

SAIC - participation or boycott

STATE POLICY towards Indians resident in South Africa was, until 1961, that they were 'foreigners' who should be 'returned' to India wherever possible. During 1961 this policy was altered, and government accepted, in the words of the then Minister of Interior, that "Indians are here and the vast majority are going to remain here....we must realise that the vast majority of them are South African citizens and as such they are also entitled to the necessary attention and the necessary assistance".

It was as a result of this change in policy that the Department of Indian Affairs was created in 1961, and the cabinet minister heading the department empowered to appoint a so-called National Indian Council to advise him on certain matters. The government claimed that it was necessary to appoint a council, as there were no identifiable Indian leaders with which it could consult. In adopting this attitude, they ignored the popularly-based Indian Congress, which had led Indians politically for generations; government claimed that Natal and Transvaal Indian Congress was communist led and without support; to the extent that it had power amongst Indians, this was held through intimidation.

The appointed National Indian Council was established at the end of 1963, when the Minister of Indian Affairs invited approximately 100 Indians to a conference held in Pretoria.

At the time, the formation of the Council was resisted by some, and several hundred Indian women gathered at the Union Buildings, Pretoria, to express their opposition to apartheid and apartheid-created organisations. When, in February 1964 the Minister of Indian Affairs announced the appointment of a 21-man National Indian Council, with the secretary for Indian Affairs as chairman, the scheme was totally rejected by the South African Indian Congress.

The South African Indian Council Act of 1968 gave statutory recognition to the Indian Council. The Minister of Indian Affairs was formally empowered to appoint 25 people to the SAIC, as well as the chairman of the council's executive committee.

An amendment to the act in 1972 empowered the state president to increase the size of the SAIC to 30, and also allowed for a certain number of members to be elected, rather than appointed. Later that year it was announced that 25 members would be appointed, and 5 members elected; the recently revived Natal Indian Congress (NIC) immediately rejected these proposals, and stated that it would boycott the election of the 5 SAIC members.

Then, during 1973, the Minister announced that at the end of the term of office of the appointed SAIC members, an 'election' would be held to vote in 15 new members; the remaining 15 members would be appointed. The election would not be held on the basis of a voters roll, but through 'electoral colleges' comprised of members of Indian local authorities, local affairs, management and consultative committees. A number of groups expressed their intention to boycott these so-called elections, including the Indian Management Committee of

Lenasia and the Natal Indian Congress.

An Electoral Act for Indians was passed by the all-white parliament during the course of 1977, which made it compulsory for all Indians over the age of 18 to register as voters. This was widely interpreted as a prelude to the inauguration of a wholly elected SAIC. During October 1977 talks were held between NIC and Transvaal Action Committee leaders, who agreed to co-ordinate their efforts in opposing the whole notion of a specifically Indian council, whether elected or not.

1978 saw the enactment of the expected law providing for an elected SAIC. 40 members would be elected on a voters roll, and a further 5 members would be appointed; 3 would be appointed by the leader of the majority party if it held 34 or more seats in the SAIC; if the majority party held 33 or fewer seats, 2 members would be appointed by that party, and 1 member by the opposition party. In addition to this mechanism, the State President was empowered to appoint 2 members on the advice of the leader of the majority party.

It was made clear that the government had formulated this act with the intended new constitutional proposals in mind, whereby a three-tier 'parliamentary' system involving separate 'parliaments' for whites, coloureds and Indians was proposed; africans were not mentioned in these constitutional arrangements.

Most progressive anti-government groups and organisations presumed that progressive Indian organisations would naturally adopt a boycott stance towards the proposed SAIC elections. This had been the consistent

position of the Indian Congress over the years, as well as a number of other Indian organisations. The influence of the black consciousness position, which had as a principle plank in its programme the non-participation in state-created, ethnically separate bodies, accentuated the conventional position of progressive opposition groups - non-participation in and boycott of Bantustan administrations, Urban Bantu Councils, Coloured Representative Council (CRC), SAIC and other similar bodies.

It was against this background that a group of Natal-based members and associates of the NIC called for a reassessment of the boycott principle, and thereby initiated a wide-ranging debate on strategy and tactics in contemporary South African politics. Early in May 1979 it was revealed that a series of meetings were being held between NIC leadership and a younger group of people who were keen to reassess the boycott strategy adopted towards the forthcoming SAIC election. This article attempts to outline the various positions taken on this issue. It is written not for the specific purpose of recording the conflict over participation in the SAIC election, but rather to raise some questions about progressive principles, strategies and tactics in South Africa. For while the specific debate about the SAIC election has been resolved, the issues involved retain a general importance for political struggle.

Broadly speaking, one can isolate four major positions on the SAIC question. The first involves the recently formed Democratic Party, which has grown out of the group nominated by the government to the SAIC. A

conservative group, it is prepared to work within the government-created system, and compromise in order to win limited gains for certain strata of the Indian Community. This party is quite happy to participate in the SAIC, and sees no problem associated with its position.

The second major grouping is gathered round the Reform Party, currently led by Y.S. Chinsamy, but recently joined by J.N. Reddy who is the state-appointed chairman of the SAIC executive committee. This group has previously contested SAIC elections, and recently gained a majority on the SAIC executive committee. The party was formed from amongst SAIC members in 1977, and joined the Inkatha-led South African Black Alliance (SABA) in January 1978. Backed by SABA, the Reform Party will participate in the SAIC election.

The third group has rejected participation in the SAIC totally, and is supported in its stance by a number of black-consciousness organisations. It is comprised primarily of the NIC, the anti-SAIC committee, and the Solidarity Front, which has its roots in the now-dissolved Anti-Constitutional Proposals Committee (ACPC), Transvaal. Some people within this group have rejected participation in the SAIC purely on principle, while others have argued that their boycott position is based on tactical considerations.

The fourth group rejects apartheid and all apartheid institutions, and sees the SAIC as a reactionary institution. However, they argued that, in the current state of 'Indian politics', there were good tactical reasons for participating in the SAIC elections; this

group suggested that a tactical advantage could be obtained for anti-apartheid forces by contesting the elections.

The groupings gathered around the Democratic and Reform Parties are not of major concern in this article. It is rather the third and fourth positions outlined above that are discussed and considered below. It must, however, be borne in mind that the pro-participation position discussed below has nothing in common with the position of the Reform and Democratic Parties, which also favour participation in the SAIC.

The position of the group which wished to reassess the boycott principle revolved around 3 basic propositions:

- 1). that participation in reactionary and/or dummy institutions does not necessarily imply acceptance of what those institutions stand for;
- 2). that boycotts of such institutions are a matter of strategy, not moral principle;
- 3). that in the current situation in South Africa, there are sound strategic reasons for progressive forces to participate in the SAIC elections.

In support of their first proposition, is that participation in an institution does not always imply acceptance of the functions of that institution, the pro-participationists outlined a number of instances where progressive and even revolutionary forces had participated in useless bodies for tactical gain.

For example, after the failure of the 1905 revolution in Russia, the militant Social Democratic Party (which under the leadership of Lenin took state power in 1917) participated

in the powerless Dumas (sham parliaments). It was argued at the time that boycotting the Dumas would distance the Party from the people, leading to the isolation of leadership from the masses.

Similar sorts of occurrences were referred to by the pro-participation group, drawn from the history of political struggle in India, Germany, western Europe and Zambia. In South Africa itself, members of the then legal Communist Party (CPSA) participated in the almost exclusively white-elected Parliament - at that time, certain 'qualified' Cape African males and 'coloureds' were permitted to vote in Parliamentary elections. According to a document issued by the pro-reassessment group, the CPSA in the 1940s

"put up candidates in Durban, Johannesburg and Cape Town for the City Council elections. In 1948 it had one of its members elected in the Cape western seat (on an African Communal roll). This Cape western seat was thereafter won by such people as Brian Bunting, Ray Alexander and finally by Lee Warden. Lee Warden was a member of the Congress of Democrats which...was part of the Congress Alliance. It was with the permission of the Congress Alliance that Lee Warden took his seat in Parliament as a representative of the Cape Western Africans.

The pro-reassessment group argued, secondly, that political boycotts are a strategic weapon, to be utilised and implemented where there is some gain for the oppressed and dominated classes. They rejected the suggestion that participation in reactionary bodies under all circumstances and situations is wrong. Specifically, they felt that boycott or participation was an issue to be decided in terms of the tactics and strategies of political struggle, and not by a rigid,

inflexible morality which implied that it is 'impure' or 'unprincipled' to participate in state-created institutions. The group then went on to explain why they believed that the objective position of the Indian community and its relationship to political struggle suggested that something could be won by contesting the SAIC elections. They agreed that when the NIC decided to boycott the SAIC in 1971, there were sound reasons for its stance. However, in the intervening years, the retention of a principled boycott had led to a growing separation between progressive Indian leadership and the majority of the Indian community. The NIC, it was argued, had not grown during the past few years, nor had it managed to create a mass base and following. The effect of the boycott policy led to a small, weakened body of progressive Indians.

They suggested that the process of contesting the SAIC elections could facilitate the building of a powerful organisation, with grass roots community support and participation. The election campaign would also allow certain ideas, programmes and policies to be put forward which would otherwise be difficult in the repressive South African context.

The reassessment/pro-participation position can accordingly be summarised in the following way:

- +participation in the SAIC election does not necessarily imply acceptance of the body;
- +boycott is a strategy, not a moral principle;
- +participation can assist in the building of a mass oriented, popularly based organisation;
- +the boycott policy has led to a distance emerging between progressive NIC leadership and the Indian masses;

+participation in the SAIC gives a certain degree of protection from state repression in the development and spreading of political policies, programmes and ideas;

+because of lack of organisation and participation in directed activity, the consciousness of the Indian masses is low. An election campaign run by progressive elements can go some way to raising mass political consciousness.

The responses of those who argued that the boycott position was the correct one can be conveniently divided into two main areas:

- 1). that boycott is a moral principle never to be broken or assessed;
- 2). that boycott of the SAIC is the correct strategy at present. This position differs from the above in that it accepts that participation in reactionary structures may be a correct tactic in certain circumstances.

Vice-president of the NIC, and chairman of the Natal-based anti-SAIC committee, M.J. Meidoo, responded to the reassessment initiative in the following way (report from Graphic newspaper, 1.06.79):

"Any participation by members of the Natal Indian Congress or their sympathisers in the forthcoming SAIC elections could cause irreparable harm and embarrassment to the sustained overseas campaign against South Africa.....In a statement....Mr. Meidoo pleaded with members of Congress to think again and avoid a split and warned that any attempt to opt for the elections would be seen by anti-apartheid campaigners overseas as working within the apartheid system and could deliver a body blow 'to our exiled leaders campaigning overseas..... I cannot concede that the entitlement of Indians to elect an

Indian Council or Parliament is really such a laudable dispensation as to hoodwink the oppressed peoples of South Africa into believing that it is anything but a fraud.... Nor do I concede that it is necessary for radical-thinking democrats to capture the SAIC in order to deny the Government the argument that Indians are participating in its system of government'.

Mr. Naidoo went on to say that the NIC was unequivocally opposed to participation in the forthcoming SAIC elections because it refused to make false promises to the people during the election campaign...and operate the apartheid system and the entrenchment of Black poverty and suffering.....

'The NIC readily concedes that the protagonists of participation intend participation with rejection, and to this end will accept their bona fides. It is essential to know what campaign promises will be made, what the manifesto will contain and what the ultimate purpose of participation is. If there is going to be a demand for one man one vote for all people including Africans, Coloureds and Indians, if there is going to be a demand for a unitary state based on recognised democratic principles, if there is going to be a demand for the release of political leaders in prison and under restriction orders and if there is going to be a demand for the repeal of discriminatory and repressive legislation then it must be made clear that this is the policy of the group and they must also make it clear how they intend to carry out their mandate once they enter the Indian Council or Chamber'. Various other arguments in favour of boycott, and criticisms of the participation position,

were canvassed in the press and at public meetings. Some of the areas dealt with by those opposed to participation were as follows:

1). Boycott: principle or strategy?

It was suggested that it was over-pragmatic to argue that boycott of state-created institutions was nothing more than a flexible tactic, to be instituted or ignored according to the political climate or the direction taken by a political organisation. This implied that, at least in South Africa where state and para-state institutions are not subject to an elective principle based on universal suffrage, it is important to accept the general idea of boycott and non-participation. However, some people in favour of boycott suggested that it was also important to accept that in very specific circumstances there may be an advantage to be gained for the oppressed by participating in a state-created structure in order to achieve specific objectives. For this group, the question over the SAIC election became whether there were good enough reasons to deviate from the general strategy of non-participation and boycott - and they answered the question negatively.

2). Discipline of candidates contesting the election.

It was argued that if the participation group went ahead, one of the problems they would face would be how to ensure that their group of candidates submitted to group or party discipline both during the election campaign, and subsequent to being elected. The possibility of running for SAIC with anti-apartheid support could attract opportunists who did not accept or fully understand the arguments for participation.

This could lead to them making election promises in an attempt to ensure election which could not be fulfilled, or which ran counter to the programme of the group; it could also create confusion once elected to SAIC in terms of voting patterns on issues, statements and speeches made, etc.

3). Campaign promises.

Related to the above criticism was the question of election campaign promises. While it was understood that a major plank in the pro-participation campaign would be one of minimum demands over issues like one man one vote, release of political prisoners, etc., some nonetheless feared that the average voter might still expect that the candidate was undertaking to improve or further the community's immediate needs (housing, roads, facilities etc). If this happened, expectations amongst voters would be raised, and if those expectations were not met, a process of apathy, disillusionment and rejection of those who stood for office might set in. They could become associated in the minds of the voters with opportunists who ran for SAIC for considerations of prestige, personal gain, or to further the interests of the wealthy Indian trading class only.

4). The ability to succeed in the election campaign.

It was of great importance whether the pro-participation group could actually win the election, defeating the Reform Party backed by the South African Black Alliance (SABA). The question was raised by the boycott group whether sufficient resources could be gathered to run a high-profile, effective election campaign in all constituencies. Might the

state not interfere to hamper their campaign and covertly support that of other candidates. There was concern raised about the effects of participating in the election, and loosing to another political party.

5). The 'black middle class' strategy.

It was noted that the SAIC fitted into a wider state strategy related to the constitutional proposals, and the attempt to create a black 'middle class' with a vested interest in society much as it currently is. The strategy seems on the one hand to create a relatively privileged african 'labour aristocracy' in the urban areas, and on the other hand to gradually involve 'coloured' and 'Indian' leadership in decision-making (but to exclude the mass of coloured and Indian workers). The SAIC seems to be a state-chosen vehicle for one part of this strategy, while Koornhof's regional councils, community councils, Wiehahn and Riekert proposals form another aspect. While most progressive forces are critical of Wiehahn and Riekert, and while most urban african leadership rejects Koornhof's committees, it might be difficult to explain why progressive sections of Indian leadership are adopting a different position, is the utilisation of the structures, rather than their total rejection. This could serve to render difficult any alliance between progressive Indian groups, and other interests.

A large number of the objections raised to the pro-participation position revolved around the practical dynamics and difficulties involved in actual participation in SAIC functions, business and meetings, as opposed to participating in the elections themselves. It was partially in response to these criticisms that the pro-participation group

proposed a 'compromise strategy', whereby they form a political organisation to contest the elections, but boycott the actual business of the SAIC itself. It was suggested that these 'boycott candidates' could facilitate the raising of mass consciousness, the building of a stronger organisation with close links with the community, keep collaborators out of 'leadership' positions on SAIC, while not having to actually take up a seat on the council.

The debate, however, was not confined to 'Indian politics'. Because of its general importance, a large number of groups and organisations intervened in one way or another. Gataha Buthelezi, chief minister of the Kwa Zulu Bantustan, warned that the anti-Indian Council campaign was aimed not only at the SAIC, but also against "our South African Black Alliance, at Inkatha and at those members of our Indian and Coloured communities who offer out their hand of friendship". Buthelezi also warned that if the boycott campaign of the anti-SAIC groups was successful, it would imply that co-operation with other blacks was being rejected by Indians, and violence endorsed.

On the other hand, various groups partially or wholly associated with the ideology of black consciousness, rejected involvement in the SAIC totally. The Solidarity Front, a primarily Lenasia-based group which includes AZAPO president Curtis Nkondo, was formed in mid-August with the express intention of opposing any participation in the SAIC elections. Nthato Motlana of the Soweto Civic Association (ex Committee of Ten), speaking at a meeting called by the Lenasia Peoples Candidates group, opposed the idea of blacks working within

government-created institutions.

"Whatever concessions black people have gained came as a result of activities outside the ridiculous Government-created institutions. You can't quote me a single example of an achievement by people working within these institutions."

he told the 750 people present at the meeting. Leader of the Peoples Candidates group, Dr. Rashid Saloojee, endorsed Motlana's position, adding that his group, which dominated the Lenasia Management Committee until it withdrew, would not participate in the SAIC elections.

In terms of its general policy, the South African Council on Sport (SACOS) made it clear that it rejected participation in any government created institutions, including SAIC, CRC, Bantustan administrations, etc. The positions of CRC member Norman Middleton who is also president of the SACOS-affiliated South African Soccer Federation (SASF), and Gataha Buthelezi who is patron of the SASF, have been considered at SACOS meetings; a recent speech by SACOS president Hassan Hossain made it clear that unless Middleton and Buthelezi were removed from the federation, or resigned their positions in government-created bodies, the SASF faced permanent expulsion from SACOS. There are indications that some of the pro-participation group in Natal were linked to SACOS, which must have made their position difficult and sometimes contradictory.

There was clearly rather limited ground for debate between those who rejected participation in SAIC on the grounds of morality and principle only, and those who argued for participation on the basis of tactics. The most interesting and productive debate tended to take place between those who

agreed that the question was one of tactics, but disagreed over which line was the more advantageous to implement in the current situation. As mentioned, it was partially as a response to this interaction that the reassessment group proposed the idea of 'boycott candidates' contesting the SAIC elections, but boycotting the body itself. At the same time, the pro-participation group indicated that they were unhappy about contesting the elections unless they obtained agreement on their revised strategy from NIC leadership as well as other groups. They felt that to go ahead without the backing of such groups both split the Indian left, and allowed for the possibility of defeat in the elections because of lack of solidarity and support on the left.

It was presumably within this context that, at the end of September, people prominent in the pro-reassessment group issued a statement aimed at restoring unity. Signed by Yunus Mohammed, Krish Govender and Pravin Gordhan, the statement said that

"After due consideration we firmly believe that the SAIC elections should be boycotted and in this regard we commit ourselves to the NIC programme.....The Indian community is being subjected to divisive manoeuvres by the state to further separate the community from the other Black communities, to divert it from participation in the national democratic struggle and to establish as spokesman of the community elements such as the Reform and Democratic parties who would follow closely state policies.

In view of this onslaught it is imperative that all progressives unite under the banner of the NIC. We commit ourselves to working towards this objective. We are grateful to our president, Mr. George Sewpersadh whose open, honest and mature approach has contributed tremendously to the resolution of the

differences within the NIC and we pledge our support to his leadership.

This new-found unity between all groups opposed to the SAIC was due to have found expression at an anti-SAIC convention in Durban in mid-October. Some 200 delegates and observers representing 29 organisations, including NIC, AZAPO, SACOS and COSAS gathered to launch a campaign of active boycott against the SAIC elections, due to be held in March 1980. However, the convention was postponed when a large group of blacks - some allegedly members of Buthelezi's Inkatha movement, although Inkatha has denied responsibility - tarred and feathered a representative of the Transvaal-based Solidarity Front. Motlana was due to have spoken at this convention, but was unable to attend. The person tarred and feathered was mistaken by the attackers for Motlana, who was their target.

The basis of the groups attack seems to have been

- a). that Motlana should direct his efforts at leadership towards africans in Natal before speaking to Indians, and
- b). that if Indians considered themselves to be blacks, they should join the SABA led by Buthelezi, and incorporating Inkatha, the Coloured Labour Party, and the Indian Reform Party.

The issue of whether progressive democrats should participate in the SAIC election is now resolved. Agreement has been reached to launch an active boycott campaign amongst the Indian electorate. A large number of important questions have been raised, dealing with issues of strategy and tactics in the South African struggle. Some of these questions remain

unanswered, despite the current unity around the boycott of the SAIC. The most important point remains: is it ever legitimate for oppressed groups to participate in structures created by the oppressors in order to win a tactical advantage in the struggle? And if the answer is positive, in what circumstances is it correct to participate, and when is boycott the weapon of the masses? The way in which these questions are discussed, and the answers formulated, will have an important bearing on future political struggle in South Africa.

Glenn Moss.

