

Lest we forget: An autobiography

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This is an autobiography of the struggle icon Philip Kgosana, who felt that his contribution to the liberation struggle ought to have catapulted his name into history, hence the chronicle of his personal experiences as a political activist. He considers himself as one of the unsung heroes of the black struggle against apartheid, despite being a victim of racial discrimination on various fronts. In the first chapter, he laments the appalling socio-economic conditions under which he lived in Makapanstad, how chief Makapan of the Bakgatla nation fought the Boers and the European settlers who were advancing from the Cape known as the Trekboers in 1854. This has inspired him to resist the injustices of the apartheid system which had polarised the South African nation along racial lines. His political activism was therefore premised on the plight of the black people of Azania.

His reminisces on the negative impact of the apartheid regime, particularly among the rural communities in the village of his birth, which entailed inter alia, land dispossession, poor infrastructure, lack of basic facilities such as sanitation, running water, electricity, as well as high levels of poverty, were sufficient to get him to the cutting edge of the liberation struggle. He attributes all of these socio-economic challenges to the white domination of the country. His anti-white sentiments play out clearly in this chapter and that accounts for his choice of the liberation movement. He found the Pan Africanist Congress to be the only political organisation which represented his philosophy, values and aspirations. Much as I welcome this historical narrative, which informs his political ideology, I however part ways with him on the notion that the apartheid policy was representative of all white South Africans. Some of them were totally against this policy of separateness which they thought was obnoxious to human dignity.

The second chapter is a narrative account of his trekking from Pretoria to Cape Town. Here he experienced problems of diverse magnitudes. He was the victim of exclusion at the University of Cape Town. He was channelled into studying economics which was not what he initially intended to do, that left him with no option but to comply against his will. He got in touch with the plight of the people particularly in Langa, one of the townships in Cape Town. Pivotal to the goals of the liberation struggle, was the eradication of the Pass Laws. At this stage, he was energised by the leadership of the PAC leader, Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe. His militancy in fighting this apartheid law was indelible. Being at the forefront of the struggle, subjected him to various forms of abuse by the police and the security agencies. His conviction that the radicalism with which he challenged the system, was definitely going to bear fruits, was somewhat idealistic. He turned a blind eye to the possible eventualities such as the loss of human lives, which is always regrettable in the circumstances.

Chapter three is the crux of the entire narrative. In 1960, the politics of resistance reached its highest peak. Here Kgosana details the various stages of the police reaction to the Anti- Pass Campaign, which I think is commendable. He also demonstrates the readiness and the resoluteness of the masses to take on the apartheid government through his powers of persuasion. However, the impression is thus created in this chapter that the liberation struggle in this regard, was the brainchild of the PAC. Another area of concern for me is that, the book dwells much on Cape Town as the centre of political activism aimed at scrapping the Pass Laws. Little is said about Sharpeville where 69 people lost their lives, which I find completely irrational. The march to the union buildings in Pretoria by women in the liberation movements, demanding the immediate abolition of the Pass Laws, as well as similar activities elsewhere in the country, do not feature prominently in Kgosana's autobiography despite his claim that only the PAC was best positioned at the time, to resist the implementation of the Pass Laws in the country. The legitimacy of such a claim is therefore in my view, debatable.

In chapter four, the writer highlights his experiences in detention, which are not different from the usual treatment and suffering endured by political prisoners in South Africa. He was condemned to the same fate as was Robert Sobukwe, namely, solitary confinement. He was charged with the incitement of the public against the Pass Laws. I like the mention of other political activists who were also detained for exactly the same reason. I also like the

detailed narrative he gives of his observations, encounters, involvements and the practical lessons that he learnt from such experiences. The inclusion of pictures in this chapter does a lot to compliment his writing, which often leads to a better understanding and the stimulation of interest on the part of the readers. These pictures also help put the reader into a proper perspective from the earliest to the most recent times in history. I think this is the most effective way of reconstructing the past, making it more meaningful and relevant.

In chapter five, the writer is honest about the impact of the Sharpeville and Langa massacres on the general public. I think Kgosana is honest enough in this chapter to admit that, the repercussions of the Anti-Pass Campaign were dire and that disgruntlement at some point, set in. This culminated in serious divisions within the PAC, which saw a substantial number of members go into exile. He further admits that the resilience of the apartheid government to scrap the Pass Laws immediately after the campaign, despite the loss of lives and casualties, dampened the morale of the freedom fighters within the ranks of the PAC. In the subsequent chapters (chapters 6 to 9), Kgosana discusses his exile experiences. These are mere narrative accounts of his ordeals and the assistance he received from different people in different capacities. I think he was reasonably objective in articulating the reasons behind his expulsion from the organization. What I also like, is his admission that the internal problems resulted in divisions within the ranks of the PAC. Consequently, the strength of the organization was weakened and this was clearly manifested in the 1994 first democratic election results.

Finally, the book is a painful account of the writer's experiences as the struggle icon, who was drew inspiration from the powerful leaders in the liberation struggle, such as Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe. He probably wishes to see the PAC revitalised and taken back to its former glory. His visit to Cape Town in March 2016, in commemoration of the Sharpeville and Langa massacres, clearly attests to that notion.