

## Phillip Kgosana

*Phillip Kgosana<sup>1</sup> recalls joining the PAC a few months after its formation in 1959 when he had become a student at the University of Cape Town. He made headlines when, as regional secretary of the PAC (Western Cape), he led the famous 30 000-strong anti-pass march to Parliament in March 1960 after the Sharpeville shooting. After being released on bail whilst awaiting trial for incitement to public violence, violating the pass laws, and marching to Cape Town without a permit, Kgosana skipped bail and left the country illegally. He joined the Ethiopian Military Academy, graduating as an army lieutenant in 1966. He obtained a BA degree in Economics from the University of Ethiopia in 1970. For 22 years he served with the United Nations as a development officer and returned home in 1996 to become national organiser of the PAC under the new PAC President, Rev. Dr Stanley Mogoba.*

I was born in 1936 in a village some fifty kilometres to the north of Pretoria called Makapanstad – (Bakgatla Ba Moseitlha). As a youth I grew up looking after my father's cattle, sheep and goats. My parents were of average primary education. I believe my mother had gone up to Standard 4 whilst my father had read up to Standard Six or so. In the early 1920s my father had the fortune of doing an apprenticeship in carpentry under an uncle in Goodwood near Cape Town.

I completed my primary leaving certificate in 1953 and proceeded to Lady Selbourne High School, whose principal then was Mr S. P. Kwakwa. I was among the bright students at Lady Selbourne High School and completed my junior certificate in a record two years, and matriculated in 1958.

I could not proceed any further with my studies as the family could not afford the college fees. I therefore looked for a job and worked as a clerk at Coca-Cola in Pretoria. I was unfortunately fired within a week because my supervisor reported that he thought I was lazy. I then picked up another clerical job at the Bantu Education Department near the Pretoria railway station.

Meanwhile I had applied to a number of pharmaceutical colleges in the country as I had hoped to study pharmacy if I'd got the means to pay for my studies. All my applications hit a snag because during those days, Africans were not permitted by law to study pharmacy in South Africa. This I had not known before. The applications were all rejected and I was simply informed by the various colleges that the course I desired to do was not available for blacks.

Lady Selbourne was a hive of political activity during the early and middle 1950s, as laws like the Bantu Education Act and Bantu Authorities Act provoked the resistance of our people, with the architect of apartheid Dr. Hendrik F. Verwoerd bent on destroying the African people by

<sup>1</sup> Edited by Mbulelo Vizikhungo Mzamane from an interview conducted by Brown Maaba, 28 December 2001, Pretoria, SADET Oral History Project.

destroying their minds and their self-worth as a people. Many famous teachers and educators like Zephania Mothopeng, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Nathaniel Masemola and many, many experienced teachers left the teaching profession.

It was during this heated time in our country that I left for the University of Cape Town to study with a loan scholarship from the South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR)<sup>1</sup>.

Although Dr Nkomo, a prominent resident of Lady Selbourne, had persuaded me to go for medicine, the University of Cape Town Medical School would have none of this because the Medical School admitted only whites, Coloureds and Indians. An attempt to get me admission at the Wentworth Medical School in Durban had earlier failed, as had a similar attempt at the Wits Medical School.

I therefore found myself one Friday evening at the Pretoria railway station on my way to Cape Town to join the Faculty of Commerce and Economics at the University of Cape Town. According to my elder brother, an opportunity had come my way and I just had to go to Cape Town. His advice was firm and simple. "Go to Cape Town. Take the challenge. A university degree is a university degree whatever the field of study."

As the SAIRR covered only my college fees, I still needed a lot of help to survive in Cape Town. My principal at Lady Selbourne High School, Mr B. L. Leshoai, who had replaced Mr Kwakwa, mobilised all manner of help to see me through to Cape Town. Mr Leshoai searched around and found one white lady somewhere in the suburbs of Pretoria who offered to send me five pounds a month and some old clothes which her children had outgrown. I accepted all the help with gratitude.

After registration at the Department of Economics I was emphatically informed that there were no boarding facilities for black students on campus. In addition, it was further made clear that only selected places on campus were accessible to me. These included the library, the student canteen and the lecture halls. All other places were out of bounds for me. I was advised to go and look for accommodation at the Langa African Township some nine kilometres to the east of the university.

Langa was a sprawling African township off the Garden Route with about eight huge blocks of triple-storey buildings which housed migrant labourers from the Eastern Cape. These were specifically bachelor quarters and no families were permitted to live in them. Most of the labourers were semi-illiterate workers who were recruited by labour recruiting companies from the Eastern Cape to provide cheap labour in the factories, railways, fishing industry and the dockyard around Cape Town. I had to find my place among the migrant labourers as a university student. The going was tough as I did not even know the commonly used Xhosa

<sup>1</sup> The South African Institute of Race Relations was established in 1929.

language and relied on my little Afrikaans and English. I was allocated a room in Block C which I had to share with one Mr Roto, who could only speak Xhosa. He was nevertheless a very kind man and shared his food with me.

The going was very tough for me and I had to think pretty fast as to how I was going to survive in Cape Town. I had no money to buy books and used one lone exercise book for my notes in all my subjects: economics, economic history, English and preliminary commerce. I agreed to sell a weekly newspaper called *Contact* to raise money for my food and transport to college. This continued for some time until I met a young lady at the bus stop one Friday as I was going back to the hostels. As we chatted she realised that I couldn't speak any Xhosa. We became friends and she bought me books. Her name is Ellen Moyake, a nurse at the District TB Hospital outside Cape Town. She had trained at Baragwanath Hospital in Johannesburg. Ellen became a great help even after our arrest in March 1960.

Life was extremely stressful for me and concentrating on studies was virtually impossible because I worried too much about my survival. But help came in its own strange ways. Nana Mahomo, a member of the PAC executive committee who was a law student at UCT, gave me a shirt and a sweater. Another helper was a colleague and classmate from Lady Selbourne days, Joe Motsogi. Joe used to bring extra sandwiches every day from his hostel. Mr Leshoai contributed a jacket (the one I wore during the demonstrations). During mid-year exams, I don't recall why, but I performed very poorly. The first year ended disastrously. I failed the end-of-year exams but was given a chance to do two supplementary examinations in commerce and economics.

During my stay at the Langa Flats I also met local PAC members and began to enjoy the comradeship of men and women who shared my political views. These included Mr Nxelewa and Mlamli Makwetu, who later became president of the PAC. The first annual conference of the PAC after the party's formation was held at Orlando in Johannesburg in December 1959. The conference was attended by delegates from all over South Africa, and I was privileged to serve on the resolutions committee on action against the pass laws with Mr Phokela, who also later became a leading figure in the PAC.

The pass laws and the intention of the apartheid government to extend them to African women were the most burning issues at the end of 1959. All indications were that the pass laws had to be opposed with all our might in the new year. Many of our people had died on white farms as convict labourers and the 1957 statistics showed that, on average, more than 1 000 male Africans had been jailed daily in that year for offences under the pass laws. It was thus evident that no African could go through life without tasting imprisonment under the pass laws.

The conference thus adopted a resolution to bring a total and final abolition of the pass laws from the face of our country. Sobukwe, the then PAC president, was given an open mandate to call the nation to action when he was ready to do so. That day was to be Monday 21 March 1960, a day that has become historic in the annals of our nation. Sobukwe came out with a very clear strategy. On D-Day, all male Africans were to leave their pass or reference books at

home and surrender themselves for arrest at the nearest police station for the crime of failure to carry a pass. (I should mention that some leaders elsewhere had urged the people to burn their passes. But that was not PAC strategy.)

On that morning of 21 March I was privileged to be at the head of some 7 000 men at Langa Flats who were ready to surrender to the police. At other police stations at Philippi and Nyanga the response was overwhelming and the police could not cope with the crowds of volunteers. History should remember heroic leaders of the PAC in the Western Cape such as Mlokoti, Noboza, Mgweba, Ndibongo, Siboto, Magwentshu, Gasson Ndlovu and numerous others who contributed immensely to the success of the PAC anti-pass campaign in the Cape.

Although I had been elected regional secretary of the party at the beginning of 1960, I had to lie low since I was in the Cape on a student permit. I could therefore not risk coming out in the open at public meetings since I could lose my residence in Cape Town and be thrown out. So although I was holding a key position, I used to function under cover most of the time; preparing background material, sending people out, arranging for meetings – but ready to come to the surface on the day of the launch of the campaign. That happened on Sunday 20 March, when I delivered my maiden speech at Bhunga Square in Langa.

At the time we had about seven PAC branches in Cape Town, with a total membership of roughly 900 people who were card-carrying PAC members. But we thought that that was a strong nucleus to drive the struggle on. In February 1960, Sobukwe visited us, together with P. K. Leballo, the secretary general of the party, and Howard Ngcobo, to check on how organised we were. Sobukwe addressed us at Bhunga Square, where he talked about *abelungu abasithandayo* (a searing reference to white people who profess affection for black people while exploiting them for commercial gain). He explained to the ordinary workers from EmaMpodweni (Pondoland) and they understood him. He talked well, with his mastery of Xhosa, his mother tongue.

On Friday 18 March, just seventy-two hours before the actual launch, Sobukwe announced that on Monday the 21<sup>st</sup> the PAC campaign would commence. He had written to the police commissioner, Rademeyer, to tell him to control the police. It was going to be a non-violent, positive campaign. If the police applied violence, we would not reply with violence but we would not run away. He said he realised that our people would like to retaliate but, until he had trained us to use violence intelligently and economically, he would not encourage undisciplined use of violence because in the end it would cost the African people a lot of lives and pain.

At Sharpeville, on that morning of 21 March, some 12 000 people were evidently milling around the small police station in the township when there was panic and the police, who were very trigger happy, thought they heard some instruction from somewhere saying: “Shoot!” Somebody later on said: “I thought I heard somebody giving the command to shoot.” In four seconds, sixty-nine people had been shot dead and over 300 wounded.

At Langa Flats, where I was on that morning, the police arrived at about 7 am in about 10 police vehicles. Armed with baton sticks, the policemen were immediately ordered into riot formation. I rushed out to meet the police officer in charge, who I later learned was Captain Van der Westhuizen. I told the captain that I was in charge and that we were due to march to Langa police station to surrender for arrest. The captain warned that if we dared march to the police station he would defend the police station with force. I replied that in that case, and in terms of my party instructions, we would not march to the police station but would instead peacefully disperse. He took my particulars and that of the PAC and ordered his men into the vehicles. I in turn instructed the crowd to disperse and reassemble at 5 pm for further instruction.

By midday, radio reports indicated that there had been some bloody shooting of protesters at a police station in Sharpeville to the south of Johannesburg. As the day closed, wire accounts told of more than 60 people killed at Sharpeville. In Cape Town I had to attend to massive inquiries from the media in the city about the events of the day. This took much of my time, such that I was late for the township meeting scheduled for 5pm. It appears that the police declared the meeting unlawful. However, some people later said that they had heard the police announcing on loudspeakers around the township that the meeting was no longer illegal. People were obviously in the middle of excitement. It appears that just before the meeting could start, the police made some inaudible announcement with a loudspeaker, and within minutes they began to shoot and baton-charge. The crowd scattered and began to pelt the police with stones and sticks. The police shot one young man who was on the platform at the time.

I came rushing from town, trying to get to the meeting. But, as I was coming out of the railway station, people were running away from the meeting, some with wounds on their heads and others bleeding. A Coloured driver of the *Cape Times* was sitting in the reporter's car, when the angry crowd overturned the car and burnt him to death.

The police started a rumour, via the SABC (South African Broadcasting Corporation), on its 7 o'clock news bulletin, that I had been killed in Langa. They retracted that story at 9 o'clock that evening and said the item might not be correct. It needed to be verified. Such tactics inflamed people's passions. By the 27<sup>th</sup>/28<sup>th</sup> March, a large number of people were not going to work, partly because they were on strike, and partly because it was impossible to work. You see, in an industrial area, if a factory is producing ink, and yours is producing cloth, and the one factory goes on strike, the other factories cannot function because one factory supplies the other with material. Thus, most of the industries around Athlone and Epping had to order their workers home because there was a lot of confusion. Cape Town, being the end of the world, so to speak, meant that everything jammed up there. Cape Town is the end of the railway line. Everything ends there. There are trains that come there carrying goods from the interior of the country. In the middle of the strike there was nobody to offload the trains. Similarly, the goods on the ships in the Cape Town harbour were not unloaded. By the time the government declared a State of Emergency on 30 March 1960 there were twenty-nine loaded ships that had been standing in the harbour for as much as fourteen days. The stevedores had also joined the struggle.

Many people joined the strike, factory workers, farm workers and domestic workers. Complaints came from all over that services had collapsed and that there was general suffering, with unattended animals dying on farms. Of course this was no joy for us but these are the consequences of any mass action.

As many people in Cape Town – domestic workers, factory workers – were at home, University of Cape Town students thought they could volunteer to clean up the city because garbage was piling up. We warned them to leave the garbage alone and they retreated.

By the end of the week we were preparing to bury those who had died at the beginning of the week. Over 100 000 mourners attended the funeral at Langa on Sunday, 27 March 1960. The Cape Town newspapers of that time, the *Cape Times* and the *Cape Argus*, captured much of what happened at the time thanks to the sterling work of journalists like Gerald Shaw and Stanley Uys.

Meanwhile, Chief Albert Luthuli of the ANC had issued a statement declaring Monday 28 March a day of mourning for the people of Sharpeville and Langa. The press had captured him burning his pass and this triggered off the burning of passes. In a subsequent charge against Chief Luthuli, evidence in court was led to prove that he in fact never burned his pass!

It was evident at this time, in the mind of the rulers of the country, that they strongly believed that a conspiracy to overthrow the government was being hatched by the “agitators” in the resistance movement. This belief was confirmed at the beginning of our trial in June when the prosecutor, Mr Cuff, told the regional magistrate who heard our case that our actions “bordered on treason”.

Hence, from the 28<sup>th</sup> through to the 30<sup>th</sup> March, when the state of emergency was declared in 110 districts in the country, we were stunned by the number of African National Congress and other party leaders who were being rounded up in their thousands throughout the country. Long newspaper columns carrying stories of old politicians being arrested filled almost all the newspapers in the country. Even the Treason Trial in Pretoria was brought to an abrupt halt and all the 156 trialists were locked up behind bars without bail at the Fort in Johannesburg.

On the night of the 29<sup>th</sup> to the 30<sup>th</sup> March the police came out in full force onto all African townships around Cape Town, beating everybody out of their homes, assaulting, breaking people's arms and forcing them to go to work, evidently in order to break the strike. As dawn broke on the morning of the 30<sup>th</sup> I was alerted by the chants of protesters as they exchanged blows with the police in the area called the Zones between Langa township and the male flats. The people were being forced to go to work. And they had decided to march into the city.

With almost all PAC leaders in the Western Cape incarcerated, the burden of providing leadership fell on me and our youth leader, Manelisi Ndibongo. Our regional chairman, Mr Mlokoti, had already been arrested, and so was the vice chairman, Gasson Ndlovu.

Mr Mampe, a regional executive member, and numerous other regional leaders were also already in jail.

I conferred with Ndibongo and we decided that the march should be redirected to Parliament and not to any police station. This was the only logical decision in the circumstances, as the police had on several occasions failed to arrest us and, in a cowardly manner, had followed us to our homes and, while we slept, attacked us at night. On the 25 March, for instance, we had gone to the city because the police had arrested hundreds of our boys. We went there to demand the release of our young boys. Patrick Duncan, who was a journalist running a newspaper called *Contact*, on hearing that there was a group of about 5 000 people marching into town, came hurriedly from his office to the police station at Buitenkant Street. On arrival at the police station with the 5 000 marchers, I was taken upstairs and locked up in a room with one policeman. While I was up there, Patrick Duncan was talking to the Commissioner of Police for the Western Cape, Colonel Terblanche, asking the police to suspend the passes for about a month. We objected to Duncan's blatant interference. Moreover, this fell far short of PAC demands, namely, the total abolition of the pass laws. The boys were released and we scored one of our many victories.

But then the historic march out of Langa was on and we chose to approach Cape Town via De Vaal Drive, which skirts Table Mountain. We had earlier announced that we were now going straight to Parliament and not to any police station anymore<sup>1</sup>. We announced to those who could hear us that we are now marching, not to any police station, but to Parliament. Langa is about nine kilometres from the city centre. We had to walk this distance, past Groote Schuur Hospital, past the old prison, down Roeland Street straight to Parliament.

The media was there in the thousands, and whatever was said or done during the march was picked up and put on the radio. That was in a way inciting the people, because even people who were not interested in going to town thought that interesting things were probably going to happen in the city. Many travelled all the way from neighbouring suburbs of Cape Town by bus, taxi and whatever public or private transport available in order to go and witness the drama in the city.

By the time the march reached the city outskirts at about midday, there were already some 20 000 people packed around the Buitenkant police station and the parade grounds. We were met at the corner of Buitenkant and Roeland Streets by Detective Sgt Sauermann, who persuaded us not to go to Parliament but to go to the police station where his superiors awaited us. I informed him that our mission was not to go to any police station but to march straight to Parliament.

<sup>1</sup> According to Driver, the march was actually scheduled to take place a day later, and the PAC leaders were surprised to learn that the protest had been brought forward. Gerhart suggests that the march took place spontaneously after the police had brutalised residents of Langa that morning. Both writers place Kgosana at the head of the march to the centre of Cape Town. (Driver, *Patrick Duncan*, p 180; Gerhart, *Black Power in South Africa*, p 244.) Lodge claims that when Kgosana first heard people marching, he was still in bed, and after being given a lift by an American journalist to the head of the procession, had to ask the protesters why they were marching. (Lodge, *Black Politics*, p 221.) On the same day, the government declared a state of emergency. (Refer to SADET (eds), 2004, pp 261ff.)



He pleaded with us not to go to Parliament as Parliament was in any case closed and the buildings surrounded by soldiers. Meanwhile, we were informed by journalists that a state of emergency had been declared in many parts of the country. We obliged, provided that the only thing to talk to the police about was an appointment with the justice minister.

Inside the Buitenkant police station, we found Police Commissioner General Rademeyer, with Colonel Terblanche, Deputy Commissioner for the Western Cape, and Major Rheder of Philippi police station. Rademeyer told us that we had committed a crime and would be charged later. I retorted that we had long been courting arrest without success. We then told him that his task was to set up an appointment for us with the Justice Minister, F.C. Erasmus. He and his aides retired to another room while we waited for a response. After a while, Colonel Terblanche reappeared and told us that the minister had agreed to receive a small delegation from us that afternoon, provided that we order the huge crowd out of the city. I requested a police loudspeaker in order to make the crucial announcement to the public. This was an exciting moment. Never in the history of South Africa had an “agitator” forced a racist minister to succumb to an undesirable appointment.

The great march into the city of Cape Town was indeed historic – regardless of what Tom Lodge says. It was admittedly an unplanned march but was created by the circumstances of the hour. We as leaders seized the opportunity and redirected the march to Parliament.

It should also be recorded that, on that day, as we entered the city, apparently a decision had been taken by the minister of justice, who was also in charge of the police, that as soon as the leaders appeared on the scene and were identified, they should be shot and killed. I only knew about this plot twenty-five years later when I was in Sri Lanka working for the United Nations. (For a full account, please refer to my autobiography *Lest We Forget*, published by Skotaville in 1988.) All I know is that Colonel Terblanche was subsequently relieved of his post and his rank and sent into early retirement. He was reinstated twenty-five years later when Adriaan Vlok was the minister of justice and they found that Terblanche had not been wrong for not shooting me.

I would like to end this bit of the story by confirming that the appointment with the justice minister never materialised. Instead, when we returned to meet him, we were immediately arrested. As Captain van der Westhuizen put it to us: “The minister is not interested in meeting you. And, under the state of emergency regulations, you are now under arrest.” Some people have asked me why we did not just refuse to move out of Cape Town until the minister met us. And my response has always been that that type of decision would have precipitated untold violence and the death of many innocent lives in the heart of Cape Town. Maybe for some they would have appeared like great revolutionaries. But Sobukwe had cautioned against such behaviour. Obviously, the government would have acted with maximum force to bring order to the city. Security forces would have sealed off Cape Town and a price would have been put on my head.



After all the dust had settled I would have been tried and sentenced, and the passes would in time have been reimposed on our people. This would not have been the game for which we had sacrificed our lives. This was not what Sobukwe had instructed us to do.

We were kept at the Buitenkant police station until 4 April, and then transferred to the main prison on Roeland Street. On arrival, I was separated from other prisoners and kept in an isolation cell for the next 21 days. I later came to know that those in the other single cells were condemned prisoners awaiting transportation to be hanged in Pretoria. A commission of inquiry had meanwhile been set up under Justice Diemont to report on the riots at Langa on the 21<sup>st</sup> of March. Justice Diemont in his report found that we had incited the people to defy the law and to refuse to carry passes. We were to blame for all the chaos in Cape Town.

Then the real trial started, I think around the middle of June in 1960. Thirty-one of us were charged with incitement to public violence, breaking the pass laws, and marching to Cape Town without the permission of the town clerk. We stayed in jail as awaiting-trial prisoners, and still wearing our own clothes. The prosecutor offered us bail but we refused it. It was not PAC policy to go out on bail or to pay any court fine. So we stayed on. Towards the end of the year the prosecutor offered us bail once more. He was due to get married and wanted to adjourn the case for two months. He reduced the bail from the original 10 000 pounds to twenty-five pounds.

Some kind-hearted Capetonian paid the bail for us but until now I don't know who this person is. So we went out on bail, as the party had then decided to despatch some of us for military training. Instructions had come from Sobukwe himself in a letter from Leeuwkop Prison where he was serving his three-year jail term.

I slipped out of the country early in 1961 and reached Dar es Salaam on 29 March 1961. The escape had been a treacherous one via Swaziland, Lesotho and the Bechuanaland British Protectorate, thanks to the assistance of TANU, Dr Nyerere and Ntsu Mokhehle of the Lesotho Congress Party.

Our political parties had now been silenced and banned inside South Africa and we had opted to take up arms against the racist regime. We considered that non-violent campaigns had ended at Sharpeville and Langa and that the struggle needed to be taken to a higher level.

In Dar es Salaam (the name means a haven of peace) I was given a hero's welcome. I was met at the airport by the secretary general of the ruling TANU Party, Oscar Kambona, and later that evening met Mwalimu Dr Julius Nyerere. Nyerere had organised my secret flight out of South Africa and I thanked him. He marvelled at how we had mobilised a 30 000-strong march into the city of Cape Town in the face of the fierce might of the racist forces.

The then Tanganyika government was very helpful. We had no passports and had been running around across borders without them. The government gave us some temporary pieces of A4 size documents with an attached picture at the corner for us to use for travel out of the country.

Meanwhile, I had an offer from the *Lillyput* magazine in London, which had connections with *Drum* magazine in South Africa, to go and study at the London School of Economics. But then when I got to London, the first political problems started.

Instead of being granted permission to go to college, I was told by the party leaders that we were in the revolution and that there was no time to go to school. I lost that opportunity to join the London School of Economics. I also lost another opportunity to go to Oxford [University] for a one-year course in trade unionism. At the end of 1961, however, I was offered a chance to do military training in Ethiopia. By the time I did military training in Ethiopia, however, I had been expelled from the PAC for disobedience to the party. But then I had already negotiated my way through with the Ethiopian government. I pleaded with Emperor Haile Selassie – I've got a beautiful picture with him which I treasure – and he agreed to let me join the Ethiopian Military Academy in Harar. I was commissioned as a lieutenant in the Ethiopian Army in December 1966. In 1967 I completed my parachute and commando basic training at the Debre Zuit Airbase just outside Addis Ababa.

In 1970 I graduated with a degree in economics from the University of Addis Ababa. In 1973 I completed a post-graduate diploma in Public Administration at Makerere University in Uganda, after which I joined the United Nations as a programme development officer and was attached to UNICEF (The United Nations Children's Fund) until I retired in 1996.