

History

Oliver Reginald Tambo was born in Mbizana in eastern Pondoland in the Cape Province on 27 October 1917. He attended Ludeke Methodist School, and completed his primary education at Holy Cross Mission near Flagstaff. From there he transferred to St. Peter's Secondary School in Johannesburg. After completing his secondary education Tambo went to the University College of Fort Hare in Alice and earned a Bachelor of Science degree in 1941. He remained at Fort Hare to qualify for an honours degree but was expelled in 1942 during a student strike over demands for a democratically elected student representative council. Following his expulsion he returned to St. Peter's in Johannesburg as a science and mathematics teacher.

In Johannesburg Tambo became involved with a group of young leaders who advocated a more radical direction for the ANC. Working with Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Anton Lembede, Ashby Mda, William Ncomo, C.M. Majombozi, and others, Tambo became a founding member of the ANC Youth League (ANCYL) in 1944. He served as the Youth League's national secretary and was elected president of the Transvaal in 1948 and national vice-president in 1949.

Tambo moved quickly into a position of influence in the senior ANC and was elected to the Transvaal Executive of the ANC. In 1948, along with Walter Sisulu, he was elected to the National Executive Committee. Tambo was also a member of the committee that drew up the Programme of Action in 1948, which helped move the ANC from a passive organization charged with catering to the elite, to one which mobilized the people for massive campaigns of civil disobedience and non-violent resistance.

Tambo left teaching in 1947 and took up law. With the support of Walter Sisulu he was articled in a Johannesburg law firm. In 1952 he qualified as an attorney, and later that year he established a law practice with Nelson Mandela. Their legal practice championed underprivileged victims of apartheid laws.

Pressure and banning orders from the South African government forced Sisulu to resign from ANC leadership leading to Tambo's appointment as acting secretary-general in 1954. Although banned himself and restricted to Johannesburg, Tambo was allowed to retain his leadership position in the ANC. During this period he helped to guide the ANC through the Defiance Campaigns and the difficult campaigns against the Western area removal and the introduction of Bantu Education. In December 1956, he was arrested and charged with treason. He was among those discharged from the Treason Trial in late 1957. In 1958, with Albert Luthuli isolated by bans restricting him to his Natal home, Tambo was elected to fill the newly created post of deputy president-general of the ANC. In 1959 Tambo was banned and was forbidden to attend gatherings for five years.

Following the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960, ANC leaders were convinced a banning of the ANC was imminent and made plans for Tambo to leave the country to serve as a foreign spokesman and to establish external missions and mobilize international support against the apartheid system.

From the banning of the ANC and PAC (Pan Africanist Congress) in 1960 until the unbanning of the ANC in 1990, Tambo led the ANC's organization in exile, living in London, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe. In conjunction with Yusuf Dadoo he was instrumental in the establishment of the South African United Front (SAUF) which brought together the ANC external missions, the PAC (Pan Africanist Congress), the South African Indian Congress, and the South West African National Union (SWANU). Through successful lobbying the SAUF brought about the expulsion of South Africa from

the Commonwealth in 1961. Following its initial success the SAUF broke up in July 1961.

Aided by various African governments, Tambo established ANC missions in Egypt, Ghana, Morocco, and London. Eventually the ANC operated missions in 27 countries by 1990. Countries hosting missions included all permanent members of the United Nations Security Council with the exception of China.

When the ANC moved to armed struggle and activated Umkhonto we Sizwe, Tambo was instrumental in securing the cooperation of numerous African governments in providing training and facilities for the ANC. Following Albert Luthuli's death in 1967, Tambo was named acting president-general. His appointment was approved by the Morogoro Conference in 1969.

Throughout the 1970s Tambo's international prestige rose immensely as he traveled the world promoting opposition to the apartheid system. In 1985 Tambo was reelected ANC president at the Kabwe conference. In that role he served as head of the Politico-Military Council (PMC) of the ANC and as commander in chief of Umkhonto we Sizwe.

In 1989 Tambo suffered a stroke and spent several months in Stockholm recuperating. He returned to South Africa in 1991 and was elected national chairperson at the ANC's first legal national conference in July 1991. He was offered the position of chancellor at Fort Hare University in 1991. Oliver Tambo died on 24 April 1993.