Chapter 1
Rural Change and the Future of South Africa
by Rachidi R. Molapo

The development of an industrialised society in South Africa took place over a period of time. It was a process guided by the interests of the state and capital, which at times were in conflict. During World War 2 and after, industrial development was rapid and the state had to change some of its racial policies as a result of the pressure exerted by urbanisation. Employment opportunities opened up in both the mining and manufacturing industries. Both African and Afrikaner nationalisms flourished during the decade of intensely fluid conditions. It is suggested in this chapter that a closer focus on the changes taking place in the countryside will be helpful in understanding the larger dynamics affecting South African society as a whole during this period.

What was the impact of the 1913 Natives Land Act?

Three years after the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910, a piece of legislation that was to have a devastating impact on South African society was passed by the whites-only Parliament — the 1913 Natives Land Act. Prosperous white farmers had exerted pressure on the government to design a law that would prohibit competition with peasants and sharecroppers who were making profitable use of the land. Particularly in the Orange Free State, sharecropping was very well established.

The passing of the Land Act was resisted by a number of people and communities in different parts of the country. Many believed that it served the interests only of the farmers, mine owners and other wealthy landowners, and would be of absolutely no benefit to most of the people in the country (see box on page 16). Some scholars believe that one of the reasons that the government of the day was willing to pass this Bill was that black tenant farmers could produce more cheaply than white farmers — due to the use of cheap family labour — and that as a result many white farmers were on the edge of bankruptcy.

The new legislation was like a pendulum that swung in favour of one race group and class against the other. The Natives Land Act of 1913 laid the foundation for segregation and apartheid. It had been influenced by fears of
As part of the resistance to the 1913 Land Act a delegation of members of the newly formed South African Native National Congress were sent to Britain to present their case to the Queen and the British public.

A newspaper report about a speech made by Mr T. Zini of the Cape Peninsula Native Association (CPNA) noted that:

"It was simply and solely in the interests of the farmers and miners and of no other section of the community. He had been at some pains to make himself acquainted with the provisions of the Bill, and he could assure them that all he couldfind it to contain was indifference to the interests of the bulk of the community, and oppression of the Natives. It was a most iniquitous measure, and they should oppose it to the very last. If, unhappily, they were not successful in preventing its becoming law, they would at least have it on record that from the first they had entered an emphatic protest against it. He was certain all Natives would combine in that. [Loud applause.] The whole measure was one gigantic invasion of their liberties. It would most adversely affect hundreds of thousands of Native families which had, up till then, lived on landed estates and farms, paid rents to the owners, and tilled the soil for a subsistence, happy and contented in their way of life."


The 1913 Natives Land Act resulted in the allocation of fragmented areas of land as "homelands" for the African population. The act dealt with the "native problem", restricting African land ownership to "scheduled areas" — some 10.5 million morgen. This representation only about 7.3% of the total land area of South Africa, the bulk of which was the "reserved areas". Resistance to the Act even took members of the newly-formed South African Native National Congress to the United Kingdom to present their case to the Queen and the British public.

The 1913 Land Act was followed by the appointment of the Beaumont Commission to look into the question of land delimitation. The areas it suggested for African occupation only slightly expanded the small amount scheduled for African ownership by the Land Act. The land that was identified for African occupation was not ideal for either settlement or agricultural purposes.

As the Act became law, its effects were felt very harshly. The status of many African people started changing from that of independent producers to that of servants or labourers. Through this Act the state intervened in the

morgen — a South African measure of land equal to about 0.8 hectares or roughly two acres

define — to determine the limits or boundaries of
Sol Plaatje was Secretary General of the South African Native National Congress. In his travels throughout South Africa, he saw the devastating effects of the Act on the communities he visited. The evictions that followed as a result of the Act revealed its harsh realities. The following report is from his book, *Native Life in South Africa*, pp. 89-90.

"Kgobadi's goats had been to kid when he trekked from his farm; but the kids, which in halcyon times represented the interest on his capital, were now one by one dying as fast as they were born and left by the roadside for the jackals and vultures to feast upon.

The visitation was not confined to Kgobadi's stock. Mrs Kgobadi carried a sick baby when the eviction took place, and she had to transfer her darling from the cottage to the jolting ox-wagon in which they left the farm. Two days out the little one began to sink as a result of privation and exposure on the road, and the night before we met them its little soul was released from its earthly bonds. The death of the child added fresh perplexity to the stricken parents. They had no right or title to the farmland through which they trekked: they must keep to the public roads — the only places in the country open to the outcasts if they are possessed of a travelling permit. The deceased child had to be buried, but where, when and how?

This young wandering family decided to dig a grave under cover of the darkness of that night, when no one was looking, and in that crude manner the dead child was interred — and interred amid tear and trembling, as well as the throbs of a torturing anguish, in a stolen grave, lest the proprietor of the spot, or any of his servants should surprise them in the act."

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creation of landlords and servants that knew racial and class interests. Eventually, the white minority would occupy 87% of the land while the black majority would occupy 13%. No land was available for sale to individuals or groups of Africans who wished to buy outside of the reserves. No financial facilities were available to provide funding for Africans to develop their land. The reserves became over-populated. This led to a situation in which scores of people left the rural areas to search for job opportunities in the cities. The supply of cheap labour became a key feature for the survival of many farms, industries and corporations in South Africa.

The immediate effect of the Act was the eviction of many, often resulting in death to both people and their livestock. The cutting of ties with a particular area became a traumatic experience.

**What strategies emerged to challenge oppression in the countryside?**

**Industrial and Commercial Workers’ Union**

A trade union that had its origin among dock workers in the Cape came to reflect the anger of many farm workers in the late 1920s. It was the Industrial and Commercial Workers’ Union (ICU). Originally, its base of operation was the cities, particularly in the Western Cape. The union organised a few dock workers’ strikes and opposed the Colour Bar Act. After it began to recruit farm workers in 1926, however, ICU branches expanded rapidly in the countryside. Estimates of membership in the late 1920s vary from 86,000 to 250,000.

Many farm workers in the country were facing an insecure future. (See box on page 18). They faced the prospect of being deprived of access to land. Labour tenants had to work 180 days per year for the farm owners, but they were facing the threat of eviction by their landlords.

The union launched a land-buying scheme for the homeless. Many blacks who were working on farms became ICU members. However, a leadership crisis in the union and pressure by the state contributed to its decline, and by 1933 it was all but dead.

**Transformation of productive tools**

Changes on the land also resulted in the transformation of productive tools. Farmers who accumulated financial resources outside of the farming sector — such as transport, mining and industries — started mechanisation. Some farmers improved their production levels by buying tractors, ploughs and irrigation schemes to replace the tools they had used before. The new approach was more productive and saved time. However, mechanisation needed considerable financial resources, and not all farmers could afford this process. It squeezed a number of them out of farming. They joined the ranks of the working class in the cities.
How were blacks affected by migration to the cities?

This movement of blacks and former white farmers and their relatives to the cities created competition for employment opportunities. The movement intensified because of the opening of opportunities as a result of World War 2. The growth of industrialisation and the manufacturing industries attracted people to the cities in large numbers. This movement placed pressure on land in the cities, as squatting on unoccupied land increased. The state was being challenged by people who wanted an alternative form of accommodation to the compounds and locations, with their oppressive conditions. These men, and later women, wanted to sink roots in the cities and not only be temporary sojourners ministering to the needs of white people.

In both the rural and urban areas, Africans were denied ownership of land. They were meant to be perpetual tenants, to be always dependent on existence and wages upon whites.

The migration to the cities was a serious challenge to the 1923 Urban Areas Act, which saw the presence of African labour in the cities as being to meet the needs of white interests. The state intensified its control measures through the use of the pass laws and other measures such as the labour bureau system.

The majority of people who went to the cities during this period were migrant workers, particularly during the 1930s to 1950s. Part of the wages accumulated by migrant workers were sent to the rural areas for the survival of their households.

In this temporary state of being, migrants lived in hostels and compounds and did not integrate into the township’s social and political life. They were often despised by urbanised Africans. At the same time, they regarded the cities as makgoweng (places of the white people). The migrants engaged in associations and burial societies to look after their own interests and rejected township lifestyles. However, as they became more settled — becoming urban immigrants instead of migrant workers — they sent less and less money to their families in the rural areas.

By the mid 1940s, every African residential area in cities around the country was bursting at the seams.

How were whites affected by migration to the cities?

The fluid urban conditions saw the state devise affirmative action to deal with the “poor white problem”. About a fifth of the Afrikaner population in the 1930s could be loosely classified as poor whites. The Carnegie Commission of 1929–1932, which investigated this issue of poor whiteism, found that the shortage of land in the countryside, capitalisation of brick-making schemes and cab-driving in the cities contributed to this state of affairs. Other contributing factors included the depression of agriculture and the influenza epidemic.

What were some causes of rural poverty?

Rural poverty was caused by a number of factors. The 1913 Natives Land Act was central, and the fact that the economy of the reserves collapsed in the 1930s meant that many people in the rural areas found it hard to survive. The migrant labour system contributed to the disintegration of families, although at the beginning migrancy was influenced by external as well as internal factors.

In the early stages, urbanisation was dominated by men who worked in mines, industry and the farming sector. This created a situation in which the roles that these men used to perform — such as ploughing, protection of households and other domestic chores — shifted to the women. However, by the 1930s and the 1940s, the process of urbanisation also involved women who wanted to establish their financial independence from their male counterparts.
relatives. This move was resisted by some men in the countryside, who wanted the women to remain dependent on them.

The transformation that was taking place in the countryside was affecting both men and women. Some women left the countryside to follow their husbands who had become makgolwa, while others went to seek an independent life to support themselves and their families.

Conclusion

The struggle to create a black labouring class was a long process. Colonial conquest did not automatically bring about a class that would be willing to offer its labour freely. Although the state imposed taxes, it found it hard to compel many blacks to go and work in the mines, industries and farms because they had access to the land as independent producers. Following the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910, the colonial state came under pressure from some of its followers to strip the natives of their status as sharecroppers. In the Orange Free State and the Transvaal, blacks could buy or rent land. The passing of the 1913 Natives Land Act was part of the process of making Africans move from being peasants and tenants to becoming wage earners.

The Land Act was aimed at stifling the independent peasantry and shutting off alternatives such as those offered by sharecropping landlords. It prohibited Africans from owning or renting land except in the reserves. The reserve economies experienced major setbacks because of overstocking, soil erosion and declining production. The consequences were rural poverty and many Africans becoming proletarians who established themselves on the outskirts of South Africa’s major cities.

The transformation of the countryside was accompanied by state intervention in agriculture. Agriculture received state assistance as many farms were mechanised. However, despite this state help, the majority of farmers could not afford the capitalisation of agriculture. Sharecropping provided the basis of survival for many of them. Although the government prohibited sharecropping and renting of land to Africans in 1913, the practice continued till the 1940s.

Africans who could not eke out a living on the land because of the capital intensive direction farming was taking, went to the cities in large numbers. This created a situation of competition with unskilled and semi-skilled blacks in the cities.

World War 2 opened job opportunities in the cities. Mining, industry and manufacturing absorbed a number of the migrants who flocked to the urban areas. The farming sector suffered a great deal, as wages in the cities were higher than those in the rural areas. The migration of thousands of people brought with it social and political challenges to the state. A crisis of accommodation emerged, and the state intensified its control measures in the cities. Orderly urbanisation initiatives were short-lived because the state denied the majority of people the right to sink roots in the cities. Whites feared the urbanisation of blacks. The National Party, with its slogan of apartheid, was able to capitalise on their fears to win the 1948 election.

Changes in the countryside had long-term implications for the country. In the following decades, South Africa became engaged in a conflict to abolish apartheid.

References
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makgolwa – totally urbanised, terminating ties with relatives in the rural areas
Chapter 2

Industrialisation and the Revitalisation of Black Politics in the 1940s

by Mohamed Adhikari

Three documents, reproduced later in this chapter, illustrate the fundamental changes that took place in black protest politics and African nationalist thinking during the 1940s, particularly in the African National Congress (ANC). Though one should be wary of imposing artificial periodisations such as decades and centuries on historical developments, it is still true that the 1940s was a time of regeneration in the African politics. It was a watershed separating the inertia and decline of the 1930s from the populism and mass politics of the 1950s.

The first document is a description of the ANC’s 1937 conference written by Ralph Bunche, an astute observer. (See box on page 28). He justifiably depicts the ANC as disorganised and politically bankrupt. What emerges forcefully from Bunche’s description is the ANC’s stress on moderation and middle-class respectability as well as its servility toward whites in authority. The ANC had by this time been in severe decline for the better part of a decade and was effectively non-functional.

The second document is an ANC report of its delegation to the Minister of Justice in July 1941. (See box on page 38). At this time, the ANC was being reorganised into a more effective body under the leadership of Dr Alfred Xuma, a medical doctor who had been elected president of the ANC in 1940. Though still decidedly moderate in tone and respectful of white authority, the document demonstrates political initiative on the part of the ANC and shows that popular grievances were starting to be addressed. The delegation, a key method through which the ANC sought to recoup prior to the 1950s, spoke of an approach to politics that was conservative, elitist and prepared to operate within limits set by the white supremacist state.

The third document, the Programme of Action, was adopted as official ANC policy at its 1949 conference. (See boxes on page 42 & 43). It marks a turning point in both the history of the ANC and of black politics as a whole. This document rejects any form of white privilege, asserts the desire of African people for “national freedom” and demands full political representation for African people. Its tone is decidedly Africanist as opposed to the multi-racialism that was to characterise ANC policy from the 1950s onwards. The emphasis on the need for economic, educational and cultural advancement indicates that it saw the struggle as broader than merely winning political rights. And very significantly, for the first time the ANC advocated the use of illegal tactics and civil disobedience.

Several questions arise from this brief analysis of these documents. Firstly, why did African politics experience fundamental transformation at this time? Secondly, where did the revival of the 1940s come from? A short answer to both questions is that these changes arose from a structural shift in the South African economy and society during the late 1930s and 1940s, which in turn manifested itself in the political arena. Its impact is clearly visible in the ANC, which shifted from the moderate and elitist politics of polite delegations and patient petitioning to the mass struggles, defiance and political activism that characterised the 1950s.

As will be demonstrated in this chapter, one cannot fully understand political change of this nature without reference to the underlying social processes that shaped it. To focus simply on the political events themselves would be to gain only a superficial understanding, not only of this particular development but also of politics and human society in general. Fernand Braudel, recognised as one of the most influential historians of modern times, described events as mere “surface disturbances, crests of foam that the tides of history carry on their strong backs”. However, before discussing the broader social forces that moulded these political changes, we need to establish the nature of African politics before the revival of the 1940s.

What was the nature of African politics before the 1940s?

The history of black politics shows that the latter half of the 1920s was a high point in black resistance. Both the Industrial and Commercial Workers’ Union (ICU) and the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) organised mass protests, pass burning campaigns, trade union activity and strikes.

periodise – to divide into portions of time characterised by the same prevalent features or conditions
inertia – literally, resistance to change; thus, a tendency to do nothing or to remain unchanged; inactivity or lack of progress
populism – advocating mass or broad public participation, especially in politics
servility – submissiveness; readiness to please or recognise the authority of others; excessive willingness to please others
deputation – a body of persons appointed to carry a message or to state a case on behalf of those they represent, usually to a person or institution in authority
The African National Congress was also politically active during this period despite being hampered by a growing rift between a majority moderate grouping and a minority radical faction within its ranks.

By the early 1930s, however, the ICU had been destroyed by corruption, mismanagement, internal conflict and state repression. The Communist Party was greatly weakened when ideological in-fighting led to widespread expulsions, leaving the organisation with no more than 150 members by the mid-1930s. The fledgling African trade union movement, which had been growing during the 1920s, had collapsed with the onset of the Great Depression in 1929.

By the early 1930s the ANC had also retreated into internal squabbling and inactivity. Moderates within the organisation wanted to pursue the politically conservative and narrowly elitist strategy of lobbying the government for incremental reform. The radicals, on the other hand, favoured mass action, trade unionism and co-operation with the Communist Party. The ANC had become so severely polarised by these tensions that the moderates banded together at the 1930 conference to reassert their control over the organisation. As a result, an extremely conservative executive committee was elected arch-conservative Pixley ka Seme became president and many of its radical members were expelled.

The coming to power of these conservatives within the ANC did the organisation serious harm. Their concerns were petty and impractical, and their tenure marked by inactivity and disorganisation, as demonstrated by Bunche's commentary (see page 28).

Seme's main interests were to revive the influence of traditional chiefs in African politics and to promote money-making schemes for African businessmen, himself included. During his presidency, the ANC's membership fell to below 1 000 nation-wide and most of its branches withered away. Disorganisation and the drying up of its funds meant that the ANC was no longer even able to publish its newspaper, Abantu Batho. By the mid-1930s the organisation appeared to be dead. Seme managed to cling to the presidency for much of the 1930s by packing poorly-attended annual conferences with his supporters.

The 1930s were undoubtedly a low point in organised African resistance. The main organisations were ineffective in the face of a powerful and
Ralph Bunche’s description of the ANC’s 1937 Conference

Ralph Bunche, a professor of political science at Howard University, Washington, spent three months in South Africa toward the end of 1937 as part of a two-year round-the-world research trip. From 1946 onwards he held a series of high-ranking posts in the United Nations and in 1950 was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his role as mediator in the conflict over Palestine. These extracts are taken from notes he made during his trip.

[The conference] started out with a procession, led by a band, around the location. Meeting opened with singing of African National Anthem. Then a black preacher announced the programme for the day, which was devoid of any serious considerations, but devoted to social celebration of the Silver Jubilee of the Congress. Said time has come when Africans must “repent of their sins” and must get down on their knees and pray for joy that Congress has continued for 25 years. Christ is the leader of the African National Congress....

The whole a.m. devoted to religious services, the singing of hymns, sermons and scripture reading. The Bishop of Bloemfontein spoke, pointing out the many good things on earth that are God’s work, abjuring complainers and agitators....

Seme, the president of the Congress, who, I am told, gets arrested for bad debts every time he comes to Congress. got up and humbly thanked the Bishop for his “helpful and encouraging thoughts.” Seme in frock coat and white spats, a stovepipe hat and morning pants....

The Congress shows a complete lack of organisation or preparation — a ridiculous waste of time....

First day (of Congress) was completely wasted. Fiddled around on morning of the second day. Trying to cook up a programme... until the Mayor of Bloemfontein came... to address the Congress. Only a handful of people in the audience this morning — not more than 50.

Rev. Calata in replying to Mayor, said his people had been brought up under chiefs and had learned obedience and loyalty and for this reason accepted the Nat. Rep. Act....

Seme’s presidential address (at long last!). Congress is the founder of the unity movement in this country.... The whole tone of the Congress, whenever it has had any at all, has been that of looking back to past achievements — if any.... (Seme says) chief aim of Congress is to teach unity and co-operation to Africans.

abjure — to solemnly renounce
Nat. Rep. Act — Bunche is referring to the Representation of Natives Act which was passed by Parliament in 1936. It arose out of the Hertzog Bills (see box on page 36)
same time, the deepening economic impoverishment of Africans in the countryside encouraged large-scale migration into the cities. Their harsh experience of urbanisation sparked off a wave of spontaneous community protest and African working-class political action. It was very much in the wake of this rising tide of popular anger that formal African political organisation was reborn to reflect and express, at least in part, the dissatisfaction and frustration of the African populace.

South Africa's experience in this respect was not entirely unique. Through much of Africa, the impact of World War 2 stimulated local industrial production, rapid urbanisation and popular unrest. One can point to Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Algeria and Egypt as examples of countries where elitist nationalist movements harnessed the popular anger of this period to transform themselves into mass movements for national liberation. That most African countries achieved independence in the 1960s while South Africa did not, can to a large extent be explained by the presence here of a large settler population and its control of the state.

The rate of African urbanisation from the late 1930s through to the early 1950s was quite phenomenal, and was greater than at any other period in South African history except after the scrapping of influx control in 1986. The urban African population more than doubled from about 1.1 million in 1936 to approximately 2.5 million in 1950. In 1936, about 18% of the African population was urbanised; by 1950 nearly 30% were living in cities and towns. This was a remarkable demographic shift, especially if one takes into account that the state, with its pass system, went to extraordinary lengths to keep Africans out of the cities except as migrant workers. Indeed, in 1937 the Native Laws Amendment Act introduced an even stricter influx control system.

Part of the reason for this rapid growth in the urban population was that in the 1940s more Africans started coming to the cities as families with the intention of settling there permanently. Previously, younger males came to the cities on their own as labourers, usually on contract and intending to be no more than temporary workers. In the 1940s the urban African population took on a more permanent character. Shanty towns sprang up on the perimeters of the cities, and people tried to build stable family lives in this squalid environment.

This migration to the cities was set in motion by two independent sets of circumstances, one in the urban economy and the other in the countryside. The expansion of secondary industry in the urban areas generated employment opportunities and created an ever-greater demand for labour. This served to attract people to the cities. At the same time, conditions in the rural areas, both on white farms and in the reserves, had by the latter part of the 1930s deteriorated to the extent that large numbers of people were living in misery and some even faced starvation. This pushed people who were desperate for the basic necessities of survival out of the rural areas.

The rural African population experienced deepening poverty from the late
nineteenth century onwards. As a result of colonial conquest, Africans were either pushed into marginal areas, which were later proclaimed as reserves, or were hired as cheap labour for settler farms. Many rented land from white farmers in return either for cash, labour service or part of their crop; they are generally referred to as sharecroppers.

The 1913 Natives Land Act, a key pillar in the state’s segregationist policies, prevented Africans from owning land in what it proclaimed to be white areas, thus restricting 70% of the population to 8% of the land area. The Land Act also outlawed sharecropping; this forced many families, who up to that point had been able to make an independent living, either into becoming farm labourers or moving onto already crowded reserve land.

Many white farmers took this opportunity to expel sharecroppers from their land, forcing thousands of African families into poverty. The productive capacity of the reserves declined steadily as a result of the overcrowding and overgrazing of land that was marginal to begin with. By the 1940s this deterioration had progressed to the point where very few families in reserves were able to make a living off the land and were increasingly dependent on the money sent home by migrant labourers. Many of the more desperate families decided to migrate to the cities where there was at least the prospect of employment.

Although poverty in the urban areas was not as bad as in the countryside, urban living conditions were nevertheless squalid and unhealthy. Housing was particularly poor and many people were forced to live in shanty settlements with the most rudimentary provisions for water and sanitation. The authorities deliberately restricted the housing available to Africans to a few small official housing estates, or locations as they were called, to discourage Africans from settling permanently in the cities.

In addition, wages were low and did not keep pace with inflation. Price increases in essentials such as maize meal and firewood were particularly steep during the war years. Most workers were unskilled and their wages were not enough to cover their families’ most basic needs. Families often depended on wives working, usually as domestics, or being involved in some form of informal economic activity. Children sometimes contributed by begging for food. People were harassed by the state and local authorities who tried to regulate their lives and deport pass-law offenders. Although one did not quite have starvation conditions in the shanty towns, there was grinding poverty and living conditions were extremely poor.

How did African working-class discontent manifest itself politically?

From these socio-economic changes and the harsh experience of urban life, there emerged two types of African working-class political action. First, there was a series of informal, spontaneous community protests on issues relating to the cost of living. Second, there were impressive achievements in trade union activity.

Community protests

The community protests were spontaneous in the sense of relying on very basic organisation by community members themselves and thus tended to be fragmented. These protests were an expression of peoples’ dissatisfaction with oppressive living conditions and the high cost of subsistence. They dealt with issues such as poor housing, high transport costs and the lack of personal freedom, such as the right to be in the city, to move about freely within its precincts, to brew bear or hawk. Two examples of community struggle during the 1940s that deserve special mention are the Alexandra bus boycotts and the squatter movements that arose on the Witwatersrand from 1944 onwards.

In Alexandra, transport had always been a sensitive issue; it was some 15 kilometres from the city centre and there was no train service. The attempt
usually took up as much as a quarter of an unskilled worker's wage. Whatever else it might have been, the squatter movement must also be seen as a form of African working-class resistance, because squatters acted in open defiance of the law and threats from municipalities. Squatting was for many a clear statement of their dissatisfaction with existing conditions in the formal townships. An important motivation for joining a squatter community was the desire to move away from the regulation and supervision of the townships to a freer environment where people had greater control over their lives.

Trade unionism

The second form of African working-class action was to form trade unions and resort to strikes. The African trade union movement experienced a remarkable revival from the late 1930s onwards as a result of the economic upswing. Besides the grievances of African workers, this revival was also due to the organising skill of a handful of white communists and liberals. Because of the weakness of African political organisations, including the ANC, they took it upon themselves to start organising African workers. From virtually no union activity in the mid-1930s, by 1940 there were about 20 unions organising approximately 25,000 workers. Five years later, there were as many as 120 unions with a membership exceeding 160,000. This is a clear indication of growing class consciousness and militancy among African workers.

There were a large number of work stoppages throughout the 1940s, many of them being wildcat strikes. A surprising number of these strikes were successful. In an environment of high economic growth, employers were prepared to make concessions and even recognise trade unions rather than have anarchy and sabotage in the workplace.

The main development on the trade union front was the formation of a union among workers on the mines, the African Mineworkers' Union (AMU), in 1941. The miners had serious grievances because of the harsh conditions in the compounds where they lived and because miners were paid considerably less than industrial workers. That the AMU was able to claim a membership of 25,000 within three years was a considerable achievement. The compound system placed workers under close supervision and made it very difficult to recruit them into unions.

In August 1946 the AMU called a strike in support of its demand for a minimum wage of ten shillings a day. Seventy thousand miners came out on what was by far the largest strike by black workers in South African history.

wildcat strike — a sudden and unofficial strike not organised by a trade union; spontaneous downing of tools or refusal to work
class consciousness — an awareness of one's place in a social system, especially as it relates to the struggle between the capitalist class and working class
to that point. The strike was ruthlessly suppressed by police action which left 12 miners dead and 1 200 wounded. There was no improvement in working conditions and the AMU itself was smashed. Despite its failure, the 1946 miners' strike was important because it demonstrated that miners could be organised despite the controls of the compound system, and also for the galvanising effect it had on a rising generation of young political activists.

How did organised African politics change during the 1940s?

All of the broader socio-economic and political developments mentioned so far had an impact on the ANC and played a role in its regeneration. In addition, from the latter half of the 1930s the growing prevalence of racist ideologies both at home and abroad created a sense of urgency within the remaining core of the organisation that its decline needed to be stopped and reversed. Developments such as the rise of Nazism and Fascism in Europe, the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, the passage of the Hertzog Bills in South Africa in 1936 and the consolidation of an aggressive Afrikaner nationalist movement helped spur what remained of the organisation into action. Once the process of regeneration started, the ANC tended to be swept along by the tide of popular protest, trying to keep up with developments rather than leading from the front. It was only in the 1950s that the organisation started taking the initiative in organising popular protest.

The first significant step in the turnaround of the ANC was the removal in 1937 of Serre as president by delegates who were fed up with his incompetence and inactivity. His successor, the Reverend Zaccheus Mahabane, a Methodist clergyman, had good intentions but achieved little. He succeeded in 1940 by the energetic and intellectually capable Dr Alfred Bitini Xuma. The election of Xuma as president represented a decisive break with the old, staid, conservative leadership that had led the ANC down a blind alley.

Under Xuma's leadership, the ANC was restructured so that it became much more efficient and politically effective. After Xuma's reforms, the ANC was better able to respond to the challenges of African working-class dissatisfaction. It was the organisational changes of the early 1940s that eventually made it possible for the ANC to lead the mass protests of the 1950s. What were these reforms?

Xuma and his associates worked on a new constitution for the ANC that was implemented in 1943. The new constitution scrapped the privileged position of chiefs within the ANC, gave equal status to women members — which paved the way for the formation of the ANC Women’s League in 1948 — and, very importantly, centralised power in the organisation within a five-member executive committee. This not only made planning, policy making and the execution of political strategies much more effective, but also brought unruly provincial factions to heel. Much effort was put into improving the finances of the organisation, recruiting new members and rebuilding its branch structure. Xuma also hired full-time organisers and forged links with organisations such as the Communist Party and the South African Indian Congress (SAIC). Urban branches were encouraged to hold regular open-air
At 2:30 p.m. on July 8th, 1941, a deputation of the African National Congress led by Dr. A.B. Xuma, President-General, waited on the Honourable the Minister of Justice. The deputation was the result of telegraphic protests and letter representations made by the President-General of the Congress about relations regarding the shooting and killing of Africans by police. Police raids, and relations of Police and Africans in general. Dr. Xuma was communicated with by telephone from the Department of Justice and advised to form a deputation of three with himself. He quickly made arrangements with Mr. P.P. Mateke — President Transvaal Congress — and Mr. R.V. Selepe. Themba M.R.C. as other members of the deputation. Unfortunately, three hours before the deputation was due at the Palace of Justice, Mr. Themba declared his inability to join the deputation, consequently, Mr. Edwin Motshintunya substituted for him. Themba.

The deputation then met the Minister at 2:30 p.m., at once, expressed appreciation of the Congress to the Minister for his courtesy and public-mindedness in meeting a deputation of Africans who can give him certain aspects of any question in Native Affairs which no non-African is capable of. In the forty-five minutes that ensued various aspects of Police and the Africans were discussed, such as:

   a. The method in which they are conducted.
   b. Need and reasons for their abolition.
2. Recourse use of firearms by police on unarmed Africans.
   a. Shooting, killing of two Africans and wounding one African at Sophiatown, June 15th, 1941.
   b. Police raid and shooting near Rondebosch Sunday, July 6th, 1941.
3. Treatment and arrest of certain cases at Benoni and elsewhere.
4. Police Raid at Western Native Township, Johannesburg on the 22nd June.
5. Alleged assault of Pregnant woman by police at Sophiatown.
6. Difficulty for Africans to prove allegations of assault by police.
7. Raiding and arresting Africans for Native Beer when the municipalities are allowed to brew and sell beer to Africans.
8. Abuse of the right to use firearms in self-defence as or abet of action taken in the unlawful prosecution of duty.

These and other questions formed the basis of the discussion.

The deputation was most sympathetically received by the Minister, who expressed preoccupation with the spirit in which the deputation came, and stated that he expects the police to be exemplary in their conduct and not to break the law in its enforcement. He further stated that he was aware of the treatment of the police and would take severe disciplinary measures against any policemans. It was his desire, he said, that no section of the community be singled out for ill-treatment. In conclusion, he urged the deputation to draw a memorandum along the lines of their presentations and submit the same to him for substantiation and action.

Dr. Xuma again thanked the Minister for his sympathetic and patient hearing of the petition’s representations as well as for his appreciation of the good intentions of the delegation.

I understand that the deputation is now engaged in the preparation of their memorandum for the Minister as requested.

Youth League members took a keen interest in the spontaneous popular protests occurring around them. They were encouraged by developments such as the successful resistance of the Alexandra residents and growing trade union activity. The 1946 mineworkers' strike had a formative influence on many Youth Leaguers.

Although members of the Youth League did not organise or lead any of the spontaneous outbursts, they did recognise that these important outbreaks presented a political opportunity. It was on the basis of this insight that they started formulating a new political strategy of mass action that would harness this popular anger through the use of boycotts.

In the early 1940s, the ANC was undergoing a fundamental transformation. The ANC, which had been primarily an urban organisation, was expanding its reach into the rural areas. This was partly due to the success of the Congress of the People, which was held in 1955. The Congress of the People was a meeting of representatives from all over South Africa, who came together to discuss the country's future. The Congress of the People adopted a new constitution for the ANC, which was based on the principles of non-racialism and popular participation.

The transformation of the ANC was reflected in the increase in the number of Youth Leagues. The Youth Leagues were part of this transformation, as they were seen as a way of involving young people in the struggle for liberation. The Youth Leagues were also important in the development of the ANC's strategy. The Youth Leagues were not just a source of support for the ANC, but also played an active role in the formulation of the ANC's political agenda.

The Youth Leagues were one of the most important sections of the ANC. They were not only a source of support for the ANC, but also played an active role in the formulation of the ANC's political agenda. The Youth Leagues were important in the development of the ANC's strategy, and they were also important in the process of transforming the ANC into a more radical and progressive organisation.

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1. the right or direct representation in all the governing bodies of the country – national, provincial and local, and we resolve to work for the abolition of all differential institutions or bodies specially created for Africans, viz. representative councils, present form of parliamentary representation.

2. To achieve these objectives the following programme of action is suggested:
   a. the creation of a national fund to finance the struggle for national liberation.
   b. the appointment of a committee to organise an appeal for funds and to devise ways and means thereafter.
   c. the regular issue of propaganda material through:
      i. the usual press, newsletter or other means of disseminating our ideas in order to raise the standard of political and national consciousness.
      ii. establishment of a national press.

3. Appointment of a council of action whose function should be to carry into effect, vigorously and with the utmost determination the programme of action. It should be competent for the council of action to implement our resolve to work for:
   a. the abolition of all differential political institutions the boycott or which we accept and to undertake a campaign to educate our people on this issue and, in addition, to employ the following weapons: immediate and active boycotts, strikes, civil disobedience, non-co-operation and such other means as may bring about the accomplishment and realisation of our aspirations.
   b. preparations and making of plans for a national stoppage or work for one day as a mark of protest against the reactionary policy of the Government.

4. Economic:
   a. The establishment of commercial, industrial, transport and other enterprises in both urban and rural areas.
   b. Consolidation of the industrial organisation of the workers for the improvement of their standard of living.
   c. Pursuant to paragraph (a) herein instructions be issued to Provincial Congresses to study the economic and social conditions in the reserves and other African settlements and to devise ways and means for their development, establishment of industries and such other enterprises as may give employment to a number of people.

5. Education:
   a. To unite the cultural with the educational and national struggle.
   b. The establishment of a national academy of arts and sciences.

6. Cultural:
   a. To unite the cultural with the educational and national struggle.
   b. The establishment of a national academy of arts and sciences.

7. Congress realises that ultimately the people will be brought together by inspired leadership, under the banner of African Nationalism with courage and determination.
mass organisation and adopting an activist strategy using tactics such as strikes, stayaways, pass burning and other forms of civil disobedience.

Conclusion

From having been a moderate movement expressing the interests of the elite of African society, by 1949 the ANC was poised to become a mass movement with an activist strategy expressing many working-class interests. Although the ideology and the organisational base necessary to turn the ANC into a mass organisation was already in place by the late 1940s, this was only put into practical effect with the start of the Defiance Campaign in 1952. By the end of the 1950s its populist campaigns had won the ANC a membership of about 100,000 in addition to a large informal following. The apartheid state’s response to the popular campaigns of the 1950s was to culminate in the Sharpeville massacre of March 1960 and the brutal suppression of the liberation movement that followed.

This chapter has tried to demonstrate that the political developments of the 1940s were based on fundamental changes in South African society. It has shown how rapid industrialisation together with social change in the South African countryside affected the nature of black protest politics and African nationalist thinking. Spontaneous working-class protest caused by workers’ harsh experience of urban life served as the main catalyst for these political changes.

References

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Chapter 3
Afrikaner Nationalism in the 1930s and 1940s
by Albert Grundlingh

As a cultural and political phenomenon, a specifically ethnic nationalism and narrowly defined Afrikaner nationalism undoubtedly left its mark on twentieth-century South African history. This is about the only non-controversial statement that can be made in connection with Afrikaner nationalism. There are differing interpretations concerning the origins of Afrikaner nationalism, its nature and content, the way in which it has been manufactured, and the precise correlation between Afrikaner nationalism and socio-economic developments.

It is also important that we do not see Afrikaner nationalism in isolation. In the rest of Africa, particularly from the 1950s onwards, a wave of black nationalism swept over the continent and led to the independence of many countries. Although Afrikaner nationalism differed from black nationalism in many respects, it also displayed some similar characteristics. It shared, for example, the idea that foreign powers should not be allowed to dominate local populations.

Much of the historical writing in Afrikaans dealing with Afrikaner nationalism presents it as an unproblematic concept. Afrikaner nationalism is seen, in a mechanistic fashion, as the automatic outcome of South African history. The weakness in this approach is that the thing that has to be studied is accepted uncritically as a natural given entity. The result is a tautological argument with very little explanatory value — "Afrikaners are nationalistic because they are Afrikaners."

Liberal, mainly English-speaking, historians were more critical towards Afrikaner nationalism. Ironically though, their basic point of departure did not differ much from that of their Afrikaner counterparts. They shared an acceptance of the concept of volk as well as idealistic notions of the growth of nationalism. The only substantial difference is that whereas some English-speaking historians denounced nationalism, often in value-laden terms, Afrikaner historians viewed it as a positive phenomenon.

More recent studies tend to pay greater attention to the material basis of Afrikaner nationalism. Such studies tend to see it as the cultural and political product of intense propaganda. While the precise mix of material, cultural and political factors is a matter for debate, there is nevertheless a degree of consensus that something like nationalism survives because it serves a useful purpose to the people or groups that believe in it.

How did Afrikaner nationalism manifest itself?

The Afrikaner Broederbond

In line with the approach outlined above, Afrikaner nationalism can be seen in general terms as a broad social and political response to the uneven development of capitalism in South Africa. This meant that certain groups, including a substantial number of Afrikaners, were left behind. Afrikaner nationalism gained ground within a context of increasing urbanisation and secondary industrialisation during the period between the two world wars, as well as the continuing British imperial influence in South Africa. Important ideological building blocks in this process included the promotion of a common language, the emphasis on what was perceived to be a common past and the unity of a common sense of religion.

Prominent in the construction and direction in which Afrikaner nationalism was pushed was the Afrikaner middle class. This class included, for example, ministers of religion, teachers, academics, journalists, farmers and certain elements in the civil service. Many leading middle-class Afrikaners in the 1930s and 1940s belonged to a secret organisation called the Afrikaner Broederbond, which worked ceaselessly to promote the exclusive interests of “true” Afrikaners on behalf of the volk. To unite rural people and urban people, rich and poor, political idealists and pragmatists under the banner of Afrikaner nationalism called for long-term political promotion on several levels over a number of years.

**Ethnic nationalism** — belief that a particular ethnic group is superior to or better than other groups

**Tautology** — the unnecessary repetition within a statement of the same thing in different words

**Volk** — a nation or people. In South Africa, it refers particularly to the Afrikaner people.
Urbanisation and poor whites

The depression of the early 1930s forced a considerable number of Afrikaners off the land and into the cities. Many of them lacked the necessary skills to assert themselves in the new and competitive urban environment and were relegated to relatively low-paid positions. For example, almost 40% of urbanised male Afrikaners found themselves in the following occupations in 1939 — manual labourer, mine worker, railway worker, bricklayer. According to the 1932 report of the Carnegie Commission of Enquiry into White Poverty, 200 000 to 300 000 white people could be classified as very poor.

Poverty was not restricted to the urban areas. It was also particularly acute in the northern Cape with its nomadic trekboers, in the Bushveld area of the Transvaal, in the Karoo and Little Karoo with its struggling peasant farmers and bywowners, and in the southern Cape where formerly independent woodcutters were fighting a losing battle against greedy wood merchants.

Impoverished Afrikaners had to be rescued for the volk. In the Broederbond as well as in other circles, a strategy combining ethnic mobilisation with the promotion of volkskapitalisme was seen as a possible solution to the problem. Through group identification and co-operation, it was hoped that the position of Afrikaans speakers could be improved.

Afrikaner institutions

Identification with the group had to be complete and had to be carried out on all levels of society. A complex network of Afrikaner organisations was established during the 1930s and existing organisations were strengthened. Across the board, from financial institutions like Sanlam and Volkskas, through to youth movements like the Voortrekkers, organisations which bore an Afrikaner imprint came into existence. Important in this respect was an umbrella body, the Federasie van Afrikaanse Kultuurverenigings (FAK), which saw to it that all Afrikaner cultural forms took a decidedly nationalistic turn. The material and cultural foundations of Afrikaner nationalism were being laid systematically.

The role of Afrikaner women

In a strongly patriarchal Afrikaner society, it was often men who took the lead in nationalistic and cultural projects. The role of women, however, can be easily underestimated. The notion of the self-sacrificing volksmoeder was an

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The cold statistics of poverty, however, did not reflect the profoundly human story of suffering and humiliation. A contemporary church commission described the situation of the new urban Afrikaner in the following empathic terms:

“He was looked down upon, he had to come with his hat in hand, he had to be satisfied with the crumbs which fell from the tables of the rich. To make any sort of progress, however little, he had to beg the English oppressor and had to obey his every command. Any job that was offered him, however humiliating, dangerous and poorly paid it might have been, he had to accept with gratitude. He and his family had to be satisfied with the worst living conditions in dirty ghettos. The door to well-paid occupations was firmly closed. His erstwhile independence was reduced to humiliating servitude and bondage.”


trekboer – a nomadic Afrikaner farmer
bywoner – a tenant farmer who laboured for the land owner in return for the right to cultivate a piece of land
volkskapitalisme – capitalism in the interest of the volk
integral element in the national ethos. It was the volksmoeder who had to transmit the appropriate aspirations and ideals to the young and who had to provide a home environment in which Afrikaner ideals could be cherished. Her influence was not to be restricted to the household, however. She was also expected to play an active supportive role in the promotion of wider nationalist politics.

Although not all Afrikaner women followed the script that had been written for them, the notion of a volksmoeder was nevertheless seen as a role model worthy for young Afrikaner girls to emulate. As a result, the continued incorporation of women into a male-dominated nationalism was assured. The volksmoeder ideal meant that women could gain social recognition only as participants in the lives of their husbands and children; plotting their own course outside the prescribed framework was distinctly frowned upon.

The powerful hold of the volksmoeder ideal is evident from the fact that it had resonance even among working-class women who had joined socialistically inclined trade unions under non-Afrikaner leadership, such as the Garment Workers’ Union under Solly Sachs. Working-class women adopted the symbols and rhetoric of the volksmoeder and then proceeded to redefine it for themselves. It was only then, they felt, that they could claim to be full members of society.

Afrikaner trade unions

An important field for Afrikaner cultural entrepreneurs was that of trade unionism. Afrikaner workers had to be organised within a nationalist context and had to be weaned from the existing trade unions which were dominated by English speakers. Afrikaner Broederbond unions like the Spoorbond and the Afrikaner Bond van Mynwerkers were established to look after the specific interests of Afrikaans speakers on the railways and in the gold mines. The Spoorbond was relatively successful, but the Afrikaner Bond van Mynwerkers met with considerable opposition from the already established Mine Workers’ Union.

The Mine Workers’ Union had come to an agreement with the mine owners that the Afrikaner union would not be recognised and that only members of the predominantly English-speaking union would be employed. Thus Afrikaans speakers were compelled to work as “reformers” within the framework of the often-corrupt Mine Workers’ Union. This gave rise to considerable tension, to the extent that the secretary of the Mine Workers’ Union, Charlie Harris, was shot by an outraged Afrikaner in 1939. To establish an organised Afrikaner influence on the mines was more difficult than had been anticipated.

The role of history

A marked feature of the way in which Afrikaner nationalism was constructed was the emphasis placed on history. The past was that of the Great Trek, the Day of the Covenant, the Anglo-Boer War, the concentration camps during that war, and other events of importance to the Afrikaners. These events were cast in near-religious terms, with Afrikaners as God’s chosen people, destined to bring civilisation and Christianity to the southern tip of Africa.

Of particular significance in moulding an Afrikaner identity during the 1930s were the centenary celebrations of the Great Trek in 1938. The Great Trek, which assumed pride of place in Afrikaner history, was commemorated by nine oxwagons slowly making their way from Cape Town to the north. It turned out to be unprecedented cultural and political theatre — feverish crowds dressed in period Voortrekker garb welcomed the procession as it approached towns and cities. Streets were renamed after Voortrekker heroes; men and women were moved to tears by the spectacle; young people were married alongside the vehicles; couples christened their babies in the shade of wagons (many infants were given names derived from the Great Trek, such as Eeufesia and Kakebeenwania). Although this “second
Features of populism in Afrikaner nationalism

- a moralistic approach
- a romantic ideal of leaders as down-to-earth people
- an open distrust of the centres of political and economic power
- the development of co-operative companies in which the ordinary person had a place
- a strong nostalgic element in drawing upon an idealised past in attempts to help shape the present and the future

What were some organisational expressions of Afrikaner nationalism?

One organisation to emerge from the centenary celebrations was the Ossewabrandwag (Oxwagon Sentinel). It promoted itself as a cultural organisation, intent on keeping the “spirit of 38” alive, but it cannot be seen as a purely cultural organisation.

It claimed to stand aloof from the sordid squabbles of party politics. Petty political differences could divide Afrikanerdor, and therefore it was felt that the organisation had to guard against divisions that might be generated by the dynamics of party politics.

plateland – remote country districts
populist – seeking to appeal to the interests of ordinary people
The (Ossewabrandwag) succeeded because it seemed to offer to every man — and at first also to every woman — the chance of an individual and ponderable contribution to the great task of unifying the Afrikaner nation. At braaivleis-aande and jukskie meetings, at the local kultuurvereniging and even on occasion at church, Afrikaners could meet in that Trekkershirt dress which was to be the uniform of the movement, and feel a sense of community of culture, of common heritage, of organised progress towards a great goal — a feeling which they did not always (or even, perhaps, often) experience within the framework of their political parties.

The movement, with its emphasis on a cultural heritage which all Afrikaners supposedly had in common, grew quickly. Membership claims of between 300,000 and 400,000 in 1941 were probably only a slight exaggeration. The strength of its appeal lay in its ability to promote kultuurpolitiek (cultural politics) which allowed for full individual expression and participation (see box on this page).

At the same time, to offset the popular appeal of the Ossewabrandwag, D.F. Malan of the National Party decided to reorganise the Party to make it more accessible to grassroots members. The size of the Party units was decreased, making it possible for even the smallest grouping of Afrikaners to form their own political cell. The aim was to educate ordinary members in the political faith and to make them feel necessary to the decisions of their political superiors.

Given the sympathies of some Afrikaners for the Ossewabrandwag during the war years, certain authors, critical of later Afrikaner race policies, were quick to equate the post-1949 apartheid state with the Nazi state of the 1930s and 1940s. Given the universal criticism heaped upon the Nazis and the general scorn evoked by apartheid, the analogy was a tempting one, and one which could be readily understood and appreciated abroad. Such a one-to-one equation, however, obscures more than it reveals. Although some right-wing Afrikaners did identify with Nazi Germany, in real terms Nazi influence in South Africa was rather limited.

The relationship between Afrikaner nationalism and German national socialism appeared to be mainly that of mutual ideological sympathy rather than deep-seated structural similarities. Afrikaner nationalists differed from their German counterparts in terms of their belief in the doctrine of Christian nationalism as opposed to the crude pseudoscientific Social Darwinism of the Nazis. Afrikaners felt no need to exterminate what they considered the inferior races, and although Afrikaners respected strong leaders, there was no cult of the Führer. Afrikaner nationalism owed its characteristics and direction more to the development of specific indigenous historical ideas, related to nineteenth-century Boer republican impulses and local conditions as indicated, than to the adoption of a rigid ideology which originated outside the country.

How was Afrikaner nationalism reflected at the polls?

White political parties represented only a relatively small section of the total South African population in an all-white Parliament. Despite this, their rivalry and jockeying for position are of interest in as far as Parliament, at the time, was still the undisputed location of power. Challenges to the legitimacy of Parliament were only to come much later.

The 1943 election

In the early 1940s different political orientations left Afrikanerdom vulnerable. Some groups outside of Parliament looked back to the old Boer republics. Others favoured an ill-digested form of national socialism and the abolition of the parliamentary system. Still others supported the Smuts government. At the same time, the ultra-right Herstigte Nasionale Party (HNP) under D.F. Malan projected itself as the parliamentary home of all true Afrikaners. Although Malan was slowly starting to assert his dominance over rival factions, at the time of the 1943 general election he could not yet claim to have translated this into full electoral support.

All of this augured well for Prime Minister Jan Smuts. On the war front the tide had turned in favour of the Allied forces, and at home the Afrikaner opposition was fragmented. He could not have hoped for a better time for a general election. The United Party retained its dominant position and won the election comfortably, with 107 seats to 43 for the Afrikaner opposition.

The election was undoubtedly a major triumph for the United Party and the pro-war forces in the country. Smuts, despite the protests of the Malanites, still managed to attract approximately a third of the Afrikaners vote. The National Party realised, rather belatedly, that their strident anti-war propaganda had alienated a considerable number of Afrikaans-speaking families who had relatives in the Union Defence Force. The war, and an overriding commitment to its successful conclusion, helped to cement Smuts’s support. The war was seen as a “higher cause”. To the greater part of the electorate it appeared unrealistic, if not downright irresponsible, to vote for a change of government while the war was still in progress. Smuts realised

Social Darwinism is a pseudoscientific theory developed during the mid-nineteenth century by Western scholars to establish a hierarchy of humans. Africans were defined as racially inferior while Europeans were seen as superior, with a sophisticated or well-developed material culture.

Pseudoscience – a collection of beliefs or practices mistakenly regarded as being based on scientific method

Christian nationalism – an ideology grounded in and promoting Afrikaner religion, culture and language

Führer – leader; the title assumed by Adolph Hitler when he became ruler of Germany

Augur well – to be a sign that something good is about to happen
that the war was his strongest electoral ally and refused to be drawn into petty party-political bickering. Smuts’s strategy worked well in the 1943 election, but it also reflected his near disdain for the intrigues and scheming of party politics which ultimately no politician can afford to ignore.

The 1943 election was the United Party’s finest hour. Its victory also conveniently concealed the cracks within the Party, and the degree to which its appeal was dependent on Smuts’s status as an international statesman during wartime conditions. As a result of these special political circumstances, the outcome of the 1943 elections exaggerated the depth and level of attachment to the United Party. For example, soldiers were allowed to vote while away on active service; their vote made an important difference in several constituencies and helped to create a false impression of the Party’s actual level of support at home. Although the Party would have won the election comfortably enough without the soldiers’ vote, their vote contributed to the illusion of a seemingly all-conquering political party.

At the same time the election understated the degree of support for Afrikaner nationalist policies. Many newly urbanised Afrikaners in the cities had failed to register as voters. The fighting among the various Afrikaner factions also had a negative impact on polling day. Despite such adverse circumstances, the National Party nevertheless gained 36% of the total vote. It increased its representation in the House of Assembly by 16 seats — from 27 seats in 1938 to 43 in the 1943 election. It was also insufficiently recognised at the time that the election had consolidated Malan’s position as the dominant spokesman for Afrikanerdor.

Between elections

If the National Party was not happy with the election results, it was certainly not dispirited. With some speed, Malan and his supporters set about consolidating the gains the Party had made. They worked hard at improving party organisation and expanding the Stryfonds (Battle Fund), which had been started in 1942 with a view to appointing more full-time party organisers. The position of the Party within wider Afrikanerdor also had to be maintained. The political energies of numerous cultural and other bodies had to be harnessed by the National Party and their views had to be expressed in favour of the Party at the ballot box.

At the same time, the Party dealt skilfully with other organisations and political movements within Afrikanerdor. It exploited the tensions and the need for an Afrikaner identity which these movements expressed. Yet, by building on the position achieved in the 1943 election, it did not hesitate to attack them if they endangered the Party’s strategy or tried to take its place as the parliamentary political expression of “the Afrikaner people”. Much of the activity of the Party after the 1943 election was geared towards extensive reorganisation and aimed at capturing all the key constituent organisations within the nationalist movement.

Despite the organisational overhaul of the Party and other factors which favoured the Nationalists, Malan did not believe that they could win the 1948 general election. They had their eyes set on the 1953 election as a more realistic target.

The 1948 election

The 1948 victory was a narrow one. The National Party had gained 70 seats and its election partner, the Afrikaner Party, nine seats; the United Party had 65 and the Labour Party held six seats. A coalition with the Afrikaner Party was necessary for the Nationalists to form a parliamentary majority for a new government.

Although the National Party had won a majority of seats, it failed to secure the majority of votes cast. It had almost 181,000 fewer votes than the opposition parties. The way in which the constituencies had been delimited, favouring the rural areas, had worked to the benefit of the Nationalists. Smuts was a bitterly disappointed man, though he tried to hide his feelings. To him the election results were a rejection of all his ideas and handiwork during his long career.

Much has been written on the 1948 election — understandably so. Among other reasons, it was only the second time in South African parliamentary history that the electorate had voted out the government.
Rural vs. urban in the 1948 election

Most of the 70 seats won by the National Party during the 1948 election were in rural areas, while most of the 65 seats won by the United Party were in the urban areas.

According to the Constitution that South Africa had at the time, the constituencies in the rural areas were smaller than those in urban areas. This meant that there were more rural constituencies than urban ones. This was to the benefit of the National Party, since it tended to do well in rural areas in terms of votes.

It has been calculated that if rural and urban votes had been of equal value, Smuts would have won 80 seats, Malan 60, and other parties 10 seats. The United Party would have won the election.

Besides the headcounting and detailed statistical analysis of the outcome, the central focus has been on explaining why the Nationalists managed to win in 1948 after they had lost so badly in 1943. To approach the same issue from the opposite end, why did the United Party fare so poorly?

The National Party fought the election with a tried and trusted slogan of *swart gevaar* (black peril) and the *swart oorstroming* (black swamping) of urban areas. This, of course, was not a new tactic. It was the stock-in-trade of many a white South African politician. However, this time round the issue appeared to be especially crucial because there had been a large influx of black people to the cities during World War 2. In addition, there were some doubts in the popular mind as to whether the United Party would maintain a strictly segregationist policy, particularly since it was believed that the more liberally inclined Jan Hofmeyr would be Smuts's successor. All of this gave *swart gevaar* tactics extra weight in 1948.

Although racial metaphors such as *swart gevaar* and *swart oorstroming* have an appeal and force all of their own, they can at the same time disguise more basic material interests. On closer examination, these metaphors can also be seen as expressions of different class interests within Afrikanerdom. For the farmers, already affected by measures to control food prices, support for the Nationalist opposition to put an end to *oorstroming* meant that the damaging loss of black labour from the rural areas might be stemmed. For white workers in the cities, many of them Afrikaans-speaking, the Nationalists promised to protect their jobs in the face of black competition. Finally, Afrikaner commercial and financial interests also saw some gain for themselves in policies designed to support white agriculture, since they relied on that sector of the market for part of their profits.

The mobilisation and harnessing of different classes should not be seen as a simplistic or an automatic process. Building such a class alliance requires a great deal of organisation and planning. The National Party victory of 1948, therefore, had much to do with the careful co-ordination of various interests and movements within Afrikanerdom. Tactically, the National Party also played down problematic aspects of the republican issue. It agreed to stay in the Commonwealth and adopt the principle of equal rights for all whites. This satisfied those Afrikaners who had no wish to continue with the "Boer-Brit" struggle and who otherwise might have voted for the United Party. It also opened the door for a favourable electoral alliance with former opponents who were now grouped together in the Afrikaner Party.

In contrast to the National Party, the United Party was not well prepared.
The war issue which had held the United Party together in the early 1940s had fallen away. In the absence of a single and overriding commitment, Smuts’s hold over the Party had become somewhat weaker. Organisationally, the Party also lacked vigour. Warnings that its cumbersome structures, as opposed to the more streamlined and personalised approach of the Nationalists, failed to keep in touch with ordinary voters went unheeded. Whereas voters found the National Party organisation accessible and responsive, the same could not be said of the United Party.

While it can be argued that the United Party government did well to see the war out, it was less capable of dealing with peace-time conditions and dislocations. Certain weaknesses and lapses in the domestic administration of the Union in the post-1945 period gave the opposition sufficient issues to exploit for electoral gain. Much was made of the shortages of meat, the unavailability of white bread, the rate of inflation and the government’s dismal housing record, which had left some white people living in garages. To make matters worse, it was said that the government’s immigration programme had brought numerous British immigrants into the country and that they had taken homes and employment away from (white) South African citizens. Moreover, it was claimed that the intention was to swamp the Afrikaners, who had a higher birth rate than English South Africans, with British immigrants so that Afrikaners could be outnumbered at the polls in future elections. A variety of public grievances had presented themselves, and while the National Party exploited these to the hilt, the United Party found it difficult to counter the accusations with an adequate political response.

Conclusion

The 1948 election has often been viewed as a watershed in South African history. It was certainly significant in so far as it brought about a change of government. Beyond that, its importance can easily be exaggerated. It has often been labelled as the apartheid election. Yet despite the National Party’s black peril tactics, it did not have a fully formulated blueprint apartheid policy ready to implement. Much of it was ad hoc and had to be negotiated in the face of competing Afrikaner and other interests. It also has to be seen in the light of what went before. Apartheid was not so much a change in policy as a change in emphasis.

Certainly, for the majority of the voteless South Africans at the time, the election was not seen as particularly crucial. Admittedly, some feared an intensification of discriminatory measures, but they also realised that the issue was more deep-seated and wide-ranging than any white election could reveal. Albert Luthuli, later to become president of the ANC, responded to the 1948 election as follows:

For most of us Africans, banded about on the field while the game was in progress and then kicked to one side when the game was won, the election seemed largely irrelevant. We had endured Botha, Hertzog and Smuts. It did not seem of much importance whether the whites gave us more Smuts or switched to Malan. Our lot has grown steadily harder....

References

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