

# THE LESSONS OF SOWETO

by Z. Nkosi

The disturbances throughout South Africa triggered off by the police massacre of schoolchild demonstrators in Soweto on June 16, 1976, represent the greatest upsurge against white domination since Union was formed in 1910. On the surface the black rebellion has been contained by the authorities, at the cost of thousands of blacks killed and wounded, and the destruction of millions of rand of public and private property. But though the men with guns may appear once again to have crushed the protest of the black masses armed only with stones and makeshift petrol bombs, what died at Soweto and elsewhere during the conflict was not the black hope of liberation but the white hope of pacification and eternal domination. 1976 was the tenth year of Vorster's rule as Premier, the 28th of rule by the Nationalist Party which, if seats and votes in the Parliamentary elections are to be counted, enjoyed greater support amongst the whites than at any time since it came to power in 1948.

Yet at the end of Vorster's 10-year reign — the longest of any Nationalist Premier — and after 28 years of ruthless application of the laws of apartheid, backed by brutal security laws and an army and

police force equipped with the latest weapons and gadgetry costing thousands of millions of rand, what stands out is the total failure of the Government to secure the submission, let alone the co-operation, of the oppressed black peoples whose interests and "independence" it claims to be promoting. It has for years been stressed by South Africa's defence leaders that victory over the enemies of apartheid depends only 20 per cent on police and military superiority and 80 per cent on political factors.

"The only really effective defence against terrorism in South Africa is to get the people, all of them in this country, on your side", said General C.A. Fraser, Officer Commanding Joint Combat Forces, on the eve of his retirement in 1973.

In September 1976 the Minister of Defence himself, Mr P.W. Botha, in the midst of the countrywide upsurge against apartheid told a Nationalist Party congress that the army was not capable of putting right everything that was wrong. "The hearts and minds of people had to be won", he said. "National security should not be seen in the first place as a military matter".

The mass uprising throughout South Africa in the recent period reflects the people's total and active rejection of everything the Nationalist Government stands for.

If the Nationalist Party leaders and their military top brass, plus their dupes and sycophants at home and abroad, ever thought that apartheid or "separate development" including Bantustans was the way to win the hearts and minds of the people, the tragic events of Soweto, Cape Town and a hundred other centres must have disillusioned them. The hearts and minds of countless black men, women and children were stopped in merciless and bloody terror unleashed by a government frantic to reassert the authority of the white man boss. The Soweto police chief told the Cillie commission of inquiry that between June 16 and August 30 more than 16,000 rounds of ammunition were fired by police in attempts to restore order there. 16,000 times in Soweto alone was Vorster's claim that apartheid brings peace given the lie. All over the country it was being proved in action that apartheid opens up only the road to suffering and death.

The total number of people who died in the 1976 disturbances will probably never be known. The official figures certainly conceal the truth, because the truth would be bad for morale and for business. Just how concerned the Government was to prevent the world from learning the facts may be gauged from the systematic harassment, including detention without trial, to which newsmen were subjected; plus threats

to newspapers in general that steps would be taken to curb them if they continued to undermine national security by attempting to tell the full story of what was happening behind the police screen. All we can say is that it is quite clear the police embarked on a Government authorised programme of mass execution as a means of bringing the demonstrations to an end. Not only were those regarded as ring-leaders systematically picked off, but men, women and children were again and again shot down without cause or justification simply because they were in the area of operations. Trigger-happy police obviously felt free to shoot and kill whom they pleased, knowing that whatever they did would be backed by their superiors, and no questions asked. The medical evidence given to the Cillie commission that most of those killed in Soweto were shot in the back provides instant refutation of the police claim that they opened fire only to defend themselves against attack and the "violence of the mob".

At the same time it is clear the authorities were faced with a country-wide rebellion involving black communities in practically every centre of the country. Hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets to protest against oppression and to demand their rights. From the outset these demonstrations were peaceful; it was the brutal intervention of the police which turned the people towards violence. At the very height of the conflict Vorster told one of his Nationalist Party congresses that there was no crisis, the Government faced only "problems". Yet a few weeks later he was threatening to call in the army because the three-month-old revolt was damaging the country's economy and threatening the flow of capital investment from abroad. The scale on which the masses were resorting to direct action is a measure of their anger. Government buildings, railway installations, buses, power stations, factories, farms, crops and plantations were set on fire in various centres. Everywhere the places in which blacks had been oppressed, insulted and humiliated were regarded as legitimate targets. An investigation conducted by *The Star* (September 28) "has revealed that damage caused by political unrest is probably well over R100 million and may reach R200 million". To this physical damage must be added the millions of rand of lost production caused by the strikes and absenteeism during the disturbances.

Whatever Vorster may say, this was the worst crisis the Nationalist Government has had to face since it came to power. This was no one-day demonstration ending in a baton-charge or burst of bullets, but a sustained and reaffirmed refutation of everything apartheid stood for. It is hardly surprising that at the Nationalist Party congress in Pretoria

in September, the Minister of Information, Dr Mulder, suggested that the terminology for separate development, already a euphemism for apartheid, should be changed once again to "plural democracy". Call it what you will, it will still be unacceptable to the black masses.

The ballot of the bullet is the only democracy the Vorster regime understands. He remains in office thanks to superior fire power, but he knows now that the more he pushes his apartheid final solution the more the black masses will unite to fight him. Soweto was a signpost marking the beginning of the end of the road for the white racists.

In *The Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels demonstrated how when the social and economic relations of production under feudalism restricted the development of the productive forces, "they became so many fetters, they had to be burst asunder, they were burst asunder". The Manifesto argued that this stage was now being reached under capitalism, and that only a rearrangement of the social and economic relations of production under communism could enable the productive forces to be expanded to meet the growing demands of mankind everywhere.

This situation has now developed in South Africa. The social and economic relations artificially imposed on the country by the apartheid system are throttling the economy, holding back the development of the oppressed peoples, crushing their initiative, stifling cultural activity, locking the body politic in a sort of rigor mortis. The more the Government tries to prevent change, the more class and national strife intensify. The Soweto demonstrations did not come out of the blue, unexpectedly, but were part of the growing force of mass action which is bursting the fetters asunder. The pressure for change can never diminish, because apartheid can never satisfy the aspirations of the people. There will be more Sowetos; the forms of struggle may change, but the pressures will intensify until finally the whole system of race discrimination and exploitation is smashed to smithereens. It is a mistake to speak of Soweto in the past tense, as an upsurge that is over and ended. As these words are written, the people's action is continuing. There may be lulls and pauses, but the struggle will not cease until final liberation is achieved.

## **THE ECONOMY**

The ability of the South African economy to expand in spite of the restrictions of apartheid is becoming more and more limited. The economic boom of the late 60s and early 70s is over. The rate of increase in the real national product declined from about 9 per cent in

1973-74 to about 2 per cent in 1974-75, and it is estimated there will be a 2 per cent net decline in real national income when the accounts for 1976 are completed. The deficit in the balance of payments on current account increased from R212 million in 1973-74 to R1,507 million in 1974-75. The currency reserves have been gravely depleted.

Normally South Africa's deficit in the balance of payments is covered by gold exports, but the price of gold dropped from 195 dollars an ounce in 1974 to 113 dollars in July 1976. Gold production in 1975 declined by volume by 7 per cent compared to 1974. Some marginal mines have gone out of production and others are threatened.

As part of the economy of the western world South Africa has not been immune from the slump. Inflation has been running at about 15 per cent and is rising. Food prices since 1970 have risen by 77%, the cost of living generally by 67%. These figures are based on prices affecting whites; increases for blacks are higher. The *Star* reported on September 3, 1976, after conducting a survey in the townships, that "those who can least afford it have to pay more for their basic food requirements" — the difference amounting to as much as 20 per cent, largely because Africans buy in small quantities at the corner shop, while the whites buy in bulk from supermarkets, but also because African shopkeepers, like all shopkeepers faithful to the profit motive, are not above grossly exploiting their own people who have nowhere else to go. The household subsistence level for Africans (a euphemism for poverty datum line, which in turn is a euphemism for breadline) rose by between 8 and 12 per cent in the main urban areas between November 1975 and April 1976 and by June was averaging R130 a month for a family of six. This means that it required R130 to provide such a family with only the bare essentials — food, clothing, fuel and lighting, washing materials, rent and transport for the breadwinner to and from work. The household subsistence level does not include tax, transport for other members of the family, medical care, education, entertainment, savings and dozens of other items whites take for granted. African wages are nowhere near the household subsistence level, and the *Financial Mail* reported on May 21, 1976, that African average earnings in all sectors except financial institutions are below the HSL. On farms the average cash wage is less than R14 a month.

The inflation and the slump do not affect all races equally. By and large the privileged whites get by, while the blacks go to the wall. In 1970 the average white household had R362 more to spend each month than the average African household. Last year the gap had widened to R546, with the average white household receiving an income 1.9 times

as large as the average Asian, 2.9 times as large as the average Coloured and 8.5 times as large as the average African household. The *Financial Mail* (13.2.76) commented: "This is an indefensible and dangerous state of affairs".

The Government last year estimated that the shortage of white (i.e. skilled) workers in 1979 would be 68,000, but has no plan to train Africans to fill the gaps. Meanwhile unemployment among Africans has been increasing at a rate of 100,000 a month, and by the end of 1976 was estimated to be at least 2 million. Unemployed Africans, save for a handful above a certain income level, receive no unemployment benefit, and for the most part are left to rot in the reserves. But tens of thousand make their way illegally into the urban townships in search of work, and the number of homeless Africans in Soweto alone in 1975 was estimated to be 86,000.

There were no signs in 1976 of the economic situation getting better. Twice in the past two years South Africa was forced to devalue her currency by a total of 23 per cent. Towards the end of the year it looked as though another devaluation was in the offing. "Economists feel it will be difficult for the country, if the gold dips below 100 dollars, to hold off a further 15 per cent devaluation of the rand against the dollar", reported the *London Times* in a survey of the South African economy published on October 4, 1976. Worst sufferers from the inflation which would flow from these manoeuvres will again be the Africans, though the *Financial Mail*, discussing the prospect of devaluation, was of the opinion that "sacrificing the exchange rate could be a small price for staving off insurrection".

## **THE POLITICS OF LIFE**

The Soweto insurrection was triggered off by the attempt of the authorities to force Africans to study certain subjects in Afrikaans, but it was of course much more than that. It was also a protest against the whole Bantu Education policy, designed to train Africans for inferiority; and above all a protest against the denial of basic human rights, especially the right to vote, the Government's perpetual determination to issue orders without prior consultation, to ignore the consequent protests and to crush any more open forms of dissidence. As the protest gathered momentum after the June 16 massacre, the political demands for total liberation and an end to white domination were brought to the fore.

The Nationalist Government often boasts that it is today spending more on African education than ever before, and that the percentage of



**Mourners remove the body of an African youth shot at a funeral in Soweto.**



In Johannesburg black workers and white students demonstrate after the June 16 shooting.



Nazi-helmeted armed police patrol Benoni street  
outside burning bottle store.



Port Elizabeth. Slogans on wall read "RELEASE MANDELA,  
SIŞULU."

African children at school is steadily rising. What is ignored, of course, is that in education, as everywhere in South African life, the gap between white and black is also steadily increasing. Whereas in 1964 the amount spent by the Government on each white pupil at school was 10 times that spent on each African pupil, by 1974 it was an average of 15 times as much and in Natal, disgracefully, it was 20 times as much.

Worst of all was the growing realisation by the Africans that education opened no doors. Those who attained even a higher education diploma or degree might still find themselves in dead-end labouring jobs or, worse still, on the unemployment heap. Those Africans who reached the top of the tree and were employed, say, in one of the segregated African universities, would find themselves getting less pay than whites with equal or lower qualifications, and subject to the dictates of an all-white university council. Increasingly African youngsters were asking themselves: what is the point of education which leads nowhere?

Consider the quality of life in the African townships, where even the highest educated African must share the common burden because the community which surrounds him is so impoverished and tyrannised. Houses without electricity, running water or internal doors. A dearth of cultural amenities. Most workers must rise before dawn and travel enormous distances to and from their work-place — in some cases up to 100 kilometres each way — returning after dark to snatch a few hours sleep before the whole process starts up again. The best educated African is as liable as the most illiterate to be raided, arrested for not having a pass, subject to constant abuse and humiliation from aggressive white police and officials. Funds for development in the urban townships are refused because Government says the Africans must look to their homelands if they want increased social services, more schools and hospitals, libraries, cinemas, swimming baths or what you will. Meanwhile, all that is on offer is a life of unending toil and squalor.

### **THE BANTUSTAN PROVOCATION**

The denial of political rights in the “white” areas of the country is supposed to be in return for “independence” in the Bantustans. Perhaps nothing has caused so much anxiety and anger amongst urban Africans as the birth of the so-called “independent” Transkei on October 26.

In return for this fake “independence”, the Africans in the “white” areas classified as of Transkeian origin lose their South African citizenship. The logic of this from the point of view of the white racists was most crudely expressed by one W.H. Olivier, of the Law Department of the University of Pretoria, in an address to the South African Bureau

of Racial Affairs in Johannesburg last September.

“The overseas attack on South Africa is made because we are a minority government”, he said. “If the permanency of blacks in white areas is recognised we will be creating a minority government.” If blacks had rights only in the homelands then there would be majority government in South Africa, he argued. (*RDM* September 30, 1976.) The fact that blacks would still constitute the majority in “white” South Africa was apparently irrelevant. They really belonged somewhere else.

This means that the majority of the African people, who live and work in “white” South Africa are destined to become stateless, rightless and hopeless prisoners of the migratory labour system. The right to stay in an urban area, at present enshrined in section 10 of the Urban Areas Act and valued because it is often the only passport to a job, will be abolished.

Nor can any African, in or outside the reserves, look forward with confidence to the prospect of good government under a Matanzima, imposed on him by white decree in terms of a constitution which he had no hand in framing. Since 1960 the Matanzima regime has stayed in power with the aid of emergency laws providing, inter alia, for indefinite detention without trial. Matanzima’s victory in the so-called elections staged on September 29, 1976, was ensured by the detention without trial of the leaders of the opposition Democratic Party. On “independence day” Matanzima took over from the Vorster regime the whole battery of security laws which helps keep Vorster himself in power, including the Suppression of Communism Act and the Unlawful Organisations Act banning the ANC and the PAC. He also has the assistance of a South African trained army unit under the command of Commandant P. Pretorius, formerly a Brigadier in the South African Army; plus a police force commanded by Major Elliot Cwele, nicknamed “Big Daddy” because, according to a “Star” report (September 25, 1976), he “is not above personally using his fists and sjambok on student demonstrators”.

The savage treatment meted out to dissidents by the Bantustan governments in places like the Transkei and Owambo inspire no confidence in their “citizens” that under their own “independent” governments they will enjoy more freedom than they did under the white racists. If anything, the stooges who take office can be expected to be even more ruthless and vicious than Vorster, precisely because they lack any secure basis of support amongst the people and rely only on force to maintain themselves in power. Any chaos or conflict which

might ensue will be grist to the apartheid mill, justifying in the eyes of the Nationalists their refusal to extend equal rights to "barbarous and bellicose" blacks.

Thus the harder the South African regime drives towards the Bantustan solution, the greater the sense of insecurity, and anger amongst the mass of the African people, who face the loss of citizenship rights in the country that really belongs to them, and ultimate exile to a territory most of them have never seen, where they will be at the mercy of unrepresentative and despotic black satraps.

### **COLOURED AND INDIANS**

For the Coloured and Indian populations in South Africa there is not even the offer of a separate territory and "independence", only of permanent segregation and second-class citizenship in white dominated South Africa. The mockery of the advisory Cabinet Consultative Council offered to the Coloured and Indian people by Vorster, together with his pledge that no black will ever sit in his all-white Parliament, has finally knocked on the head any hopes any of them may ever have had of being admitted to the white world, and reinforced the conviction that is steadily growing amongst them that their future lies in identification with the aspirations of the African majority and joint struggle to achieve their common destiny.

In 28 years of Nationalist Government, the Coloureds and Indians have received nothing but the elimination of all the privileges they may once have shared with the whites, the loss of the limited Cape franchise, the introduction of segregation in residential areas, trains, buses and concert halls, the trauma of mass removals like District 6 in Cape Town and Fordsburg in Johannesburg, job reservation, the perpetual insult of the Immorality and Mixed Marriages Acts.

This explains one of the most striking features of the recent disturbances — the almost complete absence of inter-racial violence. Instead, we saw the magnificent solidarity of Coloured students and workers, of Indian students and even some white students from the English-language universities. Mass action displaying this kind of grass-roots unity between the black peoples of South Africa has never before been witnessed on this scale in South Africa. The disgraceful attempts of the security policy to turn one black group against another were shattered on the rock of black unity against apartheid.

### **A BLACK BOURGEOISIE?**

The Vorster regime has realised that, in order to perpetuate white domination, a section of the black people, both inside and outside South

Africa, must be won over to collaborate. Hence the Bantustans, which represent in part an attempt to create a class of politicians, officials and petty traders with a vested interest in maintaining apartheid. (The widespread purchases of farms and bottle stores by the Matanzima brothers have already caused a scandal in the Transkei.)

Hence also the policy of "dialogue" and "detente" with black Africa, in an attempt to bully or buy friends through political, economic and military pressure. Noteworthy in this context is Vorster's stress on the common interests of South Africa and some African states in combating "international communism".

Vorster's tactics on both fronts are doomed to failure because they are designed not to placate but to deceive. There is no room for the development of a real black bourgeoisie in South Africa so long as neither in the Bantustans nor in "white" South Africa will Africans have the unfettered right to freehold ownership of property, the basic condition for the accumulation of capital on a scale comparable to or competitive with white capital. Rich shopkeepers, bus owners, marketeers and the like, even a sort of Bantustan kulak one can envisage, together with a plundering group of Bantustan politicians and officials. But a bourgeoisie with the freedom and security to invest their capital wherever they can get the highest rate of profit, in their own Bantustan or in "white" South Africa — this is not written in the Bantustan Bible. In terms of the Group Areas Act and other laws it is simply illegal.

For the same reason Vorster's foreign policy came unstuck when his true aims were revealed in Angola — to prevent the emergence of free African nationhood and to preserve Africa as a stamping ground for neo-colonialism, especially South African neo-colonialism, its appetite whetted by the prospect of huge and largely untapped markets just across its borders. The South African-United States-Chinese axis which was exposed, and defeated, in Angola has destroyed, at least for the time being, any prospect Vorster may have had of penetrating the African hinterland, though he is still pursuing his imperialist ambition through the current negotiations with Kissinger over a settlement in Zimbabwe.

## **WHITE INTRANSIGANCE**

The strategy of the white racists is bound to fail because, as the present crisis has revealed, the racist establishment is unwilling and unable to make any meaningful concessions to black demands. Neither in Namibia, South Africa or Zimbabwe has any meaningful change taken place. The race discrimination report in Zimbabwe, the Theron

Commission report in South Africa, the Turnhalle talks in Windhoek – all have produced nothing concrete, and were in fact designed merely to allow things to continue as before, with minor cosmetic adjustments. The basic relationships of white to black, and of both to the means of production and distribution, are to remain unaltered.

At the height of the Soweto crisis, with thousands of black bodies littering the streets of South Africa's townships, Justice Minister Kruger declared: "If the Bantu does not know his place I will show him his place". M.C. Botha, the Minister of Bantu Administration, stressed that Africans were in the "white" areas for one purpose only – to sell their labour power. The Nationalist Cabinet reiterated that the grand apartheid design, as outlined by Verwoerd and Vorster, must be carried through to its logical conclusion, Bantustans and all.

As for the Parliamentary opposition, what the present crisis has revealed has been its total impotence, its failure to influence the direction of events in any way. Where has been heard the voice of outrage or indignation at the killings from the ranks of the United or Progressive-Reform parties? Yes, there have been mutterings from the Oppenheimers and Chambers of Commerce about riots being bad for business. There have even been some pathetic attempts to bring about a Grand Opposition Alliance headed by ex-judge Marais, ironically enough one of Vorster's fellow war-time internees, to break the Nationalist Party grip on power, just as ex-judge Tielman Roos helped to break Hertzog's Nationalist Party rule at the time of the gold standard crisis in 1933. But these attempts – even if they succeed, which is doubtful – cannot solve the chronic dilemma because neither the existing nor the contemplated opposition groupings can offer any credible alternative to apartheid. All accept white supremacy in one form or another, all insist on preserving power in white hands, none stands for majority rule based on one man one vote.

What the present crisis *has* done is sweep aside the political intermediaries – the white opposition parliamentarians, the liberal businessmen, the Bantustan leaders, the Government stooge bodies like Urban Bantu Councils – and brought out the stark confrontation between the oppressed black masses and the white racists, a confrontation which can only be settled by bullets and blood. The very obduracy, callousness and brutality of the Nationalist regime is destroying the last remnants of the pacifist illusion on which reformism flourishes. When the soft answer fails to turn away wrath, the only remaining answer is the iron fist of proletarian resolve.

The disturbances at Soweto and elsewhere throughout South Africa

have not only shown the growth of black determination and capacity to fight. They have also revealed the class content of national resistance. The initiative was taken by the youth, but became a formidable force when allied with the power of the urban African working class which rallied to its call. The white establishment, racists and liberals alike, reacted either not at all or with only mild deprecation when schoolchildren were being shot down in cold blood in the townships. But when their workforce was removed during the two successive three-day strikes in Soweto which brought commerce and industry in Johannesburg to a halt, the shouts of alarm rose on all sides.

Consider well the implication of those strikes. After 13 years of detention without trial, 13 years of unrestrained police terror in which the organisations of the people and their leaders were harassed and hounded; after the mass arrests from June 16 onwards of practically every black leader able to give advice to anybody about anything; with the townships and the streets under police siege — despite these massive counter-pressures, the strikes succeeded on a scale never before seen in South Africa, showing not only political consciousness but also capacity to organise of a very high order. The worker-student alliance was able to rally the forces of the entire community in disciplined mass action.

If the student-worker army at Soweto and elsewhere had had guns instead of sticks and stones to fight with, the outcome of the story might have been very different. What is clear, in any event, is that the people, especially the youth, are ready and willing to bear arms in the struggle for their liberation; and that the time is ripe for the injection of the element of guerrilla warfare into the South African confrontation. Nor must it be assumed that guerrilla warfare can only come to South Africa from across its borders. The recent events show that the scope of mass action has not been reduced to nothing by Vorster's legislative and administrative tyranny. On the contrary, we have seen that mass insurrection in the townships, in the reserves and in the country areas, *is* possible; indeed now certain. What is called for is the raising of the struggle to a new level, combining armed action by units of the people's army in town and country together with mass protest action on the scale we have seen in recent months, though perhaps taking a different form to nullify the tactics and fire-power of the police and army.

Soweto 1976 has written a glorious page in the history of the liberation struggle. Let us learn its lessons and, inspired by the heroism of the people, continue the forward march to freedom.