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Political Prisoners

We have all heard a lot about Nelson Mandela, who is serving a life sentence on Robben Island. He is recognised by many as a great leader in the struggle for a just and democratic South Africa, but it is important to remember that he is not the only person to have contributed to and sacrificed for the struggle. Here, we want to look at a cross-section of South Africans who have been convicted for a variety of political activities.

Mandela was sentenced to life imprisonment during the Rivonia Trial (1963-1964) along with 7 others (Sisulu, Goldberg, Mbeki, Mhlaba, Matsoaledi, Mlangeni and Kathrada). During this trial the state alleged that the men had embarked on a campaign to overthrow the government by violent revolution and by assisting in an armed invasion of the country by foreign troops. They were charged under the suppression of Communism Act. The judge accepted that the saboteurs had been instructed not to kill or injure any person. This was a part of the ANC's policy of militant non-violence. The formation of Umkhonto we Sizwe (Spear of Nation) arose out of a realisation that blacks either to accept inferiority or fight against it: all legal channels for negotiation had been destroyed by the state.

Mandela and Sisulu were founding members of Umkhonto. Sisulu joined the ANC in 1940, and his militancy influenced the development of the ANC Youth League. As Secretary General, he was banned for his activities in the 1952 Defiance Campaign, which encouraged passive resistance to discriminatory laws. In 1953 he travelled to Russia and China, and became increasingly sympathetic to socialist ideas. He supported the Multiracial Congress Alliance in 1954, despite his previous black nationalism. He continued to work for the ANC after it was banned, and was arrested in July 1963 in the Rivonia Raid, which led to a conviction and life sentence for 8 of the defendants.

One of the 8 was Dennis Goldberg, an engineer from UJ who became a member of the South African Communist Party, and was involved in organising for the 1955 Congress of the People, which signed the Freedom Charter. During the trial, it became evident that he was responsible for manufacturing sabotage devices used by Umkhonto.

Another of those convicted at Rivonia was Ahmed Kathrada, who was also very involved in ANC activities, and had served 2 banning orders already when he was put under house arrest in 1960. He escaped and was an underground leader of Umkhonto until his arrest at Rivonia, which led to life imprisonment on Robben Island.

The ANC has continued to recruit members inside and outside South Africa. One of many of these is James Mange, who left South Africa in 1976 to receive his military training at ANC military camps in Angola. He returned to South Africa in 1978 to plan an attack on the Whittlesea Police Station, but this was preempted by his arrest on a driving charge. During November 1979, Mange was tried with 11 other ANC members at the Treason Trial in Pietermaritzburg. The trial was characterised by the accuseds' consistent expression of contempt for the South African political system, in which they have no say and limited rights, and for the judicial system, whose laws legitimate the injustices in this society. Mange proved to be the most militant, constantly disrupting court proceedings by leading the accused in the singing and chanting of freedom songs and

slogans. Mange was sentenced to death for High Treason, and to 18 months imprisonment for contempt of court. In September 1980, he won his appeal, and his sentence was commuted to 20 years imprisonment.

Another significant Treason Trial was that held in Pietermaritzberg in 1977. Harry Gwala, Khanyile, Xaba, Nene, Magubane, Meyiwa, Ndebele, Mdalose, Nduli, and Mdhlovu were tried under the Terrorism and Suppression of Communism Acts. Harry Gwala was very active in trade unionism, especially in SACTU (South African Congress of Trade Unions), the trade union branch of the ANC. He served 8 years on Robben Island for recruiting people to undergo military training abroad. At the Maritzberg trial, along with the other 9, he pleaded not guilty. Mr Justice Howard said that the accused were 'dedicated revolutionaries...moved by a strong sense of grievance and frustration.' They were found guilty of 'terrorist' activities which were 'committed with intent to endanger the maintenance of law and order in South Africa.' Five of the accused (including Gwala - 55 years old at the time) were imprisoned for life.

Passing on of information to groups considered dangerous by the state has also resulted in several convictions. One of these, Renfrew Christie, was a student at Wits, and became president of NUSAS in 1972, before studying at Oxford. At the time of his detention he was working as research fellow at SALDRU (South African Labour and Development Research Unit) at UCT. In October 1979 Christie was charged under the Terrorism Act, Internal Security Act, and the Atomic Energy Act.

While at Oxford, Christie was contacted by the ANC and asked to collect information on energy in South Africa. He was given a grant to do so by the IUEF (International University Education Fund), where Craig Williamson, ex Wits SRC member and police spy, was well entrenched. During the trial, the defence stressed that the information which Christie was said to have given to the ANC was freely available to the public.

Judge Eloff recognised that Christie was a brilliant academic with 'a social conscience,' yet Christie was sentenced to an effective 10 years imprisonment.

But it is not only people involved in the ANC who get convicted on political charges. Students challenging racist and inferior education are also considered dangerous to the state, because education is such an important weapon of control. Members of the Soweto Students Representative Council, (SSRC), formed during 1976, were put in this position despite their policy to avoid formal links with the ANC. Sechaba Montsitsi, the 3rd SSRC president, is still serving a sentence. He called for a boycott of exams in February 1977. While there was large division about strategy and principle amongst students in relation to this issue, the stand taken in April 1977 against rent increases, and the demands for the resignation of the Urban Bantu Council for having passively accepted these increases, was united and unequivocal. In June 1977, while preparations were being made for a June 16 Memorial Service, police swooped on a house on Diepkloof, and Montsitsi and 21 others were detained. They remained in detention for over a year before Montsitsi and 10 others were brought to trial on charges of sedition, and alternatively under the Terrorism Act.

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DELMAS TREASON TRIAL 1985 - 1989

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