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# ZAMDELA TOWNSHIP: THE EXPLOSION OF CONFRONTATIONAL POLITICS, EARLY 1980S TO 1990<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

*Zamdela Township, established by SASOL in 1954, was a typical company township and politically tranquil for a number of decades after its establishment. This situation, however, changed in the 1980s. Just like other townships across the country, Zamdela was on "fire" by the mid-1980s. The residents of the township were aggrieved by hiking of rent, lack of service delivery and perceived corruption by the local councillors, established through the regime's reforms from the mid-1970s through to the 1980s. In expressing their discontent and anger, they attacked the councillors and denied them space to work freely. Unlike other townships, such as Alexandra, confrontational politics in Zamdela were ignited and spearheaded by secondary school students and out-of-school youth - and not by adults. Undoubtedly, the bombing of SASOL and NATREF plants by members of uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the military wing of the African National Congress, left a lasting impact on the young people in the township. In this article, it will be argued that the role played by the Azanian People's Organisation (AZAPO) and its student wing, the Azanian Student Movement (AZASM), and later the United Democratic Front-affiliated Congress of South African Students (COSAS) really galvanised the students and youth in the township to challenge the apartheid regime in general and the local authorities in particular.*

**Keywords:** Zamdela; Sasolburg; SASOL; Azanian People's Organisation (AZAPO); Azanian Student Movement (AZASM); Congress of South African Students (COSAS); Black Local Authorities; councillors.

**Sleutelwoorde:** Zamdela; Sasolburg; SASOL; Azanian People's Organisation (AZAPO); Azanian Student Movement (AZASM); Congress of South African Students (COSAS); swart plaaslike bestuur; raadslede.

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1 My sincere gratitude goes to Bobo Theletsane, who introduced me to some of the interviewees in Zamdela and also availed himself for an interview. I also wish to thank Dr Mbuyiseni Quintin Ndlozi for allowing me to use his PhD thesis before he could submit it to the library of the University of the Witwatersrand.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Zamdela Township was established close to the industrial area of Sasolburg.<sup>2</sup> It is situated in the northern Free State Province near the banks of the Vaal River, 80 kilometres from Johannesburg, and more than 300 kilometres from Bloemfontein.<sup>3</sup> However, during the period under review, the township fell under the Lekoa Town Council, in the then Vaal Triangle. This area was part of the Pretoria-Witwatersrand-Vereeniging (PWV – today's Gauteng Province). Zamdela was established in 1954 by the South African Synthetic Oil Limited (SASOL) Company to accommodate its employees who came from various parts of South Africa and the neighbouring countries. SASOL itself was established two years earlier in 1952 as a government-sponsored project to produce oil from coal in South Africa.<sup>4</sup>

Research on SASOL and its town, Sasolburg, is scant, except for the PhD thesis by Stephen Sparks<sup>5</sup> and an MA research report by Puseletso Kolanchu.<sup>6</sup> More worryingly is the silence on Zamdela Township's protest politics in the 1980s. Edward Rampedi's work is significant, but its main focus is on youth protests in the township post-1994.<sup>7</sup> What consideration has been given by Rampedi and Sparks to confrontational politics in Zamdela in the 1980s is only as an allusion.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, a PhD thesis by Mbuyiseni Quintin Ndlozi and an unpublished manuscript on the history of Nkgopoleg Secondary School, written by a Mr Mako, an educator at Nkgopoleng, shed light on the explosion and spread of confrontational politics in Zamdela in the 1980s. Ndlozi and Mako, drawing from personal recollections and interviews, demonstrate how the students from Nkgopoleng organised and spearheaded protest resistance in Zamdela from 1981 through to the 1990s.<sup>9</sup>

2 PS Kolanchu, *An analysis of community awareness to chemical hazards in Zamdela Township – Sasolburg* (MA, University of the Free State, 2011).

3 After the 1994 political dispensation in South Africa, Zamdela was located in Metsimaholo Local Municipality within the Fezile Dabi District Municipality in the Free State Province. See Kolanchu, p. 4.

4 *Rand Daily Mail*, 31 July 1979.

5 JS Sparks, *Apartheid modern: South Africa's oil from coal project and a history of a company town* (PhD, University of Michigan, 2012).

6 Kolanchu.

7 ME Rampedi, *Youth, protest and political participation: The case of Zamdela, Sasolburg* (MA, University of Johannesburg, 2015).

8 Sparks, pp. 21-30; Rampedi, p. 47.

9 MQ Ndlozi, *Permanent juniority: Black youth politics in the Vaal under late colonialism* (PhD, University of the Witwatersrand, 2017), Chapter 3; Mako, *The history of Nkgopoleng Secondary School* (Unpublished manuscript). In: M Moleboheng, *Book of Nkgopoleng Secondary School*, Albert Luthuli Oral History Project, <www.sahistory.org.za>, accessed 17 November 2017.

A survey of the available literature on student and youth politics in South Africa reveals that Zamdela and, more importantly, the role played by the Black Consciousness-aligned Azanian People's Organisation (AZAPO) and its student wing, the Azanian Student Movement (AZASM), have been largely ignored.<sup>10</sup> The majority of scholars have over the years extensively researched student and youth organizations aligned to the Congress Movement, which in the 1980s was led by the United Democratic Front (UDF) in South Africa.<sup>11</sup>

In this article, it is contended that the residents of Zamdela avoided confrontational politics until the beginning of the 1980s. They complained about the unjust system of apartheid and/or the ill-treatment they experienced from the local white authorities, but they did so from the private and "safe" spaces of their work and homes, and through the powerless Bantu Advisory Board. There are three reasons for this. Firstly, from 1954 to the late 1970s Zamdela initially comprised of a fragmented "community", made up largely by migrant labourers, and later by migrant labourers and permanent residents. These groups were divided, not only on class, but also on ethnic lines. Secondly, the township's permanent residents did not have pressing socio-economic issues around which they could mobilize; instead they enjoyed basic social services, such as electricity, flushing toilets and warm water inside their houses, made possible through a subsidy from SASOL. Finally, all the residents of Zamdela were heavily kept under control through the municipality's police, commonly known as the "Black Jacks", and the prying advisory board.

In the early 1980s, however, the residents of Zamdela shed off their non-confrontational attitude. They became involved in confrontational politics in which they challenged the *status quo*. It will be demonstrated that, unlike townships like

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10 For a detailed account on the role of AZAPO and AZASM, see for example, MV Mzamane and B Maaba, "The Azanian People's Organisation, 1977-1990". In: South African Democracy Education Trust (hereafter SADET) (ed.), *The road to democracy in South Africa*, Volume 4, 1980-1990 (Pretoria: UNISA Press, 2010), Chapter 24; T Moloi, "Black student politics in South Africa, 1990-1996". In: SADET (ed.), *The road to democracy in South Africa*, Volume 6, 1990-1996 (Pretoria: UNISA Press, 2013), Chapter 26; Ndlozi, Chapter 3; Mako, Chapter 5.

11 T Moloi, *Place of thorns: Black political protest in Kroonstad since 1976* (Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 2015); J Seekings, "Political mobilization in the black townships of the Transvaal". In: P Frankel *et al.* (eds.), *State, resistance and change in South Africa* (London: Croom Helm, 1988); J Seekings, *Heroes or villains? Youth politics in the 1980s* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1993); C Carter, *Comrades and Community: Politics and the construction of hegemony in Alexandra Township, 1984-1987* (PhD, Mansfield College, University of Oxford, 1991); M Marks, *Young warriors: Youth politics, identity and violence in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2001); S Johnson, "The Soldiers of Luthuli: Youth in the politics of resistance in South Africa". In: Shaun Johnson (ed.) *No turning back* (Bloomington: Indiana Press, 1989); K Naidoo, "The politics of youth resistance in the 1980s: The dilemmas of a differentiated Durban", *Journal of Southern African Studies* 18(1), 1991.

Alexandra where the adult members of the community were the first to mobilize and confront the local authorities, in Zamdela it were students and young people who ignited and spearheaded confrontational politics. It is argued that this was caused by two factors. Firstly, the establishment of a branch of AZAPO in 1980, and in 1985 of the Congress of South African Students (COSAS), helped to conscientise and mobilize students at Nkgopoleng Secondary School against the local authorities. And secondly, the reforms introduced by the National Party (NP) regime from 1977, through the Community Council Act and in 1982 the Black Local Authorities Act, set the local councillors, already perceived as corrupt puppets of the then regime, on a collision course with the students and young people in the township – and later with the township's adults.

Due to lack of sufficient primary sources on the subject under review, this research relied heavily on interviews with former students at Nkgopoleng, members of AZAPO, members of the community of Zamdela, and ex-employees of SASOL, conducted by the author and other colleagues who were working on an oral history project in the Free State Province. Furthermore, newspapers, unpublished theses, a masters research report and dissertation; an unpublished manuscript on Nkgopoleng; and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) report were consulted. These secondary sources are invaluable. Although their focus is not necessarily on confrontational politics in the Zamdela Township during the 1980s (except for an unpublished manuscript and a PhD thesis), they, nevertheless, provide significant historical nuggets to reconstruct the history of confrontational politics in Zamdela. Interviews, on the other hand, proved vital because they offered first-hand accounts about local politics in Zamdela from the 1950s to 1990.

## 2. ZAMDELA TOWNSHIP BEFORE 1980

According to Sparks, "SASOL did not originally intend to establish a 'native location' or 'township' where Zamdela lies today. The company had wanted to establish a small 'native village' close to its colliery and factory which would exclusively house its African employees in both compounds and family accommodation".<sup>12</sup> However, its plans were complicated after a real-estate acquired land, "on the banks of the Vaal River, not far from Sasolburg".<sup>13</sup> The real-estate's intention was to build a white suburb (today's Vaal Park). But Hendrik Verwoerd, then head of the Native Affairs Department (NAD) in the 1950s, and the NP leader and the country's Prime Minister during the 1960s, felt that SASOL's intentions would confound the regime's grand plan to keep the urban areas exclusively white or European. He was concerned that another township would have to be established to accommodate Africans who would serve the needs of the

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12 Sparks, p. 187.

13 *Ibid.*

residents of the white suburb. “He would not allow more than one ‘native area’ in this region of the northern Free State otherwise there would be several black spots in European areas which is considered most undesirable,” writes Sparks.<sup>14</sup>

Verwoerd triumphed and SASOL reluctantly established Zamdela to accommodate its employees. The NP assumed power in 1948 on the election ticket of apartheid. It institutionalized racial segregation and discrimination. To enforce these, in the early 1950s it promulgated, among others, the Group Areas Act of 1950, “which was designed to allocate separate residential areas to Africans, coloureds, Indians and whites”.<sup>15</sup> Two years later it enacted the ironically named Abolition of Passes and Documents Act.<sup>16</sup> These repressive laws contributed directly to Zamdela’s quiescence in the 1950s, through to the 1970s.

After SASOL had decided to establish Zamdela, it initially built 150 houses in an area which came to be known as Proteem. However, due to lack of accommodation for white workers, the latter and their families were prioritized to live in those houses until early 1956, “when the residential precinct specially built for lower-income whites in Sasolburg was completed”.<sup>17</sup> Africans, employed at SASOL, were then permitted to occupy the houses. The houses in Proteem were installed with electricity and warm water. By 1965, SASOL had established two more townships, Botshabelo and Tsoape,<sup>18</sup> to accommodate the growing number of African workers.

From the inception of the township until the mid-1960s, SASOL subsidised and controlled Zamdela.<sup>19</sup> Up until 1967, after the Sasolburg Municipality took over, there is no evidence to suggest that the NP regime’s discriminatory laws were enforced in Zamdela.<sup>20</sup> It was during the municipality’s reign that the residents of the township began to experience apartheid laws, such as the separation of permanent residents with rights to be in town, from migrant labourers without the right to be in town. The latter, if not administering to the needs of whites in the urban areas, were forced back to their “homelands”. In 1959, the NP regime passed the Promotion of Bantu Self-Governing Act, which designated each African ethnic group a homeland where the unemployed surplus Africans were forced to settle until needed by whites in the urban areas.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, to control Africans, the Sasolburg Municipality tightened influx

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14 *Ibid.*

15 P Bonner and N Nieftagodien, *Alexandra: A history* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2008), p. 105.

16 *Ibid.*

17 Sparks, p. 205.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 210.

19 *Ibid.*, pp. 188-190.

20 Rampedi, p. 45.

21 For an in-depth account of the homeland system, see B Magubane, “Resistance and repression in the Bantustans”. In: SADET (ed.) *The road to democracy in South Africa*, Volume 2, 1970-1980 (Pretoria: UNISA Press, 2006), p. 753.

control in the township.<sup>22</sup> Raids by the municipality's police, the "Black Jacks", became the norm. Rampedi notes that, due to influx control, in the late 1970s many Africans who had drifted to Sasolburg in search of employment ended living in informal settlements on the outskirts of Zamdela.<sup>23</sup>

To comprehend the reason Zamdela remained quiescent during this period, it is important to understand that, from 1954 to the beginning of the 1970s, the township was composed of a fragmented "community" made up, initially, of migrant labourers and, later, by permanent employees who were divided on ethnic lines. SASOL employed migrant labourers from different parts of the country and neighbouring states. Nti Masisi, who was born in 1946 in Ficksburg, but relocated to Sasolburg in 1954 or 1955 after his father, who worked for the railway, was stationed there, recalled that when he started working for Synthetic Rubber Company as a clerk in 1964, he used to travel across the country identifying potential employees and collecting their call cards. According to him, SASOL employed mainly people from outside Sasolburg because, "they (white managers) used to say that people from Sasolburg were lazy".<sup>24</sup>

That was not the only reason though. Migrant labourers were ideal employees for the company because they were cheaper to maintain. They did not qualify for houses in the urban areas unless they met the Section 10 requirements.<sup>25</sup> But most importantly, migrant labourers were less likely to flout the company's rules. This is evident in Amos Mthetwa's story. In the interview with Sparks, Mthetwa recalled that he was recruited from Sterkspruit, in the former Transkei, the first homeland to receive "independence" from white South Africa,<sup>26</sup> by SASOL to work in the Sigma coal mine, where he was responsible for overseeing the conveyor belt which carried coal from the mine to the SASOL factory. He was accommodated in the company's compound. He explained that they risked losing their jobs if they fought. Moreover, they had to abide by curfew hours and they were punished if they arrived late back in the compound or were late for work.<sup>27</sup> Because of their migratory status and the fact that the company offered them accommodation, SASOL's employees in the 1950s were afraid to mobilise and, more importantly, avoided confronting the regime.

Judging by the stringent control SASOL's employees were kept under in the company's compounds, it is not difficult to imagine what would have happened to them if they were to participate in the political activities prevalent at the time. When SASOL began to operate major parts of South Africa were experiencing

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22 For a detailed account and impact of the influx control, see for example, Bonner and Nieftagodien, Chapter 5.

23 Rampedi, p. 43.

24 Interview: N Masisi with G Poli, Zamdela, s.a., 2011.

25 For a detailed account about Section 10, see D Posel, *The making of apartheid, 1948-1961: Conflict and compromise* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

26 Magubane, p. 749.

27 Sparks, pp. 226-227.

mass protests. In 1952, for example, the ANC, jointly with the South African Indian Congress (SAIC), organized a Defiance Campaign and called on African, Indian and Coloured people to defy and to court arrest against the regime's six unjust laws.<sup>28</sup> Three years later, the ANC, again, was instrumental in influencing the boycott against the passage of Bantu Education Act of 1953.<sup>29</sup> And in the same year in June, the ANC, together with the SAIC, Congress of Democrats and South African Coloured People's Congress, adopted the Freedom Charter at the Congress of the People in Kliptown, Soweto. There is no evidence to suggest that employees at SASOL participated in any of these campaigns. However, this should not be construed to suggest that Africans living in Zamdela were oblivious to the political situation in the country. Some of the residents of the township were aware of it. Ketso Makume, for example, who was a student and founding member of COSAS in Zamdela, "knew about [Nelson] Mandela from his grandmother who used to pray for his release and that of all Robben Island political prisoners".<sup>30</sup>

Before SASOL could embark on its mission to establish Zamdela, it accommodated its employees, who were largely migrant labourers in the company compounds and single-sex hostels. The latter were forced to oscillate between urban areas and rural areas, because of their impermanent labour status. They spent some time working in the urban areas, on a contract basis, and after their contracts had expired, they had to return to their homelands or countries (in the case of foreign nationals) where they had left their families.<sup>31</sup> Thus, in the 1950s, because of this constant movement, migrant labourers remained detached from the township and could not form long-term relations with the permanent township residents. On the other hand, Africans who occupied the houses in Proteem looked down upon the migrant labourers and distanced themselves from them. They perceived them as beneath their class.

In the 1960s, the Proteem residents were an aspiring African middle-class. They shunned the migrant labourers because they felt that the latter behaved immorally and were preoccupied with drinking home-brewed beer, prepared by African women who lived in Zamdela.<sup>32</sup> The Proteem residents complained about migrant labourers, especially men and women "drinking together" and behaving "very commonly". They went to the extent of requesting gender-segregated drinking facilities for men and women.<sup>33</sup> To counter the illegal sale of home-brewed beer and generate funds to administer the township, the Sasolburg

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28 Bonner and Nieftagodien, p. 134.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 136.

30 Ndlozi, p. 86.

31 For a detailed account of the impact the migrant labour system had on families, see RP Mazibuko, *The effects of migrant labour on the family system* (MA, University of South Africa, 2000).

32 Sparks, pp. 185-186.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 213.

Municipality established a beerhall.<sup>34</sup> Thereafter, its police cracked down on illegal brewing.

For most of the 1960s through to the late 1970s, the permanent employees and migrant labourers remained distant from each other. This caused each to solely focus on their own interests. In February 1964, for example, the SASOL employees living in the compounds embarked on a strike action. This was the only time before the 1980s that Africans in Sasolburg flexed their muscles against the authorities. They demanded to be paid wages, instead of being provided with food by the company. According to Sparks, “the strike explicitly attacked the arithmetic at the heart of the SASOL compound system, which involved paying compounded labourers a lower wage amount than they would otherwise have received if food rations (and accommodation) were not supplied to them by SASOL”.<sup>35</sup> An official from the Department of Labour tried to intervene by demanding to address the employees, but the latter dismissed him. Realising the seriousness of the strike, SASOL offered a 2 cent per hour wage increase. The workers accepted it and returned to work.<sup>36</sup>

However, because of the disconnection between the compounded labour migrants and the permanent residents, the strike did not have any impact on the residents of Zamdela who remained aloof from what was happening in the compounds. The Department of Labour refused to accept that this was a genuine labour action and that the migrant labourers were responsible for their actions. It suspected the South African Congress of Trade Union (SACTU), an ally of the ANC, of having agitated the strike.<sup>37</sup> This was because, the department argued, the striking labourers were chanting the R2 a day slogan, a campaign adopted by SACTU at its 1963 conference.<sup>38</sup>

The 1960s, after the Sharpeville massacre and the banning of the ANC and PAC, encouraged the residents of Zamdela to aspire to achieve economic independence. This was stimulated by the economic boom South Africa was experiencing at the time. “Huge amounts of foreign investment flooded into the

34 Before the introduction of the administration boards, local municipalities generated funding to service townships mainly from two sources: white municipalities and the sale of sorghum beer sold to Africans in the municipality's beerhall. See for example, T Moloi, “The Thembisa connection: The re-invigoration of confrontational politics in Thembisa Township, 1979-1990”. In: A Lissoni and A Pezzano (eds) *The ANC between home and exile: Reflections on the anti-apartheid struggle in Italy and Southern Africa* (Napoli: University of Napoli, 2015), pp. 112-113.

35 Sparks, p. 201.

36 *Ibid.*

37 SACTU was formed in 1955. It worked closely with the ANC. Because of this, its leaders were either banned, detained or in detention under the 90-Day Law between 1963 and 1964. Some of the SACTU leaders fled the country into exile. This caused SACTU to cease to operate inside the country. See, for example, J Sithole and SM Ndlovu, “The revival of the labour movement, 1970-1980”. In: SADET (ed.) *The road to democracy in South Africa*, Volume 2, 1970-1980 (Pretoria: UNISA Press, 2006), pp. 192, 211.

38 Sparks, p. 202.



country propelling an annual growth of 9,3%”, write Bonner and Nieftagodien.<sup>39</sup> This increased employment opportunities. According to Jonathan Hyslop, “In manufacturing, the number of employees of all races soared from 653 000 in 1960 to 1 069 000 in 1970”.<sup>40</sup> Wages of Africans who began to enter semi-skilled work increased slightly, but for the unskilled labourers it remained dismally low.<sup>41</sup> The latter is the section that would feel the pinch during the economic recession at the beginning of the 1980s.

During the 1960s, some of the residents of Zamdela became prosperous businessmen. Moses Masike, a teacher and a member of the Bantu Advisory Board, for example, through his relationship with local municipal officials was able to secure a number of municipal contracts to operate businesses in the township. In the late 1960s he formed a company, the Thabo Investment Corporation with his business associates, through which they were able to position themselves to take over township bottle stores in the region.<sup>42</sup> Other residents, following an increase in their salaries, bought cars – a sign of upward mobility.

It was also during this period, in 1966, when the Zamdela Advisory Board enquired about the possibility of a housing scheme that would allow residents to build their own houses with financial assistance.<sup>43</sup> This enquiry was summarily rejected and the Advisory Board was reminded that “Bantus” are in white areas temporarily, the homelands are black people’s homes’.<sup>44</sup> Notwithstanding the rejection, however, this new and sudden consumption phenomenon did not only muzzle political inactivity, but it also contributed to the township’s socio-economic differentiation between the sections of the community of Zamdela.

Besides the disconnection discussed above between the migrant labourers accommodated in the company’s compounds and single-sex hostels and the residents living in the township, the latter were themselves divided along ethnic lines in concurrence with the regime’s Group Areas Act of 1950. Masisi recalled, “Inside the *township* we had *Morena* – a Chief that we reported to, who was Ntate Mphohle. Everything had to go via him. And in Zamdela every *ethnic group* had its own chief. The Batswana, AmaXhosa and BaPedi had their own that they reported to”.<sup>45</sup>

Clearly the ethnic divisions in Zamdela were the regime’s intention to promote the homeland system, or homeland’s politics in the township. During

39 P Bonner and N Nieftagodien, *Kathorus: A history* (Cape Town, Maskew Miller Longman, 2001), p. 63.

40 J Hyslop, “Schools, unemployment and youth: Origins and significance of student and youth movements, 1976-1987”. In: B Nasson and J Samuel (eds), *Education: From poverty to liberty* (Cape Town and Johannesburg: David Philip, 1990), p. 81.

41 Bonner and Nieftagodien, *Kathorus*, p. 63.

42 Sparks, pp. 208-209.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 216.

44 *Ibid.*

45 Interview: N Masisi with G Poli, Zamdela, s.a., 2011.

this period and in the early 1970s, some of the residents in different townships became involved in homeland politics, representing their own ethnic groups.<sup>46</sup> Undoubtedly, these closely-knit and clearly guarded ethnic sections of the community within Zamdela would have been extremely difficult to penetrate, especially by anyone who was not part of the specific ethnic group and whose intention was to spread opposition political ideas<sup>47</sup>. Inevitably, this restrained political activism in the township. Worse, the residents of Zamdela barely knew each other during this period; many of them had just met for the first time in this new area. Nothing bonded them, except their work.

Zamdela remained tranquil during this period, also because the township's residents did not have pressing socio-economic issues around which they could mobilise the community. This was because the residents of Zamdela enjoyed basic social services, such as electricity, flushing toilets and warm water inside their houses, made possible through a subsidy from SASOL. Describing the houses built by SASOL, a resident of Zamdela interviewed by Sparks, remarked, "These houses were the envy of visitors to Zamdela [...] We were the first black people in the whole country to have a toilet in the house, electricity in the house and hot water."<sup>48</sup>

Corroborating this view was Solly Dhlamini, who was born in Zamdela in 1966. He recalled that when growing up his home had electricity and there were street lights and sanitation.<sup>49</sup>

Finally, the tight control enforced by the Sasolburg Municipality restrained the residents of Zamdela from engaging in confrontational politics. The municipality used a sifting system to maintain law and order.<sup>50</sup> It only permitted people whose names appeared in the official document called Permit to stay in the township. People's movements in and out of the township was strictly monitored. The local authorities demanded to know each and every person in the township. This kept out undesirable characters whom the municipality feared might agitate the residents of Zamdela politically. Visitors to the township and their length of stay had to be reported either to the police station, or the municipal offices.<sup>51</sup>

46 Bonner and Nieftagodien, *Kathorus*, p. 59.

47 In the 1960s, after the ANC was banned, members of the ANC established underground cells to keep the ANC's politics alive and conscientise people in different communities. See G Houston and B Magubane, "The ANC political underground in the 1970s". In: SADET (ed.) *The road to democracy in South Africa*, Volume 2, 1970-1980 (Pretoria: UNISA Press, 2006). Chapter 8.

48 Sparks, p. 206. See also, Interview: N Masisi with G Poli, Zamdela, s.a, 2011; *Sowetan*, 12 November 1983.

49 Interview: S Dhlamini, M Malindi and C Mabitsela with T Moloi and A Nyeleka, Zamdela, 8 August 2011.

50 In Alexandra Township, the regime used the permit system to forcefully remove some of the residents to other areas, for example. See Bonner and Nieftagodien, *Alex*, pp. 173- 175.

51 Interview: N Masisi with G Poli, Zamdela, s.a., 2011.

Charles Mphasane, who was born in Zamdela in 1969, recalled, “We reported. You’d go there and tell them that I have a visitor. Remember that those people used to carry out raids at night. Then we had South African Police and those who were called ‘Black Jacks’ [...] They were the ones who raided to check whether there were unwanted visitors in our homes. They would come at night”.<sup>52</sup>

If anyone not in the Permit was found staying in the township, he or she would be arrested. To avert this from happening to their visitors, the residents of Zamdela devised a plan to hide their visitors in the open space between the roof and the ceiling of their houses. Locally, this space came to be known as *lisorong*. Mphasane explained, “*Soloro* is a space between the ceiling and the roof. You see, that ceiling is hard like a rock. So, between the ceiling and the roof there was space. Now our visitors would go in there and hide whenever there was a raid. And after they [police] had left they’d come out and sleep again”.<sup>53</sup>

The Sasolburg Municipality extended its grip on the township by using some of the “trusted” adults from different ethnic groups to be its eyes and ears in the township – some of them were also members of the advisory board. This structure was established in response to the growing schism between urban blacks and whites, which were reflected in widespread protests. The government, through the Native Affairs Department, recommended the creation of advisory boards instituted through the Urban Areas Act of 1923 to encourage harmonious cooperation between the two groups. However, the advisory boards had limited powers. Their overall functions were limited to an advisory capacity and local authorities were neither obliged to consult the advisory boards nor to take into account any recommendations by them.<sup>54</sup>

As already mentioned, the role of the advisory boards was to keep the African residents in check on behalf of the white authorities. In Zamdela, for instance, the members of the advisory board took a keen interest in mundane matters such as solving family problems. They reported conjugal quarrels between men and women to the superintendent. When they felt undermined in their duty, they suggested that police constables be used to “round up” the persons in question or that the superintendent intercede on their behalf, using his power to take away houses from “undesirable persons”.<sup>55</sup> Although this suggestion was quashed by the superintendent, the thought that the recommendation by members of the advisory board could cause one to lose a house must have paralysed the residents of Zamdela from engaging in subversive activities.

The Zamdela’s Advisory Board’s lack of power was evident when, on three occasions, its recommendations were dismissed. Firstly, it was when it implored

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52 Interview: C Mphasane and B Theletsane with T Moloi, Zamdela, 4 July 2017.

53 *Ibid.*

54 Moloi, *Place*, p. 23.

55 Sparks, p. 214.

SASOL and the regime to allow the retired labourers to work temporarily so that they could hold on to their houses. The second time was in 1966, as already mentioned above, when its enquiry about the housing scheme was dismissed. And finally, the advisory board's recommendation was disregarded when its members conveyed to the white authorities the residents' discontent with the unhygienic conditions in the township and suggested improvements. As usual, the white authorities did not take any action.

From the time it took over the administration of Zamdela, the Sasolburg Municipality was experiencing financial challenges to develop the township. This was a nationwide phenomenon. To remedy the situation, the regime established administration boards to take over the responsibility for African townships in 1971. The Boards had only white representatives consisting of a chairman and members appointed by the Minister. Boards were given executive powers and were directly responsible to the Minister. They were required to be self-sufficient while providing all the services and functions which the local authorities had previously provided. By 1973 control of most townships had been handed over to the Boards. In the same year the Sasolburg Municipality's Non-European Affairs Department stopped administering Zamdela.<sup>56</sup> The Vaal Triangle Bantu Administration Board (VBAB) took over the administration of the township and that of other townships in the Vaal Triangle. To finance development, the VBAB hiked rent and service charges.

The residents of Zamdela do not seem to have immediately felt the impact of this decision, because, "between December 1972 and February 1974 African workers' salaries at SASOL increased as much as 60%."<sup>57</sup> Again lack of transport costs also cushioned the residents of Zamdela from financial hardships. The township and the SASOL complex where the residents worked, were in close proximity.<sup>58</sup> According to Theletsane, "then adults could walk to town. Some used to cycle to go there. It was a short distance".<sup>59</sup>

It was during this period that the character of the community of Zamdela began to evolve. Slowly the "fragmented" image began to dissipate. This was mainly due to two factors. Firstly, in the early 1970s SASOL began to increasingly employ South African workers, particularly educated Africans, into semi-skilled and skilled jobs previously reserved for whites. The company's reliance on migrant labourers from neighbouring states slowly decreased. Sparks argues that this change was, "precipitated by both accelerating mine

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56 *Ibid.*, p. 216.

57 *Ibid.*, p. 222.

58 *Ibid.*, p. 217.

59 Interview: C Mphasane and B Theletsane with T Moloi, Zamdela, 4 July 2017; In 1957 the residents of Alexandra used the hiked transport costs to mobilise the community against the Public Utility Transport Corporation. For three months the residents boycotted the buses and walked to their place of work and town. This became a climax of mass mobilisation in Alexandra. Bonner and Niefertgodien, *Alex*, p. 143.

mechanization requiring more skilled workers who were otherwise more attracted to manufacturing”.<sup>60</sup> Thus, in 1974, the company decided that from henceforth it would only employ Africans who had Standard 8 (today's Grade 10) or higher.<sup>61</sup> This group of employees, because of their rare skills (and the company investment in them),<sup>62</sup> were offered long-term employment contracts. They were therefore expected to settle in one area for a longer period. And secondly, Zamdela began to accommodate permanent residents. And these, unlike their migrant labourer counter-parts, became attached to the area; paid for their stay and therefore demanded basic social services. In 1974 SASOL extended the homeownership scheme it had long offered to white employees to black employees. This was after the administration board had deferred the responsibility of housing SASOL's employees to the company.<sup>63</sup> Five years later, African employees were occupying their new houses bought through the company's assistance.<sup>64</sup>

The inability of the administration boards to provide basic services to the communities and the growing discontent among Africans evidenced during the student uprisings in 1976<sup>65</sup>, forced the regime to introduce some reforms. Drawing from the Riekert Commission's recommendations, the regime promulgated the Community Councils Act of 1977, which, “allowed for the devolution of specific powers from the administration boards to the new councils, subject to ministerial approval.”<sup>66</sup> The new councils, however, were handicapped in that they did not have financial muscle; they depended on the national regime, the administration board officials seconded to the councils retained much of their authority – and many of these were opposed to the reforms.<sup>67</sup>

The community council were given minimal powers to allocate and administer accommodation for migrant labourers and family accommodation for persons qualifying under Section 10 of the Black Urban Areas Consolidation Act for such housing in urban areas; approve building plans for private dwellings and prevent the illegal occupation and building of dwellings; and allocate trading sites and maintain essential services such as water supply, refuse removal and

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60 Sparks, p. 222.

61 *Ibid.*, p. 123.

62 SASOL established the Sigma Bantu Training School to train black employees. Sparks, p. 221.

63 *Ibid.*, p. 225.

64 *Ibid.*, p. 226.

65 Zamdela was not affected by the student uprisings in 1976, because it did not have a secondary or high school. It only had a primary school, Tsatsi, which was not affected by the regime's introduction of Afrikaans as a compulsory medium of instruction at school.

66 Bonner and Nieftagodien, *Kathorus*, p. 96.

67 J Seekings, *Quiescence and the transition to confrontation: South African townships, 1978-1984* (DPhil, Oxford University, 1990), p. 71.

sewerage and roads within the township.<sup>68</sup> The Minister had absolute control over the functioning of the community councils. Worse, the councils were expected to be self-sufficient in terms of executing its responsibilities. Without the subsidy from the Sasolburg municipality and revenue from the sale of liquor from the beerhalls (these were privatised post-1976), the community councils relied heavily on rent and service charges. In 1981, amidst economic recession induced by falling gold prices and growing balance of payments deficits,<sup>69</sup> the Zamdela Community Council hiked rent and this was the main impetus for the explosion of confrontational politics in the township in the 1980s.

### 3. THE GENESIS OF CONFRONTATIONAL POLITICS AND THEIR MANIFESTATION

According to Matthew Chaskalson and Jeremy Seekings, “after 1979 the Orange Vaal Administration Board (OVAB, the name had changed from VBAB) took over the administration of the Vaal Triangle and northern Free State”.<sup>70</sup> They also note that OVAB, “had a much stricter economic (unsubsidised) rental policy than any other administration board”.<sup>71</sup> Between 1979 and 1983 rents rose sharply in the Vaal Triangle, “[...] making them over 20% higher than any other metropolitan area”.<sup>72</sup> Undoubtedly this fueled the residents’ gradually simmering anger since the mid-1970s caused, amongst others, by unhygienic conditions in the township.

Before the residents of Zamdela, particularly the students, could embark on confrontational politics, an incident which raised their morale happened in the township. It was the bombing of SASOL and the Natref oil refineries. When strategizing about how to intensify the struggle against the apartheid regime, Joe Slovo, the former High Command of the ANC’s military wing, *uMkhonto we Sizwe* (MK, The Spear of the Nation), drafted a strategic document that would guide the MK’s armed struggle in the 1980s.<sup>73</sup> In April 1980, the Revolutionary Council (of MK) adopted this document titled, *Our military perspective and some special problems*.<sup>74</sup> Slovo had identified two forms of armed activity:

68 See for example, Moloi, *Place*, p. 80.

69 GM Gerhart and CL Glaser, *From protest to challenge: A documentary history of African politics in South Africa, 1882-1990*, Volume 6: Challenge and Victory, 1980-1990 (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010), p. 16.

70 M Chaskalson and J Seekings, “The awakening: Desperation and defiance”. In: M Bennett and D Quinn (eds), *Political conflict in South Africa: Data trends, 1984-1988*. Indicator South Africa Issue Focus, 1988, p. 30.

71 *Ibid.*

72 *Ibid.*

73 G Houston and B Magubane, “The ANC’s’ armed struggle in the 1970s”. In: SADET (ed.), *The road to democracy in South Africa*, Volume 1, 1960-1970 (Pretoria: UNISA Press, 2006), p. 1037.

74 *Ibid.*, p. 1039.

armed propaganda and the sustained armed struggle inside South Africa.<sup>75</sup> It was against this background that MK infiltrated its trained cadres back into South Africa to carry out the bombing of SASOL and Natref in Sasolburg in June 1980. SASOL and Natref were part of the country's economic heartbeat. "The complex of SASOL companies in Sasolburg were important for the apartheid regime because they provided a means to circumvent oil sanctions by creating an internal source of oil as well as by generating external income for the regime."<sup>76</sup> For example, the new Coalplex Project at Sasolburg was projected to generate about R100 million a year for the country.<sup>77</sup> MK's mission was clear from the onset: human casualties should be avoided by all means. Although the bombings by MK were aimed at regime change and the weakening of the then apartheid regime, most importantly they were intended to galvanize the oppressed masses inside the country.

After spending some time in Zamdela, clandestinely reconnoitering the SASOL and Natref plants, members of MK's Special Operations (also known as Solomon Mahlangu Unit) entered the SASOL Complex and placed bombs on the night of 31 May and 1 June 1980.<sup>78</sup> In a few minutes they exploded, with loud sound that sent the residents of Zamdela into a frenzy.<sup>79</sup> Recalling these attacks, Dhlamini, who was in Zamdela at the time, had this to say, "These attacks coincided with the Republic Day celebrations in South Africa. I can still remember it was at night when we heard a loud explosion, but it was not a normal explosion. You must remember that our houses are built very close to the SASOL firms [...] They themselves make loud sounds. Sometimes it would be the pipes which emitted gases. But on this particular night this explosion was unusual and frightening [...] At home we then went outside to check what was happening [...] we found that almost all the residents in the township were outside also to check what was happening. We heard people saying the firm was burning. Some of my friends and I decided to move closer to the firm to see clearly what was happening. When we got to where the municipal offices were but now it is Sonny's garage, and this is about 500 metres from the main gate, we heard other explosions. These were now blasting Natref. We then ran back to our homes. The story about the bombings appeared in the newspapers. If I remember well I think it was *Rand Daily Mail*, which my father used to buy. [...] In the newspaper it was written that this was the work of the saboteurs. But later I learned as people were talking in the township that this was done by members of MK".<sup>80</sup>

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75 *Ibid.*

76 I am indebted to the anonymous reviewer for this point.

77 *Pretoria News*, 6 September 1978.

78 *RSA World*, 31 July 1980.

79 *Drum*, August 1980.

80 Interview: S Dhlamini with T Moloi, *Centurion*, 19 August 2011.

The damage was estimated at R6 million.<sup>81</sup> During the mission, nobody was killed. The only person injured during the attacks was the security guard, Robert Nthembalazeni, who was shot in his left shoulder when trying to accost one of the attackers.<sup>82</sup>

Without a doubt, this incident raised the morale of the residents of Zamdela. This was evident when sometime between April or May 1981 some students at Nkgopoleng were arrested with explosives they had planned to use to attack SASOL and other factories within the complex.<sup>83</sup> However, it was the role played by AZAPO and its student movement, AZASM, that conscientised and spurred on the young people in the township to confront the local authorities.

#### **4. AZAPO AND CONFRONTATIONAL POLITICS IN ZAMDELA, 1980S**

AZAPO was formed in 1978, following the banning of 17 Black Consciousness-aligned organisations in October 1977. A few days after this, the interim leadership of AZAPO was arrested and served with banning orders. This caused AZAPO to hold its first inauguration conference in September 1979. Besides agreeing on the urgent need to form branches throughout the country, activists attending the “delegates” convention in 1978, agreed that AZAPO should focus, *inter alia*, on working towards a society with a common education system for all; to working closely with all the black workers; and to oppose all government created institutions and ethnic-orientated organizations.<sup>84</sup> It was against this background that a branch of AZAPO was established in Zamdela led, amongst others, by Charles Mabitsetla.

Unlike in other townships, in Zamdela confrontational politics were spearheaded by students and young people, later joined by adults. In contrast, in Alexandra, a township north of Johannesburg, it were adults who prompted confrontational politics in the 1980s. In 1979 the township was reprieved from being removed.<sup>85</sup> The Alexandra Liaison Committee (ALC), which had fought gallantly to save the township from being removed took over the administration of the township. Just like other administration structures, the ALC, together with the West Rand Administration Board, raised rents to accrue funding to develop the township. This was despite the fact that since the ALC had taken over there was no visible development in the township.<sup>86</sup> “As early as 1980”, write Bonner and Niefertgodien, “rent hikes sparked demonstrations by women

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81 Houston and Magubane, p. 508.

82 *Ibid.*, p. 510.

83 Ndlozi, p. 83

84 Mzamane and Maaba, pp. 1301-1311.

85 Bonner and Niefertgodien, *Alex*, p. 224

86 *Ibid.*, p. 239.



hostel dwellers”.<sup>87</sup> They were followed by male hostel dwellers in 1982.<sup>88</sup> These prompted other organisations. In 1984, the Neighbourhood Committee, organizing in Phase 1, a residential area in the township, was openly opposing the Alexandra Town Council.<sup>89</sup>

Leading figures within AZAPO in Zamdela took advantage of the crisis brewing in the township to recruit and ferment its position in the township. In August 1980 the Zamdela Community Council hiked rent.<sup>90</sup> The residents boycotted paying rent. On 30 April students at Nkgopoleng Secondary School, in solidarity with their parents, took to the streets. AZAPO, which opposed all the regime’s created institutions, joined the demonstration. The demonstrators vandalized the property belonging to the council; attacked Tsatsi Primary School and broke its windows; and torched two houses belonging to local councillors.<sup>91</sup> The police acted forcefully and crushed the demonstration. Few days later all those perceived as the leaders of the demonstration were rounded up and arrested. Solly Dhlamini, who was 15 years old, was one of them. The arrested students spent 14 days in detention. Finally, they were charged for public violence. Their trial took place in Parys, where they were represented by Priscilla Jana – one of the few lawyers who represented political activists in South Africa. The court found the students not guilty and it acquitted them. While Dhlamini and his co-accused were in detention there was another group of students from Nkgopoleng who were arrested and charged for sabotage. They spent eight months in detention.<sup>92</sup> This group of students, according to Ndlozi, were found in possession of explosives, allegedly planning to attack SASOL and nearby factories.<sup>93</sup>

However, before Dlamini and his co-accused were acquitted, Mabiletsa and his comrades in AZAPO saw the detention of these students as an opportunity to recruit for AZAPO. Mabiletsa assisted the parents of the detained students to find legal representation. This gained him some popularity and trust in the township. After the students were acquitted, Mabiletsa and others recruited them into AZAPO. Dhlamini remembers, “We were detained and charged, and went through a trial. After the trial we were approached by people like Ribs Ramushi. He was very close to Mabitsela. These were the people who approached me. They explained to me that there was a political organization fighting for the rights of black people and this was AZAPO. They informed me that it is a successor to the organization which was led by Steve Biko. I would say these were the first

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87 *Ibid.*, p. 243.

88 *Ibid.*

89 *Ibid.*, pp.243-247.

90 Mako, p. 13.

91 Ndlozi, p. 83.

92 Interview: S Dhlamini, M Malindi and C Mabiletsa with T Moloi and A Nyaleka, Zamdela, 8 August 2011.

93 Ndlozi, p. 83.

steps toward political [...] education for me. Although, I never joined AZAPO but I participated in some of their activities".<sup>94</sup>

The demonstration and the police's heavy-handed response transformed the young people in Zamdela. They became militant. On 4 May 1981 the students at Nkgopoleng confronted Mr Masoge, the principal, and demanded that he call the station commander of the police in Zamdela to come and address them. They wanted to instruct him to release their comrades. Mr Masoge complied and the station commander, accompanied by a contingent of heavily armed police, arrived at Nkgopoleng. The station commander had barely started talking when the students pelted him with stones. The police responded with teargas, rubber bullets and sjamboks.<sup>95</sup>

From that moment Zamdela changed. It stopped being tranquil. Street battles between the students, supported by out-of-school youth and the police became the norm. Realizing that the community councils were failing to deliver and were constantly under attack from members of communities throughout the country, the regime, as part of its tri-cameral parliamentary system, upgraded them to town councils under the Black Local Authorities (BLA) Act of 1982. Unlike the community councils, the town councils were given more powers to administer townships. But, like their predecessors before them, the town councils lacked financial power to develop townships. They also relied on hiking rent and service charges.

In October 1983 AZAPO held its national council meeting in Cape Town. In the meeting, "AZAPO decided to intensify its campaign against the forthcoming elections for the local authorities".<sup>96</sup> "All the branches", write Mzamane and Maaba, "were encouraged to participate in the campaign against the 'sham reform'".<sup>97</sup> AZAPO in Zamdela mobilised students, who were joined by other members of the community, to demonstrate against the BLA. Recalling his participation in this demonstration, Dhlamini remarks, "If I remember well in 1982 there were some reforms which were implemented around the local government. I can still remember we held marches in the township under the banner of AZAPO. During these marches we used to carry placards written 'No to reformism' and 'Away with illegitimate local government authorities'. The majority of the people who attended these marches were students. I later observed that many of the students at Nkgopoleng, especially those who were older than me, were members of AZAPO".<sup>98</sup>

Because of its visible activism in the township, AZAPO was able to slowly swell its ranks. Taking advantage of this fertile situation, Mabiletsa returned to Nkgopoleng to complete his Forms Four and Five (today's Grades

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94 Interview: S Dhlamini with T Moloi, Centurion, 19 August 2011.

95 Ndlozi, pp. 83-84.

96 Mzamane and Maaba, p. 1316.

97 *Ibid.*

98 *Ibid.*

11 and 12, respectively) after having dropped out of school between 1981 and 1982 to work. He recruited and politicized students at school and outside school.<sup>99</sup> Khulu Gadebe, who was born in 1968 at Vanderbijlpark where his parents were employed and had moved to Sasolburg in 1976, recalls that he was conscientised and recruited to AZAPO by Phole Matebesi. He recounts, "When I was in Standard 4 (Grade 6) at Tsatsi Primary he was in Standard 5 (Grade 7). And the following year, which was 1983, he went to Nkgopoleng to do his Standard 6 (Grade 8) [...] So most of the time he liked to ask me about the bombing at SASOL and how I felt about that. And I would say the bombing was done by terrorists. But then he would say, 'No, the people who did that are trying to free the country. They are trying to remind South Africa that we are still at war and that the government that is ruling now is not the people's choice.'"<sup>100</sup>

It was in 1984 after the student branch of AZAPO, AZASM, was established in Zamdela that the organisation managed to reach out and recruit more students into its ranks. This branch followed the formation of AZASM national in June 1983. Just like its mother body, AZASM adopted BC as its liberatory philosophy. Its aims and objectives included the creation of a forum for students to articulate and express their aspirations as part of the black nation and to encourage the involvement of students in problems facing the student community as well as those facing the black community in general.<sup>101</sup> To conscientise and recruit members AZASM in Zamdela used political education. This was in line with the resolution which was adopted at the AZASM national congress held in Pietermaritzburg in April 1984. There the delegates resolved to hold seminars on "class suicide" and how to promote solidarity with the "working class".<sup>102</sup> AZASM's political classes were captivating to the extent that students did not wish to miss them or miss out on what was discussed. Gadebe recalls the time when he missed the last bus to take him home because he was engrossed in the political class, "Most of the time our meetings were conducted in English. And when they shouted viva and Black Power they really motivated us to work harder. The first meeting I attended was conducted by Charles Mabitsela, and it was a small workshop at Nkgopoleng. He used to come after school and we would have our own political classes. One evening it was so interesting that I missed the bus. I had to catch the 15h00 bus but by the time I looked at my watch it was 15h10. I ran to the bus stop, but the bus had already gone".<sup>103</sup>

AZASM also used historically significant days, such as the Sharpeville massacre in 1960 and the student uprising in June 1976, to mobilise and

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99 Interview: S Dhlamini, M Malindi and C Mabiletsa with T Moloi and A Nyaleka, Zamdela, 8 August 2011.

100 Interview: K Gadebe with G Poli, Zamdela, 14 June 2011.

101 A2675, Karis Gerhart Collection. Historical and Literary Papers, University of the Witwatersrand.

102 Mzamane and Maaba, p. 1318.

103 Interview: K Radebe with G Poli, Zamdela, 14 June 2011.

conscientise students. These days were celebrated in the last hour of school at Nkgopoleng. According to Ndlozi, “without a doubt both [days] promoted the ideas associated much more with black consciousness than COSAS. Thus, symbolically, they gave an opportunity for the advancement and dissemination of AZASM ideas. This partly explains why throughout the 1980s AZASM was the strongest in the school, winning all student representation council elections until 1992”.<sup>104</sup>

Thus, by the time the Vaal uprising erupted in Sebokeng on 3 September 1984 because of the increased rent and service charges, students, particularly members of AZASM (and AZAPO) in Zamdela were ready. After the BLA's elections, the Lekoa Town Council, together with the Orange Vaal Development Board (the Board had changed its name from OVAB), took over the administration of Zamdela and other townships in the Vaal Triangle.<sup>105</sup> Notwithstanding the economic hardships the residents were experiencing at the time, the two structures raised rents which the residents found it difficult to keep up with. According to Mzamane and Maaba, “the household subsistence level of an African family in the Vaal Triangle was R330.35 a month as against R327.11 in Johannesburg, the next most expensive area”.<sup>106</sup> Amidst this situation, rent hikes were high compared to Johannesburg, for example. Mzamane and Maaba note, “average rent for Africans in the Vaal Triangle in September 1984 was R61,70 compared with R52,55 in Johannesburg”.<sup>107</sup>

What further infuriated the residents of Zamdela was the imagined and/or real corruption and nepotism tendencies associated with some of the councillors. Chaskalson and Seekings write, “in the aftermath of the Vaal uprising, three Lekoa Town Councillors, including the former Mayor Knox Matjila, were charged with taking bribes in return for the allocation of trading sites”.<sup>108</sup> Moreover, they add, “under the OVDB's jurisdiction, the new mayor Paul Mahlatsi (he succeeded Matjila) and his brothers bought 12 of the 25 beerhalls sold by the Board at R7.5 million. They had received ‘soft’ loans from the OVDB”.<sup>109</sup>

Students, together with the disgruntled members of the community, attacked and burned down the two shops belonging to Mahlatsi.<sup>110</sup> Reporting the incident, a *Sowetan* reporter wrote: “A group of about 40 people marched through the streets. A bus was later hijacked and driven through the display window of a butchery and supermarket belonging to Mahlatsi. After plundering the shops, the

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104 Ndlozi, p. 96.

105 Chaskalson and Seekings, p. 30.

106 Mzamane and Maaba, p. 1319.

107 *Ibid.*

108 Chaskalson and Seekings, p. 30.

109 *Ibid.*

110 *Sowetan*, 14 December 1984.

police used teargas to disperse the crowd. An 18 year-old man was arrested".<sup>111</sup> In the interview with Mabiletsa, he claimed this incident as AZAPO's.<sup>112</sup>

For Mphasane, the residents attacked Mahlatsi because, as the leader of the council, he was responsible for the improper use of funds meant to develop the township. He explains, "I'm not sure whether these people were stubborn to listen or what. We were under the control of Vaal [...] and the Free State. Mahlatsi was in control. So the money that was generated here was used to develop the Vaal Triangle. Those people over there misused it".<sup>113</sup>

In the course of all this, students nationwide were boycotting classes. Zamdela was no exception.<sup>114</sup> COSAS which had been established in 1979, and was the first organisation to adopt the Freedom Charter since the banning of the ANC, had tabled its five key demands, which included the election of the Student Representative Council (SRC) to replace the prefect system and an end to corporal punishment.<sup>115</sup> In 1985 a branch of COSAS was formed in Nkgopoleng. Before the political tension between AZASM and COSAS erupted in Zamdela, the two organisations worked and fought together as comrades. This was evident when the two organisations following a rumour that one of the teachers, a Mrs Makiri, her husband was a member of the South African Police Special Branch, demanded that she should be expelled from the school. They argued that some of the activists in the township were arrested by member of the special branch for questioning about things they suspect could only have been divulged by a teacher. To expedite their demand, AZASM and COSAS called for class boycotts.<sup>116</sup>

The police responded harshly. On 9 May they arrived in numbers at Nkgopoleng and surrounded the school. They gave an order that students must return to their classes. The principal, Hlahani, tried to plea with them not to come inside the school's premises. "But in no time the police had broken the school chains and entered with sjamboks, teargas, dogs and seized on everyone, teacher and student alike. Activists fought back with stones, and later with petrol bombs".<sup>117</sup> To quell the increasing protests and retain law and order, on 20 June 1985 the regime declared a partial state of emergency, which affected 36 magisterial districts in the Eastern Cape and PWV region. And on 30 June, AZAPO was added to a list of organisations prohibited from holding meetings

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111 *Ibid.*

112 Interview: S Dhlamini, M Malindi and C Mabiletsa with T Moloi and A Nyaleka, Zamdela, 8 August 2011.

113 Interview: C Mphasane and B Theletsane with T Moloi, 4 July 2017.

114 In March 1985 students in Zamdela embarked on school boycotts. See, Chaskalson and Seekings, p. 34

115 Moloi, p. 104.

116 Ndlozi, p. 88.

117 *Ibid.*, p. 89.

that involved work stoppage and stayaways.<sup>118</sup> This must have constrained AZAPO and AZASM's activism in Zamdela.

Furthermore, on 25 August the regime banned COSAS. The students responded by changing the name from COSAS to Zamdela Student Congress (ZSC). However, ZSC does not seem to have made an impact in terms of student politics because of police harassment and detentions. Despite this, political resistance in the townships (and rural areas) continued unabated. On 12 June 1986 the regime responded by declaring the national state of emergency. The police were given *carte blanche* to act as they pleased in the name of law and order. They swooped on political activists, including students. Zamdela was not left untouched.

Mzwakhe Malindi, who was born in 1964, and in 1985 was a leading figure in COSAS at Nkgopoleng, remembers that during the national state of emergency he was detained and spent eight months in the Potchefstroom Prison.<sup>119</sup> Gill Straker, in her book on youth politics in Leandra township in the Eastern Transvaal (today's Mpumalanga Province), writes that "during 1986 alone, the Detainees' Parents Support Committee estimated that approximately 10 000 children, some as young as 10 and 11, were detained in jail".<sup>120</sup>

This was clearly meant to intimidate the residents of the townships. In subsequent years, the regime detained all known political activists' days before the commemoration of June 16 to stop them from using the day to mobilise. Equally, the police would also enthusiastically detain even people who were not actively involved in resistance politics. Mphasane recalls that this happened to his older brother. He explains, "At some point, I still remember they were looking for Sgili and they came to ask a certain policeman called Tshosa. Tshosa said, 'Yes, I know Skila'. Now Skila was my older brother. He told those *boers* that he knew Skila. They said come, show us where he lives. I was at home. When the *boers* arrived they just said *kom, kom*. When they arrived with him at the police station his face was already swollen [they had beaten him up]. Priscilla Jana [...] intervened and they found out that he was Skila and not Sgili. They released him. When Sgili heard that the police were looking for him he ran away and went to Soweto."<sup>121</sup>

The regime's efforts to break political resistance in the township by detaining students floundered. In the mid-1980s, political protests intensified throughout the country, then led by the Mass Democratic Movement (MDM). On 24 February 1988 the regime banned the UDF and restricted COSATU,

118 Mzamane and Maaba, p. 1329.

119 Interview: S Dhlamini, M Malindi and C Mabiletsa with T Moloi and A Nyaleka, Zamdela, 8 August 2011.

120 G Straker, *Faces in the revolution: The psychological effects of violence on township youth in South Africa* (Cape Town: David Phillip, 1992), p. 6.

121 Interview: C Mphasane and B Theletsane with T Moloi, 4 July 2017.

which had been established in 1985. The two organisations formed a broad alliance and called it the MDM. The latter embarked on a defiance campaign, *inter alia*, calling on its supporters to organize consumer boycotts and defy laws discriminating against black people, to force the regime to abandon its apartheid policies".<sup>122</sup> It was at this stage that student activists in Zamdela began to fraternize with the workers. This was propelled by the strike the African workers at SASOL and Natref were involved in.

On 1 October 1987 African workers at SASOL and Natref plants voted to strike for better wages, about R115 more a month. The management of the companies refused to budge and used the National Key Points Act to bar the strike. It summoned the police to quell the strike. In 2012 an ex-SASOL employee wrote a letter to the Department of Justice, recounting what happened, "We were beaten by the police and bitten by their dogs. As the strike *went* on, the SAP started shooting workers. The first victim who was shot dead was Ndiko; S. Nxhitho was shot and lost an eye".<sup>123</sup>

When the police's intervention failed, the management of SASOL and Natref used scab labour and vigilante groups. This caused serious tensions between the striking workers and the scab labour. After six months 77 strikers were killed and 2400 had lost their jobs.<sup>124</sup> For Mphasane the management of the plants caused the tensions deliberately. He explained, "It was about money and working conditions. Sasol claimed that the strike was not legal. You know, an operator working in there was some sort of an engine of the company. So, the majority of the operators participated in the strike. So, SASOL went to the different plants within the company and said to the managers 'Amongst the people on strike are there any that you think you'd want to keep?' The company made sure that the striking workers went hungry first and became desperate so that they could convince those that they wanted to retain to come back to work. When they were sure that now the workers were desperate, they approached them one by one: 'Hey man, the company needs you'. Let's be honest these guys were hungry and desperate. What would you do? Are you going to say no to the offer? You'd go back. So, some went back to work".<sup>125</sup>

The strike had devastating consequences for the workers. Dhlamini remembered, "In 1987 there was strike action at SASOL led by COSATU. Some of the workers lost their houses caused by non-payment of bonds. Some had to find accommodation at their parents' houses and others became tenants".<sup>126</sup>

AZASM, in solidarity with the striking workers, organised a consumer boycott, compiled and distributed pamphlets, wrote graffiti to articulate the plight

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122 Moloi, p.133.

123 <[www.khulumani.net](http://www.khulumani.net)>, accessed 23 October 2017.

124 *Ibid.*

125 Interview: C Mphasane and B Theletsane with T Moloi, 4 July 2017.

126 Interview: S Dhlamini with T Moloi, Centurion, 19 August 2011.

of the workers, and helped the workers in the fierce battles with the band of vigilantes called the 'Witdoeke', so-called because they wore white head-scarfs. The 'witdoeke' consisted of the scab labourers and workers who refused to support the strike.<sup>127</sup>

For Dhlamini, this strike helped to conscientise many of the adults in the township and some of them began to participate in the political activities organized in the township.<sup>128</sup> It is possible that many participated in the consumer boycott of 1988. The Lekoa Town Council hiked rents again to finance the construction of toilets in Sharpeville.<sup>129</sup> At this stage, the residents of Zamdela were complaining about lack of development in the township. Mphasane remembered that the residents felt aggrieved that major developments were only taking place in the other townships in the Vaal Triangle and not in Zamdela. They observed that the council had built a big and beautiful hall in Sebokeng and constructed a smaller one in Zamdela. "Mphatlalatsane hall [in Sebokeng] was supposed to have been built here and the stadium was supposed to have been bigger than the one they built", remarked Mphasane.<sup>130</sup>

## 5. THE DERAILMENT OF CONFRONTATIONAL POLITICS

In the mid-1980s, opposition politics had reached a peak in Zamdela. Towards the end of the 1980s they were, however, derailed by the eruption of fierce battles between AZASM (also known as the *Amazimuzimu*) and ZSC (Charterists or the Vararas). Extensive work has been produced about the rivalry between the BC organisations and UDF-affiliated organisations, particularly the students, to regurgitate it here.<sup>131</sup> But what is important is to outline in this section how the two warring factions in the township finally made peace. Mzamane and Maaba trace this rivalry to the appearance of the UDF in the political scene in 1983.<sup>132</sup> The *Amazimuzimu* and "Charterists" began to fight for political space.

In Zamdela, the conflict seems to have erupted after the formation of the MDM. This caused a lot of damage to property and divided the community. Dhlamini explained, "When I got home I went to a certain wedding's reception. When I got there I found Mabitsetla, the leader of AZAPO, tearing a t-shirt inscribed with the Freedom Charter. This t-shirt belonged to a certain member of ZSC. I tried to find out from Mabitsetla why he was tearing this t-shirt and he told me that I was now in the ghetto. I should not come with my elite behavior

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127 Mako, p. 40.

128 *Ibid.*

129 Mako, p. 42.

130 Interview: C Mphasane and B Theletsane with T Moloi, 4 July 2017.

131 Mzamane and Maaba, pp. 1320-1328; T Moloi, "Black student", pp. 1183-1209; S Mkhabela, *Open earth and black roses: Remembering 16 June 1976* (Johannesburg: Skotaville, 2001), pp. 100-108.

132 Mzamane and Maaba, p. 1320.



from the university. A fight broke out between Mabiletsa and myself. Subsequent to our fight, tension between AZAPO and MDM grew. They attacked each other and burned down each other's houses. From both camps members were carrying around with them dangerous weapons. Fortunately, there was no loss of life. I remember there were two meetings by the supporters of the MDM to plan how we were going to attack members of AZAPO".<sup>133</sup>

Realizing the damage the rivalry was causing, the leaders of the two organizations came to their senses and discussed and agreed to try and stop the violence. Dhlamini recounted, "The situation became so tense that if there was no intervention things might have turned terrible. Mabiletsa and myself not long after our fight decided that this fight was not taking our struggle anywhere. This was after we realized that tension between these two organizations in other areas had caused immeasurable damage. We felt that we needed to do something to end this violence. We consulted with some of the church ministers in the township. These were Reverend Mahlatsi and Reverend Mohebudi. They were both from the Methodist Church. We requested them to assist us in quelling this violence. They played an important role in stopping the violence between members of AZAPO and MDM. We raised funds and hired a van and a loudspeaker. Mabiletsa and I sat in the back of the van to demonstrate that we were not fighting but wanted peace. The idea was that if our members see us together they would stop fighting, because they accepted us as their leaders."<sup>134</sup>

This action helped to stop differences between *Amazimuzimu* and Vararas in Zamdela. After a protracted struggle, in 1990 the ANC (and other political organisations) was unbanned and activists in Zamdela, like many in other townships across the country, worked tirelessly to re-establish the recently unbanned organisations in the township.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Zamdela Township, which was established by SASOL in the early 1950s to accommodate its employees, had distinct factors that restrained its residents from engaging in confrontational politics. Firstly, up to the early 1970s, the area was made up largely of migrant labourers who, because of their precarious status in an urban area, avoided confrontational politics. The residents who settled in the township in the 1960s were obsessed with eking out a living and aspiring to

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133 Interview: S Dhlamini with T Moloi, Centurion, 19 August 2011; the Mass Democratic Movement replaced the UDF which was banned in 1988. It comprised the former UDF-affiliates and trade unions. See J Seekings *The UDF: A history of the United Democratic Front in South Africa 1983-1991* (Claremont: David Philip Publishers, 2000), p. 3.

134 *Ibid.*; Dhlamini recalls that for their trouble they were labelled the 'doves'. And those who were in favour of the continuation of the conflict were seen as the 'hawks'. For a detailed account of these labels, see A Sparks, *Tomorrow is another country: The inside story of South Africa's negotiated revolution* (Sandton: Struik Book Distributors, 1994).

become a black middle class than to challenge the injustices perpetrated by the local authorities and the apartheid regime. Secondly, in the 1950s and 1960s in Zamdela there was a dearth of pressing social grievances used in other areas to mobilise communities to protest. SASOL subsidised the township's development. And finally, the township, because of its close proximity to SASOL, a National Key Point, was heavily monitored. Strict prohibitions were placed on who was permitted to be in the township and who was not. This contained unwanted influences within the community. The situation, however, began to slowly change in the early 1970s. SASOL began to increasingly employ South Africans in semi-skilled and skilled posts. This category of employees was employed for longer periods and settled in the township closer to the workplace. As the residents of the township, they became attached to the area and paid for their stay. When the black local councils, introduced by the NP regime in the mid-1970s as part of its reform strategy, hiked rent and service charges to finance development, the residents boycotted. At the beginning of the 1980s, students from Nkgopoleng Secondary School, who had been influenced by AZAPO and, later by AZASM and COSAS, openly challenged the black local councilors; attacked them and their properties. By the mid-1980s they were involved in street battles with the police and, later vigilantes used by SASOL to intimidate black striking workers in SASOL. At this stage, Zamdela was different. It was on "fire". Confrontational politics had reached a peak. Towards the end of the 1980s, the students' political momentum was derailed by the infighting between the BC organisations and UDF/MDM-affiliated organisations. Student activists shifted their focus to fighting each other. Before the regime unbanned the ANC and other political organization, leaders of the warring factions in Zamdela managed to stop the rivalry and agree to function peacefully.