

THE PREMIER, POLITICS AND PREJUDICE: WINKIE DIREKO'S RISE FROM COMPARATIVE OBSCURITY IN THE 1970s TO PROVINCIAL PROMINENCE IN THE 1990s - A BIOGRAPHICAL OVERVIEW

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1. INTRODUCTION

The surprising appointment of Winkie Direko as premier of the African National Congress (ANC)-led Free State Province in June 1999 came as a rude awakening to the provincial leadership of the ANC, as well as to the Free State citizens. Because of her 'lack of experience' in as far as full-time party politics are concerned, her appointment to the premiership position came as a shock to some people in the Free State Province, who without doubt had earmarked certain individuals within the ANC provincial leadership for this position. After the June 1999 elections the appointment of the provincial premiers became the prerogative of the country's president, Thabo Mbeki. Direko found herself appointed in this position based on the trust the president had in her to lead the trouble-torn Free State Province. It is important to note that when Mbeki appointed a premier, the potential of that individual counted more than the role that individual had played in the party's politics. Direko's community involvement is a factor that could not be ignored in her appointment as the premier of the Free State Province.

Since the 1994 democratic elections, political leadership of the Free State Province has been a contested terrain; therefore, Direko's surprising appointment fuelled the political tension and instability and triggered debates around her contribution to the liberation struggle. Some people claimed that she had played a minor role in the liberation struggle and labelled her as a 'controversial figure'. It is strange that these accusations came after she had been appointed as premier but nothing was said when she had become a senator after the 1994 election and later permanent member of the National Council of Provinces (NCOP).

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The fact that some members of the ANC in the province were disgruntled with her appointment meant that the problem of the leadership contest was resurrected and continued. To justify their dissatisfaction, several attempts were made to discredit and unsettle her in the premiership position.¹ Allegations were levelled against her that to a certain extent, prior to the 1990s, she had not made it clear whether she supported the liberation struggle or not. Looking back at her political actions and the statements she had uttered long before the democratization period, distinct political standpoints concerning the apartheid government seemed discernable in a number of critical areas. This article tries to draw attention to them.

The article demonstrates the role played by Direko in the liberation struggle in the 1970s amidst allegations that she played little or no role at all. It also unravels the degree to which her actions in the 1970s and 1980s attest to her commitment to the cause of black liberation despite the allegations. The authors approach these alleged two tasks performed by Direko as inseparable sides of the same coin because she was an employee of the education ministry under the apartheid government and at the same time performed politically related tasks of being a 'community and social worker'. Focus is also placed on how critics describe her as a 'controversial leader who constructs her own life through her continuous references to her past activities in an attempt to manipulate and gain political control in the province.

To reach a rational conclusion, a wide range of interviews with some of Direko's contemporaries and friends is used due to the lack of secondary sources on this topic. These are compared to the viewpoint of various political leaders and community members around the Free State Province to come to a reasonable understanding of Direko's political and community activities up to her premiership appointment.

2. POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT: MEANING AND UNDERSTANDING BY DIREKO

It must be noted that before June 1999, the name 'Direko' symbolized two counterpoised notions for blacks and whites. On the one hand she was referred to as a 'controversial' political opportunist who would lead the province into chaos and destruction. She was viewed by others as a well-deserving community leader who possessed the ability to bring firm governance in the province which had been riddled with political infighting and instability.² It is during this period that her political contribution concerning the liberation struggle began to be questioned and that she was accused of being a self-proclaimed politician who did not possess any

¹ **Business Day**, 20 May 1999.

² **The Star**, 14 May 1999.

political credentials. This was due to the fact that prior to 1990, no one credited her as a politician. Direko's official installation as premier, on the 15th June 1999, marked the beginning of her bitter struggle to preserve her power base against the pressures of her political opponents. Attempts were made to unsettle her.

On the 13th February 2000, Mawande Jubasi, a journalist of the **Sunday World** newspaper, published an article entitled "Bid to oust Winkie Direko" in which he made claims that Direko's colleagues viewed her as a 'controversial' figure full of excuses and who failed to attend some important meetings. The article further indicated that due to her ill-health she was not fit to continue with her duties as premier and this contributed to her missing those meetings. There were people within the ANC in the province who did not want Direko as premier and tried all avenues to discredit her as a political leader. These utterances were denied by both Direko and the then ANC provincial secretary, Paul Mathlatsi. Mathlatsi viewed them as part of a strategy to destabilize the ANC in the province.³

Direko undoubtedly was a major and complex political figure in the Free State province during the years of her premiership, despite accusations that she had become a political leader and the head of the province by default. Although she had not attended political rallies and meetings, it is believed that she had been a political supporter of the ANC long before its unbanning in 1990. According to Direko she was not afraid to lead the Free State Province as she possessed the characteristics of good leadership which had become clear to her during her term as an educator.⁴

When the national office of the ANC deployed her to the province after having served in the National Council of Provinces, she reluctantly accepted the offer knowing the challenges she was to face as the premier of the province. With her experience as a senator and a member of the NCOP in Cape Town for almost five years, Direko came to the province determined to lead it. Her involvement in the above-mentioned capacities, partially exonerated her from being judged as a novice in politics as some people contended. As a parliamentarian, she had been chairperson of the select committees on Education, Sports and Recreation, Arts and Culture. She had also been a member of the Judicial Service Commission, a body which dealt with the appointment of black judges to speed up transformation.⁵ Direko is of the opinion that any role she had played in politics before 1990 was of a caretaker kind because many leaders of the liberation movements were

³ **Sunday World**, 13 February 2000.

⁴ Twala, personal collection. Interview with Ms W Direko, Premier of the Free State Province, Bloemfontein, 12 February 2002.

⁵ **Sowetan**, 5 July 2001.

incarcerated, therefore, like other educators, she had been thrust into political roles.⁶

To many political leaders, involvement in the liberation struggle denotes the following: to have chanted anti-apartheid slogans; to have been detained and arrested several times; to have been exiled; to have promoted slogans like 'liberation now and education later'; to have been associated with the self-proclaimed liberation fighters; to have subscribed to ideologies which had been coined for people's political promotion rather than for the benefit of society. Direko subscribed to none of the above characteristics of a liberation fighter. These actions are viewed to be subjective and misleading, as many people within the country and who had never been detained suffered the apartheid atrocities much more than the people who were outside the country or those who had been detained.⁷ Direko therefore falls in the latter category. The fact that she is one of the people who was never detained or exiled made some people view her as having contributed nothing to the liberation struggle.

Despite the above classification of people who participated in the liberation struggle and the label attached to those who like Direko were never exiled or arrested, Direko still contends that there were many methods of involving oneself in the liberation struggle. The above sentiments of Direko were also echoed by M Gericke, a journalist from the **Volksblad** newspaper, who said that her contribution in the liberation struggle had not passed unnoticed hence Thabo Mbeki entrusted her with the task of leading the province as the premier. She stated that long before Direko became premier, she had been involved in political activities, although in a subtle way.⁸

Direko considers herself as part of the liberation struggle. She considers it a matter of strategy that she, unlike other liberation fighters, escaped imprisonment or exile by opting to work from within the apartheid structure and challenge the apartheid legislation as an educator. She presents herself as a provincial leader who, from the initial stages of her political life, had been concerned with the national liberation of the oppressed South African people.⁹ Direko should be commended for this brave stance of dealing with the apartheid government from within the country despite

⁶ Twala, personal collection. Interview with Ms W Direko, Premier of the Free State Province, Bloemfontein, 12 February 2002.

⁷ **Ibid.**

⁸ Twala, personal collection. Interview with Ms M Gericke, journalist, **Volksblad** newspaper, Bloemfontein, 4 September 2002.

⁹ Twala, personal collection. Interview with Ms W Direko, Premier of the Free State Province, Bloemfontein, 5 February 2003.

counter motions to this explanation by Direko. These counter motions will be discussed below.

Understanding political involvement in the liberation struggle may mean different things to different people. To Direko, political involvement in the liberation struggle meant following a non-confrontational and a non-violent means of challenging the apartheid government. This suggests that the fact that she did not adopt a radical approach in her engagements with the liberation struggle should not be mistaken for having played a less important role in the struggle or that she approved of what the apartheid government was promoting.

Having worked for almost four decades under the apartheid controlled ministry of education, she became aware that the socio-economic problems experienced by the black communities were political in nature and therefore warranted political solutions, hence her subtle involvement in social politics. In the 1970s, Direko realized that the majority of the black youth had adopted a radical approach towards the apartheid government; therefore in most situations she neutralized the situation by her non-violent approach when she dealt with the security police.

The fact that Direko had an easy access to liaise with the police on behalf of the students was interpreted negatively by some members of the community who became suspicious of this easy access. Questions of why she was not arrested if she was against the system were repeatedly asked. This group of the community never realized that the police also needed a mature person to liaise with in calming the violent students.¹⁰ To Direko, this implied that to morally direct the students, peaceful means of settling the differences with the police were needed. Therefore people who doubted her role in this regard were seen as having a narrow focus of realist-based conceptions of national interests.

3. A 'CONTROVERSIAL' FIGURE OR A POLITICAL CATALYST: OPPOSING VIEWS

Although Direko is regarded as one of the prominent African members of the ANC in the period under discussion, particularly in the Free State Province, she is by no means a national figure, nor did she appear to have gained any kind of mass following nationally. Within the ANC provincial ranks she is listed as a brilliant speaker and popular with the masses in the Free State since she became the province's premier. It is doubtful whether Direko would have mustered much support if she had never been the province's premier. The ANC masses in the Free

¹⁰ Twala, personal collection. Interview with Mrs M Molatole, senior resident of Bochabela township, Bloemfontein, 18 February 2003.

State guaranteed Direko a following, and through the services of the ruling party she could enlarge it.

When interviewed on her early memories as premier, Direko more or less confirmed some of the concerns of her antagonists in politics that she had been politically immature when she became the province's premier by confessing the following:

I did not know anything about being a premier. As in the 1970s and the 1980s, I showed no interest in full-time party politics. All I was armed with when I entered this office was the zeal to serve. I had the political consciousness but without any political training as many people might suggest.¹¹

The above short and simple address by Direko in which she looked closely at her future career as the premier and her role in carrying out the dictates of the ruling ANC party in the Free State Province, set a tone for her future government in the trouble torn province. Direko might have lacked political training and charisma, but her experience in leadership positions nationally and internationally was an advantage for her role as premier. She indicated that her primary calling, however, was to be an educator and working as a community leader she addressed social matters which were politically motivated. She further stated that in the 1970s there were moments in the lives of the black communities when educators had to provide leadership on the political terrain. Therefore, her involvement in politics as premier should not be judged as her first taste with politics.

The late Caleb Motshabi, an ANC veteran in the Free State, made no attempts to hide the fact that throughout his political career as an activist and Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) cadre, he had never participated alongside Direko in any political activity since the 1940s. In a Radio Lesedi talk show, Motshabi openly criticized Direko's appointment as premier. Motshabi was vocal in stating that Direko's appointment was based on her community involvement rather than on her involvement in the liberation struggle. He contended that Direko was mostly involved in charity organizations and never played a meaningful role in an attempt to politically liberate the black masses.¹²

The national office of the ANC viewed Motshabi's statement as harsh to Direko who was directly appointed by President Thabo Mbeki. Therefore, to challenge Direko's appointment was tantamount to challenging the president's decision.

¹¹ Twala, personal collection. Interview with Ms W Direko, Premier of the Free State Province, Bloemfontein, 5 June 2003.

¹² Radio Lesedi Talkshow with Caleb Motshabi, 7 May 1999.

Although Motshabi did not hide his reservations about Direko's appointment, he was forced to withdraw his statements. Direko and Motshabi had some diametrically opposed ideas on what involvement in the liberation struggle meant. Direko, for example, held that local issues form part and parcel of the national liberation struggle.

When one scrutinized Motshabi's line of thinking, long before he could air his views, it was clear that some people within the ANC were not happy with the way the premiers were appointed from the president's office. Motshabi contended that because of Direko's shady and shaky political past she was not supposed to be appointed as premier. By being bold in challenging this matter, Motshabi was echoing Raymond Louw's sentiments when he termed this strategy by Thabo Mbeki as either a case of 'democratic centralism' or 'imperial presidency'. According to Louw, this was Thabo Mbeki's anticipated authoritarian leadership style.¹³ Exercising his prerogative as ANC President by nominating the candidates for premierships in the nine provinces, Mbeki overrode the wishes of the ANC provincial structures in three provinces, namely, Gauteng, Mpumalanga and the Free State.

Direko was quick to dispute her dubious involvement in party politics. Although she contributed differently compared to other politicians, she recalls that her political initiation and involvement dates back to the early 1950s when she joined the African National Congress Youth League (ANCYL) under the leadership of Andrew Tshehlana.¹⁴ She contends that she became a member of the ANC under the leadership of people like JB Mafora, C Motshabi and G Dichaba. These people, according to Direko, exercised a direct and formative influence on her political thinking. It was therefore ironic that Motshabi disputed Direko's involvement in politics. Direko also recalls that she was once the president of the University Christian Movement (UCM) which included leaders like S Biko, J Moloto, T Manthata, and A Nkomo. This UCM was one of the organizations which were later investigated by the Schlebusch Commission along with Beyers Naude's Christian Institute.¹⁵

¹³ R Louw, "Ousting of provincial premiers by Thabo Mbeki points to 'democratic centralism' or 'imperial presidency'", *Southern Africa Report*, 1, 17, 1999pp. 11-4. For wider reading see also R Louw, "ANC's plan to use 'deployment committee' to choose provincial premiers means more power for Mbeki", *Southern Africa Report*, 16, 33, 1998, pp. 1-2.

¹⁴ Twala, personal collection. Interview with Ms W Direko, Premier of the Free State Province, Bloemfontein, 5 June 2003.

¹⁵ *Sowetan*, 5 July 2001.

Lesley Monnanyane, another ANC veteran in the Free State Province, felt obliged to respond to Motshabi's accusations and viewed his statements as personal attacks on Direko because of bitterness and jealousy. Monnanyane also indicated that he had known Direko since their youth days and recalled that unlike Motshabi, Direko was a political introvert, and further justified Direko's subtle political involvement in the liberation struggle. The fact that she was not the natural and democratic choice of the ANC people in the Free State did not make her a bad leader. Another argument was that her appointment as the province's premier was just a compromise to unite a divided ANC in the province.¹⁶

Monnanyane summarized the reasons for Direko's rejection by some people when she was appointed as the province's premier. He pointed out that Direko appeared to be more independent and neutral than the existing divisions within the ruling ANC leadership in the province. Contrasting Direko and Motshabi, Monnanyane described Direko as a person who seemed to be driven by the need to improve the living conditions of the majority of the Free State citizens. Unlike Motshabi, Monnanyane was of an opinion that Direko by her actions subscribed to the ANC's slogan of a 'better life for all'. To Monnanyane, the fact that Motshabi was involved in the ANC operations outside the country, did not give him any authority to judge as to who contributed immensely to the liberation struggle and who did not. He contended that Direko was one of the community leaders who kept the fire burning within the country.¹⁷

Although Monnanyane insisted that Direko held views and philosophical beliefs concerning the liberation struggle, there is no known or substantial oral evidence that Direko had ever been openly involved in party politics, whether on full or part time basis. Ellen Gaborone, a long-time friend and Direko's close relative, stated that at the Modderpoort Institute where they both trained to become educators, and despite of having been taught by people like the late Dr Ntsu Mokhehle (former president of the Basotho national party in the 1990s), Direko was not involved in politics. No reference is made to her as having played a major role in the political activities of that time.¹⁸ There is also no reference to her participation in the major political campaigns of the 1950s such as the Defiance Campaign, the Congress of the People, or the campaign against the Bantu Education Act. Alongside this record of inactivity, it was clear that Direko's involvement in the liberation struggle was of a different kind.

¹⁶ Twala, personal collection. Interview with Mr L Monnanyane, ANC veteran in the Free State, Bloemfontein, 4 June 2003.

¹⁷ **Ibid.**

¹⁸ Twala, personal collection. Interview with Mrs E Gaborone, personal friend and Direko's colleague at Modderpoort Teachers Training Institute, Bloemfontein, 5 June 2003.

Despite the avalanche of repressive laws and the banning of many of the leaders in the 1950s, black protest in South Africa was by no means stilled. Direko witnessed the 43rd annual conference of the ANC which was held in Bloemfontein in December 1955. Although she was not part of the delegation to the conference because of her inactivity in party politics, she subscribed to the conference's resolutions. One of the resolutions Direko endorsed was the one proposed by the African National Congress Women's League (ANCWL) that African women would not, under any circumstances, carry passes as was stipulated by apartheid legislation.

Between 1970 and 1976, the philosophy behind black resistance to the oppression of apartheid underwent radical changes. The strategy of using the system to destroy itself from within was re-examined to determine in which ways the new structures could be evolved, inside or outside the system, which would offer a resolution to the political impasse created by the unending series of repressive laws and actions of the state. It was especially during this period that Africans were anxious to wrest the political initiative from the apartheid government to build their own structures, to determine their own goals and methodology and to look for new ideas and strategies for themselves. Broadly speaking, they were evolving a philosophy that came to be referred to as Black Consciousness. Direko had independently concluded, many years earlier, that new organizations had to be developed, in which a growing black identity could be used to promote self-advancement. Although she was not a member of the BC, Direko supported its philosophy to the letter.

In the 1970s Direko became influential in rejecting the government's community councils which were established as a 'new' structure for the local administration of Africans in urban areas. The setting up of community councils was an attempt by the apartheid government to accommodate the political aspirations of Africans in the urban areas since they were not allowed participation in either the central organs of state power or in the Bantustan structures with their rural orientation.

Controversial or not, even before she had become the province's premier, some people in the province doubted her political leadership when she was deployed to the national parliament as a senator after the 1994 democratic election. These people based their argument on the premise that during the post 1976 era Direko, as an educator with credibility in the Mangaung area as far as social matters were concerned, had a minor role to play in protecting the students who were harassed by the security branch.¹⁹ This contradicted the fact that, after 1976, with the assistance of the then national chairperson of NICRO, Richard Goldstone, she

¹⁹ Twala, personal collection. Interview with Mr CS Moshotle, former educator at Sehunelo High School and resident of Batho Township, Bloemfontein, 14 February 2003.

succeeded in getting lawyers to visit detainees in prison to hear their complaints.²⁰ If she had connived at the security branch in harassing the students, why did she then bother to arrange such visits? She was also instrumental in successfully applying for the distribution of magazines among detainees. It is widely believed that Direko to a certain extent justified some of the actions by the security branch members.

It must be noted that while Direko was engaged in political activities, she also had a job to do, that of being an educator. Contrary to this negative portrayal of Direko's role in the liberation struggle, to many of the residents of Mangaung her role was acknowledged. Hence these people believed that she deserved to be the province's premier amidst all the negative connotations attached to her name. To some people, Direko's role in liberation politics could be summarized as one of being a catalyst.

TS Belot, who worked with Direko as educator and served in her provincial cabinet as Member of the Executive Council (MEC), contends that she could not have participated freely in politics due to the fact that as an educator, she was an employee of the Nationalist Party's education ministry. According to Belot, Direko like many other leaders who showed prominence during the apartheid era, used her experience gained during that period for the promotion of democratic principles in South Africa. Belot further alluded to the fact that during the 1970s and 1980s, Direko played a role of being a peacemaker between the police and the student activists.²¹

Direko never saw herself as a controversial figure but referred to her role in the struggle as that of a political catalyst, bridging the volatile gap between the students who viewed the security forces as enemies and the security forces that saw the students as the perpetrators of violence and instability in South Africa. Direko confessed that the role she played was of peacemaker between the police officials and the students thus advancing the struggle for justice. She believed that the ultimate goal of a peacemaker is the conversion of the enemy into a friend. She realized that like many other educators she could not be neutral in the political arena.

Endorsing the fact that Direko was a peacemaker rather than supporting the activities of the apartheid government, M Mothloioa, former student of Sehunelo High School in the 1970s, stated that Direko acted as a catalyst between the students and the police, especially when students were arrested. It was because of her interven-

²⁰ **Sowetan**, 5 July 2001.

²¹ Twala, personal collection. Interview with Mr TS Belot, MEC for Tourism and Environmental Affairs in the Free State and a former colleague of Direko at Sehunelo High School, Bloemfontein.

tion that some students managed to write examinations in the police cells. In summarizing her role in the liberation struggle, Mothloioa had this to say: "Direko for all these years, she did not want cheap popularity from the students. She was quick in criticizing students when they engaged in criminal activities, like burning down the school buildings. Her vision was of promoting education as she realized that it is through education that South Africa could be liberated. It is therefore unfair to associate her with collaboration with the police."²²

Many people believed that Direko used her stature as an educator to advance the cause of the struggle be it for good or for bad. After the 1976 student uprising, she clandestinely became instrumental and influential in the establishment of the Bloemfontein Students' League (BSL). The main aim of this league was to mobilize students in the Mangaung township against apartheid legislation and imbalances the education system. In the BSL she was well known for engaging students in debates on how formal education could be relevant if rooted in accordance to the community needs, aspirations and modes of existence.²³

Direko believed that through the establishment of the BSL education had to liberate students from the political and economic forces that subjugate them, and from the low self-esteem and self-hate that oppression inculcates in many of its victims. According to her, education should equip people to break down imposed barriers to self-fulfilment and self-realization. She believed that education itself could not resolve unjust, economic, and political conditions, but it should include a comprehensive awareness of one's environment. Education can make options visible that were previously imperceptible or unthinkable. Direko was of the opinion that students need to be counseled to re-evaluate their politics and place them in perspective.

Having spent more than four decades as an educator, it is evident that Direko's role in the liberation struggle could be traced through education sectors. During her many activities in education circles, it is certainly true that Direko issued several statements criticizing the policy of apartheid. Yet it seems, from a closer examination of such criticisms, that she used her mandate to draw attention to the imperfections in the education system. In the 1970s she was articulate in demanding equality in education for all racial groups. In the educator's forum and educator unions (she was once the provincial leader of OFSATA), her stance was not only to fight for the improvement of working conditions of educators but also

²² Twala, personal collection. Interview with Mr M Mothloioa, former student at Sehunelo High School in the 1970s and presently a Deputy Principal at Sehunelo High School, Bloemfontein, 10 April 2003.

²³ Twala, personal collection. Interview with Mr ZA Dingane, MEC for Finance and Expenditure in the Free State, Bloemfontein, 25 November 2003.

for the mental liberation of educators who had to teach from the apartheid set of textbooks, in some cases teaching through the medium of the Afrikaans language. To some people, Direko's utterances were viewed as lip service and questioned her continuing service as an educator under apartheid if she was against it.

In the late 1970s, Direko led a 12 member delegation to meet the then Minister of Bantu Education, F. Hartzenburg. The concerns of the delegation included problems aligned with poorly qualified educators, overcrowding in schools, shortage of learning material etc. In order to solve this crisis, specifically the problem of poorly qualified educators, the proposal by Direko's delegation to the minister was to allow such educators to register to upgrade at the University of the Free State. This proposal was rejected by the minister. This rejection surprised Direko and the delegation because the then rector of the university Prof. Wynand Mouton had no objection to the proposal, following initial talks held by Direko and the rector. Instead of allowing Africans to enroll at the University of the Free State, a compromise was reached and the minister approved and endorsed the establishment of Vista University.²⁴ Initially Direko was outraged by the establishment of this university which catered mainly for under-qualified African educators. Eventually Direko and other delegates succumbed to the minister's offer. In January 1982, Vista University was established and the Bloemfontein campus became one of the four decentralized campuses. This was a victory for Mangaung residents and Free State citizens.

The challenge by Direko and her colleagues to have the University of the Free State admitting African students was an indication of her role in a changing South Africa. She believed that a genuine programme of non-racialism, in which the Africans should play a major role, would eventually lead to the Africanization of universities like the Free State University. To her this went beyond simply filling these institutions with mainly Africans, but would also allow them to exhibit their potential in education and also compete with other racial groups. As a student of education as a discipline, she also criticized an examination-driven curriculum that excludes a lot that would be meaningful for a development approach to education. She believed that education should be career oriented, something that was lacking in Vista University tuition.

The above-mentioned university debacle raised questions as to how far Direko could go in differing with the apartheid government. The answer to this question is perhaps suggested by her enrolment as a student at Vista University (Bloemfontein Campus) where she could express independent views, many of which had correctly

²⁴ Twala, personal collection. Interview with Professor IW Bredenkamp, former Campus Director of Vista University, Bloemfontein, 8 December 2003.

been hailed as anti-apartheid positions. In most cases Direko was criticized for failing to choose between her own independent views and those of the apartheid government. She found herself trapped by the obligations of her job as an employee of the government. She protested and uttered condemnations, but in the final analysis, she was in many ways subordinated to the apartheid government by virtue of being an educator. A thorny issue to some people was the fact that she was not arrested. She was also criticized by some who said that if she was so vocal in lambasting the apartheid government, why was she not arrested. It was not up to her to invite arrests. Some people believed that Direko was never a threat to the apartheid government therefore she was not arrested or detained. Direko's involvement in dealing with the system was not confrontational in nature, but it was one of awakening the apartheid government to the realities which confronted the Africans; and that did not warrant arresting her.²⁵

Serving in the first Student Representative Council (SRC) of Vista University (Bloemfontein Campus) in the mid-1980s, Direko was vocal in challenging the university's authorities. She challenged the university's curriculum which emphasized the study of the humanities at the expense of scientific and commercial courses. She also challenged the fact that most of the lecturers who were expected to conduct lessons in English were Afrikaans-speaking. This language problem hampered tuition.²⁶ The problem was solved by the university authorities by encouraging such lecturers to enroll with the University of the Free State for language proficiency courses. Given the background and the conditions under which the university was established, student unrest was inevitable. The former campus director of Vista University (Bloemfontein Campus) stated that Direko was listened to by the majority of students because of her motherly status and age. In most cases students who enrolled at the university were her former students at a high school; therefore even at university she commanded more control over them.²⁷

Amidst doubts about Direko's involvement in the liberation struggle, she remained popular amongst African communities for the role she played in the establishment of the township committee of the National Institute for Crime Prevention and Rehabilitation of Offenders (NICRO). The establishment of a place of safety for juveniles, the Tshireletsong Place of Safety by this committee in Mangaung, was Direko's brainchild. In 1978 she was actively involved in the arrangements for wives and parents to visit their relatives who had been incarcerated on Robben Island. Such an involvement showed that Direko was interested in the upliftment of

²⁵ Twala, personal collection. Interview with Mr DA Kganare, MEC for Education in the Free State and a former student at Sehunelo High School in the 1970s, Bloemfontein, 22 July 2003.

²⁶ Twala, personal collection. Interview with Professor IW Bredenkamp, 8 December 2003.

²⁷ Twala, personal collection. Interview with Mr J Peyper, former registrar, Vista University, Bloemfontein Campus, Bloemfontein, 5 February 2004.

African communities; therefore to compare her with politicians who were exiled would be a disservice to her struggle against apartheid. Although she is without voluminous political credentials, some people believe that to a certain extent she played a role in the liberation struggle of South Africa on local and provincial levels.

Direko also became popular outside the borders of the Free State Province for her emphasis on integrity rather than correctness. While serving as the President of the African Women's Associations, her main task was the achievement of independence for women. She encouraged women to participate in political decisions and have liberated political minds. She insisted that women should move away from the dependence syndrome to independence.

Pieter Geldenhuys, leader of the Democratic Alliance in the Free State Legislature, contends that Direko played a significant role in the black liberation struggle and opposes views held by other people of Direko's 'controversial' participation in the liberation struggle. According to Geldenhuys, it is unthinkable to suggest that Direko was quiet in challenging the apartheid government as is alleged by some of her antagonists. Geldenhuys's memories of Direko can be traced to the mid-1970s when he practiced as an advocate. He remembers Direko in many court cases where she mitigated for students who were arrested both for political or non-political reasons. In many of these cases Direko managed to convince the judicial system to release the students.²⁸ As to why the justice system let her mitigate on behalf of the students, was the fact that she was regarded more as a 'social worker' than as a politician. This image stuck with her for many years. Realizing her commitment in helping her community in mitigation processes, Geldenhuys indicated the following about her: "Ek het by haar geleer hoe om uit te reik na mense. Dit was ook danksy haar dat ek my by NICRO aangesluit het, waar ek voorsitter was."²⁹

Through her initiative, on the 20th April 1985, long before the democratic dispensation was ushered in, both Direko and Geldenhuys organized a joint camp for black and white students from Bloemfontein. The aim of this camp was to forge togetherness between the students from the two communities. In this camp motivation sessions were presented by speakers invited from the two cultural groupings. This engagement by Direko and Geldenhuys was commendable, and clearly indicated how Direko tried to mentally liberate students who for years had seen each other as enemies.

²⁸ Twala, personal collection. Interview with Advocate Pieter Geldenhuys, Bloemfontein, 4 June 2003.

²⁹ **Ibid.**

Victor Mecoamere of the **Sowetan** reported on Direko's contribution to politics through education when she was given an award by the Trust for the Educational Advancement of South Africa (Teasa). He recorded that "she acted in the interest of students and young people in general, asserting their rights to decent and just treatment during the apartheid era, and ensured that those, whose access to education was hindered, gained equitable access to education."³⁰ Other people who received awards included a mathematician, Dr T Kambule, nuclear physicist, Dr G Sibiya, author, Prof E Mphahlele and educationist, Dr N Alexander.³¹

The alleged 'controversies' of Direko also emerged when she served in a joint council with members of the Progressive Federal Party (PFP), including A Lategan, D Hopewell and P Geldenhuys. The main task of this council was to be a mouthpiece for the black population in challenging the apartheid government to improve their living conditions particularly in the Mangaung area where Direko resided. This council served as a platform where Direko could advance the social and economic plight faced by the black people in their residential areas. It must be noted that even though Direko participated in this council she was never a member of the PFP. Furthermore, she was not the only African in the council. People like P Chere and RJ Mokotjo also played a significant role in this council.³² The fact that black liberation organizations like the ANC and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) were banned meant that the council became a forum to liaise with the township municipalities in addressing the socio-economical problems experienced by township residents.

Not only did Direko solve problems of students who found themselves on the wrong side of the law. She also helped elderly people, particularly widows, who were expected to vacate their houses after the death of their husbands. These people believed that by merely reporting their problems to Direko, solutions would be found. Having managed to solve many of these problems, she became more popular among the Africans in the Mangaung township.

DA Kganare concludes that although he always professed his personal admiration for Direko, he sometimes saw her as too strict in her governance. She was sometimes too harsh when addressing some issues, whether in or outside government. In some cases her temperament overrode her actions. At some stages her assessment of situations tended to be subjective and her pronouncements prescriptive, but in most cases she knew what to do in crisis situations. As a person

³⁰ **Sowetan**, 25 August 1998.

³¹ **Sowetan**, 25 August 1998.

³² Twala, personal collection. Interview with Advocate Pieter Geldenhuys, Bloemfontein, 4 June 2003.

with courage, both physical and moral, she could always be identified with compassions rather than with coercion, seeking consensus rather than fostering confrontation.³³

The above-mentioned traits of Direko were evident in October 2002 when she took a controversial stance by justifying a strike which was organized by the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) on the issue of privatization and unemployment. ANC leaders, including President Thabo Mbeki, condemned the strike. Direko, known for her welfare work, said the strike was legitimate. This was the stage where Direko's views as a long-time community worker contradicted her stance as the premier.³⁴ Addressing a crowd of marchers who submitted a memorandum expressing their anti-privatization stance, Direko indicated that "Government needs to make improvements in the lives of the ordinary. Poverty needs the urgent of the alliance. A hungry stomach means an empty, unreasoning mind. If you are hungry, you cannot think straight. Therefore your emphasis is fair."³⁵

To the consternation of her political supporters, Direko's standpoint in support of anti-privatization was viewed as doggedly politically incorrect. This support of the strike was downplayed by the ANC's leadership, both provincially and nationally.

In keeping with the claim by her antagonists that she was a 'controversial' figure, she was accused of having violated the Electoral Act before the December 2000 municipal polls. She was accused of having threatened elderly people in the Free State town of Clocolan in her address on Wednesday 22 November 2000, saying that they would forfeit their government pensions if they did not vote for the ANC. A charge was laid with the police as well as with the Provincial IEC officer, Chris Mepha. She was investigated for having exerted undue influence on the elderly people. After investigations by both the police and the IEC, nothing concrete transpired to justify these accusations. Denying the accusation, Direko angrily said the following: "Our people, regardless of who they vote for, need their pensions desperately. You would have to be completely insensitive to say something like that."³⁶

One question that remains a grey area in as far as the politics of the Free State Province are concerned, is the fact that if Direko had no political credentials, why her provincial government was rated as the second best performing provincial

³³ Twala, personal collection. Interview with Mr DA kganare, 22 July 2003.

³⁴ <http://iafrica.com/news/sa/>.

³⁵ <http://iafrica.com/news/sa/>.

³⁶ **Business Day**, 28 November 2000.

government. In as far as performance in service delivery was concerned, the Free State Province under her leadership was believed to be doing fine. This was evident in May 2001 when her ANC-led government in the Free State scrapped its tender board and empowered heads of departments to decide on such matters. This action by Direko was commendable as the tender board stood accused of mismanagement. She justified this move by indicating that it was in line with the requirements of the Public Finance Management Act (PFMA) which makes department heads ultimately responsible for expenditure and that the move was aimed at curbing corruption and making sure that the government got the best deals.³⁷

CONCLUSION

Despite all allegations levelled against her political involvement in the liberation struggle, Direko is rightly regarded as one of the most colourful and influential political figures in the history of the Free States' democratization period. She unfortunately became involved in full-time party politics during a period of expected service delivery by South African citizens; therefore her period as the province's premier was characterized by doubts and challenges, testing her ability as a politician. As a result of her forceful personality and pragmatic approach to governance, she represented her electoral division successfully as the premier, hence her record of being the longest serving premier of the Free State Province.

³⁷ **Business Day**, 10 May 2001.