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40 years after: Understanding the Soweto Uprising

<http://www.pambazuka.org/human-security/40-years-after-understanding-soweto-uprising>

Motsoko Pheko

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The Soweto Uprising of June 16, 1976 did not just drop from the sky. The Black students of South Africa did not wake up one day and begin resisting Bantu Education. The uprising was carefully organized and led secretly by leaders of the underground political movement, most of them militants of the banned Pan Africanist Congress of Azania (PAC).

One of the students that the apartheid colonialist police shot dead on 16 June 1976 was Hector Pieterse. According to the late Rev. Benjamin Rajuili who was a minister of religion in the African Methodist Episcopal Church and a teacher at a high school in Soweto, the first student who was shot was his student named Mahabane.

It seems, however, that another student who was shot before Hector Pieterse was Hastings Ndlovu. But in both these cases there were no photojournalists around when they were shot.

The original family name of Hector Pieterse is said to be Pitso. This family is reported to have used the name Pieterse to pass off as “Coloureds.” Under apartheid colonial regime Coloureds were treated a little better than Africans/Black people.

It is to be noted, however, that despite his circumstance, Hector was shot outside Phefeni Junior Secondary School, a school for Africans only. This was at corner of Moema and Vilakazi streets. Mbuyisa Makhubo, an 18 –year old student, picked him up there. The students were singing the African national anthem “Morena Boloka Sechaba Sa Heso” (God Save Our Nation).

The Soweto Uprising is reported to have involved an estimated 20,000 African students. The number of students who died during the Soweto Uprising has been given as 176, also with estimates of 700 killed.

When commemorating the Soweto Uprising, however, it must not be deliberately ignored that there were revolutionaries who were imprisoned for leading the Soweto Uprising. They were tortured. Others were killed. There are also 82 people who were mentioned in court as co-conspirators.

The Soweto Uprising did not fall from a tree like a ripe fruit. It was organized by patriotic men and women who loved their country immensely. It is the same with the Sharpeville and Langa Uprisings. The fact that some people may not like the organizations that were involved is neither here nor there. History must be recorded as it happened, not as it is wished it could have happened in a manner that suits false propaganda of fake revolutionaries and charlatans.

Who led the Soweto Uprising?

What are the true historical facts about the Soweto Uprising? These facts are found in *State Versus Zephania Mothopeng and 17 Others – Supreme Court of South Africa – South and Eastern Local Division presided by Judge David Curlewis. Judgment was on 18, 19, 20, and 26th June 1979.* See also *Supreme Court of South Africa Appellate Division – The Petition of Zephania Mothopeng and 14 others, 12th September 1979*; A book titled *SOWETO UPRISING ISBN 978-1-919815-18-3* published by Tokoloho Development Association is more elaborative on this subject.

Many witnesses were called to testify for the prosecution as well as for the defence. Evidence was led that leaders of the oppressed Africans discussed the grievances of their people including the inferior education that was being taught the African people. The discussions were held in secret meetings called by the then banned Pan Africanist Congress (PAC). These meetings were held under cover of Young African Religious Movement (YARM) or Young African Christian Movement (YACM).

YARM had later replaced the name YACM in order to include people of other religions. Many witnesses testified in court about what really happened, who the organizers were and what the grievances of the African people were.

A witness by the name of Papuis Seroka testified that various grievances were aired from the floor by the Masupatsela High School student delegation. It was substantially at that point still called Young African Christian Movement (YACM). YACM was used as a cover for the activities of the banned Pan Africanist Congress. The idea was that the SRC (Student Representative Council) would see to it that the complaints of the students were remedied by taking them up with the authorities.

A witness in the Supreme Court where Mothopeng and other 17 PAC members were tried by Judge Curlewis told the court that he was at Masupatsela High School where he was doing his Form Three in 1976. He told the court that he knew Accused Numbers 13, 15, 16, 17 and 18. The latter was Daniel Matsobane.

This witness called him “Bra Dan” and Number 13 “Bra Mike.” He said Accused Number One (Zephania Mothopeng) was seated “in the corner” of the building where they met. This witness said he was told there was to be a meeting behind the school classroom. He went there.

Accused Number 15 spoke. He said that he had invited high school students to tell them about the setup in South African schools. They discussed the salaries of African workers and those of white workers and the inferior education to which African students were subjected.

Themba Hlatshwayo said that whites were busy exploiting the minerals of the African country such as gold to invest and enrich themselves instead of helping Africans with money to alleviate their poverty. He said the students must belong to political organizations which would enable them to lead them to liberation.

In April 1976 at another meeting, a state witness testified that Themba Hlatshwayo said the Bantustans had been formed to divide the African people into different groups so that the Africans would not know that they were one people and not “Bantus.”

Who fixed the date for Soweto Uprising ?

Papuis Seroka’s evidence in court was that in 1975 Accused Number 15 spoke to him. He invited him to a meeting that night at Accused Number 13’s place. He went there about 19.00. Present at the meeting were Number 13, 15, 16, 17, B.G. and Adam Kunupi. There were three others he did not know. They were adults.

The witness told the court that Number 13 introduced one of the three as the leader of the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) from Soweto. At his request this man, Accused Number One [Zephania Mothopeng] addressed the meeting. He first gave the open palm salute sign of the PAC which was returned, “Izwe Lethu! iAfrika!” (The Land Is Ours! Afrika!)

He said the time had come when all African people had to stand together to fight for their freedom in South Africa. He said that the PAC is organizing riots which would start a revolution. The riots would be started by the students, throwing stones and burning down buildings belonging to the apartheid colonialist government and its puppets. The riots would spread throughout the country. “Then the adults who are concerned about their liberation will take over. This will lead to total liberation.”

Mothopeng said that the date of riots had not been fixed, but as soon as it had, an alarm signal would be given and then the students would start rioting. He gave the PAC salute which was returned and he sat down.

Adam, another witness, testified before Judge Curlewis that at the beginning of May 1976 he was asked by Accused Number 15 to attend a meeting at Mike’s place. Accused Numbers 17,

B.G., 15, 16, 18 and 13 were present as well as other people, he thought about five. He said three were adults.

Mike introduced them as their leaders from Soweto. Adam said one of them stood up and said, "This is Uncle here." He pointed at the now Accused Number One [Zephania Mothopeng].

Mothopeng then addressed the meeting. He said that students were to organize riots. They must start simultaneously throughout the country. When the riots begin students must organize things like stay-away from school and from work. Apartheid government property must be destroyed in order to cripple the economy of the country.

"This is the aim of the riots. A date will be set and the students in Kagiso must start." The court was told that this is what Mothopeng said. Accused Number 13 then said he would send Number 15 and 16 the date on which the uprising would start.

Predicted riots in Soweto and Kagiso in action

A witness at the trial of Mothopeng and 17 other PAC leaders testified that on the 16 June 1976 he heard that the riots had started in Soweto. He went to the home of Accused Number 15. He asked him why the people in Kagiso had not started. Accused Number 15 said he did not know. He advised them to go to Accused Number 13's place that same day to find out.

The witness said he did not go out as his father would not let him go out into the night having heard of the riots. The following day, according to this witness, Accused Number 15 asked him why he had not attended the meeting. He explained that his father would not let him go. Number 15 then said that Number 13 had given instructions that they should meet at 17.00 at the bottle store. The riots in Kagiso would start there.

At about 16.00 on 17th June, while he was still at home in Kagiso, he heard shouting and saw the riots had started. The people were going to the bottle store. He too went there. On his arrival the bottle liquor store was already on fire. He and others looted the place.

This witness said Accused Number 15 came to him and said they had finished with the bottle store and that the next targets were the schools.

They should begin with Masupatsela High School that night. Accused Number 16, 17 and B.G. were with Number 15. They were still looting at the liquor store.

The next day 18 June, the students became uncontrollable. The police arrived. Shots were fired and the students dispersed. The school was closed. The witness said he saw that the school offices were burned down and that there was a burnt-out bus behind the school. He said that thereafter, he did not and could not make contact with any members of Young African Religious Movement (YARM) because of the presence of the police.

The court recalled that Felicia's evidence was recounted in a conversation between B.G., and Accused Number 16 on violence. They said they went outside and threw stones at buses. One bus was stopped. The driver ran away and the rioters got in the bus and drove the bus against the wall.

Students got into the bus and it was driven in the direction of Masupatsela High School. The witness said he did not get into the bus. He continued looting and throwing stones at passing buses and cars.

On cross-examination the witness said a teacher by the name of Sejanamane said the riots were a good thing. Students must fight for their rights. The students organized stay-away from work. They threatened workers and prevented them from going to work. They attended funerals of their schoolmates. They burned a truck belonging to Beeld, an Afrikaans language newspaper.

The riots continued for a long time. The PAC under cover of YARM continued with underground activities which were related not only to the unrest within the country, but mainly to the programme of sending recruits for military training outside South Africa.

Arrests of activists for the Soweto Uprising were made by the police throughout 1977 and beyond. Christopher Sophondo joined YARM in November 1976 because as he said YARM members had visited him in hospital after he had been wounded on 19 June 1976 by police bullets.

Anyway the time came for the Soweto Uprising to be thoroughly interrogated and scrutinised by the Court. What did the Court hear? What did it conclude after hearing both the prosecution and defence lawyers? Did it establish as a fact the Pan Africanist Congress of Azania (PAC) led the Soweto Uprising?

The court found that the accused organised the Young African Religious Movement (YARM) as cover for the banned Pan Africanist Congress to conscientise the students on their state of oppression and about the inferior education they were receiving; some of it through the medium of Afrikaans, the language of their oppressors.

Accused Number two – John Ganya - was convicted of organising ninety young people to undergo military training in the PAC camps in countries such as Tanzania, China, Yugoslavia and Libya – using Swaziland and Botswana as transit routes. Ganya's other recruits included 17 municipal police.

Ganya brought funds and PAC literature into the country, especially for students to read for their mental decolonisation. Ganya told the court that in 1976 there was tension in the African townships, especially in Soweto. As a result, a community meeting was called by Dr. Naoboth Ntshunsha to bring parents of detained students to talk to the representative of the apartheid regime. Many school children were no longer sleeping at their homes, but at schools or in the bush for fear of arrest. This was before June 16 of 1976. During this meeting the apartheid regime's police arrived and arrested Dr. Ntshunsha.

This witness testified that when students demonstrated against the inferior Bantu education and use of Afrikaans as medium of school instruction, the police had used bullets. They killed many students. "Whenever Africans demanded their rights peacefully, whites accused them of throwing stones and the police shot at them," Ganya said.

From the evidence led in court in the trial of Zephania Mothopeng and 17 other PAC members, it was clear that the accused had been working among the students long before June 16. But the programme on the education of African youth was linked to recruiting some youths for military training against the apartheid colonialist regime.

This became clear from the court testimony of Jerome Kodisang who in December 1975 had left Soweto for military training in Libya. He returned to South Africa in June 1976 "with the purpose of using that training."

Marks Shinnars who was accused Number Three in the Bethal Trial for the Soweto Uprising was alleged to have "instructed students in Atteridgeville to riot."

Evidence led against Temba Hlatshwayo showed that in 1975 he served as a student member on the executive committee of the Young African Religious Movement (YARM) which discussed the use of violence during the anticipated Soweto Uprising. He recruited students for membership or support of the Young African Religious Movement and participated in discussions on the use of violence against the apartheid colonialist regime.

Rodney Tsoletsane was alleged to have served on the student committee of YARM. He attended meetings at Michael Matsobane's house where the use of violence against apartheid was discussed and demonstrated. He aided two young people to undergo military training abroad.

The court found that Daniel Matsobane was a field worker for the Urban Resources Centre in Roodepoort and Kagiso in 1975 and 1976. He actively promoted its projects by transporting people to meetings.

Julius Landingwe was secretary for Masakhe Educational Promotions in Cape Town from 1975 to 1976. The Court found that he had conspired to send people out of the country for military training. He replied that he had merely transported students to Swaziland to further their academic studies. The Court dismissed his evidence.

A 21-year-old student by the name of Terence Makhubela testified in court that he left school in 1976 because he did not agree with the system of Bantu education which was being taught to African students. He explained, "It was common knowledge that the students who continued with Bantu Education would have their certificates written with blood when freedom was attained."

The Soweto Uprising of June 16 did not just drop from the sky. It was led and organized secretly by the leaders of the underground. The Court named them. When passing the sentence in the Supreme Court of South Africa, Judge Curlewis said among other things:

"You Mothopeng, acted to sow seeds of anarchy and revolution. The riots you organized and predicted eventually took place in Soweto on 16 June and at Kagiso the next day."

Judge Curlewis further said, "And then the last thing I would like to mention here...is Pan Africanism is the goal of the PAC...they propagate and promote the concept of Pan Africanism. This is also prominent throughout the existence of the Pan Africanist Congress...from the beginning the aims of the organisation were radical in the sense that they strove for a fundamental change."

Names of activists found guilty of leading Soweto Uprising

The Court found all the 18 accused guilty of leading the Soweto Uprising except one. Their prison sentences were as follows:

Name	Home	Sentence	Age
1. Zephania Mothopeng	30 years		66 years
	Soweto		
2. John Ganya	11 years	48	"
	Soweto		
3. Marks Shinnars	12 years	37	"
	Atteridgeville Pretoria		
4. Bennie Ntoele	10 years	38	"
	Mamelodi Pretoria		
5. Hamilton Keke	5 years *	34	"
	East London		
6. Michael Sithembele Khaya	7 years	24	"
	Soweto		
7. Alfred Ntshali Tshali	0 years *	47	"
	Manzini Swaziland		
8. Julius Landingwe	8 years	30	"
	Gugulethu Cape Town		

9. Zolile Ndindwa Gugulethu Cape Town	7 years	26	“
10. Moffat Zungu Soweto	7 years	43	“
11. Goodwill Moni Gugulethu Cape Town	7 years	24	“
12. Jerome Kodisang Kagiso	7 years	26	“
13. Micheal Matsobane Kagiso	12 years	26	“
14. Johnson Nyathi Kagiso	10 years	32	“
15. Themba Hlatshwayo Kagiso	10 years	21	“
16. Rodney Tsoletsane Kagiso	5 years	20	“
17. Daniel Matsobane Kagiso	12 years	31	“
18. Molatlegi Thlale	8 years	22	“

** Hamilton Keke was given a suspended prison sentence of five years. He had at the age of 17 years been earlier sentenced to 10 years imprisonment on Robben Island. Alfred Ntshali-Tshali was found not guilty and acquitted.*

Despite his advanced age, Zephania Mothopeng was sentenced to 30 years in prison. Others implicated in the Soweto Uprising died even before they appeared in Court. They were brutally tortured. Many died in detention. Some of these were Dr. Naoboth Ntshuntsha, Aaron Khoza, Samuel Malinga and Bonaventure Malaza.

Court told of torture of accused

Fourteen of the accused in the secret Bethal trial for the Soweto Uprising - June 16 revealed that they had been tortured with electric shock; pulled by their hair and beards, forced to have showers in very cold water and made to stand naked. Some had also been tied to an iron bar above their heads and made to stand several days handcuffed next to a heater at high temperature. They were threatened with a firearm and with being thrown out of the window from a high building while in detention. They were denied sleep and food for long hours.

Johnson Nyathi who appeared in court on crutches had been assaulted by the apartheid colonial police and thrown out of the window from a high building while in detention. His legs had been broken. He was interrogated about his part in the preparations of the Soweto Uprising and the armed struggle against apartheid and colonialism which the apartheid colonialist regime called “terrorist.”

Michael Matsobane testified that he had been assaulted during the police questioning about the Soweto Uprising. His hands were tied behind his back to a bench. He was hit by a policeman while in that condition until he fell to the ground and his ear began to bleed.

Court dismissed defence lawyers appeal

The defence lawyers for the accused in the Soweto Uprising case appealed the decision of Judge Curlewis of the Supreme Court of South Africa. The appeal was heard in the South African Appellate Division on the 16 July 1979 and dismissed the same day. The Court of Appeal

affirmed the judgement of Justice Curlewis. The Appeal Court stated among other things that the learned judge [Curlewis], in dealing with the evidence of Veli Maseko, had stated:

“It should be clear that these incidents are not something new, he [Veli Maseko] cannot invent, nor is there any reason for him to do. The details of the incident and their sequence, the contents of what was told to him, he did not suck out of his thumb...no matter how desirous he was of being released or getting an indemnity....”

This was with regard to Ground of Appeal 1(a). There were many grounds for the appeal. I will not deal with all of them. For Ground of Appeal 1(b), the Court of Appeal said that an indication of the learned judge’s approach was to be found in the following passages:

“One can take any of the witnesses who testified against Accused Number One [Zephania Mothopeng] and examine the hypothesis that they have falsely incriminated him. Michael, for example...it is argued that Michael has made up his trip to Moabi in Botswana and conversation with Number One to please the police to get him out of detention and so forth....”

A moment’s consideration will show the absurdity of all these arguments. If none of what Michael recounts happened, if his mind is tabula rasa, then the police would teach him to say something simple and embracing...”

Ground of Appeal 1c was next the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court considered. In dealing with the witness Fakazi John Mdakane, the learned judge [Curlewis] said, “This witness was a good witness like others. There is absolutely no reason for him to incriminate...in such a disjointed fashion.”

When dealing with the evidence against the first Petitioner [Zephania Mothopeng], the judge of the Appeal Court said in Volume 130 page 5013 line 2 to 18, “The first determining is what the real issue in the case...did the accused carry out the illegal activities as alleged by the state, that the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) and the reviving of the outlawed PAC and inciting people to go for military training and to riot, then the only inference may be that they used these various bodies as cover.

The learned judge of the Appeal Court dealing with the facts by the defence that no identification parade had been held in respect of a most important identification parade said:

“Counsel said there should have been a parade. I do not agree. Among 18 people in the atmosphere of this court he [the witness] was in fact at a disadvantage compared with an identification of a parade, particularly Number One, is known from the evidence at the time Papuis saw him, he was bearded and is now clean shaven. This I may say is an old trick....”

The Appeal Court affirmed the judgment of Judge Curlewis. The court affirmed the sentence of the accused for the Soweto Uprising as imposed in the Supreme Court. It dismissed the petition of the accused for the Soweto Uprising. They were sent to jail for organizing the Soweto Uprising.

Whatever the mutilators of history may invent to desecrate Soweto Uprising of June 16; we cannot make Soweto Uprising more sacred. The heroic students of 16 June 1976 and the heroic sons and daughters of the African soil who were tortured, killed and imprisoned for the Soweto Uprising have already consecrated this historic day with their blood and lion bravery; more than the mutilators of the Soweto Uprising can ever add or subtract.

Of the Soweto Uprising as told in court, even the media that was often hostile to the Pan Africanist Congress, could not suppress the verdict of Judge Curlewis on PAC involvement in leading the Soweto Uprising. The Sunday Times of 1 July 1979 in Johannesburg proclaimed:

“South Africa’s biggest trial and one of the longest in the country’s judicial history wound up this week when the banned Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) supporters were jailed for underground activities. They were sentenced to a total of 162 years imprisonment....

The statistics of the trial have set their records...it has taken 165 sitting days, 5200 pages of evidence and argument considered. 86 co-conspirators were involved...the entire trial including the marathon 21-hour judgment was held in camera [secretly].”

It must be recorded here for posterity that SASO leaders such as Steve Biko, Bokwe Mafuna, Barney Pityana, Bennie Khoapha and many others who developed the political concept of black consciousness in South Africa played a historic revolutionary role.

This is despite the fact that many leaders of SASO and Black Consciousness Movement later suffered and endured many distortions and vilifications from the usual fake inventors of fake goods. These mutilators of political history have always rapaciously, and for self-glorification, aimed to reap where they have neither ploughed nor planted.

Long live the martyrs and makers of the history of the Soweto Uprising!