

**Minister Fraternal vis-à-vis Ecumenism:
a close look at the confrontation between the
South African Council of Churches and the then
Bophuthatswana Ministers Fraternity (1976-1994)**

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Abstract

During the rule of the National Party in South Africa, the Bantustans were founded on the basis of discrimination along the lines of race as well as ethnicity. At the same time, some were offered “independence” which to many Black South Africans was suicidal especially in respect of their human dignity. However, this did not end there as it also advocated territorial advancement along the same lines mentioned above. The ecumenical movement in South Africa then was vocal in respect of the socio, political, economic and religious injustices of the time. The founding of the “Independence of Bophuthatswana” also opened a window of “opportunity” for them to establish what they called Bophuthatswana Minister Fraternity. Its functions were in direct opposition to what the South African Council of Churches stood for and believed in. This article will examine the socio, political, economic and religious context of that time.

Introduction

This article presents a brief background of the South African Council of Churches (SACC). It also focuses on the creation and development of Bophuthatswana (Bop), its politics and the Bophuthatswana Ministerial Fraternity (BOMIFRA). Attention will also be given to the confrontation between the South African Council of Churches (SACC) and BOMIFRA. This article will focus on the beginning of the “independence of Bophuthatswana”, the Bophuthatswana Ministerial Fraternity (BOMIFRA), and Winterveld as a point of contestation.

Background

In 1948 the National Party won the general elections in South Africa. As a political party it then introduced apartheid policies which were racial in nature. These included providing better economic and physical resources to Whites to the exclusion of all other racial groups. The National Party used the apartheid policies to divide and rule South Africa on racial grounds. As part of reinforcing apartheid’s divide and rule strategy, it inculcated an ideology of ethnicism among South African Africans. This practice was not extended to the South African Coloureds and people of Asian origin who lived in South Africa. These groups were never allocated any homelands. Instead they were incorporated into the tri-cameral parliament of the National Party’s apartheid government. The National Party further promoted apartheid by granting each African ethnic group such as the Batswana, AmaXhosa and AmaZulu people “political independence”. This was regarded as a pseudo-independence by many people globally and locally. Some Black African chiefs such as Chief Lucas Mangope, Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi and Chief Kaizer Matanzima were indentified to lead the process, establish homelands and opt for “independence” of their ethnic groups within those homelands. Since this article focuses on the South African Council of Churches and the then Bophuthatswana Ministerial Fraternity (1976–1994), the other homelands will not be included here.

The beginning

Background of the South African Council of Churches

The South African Council of Churches (SACC) was established in the 1800s but under a different name (www.sacc.org.za accessed on 28 April 2011). The name changed over time until 1968 when it

was changed from the Christian Council of South Africa to South African Council of Churches. Bishop Bill Burnett was appointed its first secretary-general. During that early period, it was a predominantly White patriarchal organisation whose aims and objectives were more focused on the racial aspirations of the then government than on faith. Bishop Bill Burnett proposed a SACC whose focus was changed to tackle issues of discrimination which included those of gender and race. In 1970, Mr John Rees was appointed as the second general-secretary of the SACC. He continued in the steps of Bishop Bill Burnett and vowed to allow Blacks to take the leadership role and have a say in the council. The SACC was declared a Black organisation within two years of his tenure. This led to many Black members feeling they belonged and could express themselves more freely in the SACC than in their churches. As a result, the SACC then set its own agenda and aligned itself with the World Council of Churches on programmes such as combating discrimination such as racism, ethnicity and gender (www.sacc.org.za accessed on 28 April 2011). In other words, the SACC got actively involved in trying to ensure that all people in South Africa could live together peacefully without any form of discrimination as propagated in the Christian scripture. This also included any state created such as Bophuthatswana which was based on the ethnicity of the Batswana people.

Bophuthatswana background

On 5 August 1972, Chief Lucas Mangope formed the Bophuthatswana National Party (BNP) which he led until 1974 when tension divided it. The tension came about because some people who were in the Tswana National Party (TNP) constituted mainly by Batswana were outside the boundaries of Bophuthatswana (Bop). Many of these people were opposed to the idea of Bop becoming an “independent state”. Some people ended up leaving the existing political parties in Bop (Benbo in Madise 2005:113). Cracks began to show when, in 1974, Lucas Mangope formed the Bophuthatswana Democratic Party (BDP). The new party managed to assert and position itself in the cabinet before the “independence” of Bop which coincidentally was achieved under Mangope’s leadership. This was despite opposition from many other Batswana political parties. This resulted in Bophuthatswana becoming an “independent state” on 6 December 1977.

For a long time the situation in Bop was exacerbated by the deeply personalised and paternalistic rule of Mangope. Part of Mangope’s paternalism was to use Christianity and the church to nurture Batswana into ethno-nationalism (Madise 2005:114). This could be seen in Lucas Mangope’s insistence that his political party adhere to Christian principles. He was also determined to maintain the “independence” of Bop. At the same time there was a specific interpretation of Batswana which was shaped around traditionalism and Christianity as a form of political control within Bop and its institutions. After being in existence for 20 years, the BNP decided to change its name to United Christian Democratic Party (UCDP) because the leaders of the party believed that Bop needed to be led by Christian principles. The constitution of the UCDP was largely influenced by some church leaders who supported the homeland government of Bop (Jones 1999:390-513). As individuals, these ministers had also formed the ministerial fraternity which was known as the Bophuthatswana Ministerial Fraternity (BOMIFRA). For those ministers and individuals, Bop was governed by a Christian government.

Bophuthatswana Ministerial Fraternity (BOMIFRA)

The relationship between the church and the state in the context of Bop was always very controversial. Chapter 2 of the Constitution of Bophuthatswana, clause (4)(b) 9, states that: "All people are equal before the law, and none may because of his sex, his descent, his language, his origin or his religious beliefs be favoured or prejudiced" (Constitution 1991:3). In spite of this clause, the homeland state favoured the Christian religion above other religions. In one of the interviews conducted with Rev Simon Kgobokwe (who was a minister in the Dutch Reformed Church and a former minister of Transport in Bophuthatswana) indicated that they were a Christian government (November 7, 2003). One of the reasons why Bop opted to be a Christian "state" was simply that at the time they first consulted the church leaders and asked them to pray to God for their success. It was only after they were "convinced" as a result of their consultation with the church leaders that their prayers had been answered in that Bop's "independence" was to become a reality, that they decided to become a Christian government. Kgobokwe further emphasised that there was nothing wrong with that because the leadership was Christian in any case.

Many of the churches that supported the state of Bop were generally not affiliated with the ecumenical movement of South Africa. These churches were mostly charismatic, Pentecostal Dutch Reformed Church and indigenous churches (interview with Rev D Atong, November 7, 2003). These denominations were seen to be a-political vis-à-vis the mainline churches. The mainline churches were affiliated with the ecumenical body of the South African Council of Churches. According to Rev Atong, this simply indicated the inheritance from the bearer of Bop which was the South African government.

In support of Rev Diamond Atong, Rev Tselapedi who belonged to the Evangelical Church argued that the church was older than the state and must therefore be prophetic in nature and support the state. Tselapedi was one of those ministers who were actively involved in the confrontation with both the government of Bop and BOMIFRA. Tselapedi was also involved in organising the protest marches with other churches and individual ministers against the government of Bophuthatswana. In spite of the opposition from the mainline churches and their continued refusal to recognise the "autonomy" of Bop, Mangope together with BOMIFRA continued to call meetings with individual ministers to persuade them to recognise Bop and to remind them that they (ministers) were the salt of the earth. He also queried whether they had any conscience. BOMIFRA saw the resistance of some church denominations and ministers as defying the state of governance of Bop. For Lucas Mangope, the responsibility of the church was to ensure that the community did not rebel against the state. This was justified by quoting Romans 13:1-10 from the Scriptures where it is emphasised that God has ordained the state and that people should recognise this.

The Bophuthatswana Ministerial Fraternity (BOMIFRA) was formed early in 1992, and, not by or through the churches, but by individual ministers and was not affiliated to any church movement. However, this fraternity functioned as though churches were affiliated to it. At the time when this fraternity was founded, the government of Bop made it clear that there shall be no "outside influence". This meant that movements or organisations outside Bophuthatswana were not allowed to function in Bop. For some reason, the South African Council of Churches was also not allowed to function in Bop. Under the leadership of Rev SS Seane, BOMIFRA's function was to improve the relations between church and state, and to further unite the different Christian denominations that were in the homeland state (Madise 2005, unpublished doctoral thesis, 121). BOMIFRA also emphasised that the "independence" of Bop was anointed by God and was going to exist for many centuries. At the same time, in one of its meetings in Bop that was held in Tlhakong (Mabeskraal), one of its members, Rev MA Tshagameno who also belonged to the United African Federated Apostolic Zion Church, in his welcoming speech, mentioned that the aim of BOMIFRA in Bop was to ensure that people hear the gospel of God. Reverend Tsegameno further said that it was in times of turmoil that the church had to work in collaboration with the chiefs who, he said, were also anointed by God, to find solutions to the prevailing problems (*Mirror* 4(26), 1993).

In support of Rev Tshagameno, Mrs D Ntuane, who was the wife to Chief SG Ntuane, emphasised that the polity of the faithful church could only be carried out by a minister who was honest and loyal (*Mirror* 4(26), 1993). Mrs Ntuane continued that the church was needed to guide people to respect the government and preach the gospel and not politics to them like other churches (in this case the reference was to the mainline churches that were affiliated with the South African Council of Churches). Mrs Ntuane asked that BOMIFRA and the affiliated ministers pray for the chiefs and the cabinet ministers as well as for the "nation of Bophuthatswana" so that it would not fall into the hands of the "enemies" who were busy confusing Batswana (Madise 2005:122). In spite of all the statements that were made by BOMIFRA and other people about peace and stability in Bop, the situation on the

ground was quite the opposite as people were constantly harassed by the police. In some places such as in Winterveld, there was no running water and no delivery of services such as proper school buildings and health facilities. No provision was made for senior citizens and the disabled people who were not "citizens of Bophuthatswana". The Bophuthatswana citizens were the only ones allowed to receive pension grants. At this time the South African Council of Churches (SACC) was not involved with the situation in Winterveld. One of the main problems that people in Winterveld were experiencing was a lack of proper educational facilities. For example, school principals in Winterveld were concerned with the poor supply of books, stationery, lack of toilets and no running water.

Winterveld: a point of contestation

Winterveld came into being as a result of forced removals of Black people from the old Pretoria townships of the Eastwood areas and Lady Selbourne. Winterveld is situated to the north of Pretoria, about 35 km away, and was one of the squatter settlements in Bophuthatswana (others were Thaba-Nchu in the Free State and Ndebele settlement in Hammanskraal). The area was a private and freehold land belonging to Black landowners who bought it in 1938 as plot to farm. When the Group Areas Act came into effect in the 1950s, many of the home-seekers flocked into the area after they had been removed from the old Pretoria townships (Southern Cross 1979).

Winterveld became a centre of tension and concentration for both the government of Bophuthatswana and the South African Council of Churches. The Winterveld Action Committee was functioning under the Pretoria Regional Council of Churches and it identified the principal area of concern as education. The identified problem was mainly with the schools as they were not supplied with textbooks and other facilities such as desks and chalkboards. The Council of Churches also led a project which was known as *Learn and Teach* aimed at teaching adults to read and write, and conscientising them through discussions. At the same time the Pretoria Council of Churches was involved in other ecumenical projects which included the building of schools on the land which was allocated to the church. This project was a joint venture with the Winterveld Action Committee (Madise 2005, 122).

The reason the government of Bophuthatswana did not provide any facilities to Winterveld was simply that Winterveld represented an area occupied by people who were not Batswana by ethnicity. A large proportion of the population came from the Nguni-speaking groups, mainly Xhosa, Zulu, Ndebele and Swazi. Moreover, many people around this area felt that they were pressurised by the requirements of education into a medium which was not of their own choice as Setswana was made compulsory (Chairman's Report 1985, 4). Rev SS Seane, who was at that time the ambassador of Bophuthatswana to South Africa and a member of BOMIFRA, wrote a letter to the SACC indicating to them that he was aware of the illegal schools that were operating in Winterveld and that they were teaching through the medium of Zulu (letter from the Ambassador of Bophuthatswana to the SACC). However, education was not the only problem that was facing Winterveld. Health, for instance, became another pertinent issue as evidenced through the living conditions.

Since Winterveld fell within the Bop authority and was ruled by the homeland government, this meant that Bop was supposed to supply health facilities to the residents. Instead the government chose to ignore this simply because it was not occupied by the "citizens of Bop". As a result, residents were forced to travel long distances to get to the nearest hospital or clinic. As a result the South African Council of Churches, through the regional council (Pretoria Council of Churches) and the Winterveld Action Committee, made some provision in this respect. The people around Winterveld were forced to help or assist some of their sick and injured people without the expertise of paramedics and the insight into health issues (Archdiocese of Pretoria Justice and Peace Commission Report 1984, August 7). This meant that patients did not receive proper health care. The South African Council of Churches together with the Winterveld Action Committee decided to send four lay people to attend basic training in health matters at Baragwanath Hospital. At the end of this training they were supplied with first-aid kits and were also taught how to use remedies for common ailments. This was a way to help patients before they could be taken to hospital or the doctor. The aim of the training course was to teach people about preventative medicine. These people who were trained were to work hand in hand with St Peter's mobile clinic which belonged to the Catholic Church and the Good Shepherd Clinic in Makaunyane. In spite of all this there was still a need to build more clinics by the church and register them as private clinics. The nearest hospitals to Winterveld were in Ga-Rankuwa and Hammanskraal which were in Bop and about 30 km away. An outcome of this situation was that some medical doctors who were struck off the roll of the South African Medical Association opened their private practice in this area until they were reinstated. At the same time, a lack of resources and proper facilities presented opportunities for traditional doctors to practice and thereby exert a strong influence on people.

Though the SACC had made some efforts to rescue people around Winterveld, the Bop government had other ideas related to the issue of health. The government's health department under Dr P Mokhobo at that time held a conference in Mmabatho Civic Centre (Mahikeng) on March 14th, 1981, and churches around Bop were invited to participate (Morongwa, April 1981). The government wanted the church to take a lead in the conference with regard to issues of health and development. However, the government was not so much concerned about establishing health facilities but was mainly interested in informing the communities about the outbreak of diseases such as cholera.

On 21 April 1982, the South African Council of Churches and the Bop government held a meeting in Mmabatho around the issue of water which was a problem in Winterveld. The SACC pointed out to the homeland that people had not been receiving water services, except those who used their donkey carts to draw water from distant places, while some were drawing water from either the clinics or hospitals. In some cases, owners of boreholes were charging 2 cents a litre or 50 cents a drum. The church maintained that this was an urgent matter which needed urgent attention to ensure healthier living conditions. In his response, Lucas Mangope chose not to address the matter but to question whether it was the function of the church to look into such matters. The Bop government believed that the matter involved people from Winterveld and there were allegations that the plot owners did not respond to the invitation to be involved (Minutes of the meeting 1982). In the government's response, the people from Winterveld were asked to agree to the upgrading of the facilities and they had replied to the authorities that the government should "concentrate on other areas, not our plots" (Minutes of the meeting 1982). Mangope emphasised that the government was just as concerned as the Council of Churches was about the situation in the Winterveld area. He (Mangope) further went on to say that the SACC should not divide people into groups and encourage them to criticise the government on founded or unfounded matters (Madise 2005:127).

From the side of the SACC it was clear that both Lucas Mangope and his cabinet ministers could not distinguish among the Winter Action Committee, the Pretoria Regional Council of Churches and the South African Council of Churches. The Plot Owners Association had approached the SACC with their problems which the SACC referred to the Pretoria Regional Council of Churches and the Winterveld Action Committee who later sought legal advice on the matter. Church ministers around Winterveld raised this issue with the SACC after complaints on a number of occasions, especially when the people were burying some people and children as residents and cited this as a matter of urgency. This meant that the SACC could no longer ignore the situation, and had to take it up with the homeland government.

The other confrontation between the SACC and BOMIFRA occurred as result of the pensions of the aged who required their pension money to be paid. The pensioners were people who were residents in Winterveld but without a Bop identity document. This issue was seen as a legal matter when in fact it was a political matter. Helen Suzman took up this matter with the South African government when it became apparent that they (SA government) had the ultimate responsibility as they were the ones who had set up Bop for "independence" (A profile on Winterveld undated, 6). At a meeting between the SACC and the Bop government, which was held in Mahikeng on 21 April 1982, this matter was discussed and the SACC pointed out to the Bop government that there was indeed an agreement on the matter (Madise 2005:129). The agreement stipulated that the South African government would pay the pensions of all Batswana who lived in South Africa and the Bop government would pay the pensions of all non-Batswana pensions who lived in their territory. The SACC mentioned that all the pensioners who were non-citizens of Bop were coerced into applying for Bop citizenship. The argument from the SACC was that residents and people should qualify for pension on the basis of old age or disability in agreement with the pre-independence negotiations between the two governments. The matter was regarded as urgent and that there should be no delay pending the determination of residence or citizenship.

Conclusion

This article provided a brief background of the SACC. It also focused on the creation and development of Bophuthatswana (Bop), its politics and the Bophuthatswana Ministerial Fraternity. Attention was also given to the confrontation between the SACC and BOMIFRA. It appears that some of the individual church ministers in Bop realised that the affiliation of churches with the ecumenical body in South Africa was much stronger than they thought. The only way for them to stop this body from functioning effectively was to form BMIFRA. For most of them BMIFRA was seen as an equivalent to the South African Council of Churches when in fact it was only a ministerial fraternity. The mistake made by many of those who were affiliated with this body was to simply attach it to the government. In some cases it looked more like being formed around the Constantinian model which was in support of

the government. This is evident from how the government leader Lucas Mangope was deeply involved in matters related to religion, more specifically Christianity. In spite of all this, denominations that were affiliated with the SACC did not in any way give way or relent to the pressure coming from both the authorities of the government and BOMIFRA which refused to recognise them.

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