

TOWARDS BLACK ECONOMIC CONTROL

Presidential Address by Mosibudi Mangena to the 15th Congress of AZAPO held at the Coastland Hotel, Durban, 28th to 30th July 2000.

The Sowetan Newspaper starts its business with the slogan “Real Power is Economic.” That is as true as it is apparent and obvious. You don’t have to read the Sowetan or a book on economics to know this. We experience this reality as part and parcel of our everyday existence.

The people of Zimbabwe gained political freedom in 1980. But by the late eighties and early nineties, those of us who lived in their beautiful country witnessed long queues of Zimbabweans, particularly of women, at the then apartheid South Africa’s Trade Mission in Harare, for visas. Those of us who remained in our own country during that period saw Zimbabwean women going from house to house selling knitwear of one description or another.

Whatever money was obtained through this exercise was used to buy goods for resale in Zimbabwe. The people of Botswana were similarly inundated by Zimbabweans selling and buying things. The Rand and the Pula were currencies worshipped by Zimbabweans at the time; most probably that is still the case. This exercise declined in time, mainly due to the rapid devaluation of the Zimbabwe dollar, which rendered this activity unprofitably. Of course, in its place we saw the illegal border crossing by Zimbabweans and Mozambicans into this country to work for slave wages on the farms and elsewhere.

What all this tells us is that while Zimbabweans gained nationhood in a spectacular fashion through a genuine patriotic liberation movement led by revolutionaries with impeccable struggle credentials, they failed dismally to access economic power. Since independence in 1980, the condition of the masses of the people has been declining. These economic hardships have led to the present state of conflict and strife in Zimbabwe. While war veterans and their allies chose to re-introduce revolutionary methods that saw them occupying farms in an attempt to forcibly redistribute land, other Zimbabweans decided to embrace Rhodesians, their erstwhile colonisers, with the hope that this attitude and action would have a positive impact on their economic status. The recent elections in Zimbabwe were essentially a confrontation between these two groups of Zimbabweans.

With minor variations, the same scenario is playing itself out in our own country. We have similarly gained political freedom. We have achieved universal adult suffrage in this land that recognises no race, class, origin, religion or sex. Yet, just like our Zimbabwean neighbours, economic freedom continues to elude us.

In fact, we are observing deterioration in the social condition of our people. Retrenchments in the private and public sectors, which added nearly a million people to the legion of the unemployed, have increased the misery of our people. The unemployment rate of 37% and still growing means that the level of poverty in our population is increasing all the time. It means many more people than before 1994 go to bed hungry. It means the consumption of protein and vitamins has gone down, that in turn producing a more sickly people who queue in clinics and hospitals that have insufficient nurses, doctors and medicines necessary to treat them. In fact, some of our hospitals are now filthy death traps lacking beds and linen, forcing many a patient to sleep on the floor with blankets from home.

There is no doubt that there are more of us living in the ubiquitous mikhukhu and on the streets of our cities and towns than there were in 1994. Even when houses are built by the state for us, they not only excruciatingly smaller than the matchboxes of the racist settler regime, but the workmanship is often also appalling. Verwoerd must be cursing himself in his grave, regretting why he bothered to build black people the hated matchboxes if a black government believes we deserve less.

Six years after the attainment of the vote, education for the majority of our people is a mess. It is attended by neglect and mediocre performance on the part of the department of education and the teaching fraternity. Poor or incomplete lack of delivery of learning materials, lack of application on the part of both teachers and students and appalling levels of discipline, all combine to produce smaller and smaller percentages of matriculants. This results in fewer and fewer students enrolling at our universities and technikons and even fewer sufficiently prepared to enter the economically critical fields of engineering, sciences, accounting and other business related studies. This can only help to condemn more and more of our young people to a life of unemployment, unemployability and a precarious eking of a livelihood at the fringes of the economy of their country. And because of this low enrolment and high drop-out rate, there is now a threat to scale down tertiary education in our country through mergers and the closing down of Black institutions.

We have hardly moved in the area of land reform. Land ownership patterns are still as decreed by white settler-colonialism where Blacks were squeezed into less than 13% of the land surface of our country. Even land restitution, which relates to sentimental land where people were forcibly removed by the racist regime, but which amounts to very little in the bigger scheme of things, very little has been achieved. Only about 1% of the more than 64 000 land claims lodged have been settled. Urban land and rural agricultural land are still firmly in the hands of the white minority. There are no large scale Black commercial farmers to speak of. Democracy is

still to arrive in farming.

Actually, the scale of land inequality is far larger than that of Zimbabweans. That is why AZAPO urges us, as a country and people, to move full throttle and as swiftly as we can to address it. In doing so, we should use, at the same time, the three methods of expropriation: land taxation and willing–seller–willing buyer.

Land tax must be imposed on people owning land beyond a stipulated size and the proceeds used to buy land to settle Blacks residentially, or as small-scale farmers or as commercial farmers. The usage of any of the three methods in a particular case and place must be at the discretion of a fully–fledged ministry of land affairs assisted by a powerful land commission. The land question must be settled now in the interest of our people, of this country and of peace and tranquillity. Failure to attend to the land question properly and timeously can only lead to disaster in the near future.

The solution of the land question should cut across the party programmes of our individual organisations. It must be a truly national effort akin to what we had during the struggle to rid our country of white racist settler–colonialism.

Land reform must be pursued as a crucial element of Black economic control in the land of their birth and forebears. This situation where Blacks are only equal to others only in terms of the vote, but remain in a subservient role in all other spheres, just as the situation was decreed by racist oppression where we are by and large still confined to our impoverished townships and villages, the places from which we still wake up each morning to board trains, buses and taxis to report to work in white–owned mines, farms, banks, insurance companies, supermarkets and other businesses, is simply unacceptable. Under these circumstances, the Black majority government is simply and truly just a majinkelani guarding the wealth of the white minority. This state, dominated as it is by Blacks, organises the police, the army and all other manner of things to maintain law and order and protect property, almost all of which belongs to a minority race.

This Black economic situation is so fundamentally difficult and serious that all differences we might have among ourselves pale into insignificance. It should be the height of stupidity for the ruling party to boast they are in power when in the overall configuration of power and wealth in the country they have very little say. It would similarly be the upper limits of foolishness on the part of those patriotic forces that are out of government, such as AZAPO, to engage in politics of pure, hysterical and unbridled vilification of the ruling party without offering anything of a positive nature to the country. It would again be unfortunate in the extreme if those

patriotic forces that are not in government were to exaggerate their differences to the extent that they have almost no combined impact on the problems facing our country.

In addition to the enormous economic problems we face, but not divorced from it, is the issue of racism. Everywhere Blacks go in their country, they are confronted by racist attitudes and actions. Blacks are often beaten up, maimed and even murdered on white-owned farms all over the country. There are cries of agony by Blacks against racist attitudes and actions in the army, the police service, the prison services and elsewhere in the state apparatus. White racism is widespread in the media, the estate industry and other such private enterprises.

Recently, the Human Rights Commission held hearings on racism in the media and it is to hold a national conference next month on the issue. But nothing demonstrates our weakness better than the fact that our only response to racist attacks and attitudes is to hold hearings and conferences. Some of us find the spectacle of an indigenous majority incessantly but harmlessly complaining about racism from a minority race rather exasperating. Until such time that we own substantial sections of the land, the media and other sectors of the economy, we will remain victims of racism in our country and our responses can only be as weak as we have them now. Whites are hardly bothered by these conferences and hearings. The conferences can have no effect on the iron grip they have on the economy and on Blacks as their workers and majinkilanis.

Another national problem defying organisational affiliation is the scourge of HIV/AIDS. The figures released occasionally by the Department of Health and other bodies working in the field suggest a pandemic with devastating effects is upon us. It is silly to suggest there can be an individual political party response to such a national crisis. A united national mobilisation of our people against the virus is called for.

The enormity of some of these national problems, which mock at our struggle for freedom and threaten to devalue that struggle and its achievements, has impelled AZAPO to approach other political organisations in our country with whom prospects of agreement on certain co-operative agreements seemed possible. We sought to identify points of intersection in our politics and policies and to use these to maximise co-operation that will enable us to attack some of these national problems together.

In doing so, we are not necessarily calling for the dissolution of our political parties into one, and by that action denying our country the diversity of views, ideas, opinions and voices that are necessary to create a living and vibrant democracy. Anything that suggests a move towards a one party state would be injurious to our country and its people.

All we are saying is that there ought to be a level at which we can meet as different parties, particularly the patriotic ones, to work out joint actions and strategies to address our economic weakness and related matters. We may go on to compete against each other for votes and express ourselves differently on many issues, but we ought to seek as much common ground as possible on the big national issues. This congress will have an opportunity to address this issue at some point.

This important national agenda we have just outlined requires and demands a strong AZAPO. A weak political organisation cannot have an impact on this agenda. All it can do is to make noises on the fringes with the hope that others with the necessary muscle will take the issues forward.

We, the leadership and the membership, have slipped up very badly in recent years on organisational and political action, in that process reducing AZAPO and the entire BC movement to a poor shadow of itself. The fact that of the thirteen parties represented in the national parliament AZAPO is the smallest pains some of us very, very deeply.

Yes, many of us contend that our showing at the polls last year does not reflect the true potential and strength of AZAPO. We identified the following factors as contributors to that particular outcome: Firstly, AZAPO did not really campaign in the last election. Many of its cadres did not do a scratch of work to mobilise people to vote for the party. It seemed as though many of us imagined that our struggle record of the past was enough to attract votes to our organisation. Unfortunately, the masses of the people do not behave like that.

Secondly, too much money is spent by parties in elections in this country. Whilst AZAPO spent in the region of R150 000.00 in this election, others spent hundreds of millions on the same election, and on the basis of this alone, our results are better proportional to the amount of money we spent. However, this country needs to do something about the fact that political parties spend so much money on elections when the nation is so poor and when so many of its citizens live in abject poverty and miserable squalor.

But the most important factor of them all is poor organisation. A better organisational machinery would have enabled us to deal with campaigning and lack of funds much better than we did. It seems in this era of neo-colonialism, which tends to open more opportunities for the Black petty bourgeois, many of our members tended to get pre-occupied with the pursuit of personal interests. In so doing, many downgraded their role in their political organisation.

If we are scientific we must accept that the political landscape has changed and that it impacts

on our lives in a different way. We should accept that people will always look for opportunities to improve their lives and those of their families.

What we should emphasise is the fact that the pursuit of personal advancement and happiness cannot be independent of the political arrangements of the day. The solutions of our problems in education, health, housing, employment and so on is dependent on the political machinery of the day and its overall attitude towards those problems. Moreover, for all those of us who are members of this Movement, it should be very clear that it is not an “either/or” question. One impacts on the other in a definite and powerful way. You can’t isolate one from the other.

We need a strong AZAPO if we are to advance the struggle of our people towards Black economic control and ownership. If we are to avoid the pitfalls of other decolonisation struggles where the hoisting of a new flag and the singing of a new national anthem meant the end of the struggle but the beginning of the economic misery of the masses, we must build a strong AZAPO. And there is no magic or secret in doing so except to do the basic things that other organisations, churches and clubs do. Some of these simple things are the following:

- (a) Renew membership yearly
- (b) Ensure your participation in your branch activities and other structures
- (c) Give your organisation monthly financial support so that while most of us are busy elsewhere in the economy, the organisational bills are paid and those employed by the organisation are paid
- (d) Contribute ideas and time whenever your organisation requires you to do so

Although these things are fairly elementary and well understood by all of us, it is amazing to see how few of us actually observe them. It is even more surprising to see how many members, who do not contribute anything somehow expect their organisation to perform.

In its rich history that spanned just over three decades, the Black Consciousness Movement has produced some of the finest freedom fighters this country has ever seen. Some of them, like Bantu Biko, Mthuli ka Shezi, Muntu Myeza, Onkgopotse Tiro, Mongameli Gxowa and others gave their lives so that this country could be liberated. They died for an open, egalitarian and caring society where the colour of a citizen would not be a point of reference.

Well, the society we have now is unequal, is exploitative, is cruel, is racist and is unsafe. Bantu

Biko and the other martyrs are in no position to do something about it. They depend and rely on us, their living comrades, to take the struggle forward to its logical and envisaged conclusion. And we owe them that.

MOSIBUDI MANGENA