

(PROFILE: Oliver Tambo

weekly Mail,

October 23 to October 29, 1987

Tambo at 70

The ANC chiefs celebrates his
seventieth birthday today.
Almost thirty^ of those years
have been spent in exile

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Tambo today: To the ANC's followers, an African Moses they hope will
someday part the waters of Limpopo Picture: vuyi mbalo, Atrapix

place it now does in South African politics -
that of a ubiquitous, combative phantom,
which few either can or do ignore.

One often hears from exiles their characteri-
sations of the ANC leadership of the fifties
with Nelson Mandela the "bulldozer" and
"action man", Walter Sisulu the "strategist",
Govan Mbeki the "theorist", and Oliver Tambo
the "unifier", the man who could hold together
the different strands which make up the ANC.

It was, above all, this group of (then) young
nationalists and communists who remoulded
the ANC from an inert body into a militant
movement with a mass following.

The ANC is now, since the 1976 Soweto
students uprising, again being remoulded by
another and larger group of young intellectu-
als.

Like many of today's youth, Tambo learned
his first political lessons in confrontations with
school and university authorities.

Born to peasant parents in the Bizana district
of the Transkei, he received a series of scholar-
ships. At Fort Hare, where he later completed
a BSc, Tambo led protests against an assault
on a black woman by a white boarding master.

And, while doing a subsequent Education Di-
ploma, he was expelled for leading another
student protest.

Together with the brilliant young Africanist Anton Lembede, Mandela, Sisulu, A.P. Mda and Robert Sobukwe, Tambo was a leading light in the formation of the ANC Youth League in 1944.

Tambo served as national secretary of the ANCYL, later becoming its Transvaal president, and eventually its national vice-president in 1948-9.

In 1949, the year the Youth League produced the ANC's first militant "Programme of Action", Tambo was elected to the ANC national executive committee proper.

Over this period, he considered entering tlf priesthood but, after Walter Sisulu had talked him out of it, he went into legal practice in Johannesburg with Mandela.

In the 1950s, he was served with first a two-year and then a five-year banning order. He was elected at different times to the posts of ANC secretary general and, then, deputy president, the position he held when the ANC was outlawed in 1960 under the presidency of Albert Lutuli.

A week after the Sharpeville shootings of March 21 1960 and two days before the declaration of the state of emergency Tambo left the country illegally to form the ANC External Mission. In fact, the executive's decision that he should leave had been taken a year earlier - but Tambo had been resisting it.

Through the ANC's bleakest years - 1960 to 1969 - Tambo led the movement in exile, treading an often lonely path from Tanzania, to London and Lusaka, and back.

Progress was slow and very painful for the ANC. The Wankie Campaign, mounted jointly by ANC and Zapu guerillas in then-Rhodesia in 1967, proved a costly experience.

And, when the ANC held its first National Consultative Conference in Morogoro, Tanzania, in 1969, feelings ran high. The entire executive was forced to resign, and Tambo was lambasted by delegates speaking from the conference floor.

But, by the end of the conference, Tambo

had been elected president to succeed Albert Lutuli (who had died in 1967) and a new sense of purpose had been achieved in the ANC. A "Revolutionary Council" was established to "take the struggle back home".

However, in 1975, the ANC was again shaken when eight senior members, led by Tennyson and Ambrose Makiwane, formed a faction they called ANC (African Nationalist) and sought an alliance with the Pan Africanist Congress.

The group also campaigned to end the relationship between the ANC and SA Communist Party. The eight were suspended from the movement and the ANC(AN) faded away.

An ANC veteran, who spent years in guerilla camps doing very little, recalls of those grim days: "They were very confusing, very difficult times. But O.R. led us through them, and so he became the father and mother of us all".

Howard Barrell

THE closest Oliver Tambo has got to South African soil-since the day he slipped across the border into exile, was a passenger seat in a high-flyingplane which hurried him across the country's eastern edges, en route to a funeral in Lesotho.

The plane flight, in December 1982, followed a South African commando raid on Maseru in which 42 people were killed, 30 of them African National Congress members.

Tambo insisted at an emergency national executive committee meeting in Lusaka that he would attend the funeral. The president could not cower behind in safety while his colleagues died in the frontlines.

The executive refused to let him go.

They pointed out that the only way he could get to landlocked Lesotho was by flying over South African territory, and there was no guarantee his plane would not be downed.

But Tambo insisted and a fierce debate ensued. By the time it had ended, Tambo had extracted an agreement from his colleagues.

Firstly, he would go. Secondly, their objections would be placed on record in the minutes of the meeting. And, thirdly, if his plane was in fact downed, his colleagues would not say publicly, "We told him so".

Very much against their better judgement, his top security advisors set about making a set of devious arrangements to get Tambo to Lesotho safely.

There, a few days later, he addressed the mourners. After 20 years in exile, he was finally south of the Limpopo. But still a long way from home.

Today Oliver Tambo turns 70. His colleagues in the ANC's External Mission are preparing a round of celebrations to mark the birthday of this African Moses who, they believe, will lead them out of despair and nearly 30 years of exile.

Tambo has not yet parted the heavily guarded Limpopo - and some would argue he is unlikely ever to do so. But this does not dampen ANC members' enthusiasm for him. He enjoys an astonishing measure of respect and affection from his colleagues at all levels in the outlawed movement.

Whereas criticism of other members of the outlawed movement's leadership is quite often heard in ANC circles, "O.R.", as he is known, escapes completely.

This enthusiasm mystifies outsiders. Particularly since the ANC, 75 years after its launch, seems a long way from reaching its objectives.

But the respect for Tambo is derived from precisely this fact: he has stuck with the ANC through thick and thin - and some of those times have been very lean indeed.

He has led the ANC through its bleakest days to what are now, arguably, its brightest. Its enemies are now forced to accord it more attention than at any stage in its chequered history.

Any realistic history of the ANC will have to take Tambo's personality into account. Without doubt, it has been a major unifying catalyst within the movement. Above all, it is that unity which has enabled the ANC to occupy the

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