

OPINION

The Biko Inquest: 'We carry our history with us'

THE ROAD FROM LIBERATION TO DISILLUSIONMENT

[Ashwin Desai](#) | Published 10 September 2026



Steve Biko's funeral on September 25, 1977

Image: SUPPLIED

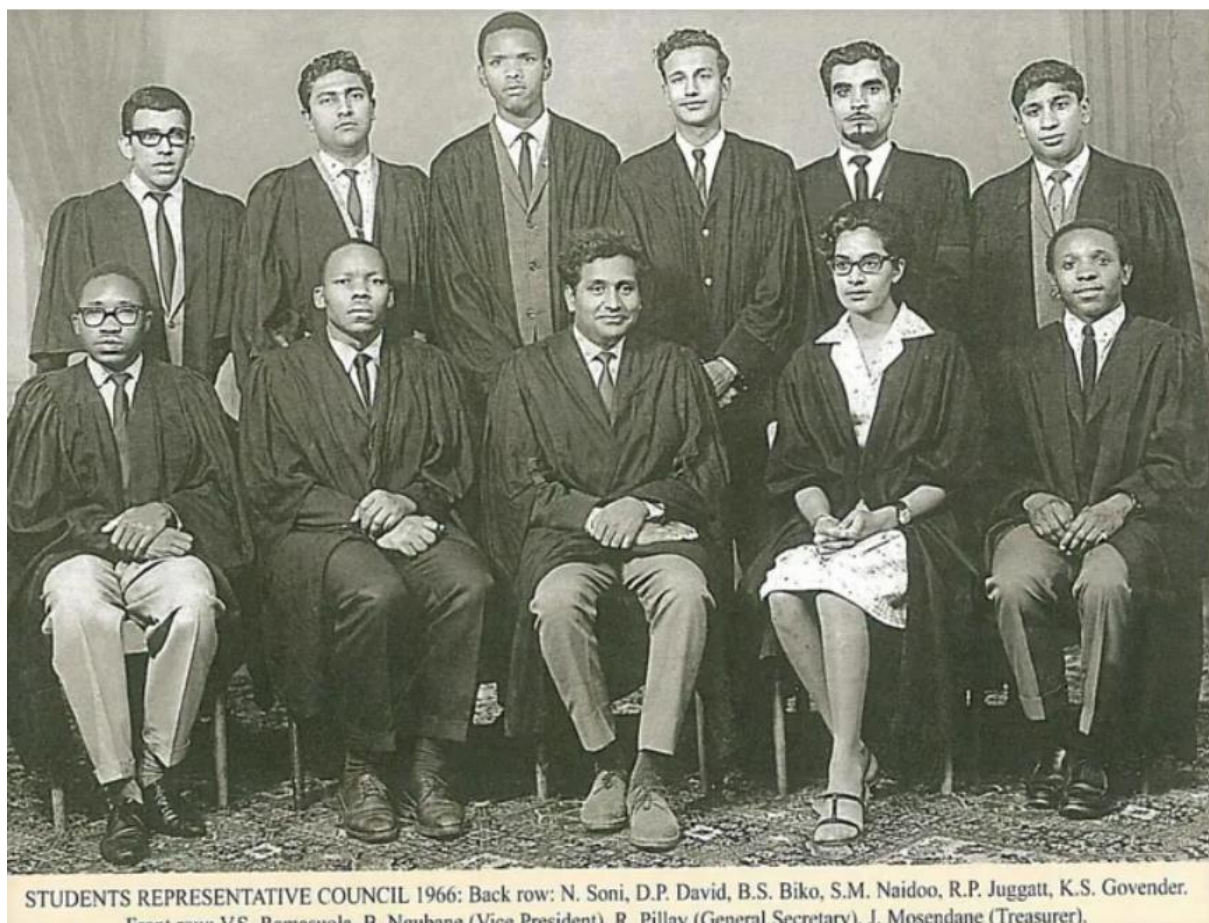
Reflecting on detention during apartheid and Steve Biko's enduring influence, Ashwin Desai connects the past to anxieties about corruption, political radicalism and South Africa's democratic future.

'Our pains will petrify when our gestures no longer make sense. But our tears, brother, who will take them on himself?' - (Edmond Jabès).

1980. Adamson House, Rhodes University. Just before dawn.

The Security Branch (SB) arrived with overwhelming force. Kicking on doors. Overturning books.

I was rushed to a waiting car and, after a short journey, hustled into their Grahamstown (Makhanda) headquarters. Before I had found my bearings, I was manacled and taken in a convoy towards Port Elizabeth (Gqeberha). Destination: Swartkops Police Station.



The 1966 SRC at Natal University

Image: SUPPLIED

A cell door slammed shut

After what seemed forever, the door cranked open. It was dark but I could make out the suited SB who grabbed me off the floor, tightened handcuffs and sped me to Sanlam Centre, the Branch's headquarters in Port Elizabeth.

Lights on. Lights off.

A punch to the gut from nowhere. Fear. It was here that Biko was flattened to within an inch of his life. An SB interrogator stopped, put his fingers to his lips: 'Listen, Biko is alive, moving around in his cell.'

Respite. Dragged me to the foyer and pointed to marks on the bottom floor: "Those are the stains of George Botha." A teacher who died in police custody in 1976.

It was a whirlwind of days without nights as I found myself alone in a cell at Swartkops listening for footsteps and the turning of the key.



*The van in which Steven Biko was driven from Port Elizabeth to Pretoria.
Image: SUPPLIED*

Panel-beater squad

One morning, Captain Gideon Nieuwoudt rushed into my cell. His reputation was fearsome. His opening words were: 'I am from the panel-beater squad.'

Peter Jones, arrested with Biko, remembers how Nieuwoudt 'started delivering fast and heavy blows to my head with a hosepipe, which was excruciating in the kind of shocks it sent to my body.

... I turned and faced the wall and closing my eyes, hoping for some oblivion, which never came, as blows rained down on my head and back.

Later it would be revealed that Nieuwoudt was the one of the SB's who 'grabbed Biko...and ran into the wall with him'.

Nieuwoudt followed this by hitting Biko with an iron hosepipe.

I was let off easy. A few kicks to the chest as I lay on the ground and Nieuwoudt was gone. It was Sunday morning and he was probably rushing to church with his family.

Biko was an inspiration

At a time when we were about 50 'non-white' students at Rhodes University out of a student population of about 3,500, Blackness was solidarity.

Biko was an inspiration because he created the language for us to burst out of imposed identities. As Kedibone Molema put it: 'Biko took people out of an ethnic identity and allowed us to have another. That was a galvanising thing.'

To be Black was to be already standing against and we got to harvest what was nurtured by the generation before.

Biko grew bigger in our lives. He was all around and next to us. It was at Rhodes that the split with NUSAS came. It was in Grahamstown that he was arrested.

An hour away was his grave. Swartkops. Left alone in a cell for a couple of days.

Suddenly whisked back to Sanlam. Captain Siebert was sitting behind a desk. Window open.

As I strained to look out Siebert claimed that it was out of this window that 19-year-old student activist Lungile Tabalaza in 1978 tried to jump to the next building and fell to his death.

And then just as quickly, I was out of the SB's hands and blinked into the first rays of sunlight.

September 2026

It is surreal to see 80-year-old Daniel Petrus Siebert giving evidence before Judge Madondo. 49 years to the month after the brutal beating of Biko. The all-powerful interrogator, bewildered, stumbling under cross-examination. One could barely watch, one could not look away.

September 11 1977

Driven overnight from Port Elizabeth to Pretoria by Siebert. Brain damaged. Bundled into the back of a police van. Manacled. Naked except for underwear. The next day he was dead.

A few months before his detention of death Biko in an interview:

'You are either alive or you are dead, and when you are dead, you can't care anyway. And your method of death can be a politicising thing.' Prophetic.

Over 20 000 people gather to inter a body that cannot care anymore. But they can. Fists raised. A whole generation straightened as aloes after rain. Assertive, thorny militants respectful of the old ground but thrusting out into new ways of living and resisting.

Biko. Detained at age 16 by the Security Branch and expelled from the famous Lovedale Institution in Alice. Finding a home at St. Francis College in Marianhill, KwaZulu-Natal. Ten years later aged 26 excommunicated from the congregations that was growing across the land.

Banned and restricted to King Williams Town (Qonce). No visitors, never to be in the company of more than one person, never to be quoted.

Matric yearbook

In 1965 Steve Biko wrote in the yearbook of his matric class at St Francis College, Marianhill: 'The history of the College shows that she has produced teachers by the thousands, doctors and lawyers galore, priests and many other distinguished figures.

Therefore may we not expect to swell this list one day also?'

Biko was full of the future. Biko enrolled at the Natal Medical School. There is a picture of him, standing tall, as a member of the 1966 Student Representative Council (SRC).

There were heady days. But Biko never lost his. Remembering the smashing of the ANC and PAC in the early 1960s many BC cadres were keen to ensure that the state would not be able to crush the fledgling movement as much as they saw the need to fill 'a political vacuum'.

Detentions

Biko had endured numerous detentions. In 1975 135 days. In 1976 101 days in solitary confinement. The state sought to ensnare him in all sorts of charges that ranged from defeating the ends of justice to planning to commit sabotage.

But he was too adept. Too clever. He had a bigger, wider purpose. Organise. Spread ideas. Bring together the liberation movements. He exuded an infectious confidence at a time when the apartheid state was at the height of its powers.

A clever Black

They could not pin a terrorism charge. He had endured the beatings, the detentions and the bannings. And yet he was still the one, inspiring, who stood out in every photograph, rally, debate or court case he was in.

He would not bend. So, he had to be broke.

In 2021, I returned to the fields in which Biko lived with us. Makhanda.

After the launch of a co-written a book entitled Line Breakers: The Rugby Playing Sons of Makana and Stuurman I invited old comrades to the Albany Club.

They dribbled in. Many had spent years in detention. Some iron-heel Stalinists.

But they were much more open now. They were now on the outside, having never been included in the spoils of liberation. Cadre deployment had ruined Makhanda, some offered hesitantly.

Others spoke of self-correction

Of course, self-correction would come after the next election, the next water-tanker tender.

At a table close to us sat the ANC cadres of the municipality. De(greed). Sly. Full of new projects designed to loot under the pretext of building, extract in the name of empowerment.

They had run Makhanda into potholes and dust.

In the 1980s, they wore dashikis and rode the glamour of radical dissent.

Now they don suits slouched just enough to preserve the fiction of defiance, with a loosened tie, mismatched trousers, or a lapel pin or hairstyle standing in for convictions long since converted into seven- but not quite eight-figure incomes.

As night deepened, despite the bonhomie, the whisky flowing, nothing could disguise my companions' threadbare clothes, their suffering. It was just too much to bear.

The long road to freedom has reached a dead end. The mighty ANC is a minority. Everywhere there are whispers of a deal between factions in the ANC and MK. The SACP as broker.

The mission

Smash the Government of National Unity. Tear up the Constitution and replace it with unbridled majoritarianism. Was July 2021 the rehearsal, much like Hitler's 1923 'Beer Hall Putsch'?

The spectre of 'national socialism' and Lebensraum (our living space) is respawned on our streets. Echoing Hitler, there may be a turn to an electoral strategy to grab state power. Already we see men in camouflage evoking 'the spirits of the past, borrowing from them their names, marching orders, uniforms' in order to bewitch and beguile those whom history has left behind.

As the ANC's promise of the new petrifies into rot, so one gets a sense of 'the twin monsters of the twentieth century' Stalinism and Fascism coming together.

Both have strong lineages in this neck of the woods.

In the chaos, uncertainty and fear, many people say they will welcome a Supreme Leader, a Saviour of the Nation.

It's coming.

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Reference:

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