



# POKELA: LEADER OF THE PAC

A profile by Wandile Ggaji  
Reprinted from *New African*, July, 1981

THE APPOINTMENT of Nyati Pokela to the leadership of the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) of Azania (South Africa) has opened vistas for this liberation movement to regain its position as part of the vanguard in the struggle of the people of Azania against the Pretoria regime.

It was the PAC, under the dynamic leadership of its founding president, Mangaliso Robert Sobukwe, who died in 1978, which organised the anti-pass laws campaign in 1960 which led to the police-inspired Sharpeville massacre. At the time of its banning, the PAC had established itself as a major mass movement in the country. This forced the then Minister of Justice John Vorster to refer to Sobukwe as "a strong, magnetic personality with great organisational abilities and a divine sense of mission".

## First meeting

After its banning in South Africa the PAC established an external mission to

galvanise support for armed struggle against the apartheid regime.

Nyati Pokela is no newcomer to the liberation struggle. He, as Sobukwe's right-hand man, played a significant role in the formation of the PAC in 1959.

He was born in October 1921 in the Herschel district in the Cape Province and grew up in Mokhohlong, a village in Lesotho. He matriculated at Healdtown High School where he first met Sobukwe in 1946.

He, together with Sobukwe, attended the University of Fort Hare where they met Ntsu Mokhehle and were later joined by Robert Mugabe, the late Herbert Chitepo and many others who were to become leaders of black nationalist movements in Africa.

At that time, Fort Hare was the hub of political activity against the newly-elected Nationalist Government. Pokela joined the African National Congress Youth League, then led by A.P. Mda. Mangaliso Sobukwe was the chairman of

the Fort Hare branch. The Youth League was formed to push the ANC into positive action in 1944. Its basic policy was to overthrow foreign domination in South Africa and the implementation of the principle of self-determination of the African people in that country.

In 1949, Nyati Pokela was in the delegation of the Fort Hare Youth League branch led by Sobukwe to the annual conference of the ANC in Bloemfontein. It was at this conference that the Youth League delegates successfully argued for the adoption of the Programme of Positive Action by the ANC.

The main points of the programme were that the African people of South Africa were fighting for independence from white domination, colonialism and imperialism. The African people were to be mobilised under the banner of African nationalism.

After graduating at Fort Hare in 1950 with a BA and diploma in education he was once more with Sobukwe at Standerton. This time they were teachers. Standerton is a small ultra-conservative town in the Transvaal. They organised and formed branches of the Youth League in the region, and mobilised the people for the defiance campaign against unjust laws organised in 1952 by the ANC.

When Sobukwe was expelled from the teaching profession for his political views and activities, Pokela was advised by him to remain and lie low but continue mobilising the African people against the white government. Pokela continued with this task until he was also expelled from teaching in 1957.

At that time there were two camps within the African National Congress. The leadership of the mother body was promoting a policy of multiracialism, while the Youth League believed in African nationalism as the creed of the African masses for liberation. The section of the members of the ANC who accepted this view called themselves "Africanists".

The Africanists broke away from the ANC and formed the PAC in 1959. Sobukwe became the first president

while working as a lecturer at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg.

Although Pokela was earmarked for a position on the PAC national executive, Sobukwe advised that he should be left out and given the specific duty of co-ordinating PAC activities in the event of their being jailed as a result of their anti-government campaign.

With the banning of the PAC in 1960, Pokela's task became onerous but he carried it out effectively. He called underground PAC conferences and chaired the most historic one at which the decision to embark on armed struggle was taken.

## Kidnapped

He made preparations to open the first PAC office in exile. This was in Maseru, Lesotho (then Basutoland) in 1962. He later fled there himself and became acting secretary-general and a member of the presidential council. Sobukwe was at that time detained on Robben Island.

In 1966, Pokela was kidnapped in Lesotho by South African police and taken to South Africa where he was charged with furthering the aims of a banned organisation.

He was sentenced to 20 years imprisonment, seven years of which were to run concurrently. Once more he was with his old colleague Sobukwe - this time on Robben Island. Pokela was released in April 1980 after serving 13 years imprisonment.

On his release the underground leadership of the PAC inside Azania, and the external wing of the movement, instructed him to join PAC's external mission based in Tanzania.

Pokela quit South Africa for Tanzania in January 1981. A few days after his arrival he was appointed chairman of the central committee and leader of the movement.

In his acceptance speech he declared: "I will continue with the work that my old friend, colleague and comrade-in-arms Mangaliso Sobukwe, lived and died for. I will not fail the oppressed and struggling people of my fatherland." ●

For more information regarding  
speaking engagements and  
other activities:

—Contact—

Pan Africanist Congress of Azania  
211 East 43rd Street  
Suite 703  
New York, N.Y.  
212/986-7378

