

THE STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRACY IN THE NORTHERN CAPE DURING THE EIGHTIES

Pieter Coetzer and Leo Barnard¹

1. INTRODUCTION

The Northern Cape made no major contribution to the attainment of a democratic dispensation in South Africa during the eighties. A closer look at the geography and demography of the province explains this apparent anomaly. The Northern Cape is the largest of the nine provinces, covering almost 30% of the country's surface area. At the same time, however, it has the smallest population, with 840 000 people, which represent 2,1% of the country's population. In addition, most inhabitants are Afrikaans-speaking (70%), with the so-called coloureds (almost 52%) as the dominant group. Political mobilisation in this part of the country was especially encumbered by the vastness of the area and the very low population density of only 2,3 persons per square kilometre.²

Though, the winds of change would eventually also blow over this apparently peaceful province, causing more than a little commotion. Looking back, it seems likely that the anti-apartheid activities in the neighbouring provinces of the Free State, the Western Cape and North-West influenced the political climate in the Northern Cape. However, the important role that activists in Johannesburg played should not be neglected. Seekings puts it this way: "Northern Cape was linked more closely to Johannesburg than to Cape Town."³

As was the case in the rest of South Africa, political events like the Soweto riots of 1976 would also have a strong impact here.⁴ Before 1976, there was relatively

1 Department of History, University of the Free State. Email: coetzerpw.hum@ufs.ac.za and leobarnard@vodamail.co.za

2 Statistics South Africa. Report No. 00-91-92 (1999). Provincial Profile 1999: Northern Cape. The province has a relatively large mining sector (9%), while there are few industries (employing 4,1% of an active labour force of 59,1%). Nevertheless, later on in the nineties it became evident that the ANC enjoyed strong support in the Northern Cape (about 67%). Only 23,4% of the population had Matric or a higher tertiary qualification in 1999. This is why some people did not always think rationally about politics during the eighties, particularly in remote areas.

3 Jeremy Seekings, *The UDF. A history of the United Democratic Party in South Africa, 1983-1991* (David Philip Publishers, Claremont, 2000), p. 90.

4 The cause of the unrest during this time was the municipal laws that forced people to pay fees for all people/boarders living in their houses. Houses were monitored constantly, and many people could not sleep properly at night due to police raids. Martin Legassick, "The life and times of Alfred Gubula, President of the UDF in the Northern Cape, 1989-1991." Paper delivered at the Institute for Historical Research and the Department of History, South African and Contemporary History Seminar, 12 October 1993; Interview with Attie Isaks, Keimoes, 11 May 2006.

little political activity in the province. The isolation and vastness of the area did not encourage political awareness, and many people were simply reluctant to get involved in politics.

2. ACTIVE RESISTANCE: 1980-1985

In the Northern Cape, it was the youth that initially sensed the revolutionary climate in the aftermath of the 1976 riots. By 1980, it was clear that the schools and the youth were the focal points of resistance. In Kimberley, four so-called coloured schools as well as the Perseverance Training College were closed by April as a result of unrest. The boycott of educational institutions, fuelled by dissatisfaction with the set-up within these institutions, lasted several weeks. The boycott campaign grew, and by September 10 000 pupils in the province were refusing to attend school. This rebelliousness led to cars and buses being stoned, while houses in traditionally white areas were damaged. Nineteen children from three townships were arrested. Still, textbooks were damaged, and the police used tear-gas to try and calm down the congregated pupils.⁵

In 1981, the resistance gained further momentum as “a revolt against the existing way of managing the boarding houses”. This developed into an all-out confrontation with the Bophuthatswana police force. On 16 May the hostel in Kimberley was stoned, and the police responded by whipping the rioters. They were thrown into police vans and taken to the Taung police station, where they were beaten all over their bodies (“not a hiding but a beating”).⁶

The diligent mobilisation of the youth and the mushrooming student bodies were conspicuous features of these years.⁷ The mass action of pupils stemmed from educational problems. Pupils/students, parents and community leaders began to cooperate. Solidarity among the groups was clearly very strong. Ordinary people and businessmen supported the protesters financially. No examinations were taken during 1980 and student boycotts increased dramatically.⁸

5 *Die Volksblad*, 10 June 1980; *The Friend*, 9 September 1980.

6 Interview with Reggie Sefotiho, Kimberley, 2 May 2006.

7 Organisations such as the Young Students' Movement (Kimberley), the Eghotseng Youth Organisation and the Eghotseng Students' Organisation (Warrenton), the Kuruman Youth Unity, the SA Youth Congress, the Young Lions (Upington, Kimberley, Warrenton and Vryburg), as well as the Galeshewe Youth Organisation and the Galeshewe Students' Organisation (Kimberley).

8 Learners/students wanted to force the government and schools to provide transport to them. The bus service finally agreed to make provision for lower bus tariffs to schools. Learners were also dissatisfied because they were forced to pay school fees, and refused to do so. Some of them were consequently expelled from schools, which led to further active resistance. Interview with Maurice Smith, Kimberley, 11 May 2006.

The beginning of the eighties heralded a new era of political organisation and protest actions. Eventually, the rebels' teachers and even parents showed their support by encouraging pupils to boycott schools and oppose the apartheid government. Resistance spread as people began to realise that things had to change and that active political resistance was their only option.⁹

Organising struggle activities at coloured schools was not plain sailing, especially since 1983 (the year of the inauguration of the Three-Chamber Parliament), when many coloureds started practising politics under the banner of the Labour Party. In this atmosphere, activists were often regarded as communists. The force of democracy, however, was unstoppable, and as far as Warrenton and Vryburg the youth and their allies were very busy promoting political awareness.¹⁰

Many pupils became aware of the Freedom Charter and the call to resist apartheid through their teachers. The advocates of democracy had a hard time.¹¹ The activities of people were put under the magnifying glass, and any *persona non grata* was summarily thrown in jail. However, pupils/students were hungry for cultural action. For the sake of the revolution, certain steps had to be taken. In Kimberley and other towns such as Keimoes, and with people like Jesse Strauss leading the way, discussions in schools often focused on the twin topics of race and culture. The music of Bob Marley, Burning Spear and others were cleverly utilised to mobilise pupils. African writers featured prominently in 'poetry sessions'. This was a very effective way to motivate learners politically.¹²

Protesters in the Northern Cape wanted to make the country ungovernable, and the evidence of respondents indicates that Xhosas were very much part and parcel of the liberation struggle. Mass action, protest marches, boycotts, toyi-toyi and demonstrations became the order of the day.¹³

Townships served as a base for planning and coordinating the struggle. Anti-apartheid plans were often drawn up late at night, which was no easy task since a curfew came into effect every night at 21:00 – everyone had to stay at home until morning. Street committees (representing different zones in the townships) were

9 Interview with Jerry Radebe, Kimberley, 24 April 2006.

10 Interview with Gordon Africa, Kimberley, 9 April 2006.

11 Those who were fighting for democracy, who wanted to cast off the yoke of apartheid, were consistently referred to as 'activists' or 'freedom fighters'. Nevertheless, Rev. Aubrey Beukes - who played a prominent role in the struggle - said: "I am not an activist; I fought for what is right, for justice." And: "We are not fighting against the whites; we are not fighting against colour; we are fighting against abuse of power." Interview with Rev. Aubrey Beukes, Upington, 18 June 2006.

12 Interview with Gordon Africa, Kimberley, 9 April 2006.

13 Interviews with NJ Tom, Richmond, 18 September 2006; Alfred Gubula, Upington, 13 June 2006.

established to organise marches and other actions in cooperation with street leaders. The people received feedback about all the activities of these street committees.¹⁴

SANCO (SA National Civics Organisation), which included organisations such as AZAPO, had important functions to fulfil since the ANC had been banned. They collaborated closely with youth and student organisations to mobilise the population as a whole, and was affiliated with the United Democratic Front (UDF). Much faith was placed in the street committees and they also focused on the combating of crime. For instance, they had to prevent criminals from exploiting political situations for criminal purposes. The street committees informed the people about the presence of the Police/Defence Force in the townships, and advised them on what they considered correct/desirable behaviour. SANCO, in turn, was instrumental in shutting municipal council members out of the community.¹⁵

Few ‘civic organisations’ sprung up in the so-called coloured and Indian residential areas in the Northern Cape. Organisations such as the Galeshewe Civic Organisation played an important role in the liberation struggle. Sports organisations were used to channel messages to the coloured community, and effectively filled the political vacuum.¹⁶

In addition, the marshals were the activists’ own ‘police force’. “They were the cadres who would make sure that when we have marches that the comrades do not move around in an undisciplined manner.”¹⁷

Despite the government’s relentless counteractions and emergency measures, street gatherings, discussion forums and house meetings still manifested.¹⁸ Coloureds were invited to the townships to be educated politically. In addition, the infrastructure of coloured residential areas was often used for political purposes. For example, libraries were used for political meetings on the pretext that students were convening there to talk about non-political matters.¹⁹

Agents and resistance organisations were everywhere in the townships. Fighters for democracy, for instance, established Christian student associations at schools

14 Interviews with Joseph Senonohi, Warrenton, 20 May 2006; David September, Petrusville, 20 September 2006.

15 Interviews with Willie Lencoe, Kimberley, *s.a.*; Nyaniso Plaatjies, Kimberley, 30 April 2006. In Keimoes, the Civic Organisation was called the Residents’ Association. Interview with Ben Sidisho, Warrenton, 1 May 2006.

16 Interview with Gordon Africa, Kimberley, 9 April 2006.

17 Interviews with Joseph Senonohi, Warrenton, 20 May 2006 and Willie Lencoe, Kimberley, *s.a.*

18 Maurice Smith says in this regard: “It was difficult, but we were able to get people together to discuss issues concerning them and affecting them directly.” Interview with Maurice Smith, Kimberley, 11 May 2006.

19 *Ibid.*; interview with Nyaniso Plaatjies, Kimberley, 30 April 2006.

instead of revolutionary organisations. The apartheid government wanted to clip the wings of the liberation groups and tried to thwart their efforts to organise themselves. Various Christian organisations, such as the Christian Catholic Association and the Young Christian Students, eventually became involved in the struggle. Sometimes as many as 80%-90% of the black resistance groups took part in the activities of these organisations.²⁰

The activists wanted the people to join the struggle, and they used various strategies to achieve this objective. Dance clubs, for example, were used to mobilise the community. Infighting was taboo, and conflict had to be resolved by non-violent means, such as discussions/negotiations.²¹

It was not always easy to convince people to join the struggle. In the words of Lena Dube, one of the parents of the Upington 25: “My father was afraid. We were not allowed to show any interest in politics. We could not refer to Mandela in our house.”²²

The Northern Cape activists regarded the eighties as turbulent years, especially after the inauguration of the Three-Chamber Parliament in 1983. This gave a measure of freedom to whites, coloureds and Indians, but blacks were excluded. The establishment of the UDF on 20 August 1983 came about as a direct result of this new dispensation. The UDF served as a front organisation for many organisations fighting apartheid and many individual members of the ANC.²³

After the UDF had been banned in 1988, the Mass Democratic Movement (MDM), which became a haven for many youth organisations in the province, replaced it. The SA Youth Congress (SAYCO) was very active in places like Kimberley, Upington and Vryburg (the ANC Youth League was banned at the time). As a matter of course, resistance to the Three-Chamber Parliament spread to schools.²⁴ They went

20 Interviews with Maurice Smith, Kimberley, 11 May 2006; Nyaniso Plaatjies, Kimberley, 30 April 2006.

21 This was not always easy, since there was friction between parties from time to time. People recall this situation as follows: “There was no affection between political parties” and “There was black on black violence.” Interview with Jomo Kgoro, Kimberley, 1 May 2006. The PAC attempted to disrupt UDF programmes, which led to confrontation. Fortunately, problems were ironed out in the interest of the ‘fight for liberation’. Interview with Horatius Kgadiete, Warrenton, 13 April 2006.

22 Interview with Lena Dube, Upington, 13 June 2006.

23 “The formation of the UDF in Upington was badly affected by the security action of the system which was operating very close to the people, more especially in the so-called coloured community who were very scared about joining any form of the struggle.” The UDF worked on three fronts, namely isolation from the apartheid regime, making the country ungovernable and mobilising the internal forces on the road to freedom/democracy (the aspirations of the Freedom Charter were stressed). Armed resistance was not on the agenda of the UDF. Interview with Willie Lencoe, Kimberley, *s.a.* Interview with Ivan Beukes, Upington, 2 May 2006.

24 At Vryburg (Huhudi), 31 students and three community leaders were arrested after unrest and damage to the property of teachers. The Huhudi Civic Association mobilised the mass protest against the relocation of residents to Bophuthatswana. Unrest was caused, among other things, by the expulsion of several students who instigated a street march and sang ‘*Nkosi Sikelele*’. *Sowetan*, 2 August 1983.

underground to a certain extent, and held meetings at night. Activists often took to the streets to mobilise people and hand out pamphlets. Students at the UWC and Fort Hare increasingly identified with the activists of the Northern Cape. They carried the political aspirations of SASCO, black consciousness movements and other activists to all parts of the province, which led to even more active resistance. The 'Release Mandela Campaign' received strong support from all population groups, and many people signed petitions calling for his and other political prisoners' release.²⁵

Active resistance and protest actions, such as making demands on local authorities, became a way of life. In Kuruman, protestors opposed the forcible removal of people from Vryburg to Podumo in Bophuthatswana. SANCO was instrumental in organising resistance to this planned displacement of people. In the Northern Cape, up to 1988 and even beyond, the UDF contributed hugely to making the masses 'politically aware' and functioned as an umbrella organisation, uniting those opposed to the new constitutional dispensation in South Africa.²⁶

As people became politically more aware, they also began to think more rationally. People became increasingly aware of their poor socio-economic conditions with regard to housing, water, electricity, sanitation and general poverty. The preference given to whites at business centres, the separate entrances, etc. was an affront to human dignity and caused much bitterness. The forced removals of communities were deemed totally unacceptable and were experienced as enormously upsetting. In the words of clergyman Aubrey Beukes: "In the Cape, apartheid was 'soft'; in the Northern Cape, we were confronted by 'hard' apartheid (undermining all humanistic ideals)."²⁷

The year 1985 was characterised by arson, class boycotts, unrest, public violence, shootings, murder and several trials. On 8 May 1985, the Galeshewe Students' Organization (GASO) was founded in Kimberley to coordinate the activities of students and deal with certain matters. GASO was affiliated with the UDF, and strove to achieve two main objectives, namely to secure the release of all students being held by the police, and to nullify the suspension and expulsion of students. Protest marches and spreading unrest manifested by stone throwing and trespassing became an everyday occurrence.²⁸

25 It was particularly the ideas of people such as Rev. Frank Chikane (SA Council of Churches), Siphon Mufamadi (General Allied Workers' Union) and Popo Molefe that were transplanted from Gauteng and took shape in the Northern Cape. Interview with Willie Lencoe, Kimberley, *s.a.*; Legassich, 12 October 1993.

26 *Woord en Daad*, 31 March 1986.

27 Interview with Rev. and Mrs Aubrey Beukes, Upington, 13 June 2006. See also interviews with Ben Mtetandaba and Caritas Sonamzi, Port Nolloth, 20 June 2006; Hendrik Visser, Springbok, 16 June 2006; Julius Magerman, Keimoes, 14 June 2006; Kobus Maarman, Garies, 21 June 2006; Feitjie Voyizano, Cornelius Ramakor, Dan Veli and David September, Petrusville, 20 September 2006.

28 *Diamond Fields Advertiser*, 25 March 1985 and 4 November 1985; *Die Volksblad*, 31 January and 23 May 1985; *Die Vaderland*, 25 March 1985. Mayor Temba Nyati's shop was burnt down. *Die Volksblad*, 21 February and 1 April 1985.

In March 1985, a Kimberley newspaper wrote, quite rightly: “We must not overlook the unrest as a genuine reflection of black frustration and grievances. What is needed is an atmosphere which discourages violence ... The economic, social and political aspirations of blacks need to be met to facilitate such an atmosphere.”²⁹

3. THE UPINGTON 26³⁰

In this political climate, Paballelo (‘Place of Playing’)³¹, a black township at Upington in the Northern Cape suddenly became the centre of attention. During the next couple of years, the world would take careful note of the people of Paballelo: a sequence of events would unfold there that would expose apartheid in all its harshness, fostering democracy in the process. On 13 November 1985, a black municipal policeman, Lucas (Jetta) Sethwala, died amid panic, mass violence and police terror. Members and supporters of the anti-apartheid movement would be united and inspired by the fate of the Upington 26, as well as that of the Soweto 6 (whose story was headlined earlier that year), to continue the struggle for democracy.

In 1985, the situation in South Africa reached breaking point – political unrest had spread virtually all over the country. Brutal police retaliation became an everyday occurrence after a state of emergency had been declared in July and the Upington Youth Organisation (UYO) criticised Lucas Sethwala, among others, for his unfair treatment of Upington street vendors. During the three days preceding Sethwala’s death, mass meetings and protest marches were held in Paballelo to air grievances.³² Clashes with police led to stone throwing incidents and arson, as well as damage

29 *Diamond Fields Advertiser*, 28 March 1985. Leading article. It is interesting to note that Kimberley and the Northern Cape were not among the 36 areas included in the state of emergency. *Diamond Fields Advertiser*, 28 July 1985. Of the 26 accused, only five were actively involved in Jetta Sethwala’s death. *Die Zuid-Afrikaan*, April 1989.

30 The story and implication of the eventual Upington 25 are illustrated in particular on the basis of the thorough study of Andrea (Andy) Durbach, who was later largely responsible for the defence of the Upington 25 together with Anton Lubowski. This was supplemented by the oral accounts of people who experienced these events and were affected by them. See Andrea Durbach, *Upington. A story of trials and reconciliation* (Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, Australia, 1999), and Legassick, 12 October 1993.

31 The Paballelo township was the product of the apartheid government’s segregation policy, according to which black people and coloureds were removed far away from the traditional white community. Paballelo was established in 1960 when people who were classified as black and had previously lived happily in Blikkiesdorp among coloureds, were moved to this new township. In this mixed community, Afrikaans was a reasonably communal language. Unemployment was a problem (30% of the residents were unemployed), and only 7% had high school diplomas. Over the years, crime levels were reasonably low by township standards, and considerably less unrest occurred here during the country-wide riots of 1976 and 1985 than in some other areas. In 1989/90 this situation changed drastically, and the township became an active community with regular protest marches and political meetings.

32 They *inter alia* demanded the unbanning of all political organisations and the creation of business opportunities. Legassick, 12 October 1993.

to property. The police shot a pregnant woman and wounded an 11 year-old boy. Feelings ran high.

On the day of Sethwala's death, a large crowd gathered at the Paballelo soccer field. Emotions still ran high, '*Nkosi Sikelele*' was sung and clenched fists raised. Once again, the police intervened³³ and used tear-gas. Amid panic, chaos and fear, the crowd fled, but stopped at Sethwala's house. When the crowd stoned his house, Sethwala fled, all the while shooting with his rifle. An agitated crowd pursued and assaulted him; he was hit over the head twice with his rifle butt (which probably caused his death), and petrol was poured over his body, which was then set alight.³⁴

In the course of the police investigation, 26 residents of Paballelo (between the ages of 19 and 61) were arrested for, among other things, Sethwala's death. Only a few had previous convictions. Eventually, 25 persons appeared before trial judge Jan Basson. Based on the testimony of a number of individuals, the Upington 25 were identified and formally charged with murder. It was clear that chaos and fear, amid clouds of tear-gas³⁵, led to panic and irrational behaviour. Eventually, the Upington 25 were defended mainly by Andrea Durbach and Anton Lubowski.

Many people (more than 150) testified, and throughout the proceedings the police were ready and waiting to suppress any sign of defiance with their batons, whips and weapons. The case was repeatedly postponed, which led to sky-high tension levels. Protest was inevitable.

The parents and family of the accused were severely traumatised by the court proceedings – something that made them reach out to one another emotionally. Lena Dube describes her ordeal after the arrest of her 15 year old daughter: "I visited her in jail and she was dressed only in a petticoat. The police hit her on her back and just below her bladder. A policeman told her that he was going to kick the child she was expecting out of her belly. She had thick purple scars across her breasts where the police assaulted her. They refused to allow a doctor to examine her."³⁶

33 Lena Dube, mother of Xoliswa (19), who was later one of the Upington 26, recounts how relieved they were when they became aware of the police presence. Lena remembers that Rev. Giddy was opening the meeting with a prayer when the police ordered them to disperse. Interview with Lena Dube, Upington, 13 June 2006.

34 Interviews with Lena Dube, Upington, 13 June 2006; Alfred Gubula, Upington, 13 June 2006. Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Upington Hearings, 1-2 October 1996. Testimony of Beatrice Sethwala about the death of her son (Jetta Sethwala), 13 November 1985. Case CT/01418/UPI. Among other things, she complained about the fact that her minister, Rev. Aubrey Beukes of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church, did not support her in any way after her son's death.

35 People who suffered the effects of tear-gas report that it was not a pleasant experience at all. "Your throat burns; your eyes, your nose." Interview with Lena Dube, Upington, 13 June 2006.

36 *Ibid.*

Several experts testified for the defence during the trial, emphasising the importance of peer pressure, socio-economic conditions and police brutality in reaction to the taunts of individuals.³⁷ A large number of generally dissatisfied people supported the Upington 25. Mr Nelson Mandela and Bishop Desmond Tutu also supported the Upington 25.

One of the accused, sent to Pretoria for neurological tests, was assaulted in police custody, given electric shocks and smeared with excrement after refusing to eat the stuff!³⁸

Support for the group of 25 slowly gathered momentum. In February 1989, the placards of a number of protesters outside the court building were torn, and the protesters themselves were summarily whipped. This gave rise to maximum security, but also to increased interest/involvement and outrage in foreign countries.³⁹

Some of the convicted persons greeted Judge Basson's verdict⁴⁰ with scornful applause, while members of the public shouted 'congratulations!' Fourteen of the accused were sentenced to death and eleven were given prison sentences or community service to perform.⁴¹ 'Nkosi Sikelele' and 'We are marching to Pretoria' were sung loudly. Chaos erupted in the court building when the police began using their batons indiscriminately to separate the Upington 25 from their families.

Afterwards, a highly emotional crowd, singing freedom songs, banged against police vans and toyi-toyed through the streets. The police warned foreign journalists

37 None of the accused wanted to testify, which only made the case of the defence more complicated. A sociologist of the CSIR, Dr CP de Kock, an expert in the field of group dynamics and control who testified for the state, actually strengthened the defence's case: "Almost without exception, non-violent action involves masses of people in highly emotional causes ... The people involved are already highly frustrated, they have a high level of aggression and regard the system as non-legitimate. As a result, non-violent direct action can very quickly be transformed into violent direct action. All that is required is a triggering incident (a spark), which is usually provided the moment the agents of control arrive on the scene." CP de Klerk, *South Africa: The challenge of reform*, 1988.

38 Durbach, p. 68.

39 Andrea Durbach justifiably says: "The pressure of the media at the trial was fundamental to the maintenance of public interest in the case. The support of journalists and newspaper editors both in South Africa and, more so, internationally had triggered political leverage by foreign governments and pressure groups when judgements went awry." Durbach, p. 100. Rev. Beukes was kept in solitary confinement for 82 days. When his wife could not gain access to his bank account, no school principal or church leader in Upington wanted to get involved and Dullah Omar had to be flown in from the Cape to help her. Interview with Rev. Aubrey Beukes and his wife (Dina), Upington, 13 June 2006.

40 Before sentencing, the accused were given the opportunity to state their case. They protested their innocence with conviction and passion. In the words of the accused Kenneth Khumalo: "My lord, this trial will act as a scale which will measure justice in the legal system of South Africa." Durbach, p. 143.

41 *Azania Vrij* says in this regard: "Het vonnis berust op 'common purpose' waarby van de veroordeelden wordt gesteld dat zij met die feitelijke dader diezelfde doel hadden." See *Azania Vrij* 14(2), July 1989. "Redt de Upington 14".

who captured these scenes on film that the state of emergency made their visual reporting illegal. The 14 members of the Upington 25 who received the death sentence were taken to Pretoria Central Prison. The five who were given prison sentences were taken to Kimberley Prison, while the remaining six were to perform community service.

Hereafter, active resistance and the pursuance of freedom and democracy became a hallmark of life in Upington. That same evening, a prayer meeting for the Upington 25 was held in Paballelo. Family members then walked through the streets with lighted candles, singing freedom songs, while teenagers joined them. And then, suddenly, the police fell on them with their batons, dogs and whips. The old and the young (including pregnant women) were hit and kicked mercilessly. The wounds of the injured were bandaged and 20 people were taken to hospital.”⁴²

Once again, the sensational events at Upington did not reflect well on the apartheid government. The *Independent* focused on the racism in the country: “South Africa’s cavalier imposition of the death sentence highlights the inevitable skewed apartheid morality which the authorities lay down as the social norm.”⁴³

A decision was immediately taken to request leave to appeal against the sentences of the Upington 25. Judge Basson refused to accede to this request. This news increased pressure on the hard-line apartheid government. The case of the Upington 25 was submitted to the European community and anti-apartheid groups, and revulsion grew. Eventually, the lawyers of the 25 asked the Chief Justice to grant them permission to appeal directly to the Court of Appeal. Leave was granted!⁴⁴

This was fantastic news for all the prisoners concerned. The group on death row experienced enormous emotional pressure. Before the hearing of the final appeal (from 6 to 10 May 1991), the country’s most famous freedom fighter, Nelson Mandela, was released from prison. This and other political events offered the defence a measure of hope. In May 1990, the Criminal Law Amendment Bill was submitted to parliament. This Bill stipulated, *inter alia*, that judges were not bound to impose the death sentence in the absence of mitigating circumstances. Any other sentence could be imposed at the discretion of the judge if mitigating circumstances could be found. The imposition of the death sentence would be accompanied by the automatic right to appeal against the sentence. A panel consisting of representatives of the Court of Appeal as well as legal experts would be appointed to review the cases

42 Interview with Rev. Aubrey Beukes, Upington, 15 June 2006.

43 *Independent*, in Durbach, p. 147.

44 During this time, Adv. Anton Lubowski was killed by snipers in Windhoek – an event that also plunged Paballelo into mourning. This was a heavy blow for the Upington 25. Lubowski was their role model and their contact in the struggle for justice and fairness in a democratic, non-racial South Africa.

of 300 prisoners on death row, and make recommendations if deemed necessary. It was only natural to conclude that these new developments might have a bearing on the future of the 14 prisoners from Upington who were on death row.

The defence team invoked the Pretoria Minute, which made provision for clemency to be granted to political offenders. The defence would, however, have to adapt their approach to the case to make full use of the new opportunities. The defence team went out of their way to ensure that international pressure groups, such as Amnesty International, the International Commission of Jurists and anti-apartheid groups, would be able to attend the hearing of the appeal in Bloemfontein.⁴⁵

The final appeal was successful, and all the members of the Upington 25, except for one, were released on bail. Jubilant crowds greeted them in Pretoria and Upington with rapturous applause, the singing of freedom songs, ‘Amandlas’ (‘Power’) and *toyi-toyis*.⁴⁶

4. MORE ACTIVE RESISTANCE DURING THE EIGHTIES

Meanwhile, since the death of Lucas Sethwala in 1985, the political struggle for democracy in Upington and elsewhere in the Northern Cape continued between 1985 and 1989. No doubt the events centring around the Upington 25 gave fresh impetus to the anti-apartheid cause.

Since the inauguration of the Three-Chamber Parliament, it became clear that the so-called coloureds in the Northern Cape, who represented the majority in the province, were split into two groups. One group supported the Labour Party (LP) and went with the stream (those who were passively satisfied), while the other group fought the apartheid government and the LP with might and main, and pursued a true democracy (the activists and those who were dissatisfied). The latter group also supported the activists’ struggle for a new dispensation.

The street committees would remain active in the townships until 1989, and would ensure good internal and external communication. The civic organisations were not exactly welcomed with open arms by the Black Conscious Movement, since they were based on a UDF concept. Street committees, assisted by the clergy and teachers, still lent themselves to the resolution of local feuds.⁴⁷

45 During this time, Andy Durbach wrote: “Our clients believe it is essential that the international community continue to monitor developments in our land in the belief that participation as observers and critics will facilitate the emergence of a truly just and democratic South Africa.” Durbach, p. 186.

46 Interviews with 50 respondents at the Church Hall, Upington, *ca.* 13 June 2006. Lena Dube’s testimony.

47 Interviews with Willie Lencoe, Kimberley, *s.a.*; Zumani Saul, De Aar, 19 September 2006; T Solomon, De Aar, 19 September 2006.

Protest marches were still a common occurrence during the late eighties. Today, Solomon Kgoma believes that their faith in God sustained them during the struggle.⁴⁸ The principles of SANCO had to be communicated to the community. As a matter of course, people had to be made aware of the struggle and its ideals on a continuous basis.

From 1985 onwards, activists continued their rebellious behaviour and they also kept on spreading their message of liberation, often in unexpected ways. Anti-apartheid newspapers, like *Voice*, were distributed on street in the Northern Cape, which led to the arrest of a number of people.⁴⁹ Activists who spoke out openly against the apartheid government and committed acts of rebellion were victimised and prosecuted as a matter of course. Some of them were warned by the Security Police, others received death threats from the Afrikaner Resistance Movement (ARM). Some had to check underneath their cars every morning to make sure there were no limpet mines. Jessie Strauss elaborates: “Our family received death threats but we were willing to die for our beliefs and for the struggle.”⁵⁰ Dina Beukes, the wife of Reverend Aubrey Beukes, provides more information: “Our house was named Pollsmoor because everybody, except the comrades, avoided going there. We were isolated to a certain extent; people didn’t want to talk to us, didn’t want to socialise with us because we were regarded as terrorists.” Security personnel searched in car engines for pamphlets, and activists were terrorised in the early morning hours on the pretext that the police were searching for bombs or specific persons.⁵¹

The youth clearly provided strong, ongoing leadership during this period. They informed churches, teachers, businessmen, political organisations and the Principals’ Council on a weekly basis about their activities.⁵²

The UN highlighted 1985 as the Year of the Youth. In the Northern Cape, it would indeed be the youth’s year. Schools were soon to become centres for the mobilisation of students.. Even after the schools had been closed, mobilisation still continued. They opposed all non-democratic institutions. People from outside the Northern Cape trained the youth in making petrol bombs and in the art of toyi-toying.⁵³

48 Interview with Solomon Kgomo, Kimberley, 1 May 2006.

49 Legassick, 12 October 1993; interviews with Reggie Sefotiho, Kimberley, 20 May 2006; Horatius Kgadiete, Warrenton, 19 April 2006; Willie Lencoe, Kimberley, *s.a.*; Jerry Radebe, Kimberley, 24 April 2006; Nyaniso Plaatjies, Kimberley, 30 April 2006.

50 Interview with Jessie Strauss, Springbok, 21 June 2006.

51 Interviews with Dina Beukes, Upington, 13 June 2006; T Solomon, De Aar, 19 September 2006.

52 Interview with Ivan Beukes, Upington, 2 May 2006.

53 Interview with Siswe Makhandula, De Aar, 19 September 2006.

Several UWC students returned to the Northern Cape as teachers. Teachers like Jessie Strauss used subjects such as History to inform senior pupils about the ANC and the liberation struggle. He told them about a better world they should strive to create. “When we were not actively involved in politics we prayed for peace and solutions in our land. Our meetings also started and ended with prayers and services were held to pray for a new South Africa”, according to Strauss.⁵⁴

School boycotts would continue during 1988/1989 in the Northern Cape. At the Gomogomotsi High School (Warrenton), pupils demanded integration and democracy in schools. Many teachers took part in resistance activities such as protest marches.⁵⁵

Consumer boycotts became a common occurrence in the Northern Cape during the late eighties. SANCO organised boycotts with the cooperation of youth organisations in particular. It was used to (i) make people aware of the liberation struggle, and (ii) to paralyse white businesses. The feeling was that whites overwhelmingly supported the apartheid government, and deserved to be ‘punished’ for it.⁵⁶ All purchases had to be made in the townships and anything bought in a white area was summarily destroyed. Sometimes people were forced to eat or drink whatever they had bought!⁵⁷

Reverend Mossie Willemse wanted whites to join the consumer boycotts, and says that this idea took shape in the province during the 1970s. In parts of the Northern Cape, these boycotts were so successful that white businesses were forced to close down.⁵⁸

As early as 1982/1983, trade unions became forces to be reckoned with in the Northern Cape. They pursued democracy on the pretext that they busied themselves

54 Interview with Jessie Strauss, Springbok, 21 June 2006.

55 Interviews with Mr Renene, De Aar, 19 September 2006; Rev. AJ Willemse, Upington, 7 April 2006; Horatius Kgadiete, Warrenton, 19 April 2006; Reggie Sefotiho, Kimberley, 2 May 2006; Joseph Senonohi, Warrenton, 20 May 2006; Jessie Strauss, Springbok, 21 June 2006.

56 Azapo members say in this regard: “The boycotts were brought about as a way of ensuring that we would face certain issues to be brought to our favour” (to the favour of the oppressed). Interview with Reggie Sefotiho, Kimberley, 2 May 2006.

57 Okasa members in particular were very strict about the enforcement of consumer boycotts. Azapo was opposed to the overly strict measures and believed that people should be educated, not harmed. NAVCOC, with whom AZAPO had a good relationship, supported them in this regard. Interview with Nyaniso Plaatjies, Kimberley, 30 April 2006.

58 Interviews with Nick Pieters, Kimberley, *s.a.*; Clifford Beukes, Upington, 2 May 2006; Joseph Senonohi, Warrenton, 20 May 2006; Horatius Kgadiete, Warrenton, 19 April 2006; Willie Lenceoe, Kimberley, *s.a.*; Maurice Smith, Kimberley, 11 May 2006; Gordon Africa, Kimberley, 9 April 2006; Reggie Sefotiho, Kimberley, 2 May 2006; Nyaniso Plaatjies, 30 April 2006; Jerry Radebe, Kimberley, 24 April 2006; T Solomon, De Aar, 19 September 2006; Legassick, 12 October 1993. In Kimberley, people such as Manny Dipico, Jim Summers and Dorothy Peters played a leading role in arranging consumer boycotts.

with labour issues. Youth organisations and teachers were closely involved with the organisation of trade unions, such as the General Allied Workers Union of SA, during this period. During 1986-1990 periodic unrest, accompanied by toyi-toying and stay-away actions demanding higher pay, among other things, was commonplace.⁵⁹

The church by no means distanced itself from the struggle, but strongly supported the liberation struggle in the Northern Cape. Freedom fighters often received words of support from ministers during church services, while activists were encouraged to attend meetings, which were frequently organised by the church; prayers were said for activists, while the clergy, dressed in their vestments, often led protest marches. Sometimes the clergy only provided moral/political support, without becoming actively involved. The police's Special Forces often harassed and threatened clergymen suspected of providing support for youth organisations and misusing their pulpits to deliver liberation messages.⁶⁰

According to Northern Cape clergy, the struggle was "waged in a manner befitting the church". Rev. Willemse, for instance, was a member of the executive management of the UDF and helped SANCO in the province to get going; he also pursued the ideal of one church for all races. This church actively supported the principle of 'one man, one vote'. They believed that God was on the side of the oppressed. Interestingly, they hid money for the struggle in loaves of bread and in spare tyres!⁶¹

Most people in the Northern Cape were of Khoi descent, and by nature they strove to find peaceful solutions to problems. Today, activists believe that their prayers made a huge contribution to the achievement of peace in the province. In 1986, a civil war still seemed a distinct possibility; in 1987, it became clear that a "political turning point had been reached".⁶²

No formal 'People's Courts' existed in the Northern Cape. Whenever collaborators/traitors were identified, the communities concerned decided how to punish or harass those found guilty.⁶³

59 Interviews with Willie Lencoe, Kimberley, *s.a.*; Nyaniso Plaatjies, Kimberley, 30 April 2006; Rev. AJ Willemse, Upington, 7 April 2006; Horatius Kgadiete, Warrenton, 19 April 2006; Joseph Senonohi, Warrenton, 20 May 2006; Reggie Sefotiho, Kimberley, 2 May 2006.

60 Interview with Sampie Beukes, Keimoes, *s.a.*

61 Interviews with Nick Pieters, Kimberley, *s.a.*; Joseph Senonohi, Warrenton, 20 May 2006; Horatius Kgadiete, Warrenton, 19 April 2006; Willie Lencoe, Kimberley, *s.a.*; Reggie Sefotiho, Kimberley, 2 May 2006; Nyaniso Plaatjies, Kimberley, 30 April 2006; NJ Tom, Richmond, 18 September 2006.

62 Interview with Jessie Strauss, Springbok, 21 June 2006.

63 Interview with Nick Pieters, Kimberley, *s.a.*

Although the ANC had been banned, the organisation still enjoyed wide support in the Northern Cape. Many activists were aware of the ANC's ongoing mobilisation of people. However, the ANC's existence and activities were kept under wraps. The ANC and SACP established branches all over the Northern Cape, even in small towns like Delportshoop. People like the Reverend Willemse rendered moral support to detainees. Many activists fleeing the police found a temporary hiding place in the Willemse's home and parked their cars in the family's garage.

The apartheid government was not always aware of the short courses presented by the ANC, PAC and AZAPO. These courses focused on ways and means to achieve a democratic dispensation. Activists in Kuruman, who created underground cells and called themselves 'guerrillas', recount how they cooperated with their colleagues in Rustenburg and how they transported weapons from their Zeerust base. Underground cells were instrumental in introducing the politics of black consciousness to communities. Many activists were trained in foreign countries (such as Botswana) to properly organise cells and direct their activities. In Kimberley, for instance, there was an ANC underground cell that met only once a year (usually in December).⁶⁴

Activists knew that the Security Police were at work throughout society, and accordingly also in the Northern Cape, where they visited schools on the pretext that they wanted more information about certain pupils. Principals and teachers realised that they were being watched closely.⁶⁵

Young activists of the eighties remained under surveillance. They recall their struggle: "Police were brutal. We were beaten like dogs ... It was illegal to form groups larger than two. We had no freedom of speech. Nevertheless, youths continued their liberation efforts."⁶⁶

There are differences of opinion as to the role women played in the liberation struggle. In Kimberley, people like Feitjie Mentoer and Dorothy Peters were very committed to the struggle and also very active. Some women joined the Women's League where they strongly encouraged the liberation programme and provided support to youth organisations. Women often led protest marches, were diligent workers, few were collaborators, and they were very vocal during meetings. In their homes they were pillars of strength, providing shelter to people seeking refuge from persecution and treating victims of tear-gas with Vaseline, etc. Women often hid

64 Interviews with Nick Pieters, Kimberley, *s.a.*; Willie Lencoe, Kimberley, *s.a.*; Rev. AJ Willemse, Upington, 7 April 2006; Horatius Kgadiete, Warrenton, 19 April 2006; Maurice Smith, Kimberley, 11 May 2006; Reggie Sefotiho, Kimberley, 2 May 2006; Nyaniso Plaatjies, Kimberley, 30 April 2006. Rev. Aubrey Beukes, Statement to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Upington, 2 October 1996.

65 Interview with Jessie Strauss, Springbok, 21 June 2006.

66 Interview with Cornelius Ramakor, Petrusville, 20 September 2006.

documents on their bodies, but their contributions were not as readily discernible as those of the men.⁶⁷

Women in the Springbok area whose men worked in the nearby mines had only themselves to depend on for long periods of time. Necessity is the mother of invention, so they performed a variety of functions at home and played a significant role in the struggle. Protest marches often consisted mainly of women.⁶⁸

Collaborators were a problem in all parts of the country, and they also presented an obstacle in the Northern Cape. It is alleged that most collaborators were policemen, teachers, members of the local council and ministers of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church. Protest marches were often held to demand the resignation of council members. The apartheid government did everything in its power to recruit collaborators by offering them money, jobs and cars. The Reverend Willemse believes that he would have been made a chaplain if he had become a collaborator – but he refused. In the community, those collaborators who were exposed, had to pay for it. Members of AZAPO today believe they may have been too soft on collaborators. Township dwellers did not regard all members of the police force as collaborators, and some policemen even provided them with important information.⁶⁹

During the same year (1985) in which the Upington 26⁷⁰ were charged with murder, a collaborator, named Stomasile, were stoned to death at Hanover. The police accompanied Stomasile to the township to collect his furniture. He was killed after having been left unguarded for a short while. Four people, Bobby Booysen (a street committee member), Nkosi Singapai, Somosi Jack and Bennet Sonamzi, were charged with the murder of Stomasile. In 1988, a court in Grahamstown sentenced them to death. In the Central Prison in Pretoria, they were placed in single cells – like the Upington group of 14 who were there with them. They too lived in a state of constant anxiety. After they had successfully appealed against their sentence, they were released from prison at the end of 1992. Shortly afterwards, Booysen was elected to the post of ANC secretary. Later he became mayor of Hanover and was very popular among the youth.⁷¹

Since the seventies, the Defence Force (SADF) were cooperating with the Police (SAP) to maintain law and order in the country. Freedom fighters regarded the

67 Interviews with Nick Pieters, Kimberley, *s.a.*; Willie Lencoe, Kimberley, *s.a.*; Joseph Senonohi, Warrenton, 20 May 2006; Horatius Kgadiete, Warrenton, 19 April 2006; Solomon Kgomo, Kimberley, 1 May 2006; Jerry Radebe, Kimberley, 24 April 2006; Rev. AJ Willemse, Upington, 7 April 2006; Clifford Beukes, Upington, 2 May 2006 and Ben Sidisho, Warrenton, 1 May 2006.

68 Interviews with Hendrik Visser and Martin Bezuidenhout, Springbok, 16 June 2006.

69 Interviews with Jerry Radebe, Kimberley, 24 April 2006; Clifford Beukes, Upington, 2 May 2006; Nyaniso Plaatjies, Kimberley, 30 April 2006.

70 Later only 25 of the original 26 were brought to court – thus the reference to the Upington 25.

71 Interviews with Bobby Booysen and Mrs N Rasmini, Hanover, 18 September 2006.