

The Birth of the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa

Colin Collins

One day in July 1968 a group of some 60 black students formed a separate caucus at the annual conference of the University Christian Movement being held outside the village of Stutterheim, Cape Province. Within less than ten years most of the students at that meeting were either in exile, banned or in jail. The most important black person participating in that first meeting of what eventually became the Black Consciousness Movement was Steve Biko. Nine years later he was to die in a South African jail under circumstances that caused many international protests. In 1976, the year preceding Biko's death, South Africa experienced some of the most dramatic uprisings of black people in that country's history.

Accusation of Conspiracy

The purpose of this statement is to examine the reasons why and the circumstances under which the Black Consciousness Movement came to be initiated at a conference of Christian students. Allegedly this movement was nurtured within the organisational matrix of the University Christian Movement which was begun in 1967 and

Colin Collins was one of the leaders of the South Africa UCM during the period under survey. This article is a condensed version of a paper sent to us by Tad Mitsui, Associate Secretary of World University Service. We know that Colin Collins is in Australia, but we could not get hold of him. We would like to extend our thanks to both Mitsui and Collins.

whose demise was recorded on July 11, 1972. Two years later an official report on the UCM was published by the "Schlebusch" parliamentary commission¹. In this report the Commission purported to interpret what the UCM and its main actors had intended to accomplish. This report portrays a conspiracy theory of amazing simplicity. In essence it is alleged that a small group of people operating under cover of a front organisation — in this case, that of the church — set out to subvert the established socio-political order. The ideology, strategy and finance were imported from foreign countries. The Commission asserted that the UCM bore no relationship to existing conditions in South Africa.

This kind of assertion appears again and again throughout the Commission's report. For example,

the impression is gained that the UCM officials were well paid to carry out a particular task... to destroy the UCM

¹ This Commission was constituted by the South African House of Assembly on February 10, 1972. It was formally known as the *Commission of Inquiry into Certain Organisations*. Mr. A.L. Schlebusch was appointed Chairman of the Commission on August 1, 1972. The specific report which is referred to here was officially known as the *Sixth Interim and Final Report on the University Christian Movement*. This report was tabled on November 11, 1974 and will be referred to as the Schlebusch report in this statement.

as a non-racial body and to promote Black Theology and polarisation...²

And again,

The fact that the funds used emanated from abroad and that the UCM had no local following of any consequence which could have influenced its leaders to follow this particular line, suggests that this promotion of polarisation was a strategy inspired from abroad and not a natural development arising from local conditions and problems.³

This report on the birth of the Black Consciousness Movement within the UCM has been the only one published. Now that most of the early Black Consciousness Movement leaders have died or have left South Africa, I feel that it is time that the record be set straight. During the period reviewed by the Commission, I was General Secretary of the UCM and therefore in a position to know better than most what was going on.

Before detailing some of the Commission's inaccuracies it is necessary to understand the circumstances which led to the creation of the UCM as an organisation which first harboured the Black Consciousness Movement.

The Segregated Students Christian Association is Dismantled

Black resistance to white rule had resulted in a series of violent confrontations during the entire decade of the 1950's. These upheavals had culminated in the massacre of Sharpsville in March 1960, at which 69 blacks were killed and more than 200 injured. International protests were loud and strong and foreign investment was withdrawn from the country. From then on, external pressure by such international organisations as the United Nations and the World Council of Churches escalated. One such international organisation was the World Student Christian Federation, which objected to some of the worst aspects of apartheid. This put a strain on the South African Students Christian Association (SCA), which was affiliated with the WSCF.

Within South Africa, the SCA operated as a quasi-segregation organisation among the English and Afrikaans speaking whites and among the Coloured and African people of South Africa⁴.

At the national level it operated on non-racial lines in a national council. Among the Afrikaner whites the SCA was very strong and controlled by the Dutch Reformed Church, a pro-apartheid organisation. The English speaking SCA was largely Methodist and Presbyterian. The Africans and Coloured SCA's were split, with Methodists and Anglicans predominating in the respective racial groups.

It should be noted that the entire SCA was, in the main, restricted to high schools. Its presence was, however, becoming increasingly evident on university campuses. The two main denominations which had well-organised, university-based students were the Catholics and Anglicans. It was of special significance that already by 1964, both the National Catholic Federation of Students (NCFS) and the Anglican Federation of Students (AFS) had a signifi-

cant presence on most of the segregated campuses. In 1964 an important event took place:

After the World Student Christian Federation, in 1964, deplored the failure of the Students Christian Association of SA to 'disassociate itself in word and act' from the policy of apartheid, and urged sanctions against the Republic, the Southern African body decided to withdraw its affiliation. In 1965 it decided to disband, to be replaced by four autonomous bodies, separately controlled by African-speaking and English-speaking whites, by African and by Coloured and Indian Christians.⁵

Emergence of the University Christian Movement

Almost immediately after this, the more liberal leaders within the English-speaking SCA and, later, within the African and Coloured SCA, commenced conversations with officials in the NCFS and AFS. The basic ideology of those meetings was a fairly simple belief in a multi-racial society, a desire to bring students together to promote this end and an acceptance that this could only be done across denominational lines in an ecumenical movement. Many meetings were held during 1966 and these culminated in the December Rossettenville conference, which progressed towards the first UCM conference held in Grahamstown in July 1967.

No doubt apartheid protagonists will declare that the prime motivation of the founders of the UCM was political. To an extent this is true in that all its initial membership comprised people who strongly believed in the community aspects of Christianity and in its ability to unite people. Apartheid was contrary to such unity and was therefore viewed as anti-Christian. These were opinions that were becoming increasingly articulated in such churches as the Anglican, Catholic, Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian.

There is also no doubt that this search for justice and unity in South African society was a trend that was far ahead of the official ecumenical movement in South Africa. Theological discussions between churches moved with glacier speed while increasingly the younger and more socially concerned Christians found greater alliances with their counterparts in white religious denominations.

Thus the original thrust to form the UCM was from a group of white English-speaking Protestants and Catholics who sought to find a meaning to unity and social justice in a racially divided South Africa. The Sharpsville massacre had shocked most of the younger people, most of whom were in their twenties or early thirties and were not very politically active at the time. There was a need for a united ecumenical movement and so the UCM was formed mainly out of the old SCA and members of the NCFS and AFS. The source of their motivation was

² Schlebusch report 7.46 p. 115.

³ *Ibid.*: 7.47 p. 115.

⁴ The Afrikaans version of the SCA, the Christelike Studente Vereniging was by far the strongest of the four branches numerically and financially. The population distribution in 1967 was: Africans: 12,750,000 (68.1%), Whites: 3,563,000 (19.0%), Coloured: 1,859,000 (9.9%), Asians: 561,000 (3.0%). Total: 18,733,000.

⁵ A Survey of Race Relations in South Africa, 1967: South African Institute of Race Relations, Johannesburg, p. 12.

religious; they had all been raised in churches that preached against apartheid. When the WSCF decision broke up the SCA, new alliances were formed.

Why in the UCM?

Some background factors need also to be given to explain why it was that the South African Students Organisation, the parent of the Black Consciousness Movement, was formed at a conference of the UCM. The sequence of these factors presented here in no way indicates their relative importance.

First, it should be reiterated that most of the white students who came to the UCM in its first couple of years were interested in finding a meaning for their Christianity in an apartheid society and wanted to become actively involved. On a theological level, the "God is dead" controversy was predominant.

Most of the black people who came into the UCM were, from an ecclesiastical viewpoint, far more conservative and traditional than the whites. They were mainly in the UCM because it was an organisation in which they could get together to discuss the South African situation and their position in it. At that point in time the UCM was the only suitable organisation in existence where this could take place. There were a number of reasons for this.

One factor was that by 1967, the segregated universities were just starting to produce their first black graduates. These people had had a sufficient amount of time to acclimatize to this segregated university existence. By 1967 organisations had been formed on such new campuses as the University College of the North, the University of Zululand and the Coloured University at Belville. Places like Fort Hare and Wentworth already had a long tradition of political and student organisation. Among these organisations were the denominational AFS and NCFS in which a new generation of black students were meeting each other and with students from white universities.

On the other hand, the early sixties was also a time of anger and disillusionment. Anger because of Sharpsville, the consequent bannings of the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan African Congress (PAC) and the tough security measures brought down to combat the two underground arms of the ANC and PAC, namely the UMKHONTO WE SIZWE and POQO. Many of the university students would have had relatives or friends who had been killed, banned, consigned permanently to Robben Island or who had fled the country. It was a mood in which most whites were suspect. They were the enemy.

This mood was compounded by disillusionment with the realities within multi-racial organisations and their inability to change an oppressive society. The National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) was experiencing difficulties in the post African Resistance Movement days. It fell into disrepute among black students primarily because it was so aggressively white in character. Whites had always dominated even when concerned with black issues. The token blacks at NUSAS conferences frequently felt manipulated. Although the NUSAS stand on apartheid was unequivocal, it never really took hold on

black campuses. It was viewed as a foreign intrusion both by pro-apartheid staff on these segregated campuses and also by the students. Denominational groups like those run by the Anglicans and Catholics had more legitimacy on these campuses and, during the early sixties, thrived there.

This is crucial to an understanding of why the black students came into the UCM at a time in which they were distrustful of whites and suspicious of multi-racial organisations. Undoubtedly, the coincidence of a unique combination of people also contributed to the final effect. John Davies, the national chaplain of the AFS who was deeply involved with black students, had been resident for a number of years on one of the black campuses. The writer held a similar position in the NCFS, a very important organisation due to the large number of black students coming from the Catholic schools system into black universities. (I was secretary of the Catholic Education Department from 1959-1969.) Mick Andrews, a former travelling secretary of the SCA, also had extensive contacts with black students. Basil Moore, then a lecturer at Rhodes University, had extensive contacts with Fort Hare students.

Moreover, a new generation of black students was being produced. Angry and disillusioned, they sought new paths of action. All the conventional lines of political and student organisation had been destroyed by the government during the period 1960-1964. Young blacks were casting around. NUSAS did not seem suitable. In 1966 the UCM was formed. The lines of communication were mainly via NCFS, AFS and the old SCA and SCM. At the first conference in Grahamstown in 1967, a large number of black students who had been attending the NCFS conference in the same town were persuaded to stay. They did so, were impressed, and spoke of the conference back at their campuses. A much more representative group of blacks came to the UCM July 1968 conference. These included Steve Biko and Barney Pitso, two future leaders of SASO. It was at that conference in Stutterheim that a black caucus was formed. This black caucus led directly to the founding of SASO in December 1968.

These, then, are some of the important events that led to the presence of a large and articulate group of black students at the UCM conference in July 1968: the destruction of all black political organisations, disillusionment with multi-racial organisations, an increasing involvement of some Christians with anti-apartheid issues in a non-patronising way, the isolation of blacks due to the apartheid policy and a unique combination of people.

Some External Factors

To complete the picture, some factors external to South Africa should also be mentioned as contributing causes to the events of 1968 and the following years when the Black Consciousness Movement was gaining momentum. As mentioned previously, the Sharpsville massacre drew protests from most countries subscribing to UN charters. International political and religious opinion really started to run strongly against the South African regime after 1960.

Another factor is that between 1960-1965 many older black leaders left the country and settled in countries all over the world. Their influence has been considerable. The politically active have continued to pressure the UN OAU and other international organisations, besides approaching specific countries with requests to take action against the South African system. This has been done consistently and with vigour from their offices in Dar-es-Salaam, London, New York and Lusaka. Especially since 1967 the external members of the ANC and PAC have organised liberation movements and training camps in Zambia and Tanzania. For the first time since the last Zulu rebellion in 1906, blacks fought whites with arms.

This is especially true of the then escalating war in Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe (Rhodesia) and Namibia (South-West Africa). By the mid sixties, large scale wars were being fought against white colonialists in Angola and Mozambique by the MPLA, FNLA, UNITA and FRELIMO. The war was hotting up in Rhodesia and incursions into South Africa were in evidence along the Namibian border — especially in the Caprivi Strip. Black middle class people in South Africa being avid newspaper readers, this information, albeit in a prejudiced form, was available to them.

Internationally, the student world was in a state of ferment in the 1960's. This was especially true of the USA. Students were opposed to modern capitalist societies. The American support of its puppet state of South Vietnam became the prime symbol of hypocrisy and hate. In the USA, many universities virtually became battlefields, some being radically changed. In Europe, students combined with workers to bring France to a standstill in 1968. It looked as if the youth of the world with their vision of a new and more humane world were making inroads into unjust social systems. Time proved that prediction to be hopelessly incorrect. However, one of the few places where that prediction became realised was South Africa. In 1976 the Children's Revolution started in Soweto.

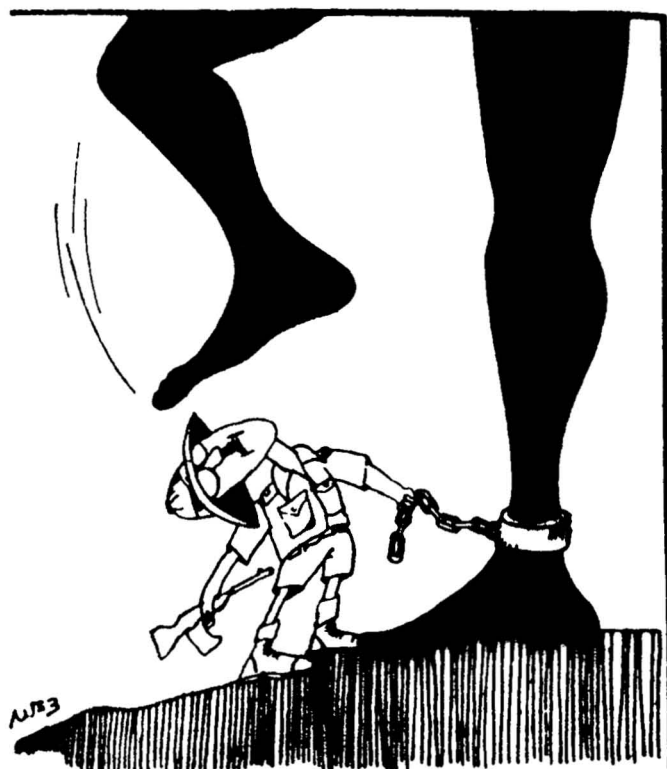
Banning of the Black Consciousness Movement

The UCM was formed in 1966. SASO was conceived in the UCM in July 1968 and founded in December of that year. From 1968 to 1976 many other black organisations were founded, mainly out of the SASO impetus. Some of the more important ones were:

- The Black People's Convention
- The Black Workers Alliance
- The Black Women's Movement

On September 13, 1977, Steve Biko died while in jail. Biko was a founding member of the UCM and the South African Students Organisation — the parent organisation of the whole operation. Both South African and international protests over his death reached a peak never before witnessed within the South African situation.

On October 19, 1977, the South African Government banned virtually all the Black Consciousness Movement organisations as well as many of its main leaders. Shortly before this took place, Mr. Vorster called for a general election in an obvious move to secure his position among the white population. As a result of Biko's death, the



protests over this and the subsequent bannings, the rest of the world has adopted a much tougher policy regarding South Africa.

The "Conspiracy" Story

The question as to what constituted the intentions of the founders of the UCM may now be addressed. The members of the Schibusch Commission are in no doubt as to the answer to such a question: The UCM was led by a few, including whites such as Basil Moore and the writer, who were much older than their student constituency. At no stage did they have any mass support for their ideology. They were paid by external sources to import a foreign doctrine into South Africa. The external manipulators were the World Student Christian Federation, with headquarters in Geneva, and the University Christian Movement of the U.S.A.

Both of these organisations, it was maintained, were dedicated to world revolution. The ideologies introduced by these foreign subversive organisations were those of Black Power and, more subtly, Marxism. The ultimate utopia was a communist state in South Africa.

The main tactics which these "ruthless" agents employed was to polarise whites and blacks, to get them to hate each other. The resultant violent revolution would lead to a classless society. They were to have done this by hoodwinking the churches, under whose aegis they worked by using them as front organisations.

Most important of all, the Commission maintained that what the UCM accomplished had no relationship to any social forces existing in South Africa and that the creation of the Black Consciousness Movement was therefore "not a natural development arising from local conditions and problems".

The Accurate Picture

Many qualifications need to be introduced to achieve a more accurate picture of what was being achieved within the UCM during this crucial period in which it seemed to act as midwife for the birth of the Black Consciousness Movement.

That there were a number of personalities who could clearly be identified as influential leaders in the early days of both the UCM and the Black Consciousness Movement is perfectly true. Names such as Justice Moloto, Stan Ntwasa, Basil Moore, and myself were bound to occur; we were the full-time organisational core of the UCM. To say, however, that we had an indoctrinating influence on the membership of the UCM is to imply that those in the organisation were easily impressed.

A related point and of much more importance is the historical fact that the Black Consciousness Movement and all its constituent bodies has become the most significant mass-based organisation among the black people in their entire history. To view such a movement in 1979 as the spread of a "foreign" disease among the black populations of South Africa would be patently absurd.

The ideology of the Black Consciousness Movement was initially influenced by the Black Power of the USA. Primarily, however, it was the result of a long and continued history of Africanism, having its roots in the Pan Africanism of Garvey and Dubois, and later the Ethiopian war with Italy and the liberation of the first African state of Ghana under Nkruma. It came at the end of a long line of Africanist thought with its religious dimensions in the Ethiopian and Zionist churches, and its specifically political dimensions in the speeches of Anton Lembede, the Congress Youth League and, finally, the Pan African Congress⁶. Also what was thought by the Commission to be communism was no more than the communitarianism of African society as promoted by Tanzania's Julius Nyerere and an egalitarianism that was largely influenced by the Christianity of the people in the UCM.

The way in which the WSCF and the UCM-USA are portrayed as planning a specific policy to be executed by their puppets in South Africa is completely unfounded. The WSCF and UCM-USA were both public organisations. Within both of them, there were constant debates and tensions about issues and strategies. If anything, the UCM in South Africa influenced the WSCF and, to a lesser extent, the UCM-USA far more than they influenced it.

As for strategies of polarisation, violence and revolutionary change, the UCM never stated anything about the two

latter items. If any member of an open organisation such as the UCM had made a statement advocating violence, such persons and the organisation would have been immediately charged or banned. What polarisation there was in the Movement grew not out of a foreign ideology, but out of the disillusionment of blacks regarding their white compatriots.

What animated those of us who initiated the UCM was a deep sense of social justice and a desire to have a more egalitarian society in South Africa. The subsequent ideology we developed was no more foreign to South Africa than Christianity or the mild African Communitarianism of Nyerere. The polarisation strategy was a direct result of the black people themselves discarding their own sense of inferiority; the encouragement that they received within the UCM was to "go to it" on their own. In these particular circumstances, the black students accepted the admonition not as being paternalistic but as being sincerely meant. For apartheid ideologues this "doing things their own way" has always meant doing things the white man's way, which, in this case, means becoming an obedient stereotype in a long-past tribal way of life.

By July 1968, the kind of black students who came to the UCM conference didn't need much encouragement; they were proud to be black, to be themselves. They recognised themselves as being oppressed and they set out to organise ways and means to liberate themselves. The Black Consciousness Movement was created by young black leaders and by them alone.

Was the UCM Really Necessary?

My own conclusion is that Black polarisation would have taken place sooner or later had the UCM not existed. The necessary prerequisite conditions were all there. The UCM did play a role in this polarisation, but of great relevance is that the young black intellectuals of the late 1960's were far more active in this polarisation than were the white officials in the UCM. Black power was born in and organised by blacks in ways far more effective and meaningful than by whites. The Schibusch Commission was unable to distinguish between sympathisers and the real actors. The UCM was the right organisation in the right place at the right time. It made itself available to the Movement. No more, no less.

⁶ See, for example, Gail M. Gerhatt's *Black Power in South Africa: Evolution of an Ideology*. University of California Press, Berkeley, 1975.

Who is Steve Biko ?

The following are excerpts from another paper written by Colin Collins: "The Death of Steve Biko".

Donald Woods, the well-known editor of the Daily Despatch of East London, who had conducted a tireless campaign to prevent Biko's predictable assassination, had this to say about him.

"He needs no tributes from me. He never did. He was a special and extraordinary man who at the age of 30 had already acquired a towering status in the

hearts and minds of countless thousands of young blacks throughout the length and breadth of South Africa."

In the 3 years that I grew to know him, my conviction never wavered that this was the most important political leader in the entire country... wisdom, humour, compassion, understanding, brilliancy of intellect, unselfishness, modesty, courage — he had all these attributes."

Steve Biko was one of the black educated elite. He came from a small country town, King Williams Town, situated in the oldest colonised part of South Africa, the Cape Province. After matriculating, he studied medicine at the

University of Natal. While there, he played lock for his university rugby side. His medical studies came to an end when he was banned from attending the university in 1973. While still at the university he married a nurse who had two children by him. His family was Anglican and his funeral was conducted by an Anglican bishop.

Biko was one of the founding members of the South African Students Organisation. This blacks-only organisation in turn was the matrix out of which a whole cluster of organisations grew. They are loosely categorised as the "Black Consciousness Movement". Seventeen of these organisations were banned after Biko's death.

One of them, the South African Students Movement, was held responsible for the Children's Revoultion of June 1976.

Biko was the first president of and the main leader in SASO; he was also honorary president of the Black People's Convention at the time of his death.

From my own personal knowledge of Biko's activities and my own involvement in the birth of the Black Consciousness Movement, I would say that Biko was the most important strategist in it as well as one of its most lucid and significant ideologues.

After Biko's death, the South African Minister of Police said that he didn't even know who Biko was. Whether blacks will say the same in 10 years time depends on whether this quite extraordinary and charismatic young man helped to create the right movement at the appropriate time.

A Mixture of Weakness and Strength

The SCM of Sri Lanka

Marshal Fernando

Changes in the Education System

In the two decades preceding 1970, deep-going social and economic developments had been taking place in Sri Lanka. These were the results of the Free Education System (free tuition from grade one to the university), the introduction of Sinhala and Tamil in place of English, the demographic revolution and the deepening economic crisis. These factors brought about severe unemployment, especially affecting the new educated generation of youth born of the Free Education system.

Among this new generation of students, a large number came from the less developed and backward rural areas. The majority of the students in the late sixties were no longer drawn from the well-to-do middle-class, with an urban orientation and an English education. The Sinhala and Tamil educated, predominantly rural and working class students came largely from families that were economically oppressed and education provided the only means — for most of them — to earn a living. However, they were mostly flocking to the social science and humanities faculties. The rural and poor schools were short of good laboratory facilities and tutorial staff to train students in the natural sciences. Hence few of those from the rural and working class families were able to find places in the natural science and professional faculties such as medicine and engineering, which were pockets of privilege and preserves of the Oxford and Cambridge ideology.

Radicalization of the Student Movement

Various hardships within the campus, on account of large numbers of students struggling to share the meagre resources, generated a continuous tension between the students and the university authorities. A radicalization process started, leading to sit-ins, demonstrations, public rallies, etc. These external manifestations of the tensions within the campuses helped to politicize the students themselves and also to create an awareness amongst the community at large of the problems of higher education. On the whole the attitude of the general public was rather mixed as to the demands and concerns of the students.

Marshal Fernando is one of the two representatives of the Asia Pacific Region in the WSCF Executive Committee.

The leftist political outlook of the student leadership determined to a greater degree the direction and tempo of the student struggle. Leftist orientation attracted the support of the leftist political parties and trade unions. But the lack of ideological depth and clear vision on the nature of the struggle on the part of the students was detrimental to integrated action for radical university reforms or social change. Superficiality in perception, too much rhetoric and super-imposed slogans failed to sustain the long-term interests of the students. Minor victories caused the disintegration of the momentum. There were instances of opportunism on the part of the leadership who betrayed the struggle for their own benefit.

The official reaction to the student demands was initially lackadaisical. Later on the ruling class resorted to arm twisting tactics such as suspensions, use of police violence, closure of campuses for long periods, blackmail through the mass media, etc. However, the capacity of the students to mobilise in thousands in street demonstrations and the ability to circumvent the force of the state apparatus caused embarrassment to the university authorities as well as to the successive governments.

Political Turmoil

The university community played a vital role in the victory of the United Front Government in the 1970 Parliamentary elections. The hope and enthusiasm generated with this election victory was, however, short-lived. The deepening crisis of capitalism and the reluctance of the United Front Government to speed the implementation of the election manifesto to cause a break with capitalism frustrated the youth and students who hoped for immediate redress in terms of employment. The old left leaders who held ministerial positions betrayed the extra-parliamentary struggle while striving hard to be smart in parliamentary procedure; they angered and disillusioned the very forces which contributed to the victory of the U.F. Government and which then began to look for an alternative to it.

They, particularly the students and youth, found it in the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (People's Liberation Front). The membership of the JVP was primarily drawn from the oppressed sections of the community and un-