

Pursuing Biko's ideals

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Our most fitting tribute would be to continue his struggle for liberation for not just one, but all, races, writes Saleem Badat

Biko's goal was a 'completely non-racial society (without) guarantees for minority rights, because guaranteeing minority rights implies the recognition of portions of the community on a race basis'

Thirty years after Biko's death unbridled wealth and privilege continue to coexist alongside dire inequity, poverty, unemployment and unequal opportunities to high-quality education, health care and social services. We believe that in our country there shall be no minority; just the people. And those people will have the same status before the law and they will have the same political rights' – Steve Biko FORTY years ago in 1967, Rhodes University refused Steve Biko and other black students attending a student conference accommodation in its residences – one of the triggers to the formation of Black Consciousness (BC) student, cultural, and political organisations. Thirty years ago in 1977, aged 30, Biko was brutally killed in detention and the BC organisations to which he helped give birth were banned by the apartheid government.

1968 was a tumultuous year. In France, workers and students took to the streets in battles against the conservative Gaullist regime. University students in Britain occupied campuses calling for greater democracy and student rights. The Prague spring saw Czechoslovakian patriots take on Soviet tanks in an attempt to overthrow Russian domination. In the US, mass opposition to the war in Vietnam and the black civil rights and Black Power movements reached new heights. This was also the year in which the South African Students' Organisation (Saso) was launched, under Stephen Bantu Biko.

For white South Africans the late 1960s was a time of political calm and prosperous sharing in an economic boom. For most blacks, it was, in the aftermath of the suppression of the ANC and PAC, a period of intensified oppression, fear, and enforced acquiescence.

Within the student political arena there were, however, interesting stirrings. By 1968, the disillusionment of black student members with the liberal politics of the largely white National Union of South African Students (Nusas) reached its peak. Biko's objection to Nusas was it was "doing nothing, it repeated the same old liberal dogma and within Nusas itself black and white formed separate opposed camps". White domination of Nusas led Biko to object to "the intellectual arrogance of white people that makes them believe that white leadership is a sine qua non in this country and that whites are divinely appointed pace-setters in progress".

In 1968 Biko, Barney Pitso and other student leaders launched Saso, as an exclusive black organisation. Its establishment drew mixed responses. Apartheid government officials gleefully, and mistakenly, hailed it as a vindication of their separate development programme. White liberals charged it with reverse racism.

Biko, Saso's first president, responded that not only was its establishment "defensible but it was a long overdue step".

Saso "was not a political party, had no well-defined ideology, (or) programme of action". It was a student organisation within the stream of "African nationalist thought" that "emphasised racially exclusive strategies for the overthrow of white domination". Unlike narrow Africanists, Saso did not exclude Indians and coloureds but defined them as part of the oppressed and also "black".

The ideas and attitudes of the BC generation had various origins. One was the very experience of apartheid. Another source was the writings of the early African nationalist leaders. A third influence was Black Power movements in the US. A fourth was liberation theology.

The key themes of BC were "the establishment of a new basic dignity, the framing of a new attitude of mind, a rediscovery of the history of the people, and a cultural revival". The previous negative definition of "non-white" gave way to positive identification as "black" – "those who are by law or tradition politically, economically and socially discriminated against as a group in the South African society and identify themselves as a unit in the struggle towards realisation of their aspirations".

Saso stressed the need for blacks to develop their own value systems and to strive towards self-definition. The emphasis was on self-reliance: on, as Biko put it, blacks doing "things for themselves and all by themselves". Multi-racial organisation was rejected, and BC and exclusive black organisation was seen as a vital strategy in the struggle for "psychological" and "physical" liberation. BC was, however, not anti-white. It was accepted that South Africa was "a country in which both black and white live and shall continue to live together". At issue, however, were liberal models of assimilation and integration and "value systems" that sought to make a black person "a foreigner in the country of his birth and to reduce his basic dignity".

Biko's goal was a "completely non-racial society (without) guarantees for minority rights, because guaranteeing minority rights implies the recognition of portions of the community on a race basis. We believe that in our country there shall be no minority; just the people. And those people will have the same status before the law and ... the same political rights".

Using the political space provided by black universities and colleges, Saso carved for itself an organisational niche and elaborated and diffused the doctrine of BC outward towards black professionals and intellectuals and black school students and youth. In a number of arenas "Saso members were well to the fore in the years leading up to the 1976 uprising – energetic, creative and uninhibitedly militant". Not surprisingly, Saso was the indisputable organisational and intellectual vanguard of the BC movement.

BC leaders refused to treat the apartheid state as omnipotent, to accommodate to the "system", and were defiant towards everything associated with the state. This stamped on Saso an uncompromising militancy. As Pitso says, Saso leaders not only "believed that radical political activity could still be undertaken within the constraints of the legal and political structures of apartheid", but indeed pushed "to the limit the bounds of possibility in order to confront and undermine the system".

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BC leaders attracted naked repression and only an indomitable spirit of courage and defiance enabled BC organisations to survive without being totally decimated. It was this spirit that BC contributed to the student and youth that confronted the police and army during the Soweto uprising, and that its cadres carried into the exiled liberation organisations, and into the 1980s UDF and National Forum.

BC played an important role and was of tremendous significance in the struggle for democracy. It rekindled a new era of black political activism and popular resistance and ruptured the silence and despair of the 1960s. By challenging multi-racial and liberal politics, it played a vital role in reconstructing black politics and political action.

There was a strong repudiation of white liberal notions of black assimilation into the existing white and Eurocentric culture and in asserting that a future non-racial society would need to be the product of all social groups and had to reflect the diversity of all cultures. In rejecting the term "non-white" in favour of "black", BC activists asserted their right to construct their own identity and to "name" themselves.

BC attempted "to rebuild and recondition the mind of the oppressed in such a way that eventually they would be ready forcefully to demand what was rightfully theirs". The focus was on "consciousness" and BC activities sought to develop the self-esteem, pride, confidence and solidarity of blacks. The ethnic black universities and colleges were turned into sites of struggle. Saso provided political education and organisational training and "experience of leadership, planning, strategising and mobilising". Mampela Ramphela says that there was "success in empowering activists in its ranks at all levels. Most of these individuals attained total psychological liberation and realised the meaning of being active agents in history. The impact of this success had a multiplier effect on the wider black community".

All of this made it possible for black students to no longer stand, as Biko put it, "at the touchlines", and to "do things for themselves and all by themselves". It helped engender a culture of black pride and assertiveness. With the apartheid government trying to win students to its separate development programme, BC renewed and reinvigorated the historical opposition to bantustans that had begun in the 1950s. It denounced separate development, attacked bantustan leaders, and mobilised people around a united South Africa. Saso helped to launch other anti-apartheid formations such as the Black Peoples' Convention, encouraged youth and cultural organisations, lent support to the Black Community Programmes, and promoted Black Theology and black cultural production.

Writer Mongane Wally Serote recalls that through its contribution to the Soweto uprising and subsequent flow of students and youth into exile, BC gave "to the ANC oxygen and new life, which the movement desperately needed – youth of the South African people, tempered in defiance in action".

BC organisations provided platforms for art exhibitions, poetry reading, drama and music festivals, and exposure for emerging black artists, and established numerous cultural, theatre, art and music bodies. Various artists went on to establish national and international reputations as novelists, poets and playwrights. BC activists were also very active in the arena of ideas and knowledge – intellectual production by the very young blacks that bantu education sought to render intellectually sterile!

There were also important cultural and symbolic dimensions connected with enhancing black pride, assertiveness and solidarity – the slogan "Black is beautiful", attacks on hair-straightening and skin-lightening cosmetics, the "Afro" hairstyle, new forms of dress, the clenched-fist salute expressing black solidarity, and slogans and songs associated with black self-reliance, defiance of apartheid and freedom.

Thrust by historical circumstances to play the leading political role in pre-1976 South Africa, BC rekindled black intellectual and political opposition to racial domination. Its activities helped sew the potential for resistance into the fabric of daily life. Its accomplishment was to bring about a "mental revolution among black youth", and to hand over a new generation of young people that were "proud, self-reliant, (and) determined".

Of course, the BC doctrine had its weaknesses. Ramphela notes that the tendency to view blacks as homogeneous group meant that there was blindness to the stratification within black communities. There was also little attention to gender relations. Women constituted up to 25 percent of total university students. Yet there was no special effort on the part of Saso to mobilise woman students or to focus on specifically gender issues. Few women actively participated in Saso, and only one woman was ever elected to national office. Still, one effect of the sexist world of male-dominated universities and BC was that it made BC woman activists become "tough, insistent and persistent".

Thirty years after Biko's death unbridled wealth and privilege continue to coexist alongside dire inequality, poverty, unemployment and unequal opportunities to high-quality education, health care and social services. Crucial questions of "race", values, identity, culture, and social and cultural transformation that BC raised remain highly relevant issues.

Drawing on the Biko legacy, we must tackle our social ills and challenges in the energetic, determined and uncompromising fashion of the BC generation, and to innovate intellectually, culturally and organisationally the way they did.

Most of all, like Biko and BC, we must push "to the limit the bounds of possibility" in the pursuit of social equity, justice, human rights and democracy and development. That is the most fitting tribute to the memory and life of Stephen Bantu Biko.

*Saleem Badat is vice chancellor of Rhodes University. He writes in his personal capacity A HERO GONE: A mourner at Steve Biko's funeral in 1977 holds up a picture of his hero. Today the depth of his ideology and the impact of his words are more relevant than ever.

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