

“We Are Still Not Counted As Human”: Contesting Unfreedom from Below in South Africa

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Abstract

This interview with S'bu Zikode, cofounder and current leader of Abahlali baseMjondolo, the largest popular movement to have emerged in South Africa after apartheid, was conducted a month before the 30th anniversary of the formal end of apartheid. Zikode gives an account of the arc of his life, and that of the movement, illuminating the costs of progressive political commitment in Durban, a city where political violence is routine. Zikode also explains some of the key elements of his political thought, which centers around a radicalized African humanism in which the idea of dignity is central.

Keywords

South Africa, Abahlali baseMjondolo, social movements, S'bu Zikode, political repression, humanism, ubuntu

On 27 April 2024, the 30th anniversary of the formal end of apartheid was marked in South Africa. There was no sense of national enthusiasm. Even the African National Congress (ANC) did not make much of an effort to try and generate some excitement although an election was a month away.

With unemployment at more than 40%, one in five people going hungry, endemic violence, a massive heroin epidemic, and brazen corruption by politicians and state officials, there is a general sense of despair among impoverished and working-class people. The sense that the project of national liberation has failed is even more acute among grassroots activists who have faced regular assassinations.

The highly indebted middle class struggling with collapsing services, such as water, electricity, and road maintenance, and having to pay for private schooling, health care, and security, is also profoundly unhappy. For many, emigration seems to be the best way out of the crisis.

None of the electoral alternatives to the ANC inspire much enthusiasm. Broadly speaking, one group of parties is funded by white capital, is liberal in orientation, and largely represents the interests of old elites. Another group is funded by the class of politically connected operators who have

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made their money from state budgets and are committed to forms of authoritarian nationalism in the interests of kleptocratic counter-elites. There is also an equally dispiriting resurgence of ethnic politics.

On 22 April, Abahlali baseMjondolo [residents of the shacks], by far the largest and best organized popular movement to have emerged after apartheid, held its annual “UnFreedom Day” rally at the eNkanini land occupation in Durban. People had traveled from across the country to be there and estimates of the numbers in the media ranged between 12,000 and 15,000 people.

When the movement began to hold “UnFreedom Day” rallies back in 2006, a year after its formation, they were taken as heretical acts by a still powerful nationalist mythology and, to a degree, treated as treasonous. This time around the event was given live coverage by the national media. Although, as almost always happens, the journalists covering the event largely misrepresented it in terms of assumptions about politics and society current in the elite public sphere its central idea—that there is no real freedom for the majority—came through clearly enough.

The movement currently has 150,000 members in 93 branches across four of South Africa’s nine provinces and is effective at occupying and holding urban land. It has frequently been able to wage and win intense local struggles against the ANC, the state, and, at times, the organized power of wealthy residents and local businesses.

These struggles require taking on the official duopoly on the allocation and management of land held by the state and the market as well as the unofficial power of local party networks that frequently seize control of both the allocation and management of land. It has paid a high price for its challenge to these forms of power and has lost more than 20 of its members, many of them leaders, to assassinations, police murders, and killings by private security companies.

Although the movement’s power is rooted in local struggles for land there is a very strong sense of shared political identity across the occupations. Collective protests, large public meetings, and an astute media strategy have enabled a constant presence in the national public sphere and the movement is well connected to radical membership-based organizations elsewhere in the world, most notably the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) in Brazil.

Some of the movement’s founding members were members of trade unions or had prior experience in left-wing politics of various kinds. From the outset, its politics carried a strong sense of affiliation to the left, although always with a strong aversion to would-be vanguards and a commitment to bottom-up and democratic forms of self-organization. There was some articulation to the democratic ideals of the United Democratic Front in which some founder members had participated but the centrality of the commitment to dignity, which includes the idea that everyone should be given the right to think, speak, and decide for themselves was also a profound influence.

The movement’s democratic practices, which are uniformly affirmed by all observers who have spent time with or adjacent to the movement, can be witnessed at the monthly General Assemblies in Durban which are open to the public. Around 400 or 500 people, mostly leaders in their settlements, participate in these meetings in which the agenda is developed from the floor and then discussed. In these meetings, the role of the movement’s leaders is to facilitate rather than to direct discussion.

The movement’s commitment to the left has deepened over the years and has been enriched by engagements with other movements, radical intellectuals, and its own political education projects. At the time of writing Ruthie Wilson Gilmour and Firoze Manji have been recent interlocutors, and members of the movement have recently spent time with the MST in Brazil, in communes in Venezuela, as well as with radical groups in Ghana and activists from Swaziland, Turkey, Palestine, the United States and elsewhere. The movement is explicitly socialist, with some key figures preferring to understand it as communist. Its collective meetings are all opened with the Internationale, and it understands itself as part of a global left project.

It is important, though, to be clear that the emergence of the movement was fundamentally grounded in the deep moral legitimacy of a radicalized understanding of African humanism, one that has striking parallels with the politics of Lavalas in Haiti. It arrived and still arrives at its left-wing views through its radicalized humanism. The latter gives the measure of the former.

The movement's current strategy, largely inspired by a remarkable young man, Lindokuhle Mnguni, who was assassinated in 2022 after coming out of prison, is to develop occupations into communes and to envisage the movement as a set of linked communes in a planetary alliance with other movements. For Mnguni, who often spoke as a communist, socialism was something to be practiced in the present, and a socialist society to be built from below by creating, sustaining, and linking nodes of socialist organization.

The movement has won many victories for its members, and when it has won policy changes, for impoverished people in general. Its media strategy, always articulated to popular struggle, organization, and mobilization, and has also won national gains in terms of challenging aspects of the logic of the elite public sphere, NGO-based "civil society," and policy making. However, it does not have anything like the sort of power that would be required to achieve a decisive change in the trajectory of the country.

Nonetheless, the fact that a movement that began with a meeting of 32 people on 6 October 2005 has been able to grow to its current size despite severe repression, and to sustain remarkable democratic practices over time, and at a growing scale, shows that sustained popular democratic organizing is possible at significant scale. If there were ten movements in South Africa like Abahlali baseMjondolo, together organizing more than a million people, South Africa would be a different country.

For many years academic critiques of South Africa after apartheid were largely technocratic in nature and focused on economic and policy questions. There was often a significant although implicit elitism at play. With the important and early exception of Michael Neocosmos critique seldom took a proper political form understanding the necessity to rebuild forms of popular democratic power. More recent critiques following the decolonial turn have sometimes replaced economism with ontology in a manner that sustains an implicit elitism. There are versions of both discourses that assume that the ideas of university-trained intellectuals rather than popular organizing and the construction of popular democratic counterpower can open the road to a better future.

This is in striking contradistinction to the dominant ideas among progressive university-trained intellectuals in the 1970s and 1980s in which building the organized counterpower of the oppressed was understood as a central political task. This generation, often inspired by Freirean ideas, produced many figures who were effective participants in this work.

With notable exceptions, much of the middle class left after apartheid has not been able to develop or sustain productive relationships with popular struggles. There are three intersecting reasons for this. The first is the widespread view that impoverished Black people do not have autonomous capacities for developing progressive political ideas and practices and require political direction and leadership from above. Arguments for modes of engagement grounded in reciprocity—and affirmed by thinkers like Freire, Fanon, Walter Rodney, and Amílcar Cabral, among many others, have often been dismissed as "romantic."

A second reason for the failure to develop effective forms of praxis has been an insufficiently critical attitude to the NGO form in a period in which Western donors and states, along with the liberal media in South Africa, have strongly supported the substitution of popular organizing by NGO based "civil society."

A third problem is that the often personally, politically, and intellectually toxic attitudes and practices typical of small and intensely sectarian left organizations all over the world have

permeated much of the NGO and academic left. This has been compounded by a high tolerance for intellectual and political thuggery carried out in the name of the left, an issue that first became a serious problem at the former University of Durban-Westville in the 1990s where there was also considerable physical thuggery, and has never been subsequently addressed.

When Abahlali baseMjondolo emerged, almost 20 years ago now, a set of left intellectuals who had been affiliated with organizations that had recently collapsed or were in the process of collapsing reacted with intense hostility when it became clear that it would take direction from its members rather than from self-declared vanguards. The discourse from some of these actors precisely mirrored that of the state describing the movement as both criminal and a fabrication of a malicious white actor. This hostility has been sustained, and passed on to others, such as visiting American PhD students and the like, for close to two decades.

One result of this is that the academic writing on Abahlali baseMjondolo is marked by a startling bifurcation. One camp is comprised of people who have done serious research on the movement, often spending months or years immersed in its day-to-day activities. Most of these people have never met and they operate with a range of theoretical paradigms. They all, without exception, affirm the movement's democratic character and its record of highly effective self-organization. Few of these people have much institutional power.

The other camp is made up of people who have done no actual research on the movement and whose perceptions are shaped by assumption, gossip, and the considerable amount of outright sectarian slander that has circulated. All of this confirms the standard prejudices about impoverished African people in wider society. The most significant actors in this small but powerful camp have significant institutional authority.

People who find the striking differences between these two camps difficult to navigate have two rational options to make sense of the competing accounts of the movement. One is to come and see for themselves. The movement has always welcomed researchers to observe all aspects of its work, including in difficult moments. The other is to base their assessments on work by people who have a credible claim to have done actual research and to disregard the views of people who have no credible claim to have done actual research.

In this interview, S'bu Zikode, a co-founder of the movement and its current leader, provides a valuable overview of the movement's history. In a break with many elite theories of politics, it also centers the experience of violence as central to oppression. It provides the best account yet published of the radicalized African humanism, and the related idea concept of dignity, that has been so important to the movement.

Johannesburg, 14 May 2024

We Are Still Not Counted as Human

On 21 March 2005 you gave a speech in the hall in the Kennedy Road shack settlement in Durban. More than a thousand people had just been beaten back from the local police station with rubber bullets and stun grenades after demanding that 14 people arrested on a road blockade two days earlier be released. Their demand was "Release them or arrest us all. If they are criminal then we are all criminal." In that speech you said "We are now alone." Can you take us back to that moment?

That was the moment when we realized that freedom and the African National Congress (ANC) were two different things. We had been promised a small piece of land near the settlement for housing. Suddenly, without explanation, the land was being worked on, there was a grader and the people working there told us that it had been bought by a businessman who was going to build a brick factory.

We blocked the road to demand that the [ANC] counselor come and meet with us to explain what was going on. We wanted to talk but they sent the police to beat us. When the counselor finally arrived in an armored police vehicle he said that we were criminals and that we must be arrested.

That was the greatest disappointment. It was not just a disappointment that they lied about the land. It was also that they could not even come and explain what had changed. It was clear that we were outside of this democracy, and that our demand to be included in discussions about our own lives was being treated as criminal. It was clear that others would think and decide for us, that we did not count.

When we marched on the police station it was Human Rights Day. The 14 people who had been arrested on the blockade had been charged with public violence although the only violence that day came from the police. Violence from the police was not taken as violence but our demand to be recognized as part of the public was taken as violence. That is when we actually realized that we are not part of the public, we are just nonsense in the city.

On 30 March the 14 people arrested on the road blockade were released. When they were welcomed back to Kennedy Road you gave another speech. You said that “The first Nelson Mandela was Jesus Christ. The second was Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela. The third Nelson Mandela are the poor people of the world.” Where were you when Mandela was released? What did it mean to you?

I was in school. I was 14. We were divided at that time. It was the time of the war between Inkatha and the UDF [United Democratic Front]. People could easily draw the line between the two sides along a river or a road. Everyone on one side was Inkatha, and everyone on the other side was UDF. A lot of people were killed or had their homes burnt down just because they were living on this or that side of the line between the two sides. I found myself on the Inkatha side.

I was forced into the war. At that time young men on both sides were forced into the war. If you refused you would be identified as a traitor, it was assumed that you must be on the other side. If you were identified as a traitor your family's house would be burnt. There was no way to say that you were just against the killing.

There was war in broad daylight. People had guns but we as young people did not have guns, we had sticks. If you turned back you would be shot. You had to face bullets from the front and the back. Somebody was shot right next to me. I stayed with him, to look after him, to drag him back to an ambulance. This allowed me to avoid the killing. He died in hospital. Other boys died that day too. Terrible things happened, very painful things. We don't talk about it.

When the news came that Mandela would be released there was huge excitement, huge celebration among some people. For some people, it was the opening of the world. But for others, the world was shutting down. There was a fear that democracy meant that the land owned by the Zulus would have to be shared and that traditional leaders would lose their power. Their biggest fear was that if [Inkatha leader] Prince Buthelezi lost the election Zulu people would be dominated by other nations.

What did all the talk of freedom mean for you?

I was very young but thinking of freedom at that time it was really about peace. It was about the end of war, the end of the politic of blood.

And for your hopes for your own life?

Somehow I wanted to go to university and become a lawyer.

My mother raised my two sisters, my brother, and I on her own. My father was not working. He was not able to pay inhlawulo [damages paid to the family of a woman who becomes pregnant outside of marriage]. Marriage was a privilege. When I was 8 years old, she had to leave us to go to work for a white family in Estcourt. That was troubling me. You cry when your mother is leaving

you without understanding that she's going to work for you, that she goes because she wants to take care of you. You ask yourself if it is really normal for a mother to leave her children, and you ask yourself why this is happening. When I went to school for the first time an English name was required. Because my mother was away her younger sister had to give me an English name. She chose Innocent. I remember this moment very vividly.

As a child, you do not understand the history that has made some people poor and other people rich. You don't understand the system that keeps some people poor and others rich. All you know is that your mother is leaving you. At most she could come back once a month, but not every month.

My mother didn't have a home of her own. We didn't have a home. We lived with different families when she left. That was the thing most troubling me. So we lived with different families, some related, some not related, in different villages, including Emmause in Bergville which is where my father's parents were. I went to four different primary schools. I was able to stay in one high school for all 5 years though.

We were always changing families and changing schools. For me that is deep, because some of the families were so poor too, and they were finding it difficult to afford to care for their own children, but they welcomed us as their children. Sometimes my mother would not be able to support them or support us. She would just leave us with them. But they gave me their love. That was unbelievable. Sometimes I feel like I owe them now that I have grown up. Just thanking them was not enough.

I still feel haunted by this but I also feel gratitude to all the people, poor people, who opened their homes and families to me. I grew up with many different families and was shaped by these different families. I tasted different ways of living with different families.

Even as a young child you start to ask why your mother must leave you to look after other children, why one family has a nice house and another has no home, why one family can remain together and another is torn apart, why some children have bikes and toys and others have nothing but what they can make for themselves. So for me, freedom meant that every family should be able to have a good home, and the same comfort, that every family should be able to be together if they wanted to.

My hope of being able to go to the university, to become a lawyer, was more of a moral obligation rather than something to do with politics. As a child from a very poor family, a child with no real home, a child sent to poor schools, a child expected to go and kill other poor children, well, the Boy Scouts was one place outside of the families that cared for me where I was welcomed and taken seriously. There we talked a lot about making the world a better place, about leaving it better than you found it, and about life as a kind of moral test. So for me when Mandela was released and the world was opening freedom was pretty much around the moral sense, the sense that the humanity of everyone should be recognized, that everyone should be given the same care and respect.

You finished school in 1996, two years after Mandela became president. That was still a time of real optimism for many people

Yes, I felt the world was changing. I was so excited when I got a letter of acceptance from the university. I thought it was that simple: you apply, you get accepted.

But then I had to face the real world. I must travel to Durban. I needed a place to stay, food, books. Most of all I needed to pay the university fees. It really stressed me. I felt really alone. My brother-in-law offered me a place to stay though. When I took the bus to the university we would pass Kennedy Road, this huge shack settlement on a hill below a rubbish dump.

I couldn't find the money for the fees and then my brother-in-law moved to Johannesburg. It all just got cut. This happened to many black people. People at home had hopes in me but I saw myself as a failure. I was thinking more and more about committing suicide.

Kennedy Road was the way out for me. Accepting that I had been defeated, giving up on my hope of going to the university, and moving to Kennedy Road liberated me from the extreme stress that I was suffering.

After a while, I found a job at a petrol station, a job as a petrol attendant. After a couple of years, I was promoted. Life was moving forward.

And how was life in Kennedy Road?

Growing up I thought that I knew what it was to be poor but when I got to Kennedy Road I came to realize that I was not as poor as I thought I was. In that way setting my feet on Kennedy Road was devastating. But people were welcoming.

When a normal person sees children eating the worms at the toilet, a child being bitten on the head by a rat, a baby burnt in a fire, or people being so badly treated by the police they want to do something about it. But at first, I thought, like lots of people do, that the people in the settlement were not doing enough, that they were either ignorant or not interested. There was kind of a blaming. I blamed the people living there. I thought they were not doing enough about those conditions. I was still optimistic about the ANC and I thought people didn't know how to engage with them, that they didn't know how changes come about. So I got involved in the ANC and was elected as the deputy chairperson of the ward.

But going to the ANC meetings at night really discouraged me. At the ward level, the meetings were dominated by middle-class people, people living in big houses. Meetings could finish at 11 or 12 at night and none of the middle-class people thought to offer us lifts back to the shacks in their cars. I was carrying a mandate from the people who had elected me in Kennedy Road but there was no interest in that. The ANC was about positions and power; who we put in power, who to mobilize against, and who to support when conferences were coming up. Often we did not know the people we were meant to support or oppose. I could not live through that for a very long time.

In 2004, there was a big meeting about a proposed housing development on Kennedy Road with various government departments. It was a deciding moment. We were not invited and we were never told the outcome of the meeting. Eventually, we came to know that the meeting opposed the housing development. They didn't want us to live with middle-class people. They wanted to take us to human dumping grounds far outside the city, even further out than the townships built under apartheid.

I left the ANC in 2004 and at the same time, the Kennedy Road Development Committee declared 2005 as the year of action.

That's interesting because 2004 is the year that people across the country, mostly people living in shacks, started organizing road blockades. That's the year in which what some people called the rebellion of the poor began.

Yes, I remember when Tebogo Mkhonza was killed by the police in a protest in the Free State. He was 17. We saw the protests through the media but we had no connection to what was happening. What caught my mind was the fact that when you see people blockading roads on the television and you read about it in the newspaper you realize that people are doing the same thing in different places without knowing each other or speaking to each other.

After we organized the road blockade on 19 March we began to meet with other nearby settlements and a number of protests were organized from different settlements against local councilors. On 4 October, at a meeting of leaders from 12 settlements, we decided to form one organization, Abahlali baseMjondolo. Our demands for land and housing in the city were clear, and at least understood even if opposed. But we also insisted that we must be recognized as people who, like

all other people, think, as people who should be included in discussions and decision-making, as people who should not be treated like children or criminals, as people whose dignity should be respected. This demand was not understood.

The emphasis on being recognized as people who think came through those early meetings very clearly. But there were two other concepts, your concepts, that were developed as ideas to guide the new politics that was being worked out: the need for “a politics of the poor” and “living politics.” Can you explain their significance?

We needed our own politics, a politics that would be by and for the poor, a politics that would be a space for the poor to think together, build our power together, and express and advance our interests.

At the time, it was not thought that the poor deserved dignity. All kinds of other people thought that they should think for us, decide for us. Development that was said to be for us was not with us, and it was often against our interests. Sometimes it made us poorer by destroying our homes and dumping us far outside of the cities in houses that were worse than our shacks.

So the politics of the poor meant that we would develop our own language, our own ideas. We needed politics that did not just mean that the poor must mindlessly obey the politicians, the government officials, and the NGOs.

We needed a politics that would make sense to the masses of this country. For this the thinking that is always already there in shack settlements and rural villages, the places where poor communities live, needed to be organized, focused, and connected.

We were kind of living two lives. There was the life where the well-off were telling us that we must learn their language to be accepted and that anyone who didn't know that language was ignorant and there was the life of the people with the language of the people. We had to organize our thinking and our power to be able to take the issues and hopes of the poor into what is called the mainstream even though it is the world of a minority. We were the majority and I thought a new politics—a new narrative, a new language, a living politics, a living communism was necessary.

We understood and still understand living politics to be a politics that can be understood by everyone, whether old or young, no matter how good a person is at English or how many years of schooling they have had. A politics that is not of and by the people is useless. A politics that is not understood, owned, and directed by the people is useless. In fact, it becomes just another form of exclusion and oppression even if it says it is for the people.

There is nothing that cannot be explained to the people, nothing that cannot be translated into their language. If you speak in a way that means that you cannot be understood that is a choice, and it is a choice to try and raise yourself above the people, to feel that you are superior to them, to exclude them.

At the time when you raised the idea of “a living communism” you did so in the tone of a question rather than an answer. You said, speaking in a way that reaches into the unknown, that ‘we need something like a living communism’.

Well, a living communism would have to be a living politics. It would need to have space for the politics of the poor, along with other kinds of politics. For me, communism needed to be grounded in community. My understanding was that in order to be able to liberate ourselves from oppression we would need a political praxis grounded in community praxis and that we would first need to build communities. We needed a different way of being in a community and a way to embrace the ability of a community to be able to liberate itself as a community. We needed to build communities of communities.

You don't just suddenly become a community because you happen to have homes, houses, close together. Communities are built. We wanted to build communities and join them into a force that could challenge the systems of oppression.

The response from the ANC and the local state, and some other actors, to the emergence of a movement, a movement outside of their control was intensely hostile.

Yes, there was constant police harassment. The police physically prevented us from participating in public discussions on radio and television. I and another comrade were stopped by the police while traveling to a radio station, arrested, and tortured. Our organization was treated as a conspiracy, a criminal conspiracy. It was constantly said that we were criminals being remoted by a white man working for a foreign government as if we couldn't think and speak for ourselves.

You have spoken about how that night in the holding cells, after being tortured in the police station, was a personal turning point.

While I was being beaten by Nayager [Glen Nayager, the head of the local police station], while my head was being banged on the wall, I was constantly asked who the hell do I think I am to think I can lead ignorant people, rubbish people, to think that we have a right to live with middle class people, to be part of society. He also asked me if I think I am a Jesus Christ that can liberate all those jondolo ous [shack guys].

When you are being beaten the physical pain, the physical damage, is one thing. But there was also an emotional assault. The inner pain, the inner damage, I found it very stressful. Why is there so much hatred when all you are asking is for the dignity of everyone to be respected, for us all to be human beings among other human beings? It may be difficult to heal that one because it leads to depression. You go off, you go mad.

Having to live with this double headache, the physical headache of having been banged on the bricks of the walls of the office, and the emotional headache I was dealing with, made me to have to think throughout the night. There was no sleep. And it was my first time being arrested, being in holding cells. I asked myself "who the hell am I?". I asked myself who was ordering the police to do this. I asked myself if I should continue with the struggle.

Then comes the dawn without me having had any sleep. I'm on my own, separated from the people who have asked me to lead, who have given me that responsibility, and Nayager vandalized that. He places me in a dehumanized kind of moment where I see myself as worthless, infected, a disaster, and a disgrace. I was reduced to weightlessness. That's how he reduced me.

But then when I came to the court I heard that there were so many people in red shirts outside the court, in the corridors of the court. When I came up the stairs into the dock in the court there were so many. Everyone was quiet, nobody could speak, but I felt the power of all the people there. I took the decision to commit my life to this struggle.

When people talk about solidarity it always comes to my mind that solidarity must be at a personal level. You need to know that people are saying that you are not alone. People can collapse when they are alone. You see the end of everything. It causes irreparable damage if people ever feel alone.

The repression continued.

Yes, it got worse in 2006 when there was an election and we followed the position of the LPM [Landless People's Movement] who had said 'No Land! No Vote!' in the 2004 election. They were repressed and some of their people were tortured. We said 'No Land! No House! No Vote!'. We had now connected with the LPM in Johannesburg and the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign in Cape Town and no longer felt alone. We took a combined movement position. This wasn't just taken as criminal. It was taken as treason.

This is when I lost my job. My boss started bullying me. He would call me in and show me newspaper articles about our movement and the campaign. Other people also lost their jobs in these early years. I became more conscious of how oppression works. Before then I had thought that politics and business were two different things.

Late on the night before the election, the ANC wanted to open the City Hall to negotiate with us. We were starting to understand our power as the organized poor, the strong poor.

In 2007, we organized a collective march on the Mayor, a combined action by all the branches in the different settlements. We carefully followed all the legal requirements but the march was banned. When it was decided to march in defiance of the illegal ban we were attacked with batons, stun grenades, rubber bullets, and live ammunition. Our march had been peaceful but the world was told that we were violent. We were shown as criminals.

In 2006 the movement sent another electric shock into the political order when it decided to hold UnFreedom Day.

It came out of a series of meetings in our movement and with other organizations. Unfreedom Day came as a result of deep discussions about the meaning of freedom. People were clear that we could not accept being bussed into the stadiums to listen to politicians tell us that we were free when we were being kicked out of democracy, and forced out of our homes at gunpoint. People were clear that there cannot be freedom without land, without housing, without access to basic services, and without being taken as people who have the same right as all other people to participate in discussions and decision-making. It has been an annual event since then.

In 2006, we started holding UnFreedom Day events on Freedom Day [the national public holiday celebrating the end of apartheid]. The City and the police tried to shut it down. In 2009 we held the event inside the Kennedy Road settlement, far from any roads and middle-class houses. They even tried to shut that down. When we went ahead they had armored police vehicles on the road and a police helicopter flying just above the meeting.

The event itself is not as important as the debates and the discussion among people about what freedom means to them. We'll have those discussions leading to the event and so the event becomes a yardstick to measure the thinking of the people.

But we kept going despite the repression and although there were many arrests, a number of leaders lost their jobs, and many people were injured, our persistence eventually ensured that we won the right to organize marches, participate in debates on radio and tv, and so on. Today these rights are no longer contested.

To get here we also had to assert our autonomy from the NGOs. We were still thinking that the ANC and the state were troublesome but that society is innocent. The lesson we learned from our experience with the NGOs was that the system of oppression is much bigger than just the ANC and the state. We realized that there were people, self-appointed people, who thought they had the responsibility to think for the poor, to direct our struggles, and to decide on our future. They would bus poor people into meetings without us having any say about the agenda. They wanted to think for us, not with us. It was quite disappointing because we thought learned people, academics and NGO bosses, had enough education to know that they should support people to emancipate themselves, not to appoint themselves as the vanguard of revolution, not to think for us and direct us. When we, together with the LPM and the Anti-Eviction Campaign, boycotted the Social Movements Indaba, the big NGO meeting, at the end of 2006 and decided to build our own movement platform they attacked us in the media, they called us criminals. They have never stopped hating us for the crime of taking our dignity seriously.

The insistence on dignity has always been central to your struggle, and it appears in the struggles of impoverished people around the country, around the world too.

When we started our struggle the view that all that we could struggle for was 'service delivery' was very dominant. Of course, we needed basic services, everyone needs water, sanitation, and electricity. But for us, the recognition of our humanity, of our dignity, was the most important thing. For us, the question of dignity is that you respect us, and how do you respect us? You engage with us in a respectful way, you allow us to speak what we think is right. We wanted to engage, we

wanted to fully participate in decision-making. We did not want people to “deliver” services to us. We wanted to participate in development. We wanted the state and the NGOs to think with us, not for us. That actually sealed the significance of dignity in our politics.

We came to realize that actually why people lie to us, why they make fake promises to us, is because in their eyes we are not human enough. It is very deep. It is very painful. If someone wants to think for you, speak for you, and do things for you, well, that renders you useless. A human being deserves dignity, something that you are born with.

A person is not taken seriously when their humanity is not recognized. People with power see no reason to account to objects because that is basically what dehumanization means. We are taken as objects, as objects, or as a kind of animal. If you are not even allowed to think then all the opportunities of life, of being human with other human beings, are banned for you. It takes away the essence of having a mind, of being human. This is why we always say that our humanity, our dignity, is not negotiable. Many things can be negotiated but not this.

If 2004 was the year in which protests by impoverished people began to challenge the elite nationalism of the ANC, 2008 was the year in which impoverished people, often encouraged by local elites, turned on other. You had been warning, for years, that ‘the anger of the poor can go in many directions’.

Yes, when migrants were attacked and killed in broad daylight it presented us with a moment of self, of introspection. We needed to reflect on the things we say, on the commitment we make, and the contribution we make to society.

It can happen that when oppressed people feel disrespected they try to regain some sense of respect by turning on other oppressed people, by trying to make themselves feel better than other people. We had been talking about dignity for ourselves but in 2008 we had to affirm that we mean dignity for everyone. We said that a person is a person wherever they may find themselves, no matter where they were born.

That moment presented us with an opportunity, again, to be tested on what we commit to, and it broadened our strategy and our understanding of freedom. Is it enough that I am free? What about others? What about my neighbors? There is no real freedom without others being free, without your neighbors being free. This tells a story about the human consciousness in relation to others.

We were able to affirm that the struggle we were engaged in was a sacrifice, a good place to talk about real freedom, freedom that does not limit or confine itself to a particular goal. We saw a bigger picture of humanity, which represents the universal definition of what a human being can be.

Of course, we also saw that xenophobia, and then ethnicity too, is intentionally used to divide poor people, people who feel themselves to be the same, when they pose a danger to the system. So, from time to time, the system has to shape them, has to remind them that they are not the same and that they must see each other as enemies. That is by design. The system must make poor people think that they are denying each other’s opportunities for a flourishing life. We must be divided by language, gender, and sexuality. This hate will keep us all poor. Because this hate always weakens the poor it has to be rejected by poor people first. We have to continue to build our consciousness, to connect with struggles around the world, to learn from each other.

When you take a principled position numbers don’t matter. Anyone is important. In fact, every individual makes us all. The question of minority versus majority doesn’t work in the definition of a human being. You don’t have to be a majority to be a human being.

Abahlali takes a very clear line on these questions.

Soon after the ANC conceded your right to participate in the formal political sphere it shifted repression toward informal violence, violence backed by the police but not carried out by the police.

Yes, we were attacked in the Kennedy Road settlement on the 26th and 27th of September 2009. Our leaders and people from the Eastern Cape were attacked, homes were ransacked and set alight. And then people were arrested, only people from the Eastern Cape.

The attack continued during the broad daylight in front of the police. But people's homes were still set alight. The violence continued.

That day very senior ANC politicians, ministers, came to Kennedy Road and launched a propaganda. They said that we were "running our own authority," that Abahlali was responsible for violence, and for the lives that were lost, and that 'Abahlali has been disbanded'. They went to parliament and said that "Kennedy Road has been liberated." Senior ANC people were saying these things, people like Willies Mchunu. That means that the attack was planned at a very high political level.

Even our lawyer was very scared, she felt scared to represent us. It is an experience that one would never forget.

After apartheid political violence has mostly been police killings and assassinations but this was like the 1980s. Men were mobilized, armed and given alcohol. There was a strong ethnic dimension. Abahlali was said to be an Mpondo organization,

Yes, it was really a war. It was like the '80s. You know, when you run, you do not know where to hide, who's going to get hurt. And these ANC guys saying that Kennedy Road was for Zulus, that I was imposing Mpondo people on them. Our movement had united people. We did not see each other as Zulus or Xhosas. This unity was presented as a kind of treason.

At the time Zuma had incited this whole ethnic politics, this Zulu politics. He campaigned by saying that the Zulu people were occupied by the Xhosa people. He used ethnic politics to find his way to power and it worked for him. It became the politics of the day. It created damage and division in the community. They made their ethnic politics very clear when only Xhosa-speaking people were arrested.

We had to go underground. We were scattered all over the place. At first we met secretly in a funeral parlor. Then we started meeting openly in a park.

And then, in 2013, the assassinations started.

Yes, they assassinated Nkululeko Gwala, a leader in our movement in Cato Crest, on 26 June 2013. The ANC had openly threatened him. Sibongiseni Dhlomo, who is now a Deputy Cabinet minister, made a public threat against Nkululeko on the day he was murdered.

We had survived the attack on Kennedy Road. We had eventually been vindicated in court. Now they started to use assassinations.

The ANC was sending a very clear message to us that we had no right to organize ourselves, no right to organize without their authority. They were saying that we were liberated by uMkhonto weSizwe, by the ANC, and that this gives them a legitimate right to rule, to steal, and to defend their rule and their stealing with violence.

They spoke as if the people had done nothing to liberate themselves. As if there was not a mass struggle. The people are not seen in the history told by the ANC and they are repressed if they want to be part of the present.

You gave an electric speech at Nkululeko's funeral. It was on the front page of *Isolezwe*. It was on uKhosi FM. It was a real moment because they were trying to terrify people into submission and you confronted them at the funeral.

The funeral was incredibly tense. It was held at Nkululeko's home village in Inchanga. The ANC tried to make it an ANC funeral. That's how dangerous they can be. They can actually kill you and then offer to bury you, to pay for the funeral.

James Nxumalo, who was the mayor at that time, was present. He also came from this village. There were other high-profile government people, lots of police, and intelligence. The local ANC councilor spoke first, setting the tone. He was implying that this was an ANC funeral, that this

village is an ANC home. Nkululeko's father was a loyal ANC member so he was moving to capture the family first. He went on to say that this is an ANC ward and that the ANC is conducting this funeral. He said that there are no shacks in the village but that people from the shacks are here. He was mocking our poverty. When he was setting the ground, he was creating threats, making it difficult for any other speaker who is non-ANC. The warning was very clear. We felt really threatened.

After he spoke, the senior leaders of the movement took me to the side and they counselled me not to speak. They warned me that it was too dangerous. But then the master of ceremonies, appointed by the family, called me to speak. Our members from Cato Crest had come in buses. Nkululeko was loved by the community. There were red shirts everywhere. We could not show fear. And anyway I was fuming, not scared, just really angry at the situation, at the lies and hypocrisy.

I spoke very diplomatically, saying, very respectfully, that the family needed and deserved to know the truth. I deliberately went against every single thing that the councilor had said. I explained how we knew Nkululeko, how we understood him, and what he meant to the community and the movement. I explained that people in rural communities like this village had been abandoned, just like poor people in the cities, and that Nkululeko had given his life for the people, for the oppressed.

I pointed out how many Abahlali members were there to honor their leader, and that nobody would tell us what to say and what not to say, that in fact, we were there to tell the truth about how he was killed. I explained that Nkululeko was killed for his bravery and honesty. I made it clear that senior ANC politicians had publicly threatened him and now there were ANC politicians at the funeral wanting to make it an ANC funeral. Emotions were very high. People were moaning. The marquee was shaking. The police stood up, the intelligence. After my speech, the ANC people, including the mayor, could not proceed to speak. The councilor disappeared. It was clear that the ANC was unwelcome. Immediately after the speech my comrades pulled me out, and put me in a car. They felt I was in danger, that it would not be safe to proceed to the grave. But the members stayed and it became an Abahlali funeral.

When you have to speak for people, you have to do justice to the people. You have to make sure that you say everything that they would have said. It is not about you. I had to satisfy them without fear for myself. After I spoke I was at peace, having said what I needed to say and confident that I had represented the emotions of our members.

There were also two police killings in Cato Crest in that same year. A police officer was convicted for one of the killings.

Yes. Nkosinathi Mngomezulu was shot by the police, shot a number of times, and seriously wounded during an eviction on 22 September. He really suffered. He had to carry a bag for his urine. It took several months for him to die, getting weaker and weaker every day. At the end, he was helpless.

Nqobile Nzuzua was killed by the police during a protest against evictions on 30 September. She was 17. When Nqobile was killed the police said that they were under attack by a vicious mob and had to shoot to save their lives. They spoke as if they were the real victims. The media repeated this as if it were true. They saw no reason to talk to eyewitnesses, to people who were part of the protest.

Although Nkosinathi was killed with live ammunition during an illegal eviction the police officer was found not guilty. This is usually how things go. But when the matter of Nqobile's killing finally went to court after five years a police officer was convicted and we were vindicated. It was shown that Nqobile was unarmed and shot from behind, and that there was no mob attack on the police.

And then they assassinated Thuli Ndlovu in 2014, S'bonelo Mpeku in 2017, S'fiso Ngcobo in 2018. There were others too. In 2016 two ANC councilors were convicted of the murder of

Thuli Ndlovu. This seemed to be a turning point in getting the media, human rights organizations and so on to understand what was happening.

Yes. Poor black people are not believed when we talk about the repression we face unless the courts, or middle-class people like journalists, film makers, or academics confirm the truth of what we are saying, and even then these people can come under real pressure. This is part of how oppression works.

There is such a high level of brutality, such a low level of consciousness. Thuli was shot with a baby on her back, a young woman carrying a baby, and a young woman who actually caused no threats to anyone. She was a mother of two.

When the two ANC councilors were convicted it did help to show that it was the ANC that was killing us.

The killing continues. All this killing is not seen as a crisis. The defiling of humanity has become normalized.

The ANC should be using the power of the people to confront the colonial system that continues to terrorize us and vandalize our humanity but instead they are using violence to repress the people so that they can benefit from the system.

The movements that emerged at the turn of the century collapsed for a number of reasons. In some cases, repression was a key factor. It often led to paranoia, division, a general breakdown in trust, and a centralization of authority. How has Abahlali come through this horrific level of repression, with more than twenty lives having been lost?

I think it is the question of dignity in life, a question of humanity. We started with this and kept dignity at the center. The movement is grounded in the principles and values of ubuntu. We centered our humanity.

We come together because our humanity is troubled. We come together to develop and defend our humanity, to make the world more human, more in keeping with the dignity of human beings. It is after this that questions of living conditions and service delivery then come into being. The camps [all night meetings] are central because we don't just talk about material issues. We also talk about the systems of care that make us more human.

And the movement came to socialism, and then to this vision of building socialism from below from communes, through humanism. Humanism remains the measure of politics as well as its foundation.

Ubuntu as a way to define how each human being should behave in relation to others becomes an idea that goes beyond the village, it goes into broader society, into broader questions of how we relate to each other. It is a broader political spirit of humanism that also appeals to the questions of freedom and liberation.

Socialism, democratic socialism built from below, democratic socialism in the hands of the people, is the political form to humanize society. Lindokuhle [Lindokuhle Mnguni, a young leader in the movement assassinated in 2022] always said that socialism has to be something you live together, something you practice together. When I talk about ubuntu, it is not just a concept I'm referring to, not just an idea, but the praxis that demonstrates our humanity, that builds our humanity, that defends our humanity.

In 2018 you had to go underground again.

When you know that a decision has been taken to have you killed there is a lot on your mind. Going underground on your own creates a big problem of self-isolation. Sometimes it seems like a bigger problem than the problem that forced you underground. When you have a story that is only known by you it is terrible. The need to go underground to stay alive, to keep people around you safe, captured me, and put me on a different planet, a planet of my own. Psychologically and spiritually I was removed from the earth.

I had a lot to think about. I had to think about all the things that I had not achieved in life, knowing that I could be killed at any time but also knowing that I did not have many options to avoid this. I thought a lot about what would become of my children. The nights were sleepless. I felt that I had been buried alive. There was fear, not fear of death itself, but fear of what my death would mean for the people who were connected to me.

I think that was the most difficult moment. But ultimately the whole thing reminded me that the point of creating fear, of those threats, was not just to remove me from the movement, it was to remove me from society. And because a leader is shaped and sustained by the people that choose them to lead it was a way to remove the influence of those people from society, to destroy their power. In a way, it is a kind of spiritual war too, a war to destroy the idea that every human being counts, and that every human being deserves dignity.

You were underground from May to December, but in September, with the movement facing a serious crisis, you emerged at that month's General Assembly. It was an extraordinary moment. And then the following month there was the massive protest against repression, after which the tide turned and it became possible for you to come back into a more ordinary although still heavily secured life.

It was a serious crisis. We had some people who had some standing in the movement because they had suffered in 2009, as a result of the attack. Without any democratic process, they sent the women's choir to perform at a campaign event for Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma [who was running for the presidency of the ANC at that time] at the ICC [International Convention Centre]. The choir felt very angry and humiliated when they realized that they were at an ANC event.

When the choir came back there was huge anger in the movement. It became clear that a small group of people had been captured by the ANC. They had been offered money and business opportunities through VBS Bank, the bank that was looted by the politicians, and through the undertakers' association that was aligned to Jacob Zuma.

The whole leadership was recalled pending a new election via a motion from the floor at the General Assembly. The right to recall is essential for any democratic organization and it saved the movement. The problem was resolved by the members but it was felt that I had to be there to give the members confidence that repression had not defeated us. The march against repression early in October was huge, and I appeared there too.

There were thousands of people, and many other organizations supported the march including street traders, hostel dwellers, trade unions, and migrant groups. There were simultaneous solidarity actions in other cities: Johannesburg, Cape Town, London, and New York. There was a clear and powerful demand to end political repression. The movement, working with our comrades in other organizations and other parts of the world, won the space for me to return, and for some time the assassinations stopped.

The people who were captured by the ANC recently returned and apologized. There has been healing.

The emergence of Lindokuhle as an extraordinary young leader, and the development of the eKhenana Commune seemed to expand the political imagination of the movement, and develop its practices in new directions.

Lindo was a brilliant cadre, a brilliant young man. Lindo and Ayanda [Ngila] started from the acknowledgment that there are no jobs for young people. From there they acknowledged that the hands that feed you will always control you. They were clear about the political stomach, that unless the poor and the working class own the means of production, the status quo shall remain. You will remain a subject of those who are in authority.

The idea of a commune came out of that discussion to say that if we want total liberation, we must occupy and use the land. They did so well that they began to be able to support the movement with their surplus. The sound system we are using today was bought for the movement by the commune.

We were reminded what land means to African people, what land means in the spirit of liberation. Before colonialism, before industrialization, people could live with just land. So it was amazing in this century to have young people thinking about that, to decide that they can live without bosses and build economic and political freedom from a commune.

Producing food was just the beginning.

There was the communal kitchen where they ate together and made sure that nobody ever went hungry. They had the youth club, the poetry project, which was amazing, and of course the Frantz Fanon Political School. The Fanon School became an important space for the whole movement, and for other organizations too. People from a number of countries came to learn and to teach. The Commune became a resource for the whole movement, an inspiration. There is now a Lindokuhle Mnguni occupation in Johannesburg that is working toward becoming a commune.

Lindo had so many more ideas. He was a Marxist, of course, a communist. He had been reading from high school, he kept reading in prison. Steve Biko, Malcom X, Karl Marx, Paulo Freire. Frantz Fanon, of course. And he was an internationalist. The first seeds for the garden came from the MST in Brazil. They would travel to Swaziland to be in solidarity with the movement there. They hosted people from around the world. And he was so strongly committed to women's equality, to building women's power. He would not entertain reactionary positions in the name of culture. He called that feudalism.

He understood socialism as something to be practiced now, he understood that you need a place to practice socialism, you need land and a community. He was so courageous. He introduced the slogan 'Socialism or death' to the movement. He knew he would die. He gave his life for the people, for an idea. Three comrades gave their lives for the Commune.

The price for land continues to be paid in blood.

There is now considerable pressure from your members to enter electoral politics.

Well any individual elected into power is highly likely to be co-opted, to be made to join the system. What we have seen with the ANC is that black people can join the system, and give it legitimacy for a few years before people see that it remains the same. It could be the same if poor people take a place in the system. The system is designed for that. So we have to think beyond that. We have to think bigger than that.

During apartheid, we thought we were only oppressed because of color, but now we have realized that it was not just about the color. At that time we did not speak about the system. Now we understand the system. Elections change faces and hands. How do you emancipate people out of a system that can use people who were most trusted to continue to oppress us? The system is smart enough to have your brother or your sister betray you.

We have to think about how we put the people in power, not individuals. That's the question that we have to battle with because any individual is likely to be co-opted, corrupted, and changed by the system. We cannot enter the system just to give it a few more years of legitimacy. We have to be wary of the system.

It is now clear that we need to talk about the destruction of the capitalist system so that there can be a real reconstruction of a new system, a new system that places the people—and the humanity and dignity of all people—at the center, a new system with a new relation to the world, to the earth, and all its people.

Why is the ANC so contemptuous of impoverished people?

Some people in the ANC knew from early on that there would be no real freedom and democracy for the majority. There were compromises from the very beginning, in the negotiations. The

demand for land had brought the people of South Africa together but it was compromised from the start. They knew it was freedom for the elites. They accepted that. I don't think it's a mistake that we see so much corruption. Enrichment of the elites was the goal. Cruelty was the method.

Where does that cruelty, that disrespect for humanity come from?

That's a difficult question. These politicians are also parents, they have daughters, and they have sons. How are they so cruel to us while going home to their families every day? At what stage does a politician step out of the garment of the politician and be a human being?

Look, we have acknowledged that politicians are liars. There is nothing serious that I can discuss with politicians. But if you love your family why can you not think of other people in the same way that you think of yourself and your family? When we have negotiated with them I was trying to find the human being that remains once they shed that garment. I couldn't find a person. I couldn't find a sense of humanity, humility, or regret. All I could see in that garment was something like a skeleton. All I found was the opportunistic elements that are left when a person no longer possesses the characteristics of a human being, that care, that consciousness, that willingness to look after other human beings, that fear for what brings shame on someone.

It's a difficult question because you have to be a human being before you can be a politician, before you can be a leader. You can be a professional, you can be whatever, but there are things that should not desert you, and there are things that should not happen to you as a human being.

Some people in the ANC feel that for them to be in charge, for them to be leaders, their power must be felt physically. For me to feel that I am in charge, I must be controlling, somebody must feel the pinch that I am in charge. There must be fear. This makes them feel better. It stops them from looking at the emptiness behind the garment. But fear is not respect.

Leadership becomes the way to control people, it becomes the way to feel empowered because you have this power, I mean physical power to control other people. That's what they enjoy, and for me that goes in hand with the mentality of the colonial time and thinking.

When I grew up in the village there was this thing of being disgraced. You would not want to be disgraced, to disgrace your family. If you were violent to someone, if you stole from someone, you were humiliating your family. You were dehumanizing your family, your village.

There are characteristics that constitute a complete human being. A human being ought to have love. A human being ought to have kindness and respect for other people, for the world. But a human being should also have fear, fear of the disgrace that comes from damaging other people. If you are a person who says 'I don't care' what has happened to your consciousness? If you are a person who will harm other people without feeling humiliated, without feeling disgraced then your humanity is slowly, slowly going away from you. You are abandoning your humanity.

There is so much that we have missed as a nation in terms of decolonizing our thinking around culture, around leadership, and around the nation. You cannot be talking about transformation and change when you have not dealt with the colonial damage to yourself.

It reminds me of how after the war between the UDF and Inkatha there was a realization from the African spiritual perspective, the cultural perspective, to say a lot of people were involved in wars, they have blood in their hands. There needed to be a conversation, a ritual, some kind of cleansing to move on from that war mentality when the time came for people to assume leadership, to think about building a nation, especially in this province. It is very dangerous to take power without emancipating yourself, without emancipating yourself from the culture of war, and colonial oppression.

Do you think that the violence against migrants has the same roots, that it comes from the damage done by colonialism?

Politicians want to feel that they have power, to feel stable in the world, to feel that they are someone, and they do that by exercising power, physical power, against us, against the poor, and

others. Poor people can do the same, they can exercise power against other poor people, people who speak different languages or were born in other countries. We make ourselves feel that we are not weak by being cruel to other people, by having power over them, by hurting them, even killing them.

You often speak about becoming human, and losing humanity, as a process.

Yes, it's a process. The fact that your bones are those of a biological human only means that you have the skeleton of a person. It does not confirm your humanity. You may be a skeleton that still needs the process of building, that still needs ubuntu toward yourself, to others, to nature. A human being is incomplete if it is defined in isolation to others.

From the beginning I have been struck by how in this movement leaders listen more than the speak. In meetings everyone speaks, you will listen and then only speak at the end. You look for the points of shared understanding, consensus, not to give a line.

There is no emancipatory politics without listening. Some people will say it's a skill. But for me, listening is much deeper than that. It's about being human, being human together. It's an acknowledgment, an embrace of others. It's not just an embrace of them as you see them, but of how they come through the world to this moment, their suffering, their hopes, their views, how they breathe, and how they express themselves. For me, that's being human.

As a leader, you have to listen to people very carefully, understand their pain, and their thinking. You have to learn from them. You already have what you know, but every time you listen to another person you have the opportunity to learn from them. Every person is a world on their own. You can't say that you are on the side of the people, that you are with the people if you don't take them seriously as people. In fact, you can't say that you are on the side of the people if you don't take yourself seriously as a person among other people.

Listening is humanistic. We build our humanity through listening.

You cannot listen well if you don't recognize the humanity of the person that is speaking, if you are not open to their thinking, their wisdom. You have to value all the people that are often not valued, the elderly, the so-called uneducated, all the people who nobody wants to listen to. If you fail to do this I don't think you can really be able to meet the people. Willingness to listen, to learn, especially from those who are often not listened to, creates a different set of moral standards, a different kind of politics.

Many years ago at a meeting in Pietermaritzburg a woman stood up. She cried. She said I have no one. I am a widow. I am a single mother. I have voted. I have a counselor. But I have no one to cry to. We can struggle with her for land and all the other things that she needs to live a dignified life, a life worthy of a human being. But struggle can be long and it can be very hard. But in that moment of the first meeting, we can listen to her. And listening can be healing. I learned that listening can be healing. Listening heals the one who speaks and is heard. Of course, it also keeps the one who listens human, and so it can be healing for the one who listens too. It stops us from seeing people as objects, as numbers, as instruments.

Before we come to Abahlali we come from divided families, families broken by the long history of oppression, ongoing oppression. The violence, the dispossession, the denial of humanity, well, these things have never stopped for the poor. We all bring our own burdens. Oppression has played itself in different ways. We are raised in different ways. Nobody comes through this society without trauma. We bring all that into the movement. There is a great responsibility to deal with all this within struggle, together. When people bring this into the movement, they don't off load it into the movement, they load it onto the movement. So healing becomes very important.

There has to be an ability, a moment, to acknowledge that what troubles you has been heard, has been processed. For each of us the damage that has been imposed on us needs to be acknowledged.

That's the beginning of the route to healing. You just have to accept what you have, what you bring into the process of healing.

It's not always so much about what a listener will tell you. They'll never have a super word to console you. Healing is a process. You narrate your story, your suffering, to a person who has the ability to listen. The ability to listen is not just about silence and using the ear. There's a particular way in which the expression from the speaker filters into the listener's heart, into their veins. There's power in that, a real power when the person that is narrating, that is expressing, can actually feel that they have connected to the person who is listening, that they have been seen, that they have been heard, that they have been understood.

You have to remember that you are provoking someone's emotions. This has to be taken very seriously. But connection translates into the power of healing. To achieve that connection you don't just listen with your ears. You use your name, you use your heart. That way you build connection and the power for the one who has travelled to feel that I am being taken seriously here. It is not a simple process.

Who listens matters. You are not going to talk to anyone. The movement has a way of choosing its listeners, shaping them.

Colonialism didn't just expropriate land and cattle. It didn't just force people into labor. It also expropriated their right to decide for themselves, to, in contexts shaped by colonialism, be adults among other adults. The forms of development we have had after apartheid have continued this. Some forms of leftism have continued this. The continuities with the colonial past are not just economic.

Sometimes you question the power of education. You question those who are educated. You question the function of institutions of higher learning. Sometimes they may talk about decolonization but most people come out of university having learned that they are better than other people, that they should think and speak and decide for other people. Most people do not come out of university with a deeper humanity. Often the main thing for people who have had that education is to make sure that they are on the other side of the line that separates the rich from the poor. Often they have the same judgments about the poor as other middle class or rich people. Of course, there are exceptions, people such as Comrade Ruthie [Ruth Wilson Gilmore] and others. These people are able to think together with other people, to think together outside of the university, to share their learning with the people, and to learn from the people.

But oppression will protect itself ruthlessly. It will protect its sense of superiority, of its right to dominate, ruthlessly. It will always present those who demand to be recognized as human as criminals, as part of some conspiracy, as people who must be crushed to protect society.

Repression is always a lesson. It is meant to tell us to know our place, that we should have known our place. It is meant to teach us that there are limits to what you can say, what you can enjoy, who you can talk to, what you can demand, and what value you can give to your life and to the lives of those around you. If you make the mistake of thinking that you are a human being and that you can engage others as human beings, well, then violence is inevitable. It is inevitable that your character will be defamed. If you cross the line and you don't learn the lesson that is given to you then the ultimate price is death.

The courage that people have shown in this struggle is remarkable. Many of the people who have been assassinated knew that they would be killed if they continued to disobey oppression, if they continued to struggle. This courage, this determination, is built and sustained together.

To continue knowing very well that you are playing with fire, knowing very well that you could be killed at any time, having been taught, having been shown that those who behave like you have been killed takes courage.

That courage comes from really being human. It comes from humanity. That courage is as simple as that. It comes from humanity because if you got it right, if you became a human being that comes with responsibilities. And one of those responsibilities of course is courage, courage to cross that line.

If you keep quiet when humanity and dignity are vandalized that troubles your humanity. You have the responsibility to say something, to act. Being a human being does not that you are able to breathe and eat. It comes with responsibility, responsibility to act, even if it means death. The responsibility that comes with being human is as deep as that.

Everyone will die but what's the use of being killed slowly slowly while the meaning you have given to your life, the value that you have given it, rots away?

We have to choose from no choice. Will you honor your life, and the lives of other people, by risking it? Will you confront truth and reality? It is not easy though. It is not just assassinations or the police that take life suddenly. We also die slowly from the diseases that come from stress. That's a long process of having to be killed slowly.

We should not be selfish. We should die knowing the truth, knowing how to better the next generation. We all want freedom in our lifetime but we know the reality that all we are doing is planting the seed to grow into the future, to benefit the generations to come. It's hard to tell if you can enjoy the freedom that you struggle for in this lifetime. You have to trust that the next generation will continue.

But we are here and we must choose whether we relax into oppression, take it as normal, and die slowly slowly, getting into the grave every day, or we confront the truth, confront justice and the possibility to die early. At least we can create courage for others to continue the struggle knowing that we may not achieve anything.

I think that we have not been appreciating the importance of creating a space where we can build courage, of being able to say that in the midst of all of this, it is important to stand firm and not compromise. I think that is what the system is so afraid of. It is afraid of people who want to be brave because they are actually showing others that it is doable, that it is possible in the midst of all this. The system wants to create fear, so much fear that you don't even try.

But if there are people who are brave, who do try, then it gives the possibility for others to do the same, and if there are many who do the same then it threatens the power of the system.

The movement is a series of linked meetings, thousands and thousands of linked meetings. That is where people think together. Nelson Mandela, the Mandela of the 1950s, wrote about the prospect of revolutionary democracy based on the consensus seeking meetings he had experienced in the Thembu royal homestead. He did not deal with the fact that these were meetings of men though.

Yes, the way we hold our meetings comes from rural life, from African culture. But even today it is often still difficult for women to participate in these meetings in rural villages. They will attend the meetings, they can be a majority at the meetings, but sitting on the floor, often on the left-hand side, and expected to be quiet. Of course, they do have power, but through men. There are often pre-meetings at home. Often when a man speaks vigorously at a meeting you must know that what he says has been influenced or shaped by what women have said at home. A lot of what men say has been influenced by women even if they are full of pride and do not acknowledge this when they speak.

It is different here. We have the same way of holding the meeting, where everyone can speak, where the person running the meetings tries to ensure that everyone can speak, that nobody is overlooked or disrespected, and to try and find consensus. But here women's power is open. Women have all the power to express their views and influence meetings. A majority of our chairpersons, the people running the meetings are women. We are intentional about building the power of women. This is what makes Abahlali so powerful.

South Africa is such a violent society. There have been meetings in which women have strongly expressed their opposition to forms of politics with a violent posture or content, and done so as women. This question of peace seems to at the heart of the experiment to develop a different kind of politics.

Yes. Colonialism used violence to dispose the African people. African people resisted with violence.

Today the violence from the state and the ANC is to defend oppression. The violence within society is not political. Desperate damaged people are just destroying each other.

Those who were oppressed had to find others to oppress. It is not just the politicians. A man who is disrespected and undermined at work may want to be in charge at home, to feel in charge. He may bring oppression home.

The damage done to us all is expressed in this violence. It has deep roots in the colonial form. And if we ignore that, if we do not want to confront it, if we do not have an honest conversation about healing, about decolonizing the mind, about undoing this thinking we will continue to live in this violence, in the politics of blood.

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