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Chapter Twelve

REVISITING SEKHUKHUNELAND: TRAJECTORIES OF FORMER UDF ACTIVISTS IN POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

Ineke van Kessel

Is the glass of liberation full, or merely half full; or perhaps, at best, half empty? In his prolific critical reflections on the outcome of southern Africa’s struggles against colonial and racial domination, John Saul keeps reminding us that the struggle against apartheid had more ambitious goals than only to overthrow racial domination, although ending the horrors of apartheid was obviously the first priority. To what extent has post-apartheid South Africa made progress towards a just society, not just in terms of race, but taking into account class, gender and democratic voice? As Saul points out, the answer will depend, crucially, on what was and is meant by liberation.

A vocal choir of academics and activists on the left has argued that the African National Congress (ANC) in government has sold out on its previous liberation ideals with its attempts to foster a politically connected black bourgeoisie, leaving millions of poor without the prospect of better life chances. Others adhere to the view that the ANC had, in fact, little room for manoeuvre once it had accepted the ‘racial bargain’ as the price for accessing state power: the white minority conceded political power on the understanding that it would (at least for the time being) retain control over major sectors of the economy, albeit with provisions for racial redress such as black economic empowerment (BEE). An admirably balanced perspective is presented in Susan Booysen’s monumental book on the ANC’s record as ruling party, listing the achievements without ignoring the many unmet promises. Booysen argues that the ANC doubles as ruling party and popular movement: as the ruling party it has largely transformed into a career machine, but without losing its popular legitimacy – yet.

In recording the views of ex-activists, my research aspires to contribute to this ongoing debate on the outcome of South Africa’s liberation struggle. Obviously, most members of the struggle aristocracy have benefited immensely from the opportu-
nities in post-apartheid South Africa, but did local-level activists also share in the fruits of liberation?

This chapter traces the careers and changing worldviews of former activists of the Sekhukhune Youth Organisation (Seyo) between 1990 and 2010. A rural youth organisation founded in the Lebowa bantustan (in the then Northern Transvaal) in the 1980s, Seyo was one of several hundred youth congresses that were affiliated to the United Democratic Front (UDF). In 1990–91, I interviewed youth activists in Sekhukhuneland about their role in the liberation struggle and their perspectives on post-apartheid society at a time when youth leaders interpreted society in Marxist-Leninist terms, mixed with elements of local belief systems.¹

My present research explores how the lives of these (former) activists have changed in the past 15 to 20 years, their career patterns, whether the comrades’ network is still functioning and how they have experienced the transition. This is part of a wider project following up on the collective biography of UDF activists since the Front was disbanded in 1991. Three case studies – Sekhukhuneland, Kagiso township and the Cape Flats – as well as the UDF’s national leadership were followed.

Most Seyo activists have made careers in local, district or provincial government, while some have gone into teaching or, exceptionally, business. Some are still actively involved in the ANC and/or the South African Communist Party (SACP), but quite a few have lost interest in politics. Although present-day South Africa is obviously a far cry from their erstwhile vision of a just society, most former activists are reasonably content with both their own careers and the state of South Africa. Far from contemplating ‘the next liberation struggle,’ they aspire to share in the good life of the black bourgeoisie. In recording the life trajectories of former activists, my research also explores the changing meaning of ‘liberation.’ Is it about the establishment of an egalitarian society and popular participation, or about expensive cars and emulating the comfortable lifestyle of white South Africa?

CLASS, AFRICAN NATIONALISM AND THE NEO-PATRIMONIAL STATE

As a long-time participant observer of liberation politics in southern Africa John Saul has, for the past 40 years, consistently taken a class-based perspective that propels him towards advocating a socialist outcome of liberation struggles.
Saul and Stephen Gelb’s *The Crisis in South Africa*, published as early as 1986, warned of the ever-present danger that the struggle might be hijacked by the petty bourgeoisie, always ready to betray the revolutionary cause and to abandon their working-class allies in favour of a reformed capitalism. The book was highly influential among anti-apartheid intellectuals on the left. A book by Heribert Adam and Kogila Moodley published in the same year might have been more accurate in its assessment of the nature of the liberation struggle. Adam and Moodley argued that mainstream African nationalism aimed at the limited goal of equality and the realisation of bourgeois freedoms, not at a revolutionary road to a socialist society.

I came across one other longitudinal survey of the changing fortunes and worldviews of activists: Ari Sitas’s survey, which traces 400 working-class leaders in KwaZulu-Natal between 1988 and 1998. He found that 51 per cent of respondents were much better off than they had been before (the upwardly mobile); 25 per cent were stuck in the same occupational milieu as before (the stuck), while twenty-two per cent had experienced a rapid deterioration in life chances (the deteriorated).

The upwardly mobile were earning much more than they had before, but became frustrated when confronted with the limitations of mobility. A crucial variant in these careers was education. The better educated were more mobile. However, for women, mobility was independent of education. For the stuck, issues of race were not salient, their main concern was job security. They manifested a strong class consciousness as well as increasing antagonism towards state policies. The deteriorated tended to blame their misfortunes on corruption, illegal migrants, the compromise deal between the ANC and the National Party (NP), but most of all on their own prior disadvantage: their lack of education. However, all agreed that their life now was much better than it had been under apartheid: now there was peace and fairer treatment. Sitas’s findings point to the resilience and longevity of African nationalism as a defining ideology.

Isak Niehaus also takes a long-term perspective in his studies of Bushbuckridge, a rural district in Limpopo province, where he first conducted research in 1990–91. In 2004 he repeated a social survey of 87 households in Impalahoek to find out what had changed in people’s lives and livelihoods. In contrast to Sitas’s and my own work, Niehaus does not focus on activists but on ordinary village households. He concludes that very few households have realised their expectations of prosperity. ‘Instead, we heard a cacophony of complaints about worsening conditions of life, crime, corruption and AIDS ... Male unemployment had increased from 16 to 43 per
cent.’ On the basis of these findings he predicted declining support for the ANC in the 2004 general election. Yet, the ANC gained 89 per cent of the vote in Limpopo, an increase of one per cent from the 1999 general election.

Niehaus concludes that the framework of neo-patrimonial politics offers the most fruitful approach for an explanation of this paradox. Continuing loyalty to the ANC is tied to the relatively modest but expanding social benefits of the welfare state. In view of declining employment opportunities, the local electorate had become increasingly dependent upon the distribution of welfare. ‘Voters perceived the elections through the prism of a transactional logic in which they traded votes for government jobs, school-feeding schemes, housing, increased old age pensions and child support grants.’ Unlike Saul, Niehaus does not believe that widespread dissatisfaction will lead to a new ‘liberation struggle.’

FROM RURAL POVERTY TO MIDDLE CLASS: TRAJECTORIES OF SEYO ACTIVISTS

In July 1990, I met a group of about seven BaPedi students from Sekhukhuneland who had been actively involved in the local youth movement, the central actor in the rural uprising in Lebowa in 1985–86. We met in a derelict apartment block in downtown Johannesburg that housed students from Khanya College, a bridging institute between high school and university. Two were students at Khanya College, one had completed his law studies at Turfloop, one was at the University of the Witwatersrand, the others were just visiting. Initially, the sudden appearance of a white woman with a foreign accent who wanted to know about their role in the liberation struggle caused some suspicion. The ANC had only been unbanned a few months before and there was widespread uncertainty about what the government was really up to. Before they consented to answer questions, they sat me down, facing the intense light of two strong lamps, for an interrogation about my own political credo. After some weeks, they agreed to take me to their home village for a weekend visit. These students and their comrades became the central characters in my chapter on the youth revolt in Sekhukhuneland.

The youth activists all came from very poor backgrounds, although most of them had succeeded in completing high school. My initial contacts had been among the fortunate few who had managed to find bursaries to further their studies and they had, in turn, introduced me to their friends and families in the village of Apel/GaNkoane. The activists I met in 1990–91 were aged between twenty and thirty,
were comparatively well educated, overwhelmingly male and highly politicised. Some were students or teachers, but most were unemployed and hanging around, waiting for opportunities to open up after the ban on the ANC was lifted in February 1990. Young female activists were exceedingly rare in Sekhukhune and I only ever managed to interview two, who were still attending high school.

Returning to Sekhukhune some 15 years later, I found that life had improved considerably for the vast majority of former activists, sometimes spectacularly so, but in most cases it had not been smooth sailing. The ‘young lions’ had become middle-aged men who had acquired life experience, a house, a family and a car – and considerably more weight.

When we met again between 2006 and 2010, three of them were working as civil servants in Limpopo, one was a member of the Limpopo legislature and one was a senior official in the Department of Justice in Pretoria. Some had worked for the municipalities in Limpopo or for Sekhukhune District and one had achieved a prominent position as mayor of the Capricorn District Municipality. Some were teachers, a few had worked for non-governmental organisations (NGOs), several had attempted business ventures, one had joined the army, one was an officer in the traffic police and two were long-term unemployed.

Since 2006, I have re-interviewed many of my former informants, mostly in Sekhukhune and Polokwane, and a handful elsewhere, notably in Groblersdal, Johannesburg and Pretoria. Most interviewees remembered our previous encounters: in 1990–92 I was probably the only white foreigner roaming around in Sekhukhuneland, apart from a few Irish nuns. Often I was welcomed as a long-lost friend and most former activists were happy to tell their story. I asked them to take the story of their life from 1990 to the present: most responded by telling me about their careers and sometimes about their ongoing involvement with the ANC. Details about family life were mostly offered only after some prodding.

A key question revolved around their assessment of present-day South Africa: how did it compare to their erstwhile vision of a liberated South Africa, what were the main achievements and the main failures? To what extent were they still involved in politics or keeping in touch with the old comrades’ network? And had they taken up any new passions or interests? After these questions, the interviews wandered in all directions, often going back to the days of the struggle. Apart from the formal interviews, where I sat down with pen and paper or tape recorder, I had many
informal chats over drinks and meals. In these informal conversations, informants were often more critical of the ANC than they were in the formal setting.

As the factional battles in the ANC and, in particular, in the ANC-Limpopo, escalated, interviewees tended to become more cautious. By 2010–11, there was a palpable sense of paranoia, particularly among people working in Limpopo’s provincial administration. As in the bad old days of apartheid, informants now insisted that we discuss sensitive matters only face to face, not in emails or phone conversations. I have used all these bits and pieces to assemble the picture painted in this chapter, but obviously the quotes are all taken from the formal interviews.

I had a happy reunion in 2007 with a group of now middle-aged ex-activists who enjoyed their weekly Friday evening gatherings at the house of one of my original informants. The change of scenery was striking. No longer were we meeting in derelict apartment buildings or poverty-stricken rural households, instead we were seated in the garden of a large Cape Dutch-style mansion in a Polokwane suburb. Inside the house, women and children were watching a huge plasma television and playing pool. Outside, I joined the men around a table laden with a variety of drinks, including expensive whiskies, followed by vast quantities of food. Was this the good life that would have been way beyond their dreams in 1990?

REVISITING PLACES AND CONCEPTS

Revisiting Sekhukhuneland and its former activists involved more than simply taking the story into the next phase of post-apartheid South Africa. When discussing the state of democracy, equality and development in present-day South Africa I was confronted with the need to re-examine concepts that had been freely bandied about in 1990–91. What had people actually meant then when they talked about democracy, majority rule, ‘the people shall govern,’ non-racialism, women’s rights and ‘the dictatorship of the proletariat’? Perhaps the activists were using the struggle discourse of the time as a ready-made legitimising vocabulary to express their own aspirations for a just society and a better life.

As Steven Friedman asks in a recent article about the motivation of participants in new social movements: are activists fighting for a new social order or are they primarily driven by the desire to secure a better deal for themselves? In fact, most youth activists were probably pursuing both goals, with individual differences in the balance between public goods and private gains. How did activists understand the concepts of equality, democracy and non-racialism, then and now?
WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

The former youth activists were mainly working as teachers and civil servants in local and provincial government, although some held elected positions. Some have had remarkable careers. Motalane Dewet Monakedi, Seyo’s publicity secretary, completed his LLB, worked for Lawyers for Human Rights and became a legal adviser in the ANC’s Department of Legal Affairs in 1995, working on the new Constitution. In 1995 he was elected to the provincial legislature of Limpopo and, since 2000, he has been the executive mayor of Capricorn District, which includes the provincial capital, Polokwane, as well as extensive rural areas. He also held various positions on the ANC’s regional executive and in the South African Local Government Association. Born in the remote village of Ga-Mmela, Motalane is now widely travelled, well connected and justifiably proud of his achievements. His views on the changes were largely positive:

We are on track of meeting our mandate, which is: please make sure that we regain our dignity and that we do not need to go begging. We are on track and expectations are being met. People should have control of their own destiny. Illiteracy remains a problem and a barrier to participation. Popular participation is a key priority for local government. We are on course, but we are battling with the legacy of apartheid. Docile subjects are waiting for government instructions.¹¹

His younger brother, Republic, owned the luxuriously furnished Cape Dutch-style mansion in Polokwane, where his BaPedi friends and colleagues met weekly to network over drinks and a solid meal. Republic Monakedi had been active in student politics at Turfloop, the University of the Western Cape and the University of the Witwatersrand, where he obtained an MA in development planning. He had been less active in politics since 1995, working briefly in the private sector and then for the government’s Youth Commission in Limpopo. In 1997 he served a one-year term as chair of the Polokwane branch of the SACP, but allowed his membership of the SACP to lapse. He was still an ANC member but did not participate actively in the organisation. Since 2000, he has served as director of the Public Services Commission in Limpopo, a government organ charged with monitoring public administration. Republic had every reason to be satisfied with his career:

I am where I am today because of the liberation struggle. Looking back on my expectations in 1990, not in my wildest dreams would I have ever expected to be living in this setting. Others have done even better, but why compare?¹²
Republic Monakedi had begun to see himself as a civil service professional and not as an active politician. The same was true for several other ex-comrades who were now employed in the provincial administration.

Republic’s wife had gone into business. His cousin, Nape Monakedi, is one of the few who embarked on a career in the private sector after obtaining a diploma in construction management at a college in Pretoria. At the time of the interview, he was working as a project manager for a civil engineering company in Pretoria, of which he had also become a director. Previously he had worked for a municipality but claimed: ‘There is more scope for development in the private sector, and more space for personal growth. In government it is easy to get stuck, but in the private sector there is no comfort zone: you have to continue developing your skills.’

Like quite a few others, he no longer used his ‘colonial name,’ Victor, but preferred Nape, his SePedi name. He had kept in touch with some of the old activist network and also with relatives in Sekhukhune, but these networks had not been relevant to his career, where political connections and struggle credits did not count: ‘This is about skills, qualifications, experience.’

Nape Monakedi was satisfied with his own achievements and had a largely positive view of the transition: ‘This is the kind of society that we were striving for in the 1980s.’ Asked about his main disappointment, he mentioned the widespread corruption in South Africa. He remained an active ANC member but had no political aspirations. His new passion was education. ‘If I make enough money now, I can do a PhD and become a lecturer. Teaching is what I enjoy most. It doesn’t pay, but my old man will be so proud of me.’ In later encounters, Nape, an avid reader, was still passionate about education. For him, the pursuit of knowledge was a worthwhile goal in itself, not merely a means of acquiring the qualifications necessary for more lucrative employment. In this respect, he was fairly exceptional. For most ex-activists, education was a means to an end. Positions in the public sector are tied to strict bureaucratic criteria and it soon dawned on aspirant bureaucrats that there was no prospect of advancement without proper diplomas.

In 1990 every aspect of life seemed impregnated with politics. Now Freddy Maputha believed that civil servants should not be politically active so as to avoid a conflict of interests: ‘We are still a young democracy and have to learn these processes. I have chosen not to be politically active to avoid a conflict of interest; I need a certain detachment from politics.’ After completing his law studies at Turfloop in 1994, Maputha had worked for the South African Police Service.
It was something very strange, a comrade becoming a policeman, but the ANC wanted a number of us from Turfloop to join the SAPS. There was such strong animosity, as the police in Pietersburg was dominated by the CP [Conservative Party], but we came in with a clout. We were pioneers in transformation and I began to like my job.15

At the time of the 2007 interview, he was employed by the provincial Department of Local Government and Housing, a job he discussed with considerable enthusiasm. His wife, a childhood friend, was a teacher in Sekhukhuneland and they lived in a middle class Polokwane suburb with their four children. Maputha was content with his own advancement but worried about the lack of progress in Sekhukhuneland and the increasing authoritarianism within the ANC: ‘People don’t speak their minds because they are dependent on the ANC’s patronage network.’

Maputha believed BEE was a necessary phase, but worried that the benefits were limited to a small black elite. ‘BEE has created the confidence that black people can be successful in business. It helped stabilise democracy and legitimate our democracy.’ To explain the fading of previously held egalitarian ideals, he pointed to the changed global context: ‘It was obvious that communist or socialist policies had not delivered freedom and opportunities. ANC activists lost faith in socialism.’ In contrast to the academic critics who accuse the ANC’s ruling elite of ‘betrayal,’ Maputha understood the abandonment of socialist ideals as a process of disillusionment that was more widely shared among former activists. He was certainly not the only one who had lost faith in socialism, but these sentiments were not universally shared. Some former activists did not speak about a loss of faith, but believed that the ANC in government realistically could not have made any other choices in a rapidly globalising world. Other interviewees continued to look at Castro’s Cuba as a model of popular democracy.

Maputha believed that the government had made the right macroeconomic choices and pointed out that considerable progress was being made in terms of the delivery of water, electricity and housing as well as the extension of social security grants. When asked how he would explain the different trajectories of ex-comrades who had all shared a poor, disadvantaged background, he listed being in the right place at the right time, some luck and a great deal of determination, being involved in student politics at Turfloop that had helped build up his network and graduating at a time when plenty of opportunities were opening up. In his case, his activist record served him well in launching him on a career in the public service. However,
Maputha fell victim to the ferocious power struggles within the Limpopo provincial administration in 2011 and lost his job.

Moss Mabotha left his law studies at the University of the Witwatersrand without a degree, but was elected to the Fetakgomo local council (covering half of Sekhukhuneland) in the 1995 local elections. In 1995 his friends, commenting on his election, said: ‘Congratulations, you’ve got a job now.’ It soon dawned on him, though, that being a part-time councillor did not mean that he had ‘a job’:

> We were paid a pittance. Then I applied for several jobs with the municipality. But those jobs are controlled by one clique that keeps out outsiders. This clique took over the leadership of the ANC. They saw us as a threat and deliberately marginalised us.

Mabotha did not put much effort into his work as a councillor and spent most of his time in Pietersburg/Polokwane rather than in his own constituency.

After several short-lived jobs, in 2006 he became the manager for disability grants in the provincial department of welfare in Polokwane. He had abandoned his previous passion for politics and his focus now was on his own personal advancement. He was pursuing an MBA and was passionate about fast cars, expensive whiskies and new girlfriends. He saw no problem with driving drunk, ‘as long as you don’t sleep,’ and felt that speed limits were an unwarranted infringement on his concept of ‘freedom’: ‘If a car can reach 200 km, then you should be allowed to drive [at] 200 km.’

After half a dozen whiskies, he admitted to being jealous of his contemporaries who had had more rewarding careers:

> Self-proclaimed communists have become capitalists. The ANC has become a bourgeois national democratic movement. Only people with money own the ANC. The SACP has become a forum for people who missed out on opportunities and positions. Some of them know nothing about communism.\(^{16}\)

Still versed in Marxism, Mabotha had a ready explanation: ‘One’s world outlook is determined by one’s class position.’ But in spite of all his articulate criticism, the bottom line of his resentment was that he wanted to be part of the good life: ‘I also want to be rich.’ Some months after this interview, Moss Mabotha died in a car accident, aged forty-two.

For a long time, Maurice Nchabeleng considered himself stuck, working at The Star newspaper in Johannesburg for eleven years.\(^{17}\) He appreciated that he had learnt research skills and work discipline, but otherwise his filing job was neither
particularly challenging nor well paid, but it was secure. His wife, Queen, worked at a McDonald’s outlet. He related, somewhat ruefully, how he had paid lobola, a traditional bride price that he would previously have dismissed as backward. On his behalf, his uncles had negotiated a bride price that amounted to about three cows, which he had paid in instalments.

In his activist days, Maurice was highly critical of the ‘backward traditions’ embodied by the chief and of assorted customary rites such as initiation and lobola. When, in about 1995, he had wanted to settle down and establish a family he had had to come to terms with the need to compromise on matters such as lobola. He finally managed to get a job in Sekhukhune in 2006 as an administrative officer in the Makhuduthamaga municipality in Jane Furse. He preferred it to his filing job at the newspaper, but still considered himself stuck compared to some of his former comrades. One of his best friends had become the municipal manager and was thus perceived to be in a position to help former comrades. Although the municipal manager did pull strings on a number of occasions, his Big Man behaviour alienated formerly close friends. It was difficult to stomach that while they had been equals as comrades, now the municipal manager earned more than five times more than his former close associates, and he underscored that point by showing off his Mercedes as well as his BMW.

Maurice did not believe that his being ‘stuck’ was related to the fact that he had never completed any tertiary education, while some of his more successful former comrades had gained at least a BA. In his view, career progress depended on connections and being in the right place at the right time. He thought that his long absence from Sekhukhune had meant he had become something of an outsider. In 2007 he landed a position as liaison officer for the Member of the Executive Council for Finance of Limpopo Province, a job he really enjoyed and that allowed him to use his considerable communications skills. At last he had the feeling that he was getting somewhere. His new boss persuaded him that a degree was a vital asset to a career in the public sector and he graduated with a B-Tech in management studies in 2011. Sekhukhuneland remains an important node in his network: many weekends are spent attending funerals, weddings and other social gatherings back ‘home.’

Like his late father, Peter, once president of the UDF in the Northern Transvaal, Maurice Nchabeleng is not only a prominent ANC activist but also a committed member of the SACP. When he was interviewed in 1990 about his views on post-apartheid South Africa, he stated: ‘We want the dictatorship of the proletariat.’
Asked in 2007 to compare his expectations in 1990 with present-day South Africa, he summed up his earlier expectations as follows: ‘We were expecting to go to the place of the whites,’ meaning that activists envisaged sharing the prosperity of white South Africa. Although this is obviously a rather different proposition from the dictatorship of the proletariat, it is altogether feasible that Maurice and many of his comrades harboured contradictory expectations about post-apartheid society. On the one hand, there was the Marxist-inspired ideal of an egalitarian society where the state would provide. And on the other hand, comrades aspired to inherit the seductive world of white South Africa. They wanted to undo the apartheid state while simultaneously inheriting ‘white privilege.’

In a speech celebrating the ANC’s centenary, ANC ideologue Joel Netshitenzhe pointed to the ambiguous effects of ‘colonialism of a special type.’ According to this concept, which the ANC borrowed from the SACP, the colony and the metropolis share the same geographic entity. For post-apartheid South Africa, the positive implication is that ‘the metropolis evinces many attributes of a sophisticated economy, integrated into global markets, which can be used as a launching pad for inclusive growth and development.’ The drawback, however, is that the culture and lifestyle of the metropolis are ‘so ubiquitous and so profound that those charged with leading the transformation effort can easily be sidetracked by the allure of its dazzling lights.’ Many of the former activists indeed seem spellbound by the seemingly infinite possibilities of rampant consumerism, a fascination which is probably fed by the non-stop soap series on television celebrating the fast life of the nouveau riche.

Maurice Nchabeleng’s overall judgment is largely positive. In his view, life in Sekhukhune has improved considerably. ‘Now we have water, electricity and RDP [Reconstruction and Development Programme – subsidised social housing] houses. The chief no longer bothers us. And we now have freedom of movement and freedom of speech.’ However the main drawback is mass unemployment:

In 1990 we believed that the majority of the people would have a job in the government or the private sector and that educational opportunities would be more plentiful. If you are not well connected you have no access to BEE. Very few people get very rich. When thinking about democracy we expected local communities to be empowered. But many instructions now come from the top. ‘The People Shall Govern’ is an idea of the past. The fundamentals of democracy are in place, but the benefits should be more evenly spread.
Nchabeleng’s sister, Pinky, ran the constituency office for the local Member of Parliament, while also serving as a district councillor for Sekhukhune District. She lives with her two younger sisters in the family house in Apel, which has been extended and renovated and now sports urban comforts such as a freezer, a refrigerator, an electric stove, an inside toilet, a bath and a television. There was no electricity in 1990 and drinking water was carried from a well in the basin of the Oliphants River. Pinky fervently supported the ANC quota system for increasing the participation of women in elected bodies.

Women are tired of always being the deputy only. Men say that it is not acceptable for men to be led by women in our culture. But they only say that in private, not in public. Men will just have to accept this. In the old days, women were not allowed to head a tribe but nowadays women have more opportunities.\(^{19}\)

Pinky made calculated choices about the elements in BaPedi cultural heritage that she wanted to retain and those she would discard. Likewise, she embraces elements of liberal democracy – notably the legal equality of men and women – but is scornful of some basic tenets, such as political pluralism. In Pinky’s worldview, opposition parties have no legitimate reason to exist: ‘We want everybody to be ANC.’ In today’s post-apartheid society, many still see the ANC as the liberation movement, not as a political party in open competition with others. In this worldview, there is no separation between the ANC and the state. Councillors in the municipality or district as well as government employees such as municipal managers are well aware that their position and prospects are determined by the ANC deployment committee in Limpopo.

Maurice and Pinky’s elder brother, Elleck, an ex-Robben Islander, served as a member of the Limpopo legislature and developed an active interest in NGOs dealing with land and environmental issues. In 2009 he was ‘deployed’ to the national Parliament in Cape Town. He bemoaned the changes in values, organisational culture and policies in the ANC as a consequence of the influx of newcomers: bantustan elites, intellectuals and businessmen. ‘If you listen to the discussions you don’t know whether you are in an ANC or DA [Democratic Alliance] meeting. After 1994, the old activists pulled back. That was a big mistake, a monumental blunder.\(^{20}\) He spoke of a rampant factionalism that was not about political differences but about empire-building, with networks of patronage.

Another brother, Mpho Nchabeleng, held a senior position in the Department of Justice in Pretoria and lived in a huge house in a Pretoria suburb with his wife and
three daughters. In spite of the comfortable house and the three cars in the garage, Mpho believed that although he had done well, others had done much better. ‘We are not yet middle class; we’re not able to afford luxuries such as overseas holidays.’

He dreamt of having his own lawyer’s office and had considered doing a PhD, but he had also taken an interest in family history and was interviewing aged aunts and uncles about the old days in Sekhukhuneland. After more than a decade as a successful senior civil servant, Mpho Nchabeleng yearned for a small house in the village of Apel because ‘that is my home. I belong to the chief so the chief has to give me a plot free of charge. Then I’ll build a house and we’ll go there more often. I’ll be able to visit my friends more often.’

Coming from a member of a family with a long-standing history of antagonism to the local chief, this was a rather surprising statement. The Nchabeleng family viewed the chief as an instrument of apartheid oppression, while the chief himself distrusted them as a bunch of rebels and communists. Mpho considered the government departments in Pretoria to be a neutral space where he was hired on the basis of his qualifications and expertise. He would be closer to home with a position in Limpopo, but he did not expect to get employment there as, in his experience, positions in Polokwane had already been assigned prior to the job interview.21

Worst off in the Nchabeleng family was Luthuli, an ex-MK (Umkhonto we Sizwe) soldier, who returned from exile in 1990 with a pregnant Zambian wife, little formal education and missing two fingers following an explosion. He received a veteran’s pension and was given work as a security guard, first at the ANC head office in Johannesburg and later at various government departments in Pretoria. Luthuli was a bitter man. Joining the armed struggle as a young man had resulted in him missing out on his youth as well as on educational opportunities and now he felt excluded from any new opportunities. He dreamt of making big money by buying shares but had no idea of how to proceed.22

Nelson Matseba had made his career in Apel/GaNkoane. As a comrade he had run a shebeen at his parents’ house and now he was the proud owner of a spacious beer hall in well-kept gardens. He also had a job with the traffic police. One of his concerns was the power of the chiefs:

They were never in the liberation struggle but now they say they are ANC. If they don’t like you, they create problems for you. The government should control the chiefs. And the government should look after comrades who have no jobs, otherwise they might create problems. The people who now run the municipality were not in the struggle.23
Sydney Ramushu, now the principal of a primary school in Sekhukhune, believed that education and political connections were key elements in building a career. He had served one term as a municipal councillor and also had a small construction business. In the future, he hoped to run a ‘family restaurant’ – a euphemism for a beer hall. He was quite happy living in Sekhukhuneland.

Around 1990, everybody wanted to go to town, but this is no longer the case. Now we have proper drinking water, electricity, good roads and the Spar supermarket. Life here is no different from life in town. We even have a flush toilet, something we never dreamt of. We never thought these things would happen so fast. The biggest problem is unemployment. Otherwise, we can relax now; there is no more police harassment. This is the better life that we were fighting for.

Silas Mabotha (no immediate relation to Moss Mabotha), however, who had become a high-school principal in Sekhukhune, readily admitted to a sense of disillusionment. Relations of trust among former comrades had been undermined. ‘We cannot even advise former comrades because they suffer from paranoia. They think you are after their job.’ Well known as a militant and articulate youth activist, he was no longer active in the ANC. He complained that the ANC government was following a capitalist agenda:

BEE is nothing other than building a black bourgeoisie. Unemployment is growing while some people become super rich. We see privatisation, and the casualisation of labour. That is not what we fought for, privatisation. They are trying to do away with government altogether.

He was very unhappy with the ANC’s gender policies and its quota for women because now ‘many incompetent women are blocking the way for others.’ Silas Mabotha was, in fact, expressing a sense of frustration about not being part of the new black bourgeoisie. He strongly objected to plans for an RDP development next to his house in Polokwane ‘as these RDP people bring crime because they are unemployed. RDP houses should be built next to the white suburbs,’ he argued, ignoring the fact that he was presently living in a former white suburb.

He complained that his income did not allow for any middle class luxuries as he had to support an extended family. While he objected to BEE as simply a scheme to build a black bourgeoisie, he simultaneously complained: ‘We do not even have the money to buy shares ... We are worried that they will have run out of Mercedeses before our turn has come.’ Some years after the interview, Silas Mabotha landed a job as procurement officer for the town of Marble Hall.
Watson Mosoane, a founding member of Seyo, lived with his wife and two young children in his mother’s tiny house in Apel. His mother’s pension and the child-support grant for the two boys constituted the household’s total income. Watson dropped out of high school in 1985 and never obtained a matriculation (school-leaving) certificate. For a while he was on the run in Johannesburg, hiding from the police. He did various odd jobs and took up welding until an accident left him disabled. He returned to Apel in April 2006. In the interview, Watson blamed himself for his misfortune: ‘I was hanging around with the wrong people in Johannesburg. They prevented me from studying. Whenever I earned a little money, it was spent on drinking. That is why I came home.’

He dreamed of completing his high-school education by correspondence and of getting a driver’s licence, but he spent his days doing nothing: ‘I suffer from stress all the time.’ The comrades’ network managed to get him a job as a security guard but he lost it within days. According to local rumour, Watson was a member of a ‘concerned group’ of ex-comrades who had lost out and found themselves without prospects. They had occasionally disrupted an ANC gathering or a council meeting to draw attention to their plight, but since the group had no funds, it soon fell apart. Elsewhere in Sekhukhune, too, stories of similar ‘concerned groups’ circulated. In Tjate, for example, one such group was held responsible for attempting to blow up the newly unveiled bronze statue of King Sekhukhune with spent dynamite from a platinum mine.

The two female youth activists were both unemployed when I interviewed them in 2006–07. Sauwe Mamaganyane had received her matriculation certificate in 1992 and had since worked for various NGOs in the fields of career guidance, reproductive health and Aids awareness. She lived with her husband, a teacher, in Lebowakgomo and appeared a confident, well-dressed woman who had set her sights high when looking for a new job: ‘Something in community development but at a managerial level. I cannot compromise on that. I have lots of experience, and that equals academic paperwork.’ She had lost interest in politics because of ‘all the power struggles and massive corruption’ although she was reasonably satisfied with her own career.

I am where I am today because of politics. Being active in the ANC gave me exposure to the wider world. I am not afraid to stand up and speak my mind. The ANC has done a lot for women’s empowerment and gender equality.

Damaris Maditsi graduated from the Sekhukhune College of Education in 1995 with a primary-school teaching diploma. She had, however, never held a proper
job, only a few temporary positions at a private school. The college, which has since closed down, had a dismal reputation. Like Sauwe, Damaris related how her involvement with the youth movement and student politics made her a confident person who was not afraid to stand up and speak out, if necessary in English. Life had improved since 1994 with free education and school lunches for the pupils. Moreover, ‘there are social grants, and we have water and electricity in our house.’ She did not, however, approve of the child-support grant as she shared the widespread belief that girls were falling pregnant in order to access the grant. In general, ‘people are free now, there are no more restrictions.’ Damaris was still a member of the ANC but the Zion Christian Church had become much more important in her life and provided solace in the face of an abusive marriage.

The desire for a larger share in the fruits of liberation was widespread, both among ex-activists enjoying a comfortable life and those struggling to make ends meet. Ex-comrades talked, with a mixture of awe and astonishment, about the true revolutionary character of Lawrence Phokanoka, a veteran ANC and SACP cadre who died in 2005. Phokanoka refused his veteran’s pension, saying that he had not been in the struggle to become rich. However admirable it may be, this position has few followers.

JOBS, EDUCATION AND NETWORKS

In this section, I summarise the main findings gleaned from my interviews and draw some conclusions: do local activists share in the fruits of liberation? What are the key variables for success? Most of the interviewees held fairly secure jobs in the public sector. For the few in private-sector employment or who were self-employed, the ANC networks had not been relevant for their careers. Conversely, comrades’ networks from UDF days or later ANC links had been of vital importance for most ex-activists in the public sector. However, I also heard bitter complaints from interviewees who felt that they had been dumped or even betrayed by former comrades. Family networks, as in the case of the Monakedis and the Nchabelengs, may have helped to open a few doors, but were certainly not a passport to golden opportunities, as is illustrated by the story of Luthuli Nchabeleng, the ex-cadre of the ANC’s armed wing, who had missed out on educational opportunities and thus had little prospect of a career.

Although some continued to be active ANC members, few actually held an elected position on local, district or provincial councils or an ANC executive position. The
municipal councils in Sekhukhune included a few ANC veterans from the 1950s but consisted, by and large, of teachers and businessmen with no record in the anti-apartheid struggle.

Even in the early 1990s, when the UDF was disbanded and Seyo merged with the ANC Youth League, youth activists in Sekhukhune complained that the newly established ANC branch was controlled by teachers and businessmen who had been adversaries rather than allies in the liberation struggle. For a while, Apel had two rival ANC branches, one controlled by comrades and one by newcomers, who came to be known as ‘February 2s’ – those who joined the ANC after President FW de Klerk’s announcement on 2 February 1990 of the unbanning of the ANC, when no risk was involved. In turn, the February 2s had their own label for the activists who rose to prominence during the 1980s: ‘expiries’ (those whose time had expired). Among the contested issues was the question of whether ANC meetings could be held in the chief’s kraal.

Apart from strategic connections, educational qualifications are a crucial variable in the careers of former activists, as they were for trade unionists, according to Sitkas’s survey. Without at least a BCom or a BA, access to the much-desired senior positions in municipal or provincial administrations is denied. The former activists who have been successful invested in their education and a number of ex-comrades who are now in their forties were still furthering their studies through the University of South Africa or other part-time courses.

My interviews took place against a backdrop of rampant factionalism within the ANC and a rapid decay in the Limpopo provincial administration. My informants were well aware of corruption and irregularities, but these practices had little impact on their – largely positive – assessment of their own trajectories. Some were involved in corrupt practices, while others decried wasteful and irregular spending, but most were not in a position to consider alternative career options independent of ANC patronage.

REPRESENTATION OR REDISTRIBUTION

Politics in Sekhukhune is about redistribution rather than representation. Although this is a rural area, redistribution of land is not high on the agenda of the former youth activists, except at a rhetorical level. Jobs are all important, as these are perceived as the key to networks, benefits and accumulation. Elected positions are perceived as jobs distributed by the ANC to loyal and deserving members.
At the time of my 2007 visit, ANC members were engaged in a heated discussion on the issue of whether teachers could be councillors. The prevailing argument was that, with mass unemployment, it was unfair for people to have two jobs. The ANC had already given them the job of teacher, so why should the ANC also give them a job as a councillor? A businessman serving as a councillor was not considered problematic because he had created his own job, so it was acceptable for the ANC to give him/her the job of councillor.

An investigation in 2007 by the Public Service Commission (PSC) found that almost half of all councillors in Limpopo were public servants, a situation the commission deemed highly undesirable. According to the commission’s report, of the 1,057 municipal councillors in Limpopo, 456 were simultaneously employed as public servants, the vast majority as teachers. However, the commission’s line of reasoning was different from the popular ‘two jobs is unfair’ argument. It insisted on the distinction between state and party: public administration and party politics do not mix.

The resulting ban on public servants serving as elected representatives was welcomed, even though it was based on a ‘two hats is unethical’ rather than ‘two jobs is unfair’ argument. The PSC’s argument fitted the logic of liberal democracy, while local ANC members understood the ANC as a career machine, dispensing jobs to cadres. The distinction between state and party made little sense to them, and rightly so: their fortunes depended on an adequate assessment of the balance of power in the ANC, not on a theoretical understanding of the functioning of a constitutional democracy.

In her detailed examination of the relationship between the South African state and the ANC, Booysen demonstrates how political careers can be ended abruptly if the incumbent falls out of favour with the dominant faction in the ANC. President Thabo Mbeki lost control over the ANC when he asserted the primacy of the state over the party. She points to the ANC’s flawed management of the state as its greatest contemporary weakness. ANC problems tend to become state problems.

It was commonly understood in Sekhukhuneland that elected representatives were accountable to the ANC, which had put them there, not to the voters, who were seen as recipients of ANC largesse or, alternatively, as a nuisance when they complained about the lack of service delivery. Due to limited qualifications and experience, many ex-activists would have little prospect of success in the private sector and thus depend...
fully on maintaining their strategic ANC networks. If one happened to land in the wrong camp, the risk was that one would no longer be connected with party patrons who dispense favours, jobs and contracts. Most awe-inspiring is the ANC deployment committee, a provincial party organ that has no constitutional or legal basis but is considered all-powerful because it assigns strategic jobs to party members.

While we spent long evenings pondering over Marxist-Leninist classics in 1990–91, political discussions now centred on personalities rather than policies. Among the most strongly contested issues were the appointment of functionaries who were perceived to control other appointments and tendering processes. Even positions on an ANC executive at village level were hotly contested, as members of the executive are better placed to access information and exercise some leverage. As one former activist lamented:

We no longer have a culture of debate, but a culture of fear. It is called the Politics of Nando’s: people want to eat and they cannot therefore fall out with the leadership. Nando’s now guides our way of doing things … We have become very self-centred, with much less social cohesion than before. We have become a class-based society … The leadership has isolated itself from the people. No MP lives in his own district. Even those in the Limpopo Parliament all live in Polokwane.  

In fact, one of the first initiatives by the provincial legislators elected in 1994 was to build a parliamentary village – a gated and guarded housing settlement that effectively shields the people’s representatives from the people.

CONCLUSION: MAKING SENSE OF DEMOCRACY, EGALITARIANISM AND NON-RACIALISM

In the article cited in the introduction, Saul identifies four terrains of liberation: race, class, gender and voice. While liberation from racial domination was the dominant theme, anti-capitalist sentiments were a powerful sub-theme. The third front involved ‘a distinctive measure of gender equality,’ while a ‘meaningful democratic voice’ was to be attained by the ‘genuine empowerment of the entire mass of the population from the bottom up.’

Saul’s terrains of liberation largely overlap with my categories of popular democracy, egalitarianism and non-racialism, as the core values of the UDF in the 1980s. In assessing whether – in the eyes of former activists – the glass of liberation is full, half full or half empty, it is essential to distinguish between their personal careers, their judgement of present-day South Africa and their changing understanding of
'liberation,' although these three dimensions are obviously interlinked. As Moss Mabotha explained: ‘One’s world outlook is determined by one’s class position.’

**Democracy**

Whenever I asked ‘what has changed since 1994?’, the most common response was ‘freedom.’ The next category of responses focused on material benefits: electricity, water, free schooling, basic health care, the child support grant and other welfare benefits. It was rare for a respondent to mention ‘democracy.’ Freedom was a much more central concept than democracy, and it was also more central than ‘liberation.’ ‘Freedom’ referred to freedom of movement, freedom of speech, freedom from chiefly impositions and exactions, freedom from tribal customs to the extent that these were experienced as burdensome. Thus, freedom is a more limited, more clearly defined concept than Saul’s concept of liberation. On the scorecard of freedom, the glass is certainly more than half full.

My own findings in Sekhukhune are in line with Anthony Butlers’s observation that

ANC activists often view liberal democratic institutions as western impositions that entrench the privileges of a property-owning white elite. The movement has not successfully inducted such cadres into liberal democratic values. ANC internal politics is meanwhile secretive, hostile to open debate and to the media, and increasingly paranoid in character.33

This is a valid opinion, but it is equally pertinent to recall that the ANC’s blueprint for South Africa was not liberal democracy, or ‘bourgeois democracy’ (the derogatory label), but the National Democratic Revolution (NDR). According to the two-stage theory as it was originally developed by the SACP, the NDR is the necessary stepping-stone to a socialist state. Judging by this yardstick, it is difficult to blame the ANC as government for neglecting to do what the ANC as liberation movement did not strive for.

South Africa’s Constitution has been praised worldwide as a state-of-the-art model of liberal democracy, but liberal democracy was not what motivated most anti-apartheid activists. The conceptual gap between liberal democratic institutions and the popular understanding of democracy might, in part, explain the troubled relationship between elected representatives and their voters.
Egalitarianism

While many critics on the left accuse the ANC of betraying the promise of a more egalitarian society by following neo-liberal policy prescriptions, this view is not shared by a majority of former activists from Sekhukhune. Some take current socio-economic policies for granted, others believe that South Africa had no alternative in a rapidly globalising world and quite a few of those who bemoan the loss of a socialist vision are in fact complaining about being left out of the new black bourgeoisie. In my interviews there was frequent mention of ‘betrayal,’ but, more often than not, informants felt personally betrayed by former comrades, not by ANC policies. As Saul points out, in post-apartheid South Africa, the income gap between black and white has narrowed somewhat, but the gap between rich and poor has actually widened. However, the benchmark used by ex-activists is how their own careers compare with those of their contemporaries.

In relation to gender, equality in South Africa has undeniably made huge progress, not only in terms of constitutional rights but also in the public sphere. In 1990–92 career prospects for women in Sekhukhuneland were largely limited to teaching and nursing. Politics and public administration were male preserves. In the presence of the chief, women moved on their knees. It proved quite difficult to interview girls and young women: with downcast eyes, they shuffled around shyly until the ‘white madam’ finally gave up. Nowadays, when I walk the roads of Sekhukhune, I am often cheerfully greeted by young women who are happy to stop for a chat.

Female mayors and councillors are common and, although men grumble frequently that their own prospects are blocked by all these incompetent women, there is little they can do about it as long as the ANC sticks to its gender quota. The women cited in this chapter were unanimous in their appreciation of the ANC’s record on women’s empowerment. Gender equality was not high on the agenda of young male activists in 1990, but as loyal ANC cadres they accepted the guidelines from above. It is doubtful whether a ‘democratic voice from below’ would have achieved the same outcome.

Non-Racialism

For BaPedi youth activists in the 1980s, non-racialism was a theoretical concept rather than political praxis, but it was, nonetheless, one of the tenets of political
education in the Marxist-Leninist workshops popular in the 1980s. As several authors have argued, current policies of affirmative action and BEE based on race rather than class risk perpetuating apartheid’s racial categories. Moreover, after Nelson Mandela’s celebration of the Rainbow Nation, the Mbeki presidency legitimised a more exclusive brand of African nationalism, which critics have variously labelled racial nationalism or nativism. Blackness in general, and African-ness in particular, have thus become an economic resource.35

My attempts to discuss this shift from non-racialism to a more exclusive Africanism were largely unsuccessful: for most of my African informants this is a non-issue. I had interesting discussions on equality, democracy, corruption and many other topics, but the issue of non-racialism elicited no reactions.

Mission accomplished or the revolution betrayed? In its long and chequered history, the ANC has been home to an uneasy cohabitation of African nationalism, socialism and non-racial universalism. Searching across time and space in the history of a centenarian, it is not difficult to come up with different concepts of democracy, divergent views on socio-economic development and diverse understandings of nation and citizenship, ranging from an exclusive brand of black African nationalism to an inclusive perspective of a non-racial society.

Did the ANC aspire to foster a black bourgeoisie or to establish the dictatorship of the proletariat? Did it aim at an inclusive liberal democracy or at some kind of ‘people’s power’? Was it driven by African nationalism or by the ideal of a non-racial society? Obviously, at some time or another, the ANC has stood for all of these and more.

Charges of betrayal come mostly from critics who take the dominant ideology of the 1980s as the benchmark by which to measure the achievements of the ANC in government. The UDF’s vision and practice of non-racialism and its radical utopia of an egalitarian, participatory society is indeed a far cry from post-apartheid South Africa. It is, however, beyond doubt that the lives and prospects of many South Africans have improved significantly over the past few decades. This is certainly the case for the former activists from Sekhukhuneland, who are all too aware that their fortunes are closely linked to that of the venerable centenarian. Most of them would agree that the glass of liberation is at least half full, and probably more than half. In order to fill the rest of the glass, they would aspire to a bigger swig of BEE rather than join Saul’s elusive ‘next liberation struggle.’
Endnotes

1. JS Saul, 'Race, Class, Gender and Voice: Four Terrains of Liberation,' Review of African Political Economy, 37, 123 (2010), 61-68. See also John Saul's chapter in this volume.


8. Ibid, 542–43.


15. The Conservative Party, to the right of the National Party, was opposed to the negotiated transfer of power from the white minority to a democratically elected government.


22. Interview with Luthuli Nchabeleng, November 2006, Apel.


24. Interview with Sydney Ramushu, November 2006, GaNkaone.


27. Interview with Damaris Maditsi, 27 March 2007, Monsterlus.


31. Nando's is a fast-food chain serving popular Portuguese-style chicken dishes and is considered superior to the cheaper outlets.

32. Saul, 'Race, Class, Gender,' 61–62.


34. Saul, 'Race, Class, Gender,' 68. See also J Seekings and N Nattrass, Class, Race, and Inequality in South Africa (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2006). Seekings and Nattrass have demonstrated that formal
deracialisation of public policy has not resulted in a reduction of inequality. Their research points to a fundamental continuity in patterns of advantage and disadvantage.
