

Revolutionary Mobilization: Student Uprising in South Africa in 1976

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Abstract

This case study is about the South African Revolution during the volatile years of the 1970s, during which a number of uprisings occurred to combat the apartheid regime. Many young students became involved in the revolution during these violent years, joining the several revolutionary factions that were present at this time. The characters included in this case study are a young African student and members from the African National Congress, the Black Consciousness Movement, the South African Communist Party and the Inkatha Freedom Party. The characters and their confrontations raise the issues of apartheid and racial equality, nationalism, organization legitimacy, non-violent versus violent resistance and economic development. This case facilitates students to discuss the personal afflictions the course of a revolution has on individuals.

Introduction

Throughout the communities and territories of South Africa there was increasing unrest in the 1970s. The struggle against the apartheid regime had increased in violent measures after the Sharpeville massacre in 1960. The Afrikaner government and the police were constantly facing mass protests and revolts against the system of apartheid. There was little the government could do except tighten restrictions and employ more brutal force in hopes that sheer coercion would contain organizations and supporters. As the counter violence grew however, organizations like the ANC and the Black Consciousness Movement increasingly grew in strength and in numbers, keeping the revolutionary spirit thriving.

Historical Background

The Dutch first settled the territory that was to become South Africa in 1652. As they settled, they began displacing the local tribes to cultivate the land for farms and homes, forcing tribal people to work on inhospitable lands or find new means of nourishment and support. After incorporating some African language into their own, the Dutch changed their name to Afrikaans. In 1806, the British arrived in South Africa and seized control over the Afrikaner settlements. The Afrikaans, displeased with the British abolition of slavery, left their original settlements to begin new republics. (Davis, encarta.msn.com 2001) Once settled in their new homes, they discovered a wealth of precious metals in the neighboring valleys that stretched throughout South Africa. In 1899, the Boer War broke out between the British and the Afrikaans for control over the new republics. Although the British were victorious, they would relinquish their control eight years later and allow the republics to become autonomous. "The Act of Union" in 1910, created a union between the British and Boer colonies that formed the present-day South Africa.

The new union and government brought about the ideology of racial superiority of the whites. Legislation was created to accentuate the Afrikaner's racial superiority. Many tribes, starving due to the unmanageable soil they were forced to work on after losing their grazing lands, had become the rural peasantry. The 1912 "Native Land Act" which prohibited blacks from using lands that were apart of a white community further stripped them of land. Many blacks were forced to either move towards urban centers or work as labor for the white landowners and enter into a system of debt-peonage. (Holland, 1989) Those peasants that moved into the city to become urban workers were greeted by an increasing amount of unemployment. The huge migration of blacks to urban centers

exhausted the meager amount of work that was available. The migration also caused many Afrikaner workers to become increasingly resentful towards blacks. Many were fearful that the blacks would compete with them for jobs and force them to find other means for survival. The system of apartheid was created to prevent such a thing from happening. (Defronzo, 1996 p.298) In essence the system of apartheid was created to prevent the attainment of crucial resources by the black population that would allow them social mobility and flexibility.

The system of apartheid became official when the National Party led by D.F. Malan won the 1948 election over the United Party under Jan Smuts after World War II. Support was gained again through the fear of black competition for Afrikaner jobs. A substantial number of blacks were returning from fighting in the Second World War that would be competing with whites for work. Malan's party began instituting many apartheid laws including in 1950, "The Suppression of Communism Act," that banned the SACP. In 1952, the "Native Laws Amendment Act" was passed, preventing the right of native Africans to own a permanent residence in towns and urban areas. In 1956, the "Native Resettlement Act" was passed to "re-segregate" blacks after urban expansion was necessary to increase production. The acts helped to prevent extensive mobilization of minorities as they were constantly being forced to uproot and leave their homes and towns. However, as production increased and more labor was needed to keep production going, blacks were herded back into the urban areas from which they had been forced to move. They were usually placed in ghettos surrounded by white communities.

Resistance against apartheid had begun early on in 1912 with the creation of the ANC. Originally, resistance was based around the "passive resistance" teachings from Mahatma Gandhi, who believed that change could be achieved through non-violent measures. (Holland, 1989) However, as time went on the apartheid regime tightened the restrictions on non-whites and increased the enforcement of apartheid. Many people, including many younger members of the revolution, began to feel that the policy of non-violence was not working or working too slow. These feelings were heightened after the Sharpeville massacre in 1960, where peaceful protesters were fired upon by Afrikaner police. Sixty protesters were killed; many were shot in the back as they tried to flee. After this incident, many revolutionaries concluded that violence was necessary to combat the violence of the government. Revolutionaries began to arm themselves and guerilla tactics were employed. Many of the guerilla tactics were taken from the teachings of the socialist revolutionary, Che Guevara. (Holland, 1989) Guevara had strongly believed that a revolution against a repressive government could not be successful without the use of violence. Now, many revolutionaries in South Africa were beginning to agree.

Many other revolutionary organizations became involved; some that worked with the ANC and others that competed with the ANC. A major supporter of the ANC was the South African Communist Party that saw this revolution as anti-imperialist. As with revolutions like Vietnam, Cuba and Nicaragua, they believed that a capitalist and imperialist government were exploiting the people of South Africa. Similar to the Bolsheviks of the Russian revolution, the SACP believed that the power of the revolution lay within the hands of the South African worker, the proletariat. Another revolutionary group, the Inkatha became the challenger of the ANC. The Inkatha started as a "cultural movement," and was centered on the Zulu tribesmen and their homeland KwaZulu. Reminiscent of the revolutions of Cuba, China and Mexico, the Inkatha gained most of their support from the Zulus and the rural peasantry. Unlike the revolutions in China and Mexico, the Inkatha did not adopt any socialist platforms and instead actually helped the Nationalist Party. Other movements included the PAC and the Black Consciousness Movement, which focused on

the ideology of Black Nationalism whereby only blacks should be allowed to participate in the revolution.

Setting

The township of Soweto was one of the townships built by the government to house black workers. Originally, the area of Soweto was designated for those blacks employed in the mines near Johannesburg. It became overcrowded though due to the government's resettling of thousands of blacks and migration from rural areas. To offset the shortage of housing, the government built tens of thousands of poorly built and small houses creating the township.

On June 16, 1976 a revolt began that pitted many young black students against the brutal force of the Afrikaner police in the township Soweto. Students had gathered on June 16th in protest of the latest reforms that would force the schools to teach in the Afrikaner language as opposed to English, which was spoken more often in urban areas. As the protest grew in number, the police arrived and without warning open fired on the crowd of students gathered in peaceful protest. The first student to be killed was Hector Peterson a thirteen year-old boy who had been near the front of the protest. In the ensuing chaos of the following days, police shot at and killed children as young as six and seven years old. (Gorodnov,1983 p164)

The unwarranted killing of students set off a wave of violence that spread through neighboring townships and cities like Johannesburg and Transvaal. Over the next two days, student protests throughout the townships numbered in the thousands and administration buildings were set on fire. Parents and workers began to join the demonstrations and revolt against the administrations as well.

It is June 18, 1976, the third day of the Soweto uprisings and there is little reason to think that the violence will end soon. Albert Ikwezi is a seventeen year-old student living in the township of Soweto. Earlier in the day, Albert was arrested and incarcerated on his way to the police station with his mother. Albert has been living in Soweto with his mother and two brothers Ezekiel (nineteen years old) and Herbert (twelve years old) for less than a year in the home of his aunt and uncle. Albert's father has been unable to locate the necessary paperwork to find a residency and steady work for almost five years and so has sent his family to live with his brother illegally for the time being, until he can straighten out everything with the Board's offices.

Fearing that he may be arrested, Albert was not present at the first demonstration two days before. He could not risk having the police discover his family's illegal residence and have them arrested and jailed. In the events of the past days however, Albert has been strongly affected by the revolution. Albert's older brother has been missing since the first day of the protests and the family is unable to get any information on his condition or whereabouts from the police. When Albert and Herbert ventured outside the day before, they witnessed policemen in plain clothes showering bullets on a group of students no older than fifteen. They were then chased and shot at by the same policeman as they turned to run home. Albert was uninjured, but Herbert was grazed in the arm by a bullet. The next day, while on the way to the police station with his mother, Albert was arrested and put in jail under the charge of "inciting violence against the police." The only thing he was thankful for was that he and his mother were not killed.

Before the events of the past days, Albert had never thought of joining the fight against apartheid. He was hesitant because he could not risk being captured by the police and jailed because of the illegal situation his family is in. Also, with his father away, Albert and his brothers have had to take care of his aging mother. Despite these hesitations, he has begun to question whether or not he should become involved. He believes in the equality of

all races and wishes for a country where all races could live and work together. He does not feel that his life should be dictated by a regime that does not allow him a voice and does not see him as worthy of life because of his skin color, and he is tired of feeling inferior. All he wants his family to be able to find a home and stay there without having to check and make sure the government will permit them residency. Albert wants the security to be any profession, find a job and a home to support his own family when he is older. He cannot imagine having to work in the mines like his relatives are doing now for the rest of his life. He is tired of carrying around a booklet of identification papers to prove he is able to walk down the street and not be arrested. He wants the right to vote in an election that concerns his home and his family. Albert has never believed in violence against another person, nor does he think it should be used in retribution. He feels that violence against blacks would only increase if violence were used as a revolutionary tactic against the government and the Afrikaners. He desperately wants the violence and the revolution itself to be over.

Sitting in jail, he becomes involved in a conversation with the men around him in the same cell. These men were arrested separately for similar charges as “inciting violence” and “treason.” As it turns out, these men happen to be involved in different revolutionary factions that encompass the South African struggle at the present. They are: Robert Mabhida from the ANC, Ike Motlana from the BCM, Simon Lephanya from the SACP, and Amos Khasago of the Inkatha. As they try to convince Albert to join the revolution, arguments ensue as each man tries to convince him to join a certain revolutionary group.

Political Background

The African National Congress

The ANC was the first revolutionary organization created in 1912 to oppose the racist system of apartheid. Created by Dr. Pixley ka Izaka Seme, the ANC believed in a non-violent resistance to the apartheid regime. During the 1950s however, under the leadership of key figures such as Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo, the ANC began a system of “civil disobedience,” using increasing violence to combat the Afrikaner government in the form of sabotage and guerilla tactics. (Tambo, 1988 p.9) In 1960, following the Sharpeville massacre, the ANC was banned and all of its leaders either imprisoned or exiled. The ANC continued its revolutionary organization and mobilization through underground contacts and through neighboring countries. Their military wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) was created in 1961 to carry out acts of sabotage. Members of the ANC like Oliver Tambo, who were exiled, traveled around the world asking for support from countries such as the United States, the Soviet Union, Cuba, England and others. The ANC became the largest revolutionary organization and was the main cause that the revolution was able to survive from 1960 until 1990 when the ANC was legalized once again. In 1990, Nelson Mandela was released from prison and in 1991, became president of the ANC. Shortly after, he began negotiations with President W.F. de Klerk. In 1994, elections were held and the ANC received sixty-three percent of the vote. Mandela was selected as the president of South Africa.

Robert Mabhida

I joined the ANC when I was in my mid-twenties and although it is presently banned, I continue to work as an illegal operative since the ANC is still present through a highly efficient underground organization. I decided to join right after I graduated from law school because I felt as though I had an obligation to assist in the struggle against apartheid. The ANC attracted me because it believes that everyone who is against the apartheid regime should be included in the revolution. We believe that the revolution should be multiracial and not simply “blacks” against “whites.” I do not agree with the “reverse racism” of the Black Consciousness Movement, where only blacks are allowed to join in the fight. The ANC welcomes the support of the SACP and other socialist government like the Soviet Union and Vietnam, but we all agree that some socialist reforms may be unattainable. We

believe that all South Africans should be allowed to vote in free elections and that there should be a multiracial government. The only way to maintain a certain level of economic and social stability is through the forging of a multiracial society and government. The government should be in the form of a parliamentary coalition and they are unwilling to back down from the idea of “one-person-one-vote.” Although we have used violence in the past, we agree that forms of sabotage and non-violent tactics should and can be used. “We are not setting out to wipe out civilians. We are setting out to wipe out the enemy forces, the defenders of the system of apartheid, certainly the armed ones, those who maintain the instruments of oppression.” (Tambo, 164) We also believe that foreign pressure in the form of sanctions on the apartheid government and monetary support for the revolution is needed to continue the fight. Internal pressures of sabotage and protesting along with external pressures from foreign bodies will cause enough strain on the Afrikaner government to cause more reforms leading to the eventual destruction of the system of apartheid. After the fall of apartheid, we would like to invite foreign investors back in to strengthen the economy and create more jobs.

The Inkatha Freedom Party

The Inkatha National Liberation Movement, as it was originally named, first started in the 1924 by King Dinizulu, who warned against “cultural domination” by the Afrikaners. (Byte Internet Services, 2001) It only became a formal organization however on March 21, 1975, to fill the void that has been created when the ANC was banned. Dr. Mangosuthu Gatscha Buthelezi, grandson of King Dinizulu and who had been a member of the ANC Youth League, became the President of the newly named Inkatha. Buthelezi had become chief minister of the Bantustan territory called KwaZulu. KwaZulu was part of the policy of apartheid that created territories and separated races among those territories. Buthelezi, opposed at first, turned his attention to working within the system to cause reforms. Mostly made up of Zulu tribesmen, the Inkatha were looking for assurances of continued sovereignty over the KwaZulu homeland as well as an end to apartheid. Many other blacks saw Buthelezi as a traitor to the revolution and a further cause of the separation of blacks involved in the revolution. During the 1980s, the Inkatha entered into a period of violent fighting with the ANC. The Inkatha saw the ANC’s reforms as socialist and a danger to the control of their homeland. Buthelezi wanted to “avoid at all costs being made cannon fodder by people who want to use our corpses to stand on in order to be seen as leaders.” (Davis, 108) Throughout the eighties the two organizations clashed in violent battles. In 1990 Buthelezi, wanting to create a political party that could participate in future elections, renamed the organization to the Inkatha Freedom Party.

Amos Khasago

As a Zulu, I saw it as my moral obligation to join in the Inkatha and save my tribe’s claim to our homeland. Although it is crucial that we end the system of apartheid, we are unwilling to displace the Afrikaners from their positions of power. We wish to negotiate with those in power in the hopes of creating “constituency politics,” which will give a coalition government that will grant autonomy to its provinces such as KwaZulu. We believe that it is better to create through negotiations, a presence in the government rather than trying to completely dismantle it. We feel that “it is ‘in fact better to increase one’s activity in the system and in so doing to increase the influence one has,’ rather than to ‘pretend’ to be ‘an outside as some black consciousness spokesman try to do.’” (Maré, 1987 p.82) We believe in a multiracial capitalist economy, which invites foreign investors. We do not agree with the exile missions of the ANC to gain support and impose sanctions. We think that the idea of sanctions will be more detrimental to the liberation of blacks than helpful. It is quite obvious that the sanctions the ANC wants to place on South Africa is going to hurt the black workers the most. Continued foreign investment will serve to further the struggle for liberation as it would almost certainly bring about reforms and the

improvement of economic conditions for the blacks of South Africa by creating more jobs that through the growth of a national capital. "Reform is the inevitable consequence of economic progress in our country." (Maré, 101) We also believe that most of the ANC support is coming from corrupt dictatorial socialist governments. Since the ANC's foreign support is coming from these socialist countries, their government will look similar to a dictatorial socialist regime. We are looking for non-violent methods to change the politics of the Afrikaner government, however we will use violence to defend our homeland and ourselves. We do not agree with the ANC's recent use of violence during their exile. Violence should be used as a last resort defense mechanism and should never be used offensively.

The Black Consciousness Movement

One of the most prominent student-based organizations was the Black Consciousness Movement, formed in the 1960s. Stephen Biko, a medical student at the University of Natal at the time of its founding, became the most influential leader of the movement. He was one of the main advocates for "black nationalism" stating "that liberation grows out of 'the realization by the Blacks that the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed.'" (Davis, encart.msn.com 2001) One of the movement's most prominent organizations and creations was the South African Students' Organization (SASO), which was created in 1968. The SASO was created to take the place of the National Union of South African Students that was largely controlled by the apartheid government. The SASO was a leading motivator in the protests that occurred in Soweto, as it was constituted mainly of students. In 1972, the BCM also helped to organize the Black People's Convention aimed at united blacks, those of mixed descent and Asians against the white apartheid regime. The BCM appealed primarily to the students and black intelligentsia. Their initial supporters alienated many people that were looking for organizations to lead and direct them after the banning of the ANC and PAC. Therefore up until the Soweto uprisings, the BCM remained merely a small activist organization. In the year following the Soweto uprisings, the Black Consciousness movement would have many of its organizations banned, including the SASO, and its prominent leader, Biko, beaten to death while in police custody.

Ike Motlana

As a young student myself, I understand the hesitation of joining the struggle so early on, but being apart of the Black Consciousness Movement has given me a new insight into myself and the native African population. What attracts me to the BCM is that it is an organization created and led by students, not by an older generation that frankly, is not in touch with the younger generations involved in the struggle. Also, today it is the only "legitimate" anti-apartheid organization still functioning legally since the banning of the ANC and PAC. The Inkatha, although legal, are just pawns that the apartheid regime is using to cause disunity among blacks. The BCM wants to combat the black dependence on white administrations and organizations for survival. If blacks are going to be able to survive after the revolution they must fight it on their own. At no moment in the revolution should help be received from whites. We see any involvement of whites in the revolutionary movement as detrimental to its course and the future of black liberation. We believe that the inferiority complex of blacks will only be heightened if whites are there to support them. Our ultimate goal is to create an independent black state, separate from white society.

Black Consciousness provided and ideological orientation for this generation—keeping alive and amplifying ideas about oppression and the inherent human right to liberation, providing an intellectual and psychological basis for solidarity among the dispossessed, and focusing on the common enemy. (Price, 1991 p.53)

Prior to the Soweto uprising, we had a policy of non-confrontation. Since the uprising, which our ideologies influenced heavily, we have begun to change our stance to incorporate the many new followers that have streamed in. We are leaning towards a more violent stance to combat the apartheid regime. We now realize that mobilization will occur more extensively through protests and violence than relying solely on the psychology of black consciousness and nationalism.

The South African Communist Party

The Communist Party in South Africa (CPSA) was established in 1921 by a group of exploited white workers. Although originally they refused to work with blacks due to the racists beliefs that they held, they soon came to realize that blacks were a force that if mobilized could bring the fall of the Afrikaner government. (Lerumo, 2001) During the 1920s, the CPSA served to mobilize people of all ethnicities in trade unions and began working closely with members from the ANC. The "Suppression of Communism Act" that was passed by the apartheid government under Malan in 1950, banned the Communist party. After the ban, the Communist party maintained an underground organization with help from the ANC and the Indian Congress. In 1953, the party reappeared with a new name, the South African Communist Party (SACP), which was dedicated to creating a strong Marxist-Leninist party and society. It was a symbol "of unflinching struggle against oppression and exploitation, for unity of the workers and freedom-loving people of county, irrespective of race and colour." (Lerumo) After 1950, the ANC and the SACP began working together without any hesitation. After the ANC was banned in 1961, the SACP helped to maintain the underground organization by providing it with critical funding from the Soviet Union.

Simon Lephanya

I became interested in the SACP as a graduate student after studying the works of Marx and the Russian revolution. It became apparent that Marxism would be the only way to achieve our ultimate goal and create a society based on equality. Studying Marx has opened my eyes to see that the injustices in South Africa are universal and not just a struggle between "black" and "white." We see the South African Revolution as a socialist revolution against the imperialist powers of the West. We believe that the idea of race has been created as a way to justify apartheid and the ruling class of whites. Race has been the main tool used in preventing the unification of the proletariat throughout Africa. Racial tension prevents the unification of the exploited people against the imperial government.

Carried to its fulfillment, this revolution will at the same time put an end to every sort of race discrimination and privilege. The revolution will restore the land and the wealth of the country to the people, and guarantee democracy, freedom and equality of rights, and opportunities to all. The Communist Party has no interests separate from those of the working people.(Lerumo, www.sacp.org)

The SACP wishes to create a socialist government as opposed to the coalition government that both the ANC and Inkatha have proposed. We believe that socialism is the only way to cure the economic ailments that South Africa is suffering right now as well as serve the working class. Capitalism as we see it, is a strength of the imperialist powers and something that will inevitable keep proletariats of all races subordinate in the end to colonialism. To continue with a capitalist system would merely perpetuate the exploitation that urban workers experience now. To implement socialist government with constitutional reforms for a multiracial governance and bill of rights would bring equality and protection to everyone in South Africa. Redistribution of land and resources attained through the nationalization of South African industries would allow everyone some land as well as creating an equal and classless society. Foreign investors would only continue the imperialist

system and the dependency of South Africa on other capitalist countries. We agree with the ANC that sabotage is necessary at times to defend the revolution, but we also view violence as a justified means to progress the liberation of South Africa from our exploiters, the Afrikaners.

Questions

1. What are the motivations for Albert to join the revolution?
2. What are the motivations for Albert not to join the revolution?
3. What is your character's vision for the future of South Africa?
4. How does it contrast with the other characters' visions?
5. How does your organization address the hesitations that Albert has about joining the revolution?
6. What are you able to offer Albert in the way of fulfilling his hopes?
7. What other factors (like legalization, group constitution, etc.) would be appealing to Albert?

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