# Nostalgia as a weapon ...

## ... and also a way to bring back the dream

- By Ari Sitas

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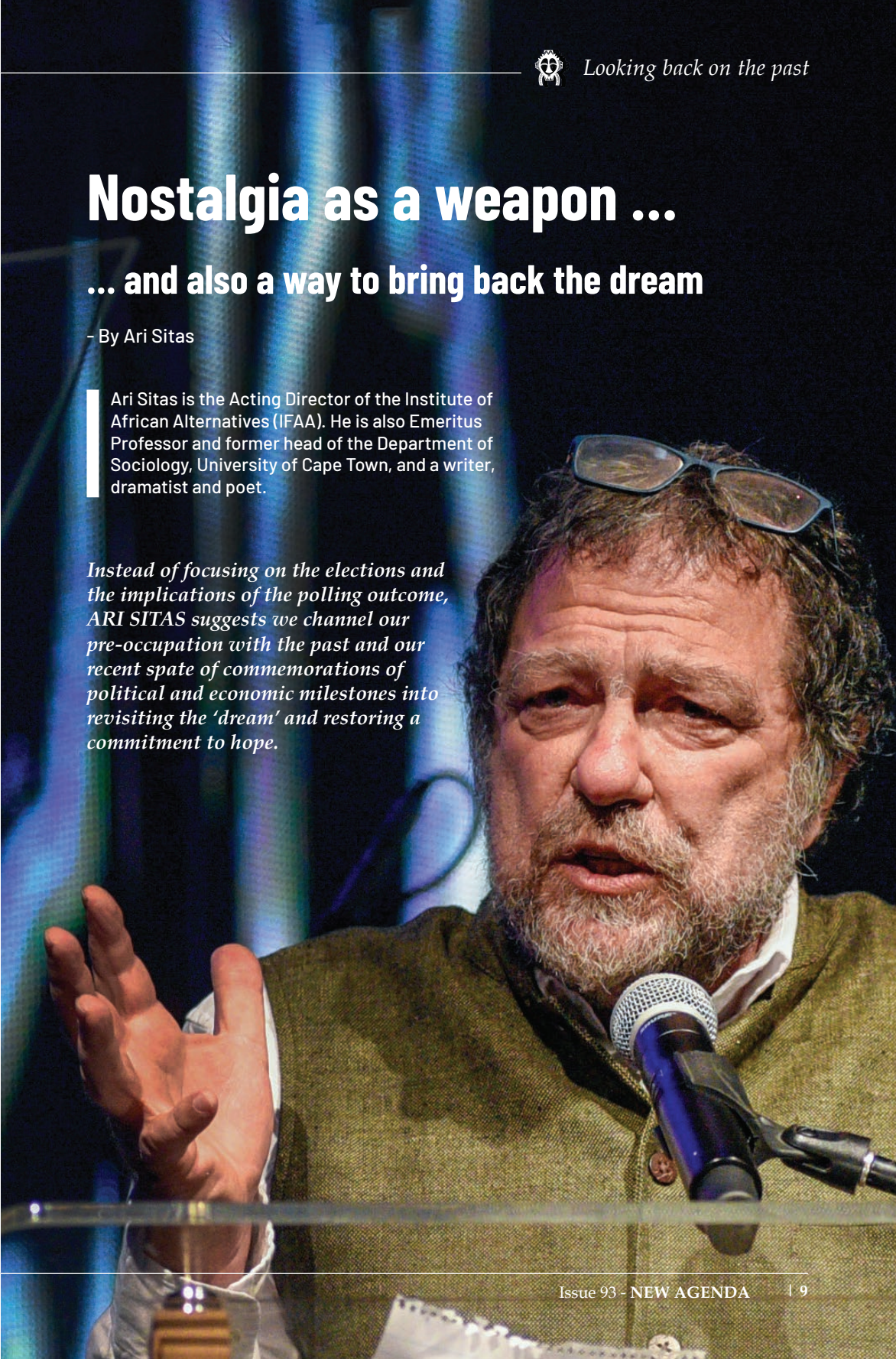
*Instead of focusing on the elections and the implications of the polling outcome, ARI SITAS suggests we channel our pre-occupation with the past and our recent spate of commemorations of political and economic milestones into revisiting the 'dream' and restoring a commitment to hope.*



The last two years have been all about political nostalgias in South Africa. They were marked by serious commemorative events that emphasised the "possible" that never was: 50 years since the Durban strikes, the spontaneous upsurge there of a black working-class; 40 years since the launch of the United Democratic Front (UDF), the unprecedented popular-democratic movement that challenged apartheid to its core. That was 2023.

2024 brought its own momentum: 30 years since the first real democratic election that ushered Mandela into the country's stewardship and the ANC into state power; 20 years since the ANC trounced Chief Buthelezi's Inkatha to take over the civil war-wracked KwaZulu-Natal and lastly ten years since Zuma's large majority which instead of reversing neo-liberal protocols as promised, introduced a rapid focus on kleptomania.

So here we are in 2024: the labour movement stands divided and battered, unsure of how to wrest livelihoods off a rampant plutocracy, white and black. The remnants of the UDF leadership were making serious noise against opportunities lost but without any movement to under-girth its voice; the more explicit leftward bemoaning the fact that 30 years of democracy has failed to deal with poverty, unemployment and inequality; those that struggled to establish a culture of peace and reconciliation in KwaZulu-Natal facing the callous re-emergence of social violence and murderous politics; those who backed the ascendance of Jacob Zuma, believing in his talk of a decisive state, finding themselves on a margin or trying to stop the looting, in support of Cyril Ramaphosa's "caring capitalism" drive.

I write this as an opinion piece, slightly biased towards KwaZulu-Natal where my experience was more vivid and at close encounters.

For those outside these waves of nostalgia opinion is divided: the ANC will sink as against those who argue that the ANC should sink.

This sinking talk I think is the wrong pre-occupation. The depleted ANC will win enough votes and it will inherit the institutional mess it has created. What is the correct pre-occupation is that in amidst the sobbing and gnashing that the nostalgia has generated, there is a clear re-commitment to hope and to the "dream".

Take the labour movement's relics: there is a serious re-valuation of its failures and achievements. Yes, the trade unions during their social movement days were celebrated as an exemplar of working-class politics and grassroots democracy everywhere. With little prompting the trade union movement chose a path of "strategic unionism": to participate in the ANC and South African Communist Party's (SACP's) Tripartite Alliance and help shape government policy towards social justice and redistribution. But hardly had it helped finish the design of a Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) when it was stumped through the ANC-spawned market-friendly and trickle-down Growth, Employment, and Redistribution (GEAR) policy. It was often reduced into an electoral prop for the ruling party, it introduced some of the most suspect business unionism practices, its leadership in many instances lost touch with its democratic base, it sided with Jacob Zuma in the attempt to stop Thabo Mbeki's "pragmatic" capitalism (fiscal state with a mix between austerity and developmental stimuli).

By 2012 divisions within its ranks became palpable. Then the Marikana killings happened and the fragmentation of the trade union movement became real. There were then two large federations – the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) and the South African Federation of Trade Unions (Saftu).[1] Both have been unable to deal with the rise of casualisation, precarity and informality; unable to stem the tide of de-industrialisation and the loss of blue-collar enclaves whilst winning over white collar ones. Both have been unable too, to deal with the large presence by now of migrant and refugee labour from the rest of the continent.

Yet, it is not sociologically prudent to ignore trade unions. Despite shocking levels of unemployment, there are still 10 million plus some thousands who are working. In a country of 60 million this is more than significant. That only 2.5 million belong to trade unions, down from the 3.9 three decades ago, is still quite a serious number.

In the commemorative gatherings shop-stewards raised four serious issues that came to my attention: firstly, that the perception of the "unemployed" as a distinct category is far-fetched, the unemployed belong to their households and they are being kept alive, less by the R350 grant a month from government that buys them bread for two weeks, but by their mothers, fathers and siblings in employment. Also, the informal workers if not IN their households, they do subsist in their neighbourhoods.

Secondly, women shop-stewards raised the issue of women-headed households and the strains they are experiencing. This is the most important sociological (and fastest growing) category in the country as 41% of all households are women-headed, raising issues around the connection between production, informal trade and reproduction.

Thirdly, more than half of workers have their main household in the countryside, which makes them active across urban and rural interconnections. These households are in customary areas where women are still struggling over land rights and against patriarchal control.

The fourth is that workers are outraged by the increase in the retail prices of basic needs-related goods during and beyond the Covid pandemic. They are convinced that the big retail companies have raised prices to maintain their profitability at the highest level possible and by implication have passed on the burden to the black majority.

Mobilisations are beginning to happen.

As for the remnants of the UDF, whose leaders in the main have done exceedingly well under the new dispensation, and therefore lack a popular base these days in the unfolding drama, have mostly acted on defending the democratic dispensation and the Constitution and threw their lot in anti-corruption initiatives.

Nevertheless, their high profile attracted a lot of media space. Some have admirably gone further and encouraged civil society initiatives and inter-faith cooperation. They have also moved on housing and transport issues and have mainly assisted existing non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and non-profit organisations (NPOs) that are mostly run by their children's generation. What was really missed by all was the burst of creativity across the class and gender spectrum, from the Mpumalanga Arts Project to Ravan Press, from children's literature to worker plays, from Indian Delights to high art. The loss of cultural energy was noted everywhere.

Their nostalgia makes them re-articulate and narrate how hard it was in the past, how they all built the movement township door to township door in the most repressive of conditions. What they do not appreciate fully is the new youth dynamism that is e-network-based, but they understand that time has marched on and they have become "bit players" in a new social context. Most do find that the future is in the hands of their children, but what that future is remains difficult to fathom. They are divided between those who would like to help clean up the ANC as they do believe that the dream can be salvaged there, and those who would rather see a new dispensation.

Their long-term commitment to deepening democracy will be tested after the elections. Those of the Front who were more socialist or even communist in their dispositions found themselves either working through the SACP or with a variety of left groupings that almost succeeded in creating a new United Front in 2018 – but there has been little movement, unless a movement is confused with traffic moving on digital highways.

Yet many of them are at the heart of the current celebrations of the 30 years since the first democratic election. On the democratic breakthrough you can count adversity on two hands, but on the compromises that led to its possibility there is a serious retrospective critique.

There were always the "nay-sayers" anyway. Long-standing critics of the Congress tradition were plenty: the Unity Movement, the PAC stalwarts, the Black Consciousness thinkers have all exercised a sustained critique of the Congress' Freedom Charter, the movement's revolutionary vision, its class priorities, its non-racialism and its implicit Stalinism (which it supposedly inherited from the SACP). So, nothing the ANC did would be outside its critical focus. And as black intellectuals who were not dragged into leadership positions the day after the election and who were employed rapidly in the university system because of its lack of black academic staff, the social sciences and humanities have been hostile to the ANC, its alliance partners and government.

The 30 years of democracy celebrations had a mixed repertoire of achievements on display and as they occurred during an election year, so did the many grudges about Nelson Mandela's rulership tended to proliferate: that he had "sold out" the revolution; that he abandoned the idea of nationalisation of the economy's key points; that he was too harsh on Winnie Mandela; that he allowed GEAR to stump the RDP; that he chose the wrong replacement in Thabo Mbeki; that he only commandeered an elite transition; that the Rainbow Nation and Reconciliation were a sham. And as I argued before in a more scholarly way (Sitas, 2010), the pillars of the compromise would not hold for long, especially over the land question, the rule of chiefs in the customary areas, the co-determination model between government, capital and labour.

On the positive side, we have heard that Mandela oversaw and often managed a major transition away from the most powerful racial autocracy towards a society that was rights-driven and equity-seeking; that he endorsed radical equality between the sexes, faiths and languages, that he did away with the death penalty and dismantled the country's nuclear arsenal; that his rulership endorsed compulsory education for all, free access to health for poor households and quite a fair taxation system.

The litmus test of "grudges" of course, was to be found in the most mutinous of

provinces: KwaZulu-Natal, already embroiled for five years in what was a civil war essentially between Zulu democrats and Zulu conservatives. A grudge was very obvious when, hardly two weeks after his release, Mandela ordered the 200,000 armed supporters, many from the war zones, to throw their guns into the sea and stop the carnage. The call for peace and reconciliation did not receive a very warm applause at home, but he and his surrounding leadership persisted. Could there have been another way? Could the system have been overthrown by arming the Congress-related defence committees and opting for a people's war?

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There was a strong faction in the ANC that believed in it, even though "Operation Vula" to arm the insurgency was foiled. What was arming by then the Comrades movement and their defence committees that Harry Gwala and his cohort set up in the Midlands was powerful, but the arms trickling in from the Transkei were too meek against the kind of firepower Inkatha's *Amabutho* and Third Force Askaris could muster. Gwala (celebrated now as a great hero) and Sifiso Nkabinde (who was later found or alleged to have been part of the "System") believed in armed insurgency. Yet the "eye for an eye", "torso for a torso" vision had the Midlands mostly under Comrades control, but caused devastation in Northern and Southern Natal and KwaZulu.

Durban had the more willing negotiators and peace-path scouts in the leadership who were in direct discord about the Midlands' mass-line. It was this polarisation that created the context for a third-way: enter Jacob Zuma as a peace-maker, a rooted traditionalist, supported by the SACP and Cosatu who could, from the Chairship of the ANC, neutralise the Royal House.

From what I recall, not all was well in the Congress movement leading up to that moment.

There was tension between the UDF and the trade union movement: the latter had never folded into the UDF but attacks on black working-class communities brought about cooperation between them and this cooperation was named the Mass Democratic Movement. Unlike other provinces there was no room in KwaZulu-Natal for the rise of the ugly head of sectarianism.

There were serious identity questions and tensions as well as the UDF was deemed to be orchestrated through an Indian cabal. Many in the ANC set to work to marginalise the individuals named as members of the cabal. There was even discord in the ranks of the Zulu Royal House, some Chiefs felt used and abused during the civil war, tensions that led to the creation of the Ingonyama Trust handing over half of the KwaZulu customary areas to the Trusteeship of the Royal House and the King.

There was discord articulated by the two rival women's movements — the Natal Organisation of Women and Inkatha Women's League, elements of whom wanted an end to the violence. There was also turbulence in the universities (the "Knowledge

Affair"[2] at Natal University that almost had it burnt down, and the explicitly anti-Congress COMSA insurgency[3] at the University of Durban-Westville.)

The shift from the Federation of South African Trade Unions (Fosatu) to a more Congress-aligned Cosatu spawned a backlash, an Inkatha-affiliated alternative, the United Workers' Union of South Africa (Uwusa), which was to then facilitate attacks on Cosatu-linked shop-stewards who were Inkatha members anyway. This violence and the formation of Uwusa were key strategic mistakes of Inkatha, as significant as the hostel violence that was unleashed by Inkatha-supported hostel-dwellers and Third Force operatives in Gauteng, because it targeted people who were part of the democratic union movement.

The national election that almost did not happen handed over the province to a victorious Inkatha. The invitation to Inkatha to be part of the Government of National Unity and the obvious reciprocity by Inkatha to involve the ANC in the KwaZulu-Natal cabinet, meant that the Mandela line of reconciliation brought an end to political violence. Also, the appointment of Jacob Zuma as the Minister of Economic Affairs in KwaZulu-Natal started the formation of his economic power-base.

Even though 30 years of democracy celebrations in KwaZulu-Natal were muted for other reasons, which will be visited below, the election is remembered as the end of a civil war that affected everything: kinship systems, clans, ethnic relations and communities. The publicity around togetherness and "growth" enunciated by Premier Nomusa Duma-Ncube in 2024 does not address the mutinous energies that I am about to describe.

It was 20 years since the ANC, after a decade of hard ideological and organising work, won the province of KwaZulu-Natal away from the Inkatha Freedom Party. By then, Jacob Zuma was re-deployed to the Presidency as President Thabo Mbeki's second in command.

On the ideological front, Sibusiso Ndebele, an ANC leader in the province, launched quite a formidable version of the African Renaissance, arguing that it was the only way to move the province beyond conflict. Inkatha and its constituencies were welcomed in these events and in the process re-defined Zulu-ness as the unfinished project of the Shakan revolution – a tradition that was about an endogenous modernity.

Furthermore, Ndebele worked hard on the inter-faith front to bridge Western and African Christianities, made sure that there was also a Workers' Parliament in the province and welcomed big capital projects. But if Ndebele was about the politics of reconciliation and identity in the province, the hard-nosed organisers of the ANC – Willies Mchunu and Zweli Mkhize – got down to grassroots work, almost trade union-style, and spread branch activity everywhere. They were helped by the 1999 Local Authorities' Reform[4] which made the way for the proliferation of branches everywhere possible and necessary.

During May 2004, the ANC gained more than 50% of the vote to become the leading party in the province.

In remembering that time, one enduring idea around the morality of moving beyond conflict was initiated in the movement's discussions. Some were formal, expressed through Pitika Ntuli's inspired Sankofa, some around Fatima Meer's impressive Institute

for Black Research, the Peace Programmes of the Phoenix Settlement Trust and the Diakonia inter-Faith Programmes. Others were informal, around Sibusiso Ndebele's initiatives that also involved National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) thinkers from Atlanta; reflections also initiated by Bennie Khoapa's Black Consciousness circles and prompts from African philosophers like the Malian Adama Samassekou who was then defining the language vision of the African Union. To simplify: it was a search for the distilling of a concept of "*ubuntu*" as a historically evolving morality that was open to difference, diversity and disagreement. And, a new Africanism that was to underpin the continent's development.

Yet politics is about power and often ideas are a sideshow. Matters shifted in the decade that followed, as the ANC consolidated its power in KwaZulu-Natal, Premier Ndebele's leadership was ended as Zweli Mkhize, riding on a strong wave against Thabo Mbeki's leadership, carried the contestation over into KwaZulu-Natal. But what the ANC gained in KZN was lost in the Western Cape, as an ascendant Democratic Alliance led by Helen Zille pushed Congress into a marginal corner.

It was precisely that wave that brought Jacob Zuma to power: backed by the ANC's Youth League led by Julius Malema, black businessmen disappointed by President Thabo Mbeki's networks and also movements and influential leaders that decried "AIDS denialism". Furthermore, the SACP, Cosatu and the South African National Civics Organisation (Sanco) completed the list. The ANC conference at Polokwane ushered in the new power bloc which promised a shift away from neo-liberal protocols, the introduction of a state-centric development path, the rapid introduction of anti-retroviral medication and a recovery plan from the 2008 meltdown.

Instead, it brought, since the ANC's decisive national victory in 2014, a kleptocracy led it seems by Zuma's advisers, the Guptas.

Yet it was also a time of serious reflection: did Zuma's ascendancy, instead of just stopping what the SACP called the "1996 Class Project", unleash another one? Could it be called the "2010 Class Project"? Is it a national or an ethnic power bloc? What is the link between it, if any, and the Taliban power bloc that routed the Ramaphosa-linked one, ironically labelled the Ankole after the cattle the president cherished? Although the slogan of Radical Economic Transformation binds them, are they both linked to the rise of the MK Party? Did the MK Party benefit from the lack of success of the Taliban bloc in gaining any headway in the ANC's national power structure? Will it sustain the obvious fact that it is not the real Umkhonto we Sizwe?

What is the way ahead for the Economic Freedom Fighters, a child of ANC discord and constant indecisions over land and wealth redistribution? Will its appeal to a younger generation of black South Africans be tempered by the rise of alternatives such as Rise Mzansi?

Regime change pandits and of course the Democratic Alliance had hoped that the ANC would sink to a 40% nadir, a hope that was trumpeted by the Brenthurst Foundation, whose powerful centre-right networks in the media world echoed such a hope. Such pandits turned Ramaphosa from a saviour to an indecisive, weak and uninspiring leader who had to go. Close to 4,000 ANC branches got going door to door,

alongside the SACP, which had already started on 1 May, spreading its leadership to all provinces and using their rallies and platforms as Vote ANC ones. The staggering fact remains: 42% of registered voters were not convinced to vote.

What I am getting at is that the two years of nostalgia-inducing gatherings have done among those who seriously participated in their "thinking" parts is that the vote is not the only answer: it is only a sustained movement of movements that prioritises the defence of democratic freedoms and pushes hard for livelihoods equity (combining class, race and gender issues) that will shape outcomes; also, a movement that struggles hard to absent and get rid of what blocks and stunts such freedoms.

The nine million under 13s on the road every day to one school or another, the million students in tertiary institutions, and the many in-between, all deserve a better "us".

Perhaps, a second wave liberation movement is a must, it might also be about the integrity of our ecosystems which is quietly building up.

There is also no doubt that an emphasis on self-expression and culture is at the heart of any new vision – not in its crass commercial sense but expression that questions, celebrates and pushes talent to its limits. It cannot only be about rugby and soccer, cricket and *amapiano*!

There is a new serious bifurcation on the way, clearly brought about by South Africa's daring to disturb the war and genocide against Palestinian people. And serious ructions because South Africa has taken its role in the African Union, BRICS and G20 seriously as a player and not a neo-colonial vassal.

It has to be a moral movement too, that is based on a progressive understanding of "*ubuntu*" – the Mandela period gave us the juridical backbone to facilitate the growth of such a movement and the right to dream. It is not bad that dreaming is on the rebound. Yet it is not the courts that will realise the dream.

The past 30 years have not been exactly glorious but that the past facilitated dreaming and possibility.

And now?

Even nostalgia is a kind of weapon. **NA93**

#### REFERENCE

Sitas, Ari. 2010. *The Mandela Decade*, Pretoria: Unisa Press.

#### ENDNOTES

1 There are other smaller ones, one of which, Solidarity, is white dominated and the Federation of Unions of South Africa (Fedusa) that organised professionals to start with, but emphasises an apolitical form of trade unionism.

2 Natal University was the first hitherto white university to open its doors to black students in 1988. By 1990 the issue of exclusions came up and Knowledge Mdlalose led the riot that ensued. According to some, it was all engineered by a "Third Force". But the issues were real. Knowledge subsequently disappeared, and is on the TRC list as a disappeared person.

3 COMSA was the combined Academic and Staff Association of the University of Durban Westville which took control of the institution through direct action, stoppages and challenges to authority.

4 Section 7(1) of the 1999 Constitution guaranteed the establishment of democratically elected local governments.