

Remembering Sobukwe the Man by RL Molomo

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When Mangaliso Robert Sobukwe assumed the leadership of the PAC in April 1959, the people of South Africa could have justifiably proclaimed: "The Man of the hour has arrived." Sobukwe belongs to that breed of individuals who have been referred to as 'great men of history or simply' or simply 'men of destiny'. The great debate around these individuals is whether they are 'mere products' of the circumstances in which they find themselves or whether they mould the circumstances to suit their purposes.

There can be no doubt that Sobukwe was not simply and purely a product of settler colonialism and white domination. Certainly the oppressive system always set him on fire. But there was something more in the man himself. In the realm of ideas he was a giant among giants. He had a vision for the future of South Africa, Africa and the world. For South Africa and Africa he was committed to the destruction of white domination, the creation of African unity and monolithic United States of Africa. For the world Sobukwe was no less committed to individual liberties and a non-racial world. "We are fighting for the noblest cause on earth," he said, "the liberation of mankind." For us (the PAC) "There is only one race, the human race. Multi-racialism is racism multiplied."

It is this system of ideas which set Sobukwe aside from the hitherto leaderships in South Africa. But what was even more, Sobukwe showed unflinching commitment and determination to these ideas. And he had the courage and the charisma to practicalise them. He said the PAC was "blazing a new trail", and "we will not relent" he said. Piloting what is now known as "Sobukwe Clause" through the Apartheid parliament the Minister of Justice, B.J. Voster described Sobukwe as "a man with magnetic personality, great organizing ability and a divine sense of his mission...He will not see freedom this side of eternity".

Both at his trial and in pronouncements such as this one of John Voster quoted above, Sobukwe and the PAC policy objectives were maliciously distorted. A revisit of the Party's Basic Documents will readily show that the bulk of the unsuspecting members of the white community in South Africa were subjected to severe bouts of disinformation about the PAC and Sobukwe. For an instance, the PAC maxim that Africa belongs to Africans was and still is interpreted to mean that in a PAC-ruled Azania the white people will be chased away. The PAC Basic Documents adopted in 1959 and still adhered to to this day say an African is any one who regards himself/herself as an African and owes his/her only allegiance to Africa and is prepared to accept African majority rule is an African. To the PAC this is the best security for the future the whites could find anywhere. And all critically important life support systems such as air the decision comes with no cost. All an individual needs do is: I am an African; and renounce any and all other existing loyalties.

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Sobikwe led the PAC from April 6, 1959 to March 21, 1960, a period of about eleven months. We have seen his achievements in the realm of ideas. What were his hard material achievements in that short space of time? The most obvious and perhaps most important in this regard is the paradigm shift that he initiated in the liberation struggle.

“For more than 30 years the movement’s (ANC’s) old Guard had spent their lives trying to win the acceptance of their white country men. They had been openly contemptuous of the ‘lower classes’ and had shied away from attempts to mobilize the masses, fearing that this would antagonize the government and the white public.”

This is the struggle culture that Sobukwe turned around, and introduced armed struggle in the new equation. Immediately after the arrest and banning of the PAC and ANC, following the Anti-Pass Positive Campaign the PAC (Poqo) went underground (April 1960) and unleashed so much violence that the racist regime was forced to declare a state of emergency. In 1961 the ANC announced the formation of MK, its military wing. Henceforth South Africa was in a state of hot war which would be halted by CODESA Two in 1993 and freedom agreements at Kempton Park.

Sobukwe, as per prediction never saw the freedom. He had passed on in February 1978, 30 years ago today. The second material achievement that must be credited to Sobukwe. Although the abolition of the pass laws was announced in 1986, 26 years after 1960, there can be little doubt that it was Sobukwe’s blow that shattered the structure. The third material achievement that Sobukwe can legitimately claim is the flight of capital out of South Africa. The rand lost more than a third of its value, an event which rocked South Africa to its foundation and gave credence to the liberation movements’ call for comprehensive economic sanctions against the country. Fourthly, South Africans should know that the foundations of the very freedom they are enjoying today were laid by Sobukwe and the PAC. On a world Sharpeville was declared a Human Rights Day and Apartheid was declared “a crime against humanity”. The Declaration followed the Sharpeville and Lang Massacres of 1960.

Finally, Sobukwe’s advancement of the pan Africanism. It is fitting that the Pan African Parliament is located in his country. It is, in a way honoring the man. Not that it would matter, at any rate to him, where in Africa it was located. What would be of concern to him, and is of concern to the PAC of Azania, is its content. The institution is devoid of any pan-Africanism.