

CIVIL WAR IN THE BORDER BANTUSTAN.

Introduction.

1983 was the year when Botha told South Africa and the outside world that apartheid was dead and he had a new constitution to prove it.

It was also the year in which self-appointed life president of the Ciskei, Lennox Sebe declared war on the people of Mdantsane when they refused to board the buses of the Gompo transport company after a fare increase.

While Botha and the Nationalist government declared loudly that reform was just around the corner, the Sebe leader was gearing himself up to step into Pretoria's cast off shoes.

The new deal for Coloureds and Indians and the so-called 'self-government' that the Black Local Authorities Act offered to urban Africans meant that someone else had to take over the unpleasant task of controlling the vast majority of rightless people.

The Homeland system and the political solution it is supposed to provide for the majority of people in this country is not new to us.

Nor are deaths in detention in Venda, or the murders of students at Ngoyi, or the shooting of residents in Mdantsane. Apartheid has a long history of this kind of action against people who don't toe the line. What's new is that the Botha government is trying very hard to make out that it doesn't carry out this kind of thing any more. It is trying very hard to show the outside world that if these things do happen, they are the work of independent people, in the way they know best.

Chief Lennox Sebe is not a man renowned for his insight. Yet even he managed to put his finger on the reason for his own existence. Just before he was made President of the newly independent Ciskei, he is known to have said:

"So when I say the South African government needs me, I mean every word. Pretoria is spending a great deal of money on defence. But there has to be positive political action to satisfy the aspirations of the people".

It is to Sebe's brand of "positive political action" that I want to focus attention on in this paper.

The Mdantsane Bus Boycott.

Eight months ago on the 17 July, Ciskei's bus company, Gompo Transport raised bus fares by 11% an effective increase of about 50c a week on the journey to and from East London to Mdantsane.

Since this time Mdantsane's half a million residents have refused to board Gompo Transport's buses. Instead they have used taxis and trains to carry them on the 16 kilometre journey to work.

School children were refused a discount on school bus fares and a few weeks later they began boycotting classes in support of the demand for lower fares.

The response of the Ciskei government was so harsh as to provoke a situation in Mdantsane that was nothing short of civil war.

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Residents estimate that nearly a hundred people have been shot and killed since the boycott began. Nearly eighty of whom died when police opened fire on commuters at Egerton, Fort Jackson, and Mount Ruth stations on the morning of August 4th.

Mdantsane's Sisa Dukashe Sports Stadium was turned into a detention and torture centre by vigilantes recruited by Sebe's government from rural villages to crush the boycott. Former inmates of the Sisa Dukashe stadium tell horrifying stories of dozens of residents crammed into tiny change rooms without food, water ablution facilities or blankets in the middle of winter. They tell of men being suspended by their wrists from the change room rafters and sjambokked, of women raped in passageways and children forced to run in circles and sing praises of Lennox Sebe.

Residents who escaped the Stadium were faced with daily roadblocks where taxi-passengers were stopped, beaten and fined by vigilantes. Vigilantes also conducted house to house searches, looking for school children, so-called subversive literature like the Black Sash booklet "You and the Pass Laws", that was banned, for possession of T-shirts, and membership cards of the South African Allied Worker's Union (SAAWU).

The South African Allied Workers Union which represents 20 000 workers in East London, was blamed by Sebe of being behind the boycott, and banned from the Ciskei soon after the boycott began. ^{all but} ~~one~~ office bearers were detained and Thozmle Gqweta, SAAWU President (who has been detained no less than nine times by the Ciskei and South African security police, but never charged) was forced to go into hiding after he received a death threat.

Sebe also imposed a 10 p.m to 4 a.m curfew in Mdantsane, detained over a thousand people and banned all meetings of more than four people.

Three months after the boycott began Sebe was forced to halve the fare increase. But the boycott continues to this day. Residents have time and time again told Sebe that they will negotiate the end of the boycott if he releases all detainees, compensates the victims of the vigilantes, and the police shootings, and withdraws the bus service. Sebe has refused to meet these conditions and so the boycott goes on. Armed police escorts now drive behind near empty buses they claim to be protecting passengers from intimidation.

But the people of Mdantsane remain firm, as one resident said when Sebe lowered the fares :

"Five cents will not bring back the dead. The buses smell of blood. I will never use them again".

What I want to look at is why the people of Mdantsane have shown such incredible fortitude in the face of such violent attempts to end the bus boycott. I also want to look at why the Ciskei government went to such extreme lengths to try to crush the boycott.

The reason for the fortitude shown by Mdantsane residents lies in both the poverty of the area which means that even a small sum of money like 50 cents a week fare increase causes hardship for many families. The second reason lies in the depth of opposition to the Ciskei government itself.

Poverty in the Ciskei/---

Poverty in the Ciskei.

The Ciskei is one of the poorest bantustans in South Africa. The Quail Commission appointed by Chief Minister Lennox Sebe to advise him on whether to opt for independence had this to say about the Ciskei economy :

"The homeland lacks all the attributes of a viable economy. It cannot grow sufficient food to feed its population. It cannot provide employment for all of its resident population, it does not have control over four fifths of its own revenue".

The commission went on to describe how there were only 3000 jobs provided for inside the Ciskei itself, four fifths of its budget comes from South Africa and the agricultural potential of the region is limited by the devastating droughts it experiences.

In addition the population of the area has doubled over the last ten years as a result of forced removals of people from "South Africa" to within the Ciskei's borders.

All of this means that unemployment is very high, the family income has to stretch to feed many mouths.

Opposition to the Ciskei Government.

The vast majority of Ciskei residents were opposed to the Ciskei Independence. In summing up the attitude of the majority of the people towards independence the Quail commission said : Homeland independence tends to be seen by the majority as an unfair dispensation imposed by Pretoria and implying the loss of rights and economic opportunities without necessarily inferring an escape from the dictates of Pretoria....."

In the referendum held to determine the attitude of people to independence, a clear majority did not want it.

Opposition to the Ciskei government has always been particularly strong in Mdantsane where the large urban population is more difficult to control, manipulate and intimidate than small rural communities.

Nevertheless residents are united in explaining that it was the extreme and indiscriminating brutality with which Sebe tried to crush the boycott that finally lost him what little support he had amongst Mdantsane residents.

This anecdotal story illustrates how former Ciskei National Independence Party(CNIP) supporters became disillusioned in the course of the bus boycott.

Mrs. Maquebela was a CNIP supporter. She worked as a cleaner in an East London hotel. At the beginning of the boycott she complained of intimidation by other commuters and was afraid if she boycotted the buses she would arrive late for work.

Mrs. Maquebela's attitude changed radically after August 4th when at least 80 people fell to a hail of bullets before sunrise at Mdantsane railway sidings. Victims who survived said they had been shot in cold blood.

They were strangers to Mrs. Maquebela, but she wept, tore up her CNIP membership card and vowed never to board a bus again. She now walks 24 kms a day to the station.

Why did Sebe go to such extremes to /---

Why did Sebe go to such extremes to crush the boycott?

I have already pointed out the level of unpopularity which Sebe in particular, but Ciskei independence in general has amongst Ciskei residents. This means that it is impossible for Sebe to rule with any degree of consensus. As a result he is forced to rely on a combination of patronage, co-option and when all else fails, brute force.

In the isolated rural communities the control which Chiefs exercise over land, housing, jobs, education, health services and drought relief means that people are forced to offer them a means of political support and obedience. And the level of obedience demanded is considerable.

One peasant farmer ploughed his fields without permission from the extension officer. He was arrested, his teeth were pulled out and he was then thrown into detention for six months.

At Mgwali, for example, a black spot outside the Ciskei, but subject to Ciskei Administration, residents resisting removal to the Ciskei are not given drought relief.

In the Urban areas a similar situation operates. The Housing, Education and jobs remain under Sebe's control. In Mdantsane political detainees families are evicted from their homes the minute they fall behind with their rent payments. Most evil of all is the Ciskei Manpower Development Centre. All workers whether employed in the cities or elsewhere have to register with the Centre and give details of previous job histories.

The Centre keeps records of workers involvement in trade unions, politics and strikes. Workers with bad job records as political records are blacklisted and will never get jobs again.

Nevertheless it is becoming increasingly difficult for Sebe to control urban Ciskei residents.

Overcrowded living conditions, low wages, high unemployment and harsh administration all mean that Mdantsane residents in particular are willing to take militant action against Sebe's regime. The fact that many of them have jobs in East London and therefore have a measure of economic independence from the Ciskei government means they are able to take action more easily than their equally impoverished rural counterparts.

Perhaps the major reason why Sebe is forced to resort to force to control Ciskei residents is that his government has so little to offer in return for support and loyalty.

Quite apart from the fact that land, jobs, housing, education and health care are in short supply, Sebe does not have the means to buy off the bantustans bureaucracy itself.

There are two small agricultural schemes at Tyefu and Shiloh where the government is offering irrigated land to privileged peasant farmers. But in the end strong arm tactics are the only way that Sebe can control bureaucrats, headmen and even members of his own family.

While some members of Sebe's/---

While some members of Sebe's government may enjoy shares in Casinos, homeland industries, large farms, cattle and cars, they are discovering independence is a double edged sword.

At present the South African economy is in the grip of the worst recession ever, retrenchments are at unprecedented levels and unemployment has reached crisis proportions. The response of the South African Government to this has been to tighten up influx control both by forcibly returning illegals to their so-called place of origin and by cutting down on the number of contract workers employed in "white South Africa" in favour of employing africans with permanent urban rights. This situation is particularly acute in the border region where industry is experiencing an even more severe recession than in other parts of the country.

As the South African government displaces its economic and social problems onto the Bantustan governments the Ciskei government, unable and unwilling to respond to the needs of the unemployed and starving people turns increasingly to naked repression to control its residents.

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