

## The End of an Absurdity

**A**fter three centuries of white minority rule, South Africa's transition from racist autocracy to multi-racial democracy has been breathtaking. From the capitulation of Inkatha's Gatsha Buthelezi to the containment of the violent Afrikaner Resistance Movement (AWB), South Africans came to the brink but proved their determination—one more time—to repudiate the repressive past. But of these historical moments, none was more dramatic than the violent and sudden collapse of Bophuthatswana and its consequent re-incorporation into South Africa.

A creation of Grand-Apartheid, Bophuthatswana, nicknamed "Bop," was a ridiculous oddity. Of the 10 homelands, it was only one of four such entities—the others were Ciskei, Transkei, and Venda—to accept "independence" from South Africa, which it did in 1977. With that act, all blacks under the Bop government, mostly Tswana speakers, estimated at about 2 million, lost their South African citizenship. Lucas Mangope, South Africa's hand-picked puppet, ruled the territory until its collapse in March 1994. Made of six separate, fragmented, and mostly barren portions of land, Bop was never recognized by any internationally recognized government. About 9 million Africans were de-nationalized in the "independent" homelands.

Under the Mangope regime, anyone attempting to independently organize or agitate for political participation in the electoral process was subject to arbitrary arrest and detention, assault, or extrajudicial execution. Other opponents of the state were simply deported to South Africa. Except for his Bophuthatswana Democratic Party, Mangope severely restricted all other political parties. Any political party that was not registered in Bop, such as the African National Congress (ANC), required the permission of the minister of law and order—who was Mangope himself—to hold meetings. Not surprisingly, Mangope never permitted any

ANC meetings. Detentions, deportations, and killings of ANC activists were commonplace. Mangope implemented his reign of terror through his dreaded police force and the Bop Defense Forces (BDP), who worked hand-in-glove with the South African Defense Force (SADF) and the South African Police.

In the months prior to the April elections, Mangope had flatly refused to join the electoral process. Not even political pressure by South Africa's transitional body, the Transitional Executive Council (TEC), and the South African government persuaded Mangope that he was running out of options. In the meantime, the other homelands—except KwaZulu—had either voluntarily agreed or been forced by popular pressure to join the electoral process. According to Gay McDougall, the sole American on the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), the official body mandated to organize, run, and monitor the elections, "we [IEC officials] met with Mangope and attempted in vain to convince him to join the election. His intransigence made confrontation inevitable."

Almost immediately, the Mmabatho/Mafikeng crisis committee, an ad hoc organization formed by civil servants to address their future in the post-election period, precipitated Mangope's fall. Their demands for job security and pension pay-outs turned into a popular uprising—an open revolt seeking participation in the April elections—causing the implosion of the repressive authority on March 11. Mangope responded to these demands with an iron fist: by unleashing his repressive security forces against the people. But as popular resistance heightened, many in the police and security forces switched sides, joining the demonstrators.

In the aftermath, Mangope fled. At some point, he invited or accepted requests by white right-wingers to come to his defense. On March 12, hundreds of AWB members poured into the homeland and started

shooting indiscriminately at defenseless civilians. But they quickly turned tail after Bop security forces turned against them, and shot and killed three of them as they pleaded for help. SADF forces were quickly dispatched to the territory to restore calm and curtail widespread looting. On March 14, the South African government and the TEC appointed Job Mokgoro, a banker and an ANC stalwart, and Tjaard van der Walt, formerly the South African "ambassador" to Bop, joint administrators of the homeland. Their appointment—and mandate to "reestablish good government" and ensure "free and fair elections"—effectively re-incorporated Bop into South Africa's North-West Province, ending almost two decades of disenfranchisement.

Once Bop fell, the new authorities and TEC officials had only about a month to prepare the territory for elections. Although it was clear that the ANC enjoyed overwhelming support in the region—it was virtually the only party with a presence in Bop—there were concerns about voter turnout. Although the SADF had taken over the territory from Bop security forces, there were fears that pro-Mangope loyalists would organize in conjunction with the AWB to intimidate the electorate and impede voter education. There was evidence that the Internal Stability Unit (ISU), the hated signature of South African security forces, was harassing ANC activists. According to Frank Chikane, the IEC commissioner responsible for Bop, "political assassinations could have started if the political situation had not been stabilized with new police and political authorities."

In other areas of the North-West Province adjoining Bop—usually white farm areas and towns such as Klerksdorp, Rustenburg, and Lichtenburg—Africans affiliated with the ANC were routinely harassed by the AWB. In certain cases, ANC activists reported that the police had escorted right-wingers as they tore down ANC posters. A major concern was the "electoral black-out" imposed by white farmers on African farm workers. The workers, who total in the hundreds of thousands in the province, live in self-contained plantations in conditions approximating slavery.

Many of the workers were never allowed to leave the farms or to be visited by IEC officials for voter

education. There were reports of farmers confiscating IDs from workers and providing them with "ballots" to vote early. In some cases, farmers would allow white but not black parties to canvass support among the workers. Some farmers promised their workers additional vacation and bonuses if they joined or voted for the National Party. Many of the workers were simply unaware of the political process and the upcoming elections. As the elections approached, there were real concerns that white farmers in this deeply conservative part of the Transvaal would not allow their workers off on election day.

In spite of these enormous security, administrative, and political problems, the IEC managed to set up over 700 polling stations in the province, enough to cover all eligible voters. On April 26—the first day that any black South Africans had ever voted—the aged, the infirm, and certain prisoners convicted of non-capital offenses—flocked to the stations and stood, many for long hours in the heat, to cast their ballots. In one polling station in Itsoseng, the scene of some of the worst disturbances following the collapse of Bop, a woman in her 90s said that she "could die now that I have finally voted." But in Lichtenburg City Hall—smack in the middle of the *volkstaat* or "separate Afrikaner homeland"—tension filled the air as people filed in to vote on April 27. The legacy of apartheid was alive and well: Two segregated lines—one black, the other white—led to the polling booths.

There was never much doubt about who would win Bop and the North-West Province. The only question was by what margin the ANC would carry the province. In the end, it scored an overwhelming victory, propelling its regional candidate, Popo Molefe, the former secretary-general of the defunct United Democratic Front, to the premiership of the province. Although Bop is now history and white minority rule is over in the province, the new government faces an almost insurmountable challenge in addressing poverty among blacks. The road ahead for Bop, and indeed for all South Africa, is strewn with political mines as the first democratic government in the country seeks to undo centuries of hateful repression and unacceptable deprivation. ■

—Makau wa Mutua