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VENDA

TEN YEARS OF REPRESSION'

a By Thando Zuma

The Venda bantustan, situated in the northern Transvaal but separated from the Zimbabwean border by the so-called Limpopo corridor, is due to celebrate its tenth anniversary of 'independence' from Pretoria, in September this year. There will no doubt be attempts to organise extravagant parties in a Thohoyandou, Sibasa, and other places. For the Venda regime it will be time to sigh and say, "We have at least managed for ten years!" For the people there will certainly be nothing to celebrate.

A crisis in the bantustans has come to haunt the apartheid system. The regime cannot claim to be totally in control of the situation in these areas.

The coup in the Transkei in December 1987 and the attempted one in February 1988 in Bophuthatswana; the anti-independence uprisings in Kwa-Ndebele; the state of political flux in Lebowa; the positive anti-apartheid developments in KaNgwane and the general, stagnated process of granting these areas 'independence' shows that all is not well within this aspect of apartheid. There are signs of a crisis in the policy.

So, as the Ravele regime prepares for celebrations to mark ten years of 'independence,' what actually is the situation in Venda?

Venda is a typical bantustan, a creation of the apartheid policies of the Nationalist Party. Constituted under the Bantu Authorities Act of 1951, the Bantu Homeland Constitution Act and subsequent legislation, the Territorial Authority of Venda was made a 'legislative assembly' in 1971. In 1973, Venda was given 'self-governing' status.

The estimated population is about 482 000, excluding those who reside in 'White' South Africa, estimated at about 66 000. The major

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concentrations of population are Sibasa and Thohoyandou, the capital of the homeland.

Reservoir of labour

The economy of Venda follows the pattern of other bantustans. Venda is principally a rural economy within the framework of the political economy of South Africa. The bulk of the people are rural, although their main means of subsistence originates from the industrial economy of South Africa. True to the economic character of all bantustans, Venda is a labour reservoir for the 'White' South African economy.

In 1979-80, it was estimated that 500 000 people were employed in Venda itself. Of these, 43 000 were classified as agricultural workers. This is a misleading classification, because there is very little large-scale commercial farming in Venda. The conclusion to draw about this statistic is that the figure includes within it a significant percentage of disguised unemployment, that is, people who work on the land but whose income is far below the basic subsistence level, and their marginal contribution to gross

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production on the land is actually below zero.

By 1982 there were 87 000 migrant workers to South Africa and commuters to the nearberhite towns and farms.

The dependence of Venda on migrant labour, and its location within the South African political economy, is also shown by the fact that over 70% of its gross national income comes from remittances by migrant workers. The South African economy has been experiencing a recurrent crisis, and one of the results of this has been increased numbers of unemployed. Migrant workers have been heavily affected; the number of migrant workers from Venda dropped from 87 000 in 1982 to 49 000 in 1986. This was obviously the cause of the increase of about 38 000 in the numbers of the unemployed.

Wages below subsistence level

Workers in Venda are among the most exploited in South Africa. The working class there is vulnerable to intense exploitation by capital, since the law allows no trade union organisation. Inflation in South Africa averaged 12.4% in 1988, therefore the legal average minimum wage in Venda of R1 10 per month (1988 figure) is far below a subsistence wage. At that rate, a single trip to the supermarket could mean that one returns with a half-empty basket.

The salaries of the Venda president and his cabinet are a far cry from these starvation wages. In 1988, Venda ministers earned R55 217, and their deputies R50 366. On top of that, they, received non-taxable allowances to the tune of R24 354 and R21 037 respectively. Most of these ministers also engage in business activities of various types. The houses of the president and his cabinet, built in 1981, cost R588 000 and R88 000 respectively. This was paid from the budget of the bantustan. The class differences speak for themselves.

Electorate with no power

The political process in Venda is not very different from the general bantustan model. The fundamental characteristic of bantustan politics is the composition of the legislative assembly, 1 where a given number of seats is reserved for the nominated chiefs. These seats can range from a majority at one time to a minority at another. Even during periods when they may be a minority, they still hold some weight in deciding the balance of power.

When Venda became 'self-governing' in 1973, only 18 seats but of 60 were directly elected. The other 42 were reserved for nominated chiefs. Two main political parties contested the 1973 elections; the Venda Independence People's Party (VIPP) and the Venda National Party. The VIPP, led by Baldwin Mudau, entered the elections on an anti-bantustan platform. The VNP was the pro-independence party, led by Chief Patrick Mphephu.

The VIPP gained a popular vote for its platform. It won 13 out of the 18 elected seats, leaving Mphephu with only five. This was a clear expression of the people's abhorrence of 'independence.' But Mphephu moved swiftly to mobilise the unelected chiefs. He took them on a beautiful trip to the Manyaleti Game Reserve, the Black section of the Kruger National Park, and entertained them to the best of his ability. The result was that of the 42 chiefs, 37 supported

Mphephu and only five had the nerve to refuse. Over the next two years, some chiefs began to desert Mphephu and move towards the VIPP, thus reducing his majority to six. But the weak political strategy of the VIPP made it unable to capitalise on this development and secure the removal of Mphephu. The VIPP was not strongly committed to its own campaigning platforms. There was a lot of vacillation, which became clear later when they accepted the system. Students in revolt

The 1976 student uprising had its effects in Venda. A militant student movement took root, and in 1977 there was a massive student uprising' around the anti-Bantu Education issue. Students boycotted classes, and marched on the legislative assembly to stone and attempt to burn it. The . police moved in with their usual repressive

methods. Faced with a continued uprising, the regime quickly pushed through legislation which gave Mphahlele powers to detain without trial, and ban meetings. As a result, over 100 schools were closed, hundreds of students detained and thousands sent home.

It was in this tense climate that Mphahlele called the 1979 pre-independence elections. By that time, the number of elected seats had increased from 18 to 42, and despite its unclear position, the VIPP won 31 of them, apparently in a poll of just over 50%. Before the assembly met to nominate the chief minister, Mphahlele used his powers as incumbent chief minister to detain some members of the VIPP in order to provoke them. The VIPP boycotted the meeting, and Mphahlele emerged unopposed as the new chief minister. His base was very weak, though. In 1979 he proceeded with his independence plans.

Unable to devise any strategy to remove Mphahlele, the VIPP leadership, in an about-turn called for the merger of the VIPP and the VNP. In what they called the "national interest." Scenting blood, Mphahlele refused this, and scornfully continued to preside over the crisis-ridden bantustan.

Mudau died in 1981 without having realised his dreams of enjoying power in Venda, and was succeeded by an even more ambitious opportunist, Gilbert Bakane. Bakane declared, "Venda is democratic," and finally recognised the bantustan which, in the early 1970s, the VIPP leadership had vowed to keep away from so-called independence.

In 1987, the Republic of Venda Constitution Amendment Act made Venda a de facto one-party bantustan.

In an amendment to Section 24(1), the Act now says, "every member of the Venda Parliament must be and remain a member of the Venda National Party." This effectively cuts away the question of the democratic and patriotic forces in Venda being in parliamentary opposition to the VNP.

It must, however, not imply that the Venda regime cannot be pressurised through struggle and by mass action to allow parliamentary opposition.

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#### Repression '1

From its inception, the Venda bantustan faced opposition from the people. The experiences of students and the community during the 1977 uprising left no doubt about the repressive propensity of the Mphahlele regime. The detention of students and the banning of meetings under security legislation were some of the clear and open forms of repression.

Since then, a number of events have again highlighted the brutal nature of the Venda bantustan authorities. Following a daring attack on the Sibasa police station by a unit of Umkhonto We Sizwe in 1981, the Mphahlele regime unleashed a campaign of terror against the people. There were large-scale detentions and torture of detainees. One detainee died during this period. Well-known church people like Dean Farisani were singled out for special repressive actions. Under the Venda Public Safety Act, the regime has given itself powers to declare martial law at

any time it feels threatened by actions of the people. This automatically means letting loose its police and army units on the people. Any action by the people against the regime can be quickly dubbed a "civil disruption," and martial law can be used against the people. The Venda police are now notorious for their harsh actions against any form of people's protest.

When Mphephu died in April 1988, Ravele succeeded him as president. In June, the regime under Ravele declared illegal the community newspaper, The Advertiser. A community advice centre was summarily closed. Once again, Dean Farisani was arrested and kept in detention by the Venda regime. In an attempt to dilute the militancy of the youth, the regime has set up an indoctrination centre called the Maheni Youth Adventure Camp, the main purpose of which is to move the youth away from the democratic movement, particularly the United Democratic Front. Many sessions at this centre are also directed against the ANC and its allies. During the height of the national uprisings of 1984-86, Venda had in its cells a number of detainees, activists and non-activists. Other repressive bantustans had also kept detainees; in line with the general approach of the South

African regime. Transkei had about 368, Ciskei 116, Bophuthatswana 8 and Venda 28. By 1987, there were still a number of detainees in these bantustans, the highest numbers being in the Transkei, Ciskei and Venda.

#### Corruption

As in most of the bantustans, corruption is rife - in Venda. The salaries and houses of the Venda establishment are just a small indication of the miserable state of affairs. It is generally known in Venda that to get a job, you have to buy this minister a video or that minister a TV. Not content with their huge salaries, these parasites go further, to rob people who earn far less than they do. Not only that - sexual harassment of women -; is commonplace in job procurement. There has, also been a number of 'n'tual murders' of people by ministers, who, in line with their idealistic conception of life, seek to strengthen their position's in society by 'muti.'

; a In the face of all the objective conditions that the people in this bantustan suffer under, it should have come as no surprise when the people rose up in defiance in August 1988. Indeed, the people's patience is not endless. Accumulated frustrations and anger found expression in the more than four days of the Venda general strike. , - Sparked off by the murder of a teacher in Tshakuma, the general strike started when pupils at the school embarked upon an eight-week strike, demanding that the murderer be found.

\_ Students at the University of Venda followed suit with a protest march to the Venda parliament. The march was mercilessly broken up' by the police, and a number of students were detained. As is common practice in this repressive bantustan, the detainees were tortured.

#### Massive show of united action

As mood developed amongst the people for decisive and militant action against the regime. The main suspect in the teacher's murder was nobody elsetbut A A Tshivase, then the strong man of the Ravele regime. Tshivase was in charge of. four government departments, including those of law and order, and justice and prisons. Most people in Venda feared this man, but the general strike changed all that.

In a massive show of united action, students, workers, teachers, civil servants, taxi-drivers and some police v-took part in an historic four-day stayaway. The progressive clergy came out openly in support. The stayaway completely paralysed economic activities, schools and the bureaucracy. The mood of the people was high, militant. The Ravele regime was compelled by this mass action to force the resignation of Tshivase from the cabinet. But the people wanted him brought to justice for the murders he had committed.

There are many lessons to be learned from this mass upsurge in Venda, locally, in other bantustans and within the mass democratic and revolutionary movement. The primary one is that there exists in Venda a general mass indignation against the bantustan regime. This indignation can be mobilised into peoplels action round a common programme. Because of repression, ' mass opposition to the Ravele regime has not as yet been channelled through mass democratic organisation. Clearly various fomis of organisation need to be devised in order to harness this political situation.

#### Fertile ground for organisation

One form of organisation is clearly going to be clandestine or semi-clandestine in the short to medium term. This should encompass all sectors of the people, and primarily workers, students, youth, religious people and the bantustan armed forces and police. The August uprising shows that the ground is fertile for such organisation. ' This form of organisation should be guided by the possibilities for future political developments, such as the reversal of the one-party system. - , In the event of such reversal, the tactics to be applied should be fully discussed with the entire democratic and revolutionary movement. One tactic should be to come out with an opposition party which will draw on the lessons of the VIPP, and will be based among the masses in the area. Such an organisation could win most of the seats

in the legislative assembly. Whether it takes over the administration or not will depend on the particular state of affairs locally and nationally, and must be decided on in consultation with the mass democratic movement, With the clear objective of blocking any collaborationist forces.

Unlike the soldiers' revolt in Bophuthatswana in February, or the Holomisa coup in Transkei in 1987, the Venda situation has the potential of involving the mass of the people in removing the reactionary clique in power in the bantustan. Some form of localised insurrection is possible. The apartheid regime will work hard to reverse people's gains, and that is why the timing of particular forms of open struggle will be crucial.

But the role of the mass democratic movement as a whole will be of no less significance. It will be of primary political importance that revolutionary content be infused into all the , struggles waged. The perspective must be to, ' broaden political consciousness beyond the Venda ethnicity that Ravele and his Pretoria bosses are imposing on the people. The perspectives of the oppressed people as a whole should find expression in localised struggles, so that these can tailor into the question of destroying the entire apartheid state and creating a unitary, non-racial and democratic society.

Many challenges ahead

The ten years of independence in Venda have seen increased suffering among the people. Independence has been of no benefit to the people at all; only to the puppets of the apartheid state. There is nothing for the people to celebrate, and the mood of the people was clearly demonstrated in the general strike of August 1988. People have to work towards removing the Ravele regime.

However, there are a number of subjective weaknesses that the democratic and revolutionary movement needs to attend to. Among other things, and as part of what has been suggested above, there is need to:

1. Organise workers to demand trade union rights; for example, the right to organise and belong to a trade union.

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3. Organise students at the university and schools.

4. Organise women, youth and patriotic chiefs.

5. Organise the police and army units to the side of the people.

6. Forge links with the mass democratic organisations throughout South Africa. This should not be just the initiative of the progressive forces in Venda alone; but part of the programme of the mass movement as a whole. .

7. Engage in armed struggle as part of the general offensive, but bearing in mind local conditions - for example, actions against local tormentors of the people like Tshivase and those diehard police and soldiers.

There is a need to put forward continually the perspective of a united, democratic and non-racial South Africa. Through struggle, the repressive bantustan regimes can be removed, as part of the forward march to people's power. in a united South Africa.

People of Venda queue for water