

Anatomy of an unknown quantity

By Sue Valentine

GENERAL secretary of the Pan Africanist Congress-Internal (PAC) Benny Alexander claimed in a recent interview that support for his organisation included about 400 000 signed-up members, wider support numbered "millions".

While other sources are sceptical about these figures, there is no doubt that the PAC, while something of an unknown quantity, represents a potentially significant force.

The PAC's present low profile is in sharp contrast with the prominence it enjoyed in 1960, when it received worldwide attention, largely as a result of its organisation of the pass law protests that ended tragically at Sharpeville.

Within a year of the formation of the PAC in 1959 and eight months after Sharpeville, a survey of middle-class African men by the SA Institute of Race Relations showed significantly more support for the PAC than the ANC.

The poll indicated 57 percent favoured the PAC while 39 percent supported the ANC. PAC president Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe emerged from the poll with a higher profile than ANC president Chief Albert Luthuli.

However, state repression and the imprisonment of PAC leaders, notably Sobukwe, severely weakened the PAC. The most important consequence, says SA Institute of International Affairs researcher Gary van Staden, was the series of leadership and policy crises which dogged the PAC for the next two decades.

"The quality of leadership and the frequent, often violent, disputes which erupted around it were sufficient to render the PAC all but useless," Van Staden says.

During this period rival leaders were assassinated and the PAC was linked to gun-running and drug-dealing.

But a revival of the PAC has been evident since the mid-1980s, says Van Staden, who attended a PAC consultative conference in Harare towards the end of 1989.

The three days of talks covered a range of topics, but focused particularly on negotiations, the armed struggle, internal mobilisation and unity with other groups.

VAN STADEN says the new clout of the PAC was reflected in the attendance at the conference by representatives of the United States, Britain, China and the Soviet Union.

He notes that the PAC has tripled its diplomatic representation since 1985 and now has more "foreign envoys" than the Republic of South Africa and only a few less than the ANC.

Among the positions which emerged at the conference were:

- * An indication of a more flexible approach than the PAC has been credited with previously;
- * Unconditional negotiations are out of the question, certain conditions must be met first;
- * The "time is not right" for negotiations at this point in South Africa's history;
- * A shared perception that the South African government is not serious in its stated intention to negotiate;
- * No negotiated settlement which involves the concept of groups



LEFT: The secretary of the PAC-Internal, Benny Alexander, claims the PAC has 400 000 signed-up members.

ABOVE: Seventy-six-year-old PAC president Zeph Mothopeng.

pictures: AFRAPIX

can succeed.

Consistent with its position since its inception in 1959, the PAC declared itself willing to consider participation in negotiations only if the "five pillars" of apartheid were removed first. These include the Population Registration Act, the Land Acts of 1913 and 1936, the Acts which created the bantustans, the SA Constitution Act of 1983 which created the tri-cameral parliament, and the Bantu Education Act.

Van Staden finds it significant that the possibility of negotiations at some future date was not ruled out at the conference. This, he says, represents movement in the PAC position.

On the question of unity with other organisations, the major issue separating the Africanists from the Charterist position remains the suspicion with which the former view the South African Communist Party and the role of "white organisations" such as the Five Freedoms Forum and the Black Sash.

Van Staden says the PAC draws a clear distinction between individual white South Africans who accept African socialist majority rule (who are welcome), and whites who see themselves as part of a "group" wishing to influence the course of the liberation struggle for (usually) selfish ends. These whites are not welcome.

According to Van Staden, the favourable circumstances in which the PAC finds itself at the moment are based largely on two variables. The first is the increasing radicalisation of the black political milieu. The second is the failure of the ANC to take full advantage of the current situation.

But the PAC remains enigmatic to those looking in from the outside because information about it is as sketchy as its public image. This situation is largely a product of internal leadership squabbles and lack of internal structure, as well as the ANC's dominance of the media.

Sue Valentine is Publications Assistant with Idasa.