

POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT BIOGRAPHY OF MR. KOPENG OBED BAPELA.

Family Background:

I was born in Alexandra on 28th Of February 1958, and am the first born in the family, had four brothers and two sisters. My mother, who got married to my stepfather and both became my parents were ordinary labourers and one could say with certainty that are part of the working class. The place we stayed and grew at in Alexandra was a rented one roomed house, which was “all in one”, a bedroom, a kitchen, dining and lounge, and as children would sleep on the floor. Life continued with my father being the only person employed and my mother was in and out of odd jobs as a domestic worker in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg.

At an early age was taken to Ga-Masemola to stay with my grandfather, started the school there in 1967 but later moved to Johannesburg in Alexandra to rejoin my mother. The school I attended in from 1969 was a lower primary to higher primary by the name Gordon Primary School, which at the time didn't have enough class rooms and will moonlight or share the day where some will be on morning class and afternoon class. The condition due to overcrowding were such that will be taught under a tree, as Alexandra was being demolished and part of the school buildings made way for the single men's hostel in Alexandra.

Currently am married with three children who are in their teens and still at school and staying at my own house.

Political Background:

My political involvement started in 1976 in June to be precise. Though one was political conscious, as I was doing history and secondly had a classmate who was my friend and will continuously talk with me politics of South Africa, Africa and the world. I remember the Nixon Gate scandal in the United States of America when it made the international headlines we used during our study periods at his place or wherever we were together used to read about and will discuss and analyse it's effects in the international body politics. My later skipped the country after the 1976 student uprisings with his twin sister and their names are Bietjie and Abrahams from the so – called coloured families. His is currently working for the National Intelligence Agency and the sister got married in Australia and still lives there with her husband and children.

In was around 1975 when the Bantu Education Department introduced Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in the schools and in Alexandra was introduced the beginning of 1976 and was doing my Junior Certificate referred as the “Form Three”. Having done all my subjects in English, except for languages, it was a very difficult shift that affected our performance as students.

Student Uprising in Alexandra – 1976:

On the 17th of June in the evening a meeting was convened at the old Alexandra stadium, behind the white building, which was used as a sporting area for boxing training in the evenings and was my class room (for Accountancy Commerce and Business) students, Form 2 B, as we were categorised then.

The Alexandra stadium was also used as a training facility by many soccer clubs and a one go will probably have 10 or 15 clubs training at a go, sharing whatever space available and will have up to 100 people or more in the dusty pitch.

The venue was chosen a cover and those who came for the meeting first watched the training sessions, as there were always spectators on the grandstands coming to watch. Usually the training sessions ended around 20h00 or 8’00 pm. As the stadium cleared were called behind the white buildings and were addressed about the action for the 18th of July.

Some of the leaders were members of South African Students Movement (SASM), such as late Toto Skhosana, who was my classmate, and was killed as Mkhonto we Sizwe trained guerrilla in Pongola in the 1977 battle with the security police, Lebone Mosia who now works for the Mpumalanga Premier’s Office and one of the MKMVA leaders, and many others.

This became my formal organisational involvement and organised activities, which baptised me formally into the politics. In the morning of June 18th was on a Friday, those who knew what was to happen did not carry our full schoolbooks. In fact we were carrying old books in plastic carry bags. We had arrived at school on time, before the ringing of the bell, mixed as usually with our other colleagues, were told not to act suspiciously and never to say a word to those who were not part of the meeting.

When the bell rang, we all moved to the Assembly point for the morning prayers, singing of hymns and for announcements. It was after the Lords

prayer, when one student leader, Toto Skhosana moved from the rows to the front and made the announcement punctuated by the “Amandla”, “Power” and “Down with Afrikaans”.

Students all filed out to the 15th Avenue taxi rank, were joined by other youth and one leader who was released from Robben Island called Jappie Negengulu and marched through Alexandra, School by school until we reached the Peri-Urban Police Quarters in First Avenue which led to shootings and all broke loose.

Police came in and there were shootings, running, teargas, stone throwing and this led to 19 people killed in Alexandra over the entire weekend. This changed the political landscape of Alexandra as more and more young people joined in defying authorities on the usage of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction and Bantu education as an abhorred system of education.

Funerals took place, police hunted leaders and many skipped the country and most where people I knew as classmates, as senior students who after passing their Junior Certificate left to attend school in Soweto, Tembisa, Katlehong and other places in the Witwatersrand area.

Joining a Student Organisation - 1977:

In the year 1977, after the arrest of the June 16 leadership in Soweto, Student Representatives Representative Council – (SSRC), new student bodies were established, such as Soweto Student’s League (SSL) and in Alexandra was the Alexandra Student’s League (ASL) with Sylvester Zakhele Ndaba (one of the former Referees of the PSL in soccer), Hlome Mbatha currently a General in the SANDF, Steve Tau, Jackie Seroke a poet and currently a leader in the PAC. I was one of the additional members in the Executive and one of the student activists at the Alexandra High School.

In 1978, was expelled from school together with other student leaders, and by that time were on the run from the police and others left the country into exile such as Hlome Mbatha.

The same year was approached by Petros “Jingles” Makgatho, one of the late celebrated poet from Alexandra together with Sandy Thobejane. They had wanted to form a new student organisation to mobilise in the school as both were still full-time students.

Agreed to form the Youth Alive, which was to disguise itself as a cultural and a tuition organisation to help students with their studies. This was done because it was at the time when the Black Consciousness Movement was banned.

One of the mentor in the 1976/1977 was Bra Joe Manana, who was and still is a business man from Alexandra who was already part of the underground ANC and in the Black Consciousness movement.

Formation of COSAS in South Africa in 1979 and the establishment of the Alexandra Branch in 1980.

The new era of politics dawned in South Africa which was a move from Black Consciousness to the congress politics of the African National Congress which were dominant in the 1950s before its banning in 1960s. Congress of South Africa Students (COSAS) was formed in Johannesburg and ushered in more militancy, progressive politics and