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Edson Sithole: new book uncovers the work of a thinker, lawyer and Zimbabwean freedom fighter who 'disappeared'

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Edson Sithole was born in what was then Southern Rhodesia in 1935. He was the first black person in southern Africa to obtain a Doctor of Laws degree. He was the second black person in the country (which became Zimbabwe in 1980) to qualify as a lawyer, and co-founded Rhodesia's African Bar Association in 1973. Sithole was an anti-colonial nationalist. He was "disappeared" alongside his secretary, Miriam Mhlanga, in downtown Salisbury (present-day Harare) 50 years ago. Brooks Marmon, a historian of Zimbabwe's liberation struggle, has compiled and edited a forthcoming collection of Sithole's writings, speeches and interviews.

Who was Edson Sithole? Why does he matter in Zimbabwe's history?

He was one of the most prominent pan-African nationalists who had not gone into exile, a major legal and intellectual force behind multiple Zimbabwean liberation movements.



Edson Sithole. December 1963 issue of The African Parade

Despite his important intellectual and organisational contributions to Zimbabwe's independence struggle, he is best remembered today for the sensational nature of his elimination from the political scene. He left the Rhodesian press club at a downtown hotel in Salisbury on 15 October 1975, and was never seen again.

The 50th anniversary of Sithole's elimination is an apt time to recover his political voice. Sithole was a prolific writer but much of his work appeared in periodicals that were banned and silenced by settler authorities.

What's new in this collection?

The contributions in the book highlight four themes: Sithole's views on pan-Africanism; his experience as a political prisoner; his views on intra-nationalist factionalism; and his search for a settlement with white Rhodesians.

Sithole's voice is supplemented by my own biographical account of his political life.

Given Zimbabwe's struggles with political pluralism, the section on factionalism is especially illuminating. A recurring theme is Sithole's rivalry with one of the leading protagonists of Zimbabwe's liberation struggle, Joshua Nkomo. Coupled with Sithole's overlooked membership in several breakaway liberation movements, a holistic view of his independent character emerges.

This was particularly notable in an era in which an absolute commitment to unity was a key facet of the defining ideology of the struggle, pan-Africanism.

What role did he play in the liberation struggle?

Sithole was an executive member of four Zimbabwean liberation movements. In 1964 he became the publicity secretary of Zanu-PF, Zimbabwe's current ruling party, then known as the Zimbabwe African National Union. He was that party's chief spokesperson 60 years ago this November when the colony's small white minority unilaterally declared its independence from Britain.

The last decade of Sithole's life was spent trying to end this rebellion and usher in genuine independence under majority rule.

When the Conservative British government appeared poised to reach a settlement favourable to continued white domination, Sithole co-founded the African National Council (ANC) in December 1971. Its opposition to the tentative accord forced the British government to abandon that effort to reconcile with their settler "kith and kin" in Rhodesia.

White minority rule dragged on for eight more years and thousands lost their lives in the struggle to affect a change, including Sithole.

Sithole's intellectual profile was particularly impressive as he spent more than half of his adult life as a political prisoner. He was first detained in 1959 at the age of 23. He completed a master's degree in law from the University of London via correspondence during that first stint of restriction. During a second period of imprisonment, he completed most of his work toward a Doctor of Laws from the University of South Africa.

Why was 1974 such a pivotal year?

In April 1974, the hardline Estado Novo regime in Portugal was overthrown in a military coup. It soon became clear that Portugal would dismantle its colonial empire, including Mozambique and Angola.

This development transformed the political scene in southern Africa. White Rhodesia was deprived of a major European ally and a secure border on its eastern flank. At the end of that year, all four of Zimbabwe's major liberation movements united under the banner of the African National Council in Zambia.

For some of the most prominent Zimbabwean nationalists, such as Nkomo and Robert Mugabe, the Portuguese revolution resulted in their release from prison, culminating in their ascent to political power in independent Zimbabwe in early 1980.

Sithole, however, experienced no fruits of détente. Instead he became enmeshed in a political struggle with both the settler state and his erstwhile nationalist colleagues.

In early June 1975, intra African National Council violence erupted between factions loyal to its head, Abel Muzorewa, whom Sithole backed, and Nkomo, a long-time foe of Sithole, who had headed the Zimbabwe African People's Union.

Nearly a dozen people were killed and Sithole was manhandled by Nkomo loyalists.

Near the end of the month, Sithole released a document which claimed that Nkomo and prime minister Ian Smith had reached a secret deal to elevate Nkomo to the head of the African National Council. Days later, Sithole developed severe stomach cramps. He declared that the settler state had poisoned him, an allegation backed by a Zambian doctor who treated him.

Tensions increased. The last month of Sithole's life was consumed by attempts to derail any possible attempt by Nkomo and the Zapu element in the African National Council to reach an accord with the Rhodesian state.

What's known about his abduction?

On Sithole's last day as an independent man – 15 October 1975 – he held a press conference which accused the settler state of favouring Nkomo, whose faction had recently been allowed to hold a massive open-air meeting.

Two detectives visited Sithole at his office that afternoon and took a statement.

That evening, he made the short drive to the Ambassador Hotel in his blue BMW for drinks at the Quill Club.

Sithole left the hotel around 7pm, where a witness outside saw him met by two white and two black men who identified themselves as belonging to Rhodesia's Special Branch. They escorted Sithole and his secretary into a grey Mazda van, a make typically associated with the renegade state's security apparatus.

International media accounts identified Detective Inspector Winston Hart and Detective Section Officer George Mitchell as the two white men. As recently as April 2023, an interview with Hart about his service in Rhodesia popped up on YouTube.

Sithole was never seen again, although persistent rumours claimed that he had been seen in various government detention centres.

Sithole was just one of tens of thousands of individuals who died during Zimbabwe's independence struggle.

Unlike South Africa, Zimbabwe did not embrace any formal transitional justice mechanism following independence. After Mugabe was voted into power, he announced:

We will be interested to get some evidence as to what happened to Dr. Sithole. (16 March 1980 issue of the Zimbabwean Sunday Mail)

Nothing substantial ever came out of the inquiry.

Reference:

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