

# The Struggle for South Africa

by Lerole David Mametja

**Introduction:** South Africa is one of sub-Saharan Africa's largest and most economically important countries. It is the world's largest producer of platinum, gold and chromium and has an important industrial sector. The country has a total population of almost 43 million people, of whom 75% are black Africans, 13% are of European ancestry, 3% are originally from the Indian subcontinent and approximately 9% are designated as "Coloured," or of mixed background. The Cape of Good Hope was an important stop on the trade route between Europe and India. The Dutch East Indies Company established the first permanent European settlement in the area in 1652. South Africa became a British colony in 1814 after the Napoleonic wars. Many of the Dutch settlers migrated to the interior, but were brought under British control following the Boer War (1899-1902). The country became nominally independent under the control of its European settler population in 1910. In 1912, the African National Congress was formed to demand rights for the African, Indian and Coloured populations. Among its founders was Mohandas Gandhi. An *apartheid* government committed to white authority and the complete and permanent separation of the different peoples of South Africa came into power in 1948. The African National Congress continued to battle for an inclusive society despite the arrest and imprisonment of its most prominent leaders, including Nelson Mandela. Mandela was finally released from prison in 1990 and in 1994, in an election open to all South Africans, was elected as President.



In recent years South Africa has been hit particularly hard by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. An estimated 20% percent of its adult population is infected. As a result, it is projected that the country's population may decline by as much as 25% during the next fifty years.

Growing up as a black child in apartheid South Africa, you did not always understand what was happening around you. I lived in a very isolated part of the country where separation, discrimination and poverty were the normal circumstances of our lives. My experience was different from a young person who lived in a big city such as Johannesburg. We were religious Christians who were taught to be more concerned with the promise of heaven, than with the hardships, difficult times and unthinkable conditions of this world. It was not until I started to attend university that I realized that things were not the way that they should be in our country.

I was born in 1966 in a very small village in the northeastern corner of South Africa. Twelve months after I was born, my family was forced to relocate by the apartheid government to make way for white farmers who wanted our fertile land. We were moved to an arid and barren area about 30 kilometers (20 miles) from a white

township near the city of Pietersburg. Because the land by our new homes was too poor for farming, people were forced to work for the white farmers and townspeople. Later, I came to realize that this was part of the government's plan.

## My Family

My mother was only a teenager when she had me, so we depended on the help of my grandparents to live. My grandmother, who was in charge of things in our family, did piece work when she was able to find employment. My grandfather was a police officer, which was considered a professional job for a person of color. However, he abandoned the family and moved to Pretoria, the capital city of South Africa, where he started another family. He occasionally sent my grandmother money, but we did not see him for years at a time. My father, who was from a family with

somewhat better resources, was never spoken about. He would bring me small presents when he visited our village, but it was not until I was older that I even realized that he was my dad.

When my mother finished school, she started a low paying job with the government that required her to move to a town that was 100 miles away. After that I was lucky if I saw her once every month. I stayed with my grandmother and lived with my cousin and younger brother until I finished high school.

My mother had to go to the bank and beg for money so I could further my education at Fort Hare University near Capetown. She received a loan that was sufficient for tuition for only the first four months, so we decided I would start school and we would have to see what would happen after that. I was fortunate to get financial aid from an American educational philanthropic foundation that provided scholarships to South African students in financial need.

Fort Hare was a segregated black university in South Africa that was run by the government. One of the people who had attended was Nelson Mandela. The teachers and staff, who were overwhelmingly white Europeans, wore military uniforms. I remember there were only three Black professors at the time.

### ***A Revolutionary Movement***

Fort Hare, with its huge buildings and young people from all over South Africa, was very unlike the world that I had known before. In 1984, three weeks after I arrived on campus, there was a major student upheaval. This started the transformation of my consciousness. I sought out a Christian fellowship group for support, but found a very different kind of religious belief. This Christianity preached that we could not relate to God and find heaven if we accepted injustice in this world. This message opened my eyes so that I could see my people, my family and our village in a new way. My

understanding of apartheid in South Africa changed until frustration and anger welled up inside me and I became involved in the politics of liberation. The African National Congress (ANC), the party of Nelson Mandela, was outlawed so you could not legally become a member. However, all of the student groups were linked to the ANC through an underground network. As I became part of this network, I had access to new ideas, discussions and banned reading materials. I learned about the history of South Africa and my commitment and consciousness continued to grow.

The university administration suspended the student government because of its role in demanding better education and promoting a strike. After protests by students, the student government was reinstated in 1985 and worked closely with the Christian organization I was part of. As part of the leadership for the Christian students, I helped organize weekly religious services for the general student population. These services were places where we taught each other and envisioned a new future.

In 1986, the administration decided to ban the student government again. The situation on campus got out of hand when the government used the military to round up and arrest the top student leaders. They were forced to go into hiding in the bush (the backcountry), so I became one of the new student leaders. We continued to secretly meet with our friends for instructions and guidance and to maintain a link with the broader struggle for the liberation of South Africa. We would have to purchase extra food for them in a way that would not draw the suspicions of authorities who were watching us carefully. Sometimes the military would attack student housing with tear gas. Our lives were constantly in danger.

When the military started to look for me and my colleagues, I realized I had to leave the area. One of the African lecturers at the university smuggled 5 or 6 of us off campus in the boot (trunk) of his car. He dropped us off approximately 10 miles from campus and then we had to travel about 200 miles to

Johannesburg. There we hid with a group of white Christians who supported our cause.

The following year the political climate began to change and I was able to register at a university in Durban on the east coast of South Africa. I became Vice-President of the student government, finished my degree in 1988 and took an extra year of advanced honors. After that I accepted a position as a temporary teacher of biology in a high school and began to take financial responsibility for my mother and brother. I later went to work for an organization doing medical research and helping to improve the delivery of health care to the people of South Africa

In 1990, Nelson Mandela was freed from prison and things began to change rapidly in the country. In 1994, all the people of South Africa were allowed to vote in a free election and we selected a government that represents the majority of the people. At about this time, the HIV/AIDS epidemic began to emerge as a new challenge to our society. Despite this challenge, I believe we will succeed in building a just and prosperous South Africa. I have faith in the people and trust in our democratic government. I believe that whatever problems there are in South Africa, we will be able to overcome.