

Frank Chikane, May 4, 1987, interviewed by Larry Jones, a student at Union Theological Seminary, New York

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[This interview was conducted just after Rev. Chikane's appointment as General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches (SACC). Chikane, age 36, was underground at the time of the interview.]

Q: What is your reaction to the pro-South African government stand of American evangelicals?

Frank Chikane: I think I read it [American evangelical propaganda about South Africa] for the first time when I was in New York. I had been concerned by the church throughout [the world] especially in South Africa and the fact that it has been seen supporting apartheid. And that the perceptions amongst blacks in South Africa is that missionaries just came in and exchanged the Bible for their land. They were given the Bible, and the whites are oppressing them, and the negative reaction to that. I've argued in South Africa that it is still a miracle for one to be a Christian as a black person.

Given the situation as it is there is no reason why I should still be a Christian. There were two choices that were open for me: either to reject the Christian faith, or otherwise to liberate that faith from the hands of those who are making use of it or misusing it. I chose the second option. But not all blacks will do the same.

When I read of this stuff in the USA I began to realize that our problem was more serious than I thought. Then I began to link up with some of the literature, with some of the groups that have been emerging in the last two years in South Africa with some groups in the USA. And that showed me that there is a whole international conspiracy of making use of the Christian faith to support very evil, repressive regimes, particularly in the third world. And all this is done in the name of, you know, combating communism.

I'm convinced that the issue at present is no more the question of faith — of people who believe and people who don't believe. And I still believe that the issue in the Bible was never between people who do believe and people who don't believe. The Old Testament deals with believers who behave like non-believers. It means you deal with the question of idolatry. That's the biggest problem the Bible deals with. In fact it's worried about those who believe in idols rather than in the living God.

And what I think has happened is that for the West the whole fight against communism has become an idol on its own. It means they can do anything as long as they are fighting communism. They can kill, they can commit atrocities. The American administration can be directly involved in atrocities and fund groups that are engaged in those atrocities, but as long as they are fighting communism, it's OK. There is that type of relaxation.

And the whole Contra story, I was in the USA during the time that that unfolded. What I missed in the debates - The debates were saying how, why it happened the way it happened rather than why does it have to happen. It means I listened to the politicians, everybody else, they were saying the way Reagan did it and his team wasn't good enough. They should have done it better. That's the message. You don't get a question of saying in the first place what are they doing there [in Nicaragua]? Is it justified or not justified. That question doesn't arise because They are fighting against communists; so it is not an issue to them. That's the issue I am grappling with at the present moment.

And I have said that I'm concerned about the West because they claim to be Christian and I have become more [critical], simply because they claim to believe in the same God. And my concern is that their obsession about communism makes them to fail to even understand or listen to God speaking to them. They can't hear God anymore. Put it in that way.

And I've said that the East has got the same problem. When they talked about a new vision of society, they were hit badly by Christians and then there was the counter-action against people of faith. And then you end with the whole question of seeing Christians as counter-revolutionary groups. And therefore religion becoming a counter-revolutionary conception from the Eastern point of view. And because of their fear of counter-

revolutionaries manifesting themselves in the form of religious groups, they have been hitting against religion at all costs. And that has intensified the tension, in fact, between the East and the West.

And when I was in Germany recently after visiting New York and reading all this stuff, I said to them: I believe the third world is going to save both the first and the second world if they don't blow away the world before we come... Because they could do it.

But if they allow us to come, in our weakness, through death, as they kill us, they are involved — the arms are manufactured there, the technology - The security they are worried about is the security of the USA, it's not the security of South Africa. If South Africa is taken by the communists then their security is threatened, then they must come here and cause our death. They must go to Nicaragua, they must go to Latin America, etc. And the East comes in when they are there and the conflict starts.

There are no bombs thrown there in their countries. The bombs are thrown amongst us. We become the victims. But I'm saying, in our weakness, as we die, there is going to be a message that will come out of it. And it will come in the form of a resurrection for the world at large. And I think Nicaragua, South Africa, the Philippines, most of those countries where Christians are heavily involved in those struggles are beginning to create contradictions for both the two worlds. For the West it's strange for Christians to be hand in hand with so-called communists. In the Philippines, I mean, its 80% Catholic, 90% Christian. Is strange for them. They can't understand that.

They can't understand why in South Africa we needn't first start sorting out who is a communist amongst us and who is not a communist. To us it is not the issue. The issue is what is just and what is not just. And then once you start from there you can sort out anybody else who talks about injustice, you know. So for the third world they are not obsessed by communism nor are they obsessed by religion. And for the East it's a strange conception to have Nicaragua with Christians involved and South Africa with Christians involved and the Philippines. It defies their original theory. I mean the dogmatic Marxist approach. And therefore most of the theorists in those areas are also beginning to review their conception of religion.

And therefore I'm seeing the death and pain of the third world as having a message for both the first and the second world. That was my reaction. In fact this documentation led me to develop that theory further. Because after New York in March, the beginning of March, I went to Germany and had two meetings there before I came back. And by that time I had formulated this theory. And I felt it looks arrogant. It looks like we are saying we are the savior of the world. But it is true that in our death, in our weakness, through the cross, it looks like that is the only way. Because we're not obsessed by any of those struggles they are engaged in.

Q: Which groups do you see involved in this international conspiracy?

Frank Chikane: I think, I mean I would have to go back into the documentation to pull up the specific names but it is very clear that there are conservative right-wing groups particularly concentrated in the USA linked up with some groups in Europe and throughout the third world, and that those groups do relate to existing governments and make use of intelligence networks of those governments. And that they are funded mostly - I mean there is an indication that they are funded - by those governments and business people who are supporting those regimes. In particular it comes from conservative, evangelical, pentecostal groups, although you do get them across the board. You get right-wing groups within the Catholic church or the Anglican church. But they manifest themselves and express themselves in the name of evangelical faith, and the pentecostal groups would fall within the same range.

We need to go also a bit further, but I mean in the Philippines we're looking for that document that-- People in the military do research in terms of their studies, doctoral studies, etc., on the church and how it's behaving and responding in Latin America. To study how they can in fact promote the right-wing groups to act against the mission of the church in those countries and discredit people who are concerned about the issues of justice, etc.

Q: Do you see them using Christianity as a form of psychological warfare?

Frank Chikane: I think they are. I mean that's the whole-- If you want to hit at communists you must talk about a threat to your faith, that those people are going to kill all Christians, etc. And psychologically it appeals a lot

to ordinary Christians who have not even read about communism. In South Africa most blacks will have not even read about Marx. Some few years ago it wasn't an issue at all but when you come and tell them the communists are coming and that they are going to hit against your faith it appeals to ordinary people. It takes time before they discover the contradictions.

For me the contradictions became clear very early in my life as a Christian. I find myself oppressed by Christians and these Christians are supported by other Christians and they come to me and tell me that communists are bad. And they try to throw propaganda around how communists torture people. During our days there were leaflets about communists hanging people head-down, burying them alive, and all that type of stuff. And when I got detained, in my detentions I found out that these people were using the same methods they were telling me about, so I got confused. So I said well, what's the difference. What should make me believe in these people because they are Christians? In fact I should believe less in them because they claim to be Christians and they do that. If there is someone who is not a Christian, an unbeliever, doing it I will say well, you know, that's a different story. But if a Christian does it makes it worse. But for me my concern is for those Christians rather than for so-called communists. I can worry about that as a secondary issue.

My primary issue is what is the weakness of the church in this world and what is the church doing which is discrediting that very mission and what are Christians doing which discredit that mission which gives those who do not believe leverage to say Amen, we're justified to deal with them.

As early as 1975 I preached a sermon in my church during a youth rally. It was after Mozambique [began moving to independence]. And I said to them when the people [of Mozambique] close the churches and use them as social centers we should not claim we are being persecuted because what we do now before the independence, before people become free, determines what is going to happen after. And if we do nothing now we shouldn't claim to be persecuted because we are part of the problem. But if we now begin to stand for the truth, then after that day when we are persecuted we will say we are really persecuted wrongfully. And therefore will stand for it.

And I have said blacks will have to lock me up if they practice injustices and they are in a majority government. Then they will be holding the prisons and I will have to go back to that prison and they will have to torture me. Because to me it is not a matter of a black or a white question, it is a matter of justice for me as a Christian.

Q: What happened to you during your detention?

Frank Chikane: I have been detained for about 5 or 6 times already between 1977 and now. Most of those detentions, except one, would have been basically because of my pastoral activities, helping victims of the system of apartheid, helping families of detainees. The question from the police is why do you do it; it means you are supporting them. I said to me the question is not whether I'm supporting them or not. If somebody is detained and the children are left at the ledge it is my responsibility as a pastor to take care of those children. It doesn't matter what the father has done. But in most instances, they lock up people and [then they] get released. Almost 80% of the detainees are never charged for any crime. They get released and therefore you cannot assume because a person is detained therefore that person is a [criminal].

Of course, *the crime* has to be questioned. And who makes the law? If legitimate activity becomes a crime then I cannot endorse the action of the state on the basis of an unjust law. I can't say that because it is legal it is therefore justified. To me it's how just is the law before I find it justifiable.

So most of the time it was mostly pastoral. The first detention, for instance, I realized when they came to my church-- I was in Soweto and now in Kagiso. I realized they came with a family in Soweto which belonged to one of our congregations, both father and mother. They were looking for the elder son and they thought because he's a friend to my brother they would be together, maybe at my place. But then I realized that they had the parents of that family and the elder brother should be the one they are looking for. So it would have been the 15 year old with 5 other kids left in the house. So the first thing I do is to get on my totes(?) and go to Soweto to go and check the kids. And when I arrive there they say that the fact that you have come here is because, you know... And I say, no, I have come here to check on the kids; that is my responsibility.

And they locked me up. It involved a third degree method. By the second day I couldn't walk properly, I mean they had really messed me up. So that was the first [time].

The second one as well was basically pastoral. I was helping victims of the detentions at the end of 1976. They detained them in December. During the 6 months up to June I was relating to families, helping some of the children, paying rent, locating their parents, or father or child, etc., and instructing lawyers. So I think the police realized that the lawyers kept on saying we are instructed by Pastor Chikane to find out about the whereabouts of so-and-so. Because at times it takes too long to get the family which is working to go to a lawyer, to sign a document, etc. I said I will sign it. I will take the responsibility, you know. Ask them where is this person because people just disappear. And so they came and detained me 6 months later. And there they tortured me badly.

Q: How did they torture you?

Frank Chikane: They used various methods. I have written a document on my torture in detention. I mean they would use 3rd degree methods where they beat you, you know, and there's blood all over. But I think the torture process which is the long, slow process, would be making you take certain positions like sitting on a chair that's not there for hours and they would beat you up or chain you against some fixed object, you know, in a crouched form for hours or even days, depending on whichever case.

With me it was just for some hours in a day. Burn you with cigarettes, beat you up with broomsticks, and hang me head-down until I lost my senses, you know, over a wooden staff and beat me up with my head facing downwards. I couldn't walk afterwards. Made me to stand for 50 hours, interrogated me around the clock, and assaulted me throughout. I mean all those types of methods would be used.

The only thing that they haven't done was to subject me to electric shock, which they did to most of the young people. And one could, you know, go on with all the details. I have documented that part of the stuff.

But they were having my diary. When they detained me they got my diary. And they had a list of about 9 of those people who were in detention at the back of my diary. Now, they wanted me to say that I know those people, you know, I have been doing something with them. Whereas when families come to me you write names on your diary so you remember when you give them to a lawyer, etc. And they showed me the names after a long period of torture to say you've been denying you know these people but these people are in your diary. I said it doesn't mean that I know them. The fact that they are in my diary doesn't actually prove that I know the people. In fact the fact that I couldn't remember them shows that it is just a list of names for me and they didn't mean much in terms of personal relations. But to them it means that I was hiding something and I need to tell them the things that I don't know. Because they didn't know anything themselves and they had tortured a lot of youngsters who made statements, etc. And I mean, the second detention, the third detention, would be the same.

The different one would be the 1985 one. People participated in the United Democratic Front, and church groups, etc., even councils of churches affiliated to the UDF -- Because then it was just a front of all the groups that were against apartheid. I participated in that campaign against the apartheid constitution and got detained, charged for treason, and got acquitted. But even then it is part to me of a ministry that is required in a country where the injustices and the doctrine or ideology of apartheid challenges the very basis of your faith. You are bound to take sides with the victims of that system and participate in challenging what the church has called heresy. Because that is something that the church has made a pronouncement on. But that would be the basic type of situation.

But the fact is you are tortured by Christians. This is the problem. The person who supervised my 6 weeks torture in 1977, during the '77 detention, the long period, was a deacon of my church. In the white church. And people don't believe when you say that. But it's Christians who are doing it. And that creates more contradictions for me as a Christian.

Q: Did you ever talk about your faith with this man who was torturing you?

Frank Chikane: Well, that's why I had to know where he is worshipping, etc. And he wasn't prepared to discuss, you know, his faith in relation to what he was doing because he supervised my 50 hours of interrogation, torture. And he came during office hours, he kept on coming back and saying are you still fine, you know, you are causing pain to yourself. If you cooperate with us and collaborate you wouldn't be going through the experience. Of course he used very derogatory language. He said, you know, we belong to the same church. You are a pastor of my church, but, and then he went on. To him, he believes that he is dealing with terrorists, communist inspired people, and that he is justified as a Christian to go ahead. See, the contradictions are heavy for me. Very difficult to handle.

Q: How do you see the situation now in South Africa?

Frank Chikane: I think this country is a tragedy. Put it in that way. It is a tragedy. Maybe start from the subject we are discussing at the present moment — that Christians have failed to understand that their context, their background, their socialization process determines what they think as Christians. It means some people innocently support these right-wing groups, conceptions, theology, etc, completely honestly because they have not known anything outside. That reality, that is their world view. That's where they are living.

And if they are told that the communists are against you it doesn't strike them that 85% of the people in this country can't vote for the government. It doesn't strike them that a Frank Chikane cannot decide on the guy who makes the law and declares the state of emergency. There is no way in which I can decide whether that law should be there or not. I can't decide whether P.W. should be the president of the country, but when he makes the proclamation it effects me. People can't see that.

What they see is...they start from the position of privilege. They benefit out of that system and cannot see beyond their benefit and the need to protect their interests. And they develop an ideological basis for it and the Christian faith is drawn into that type of ideological justification.

If one would say, like Boesak said one time, if we take over as blacks we will substitute white for black in the law and people were shocked. He was addressing a meeting. You see, he started by doing that. He said, why are you shocked? Because whites in this country think there is nothing wrong, you see. Let's substitute black for white. Let's have blacks having their parliament and we give them [the whites] some structures where we determine how those structures should run, to what level, and if they exceed it we dissolve it and form another one. And we be in charge of the army. We make the laws. We give blacks 10 times the amount for education than for whites. Let's do it the other way around and see whether that's "normal."

They will tell you: I will fight. I have talked to whites who have told me if that would happen I would fight. But they cannot see why a black has to fight because you see they are starting from a racist premise of superiority, of saying, you know, blacks are less superior, we made them what they are if they are anything. Blacks here are better than those in Africa [...] and we made them what they should be. It's a very racist type of premise from which they start their theory.

I think when you read Jimmy Swaggart's stuff you get the same type of conception. Blacks cannot rule the country as whites have been. And all these wars in this world have been caused by whites in fact. There were no blacks involved in the first World War and the second World war with the millions of people who got killed during that time. They cannot see anything wrong in that history but they are able to see something wrong in the history of those people they suppress and make sure they do not get the necessary education, except what they want to give them to serve their interests. I think that's the tragedy about it.

But I think beyond that the tragedy is that those who are in power are not going to abandon their power base without being forced to do so. I think that's the most serious tragedy. And it doesn't look like in history anybody in power has given up voluntarily. Somehow you have to force those people to do so. And it doesn't look like whites in South Africa will open their eyes until a lot of people are dead.

And you could go to all the struggles in the third world, go to Zimbabwe, you know, and other places--it doesn't look like until a lot of people are dead and that their security is threatened and their future is no more guaranteed that they give in. But they never do it before. And this is the pain and tragedy because it is unnecessary.

As early as the 1950s Luthuli called for a national convention. They refused. And go through the records of Mandela. I think there was a second attempt again in the 1950s. They refused. In the early 1960s before the ANC took up arms they tried again. They appealed to Verwoerd and said let's have a national contention. Don't declare a Republic of South Africa without all the blacks involved. They refused completely.

The ANC resorts to an armed struggle. Today the basis of discussion is they must stop being violent before we talk to them. My argument is: who sends them there in the first place. If you refuse to talk to them how do they trust them? They didn't have arms then. They said to you let's talk. You refused. Now you want to talk to them, you say when you want to talk to them they must put down their arms first before you talk to them. No. No one is going to trust South Africa on that basis because they refused to talk with them before they even took up arms. In fact the organizations were banned before they took up arms. They were very non-violent, peaceful, and they were banned on that score.

And therefore it doesn't look like South Africa is going to see the light until they are forced to. And the problem is how do you do it. And how much life is going to be lost in that process. How many people are going to suffer. Some people talk about sanctions for instance. I say there is no option for blacks but to have the sanctions irrespective of the costs because somehow you need to force them to, you need to affect the standard of living of whites, you need to make them feel they are no more secure. You need to make them feel this country is no more viable economically. Once that happens it's then that maybe they would talk.

And that's the problem — where you balance the destruction is the biggest question. And those who say don't destroy this country, what they are actually saying is accept your oppression indefinitely. I may understand that, maybe, but the people who are going through the pain are not going to understand that they must subject themselves because the country will be destroyed. Their lives are being destroyed anyway. So it doesn't matter to them what happens except that it leads to change, that that's the basis. And I think that it's a tragedy for South Africa. That's my opinion.

And the elections now just tell you the story. The Nats [National Party] have become more conservative. The language they speak for elections to get elected is more conservative than ever. There is no way that you can have reforms after the elections when you have contradicted the very spirit of reform to be elected. The basis of going into Parliament is that we will keep the system. Now you can't go afterwards and change that system. So there isn't hope among the Nats either.

And the problem is that the victims who are the majority of the country will resort more and more to violent options. Not because they have no option in fact. It's not a matter of a choice to say, well, what do I want to do. For whites you can make an option. You can say, well, I don't want to be violent so I'm not going to do anything because you benefit out of the system. But for the victim there's no choice.

And most of us who have talked about nonviolence are finding it more and more difficult to tell people you can't be violent because we can't give them a choice. All the non-violent methods are closed. Everything is subversive that you can do. Calling a meeting is subversive. You know, calling for a boycott is subversive. Boycotting rent, which is a very peaceful activity, is subversive on its own and sends you to many years in jail. What then do you do? Producing a sticker or pamphlet becomes subversive. There's nothing actually left that could be done for the victims. And I always say for the victimizers there is still a lot to be done.

Q: Many white evangelicals say there is no political solution possible in South Africa but only the chance that God might directly intervene.

Frank Chikane: I think my opinion has been that anything that will save South Africa now from destruction would be a miracle from God. Now what do you mean by miracle? Some people don't like the word miracle but they'd rather talk about deeds of power, whatever we mean by that. But something extraordinary has to happen for lives in South Africa to be saved. Otherwise we will have to go through, the whole way through, the bloody confrontation.

At the end something will come out of it but it will be a bloody confrontation. And anything that can intervene now, given the fact that whites are not prepared to face reality and blacks are not prepared to remain oppressed indefinitely, you are going to have a violent confrontation and something will have to happen miraculously.

For me that something happens through people, Christians who listen to God. And I have used people, firstly because when Christians don't, God does use ordinary people to resolve [things]. God can use stones as well. When Israel doesn't listen. God uses other people to resolve a problem and therefore I'm looking forward to those who are going to listen to God and act accordingly.

A miracle to me is not something that just happens with no factors that are put together. God puts together those factors in a miraculous way. But it is us who have to be available to be used by God. You don't need to go and relax and say I'm waiting for God to do it. You need to say what does God want me to do, not what is God doing but what does God want to do? Where do I fit in that program that God wants to undertake at the present moment? That's what I'm struggling about now, to say what is the role of Christians in this country in terms of the conflict situation we are facing? And if they take the anti-communism stance, which most whites have bought, we have no future because blacks are not prepared to believe that story.

You know, for blacks now, when you hit communism you actually tell them they must be communists in fact, because the person who hits at communism is the one who is causing them pain. When you say UDF, like they made a mistake, UDF is [equivalent] to the ANC, people were excited, you know. The propaganda for whites and for the west doesn't work for blacks who are the victims of the system. It actually produces the opposite effect.

I told one business person a few days ago: When they went to court last week, police said the living wage campaign of COSATU is a Marxist, communist, you know, campaign and must be stopped by the security forces. Then what you are saying to the ordinary person who is earning R150 per month and paying R75 for rent, using R30 to travel home, I mean, to travel to work, using R30 to keep children somewhere else with a child-minder and having nothing to eat. You tell a person demanding a living wage it is communist stuff. That person will believe communists care for them.

There is no way you can win in that type of situation. I've advised those that want to deal with communists [that] we're not part of the problem, it's their own problem. Those who want to deal with communists or communism must start from the basis of justice. They must say what is just first, before they actually hit at what they call communism. Because if you take an unjust position, which is most of the time with the west-- The west has been unfortunate. It has been the colonizer of the third world. The people in the third world had to fight the colonizers and they happened to be the west; and the east comes to help them. That has been the broad historical reality of the west. That west was oppressing those people and practicing injustice, and therefore for them they just started from the wrong basis actually. The anti-communism slogans are not going to work in the third world unless the questions of justice are addressed.

Q: What do you see happening in the next five years in South Africa?

Frank Chikane: I think that there is going to be an attempt of various people to intervene. It is very difficult to predict what is going to happen in the next five years. Seven years ago, six years ago, we wanted to know what will happen in five years time, and the events between '83 and '85 are such that they defy those sorts of predictions. Because so much happened during that time that it changed the whole perspective and reality of the South African situation. Some used to talk about oh, it will take 20 years before they must change.

You know, that was about 6 years ago. But the events that started from '83 showed that things could happen faster than we ever thought. And I think even the western bloc is beginning to take that very seriously. They realize that South Africa is going to last unless there is intervention. Irrespective of the arms, the intelligence, everything, you can't use that on 85% of the population. It simply doesn't work.

Good intelligence works, you know, against outside elements outside the mainstream. If you are an outside element dealing with the main-stream then you need a more, I don't know how sophisticated you need to be. You need three cars, I've said, with 2 people each in every car to follow one car.

So you can't deal with the majority of the community, because then you need more people to deal with the majority of the community if you are doing intelligence work. So the whole system breaks down if you try to deal with the majority. The system is manned for what you'd call 'out of the normal' type of cases, a society where you've got people who resort to abnormal ways of dealing with problems. Then the mainstream would be dealing with a problem in a particular way. [But not here.]

And therefore I don't think South Africa is going to last. If it has to, then they will have to kill thousands of blacks. That's the only way they can continue maintaining the system. I wouldn't be surprised after the election that they would go for martial law. I wouldn't be surprised if more and more blacks get locked up and killed and brutalized. And of course they will raise the question of fighting against communism. I can tell you, the people in those townships, most of them have never even worried about Marx and communism. Those people are simply looking forward to being treated justly. That's all they need really. Very few of those young people have read Marx for instance, nothing...except that they need to be treated like human beings. But if this onslaught continues and they are told about communism and Marxism and then they go and look for books and then it's actually counter-productive for those who want to achieve whatever they want to achieve. I'm convinced that unless the injustices are removed they will have to kill a lot of blacks, as much as we're dying now.