



**PRESIDENT
OR TAMBO**

**POLITICAL
PROFILE**

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on the Occation of
his 70th Birthday

By FRANCIS MELI

IT HAS become a tradition in our movement that when a historical event or an important occasion takes place it is commemorated, indeed celebrated, in a fitting fashion. This is all the more so because the collective memory of the people usually translates itself into mass consciousness, and historical memory being what it is passes from one generation to another — in fact it lingers over the heads of generations. The masses — it is said — make history. But individuals too make their imprint. The role of the personality in history and politics does influence the course of events. One such personality is OR Tambo, President of the ANC, who is celebrating his 70th birthday this month. OR (as he is affectionately called) has been at the centre of political action all his adult life and has been pivotal in all the innovations and developments within the ANC and South Africa as a whole.

EARLY BEGINNINGS

Born on October 27th 1917, in Bizana (the peasants in the area call the place Mbizana) Eastern Pondoland, Transkei, Oliver Reginald Tambo grew up in the rural areas. His father, Frederick, a peasant farmer, had several wives and his mother gave birth to two children — Oliver and his siter, Lydia. At the age of 12, O.R. Tambo attended the mission school at Ludebe in Holy. Cross near Flagstaff. Thereafter he got a scholarship from two English missionary women and went to St. Peter's School in Johannesburg where he completed matriculation with a first class pass

in 1938. He was awarded a scholarship by the Transkeian Bunga and then proceeded to Fort Hare University college in Alice where he graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in 1941.

But even before he graduated a 'simple' incident, which had repercussions on his later political life, influenced him. A white boarding master assaulted an African woman employee and when no charges were filed, a student protest broke out and Tambo was a key actor in that protest. This was the beginning of his political baptism, his own activism and action against 'authority.' OR has this to say about the incident:

"I was just an ordinary student . . . I'd always got along with authorities quite well . . . I found myself playing quite the leading role in the protest against what happened to this woman."

He graduated and went to Johannesburg where he met ANC politicians, notably Walter Sisulu. By the time he went back to Fort Hare for a post graduate course in Education — University Education Diploma — he had close contacts with some ANC leaders.

Tambo as the elected head of the hostel approached the warden of the hostel about reconditioning an old tennis court. He got permission but when he asked if they could play on Sundays the warden was horrified at the thought. Tambo's hostel was Anglican and the warden feared that this was going to tempt the Methodists and Presbyterians — who were not allowed to play tennis — to play on Sundays. The students protested. Their weapon was "non-

co-operation."

They would go to the chapel, get there and just keep quiet throughout the service. This went on for a week. The students were then brought before a disciplinary committee. Tambo was expelled. This was in 1942. He was not the only one to be expelled — the whole hostel comprised a quarter of the student population — and some left voluntarily, in sympathy with those expelled. OR Tambo remembers.

"These events — they pulled me out of my sense of security."

After expulsion from Fort Hare he went back to Johannesburg where he re-established contacts with ANC. Tambo was 'forced' into political activity by the situation of racial discrimination that surrounds every black man. He taught at St. Peter's — though he did not have a University Education Diploma, a licence to teach. His students included Duma Nokwe, later to be Secretary General in an Executive headed by Chief Lutuli and OR Tambo. President Tambo remembers taking some students from St. Peter's to an Anglican cathedral on a Good Friday in the mid-40's. They were two thirds of the way up in the church when a White priest came around and said:

"Would you please go to the back of the cathedral because this section is reserved for Whites."

OR ignored him and when he came next time he found OR kneeling and he (OR) said:

"Please, don't interrupt me."

Up to then OR thought that the church was part of



the struggle. He taught at St. Peter's until 1947. He turned towards politics.

We relate this story because it has relevance for the younger generation of today. OR studied Science; was disillusioned with the church and had discredited his ambition of being a medical doctor - he had now turned to law, on the advice of Walter Sisulu. In 1947 he was 30 years old but today children of 15 are already involved in politics. This is not only a change in attitudes but in the politics of our times; it is not a so-called generation gap but a continuation of a process of injection of politics into education a process started by the founding fathers of the ANC but definitely developed by the generation of OR Tambo.

THE ANC YOUTH LEAGUE

In the mid-forties young men and women in their mid-twenties or early thirties, mainly teachers or students of medicine or law, became dissatisfied with the manner in which things were done by the ANC and the pace with which they were done. These were young intellectuals. Walter Sisulu, a worker, was a noticeable exception.

These were prominent members of provincial and/or local student associations who articulated the aspirations of their generation and the masses of the people as a whole. They held political discussions frequently.

The African youth were concerned with the deteriorating conditions of our people; the rise of fascism in Germany and Mussolini's barbaric attack on Ethiopia in 1935-36 aroused interest not only about the fate and future of South Africa but of the whole continent. The growth and new militancy of African trade unions (the mine workers) and the activi-

ties of the Communist Party were other factors which led to the rise of the ANC Youth League. These young people participated in militant mass actions.

It was in response to this situation that the annual conference of the ANC on December 21, 1942 resolved that "this annual conference of the African National Congress authorises the Executive to institute a youth League of the African National Congress to include students at Fort Hare" and the 1943 annual conference adopted a similar resolution. These young men consulted with the ANC leadership, especially Dr Xuma - the ANC President General before the ANC Youth League was formally established at the inaugural meeting held at the Bantu Men's Social Centre in Johannesburg in April 1944.

Anton Muziwakhe Lembede became its first president and OR Tambo was prominent leader. There were many others, the most noticeable being Lembede, Mandela, Sisulu, Tambo, Mda, Njongwe Nkomo, Ngubane, Sobukwe, Ntsu Mokhehle and others. The aim of these young men and women was simple and honest: a desire to remould the ANC, and there was a noticeable shift towards recruiting a broader circle and organising a permanent youth wing within the ANC.

The other aims of the Youth League were to articulate ideological questions such as African Nationalism; to work out political strategies, militant policies and to map out organisational structures.

The moving spirit in the Youth League was Anton Lembede, a controversial but certainly one of the most misunderstood personalities in our history. Lembede was

militantly nationalistic, with very strong views on the Africanness of our struggle his philosophy, he called it, "Africanism". But Lembede's ideas were not static but changing with the times.

On March 9, 1947 a meeting of the Joint Committee of the ANC, the Transvaal and Natal Indian Congresses was held in Johannesburg. Present were Dr A.B Xuma, in the chair, Dr Y.M Dadoo (TIC), Debi Singh (NIEC) J.B. Marks (ANC), M.P Naicker (NIC), D. Tloome (ANC), C.S. Ramohane (ANC), Y.A. Cachalia (TIC), J.N Singh, A.B. Meer (both NIC) and, significantly, A.M. Lembede.

A sub-committee, consisting of Drs Xuma and Dadoo, Singh, Meer and Lembede was appointed to draft a joint declaration. The joint declaration which was read and accepted, stated:

"... that the next meeting of the joint committee be held on 23 March 1947 at 11.00 am to which representatives of APO should be invited to attend."

What we are saying is that Lembede was part of a Joint Committee of Africans and Indians and was a member of a sub-committee which appealed to the Coloureds to join the Africans and Indians in the struggle. This call for a united front of all democratic forces could only be realised in the 1950's. Even ideologically he was developing and changing his views, attitudes and ideas about the Communist Party. Unfortunately he died in July 1947 at the tragically early age of 33.

Tambo was part of this collective. He served for a while as the National Secretary of the Youth League, then became its Transvaal president and, in 1948-49 was National Vice-President.



called for the formation of the ANC or Gumede when he came back from Moscow or Mandela's Rivonia Trial Speech.

The Western Countries are mounting a campaign against the ANC. We are told that the ANC is a communist front organisation and therefore it must not be supported in fact people are called upon to fight it. The ANC is told to loosen its ties with the Soviet Union and dissociate itself from the South African Communist Party; it must abandon armed struggle it must be part of the 'reform' process.

In this connection it might be instructive to relate what President Tambo told George Schultz, American Secretary of State. The Soviet Union has no interests in Southern Africa that are separate and different from those of the rest of humanity. It wants an end to apartheid. What the U.S should consider is having discussions with the Soviet Union with the aim of seeking ways and means of devising a joint plan of helping us overthrow apartheid. This is what is called consistency in struggle — a characteristic feature of OR.

In the 1970s South Vietnam was liberated and Vietnam united or rather reunited. OR Tambo was so inspired by this victory that he led an ANC delegation to study the experience of the Vietnamese people. These were questions connected with armed struggle and mass mobilisation. This was before the formation of the UDF and other mass organisations. This experience proved useful in the development of our theory of armed struggle and mass mobilisation.

One of OR's contributions has been the drive for the release of all political priso-

ners and the struggle for unbanning the ANC: a process which took the form of transforming the ANC from an African organisation into a national organisation of like-minded people, united by their hatred of colonialism, racism, exploitation and national degradation; sharing a common goal — the Freedom Charter — and whose activities consist in propagating its ideas amongst the people and fighting in a constituency which it itself defines. This was realised at the Second Consultative ANC Conference in Kabwe in June 1985. The subsequent meetings between the ANC and organisations from within the country have vindicated the correctness of this line.

HIS INTERNATIONALISM

The ANC NEC foresaw that our movement is going to be banned: hence they instructed OR to leave the country and mobilise internationally. This proved to be doubly important because when the ANC leadership was arrested at Rivonia in 1963, the External Mission of the ANC had to take over the tasks of the Men of Rivonia — armed struggle — and OR features here prominently. He is a military theorist, strategist and organiser of armed struggle.

When the External Mission had to shoulder the tasks which were the province of the Rivonia Trialists — armed struggle, OR Tambo together with Mgwenye (senior cadres of Umkhonto we Sizwe) initiated the participation of our young army in the Zimbabwean struggle. This was OR's internationalism. There were heroes of ours who had fallen in Rhodesia and comrades of ours who were arrested and sentenced to death by the Smith regime and those who were caught in Botswana and even in

South Africa. Some were executed (Mini, Khayingo, Mkhaba) and others sentenced to long term of imprisonment. These include the men of Rivonia.

These were some of the problems that faced OR and his executive in the 1960s.

OR, together with Uncle J.B. Marks and Moses Mabhida (Moses Kotane was at this time incapacitated) helped to give directions in the difficult deliberations of the Morogoro Conference and later became central in the struggle against the 'Gang of 8'.

Comrade Tambo's role in arousing world consciousness has had an immense impact on international opinion about South Africa. His basic thesis is that by liberating South Africa we are contributing to the international community's struggle for justice and therefore assistance to us is not an act of charity: it is a revolutionary duty. Apartheid is not only fraudulent, says Tambo, but anachronistic.

Our struggle against apartheid is therefore connected with the worldwide struggle for peace — our armed struggle is basically a struggle for peace.

Since coming out of South Africa in 1960, he has earned the respect of many world figures by his honesty, his modesty,

his incisive intelligence and his historic indictments against the apartheid regime at the United Nations and other world forums. He has met practically all African Heads of States and world leaders including recently Gorbachev. In this he was continuing the work he and Mandela started in 1961. So ably has he represented the case against South Africa that he has come to be regarded as a man whose

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ed the fourth general assembly of WCRP in Nairobi, Kenya in 1984.

The consultation was a follow up on a decision taken at the fourth WCRP general assembly held in Nairobi to send a delegation to South Africa to assess the political crisis in our country. This was not to be as the regime refused most of the members of the delegation visas.

The WCRP was determined to be informed about the situation in South Africa and decided to hold the consultation in Lusaka, Zambia. The WCRP-SA delegation led by the Archbishop D. Tutu included Anglican Bishops and religious leaders from Muslim and Hindu religions. The WCRP international chapter was led by its Secretary-General, John Taylor and other WCRP leaders from India, USA and Australia.

The ANC delegation was led by Cde. Ruth Mompoti and consisted of other four members of the NEC and other comrades. The consultation was significant for the one reason that it took place at a time when Botha was threatening all South Africans opposed to apartheid not to have any contacts with the ANC. It was also important as the regime has imposed a blanket ban on news of the atrocities it is perpetrating against our people, and the people of southern Africa. The participants in the consultation were able to get first hand informa-

tion from people involved in the struggle some of whom have been victims of its repression.

The movement over the years has worked closely with the church leadership. It was the first time to be exposed to youth from the Hindu community which is waging struggles to involve more of the leadership from his community in the National liberation struggle. The consultation was held in a cordial and warm atmosphere which enabled delegates to reach common understanding on a number of issues. At the end of the consultation a communique was issued which stated inter alia:

"Religions are becoming a real vital force in South Africa and people of religions have an increasingly important role to play in the struggle for liberation.

Inter-faith cooperation is essential in South Africa in order to focus on the fact of religious pluralism in South African society to provide a platform for the continuous condemnation of apartheid and to attend to inter-faith tensions as a potentially divisive factor which the apartheid regime seek to exploit. . .

Apartheid cannot be changed or reformed and should be abolished and destroyed. The present regime refuses to meet the just aspirations of the people of South Africa and remains the obstacle on the road to a relatively peaceful

solution. It resorts to increasing repression within the country, to increasing aggression and acts of destabilisation against sovereign states in southern Africa and therefore blocks the possibility of a negotiated solution at this stage.

The Pretoria regime meanwhile has become more brutal and inhuman in the present war against its people. The meeting recognised the centrality of the ANC to any solution of the south African conflict. All participants shared a common commitment to the establishment of a non-racial democratic society in South Africa based on one person one vote.

To this end the participants urge the international community to take prompt and strong measures aimed at isolating the Pretoria regime."

The consultation also discussed the forth coming Commonwealth Summit and directed the above communique to the leaders who will be gathered in Vancouver, Canada, to impose mandatory comprehensive economic sanctions against the Pretoria regime.

The WCRP is making preparations for its fifth General Assembly to be held in Australia in 1988. The issue of Southern Africa will be high on its agenda and the ANC will participate and contribute to the deliberations of this important occasion.

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authority cannot be challenged on such issues. He has travelled widely and continues to do so. The esteem with which he is regarded in Africa can be judged by the fact that the movement he leads, the ANC,

is regarded as the authentic and representative voice of the Black masses of South Africa. He knows personally almost all African leaders on the continent — except Banda — who have a great respect for

his opinions. His speeches have been published and translated into many languages.

This is OR, the man of the people leader of the oppressed masses in South Africa and maker of history.