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Sadtu courts rival unions, but they play hard to get

Madisha says unity is in teachers' interests, but others say educators are not a homogenous group, writes **Daisy Jones**

OFFERING to give up its name, and even to demote its president to the rank of a branch chairman, the SA Democratic Teachers' Union (Sadtu) could not have been more explicit this week about its desire for the unification of SA's three main teacher trade unions.

Sadtu, which represents more than 200 000 teachers — or more than half of the country's 360 000 public school teachers — celebrated its 10th anniversary this week. The union is aligned to the Congress of SA Trade Unions (Cosatu).

Speaking at a public debate with the National Professional Teachers' Organisation of SA (Naptosa) and the SA Onderwysersunie on Tuesday, Sadtu president Willie Madisha said Sadtu would agree to operate under another name if the other two unions would agree to structural unity.

In an interview yesterday, Madisha — also the president of Cosatu — said Sadtu's drive for unity ran parallel to Cosatu's call for one union per industry.

"I would be willing to give up the position of Sadtu president to cement unity," he said.

SA's second-biggest teachers' union, Naptosa, with 100 000 members, poured cold water on Sadtu's vision following the amiable debate. "Teacher unity is not high on our agenda," said Naptosa executive director Henry Hendricks.

"Sadtu is a politically aligned union and we are fundamentally not aligned. We cannot overcome these differences in a two-hour debate.

"Teacher unity appears to be high on (Sadtu's) agenda, but



Thulas Nxesi

then why have they not approached us? If they approach us, we will sit in a meeting with them," Hendricks said.

Corn Booyens, president of the Onderwysersunie, said there were ideological differences, meaning teacher trade union unity was currently a dream.

"Only time will tell us what the future might bring — trade union unity in a singular structure or trade union unity through diversity," he said.

During the debate, Naptosa president Dave Balt said it was not possible to squeeze all SA's teachers easily into a "one-size-fits-all" organisation.

"It would be naive to imagine that we are a homogenous group that can be represented by a single union," he said.

Sadtu general secretary Thulas Nxesi challenged Balt to explain what could divide teachers, since they had the same economic interests.

Sadtu deputy president Edwin Pillay went one step further,

saying the unions did not seem to have a sufficient sense of urgency regarding the question of unity.

"We are all in comfort zones and want to protect that. The thrust towards single structural unity seems to be something we want to keep in our minds," he said.

Balt said the reality at grassroots level was that teachers who belonged to the different unions did not see eye to eye.

"In classrooms and staff rooms there are different perspectives. National and provincial leaders should be seen to be more compatible on issues; it will water down," he said. Teacher unity was "the first prize by far, but there is a fair amount of work to be done before that can become a reality".

Madisha said the most important reason for unity was to secure decent remuneration and conditions of employment.

"We believe we should complete the teacher unity process to eradicate contestation between workers ... to approach our common employer from a united position," he said.

Unity was also important because government's growth, employment and redistribution (Gear) policy had negative implications for education. Gear led to "budget cuts, downsizing, privatisation and the shifting of the burden for social services onto the poor", Madisha said.

He was confident that ideological, cultural and political differences could be overcome.

"We can transcend this to achieve unity.... Development and education must reign supreme," he said.

IN SIGHT by Vuyo Mvoko

ANC leadership's fingers are sliding off the pulse of SA



"WHO is this Willie Madisha guy? Where does he come from? We don't know him."

I would not have understood the paranoia in Mbu's questions about the Congress of SA Trade Unions (Cosatu) president — posed around the time of the labour federation's congress last month — were he not an old acquaintance from Port Elizabeth of the 1980s.

In those days Mbu was a die-hard supporter of "the movement" — the African National Congress (ANC) and its allies. Self-styled disciplinarians like Mbu, with their blind sense of loyalty to the movement, were a demagogic, intolerant lot. Mbu and his idol Manqina were among the leaders of Amabutho, the youths of our

generation who literally ran the Port Elizabeth townships. Those were the guys for whom Winnie Mandela's now infamous remark about "our matches..." struck a chord.

That was the era when those who dared question the atrocities committed by some of our supposed revolutionaries easily became the sworn enemies of "the people". But it was also the era of Desmond Tutu, and United Democratic Front leaders Valli Moosa and Murphy Morobe, who lacked the "wisdom" that other people had of keeping quiet. They spoke out against some of the actions of their comrades so the credibility of our struggle could be maintained.

A lot of things have changed since those days. Mbu has a family, and is

"no longer that interested in politics". He wants to return to Port Elizabeth and start a business.

He likes the way "Cosatu comrades make us see these things" but — and here is the point — he disapproves of the way the Cosatu president criticises the ANC president.

President Thabo Mbeki is "a tried and tested leader", Mbu says, and in the tradition of the movement, you do not speak the way Madisha does to leaders like Mbeki unless you have a hidden agenda.

There was time when the marketplace of ideas was found at ANC rallies and public meetings. It was there that the ANC brought together disparate social forces into one entity whose primary goal was the

emancipation of the majority of this country. An erstwhile ANC activist now rapidly climbing the corporate ladder still reminisces over the slogan that captured it all: "The ANC lives, the ANC leads."

Through organised labour, the civics and the churches, the party had its finger on the pulse. No one was better positioned to assess the full effect of truculent police actions in our townships, the inhumane living conditions, a debased education

system. This put the ANC in the unique position not only of being able to articulate eloquently the aspirations of most South Africans, but also put it in the forefront of the formulation of policy alternatives.

ANC secretary-general Kgalema Motlanthe, in his report to the party's recent general council meeting, lamented the fact that the party seemed to be losing that magnetism. Perhaps it is because it is losing its link with "the people".

An example of why this may be so can be found in the shortcomings of pension distribution in the Eastern Cape. That it took a Grahamstown High Court judge, and not the ANC, to highlight these problems is a betrayal of the people and of what our fallen heroes stood for. It is an indictment of the former liberation movement. The ANC kept quiet because it worried about how government would look in the media.

Further, should it really matter to government communications political chief Essop Pahad if some columnist believes opposition leader Tony Leon is a "self-confident white male" who "always opposed" apartheid? We know the truth, do we not?

But then again, Pahad should be worried if the ANC constituency is ready to believe that.

What should really be worrying Pahad is that it is his ministry that is charged with responsibility for youth and women's affairs. Why is it that the youth commission offers no new ideas on how to help build a new army of bankable, intelligent young people who can bring an entire kwaito generation to a polling station, and who are at home discussing vital political matters of the day?

Luthuli House, the headquarters of the ANC, could be more than simply a building where the head of the presidency, Smuts Ngonyama, concocts views on whether HIV causes AIDS. Perhaps Ngonyama should devote his time to supporting the ANC health desk's scientific and medical experts' work on the disease, and even persuading ANC ministers to leave the unit to deal with the challenges facing the public around the issue, including challenging government's views if need be.

If that could be achieved, it would be unnecessary, for example, for a minister's media official frantically to ask a journalist: "Do you want to get

him fired?" after the minister is asked whether he believes HIV causes AIDS.

The ANC's near two-thirds parliamentary majority is one that most parties around the world can only dream of. Yet that mandate was not given so that ministers could wander around grandiosely, spreading allegations of careerism and opportunism against those who call their actions into question.

It was a mandate given not only by Mbu and the traditional ANC support base, but also by intellectuals and other independent-minded people.

They felt the ANC had earned their respect, and that it was perhaps the only party with the integrity and leadership to build a modern democracy and work for the betterment of this country, of Africa and of humanity.

The ANC dare not abuse this mandate. It dare not allow that dream to evaporate around the hot heads of party bureaucrats, or disappear within the bloated egos of arrogant ministers who think they have all the answers to SA's problems. Someone from the ANC has to do something before the next generation starts asking: "What is this ANC, where does it come from?"

TRADITIONAL LEADERS MUST GET ABOARD THE DEMOCRATIC TRAIN

RIGHT now there are so-called traditional leaders who are threatening violence during the coming local government elections if their concerns are not addressed.

One wonders how responsible community leaders can talk about violence when they are still engaged in negotiations with President Thabo Mbeki on their concerns about their powers vis-à-vis those of elected councillors.

I feel it is high time that we peace-loving democrats of South Africa asked ourselves about where the interests of our traditional leaders lie. Are they concerned about the well-being of the millions of historically-impooverished people under their jurisdiction?

Or are they only interested in their own narrow interests? I am asking this because of the following: the Constitution of our country (one of the best constitutions in the world) spells out clearly that "the local sphere of government consists of municipalities, which must be established for the whole of the territory of the republic". (Section 151.1)

Hence, the municipality demarcation board had a mammoth task to work out new boundaries for democratically-elected local government structures. (Which is the last lap of the democratisation of our country, after the burial of apartheid on April 27 1994.) As far as I can remember, there is no mention of stripping traditional leaders of

It's no use opposing the tide of democracy



Now is the time to openly and publicly debate the role of traditional leaders in our new democratic South Africa, comments Mtholephi Mthimkhulu.

their powers. If they truly represent people, why do they fear democracy? Why can they not work hand-in-glove with elected representatives of the people?

SURELY, I value the institution of traditional leadership, but the point is that it must co-exist with democratic structures. The traditional leaders claim that the elected council system will erode their powers.

I fail to understand what they actually mean by these powers. Do they mean powers to dictate to people in their tribal areas? Do they mean powers to demand various levies from the poor rural communities?

Do they mean powers to force people to belong to political parties of their (traditional leaders') choice?

Surely if answers to the above questions are affirmative, it will mean we did not know what we

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Let us call a spade a spade. People in rural areas under some traditional leaders live under oppression, suppression and repression

were struggling for when we fought for the total abolition of oppression.

Let me paint a clear picture about the life of the people in rural tribal areas.

I am qualified enough to give an authoritative description of how life is under most traditional leaders because I was born in a rural tribal area and my family and rela-

tives (paternal and maternal) are still living under an *inkosi* (chief).

Firstly, in a tribal area it is only an *inkosi* and his tribal authority who decide on various issues affecting his people.

LOCAL REPRESENTATIVES of *inkosi*, i.e. *izinduna* (headmen) and tribal council members, are appointed by him; thus they sing and dance to his tune.

Secondly, if you question something, you are automatically regarded as disrespectful and uncultured. That is why an *inkosi* will instruct his *izinduna* to collect a certain amount in contributions from each homestead and no one will be allowed to query that. Do you think this is compatible with the tenets of democracy?

Let us call a spade a spade. People in rural areas under some traditional leaders live under oppression,

suppression and repression.

Therefore, it makes a lot of sense to vigorously transform the institution of traditional leaders to enable it to co-exist with democratic structures. We have a good example of this scenario just next to us in Lesotho, and in European countries such as Denmark, Britain, Sweden, Norway and others.

I sincerely do not want to see the evaporation of the traditional leadership institution, precisely because I regard it as part of our heritage. My concluding word of advice to our traditional leaders is:

□ History will be against them if they think of opposing the tide of democracy.

□ They must recall what happened to the French absolute monarch (Louis the 18th) who tried to block the democratisation of France towards the end of the 18th century and also many other traditional leaders in other countries in the world who did not want to embrace democracy.

South African traditional leaders are not immune to that. People, world-wide, including those of South Africa, fought for democracy and will never tolerate any force that tries to turn the clock back.

We are now at the dawn of the 21st century – the train of democracy is unstoppable.

□ Mr Mtholephi Mthimkhulu is an African National Congress Member of Parliament in KwaZulu-Natal and member of the Provincial Executive Committee. He wrote this article in his personal capacity.

