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## Ben Turok – a revolutionary Thought Leader until the end

*Ismail Vadi*

**On Sunday 2 February the ANC will celebrate 30 years since its unbanning as a liberation movement by former president FW de Klerk. The event will be marked by President Cyril Ramaphosa at the Johannesburg City Hall, where he also will pay tribute to the late Professor Ben Turok, one of the most outspoken revolutionaries of our time.**

Who can forget the diminutive Ben Turok, clad in a brightly-coloured African designer shirt, treading through the corridors of Parliament with his large trolley bag filled with copies of *New Agenda: South African Journal of Social and Economic Policy*, that he ably edited?

Turok can best be described as a fearless and outspoken activist and a lifelong revolutionary thought leader.

His book, *Revolutionary Thought in the 20th Century*, published in 1980, was an essential read for any activist involved in the mass struggle for freedom and democracy in South Africa. It carried the seminal document, *Strategy and Tactics of the African National Congress of South Africa*, which raised seizure of power by military means as a major objective of the liberation struggle in our country.

Turok had the singular honour of introducing the third clause of the Freedom Charter, *The People Shall Share in the Country's Wealth*, at the historic Congress of the People held on 25-26 June 1955 in Kliptown. In doing so, he declared:

“Mr. Chairman and Friends, it is not only the gold mines that are a curse to South Africa, it is also the monopoly industry, it is also the big factories throughout the country, it is also the factories that you find outside Johannesburg, inside Johannesburg, in Cape Town, in Port Elizabeth and in every big town. Wherever you find big factories you find many workers, and where you find many workers you find low wages, and where you find low wages you find a fat boss, a rich boss, a boss who oppresses you.”

At the time Turok was a full-time organiser and Secretary of the South African Congress of Democrats in the Western Cape.

Having gone into exile in the early 1960s, Turok initially settled in Tanzania. He was appointed the editor of *Sechaba*, the ANC's publication launched in 1967, a post he held for five years.

After the unbanning of the ANC in 1990, he immersed himself in formulating ANC policy for a new era of democratic governance in the country. Trained as an urban planner, his passion was economics and the development of the ANC's Reconstruction and Development Policy.

Turok was a fierce critic of any authoritarian tendency within the ANC and the South African Communist Party, which often earned him the ire of some elements of the established leadership of both organisations. He did not care; he continued to express himself on matters he considered important.

It is not surprising that he broke ranks in Parliament in 2011, when he defied an ANC caucus decision, by abstaining in the vote on the Protection of State Information Bill, dubbed the Secrecy Bill.

He was among the first ANC veterans who vociferously spoke out against former president Jacob Zuma, and he publicly called upon him to resign from office. He said he was sickened by the lies that were being propagated by some within the ANC and in Parliament on matters relating to the Guptas, Nkandla and the late-night dismissal of Cabinet members.

I was saddened to see him in a wheelchair at perhaps his final public engagement in late November 2019, when he spoke at a dinner hosted by the Congress of Business and Economics in Johannesburg. Even then his fiery spirit had not abated.

He stressed the importance of combating racism, advocating non-racialism and challenging State Capture and the theft of public resources by some public representatives, civil servants and some in the private sector.

What remains fresh in my mind though is his remark that Flat 13, Kholvad House, where Ahmed Kathrada lived in Johannesburg, served as the nerve centre of non-racial politics in the 1950s. Many Congress leaders and activists coming from another part of the country would inevitably land up at Kathy's flat for a meal or accommodation, and a hearty political discussion on the Congress movement.

Turok was a prolific and independent writer on the Congress movement; development and underdevelopment, particularly in Africa, and on revolutionary thought and politics in the 20th century. He will not be easily replaced. **DM**

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**Reference:**

Vadi, I. (2020). [Ben Turok – a revolutionary Thought Leader until the end](https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2020-01-31-ben-turok-a-revolutionary-thought-leader-until-the-end/), from *Daily Maverick*, 31 January 2020, [online]. Available at <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2020-01-31-ben-turok-a-revolutionary-thought-leader-until-the-end/>. Accessed on 1 February 2020