

# Black South Africans Must “Schedule Their Suffering”



Scott Reynolds

Chief Gatsha Buthelezi is a dazzling, and controversial, figure on the South African scene. Of royal blood—a direct descendant of the great Zulu warrior kings of the last century—he draws the natural respect of many of the country's nearly five million Zulus. They form the biggest single population group, outstripping the ruling whites in number. Buthelezi is as conscious of his hereditary role as are his followers.

Through his political actions of unceasing attack against racial apartheid, Buthelezi, aged fifty, also earns the support of many other blacks. He is a vocal and articulate proponent of a united and nonracial South Africa, which brings him white liberal support.

But many are bitterly opposed to him. Certainly the majority of white South Africans try to ignore him or condemn him as a dangerous agitator. Among blacks too there is by no means unanimous support for him—chiefly because of the place he occu-

pies in official government structures. For Buthelezi, even while rejecting the system, is an integral part of the Separate Development framework—the racial ideology created by the Afrikaner Nationalists as their means of ensuring white identity and privilege.

The policy enforces the separation of racial groups—whites, coloreds, and Indians, and the blacks who are further divided into tribal groups. South Africa is gradually being broken up into a major “white” state, occupying 86 per cent of the land, and a series of some ten mini-states for each black tribal group in the remaining 14 per cent.

KwaZulu is the home of the Zulus, in Natal in the east. Eventually, once land consolidation has taken place, it will comprise twelve separated chunks of land—a “nonsense state,” as Buthelezi has termed it. But for his own reasons he works within the system, even though he declares he will refuse to allow KwaZulu to become independent. Two of the homelands have

already acquired independence but are recognized only by South Africa itself: Transkei and Bophuthatswana.

Because of Buthelezi's cooperation with the government there is black opposition to him. In reply, however, he points to the fact that he draws crowds of up to twenty thousand when he holds a meeting in Johannesburg's Soweto; and he quotes the finding of West Germany's Arnold Bergstraesser Institute, released in June, 1978, that with 43.8 per cent of opinion polled, he is the leader most favored by blacks.

Seeking to broaden his power-base, Buthelezi has revived a Zulu cultural organization: Inkatha, the National Cultural Liberation Movement. In July it claimed 150,000 members; the figure is now put at more than 200,000. It aims at involving all blacks, whatever their tribal background, but it is likely that most members are Zulus. Through Inkatha, Buthelezi has also been aiming at creating links with sympathetic colored, Indian, and white political bodies.

The following interview was conducted with Buthelezi at his home at Mahlabatini in KwaZulu. A few minutes away is Ulundi, scene of the battle ninety-nine years ago, when the British army broke the power of the Zulu impis and put the nation under white control. Now Ulundi is rising again as the seat of the Zulu government, with Buthelezi as its elected head.

Buthelezi's home, newly completed, is large and pleasant, a blending of Western architecture and traditional Zulu style. The house sits on the edge of a hilltop, looking out over the picturesque countryside dotted with thatched tribal huts. Seen from a distance, the rugged beauty conceals the mass poverty and lack of modern amenities of many of the Zulus.

Ask Buthelezi about the condition of his people and the words pour out, tumbling over each other. But the seriousness readily gives way to humor and a booming laugh. And always there is a great human warmth.

—B.P.

# An Interview With Chief Gatsha Buthelezi

by Benjamin Pogrund

**Question:** Can we start by talking about yourself? You're the elected and the hereditary leader of the Zulus, the biggest single group in South Africa. What's your life like?

**BUTHELEZI:** When you and I first met some years ago, I was then the head of the Buthelezi tribe, which is one of the tribes that was amalgamated by King Shaka in the Zulu nation during the nineteenth century. In that capacity I administered the affairs of my people from day to day, such as, for instance, civil and criminal disputes, and disputes between husbands and wives. And also problems about arable lands and employment. At the same time, the king then, King Cyprian, was my first cousin, and I also acted in matters concerning all the Zulus as a kind of traditional prime minister to him.

When KwaZulu was inaugurated under the government's "homelands" policy in 1970, the Zulus really pressurized me. I was placed in a very great dilemma about that because I did not wish to be associated with this policy. But at the same time, I could not abandon five million people for whom I had these hereditary obligations. So I was elected chief minister. My daily routine in my own tribe ceased.

My life now consists mainly of administration, facing up to the problems of the Zulu people on a day-to-day basis. My own department is finance, and in the chief minister's department I am also involved with coordinating all the seven departments that we have. Now, with the growth of my National Cultural Liberation Movement, Inkatha, I have added duties because Inkatha has grown so much—it has over 200,000 members, I was told by the secretary the other day—I could actually attend to only Inkatha's problems.

**At the same time, you're a black South African. What does that mean in your everyday life?**

This is a very fascinating point because quite often I wonder as I pick up the receiver, if anyone phones me, whether my friends who are white realize the amount of internal bleeding, or spiritual bruising, that one has every day. For instance, even over the telephone from the exchange—because we haven't got an automatic exchange here—there is the rudeness of the ordinary telephonist to you as soon as he hears your voice is black.

**Even to you?**

Oh yes! They shout over the telephone and tell people that time has expired: "Finished! Finished! Finished!" and so on. It is just horrible. It's just one aspect. I think that by God's grace one is not really embittered, but I can see that if I was still younger than I am, it would create so much hatred. Because it's so humiliating and it's so unnecessary and we know it's done because we are black, and it's done by an ordinary telephonist because he has a white skin.

And also, at the same time, as a black man, in spite of the fact that I am political head of the Zulus, I still carry

my pass, my reference book, like anyone else. And I know that I cannot go to any restaurant unless I'm courting trouble, because unless it is arranged beforehand, I just couldn't. I cannot sleep at any hotel unless it's a five-star hotel and arrangements have been made before. But these "international" hotels in South Africa, of course, are now obliged to take us in.

And I know that I cannot take my children to any school of my liking. Because, you see, that is not done here. A neighboring Catholic school has a few black children, mainly colored children, and some of the nuns wanted my child to go there. But I heard that there was one African child there and the pressure was so much on the child that the child had to leave. He was persecuted by the other children. And I just imagined how it would have been if it was my child.

These are some of the things that one encounters. For all practical purposes, there's no label that I'm the chief minister of KwaZulu. Unless you know beforehand, I am subjected to the same humiliations as any other black.

**Here you are though, a recognized leader of black South Africans, known nationally and internationally. As far as the South African Government is concerned, what role do you think you play in shaping what goes on in this country?**

I have never believed that there is any meaningful decisionmaking through the homeland governments. Because what we do is just by way of petitioning them, the government, to decide alone, not with us. It means that I do not participate in decisionmaking as such. The very fact that we have to lobby in this way for our people underscores the very point I am making: that we haven't got any real participation in decisionmaking.

**How do you think racial change can come about in South Africa?**

Racial change can come about much as the Afrikaners and the English fought wars in this country and then decided to bury the hatchet—by meeting around a conference table. I believe that since we blacks were not involved in this, the only thing that can defuse the possible escalation of violence is if representatives of all the peoples of South Africa, including all those who are exiled, gather around a conference table. I see a conference table as the only alternative to possible escalations of violence that may be unmanageable.

**As you know, some people in fact say that violence is inevitable now.**

That view is a possibility. The chances are 50-50. There is as much possibility for nonviolent change as there is for violent change. Even though the options are narrowing, I wouldn't say that one can give up possibilities. There can still be nonviolent change. But now the change must take place on the other side, that is, among the whites, not amongst us. I think the majority of black people are still prepared to negotiate.

We are already in an era where there is escalating violence. There is violence that is used to maintain the status quo by the whites. I see white militarization as

one of the things that is going to push people toward violence, because if you're going to rely more on the gun than on negotiation, then you are going to have a polarization where people think that the only option is that of violence, that they must use more and more violence to maintain the status quo.

**People, especially abroad, talk very readily about the inevitability of violence in this country, in the sense of blacks turning to violence to attack white authority. What's your reaction to that?**

Quite apart from the philosophy of nonviolence, in which I believe, purely from the pragmatic point of view they are being unrealistic. Violence has never, throughout the history of man, been something that people resort to out of choice. It's something that people do when they have nothing else at hand to do. But in the situation of South Africa it would be suicidal for blacks to play up to that.

Last year I had a long interview with President Nyerere of Tanzania, and we looked at these issues. I was pleased later to see that in an interview he gave to *Time* magazine he repeated what he said to me, when he said that at present there is not a single African country or a combination of African countries that can take on South Africa militarily. People also tend to talk simplistically about guerrilla warfare here. But the terrain of this country doesn't lend itself to that kind of warfare.

At the same time, South Africa can call up 400,000 men to arms, and civil defense has been stepped up. So when I have said before that the whites were itching to shoot us down, I have meant just that. There are some who, at the slightest excuse, would like to do this. Two prominent Nationalists, one of them a cabinet minister, have told me that they are worried because a lot of whites are saying "Come on, let's have a showdown with these blacks." I think for people to walk into that would be stupid.

#### **Urban violence?**

I've said that exists already. But people talk about us taking up arms, they talk simplistically about the armed struggle, and so on. I'm trying to say what forces are arrayed against us. Urban violence is going to grow. But for the foreseeable future it seems to me that this regime is equipped to deal with it.

**Is South Africa changing? Many people say that changes are happening, that good things are happening, that we are, under the Nationalist government, beginning to work out something different in this country. Do you see change around you?**

My view is that there is no meaningful change because there is no change on fundamentals. I think the main areas are decisionmaking and the sharing of wealth. In spite of the fact that the wages of black people have gone up very much, the gap between what whites and blacks earn on the average has not been bridged. In fact, that gap is not narrowing at all. At the same time, the free enterprise system as it operates in our country excludes black people. So one can say that there cannot be sharing of wealth unless black people also become

part of the free enterprise system. About decisionmaking, unless blacks are represented—if they just participate, let alone in what proportion!—one can never talk about any sharing of decisionmaking. As far as this is concerned, the government has slammed the door so far.

**What about overseas pressure for change? American pressure, for example. Do you welcome or reject it?**

As someone who is committed to nonviolent change, I believe there should be pressures. But I don't have a blanket opinion about pressures. I don't say just any pressures, because I know that there are some pressures that are counterproductive—that don't help us at all and that, in fact, just push more whites into the *laager*. So I believe one must select pressures that must be brought to bear on South Africa. For instance, the pressure on investments: I cannot myself see that there is any potential of bringing about change here.

**I want to ask about that because you have been outspoken on the issue of disinvestment, which is so controversial in America these days. And I think you have basically tended to oppose disinvestment.**

Yes, in the first place, as a hard-bitten politician, I am not convinced that the majority of black people in this country want that. I don't think my constituents want disinvestment. Already we have 26 per cent of the economically active blacks out of employment, and we are in a situation of increasing difficulties as far as employment is concerned. Some people have said to me: "Aren't you prepared to suffer for your liberation?" Of course we are prepared, we are prepared even to die. But we are not prepared to suffer for nothing. Because when you look at this issue; what are you hoping to accomplish? To pressurize South Africans toward making some changes? But as I have seen in the Rhodesian experience—and these days one reads about the breaking of oil sanctions in the Bingham report—there is a lot of dishonesty among human beings. Even Russia, as far as chrome was concerned. I mean, they are more vociferous than any other nation about human rights, but in fact they also broke the Rhodesian sanctions.

If you look at the economy of this country, which is the fifteenth most powerful economy in the world, they are going to last much longer than Rhodesia. They have even prepared for this, because I happen to know that they have even bled oil into some of the disused coal mines in this country. I suppose I'll get into trouble for saying so, but in fact they have anticipated what might happen. This is the extent of the intransigence we must face up to.

So I don't believe that if disinvestment took place, the Pretoria regime will come crumbling down. That's not going to happen. It would just mean suffering without getting a schedule. You must have some kind of schedule if you plan properly for anything. If the aim is to bring about change, then even the suffering must be scheduled. My people are prepared to suffer, but for how long? I don't think my people are prepared to suffer indefinitely, with nothing at the end of the tunnel.

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**If you don't favor disinvestment, is there any other sort of action you suggest to people abroad?**

If disinvestment is tied to something—if the investor says, if the multinational corporations say to the South African government, We are under pressure, if you people don't get moving toward the conference table, then we are going to disinvest—I will support that. I think it's sensible.

I believe also that sports pressure has been very effective. So is the arms embargo. When it began, some people said, Oh, it's just talk. And I said, Well, it's a meaningful type of talking because we believe that, as black people, we are kept oppressed through the gun. So it's a symbolical thing, but a meaningful type of thing.

**Do you think the world, and talking about America here, should be concerned about the South African racial situation and about apartheid?**

They should be concerned because the issue has already been internationalized. Not by myself, or by you or anyone else, but by the fact of their involvement here. They are involved here through the investments we discussed. In any case, I believe they need to make up for their past failures—because, for instance, take the extent that this country is armed to the teeth: Those arms were got from the West. It isn't as if the West didn't have morality before and they've suddenly discovered morality now.

This country, of course, also claims that it is part of the West, and people here like to bang their chests saying they are Christians. Those are some of the ideals of the West, which they claim to be part of, and in this way too I believe that the West should be involved.

**Inkatha, at its congress in July, decided to start monitoring the activities of business corporations in South Africa, both the multinationals and local companies, and to test their activities against the various codes of conduct that have been prepared: the Sullivan code for American corporations, the EEC code, and the various local codes. Why are you doing this?**

I am often denigrated as if I am prostituting my people because I support investment in South Africa. We can have a more meaningful role in supporting investment with a clear conscience because I believe that investments have a constructive role to play; that investments can advance the cause of my people as far as economic justice is concerned. So I have felt that there is something concrete we can do, rather than just talking about things, to ensure that the people who have authored these codes implement them. It is the least we can do to ensure that the kind of constructive investment that I am talking about actually takes place. That is my main motivation in being involved in this.

**How will you carry out your monitoring?**

People overseas who are involved in this disinvestment issue have always found it difficult to get information from here. But we have 200,000 members of Inkatha, and I believe that our people who are employed will provide the monitoring. There are also discussions going on between us and the black trade unions because we

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intend to coordinate efforts with them. And when the Sullivan group of America came to this country recently, we also discussed the apparatus for this with them.

**How will you enforce it? Against defaulters. Let's say you find company "X" is not coming up to the mark.**

Then we will bring pressure to bear on them. But at the same time, I've said to companies that they must not see me as their enemy, as some of them do, but they should see me as a partner. All of them having authored these things, a system to correlate what they declare with what they do, it should not be seen as an act of hostility.

We'll have to exert pressure. I have contacts with trade unions, both in Europe and America. I'll see where we carry it in coordination with them.

**What about local strike action?**

That of course needs preparation. As a tactician, I wouldn't like to make a song about that. But I can just say there are possibilities there, there are great possibilities there.

**Would it be fair to suggest that, in fact, what we might be seeing here is really political action riding on the back of labor action based on the principle that the one effective power that blacks have got is their labor?**

Of course, I believe that entirely about the power of blacks. When you talk about the economy of this country, 71 per cent of the economically active people are blacks. So that when people talk about investments crippling the economy of the country, I say they must leave that to us. I mean, if there is a necessity to go that way, to cripple the economy, black people will do it themselves.

**If I may ask you a blunt personal question: There are some South African exiles who describe you as a puppet of the South African Government because you work within the official system of Separate Development. What's your reaction to that?**

It is very well and good to say that when you are thousands of miles from here. But I know that my people—and by "my people" I don't just mean the Zulus, I mean the majority of black people in this coun-

try—in fact support me. And I am not only imagining this, because one can talk about the rallies that I have in Soweto with crowds of many thousands, which no one else has. These people like to say that the minister of justice, Mr. Kruger, banned other organizations last year. But, in fact, even before that, they never had the kind of support that I have. The Arnold Bergstraesser Institute findings, which confirmed other market research findings, have come to the same conclusion that the majority of people support me.

Also, I think my role is often not appreciated abroad because all of us are regarded as what is labeled a "homeland leader." My position, by an accident of history, is not the same as anyone else who is involved in homeland politics. If I were to be a hard ideologue, as they want me to be, it would mean abandoning five million people.

**If I understand your position correctly, you reject the whole basis of the Separate Development policy but you find yourself in the dilemma that this is the only way in which you can try to exert what influence you can, and you therefore set out to use it very deliberately as a platform.**

That is precisely my position. I reckon it is very simplistic to speak about working within the system, because what African is not trapped within the system here? I mean, KwaZulu is as much of a ghetto as Soweto is. Must people then abandon Soweto? I have not seen any sit-ins in the white suburbs of Johannesburg—people refusing, as a protest, to live in Soweto. They live there, they travel by separate trains, separate taxis, they go to separate hospitals and separate schools. I think this stand is just an ideological slogan that is not meaningful. And in any case, our people, our people as a whole, are trapped in that system. Who doesn't want to soil his hands where his people are is not really prepared to participate in the change that must take place. Because one can only participate in the change by being involved with the people who are trapped in the wicked apartheid system.

**What do you think of the new prime minister, Mr. P.W. Botha?**

I'm really very frightened of him. I don't know him except that I have seen him a couple of times at a distance. I've never talked to him.\* But my image of him is that he is really as the press has called him—a hawk. And I don't quite trust his judgment. If I look at the involvement of South African soldiers in Angola in 1975, for instance, I get very frightened of him because we have a very delicate situation in this country and I think that we need someone who is stable, and I'm not strengthened in the belief that he is emotionally stable. Let me say that very bluntly. I don't think he is. I don't think we can afford to have anyone who cannot keep a cool head. This is the time for cool heads, and I don't think that Mr. P.W. Botha has the ability to keep a cool head.

**A last question, a general one: What sort of South Africa do you want to see?**

I would like to see a South Africa in which there is equal opportunity, where a man will not be penalized because of his cultural background and sentenced to an inferior way of life. I want to see a South Africa in which the people of South Africa will participate in decisionmaking, and where they'll have equal opportunities to share in the wealth of the country.

And I want a South Africa in which there will be no domination of any people by others, whether it's majorities dominating minorities, or minorities dominating majorities just because of whatever advantages they possess in numbers or in guns.

That's the kind of South Africa I yearn for. That's the kind of South Africa I'm working for. That's the kind of South Africa I hope we will ultimately see. That's the kind of South Africa for which I am prepared to sacrifice. That's the kind of South Africa I'm prepared to suffer any penalties for. That's the kind of South Africa I am prepared to give my life for. That's the kind of South Africa where black people will feel equally as compatriots with the white people that there is something to defend. Because at present we have nothing to defend except our skins.

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\*In January, Prime Minister Botha met with Chief Buthelezi, after which Buthelezi said Botha is more "flexible" than expected.—*The Editors.*