exiles from the Black Consciousness Movement".[12]

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[8] ibid

[9] See, Mphahlele, L. *Child of This Soil, My Life as a Liberation Fighter,* (Cape Town, Kwela Book, 2002), pp. 52-62. For a detailed account of the PAC's infighting in exile, also see Lodge, 'The Pan Africanist Congress' in Ian Liebenberg et.al (eds), *The Long March,* pp. 104 -123

[10] Interview with Simon Ramogale

[11] Lodge, 'The Pan Africanist Congress' in Ian Liebenberg et.al (eds), *The Long March* p.116

[12] ibid, p. 119

Another political opportunity for young people in Tembisa was to be found at school. From the early 1970s schools provided essential space, initially, for political conscientization, and later for political mobilization. Jonathan Hyslop sees this as a result of the changing educational policy in the mid-70s. According to him, economic demands meant that more semi-skilled employees were needed. Following complaints by employers that the demand for skilled and semi-skilled workers was such that white workers alone could not meet it, the government made money available for the building of schools, particularly secondary schools".[13]

Bonner and Nieftagodien note that this "resulted in a massive 500% increase in the number of African pupils between 1970 and 1974".[14] This led to the expansion in the number of secondary schools' students. However, this expansion was not equalled by a growth in appropriate job opportunities for the recently matriculated students or for the out of school students".[15] This frustrated many students and they became resentful of the status quo.

For Bonner and Nieftagodien problems in black schools were further "exacerbated by the government's decision in 1974 and 1975 to do away with the standard six year in primary school, effectively allowing all pupils that passed standard five to proceed directly to secondary school".[16] This caused overcrowding in schools, which made it difficult for teachers to teach (as well as to control students). Mongezi Maphuthi, who was a Form 1 student at Tembisa High School in 1974, recalls:

> Well in Tembisa high when we arrived we were rather too many. In our class we were about 70 or 80. And there was a shortage of classes and schools in 1974. And what happened was that we were taken to Mvelaphanda Primary School at Sthama section. That [school became] a branch of the high school. I mean teachers would have a period at the high school and move

[13] Hyslop, J. 'Social Conflicts Over African Education in South Africa From The Late 1940s To 1976', Ph.D. Thesis, (University of the Witwatersrand, 1990), p. 79

[14] Bonner and Nieftagodien, *Kathorus,* p. 68

[15] Hyslop, J. 'Schools, Unemployment and Youth: Origins and Significance of Student and Youth Movements, 1976-1987' in Bill Nasson and John Samuel (eds.), *Education: From Poverty to Liberty,* (Cape Town, David Philip, 1990), pp. 79-87

[16] Bonner and Nieftagodien,*Kathorus,* p. 68

> down to Sthama to attend our period. I remember teacher Molala who was teaching us Agriculture would move from there and come to Sthama.[17]

These conditions prevailed in other townships. In Alexandra Township and KwaThema, for instance, similar conditions were prevalent. Jaki Seroke who was a student in Alexandra Township in 1973 remembers:

> In 1973 we were given an aptitude test. The Department of Bantu Education gave us an aptitude test as a trial to see whether those [who took it could pass]. There was still standard six. There was a certificate for standard six during that period. We were in standard five when they gave us [that test]. They made us skip standard six and we went straight to the secondary school [to do Form one]. At our school there were about 11 of us. There was a problem in that there was overcrowding at the school. There were no classrooms for us. So we used a gym at the [Alexandra] stadium – it was a boxing gym. So we attended in a place that in the evenings was used as a gym and during the day we used it as a class. And I must tell you we had a problem: there was a shortage of classrooms.[18]

Andile Ncamane, who was a student at Phulong Secondary School in KwaThema recounts dramatically:

> Hey, hey, it was a mess. I can easily say some times we would be 70 in a class. I mean in Phulong Secondary School at one point in [class number] 3D we were about 85 in our class. They then broke the partition that divided the two classes. Then they had to combine 3C and 3D and made [it] one class because we were so many. One guy, Michael Hlatshwayo, who used stay in Mofolo, [Soweto], a friend of mine (but I don't know what chased him away from there he came to stay here in KwaThema) he used to smoke right at the back [of the class and the] teacher would be there in front [teaching]. That shows how overpopulated we were. And suddenly he'd sneak out of the class through a window and he'd go. We were too many in that class…[19]

Overcrowding made students increasingly restive, and forced teachers to "resort to authoritarian methods of controlling [them]. And this further increased the students'

[17] Interview with Mongezi Maphuthi

[18] Interview with Jaki Seroke, conducted by Tshepo Moloi, Illovo, 25 August 2004

[19] Interview with Andile Ncamane, conducted by Tshepo Moloi, 14 September 2004, KwaThema , SADET Oral History Project

resentment".[20] Reflecting on how teachers in the 1970s dealt with undisciplined students Teboho Tsenase, a former student in Tembisa in the 1970s, remarks:

> At some stage we were doing gardening and a lady teacher lost her purse with money inside, [the] male teachers came to search. 'Hey, where's the money and all that?' I think some of the boys connived to say '*Are re ke bare ena ya ko Freistata* (i.e. Let's say it is this fool from the Free State). So I was called in there [and] I was given a great hiding. And I asked 'People, why are you beating me; what have I done?' They said, 'You must tell us where the money is'. So I tried without help. So these guys really beat me up badly – and I was never beaten like that before. The principal arrived while they had given me a break. They gave me a break - they were going to beat me again. I showed him how they had beaten me and he couldn't believe it. He asked, 'Why?' And they said, 'We suspect he had stolen the money'. He rebuked them [and said] 'without proof you are not supposed to do that'.[21]

Faced with overcrowded, and in some instances the lack of educational facilities such as books, desks, laboratory instruments, students began to question the effectiveness of the education system to equip them adequately for the future.

In addition schools provided students with a political opening where they could meet in a safe environment (and meet with other students from other schools) to exchange and share information about the political situation in the country. Clive Glaser, responding to Nosipho Diseko's[22] claim (that the Department of Bantu Education was highly vigilant in keeping politics out of the school) confirms that "… schools offered … opportunities for discussion and debate, even if informal". He continues "high schools were also important in bringing together literate, inquisitive youths with similar social backgrounds and grievances".[23] Debates in this regard became crucial in shaping students' political consciousness. Tsenase recalls:

> Now this school [Tembisa High] and the schools in the townships around the East Rand debated. There was this thing called schools' debates – a very powerful medium of passing

[20] Bonner and Nieftagodien, N, *Kathorus,* p. 69

[21] Interview with Teboho Tsenase

[22] Diseko, N. 'The Origins and Development of the South African Student Movement' in *Journal of Southern African Studies* (JSAS), Vol. 18, No. 1, March 1991

[23] Glaser, C. 'We must infiltrate the Tsotsis'; School Politics and Youth Gangs in Soweto, 1968-1976' *Journal of Southern African Studies* (JSAS), Vol. 24, No. 2, June 1988, p. 302

> information on [from one] to another. So we'd attend debates. The senior students, who were old also by age, and also senior by standard, were in charge of the debates. There were two or so teachers to act as adjudicators. And the topics that were [debated] were [topics] like 'The tree of liberty grows better when watered with the blood of the martyrs'; 'The pen is mightier than the sword'. You know [topics] like that that would make you ask yourself why things were the way they were. We would flock to the debates. Debates were on Fridays.[24]

The debates were taken very seriously and encouraged students to search for information. Glaser notes that "debating encouraged intellectual inquisitiveness and research".[25] Khotso Seathlolo, cited by Glaser, observed that "debates were really enriching because you couldn't be a good debater if you didn't keep track of current affairs, if you weren't an avid reader".[26] Tsenase recalls that students read a variety of books such as *Cry the Beloved Country* and *Animal Farm,* with different points of view that opened their eyes to the oppressive situation in the country.

The safe environment provided by the school enabled students to raise questions that they would not otherwise raise outside of school because of fear of being reprimanded or scolded, and this deepened their desire of wanting to know more about certain issues beyond the prescribed curriculum. Madlala observes:

> Well initially I think, if you would understand, we were told that heaven is up there. And now you start to understand History, [Science] learning about planets, Saturn, Jupiter, and so forth and so on. Now you start questioning where [was] the planet heaven. You see these are some of the questions that we [asked]. And you start knowing, as well, that the world is round. That's when we were starting knowing that the world is round. That, you know, when you're pointing up, you [are] actually not pointing up you are pointing sideways in terms of the position in which South Africa is in the globe. And, you know, starting to reason some of those things. So we had a lot of debates and arguments around some of those things. We would have these debates with other fellow students and the teacher. I think our teacher had a tough time having to explain some of these things because we would challenge him very

[24] Interview with Teboho Tsenase, 10 September 2004. According to Tsenase teachers at Tembisa High School who facilitated the debates in the 1970s were Mrs Masiza, Mrs Nkumane and Miss Joyce Makhafula

[25] Glaser, 'We must infiltrate the Tsotsis', p. 306

[26] ibid. pp. 306-307

> strongly. I think that's where I learned to be – not interrogative – inquisitive about how life is and what is happening around us.[27]

The debates were not confined to Tembisa High School. In some occasions Tembisa High would challenge other schools around the East Rand or even as far as Witbank in the then Eastern Transvaal (Now Mpumalanga). Tsenase recalls:

> I remember we went on a trip to Witbank to play sport. There were also debates. So we debated with [students] in Witbank about various kinds of topics and we realized that we were sharing the same frustrations and the same problems, and we have the same desire to be free from the situation of being governed by those who hate us. So the debates were a very powerful means of communication.[28]

Although debates became one of the important vehicles of conscientizing students, they only began to have an impact on students in Tembisa in 1975. At the beginning of the 1970s students debated apolitical topics. Maphuthi observes: "You know the debates that we used to have [were] not much of politics – but we were just debating. The question of politics came in 1975 when we were doing Form two at eNxuweni".[29] Greg Malebo echoes Maphuthi: "The [debates] were not really politically viable. I think we [had topics] like 'Should girls be educated?' or 'Should boys be in the leadership?' You know that kind of nonsense. But at that stage we found them interesting".[30]

The situation in Tembisa schools contrasted with that in schools around Soweto, such as Morris Isaacson and Naledi High. Glaser notes that debating societies in these schools "by 1973 … had been thoroughly penetrated by the Students Christian Movement (SCM) and SASM activists".[31] However, this does not imply that students in Tembisa during this period had not been politically conscientized. On the contrary,

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[27] Interview with Figo Madlala

[28] Interview with Teboho Tsenase

[29] Interview with Mongezi Maphuthi

[30] Interview with Greg Malebo, conducted by Tshepo Moloi, 14 October 2004, Tembisa, SADET Oral History Project

[31] Glaser, 'We must infiltrate the Tsotsis', p. 306

they were politically aware of the prevailing political situation in the country. This was also largely due to the BCM's influence.

Because of the prevailing unequal standard of education (and inequality in general) in the country, Black students became more receptive to the BCM's ideas. This was mainly due to what black students experienced in their daily lives – racial discrimination. For Tsenase and his peers the situation was the way it was because Whites were oppressing Blacks. Tsenase observes:

> You know, when we went to town we saw young people like ourselves going to better schools. Their schools were double-stories. We saw them riding buses to school when we walked. I lived in Sedibeng section. Sedibeng is about six kilometers from Tembisa high. I walked to school. All of us knew that something was terribly wrong and [was] against us. And that thing was the White people because they were in charge. And we also knew that we were more than they were in numbers. And we were wondering how did it [happen] that the majority be ruled by the minority. We never got the answers, but we used to debate [those issues].[32]

During the 1970s the BCM ideas were propagated through organizations such as the South African Students Organization (SASO), the Black Peoples Convention (BPC) and SASM. Maphai claims that SASO and BPC were established in 1969 and 1972, respectively.[33] Diseko, on the other hand, asserts that SASM was established in 1968.[34] Paulus Zulu notes that "the main purpose of the Black Consciousness Movement was to instill a sense of being and pride in the black man, who was perceived not as a negation of the white norm but as a complete entity with human dignity and worth".[35]

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[32] Interview with Teboho Tsenase

[33] Maphai, V. 'The role of black consciousness in the liberation struggle' in Ian Liebenberg et.al (eds.), *The Long March*, (Pretoria, HAUM, 1994), p. 126

[34] See Diseko, 'The Origins and Development of SASM', p. 42

[35] Zulu, P. 'The politics of internal resistance groupings' in Peter L. Burger and Bobby Godsell (eds.), *A future South Africa: Visions, Strategies and Realities*, (Tafelberg, Human & Rousseau, 1988), p. 129

At this stage branches of SASO and SASM had already being formed in other townships. However, in Tembisa there were none in existence.[36] This is contrary to some authors' assertion that there was a SASM branch in Tembisa.[37] Although there were no branches of SASO and SASM formed in Tembisa however, there were individuals who exercised a strong BC influence in the township. Maphuthi remembers people like Mthuli Shezi, Thami Myele, Mxolosi Moyo and James Moleya. "The latter", he emphasizes, "were exponents of the BC ideas".[38]

It appears that the strong BC influence in Tembisa filtered down to some of the young people in the township. Maphuthi recalls:

> Man, it was very strong because at the time the guy that you would hear of was James Moleya. James Moleya was an artist, also a BC person. And at the time even ourselves were also organized under the BC. I mean we went to some meetings of the BC. I think we attended a lot of BC meetings together with Jaki Seroke and Mpiyakayipheli Figland.[39]

The BCM's influence was also instilled in students by the former students of the so-called 'bush colleges', who had taken up teaching posts in Tembisa High School.[40] One of these teachers was Ralph Mothiba. Mothiba was a student at Turfloop in the early 1970s. After he had resumed his teaching post in Tembisa he became a member of the BPC. Tsenase remembers that Mothiba – as a teacher – was harassed by the police for being an active member of the BPC. He explains "we were aware [of this] because even when Steve Biko died, Mr. Mothiba was one of those whom we knew had gone to the funeral".[41]

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[36] For instance, Nosipho Diseko points out that in 1968 SASM was centred at Diepkloof Secondary School. See, Diseko, 'The Origins and Development of SASM', p. 43

[37] See, Brooks and Brickhill, *Whirlwind,* p. 88; Karis and Gerhart, *From protest to challenge*, p. 162

[38] Interview with Mongezi Maphuthi

[39] ibid

[40] 'Bush Colleges' were tertiary institutions based in the homelands. Examples of such institutions were the University of the North (also known as Turfloop) and University of Zululand (Ngoye). For a more detailed account of the role of the ex-Bush Colleges' students, see Glaser, 'We must infiltrate the Tsotsis', p. 304-306

[41] Interview with Teboho Tsenase, 10 September 2004

Reflecting on Mothiba's influential role, Malebo remarks:

> Ja, we had Ralph Mothiba who was in the BPC. He really played a role in shaping our political thinking in that during the History lesson in particular we'd talk about Kwame Nkrumah, African Unity, Patrice Lumumba. He'd talk about all those things. And there was also Mr. Masiza, who taught us English. In a way in terms of knowledge I think Mr. Mothiba played an important role in shaping our thinking.[42]

In similar vein, Seroke proudly remembers:

> I was liasing very closely with people in Tembisa. We were involved in politics. I remember in 1978, I think, when Robert Sobukwe died in February I organized. We went there to commemorate the death of the "Professor" and the principal [of Tembisa High], Ralph Mothiba, was a member of the BPC. So I asked him "can we come there and mobilize?" He just gave us the platform. So we went there to mobilize the students and commemorate Sobukwe, and so on.[43]

The BCM's influence filled black students with a sense of pride about who they were. Tsenase observes:

> We were not as naïve as the authorities would have loved to think. You know there were songs like *tswang-tswang le bone ngwana o tshwana le lekhalathi* (i.e. all come out and see our child looks like a Coloured). You see we did ask ourselves why do we think to be Coloured is more important than what we are. How can you desire to be someone you are not? So we could really put things into perspective.[44]

The BCM's influence on students in Tembisa also made them aware of the political situation prevailing in the country. In the words of Tsenase:

> I remember that when we went to town we had to carry a pass. Even during school holidays if you are in town your pass used to have a stamp from school to say that you were on holidays from this day to this day. There was a table there so that you are not arrested. So we knew that at the station – railway station –there were escalators for blacks and for whites. We saw all those things – those were open to everyone. When we were together during school breaks and at youth clubs we would ask ourselves 'why didn't our parents fight off this apartheid

[42] Interview with Greg Malebo

[43] Interview with Jaki Seroke

[44] Interview with Teboho Tsenase, 9 June 2004

> system?' We didn't really call it apartheid. We were calling it the white government because to us it was just a matter between blacks and whites. Because we saw that whites were enjoying life.[45]

The churches' youth clubs also provided an organizational home for young people in the township. These were established to keep young people in the township away from trouble. But they acted in turn as a vehicle that would help shape the political consciousness of young people in the township. Tsenase remarks:

> You see churches had youth clubs. I was a member of the Catholic Church, my friends like Mabunda were in the N.G.[Kerk]. And there were youth clubs in those churches, I can tell you. The youth clubs were very powerful. We understood the youth clubs were there to keep young people engaged in positive activities so that we don't go out to do things that were not benefiting us. Well, there were no drugs but *dagga* was there. And you know jollying around without doing good it was not a wonderful thing. So, youth clubs would keep us there. We were singing [and doing] drama.[46]

However, young people involved in the churches' youth clubs did not restrict themselves to religious dramas. They also dramatized the prevailing political situation at the time. Tsenase recounts:

> Remember that there were some of the plays of Gibson Kente, which were the things of the time. And some of the books, which we were dramatizing [were books like] 'Cry the Beloved Country'. It was banned but we had copies. Eh, the drama plays that were in then which people used to watch in community halls were telling the youth that this is not how it should be. So the youth clubs were encouraging youth to do drama about anything. So when we came to school we also dramatized [about these things]. So we saw that these things go along.[47]

Some of the youth clubs, although operated under churches, were explicitly political, or at least some of their members were politically inclined. In 1975 some of the youth in Tembisa formed a political youth under the pretext that it was a church youth club. They called it the eNdulwini Youth Club. Maphuthi remembers:

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[45] ibid

[46] ibid

[47] ibid

> We had a youth club at eNdulwini. I remember that that youth club was at the Roman Catholic Church under Deacon Nyathi. There was this openness that every youth can join this youth club [even if there weren't members of the Catholic Church]. I was the secretary of the youth club and Sipho Kubeka was the chairman. We had people like Mpikayipheli Figland. We travelled a lot. I remember at one stage we went to … what's that place? It was somewhere not far from Pretoria. I think we were at St. Peters. That is where I was debating about something. They asked 'who would we consider as a person emulating Jesus Christ in the whole world?' I remember citing [Steve] Biko. And I was articulating serious views about that.[48]

Not surprisingly, after this outing the youth club's relation with the church's authorities deteriorated. This resulted in the church deciding to withdraw the membership of the non-Catholic members in the youth club. Following this decision the youth club ceased to exist. Maphuthi recalls:

> When we came back, I think, Father Mark did not like it as he got the report – I am not saying that was the reason. [But] I think that was one of the reasons that led the Catholic Church to say to all those who were not Catholics must withdraw from the youth club. [They said] the youth club must solely be for the Catholic youth. The youth [club became] defunct, and that was the end of it. That was around 1975.[49]

It is evident that youth clubs operated beyond churches guidelines. At this stage community youth clubs had also been formed. Some students even established youth clubs at their schools in order to mobilize fellow students. Tsenase remarks:

> There were other youth clubs outside churches – in the community. For instance, I remember that in 1978 we actually formed another youth club right here at Tembisa High. It was after those riots and things were now settling down so we wanted to give direction. [Our] youth club was just Tembisa Youth Club. In that youth club it was myself, I can mention Solly Molepo. The other guy is a doctor now, Dr Mandla Mphuthi.[50]

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[48] Interview with Mongezi Maphuthi. Sipho Kubeka mentioned by Mongezi Maphuthi should not be confused with Sipho Kubeka who was a trade unionist from Alexandra Township. For a detailed account of Sipho Kubeka's, the trade unionist, life history see his interview with Noor Nieftagodien, 10 June 2003. Alexandra Social History Project.

[49] ibid

[50] Interview with Teboho Tsenase

The Tembisa Youth Club, like the churches' youth clubs, also engaged in singing and performing drama. However, there is no evidence to suggest that it engaged in political activities or was led by politically conscientized youth like the eNdulwini Youth Club.[51]

It is thus evident that young people living in Tembisa in the 1970s were drawn into politics in a diverse range of routes. Notwithstanding this, the period between 1970 and mid-1975 no attempt had been made by these young people to form an explicitly political youth organization in the township.

However, it was not long before the situation changed. Momentarily, students in Tembisa High in late 1975 formed the Tembisa Students Organization (TSO), which had a short period of existence. Madlala recalls:

> … We launched TSO in Tembisa High. I can't remember who were in the executive of TSO. But I think amongst others Elliot Dhlomo was there – but I'm not sure. But I know that Brian Mazibuko was in the executive of TSO. TSO did not exist for too long. If you take the situation that TSO was formed late in 1975, so it could have [had] very few months of existence …. prior to the uprisings. TSO had to take over some of the issues that we discussed related to the formation of the Students Representative Council (SRC).[52]

The formation of this organization was precipitated by the government's decision to introduce Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in black schools. Black students opposed the policy because they perceived Afrikaans as the oppressors' language. This ignited the situation that resulted in the Soweto students' uprisings – which then spread all over the country.[53] Madlala observes:

> In Tembisa students' concern over the use of Afrikaans began in 1973. In 1973 I was in Tembisa high doing my Form 1. My subjects were Maths, Arithmetic, History and Geography and Health Studies and Agriculture and Languages: Isizulu, English and Afrikaans. Other than the Afrikaans language the other subject which we were taught in Afrikaans was Agriculture. Agriculture was called *Die Landbou.* Teacher Molala taught us this subject.

[51] For a detailed account about the role of youth clubs in the struggle, see Seekings*, Heroes or Villains?,* pp. 22-24

[52] Interview with Mike Figo Madlala, 5 November 2004

[53] See Lodge*, Black Politics,* pp.321-356 ; Brooks and Brickhill, *Whirlwind,* pp.7-35

> The first day in class he asked us 'W*at is die grond?'* (what is the soil?) How do you explain what soil is in Afrikaans? And communication was difficult because we had to respond in Afrikaans. [Someone] said '*Die grond is bietjie* things' (Soil is very small things). We could not explain *'wat is die grond?'* Then he read it out for us in the book what soil is in Afrikaans. But still we could not understand what that was. [So every time he asked us this question] we would repeat exactly what the text book was saying …[54]

Students' unfamiliarity with the language and a high failure rate at Tembisa High in the first quarter of the year resulted in students complaining against being taught Agriculture in Afrikaans. Madlala remarks:

> Well, we couldn't understand a thing. [So], we complained to say we don't understand this language. In fact there was a dismal failure rate in the first quarter such that it was clear that students didn't understand Afrikaans. We … said we wanted to change the subject. They changed the language from Afrikaans to English in 1973 after the first quarter. So we had to go and buy the English text books.[55]

Students' protest against the Afrikaans language in 1973 served as a catalyst for major protests in mid-1976. It was therefore not coincidental that the students who led the protests in 1976 were those students who were in Form 1 in 1973. People like Figo Madlala and Brian Mazibuko played a leading role in these protests.

The students' protest in 1973, notwithstanding, it was in 1975 that students began to critically question the use of Afrikaans, and to weigh its benefits for their future careers. Tsenase observes:

> Look I grew up in the Free State so Afrikaans was not a problem, but I think I could decipher that to be able to do things in Afrikaans was not beneficial. I mean we were young but we understood that the [whole] world doesn't speak Afrikaans. We've read that Jan van Riebeck came here in 1652, he was not in Zimbabwe, in Nigeria. So, we understood very well that Afrikaans is our language as South Africans and it has nothing to do [with what was happening] across the borders. Then we saw that we were being stifled. Then the fear of being kept in the cage of the so-called Republic of South Africa was great.[56]

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[54] Interview with Figo Madlala

[55] ibid

[56] Interview with Teboho Tsenase

In similar vein, Malebo recalls:

> I think we were told once we were doing Form 1 in 1974 that as from next year you must know it was going to be Afrikaans. You know, because of the fact that Afrikaans was seen as an oppressive language … many people hated Afrikaans. In fact the majority of people in our class did not really want Afrikaans. The argument was that what [were] we going to do with Afrikaans. It was not an international language. We were unhappy …[57]

The issue of Afrikaans did not only affect the students but the teachers as well. Although they were not as vocal in their opposition as the students they, nevertheless, voiced their dissatisfaction especially among their friends and families. Ramogale recollects:

> I was getting this information mostly from the teachers who happened to know me. We had guys like Mangaba – he was the principal and teaching Afrikaans. There was also the principal of Tembisa High, Seboni. No, most of them were not in favour of it. But you have to understand their position. They couldn't be explicit and say that this is rubbish. But those that I knew would say 'No, it's not on'. They had learnt all these things in English. How were they going to start teaching Biology in Afrikaans? So it was not only a concern for the students, but the teachers as well.[58]

Similar sentiments were expressed by teachers from other areas as well. One teacher remarked: "you just looking at the Junior Certificate and Matriculation results and you don't have to look far to realize that Afrikaans is the killer subject. And the principals can tell you what a sweat to get teachers willing to offer Afrikaans, let alone being capable and qualified to teach it".[59]

The government's uncompromising position over the issue of Afrikaans resulted in student uprisings on June 16, 1976 which started in Soweto. In Tembisa students embarked in a solidarity march the following day on the 17. Reporting on this demonstration a newspaper article recorded "On the east Rand, African pupils in

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[57] Interview with Greg Malebo

[58] Interview with Simon Ramogale

[59] *The World,* 13 February 1976, cited in Ndlovu, Sifiso Mxolisi *The Soweto Uprisings: Counter-memories of June 1976,* (Johannesburg, Ravan, 1988), p. 8

Tembisa, near Kempton Park, staged a sympathy march with Soweto. They carried placards, which read 'Away with Afrikaans'.[60] Madlala recalls:

> [On the 16th] we finished the day normally. It was on the 17th the headlines were in the newspapers 'There's a march that had taken place in Soweto'. That was when in the morning at the assembly there was a feeling [that] something was going to happen. And very quickly the word was going around. We were then [directed] to a class where we then discussed as students the situation as it was happening in Soweto. Of course there were a number of [politically conscious students] who were involved. You could sense from the way in which they were participating. One of these people who were in the leadership was Absolom Mazibuko. [In] that meeting we resolved that we [were] also going to march. And we said our march would go to Boitumelong Senior Secondary School because they were also affected by Afrikaans. We were supposed to discuss [with them].[61]

Remembering the events as they unfolded, Malebo recounts:

> I remember we read [in] the *Rand Daily Mail* about what was happening in Soweto and said this is it. There were people who were in the senior classes who took up the leadership. As I said this whole thing was on Wednesday, and on Thursday there were those discussions. We would bunk classes, but be around [the school]. So on Thursday then during [those discussions] we had Kenneth Phasane, Eddie Dube, Ngoako Ramathlodi, Brian Mazibuko and Figo Madlala. We were saying we're affected by Afrikaans as well. And what are we going to do when we start working; what are going to do with Afrikaans? We need to be taught in English. The resolution was that we are going to march. A march was called on Thursday. And during that meeting we had somebody from Soweto, I think, it was Dan Montsisi. Dan Montsisi came to Tembisa. And then a committee was formed that was supposed to direct the march. I'm talking about Kenneth Phasane, Eddie Dube - others I can't remember. The leadership then took a decision that we should write placards. They said we should do the same as we saw in the *Rand Daily Mail* [people holding placards written] 'Away with Afrikaans'. The instruction came from the leadership.[62]

Tsenase echoes Madlala and Malebo:

> [At] lunch time students were standing in groups talking about [the Soweto uprisings]. We were reading *The World*, which was the newspaper then. The newspaper would tell [us] what was happening in other parts of the country, in Soweto. And when we heard that June 16 was

[60] Robben Island Museum, Mayibuye Archives, Historical Papers Section, Soweto 1976, Box Number 38, see, *The Cape Times*, Friday, June 18 1976

[61] Interview with Mike Figo Madlala

[62] Interview with Greg Malebo

> like that in Soweto, it happened on the 17 here in Tembisa. The very next day a big march ensued – it was a big march.[63]

After the meeting students marched from Tembisa High School to Boitumelong Senior Secondary School located in Moriting section to discuss the Afrikaans issue. However, on the way the police, who had barricaded the road, disrupted the march. The march did not reach its intended destination. Madlala explains:

> We had already moved from Tembisa High. We were close to Boitumelong. We were somewhere in Mashimong [section] when we were disrupted. The police tear-gassed us and unleashed dogs on us. Students started running helter -skelter. [We] ran into a toilet. We got into a toilet I'm sure we were about 15, if not, 20 – in one toilet. It was easy to go in but when we had to get out we couldn't because we were pressing the door out.[64]

Malebo recalls that after the march was disrupted they vented out their anger on everything they perceived as apartheid symbols.

> What happened was that we went to Boitumelong. And the police broke the march. Then we went wild. It was like this was organized, and I don't think it was. In that I remember on my own I went to a bottlestore in Leralla – next to Leralla Station – which was owned by what was known as the East Rand Development Board. I must be honest no one really told me to go there, but I knew that it was the symbol of apartheid. And we came to learn that others had gone to a bottlestore in Sedibeng [section]. It was spontaneous. So, we then burnt the bars, bottlestores and we took some straights - for the first time we got drunk.[65]

The mood had changed from a peaceful protest to confrontation. Students' demands went beyond the issue of language. Now they demanded the abolition of Bantu Education and apartheid in general. Madlala observes:

> From the 18th the language changed from that we [were going] *to* approach Boitumelong to discuss Afrikaans as [the] medium of instruction and object against it. People were now talking about Bantu Education being a bad system. And as well they were talking about apartheid system. You know, to say we are oppressed as a nation. Hence on the 18th

[63] Interview with Teboho Tsenase

[64] Interview with Mike Figo Madlala

[65] Interview with Greg Malebo

> bottlestores were attacked. You know all the bottlestores in Tembisa were destroyed, except for one the Thabethe bottlestore. It was attacked several times but they failed to destroy it.[66]

The destruction of government institutions continued. Tsenase remarks:

> A lot of institutions that were seen as government institutions were burnt down. You know, the municipality had erected a lot of beerhalls. This is a building where they sell *umqombothi* (sorghum beer). Well, some of them did sell Castle Lager. They had a big yard and benches. We saw that our fathers on Fridays instead of going home they were going there to spend our monies there on drunkenness, instead of helping us get free. We also burnt the offices of municipality where rent was paid. There were two of them. One was in the East and the other on the west [of the township]. They were razed to the ground.[67]

Responding to a question whether their decision to destroy and burn government institutions in the township was discussed before the march, Tsenase succinctly recalls:

> Ja, [that] was discussed. I remember vividly that before the march these things were discussed. The burnings happened after coming together. We came together here in the great hall of Tembisa High School. We were addressed by our leaders. They began by mentioning things [which were troubling the] societies such as Afrikaans - the compulsory use of Afrikaans, Bantu Education and the fact that our parents were being destroyed by these beerhalls. So, of course, they were meant to be targets for destruction, because they were taking the focus of our parents away from the real issues.[68]

Similarly, Maphuthi recounts: "… A lot of meetings had been addressed at the high school by people like Ben Mhlongo from Alexandra. And people like Absolom Mazibuko used to come and address us here; and we would also hold clandestine meetings at the St. Vincent Roman Catholic Church".[69]

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[66] Interview with Mike Figo Madlala

[67] Interview with Teboho Tsenase. For a more detailed account of the Tembisa students' uprisings, see University of the Witwatersrand Library Government Publications, Cillie, P. M. *The Cillie Commission: South African (Republic) Commission of Inquiry into the riots at Soweto and elsewhere report,* Vol. 2, 1980, pp.27-306

[68] ibid

[69] Interview with Mongezi Maphuthi. Ben Mhlongo was a resident of Alexandra Township but attending school in Tembisa

The state responded with brutal force and in the process there were a number of casualties. For instance, C. Lekaba, L. Ntaposa, C. Khoza and E. Mabye were amongst those killed during the uprisings in Tembisa.[70]

In an effort to curb the sporadic incidents of violence and co-ordinate the demonstrations, high school students in Tembisa came together to form the Tembisa Students Representative Council (TRSC). Tsenase remembers:

> The TRSC was formed a few days after the march of the 17. Our leaders, Brian Mazibuko and others whose names I've forgotten gave us pamphlets. We passed them to several schools: high schools and primary schools informing them [about how] to join. And there was also information [about] why there should be an organization of students. So that happened after the 17 onwards in Tembisa. [71]

Madlala, who was one of the organizers of the TRSC, recalls:

> Somewhere around the 18 and 20 we launched our TSRC. We actually had a meeting, but we did not have the meeting with the students which we were able to [organize] at the time. We requested a class at eNdulwini Primary School that's where the TSRC was actually launched. The [people] that conducted the elections, for instance, with regards to our TSRC were Dan Montsisi and Tsietsi Mashinini. [Some of those] elected to the executive of the TSRC were Elliot Dhlomo, Ben Mhlongo, Absolom Mazibuko, Brian Mazibuko and myself. I can't remember all the people.[72]

The objectives of the TSRC, according to Madlala were "to take students' issues and their grievances to the principal and to represent the aspirations of the students. He claims that Dan Montsisi, Murphy Morobe and Yster were the ones who briefed them on how to form the TSRC. He notes that it was emphasized that the TSRC "shouldn't be highly political in spite of the fact that it was formed [during] the turmoil".[73] It appears that this was intended to enable the organization to operate without attracting unnecessary attention from the authorities.

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[70] University of the Witwatersrand Library Government Publications, Cillie *The Cillie Commission*

[71] Interview with Teboho Tsenase

[72] Interview with Figo Madlala

[73] ibid

However, the police somehow detected the existence of this organization and targeted it. This resulted in mass detentions of students, including the leaders. Madlala observes:

> We were arrested immediately. I think around the 21st we were then arrested. We were meant to have a meeting at school and the police encircled us. About 300 of us were arrested. And some [were discharged] then 105 of us were charged with public violence, alternatively arson. Our cases were then divided into three. Some were charged with three public violence; some with two public violence; and others [were charged] with only arson. If you were charged with public violence they would always put an alternative [charge of] arson. So I don't know what happened to it (TSRC) after we were arrested. But it did not exist long.[74]

In the same vein, Tsenase recalls, "I think the leaders did meet several times. But I believe that the TSRC was crushed too quickly by the police, because we were arrested round about the 21st [of June]. A lot of people were arrested. I was arrested myself. The trial took a long period – it ended in 1977. We were here in the Tembisa Police cells. And they took us to Modder B Prison".[75]

The police swoop on the TSRC's leadership and some students brought an end to any student organization in Tembisa for the coming eight years until a COSAS branch was launched in the township. However, this does not appear to have deterred some of the students' determination to continue the struggle. For them the armed struggle became the only viable option left. This propelled many of the young people in the township to decide to leave the country in order to receive military training in exile, although their attempts on some occasions were fraught with problems. Recalling his attempt to skip the country, Maphuthi remarks:

> After 1976 we were planning to leave the country. We went to Matias' home, Thami Myele was also there. We were about to leave the country, then a truck came in the middle of the night. This truck was carrying Xhosa-speaking people from eKoloni (Eastern Cape). We had been briefed by Matias and others that we belonged to the ANC. So we all jumped into the truck with our belongings. And on the way we then heard these people talking about the PAC. They said 'The PAC stands for Africa for Africans'. The men we were travelling with belonged to POQO. On our way we quarreled with these guys. This was not far from Oshoek.

[74] ibid

[75] Interview with Teboho Tsenase

> Some people in the truck were saying we are going forward and others were saying no, we are not going forward. We then jumped off the truck and ran into a huge bush. We were running in all directions. It was myself, Joe and Freddie. Freddie was my cousin from Soweto I had recruited. Luckily we got a lift. We managed to get back home. Others were arrested.[76]

Madlala's attempt was similarly squashed.

> I came back [from Natalspruit] but I was not staying at home. On the day that I was supposed to go I left Tsenelong [section] where I was hiding I went home. I wanted to reach my mom before she left for work – just to get money from her and then go. She left me money and [went] to work. I started packing my bag. I took everything from the bedroom. I was in the kitchen ready to go out. [But] I had forgotten money on the dressing table. I went back that side [in the bedroom to get the money]. When I came back they (police) were already in the house. That's how I was arrested for the second time in September.[77]

Malebo recalls that his groups' attempts to leave the country were hampered by their contacts' unfulfilled promises.

> What happened was that we would have contacts. There would be somebody who would come to us and tell us that it's about time that you guys left the country because you are the targets of the regime. I think on more than five occasions when we arranged to leave these people would not come. I remember the last one was in Alexandra when we were told to go and wait at Pan Africa – there's a place called Pan Africa [in Alexandra]. We were told to wait there and at six o'clock somebody would come. We were about seven all from Tembisa. [They told us] that there's transport that was going to take us from Alexandra to Botswana and ultimately to Zambia. But nothing came – no transport.[78]

However, not all young people in Tembisa who tried to leave the country were so unfortunate. Others managed to leave the country successfully. Tsenase, remembers Elliot Dhlomo as one of the people who managed to flee the country. He remarks: "He was actually a relative of mine. I discovered in jail that he was my relative when

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[76] Interview with Mongezi Maphuthi. POQO (meaning pure) was the name given to the PAC's military wing before it was changed to APLA

[77] Interview with Figo Madlala. After they were arrested for the second time, Madlala and Brian Mazibuko were charged with sabotage and sentenced to five years imprisonment each on Robben Island. They were both sentenced on 7 March 1977 and released on 6 March 1982

[78] Interview with Greg Malebo

we were in detention. Sadly he has not come back. Sadly nobody can account for him".[79]

Following the imprisonment of some of the students' leaders, and subsequently the flight of some into exile, tranquillity descended upon Tembisa once again. Students went back to school and continued with their educational activities. Tsenase notes, "well, we were released and luckily we got out of jail. We were acquitted because there was no evidence … In 1978 life went back to normal"[80].

Although sporadic riotous acts erupted in the township, which were carried out by some students, many of the students in the township seem to have lost interest in the uprisings. Instead some of the students formed themselves into reading groups and a group that engaged in political discussions. Young people in Tembisa – following the government's decision to ban political organizations in 1977 - came together to form a reading club which they used as the platform to conscientize people. Seroke recalls:

> Soon after the [organizations were banned] we sat down and discussed to say 'no, we can't just not have a structure; we can't wait for it'. We decided that rather than wait for the formation of a youth [structure] here in the township let's do something. In Tembisa in '78 and '79 we had something called *Babupi* (The Creators). We called it the *Babupi* reading club. We were using it as a front to mobilize people and conscientize them. We would give them books. We would go to the Germiston Station to give people material for [them to read]. I was already writing for newspapers like *The Voice* and also writing poetry. [In] *Bapupi* we were with Tlhaki Lekganyane, Mogale, Thami Myele – there were many of us.[81]

Because of police harassment *Babupi* did not exist for long. In the words of Seroke, "… after the harassment and [after] AZAPO was formed we just decided to abandon [it]. It was no longer viable because at the reading club we would get spies. I supposed it just died".[82]

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[79] Interview with Teboho Tsenase

[80] ibid

[81] Interview with Jaki Seroke

[82] ibid

Some of the students visited the families of their schoolmates that had been arrested to comfort them and also engaged in political discussions. Malebo remarks:

> [Because of the repression] we were not able to meet until [we formed the] Committee of Ten [in 1978]. We were ten people that would meet and talk. We had Shadrack Mkhonto. Mkhonto left the country in 1979 or 1980. And we had Nicholas Molutsi, we had Pule Tsatsi, and there was Tshepo (I have forgotten his surname) and there was Eddie Dludlu. You see many of them decided not to take part after the Boers had beaten them up. [We were just engaging in] political discussions. But let me be honest [we] never had direction. You know we were a group that would meet everyday to check what was going on in the township; check Brian Mazibuko's family; whoever gets arrested we would go in there to talk to the family, comfort the family. We were more of that than organizing students. Because of oppression it was risky to that.[83]

Momentarily, some of the members of the Committee of Ten and *Babupi* joined the Azanian Peoples Organization (AZAPO). AZAPO was formally launched nationally in May 1979.[84] The Tembisa branch of AZAPO was launched in 1980 at the Lutheran Church in Thiteng section.[85]

Notwithstanding the state's severe repressive measures and intransigence on the issue of Afrikaans, the students' stance to oppose the compulsory use of the language as the medium of instruction in black schools, although it ended tragically with thousands of students either losing their lives or being paralyzed for life or being forced to flee their country of birth into exile, yielded some crucial victories. For instance, the government was compelled to abandon its decision to turn Afrikaans into a compulsory medium of instruction; compulsory education was proposed in some areas; teacher upgrading was developed; and Bantu Education Department (BED) was changed to Department of Education and Training (DET).[86]

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[83] Interview with Greg Malebo

[84] See Maphai 'The role of black consciousness' in Ian Liebenberg et.al. (eds.), *The Long March,* pp. 125-35

[85] Interview with Frans Pale, conducted by Tshepo Moloi, Tembisa, 6 June 2004

[86] Hyslop, J. *The Classroom Struggle: Policy and Resistance in South Africa, 1940-1990,* (Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal Press, 1999), p. 168

3.2 Re-emergence of students and youth organizations, 1981-1986

According to Hyslop "the second cycle of students struggle began in February 1980 when school boycotts broke out in the 'Coloured' schools of the Western Cape". He continues "these were sparked off by the students' outcry at the South African Defence Force (SADF) national servicemen teaching in schools".[87] These were followed by school boycotts in KwaThema in May of the same year. Students in KwaThema called for school boycotts following the detention of Duke More, chairman of AZAPO branch in the township, and others in the township at the June 16 commemoration. The boycott lasted for four weeks.[88]

Preceeding this, however, COSAS was launched nationally in June 1979. According to Seekings it was formed by ex-SASM leaders and students who had emerged during the events of 1976-77. He notes in his book 'UDF: A history' that its formation was led by former Modder B detainees in 1978 such as Tom Manthata (Soweto), former president of SASO, Diliza Mji (Natal) and Curtis Nkondo.[89] From its formation it adopted the Freedom Charter as its guiding policy document. Apart from its specific task to organize Black school students nationally it further aimed to strive for 'free, compulsory, dynamic education in a non-racial South Africa.[90] Soon after its launch, branches sprang up in many townships. However in Tembisa it was not until 1984 that a branch was formed.

Between 1980 and 1984 the first youth organization was formed in Tembisa. For Seekings, the formation of youth organizations in the country in the 1980s was induced by a "…considerable social change [which the country went through]". "The category of youth, he continues, "came to be increasingly understood in terms of attitude and behaviour, particularly related to the process of political change".[91] It was

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[87] ibid

[88] See interviews with Sonduza Madonsela, KwaThema, 23 September 2004; Sandile Njoli, KwaThema, 9 September 2004, conducted by Tshepo Moloi. SADET Oral History Project

[89] Seekings, *Heroes or Villains,* p. 32; Seekings, *The UDF: A history of the United Democratic Front in South Africa, 1983-1991,*(Cape Town, David Philip, 2000), p. 35

[90] University of the Witwatersrand Historical & Literary Papers, 2887 T-9 Publication. *South African Press Union Publication,* Oct/Nov 1985

[91] Seekings, *Heroes or Villains,* pp. 1-2

at this stage that the youth category, as opposed to young people, came to be used to refer to people involved in the struggle outside out of the schools.

The ANC sensed this and declared 1981 to be the 'year of the youth'. Oscar Mpetha, ANC leader, said "Robben Islanders had decided that the key to success lay in organization of the youth and history has shown that there would be no freedom without the youth being properly organized and encouraged to play their rightful role.[92] Indeed political prisoners from Robben Island conveyed this message upon their release – that youth congresses should be formed. In Tembisa Brian Mazibuko and Madlala played an instrumental role in the formation of a youth organization in the township. Madlala recalls:

> Of course everybody that came out of Robben Island if you were ANC you'd have special tasks that you would be given – that you had to do. At the time the ANC's programme was to build the organization. So our task when we [returned], myself and Brian, was to build the organization. That's why when we came out in 1982 the first organization we build was the youth in Tembisa.[93]

Reflecting on the political developments in the township at this stage, Maphuthi remarks:

> I think the guy that came to shape up our thinking round about 1982 was Brain Mazibuko, who came from Robben Island. He was a student leader in 1976 at high school. He was incarcerated on Robben Island together with Figo Madlala. After his five-year term he came back, and he met with a number of us. He even met me. I was staying at my sister's house in Makhulong [section]. He came to me and said, 'Hi, Mongezi, *ngi buyile'* (Hi, Mongezi, I'm back). And we would visit him a lot. Then he told us that there was the preparation [for the formation] of the UDF.[94]

Madlala and Mazibuko's influence resulted in the formation of Moya Youth Movement (MYM) in 1983. Reuben Mahlagare and Thabiso Radebe explain, "the formation of the MYM was influenced by Brian Mazibuko and Figo Madlala. Brian

[92] ibid, p. 34

[93] Interview with Figo Madlala

[94] Interview with Mongezi Maphuthi

gave Greg Thulare a copy of the Freedom Charter and also gave him the guidelines of how to form an organization".[95]

Reflecting on how the MYM was formed, Greg Thulare, remarks:

> This is how Moya was formed. Moving from the school's environment, from students' mobilization, we had reached the level where we thought we had a sizable number of the students to say it was too much for us to just continue with the whole load of the students on our own. We had then to … move them from the school's environment to the township's environment. And the only venue that we would get, which wouldn't raise any suspicion and it would make everybody comfortable… and which we had access to because of my family's connection with the Roman Catholic Church. You see my family had a very strong influence in the Roman Catholic Church – all of them. So it was not difficult to go to the Priest and say 'can we use the venue as the youth of Tembisa. We just want to a place where we can meet and discuss …Then we went to the Roman Catholic Church which was situated there in eSangweni section. The name of that church is Moya. Because … we were taking [students] there and starting to introduce them to people like Figo, Pat [Twala] and Brian …We then adopted the name MYM – we couldn't come up with any other name which wouldn't really become a problem…[96]

The idea of setting up youth structures was first discussed at the COSAS' national congress held in May 1982 in Cape Town. The main reason for the establishment of youth structures was to cater for the young workers and the unemployed youth out of school.[97] For Carter "the COSAS' decision to initiate the formation of youth congresses was propelled by a number of factors". One of these, he notes, concerned the "cancellation of 'associational membership' of COSAS, which previously allowed for active participation in the organization of non-students". This decision, he continues, "had been made in response to allegations by the Minister of Law and Order, Louis le Grange, that non-students were directing the activities of the school-based organization".[98] This propelled youth organizations to operate out of schools.

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[95] Interview with Reuben Mahlagare and Thabiso Radebe, conducted by Tshepo Moloi, 26 August 2004, Tembisa. SADET Oral History Project

[96] Interview with Debora Marakalala and Greg Thulare

[97] See, Seekings, *The UDF*, p.43

[98] Carter, 'Comrades', p.96

In its formative stages the MYM operated under the guise of a church organization. Former members of the MYM claim that this was for security reasons. Mahlagare and Radebe remark:

> The MYM was established by the committee of six. These were, Greg Thulare, Thabiso Radebe, Johannes Kwatiba, Lefty Selepe, John "Leeuw" Mailane and Bengeza Mthombeni. Greg Thulare was a member of the Catholic Church in Tembisa, also known as Moya at Esangweni section. Greg was very close with the Father there. So, he asked the Father if we could form a youth club. We then established the youth movement, which we called Moya Youth Movement – named after the church for security reasons. We didn't want to expose ourselves and our activities. We wanted the movement to look like it was a church youth club. We elected a leadership which was made up of Greg Thulare, chairperson, Mongezi Maphuthi and Brian Mazibuko.[99]

However, it was not long before the activities of the MYM were exposed. In the same year it held a march protesting against the elections of the local councillors under the BLA's Act in the township. Mahalagare and Radebe observe:

> Our mistake was that we called everybody to meet at the church, and that is where the march started. And banners were hoisted. I remember at the time we used the banners of Food and Allied Workers Union (FAWU) and other trade unions. And we began the march. That created problems. That's when the church people discovered that there's trouble here. After the march the church expelled us. The Father called Greg and told him we can't continue using the premises. But [by] that time we were established. Interestingly that march mobilized the youth in Tembisa.[100]

Madlala echoes Mahlagare and Radebe:

> We operated under the name of a church because that's where we were holding our meetings. It was a disguise. We [called our structure] Moya Youth Movement… We operated on that name until we were discovered and dismissed. And we did not find any reason why we should maintain that name. We then changed [our name] to Tembisa Youth Movement (TYM), and later changed it to Tembisa Youth Congress (TEYCO).[101]

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[99] ibid

[100] ibid

[101] Interview with Figo Madlala

The MYM's march raised interest amongst other youth in the township to the extent that they also formed other youth structures. Mahlagare and Radebe recall:

> That march was interesting because the youth were so mobilized that other youth in Tembisa West felt that they must form their own youth movement. They formed what they called Zangara. But [it] operated just for few weeks. When we heard about it we called them to a meeting to discuss with them that we should [form] one movement. They agreed. And part of their leadership joined our leadership. People like Oubaas Letshele and the late Bomba joined our leadership.[102]

Flowing from its mandate to broaden its politics, the MYM played a significant role during the TCA's 1000 signature petition against the TTC's decision to implement the service charge increases in 1984.[103] However, its activities were soon overshadowed by the revival of students' politics. This was primarily caused by overlapping membership between the youth and students structures. At this stage a substantial number of the MYM's active members were students. With the revival of students' politics they actively participated in students' politics – and in the process the youth organization was left inactive.

Between 1982 and 1983 students in the township began to complain about the conditions at their schools. Like in many other schools all over the country at this stage students complained about inadequate facilities, corporal punishment, the regulation regarding age-limit[104] and the prefect system. They demanded to have an elected SRC.[105] Mashishi remembers: "I attended at Boitumelong Senior Secondary School here in Tembisa. The conditions at the time – I think it was 1982 or 1983 – were very oppressive. I would say corporal punishment would be applied whenever for any offence. The school at the time I'd say it was run like a military camp".[106]

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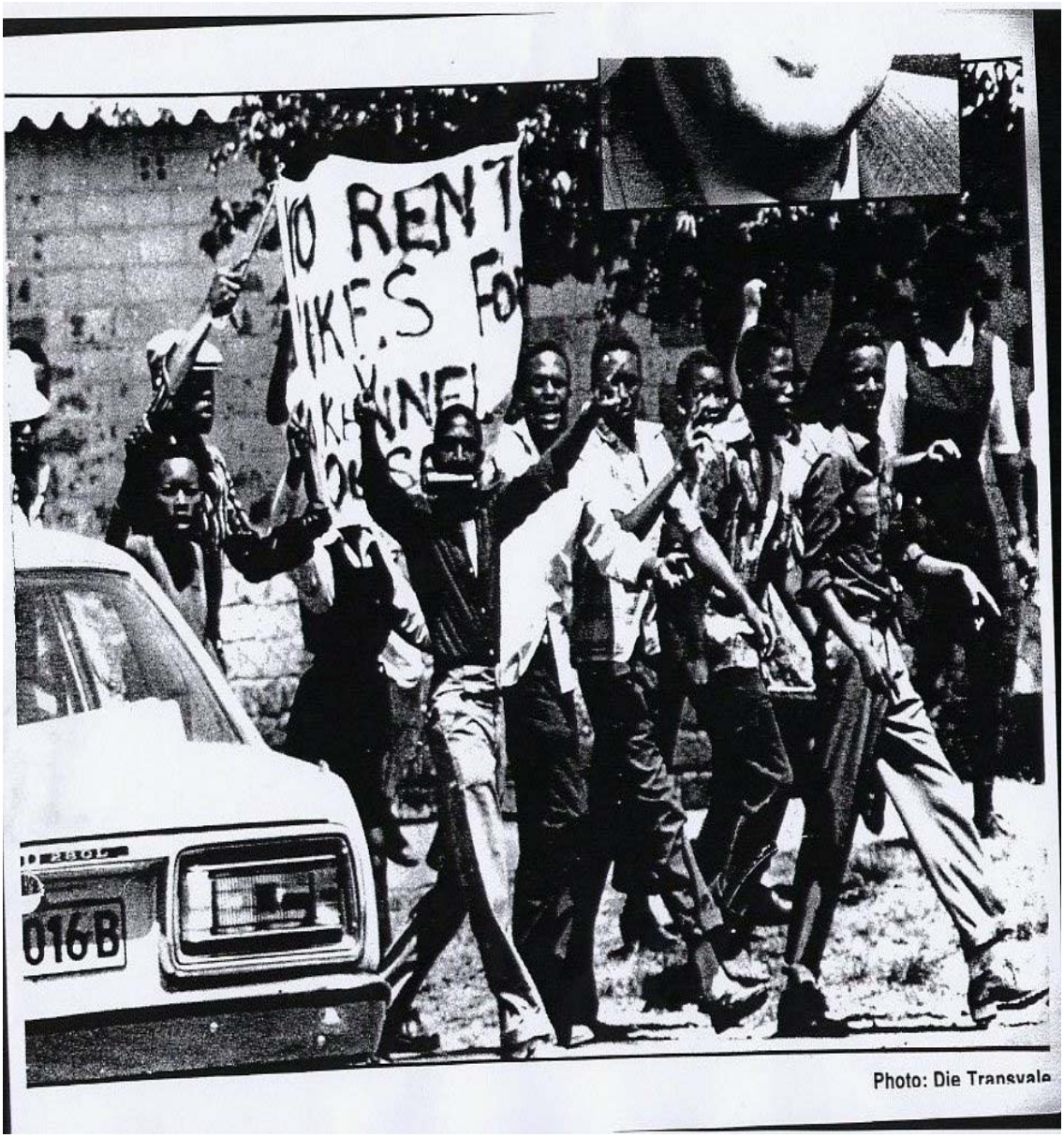
[102] Interview with Reuben Mahlagare and Thabiso Radebe

[103] Siyotula, 'Tembisa', p.33; *Rand Daily Mail Extra*, 26 June 1984

[104] The Government regulations gazatted in December 1980 and May 1981 laid down 'age limits' of 16 year for African pupils in standard five; 18 years for standard eight; and 20 years for standard ten. see, Carter, 'Comrades', p. 96

[105] University of the Witwatersrand Library Historical and Literary Papers, Box AG 2887 T-9 Publications, *South Africa Students Press Union Publication,* Oct/Nov 1985

[106] Interview with Simon Mashishi



*Robben Island Museum Mayibuye Archives: File, Popular Resistance, 1980s

However, despite the bad conditions they experienced, he recalls that they did not take any dramatic steps to challenge the school's authorities. Instead they complained and grumbled among themselves. This he observes, "happened until they were "shown a political line".[107] In his words:

> Finally – that was in 1984 – "Terror" [Patrick Lekota] came to our school secretly and he was informing people about what was at stake, you see, nationally. And he impressed upon us that now, well, if we in Tembisa we do not rise against the Boer government then we must be rest assured that Black people will be oppressed for years.[108]

This visit must have been encouraged by COSAS' resolution that 1983 will be the year in which COSAS will begin to concentrate on student issues. As former president of COSAS, Shepard Mati observed, "…In the past COSAS had tackled community issues and isolated itself from its student base. In 1983 COSAS will concentrate more on student issues".[109] During this period – 1983 – COSAS had become an affiliate of the UDF.

Mashishi contends that, although most students - prior to Lekota's visit – did not have a clear 'political line', a lot of his schoolmates had by 1983 already developed a certain level of political consciousness. He claims that this was brought about by, for instance, the hangings of *Mkhonto we Sizwe's* (MK) cadres that took place that year. Three MK cadres were executed on 9 June 1983. They were Benjamin Mosololi, Simon Mogoerane and Marcus Motaung. The three came to be known as the 'Moroka Three'.[110] Describing the students' reaction to the hangings of the 'Moroka Three', Mashishi observes:

> I remember the day when they were being hanged – the guerrillas from *Mkhonto we Sizwe* … we did not sing like everyday, do you get what I mean. The principal came and we bowed our heads. Ja, we bowed our heads and he alone, the principal, prayed [during assembly]. And I remember one lady teacher crying. Then we understood that they had been killed by the

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[107] ibid

[108] ibid

[109] University of the Witwatersrand Historical & Literary Papers, AG 2887 T-9 Publications. *South Africa Students Press Union Publication*, Oct/Nov 1985; Seekings, *The UDF,* p. 4

[110] *Sowetan*, 9 June 1983

> Boers. Then we decided that *voetsek, siya yi nyova* (to hell with what is happening, we are going to cause havoc). At the assembly when we were supposed to sing religious hymns as usual, we instead chanted *'come guerrilla; come Amakomanisi* (Come guerrilla; come the Communists). We chanted revolutionary songs.[111]

Notwithstanding this the students' resolve to cause havoc was not realized until in mid-1984 when the COSAS branch was launched in the township. It was launched following class boycotts organized by high schools.[112] Mahlagare and Radebe remember that it was formed with the assistance of student activists from Alexandra Township, such as Tekere, Victor Kgobe, Dipuo Mvelase and Paul Mashatile. And it was led by students such as Tshepo Mphuthi, Bengeza Mthombeni, Greg Thulare and Philimon "Oubaas" Letshele".[113]

The local COSAS branch, despite its involvement in students' activities, also played an instrumental role in the formation of TEYCO. Maphuthi claims that TEYCO's formation was precipitated by the killing of Thami Myele in a raid in Botswana in 1985.[114] Myele was an MK cadre from Tembisa. He recalls: "Myele's assassination accelerated a lot of movement in Tembisa in terms of the way of forward." "Immediately after the death of Myele", he remembers, "in 1985 there was the launch of TEYCO".[115] It was launched after different youth clubs and MYM combined. He explains:

> "The Moya Youth Movement amalgamated with other youth clubs. There was MYM, Provenance, and many others. All these youth clubs came together to formulate what came to be called the Tembisa Youth Congress, of which I was the president".[116]

The formation of TEYCO revived youth politics in the township. It participated in civic politics by supporting the TCA, and later TRA, in their struggle against rent increases. It enforced rent boycotts "… by politicizing people and explaining [to

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[111] Interview with Simon Mashishi

[112] *Sowetan,* 28 July 1984

[113] Interview with Reuben Mahlagare and Thabiso Radebe

[114] *Sowetan,* 17 June 2003

[115] Interview with Mongezi Maphuthi

[116] ibid



*Robben Island Museum Mayibuye Archive, File: Education, LA311-1-4

them] why they should not pay rent …"[117] However, it does not appear that its activities went beyond this. This was mainly due to the severe repression applied by the state after it had declared the first (partial) state of emergency on July 1985, which affected 36 magisterial districts, including Tembisa. In less than a year the state declared the second (national) state of emergency on 12 June 1986. Between the two state of emergencies a substantial number of activists in the township, as in many other townships around the country, were detained and others were forced to operate underground.

Coleman and Webster note that "the emergency unleashed oppression more severe than that following the Soweto 1976 uprisings and the 1960 state of emergency. They estimate that "in 1960, 2 154 people were detained …" Whereas "in the first three months of the [1985 state of] emergency, over 5000 people were detained".[118] Straker writes that "during 1986 alone, the Detainees' Parents Support Committee (DPSC) estimated that approximately 10 000 children, some as young as ten and eleven, were detained in jail".[119]

In Tembisa Buras Nhlabathi, a student and youth leader, was forced to work underground until he was detained and, later fled the country into exile.[120] Deborah Marakalala was another TEYCO member that was detained during this period. At the time of her detention in 1987, Marakalala was TEYCO's vice president. She spent 535 days in detention.[121] Despite the detentions, youth activists in the township could not operate openly because of constant harassment by the police. Swakamisa recalls, "we communicated by calling meetings, even though, as time went by, police cracked

[117] Statement by Buras Nhlabathi in Victoria Brittain and Abdul S. Minty (eds.), *From the Harare Conference, Children of Resistance: On children, Repression and the Law in Apartheid South Africa,* (London, Kliptown Books, 1988), p. 41.

[118] Coleman, M. and Webster, E. 'Repression and Detentions in South Africa' in *South Africa Review 3* (eds.), (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1986), p.126. This figure must be treated with caution since the state had the prerogative right to release figures of those detained. And in most cases the state tended to lessen the number of the detainees.

[119] Straker*, Faces in the revolution,* p.6

[120] ibid, pp. 41-43

[121] Robben Island Museum Mayibuye Archives Historical Papers, *Year of the detentions report* by Gavin Evans. I have a copy in my possession

down on these meetings. You see, you'd find that when we wanted to hold a meeting at a certain place we'd find police occupying that area. So we couldn't hold them. That's why we decided to employ the M-Plan (Mandela Plan) to form street committees which were meant to disseminate information to the people on the ground".[122]

From the limited documentation about TEYCO it appears that the latter was virtually inoperable or weakened following the detention of most of its leaders. There is strong evidence that suggests that during the national state of emergency the most active organizations in Tembisa were the TCA (and later the TRA), and the South African Black Municipal and Allied Workers Union (SABMAWU). SABMAWU began organizing in Tembisa from 1984.[123]

The suppression of TEYCO did not mean the end of youth politics in Tembisa. Soon an Africanist-orientated youth organization was formed in the mid-1980s in the township.[124] It was called AZANYU. A detailed account of its role will be dealt with in the next chapter.

Conclusion

The chapter has shown that young people in Tembisa were introduced to politics through a variety of routes. These included their interaction with an ex-political prisoner, the safe environment provided by the school. In school, like-minded young people who shared a common socio-economic background and a desire to be free met and exchanged views and debated about the issues pertaining to the prevailing political situation in the country.

The adherents and members of the BC ideals also played an important role in shaping the young people's political thought in the township. This was evident when the BC-orientated teachers began to teach in the township. They instilled a BC philosophy in

[122] Interview with Thandi Swakamisa

[123] Siyotula, 'Tembisa' , p.41.;also see, Coletane, M. 'Organizing local authority workers', *South African Labour Bulletin,* Vol.12, No. 4, 1987

[124] Charterist is an appellation given to all those who had adopted the Freedom Charter as their guiding document.

their students. They were able to do this by engaging students in lessons such as History. This appealed to the young people in the township, and it instilled in them a sense of self and dignity

Youth and church clubs provided another opportunity into politics. They became a stage where young people could meet to discuss and perform dramas that depicted life under apartheid. This propelled the young people to begin questioning the prevailing situation.

It was at this stage of political ferment that young people in Tembisa came together to form an explicitly political student organization in the township. This marked the beginning of students' resistance in the township.

In the early 1980s youth organizations were formed in the township. They played an active role in the civic matters. However, their effectiveness was subdued by the revival of the students' politics in the township and state's repression.