

Apartheid-era coup leader Bantu Holomisa calls for South African electoral commission head to resign

Thabo Seseane Jr.
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With United Democratic Movement (UDM) President Bantu Holomisa as their ex-officio spokesman, a group of South African opposition parties, including Agang [“Let us build”] South Africa, Congress of the People and the Economic Freedom Fighters, called April 1 for Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) chairwoman Pansy Tlakula to step down. If she did not, the credibility of the May 7 election was at risk, they said.

This follows Public Protector Thuli Madonsela’s release in April 2013 of a report, “Inappropriate Moves”, about the R320 million (US\$30 million) lease on the IEC’s new head office. Madonsela recommended that Tlakula be held responsible for her role in the flawed procurement process.

In line with Madonsela’s advice, the Treasury asked auditors PwC to conduct that investigation, which was completed in December 2013. PwC substantiated the public protector’s findings of irregularity, branding the IEC procurement process “not fair, equitable, transparent, competitive or cost-effective”.

Holomisa drew attention to the matter of the “undisclosed and unmanaged conflict of interest” between Tlakula and African National Congress MP Thaba Mufamadi, “her chairperson and co-director in [mining contractor] Lehotsa Investment Holdings”. Abland, a property management company 20 percent-owned by Manaka Property Investments, which Mufamadi chairs, successfully tendered for the contract to let premises to the IEC after bid evaluation criteria were changed to favour Abland.

Holomisa asserted that through her behaviour, Tlakula risked the “loss of public confidence in the Electoral Commission”, and fostered a “perception from potential service providers that they cannot expect fair and equal treatment from the Electoral Commission”. In an

interview with the *Sunday Independent* in early March, he alleged that “rogue elements” in the IEC would facilitate the underperforming ANC in the upcoming general election.

What is clear is that a company partly owned by Mufamadi unfairly benefited from a corrupt tender process. Further, Tlakula was remiss to say the very least in not disclosing the conflict of interest arising from her relationship with Mufamadi, and in failing to recuse herself from the process of choosing a new IEC landlord.

It is impossible to tell whether this presages rigging of the 2014 ballot. However, the theme of a less than free and fair election recurs in Holomisa’s pronouncements, as at the launch of Julius Malema’s EFF at Marikana late last year. On that occasion, Holomisa, who has warm relations with Malema, warned, “You need to know that the IEC will refuse to share information you need to strategise and prepare for elections. You won’t be told how many ballot papers have been printed and how many of those have serial numbers”.

Madonsela launched her IEC investigation on the basis of allegations originally made by Holomisa in 2011, including suspicions over the validity of lease agreements entered into by the commission, and various payments to Abland. Unfortunately, Holomisa is something other than the champion of democratic values that he portrays himself as being.

He first gained prominence in 1987 when, aged 32, he led a coup against the ruling Matanzima family as a major-general in the defence force of Transkei, the apartheid-era Bantustan now incorporated into the Eastern Cape province.

Beginning with the Transkei in 1963, the apartheid regime of South Africa established ten Bantustans for designated ethnic groups. The white supremacist

government, through these “self-governing” enclaves, sought the further subdivision of the working class along ethnic lines. The Bantustans were unstable entities knocked together from non-contiguous patches of poor land with little infrastructure. They were recognised only by the South African government, on which they depended for up to 80 percent of their budgets.

Certain liberal circles at the time defended Holomisa’s coup as progressive, arguing that a young military officer sympathetic to the anti-apartheid struggle was better than the Matanzima brothers, Kaiser and George, who squabbled not only among themselves, but also with Lennox Sebe, head of the Ciskei, the other Bantustan of the Xhosa tribe.

In 1994, Holomisa was elected to the ANC National Executive Committee, and served as the Deputy Minister of Environment and Tourism of South Africa. After testifying at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), he was expelled from the ANC in September 1996 for bringing the organisation into disrepute.

Holomisa infuriated the ANC by asking the TRC to investigate fellow ANC member Stella Sigcau (the same Sigcau who succeeded George Matanzima in Transkei), intimating she accepted a R50,000 payment from Matanzima that was part of a R2,000,000 bribe from hotel magnate Sol Kerzner.

Holomisa then founded the UDM in 1997 together with apartheid-era minister and former National Party (NP) General Secretary Roelf Meyer. Of 400 National Assembly seats, the party won 14 in 1999, nine in 2004 and just four in 2009.

Panic over these figures explains the recent flurry of activity to boost Holomisa’s profile among indifferent voters. Holomisa has made appeals to provincialism, claiming that under the late Matanzima, properties in the central business districts of many towns in the former Transkei were owned by local citizens, as opposed to the foreigners who now own most.

Holomisa is hedging his bets by aligning the UDM with other black-led opposition parties. Already, the UDM has absorbed the Mbhazima Shilowa faction of another ANC breakaway, the Congress of the People (COPE). Shilowa lost out to Mosioua Lekota in a bruising court battle for leadership of the party, and may feel safer in an alliance. COPE became the official opposition in the Eastern Cape in 2009, winning 13 percent of the vote against the UDM’s four percent. With his eye on the provincial premiership, Holomisa has lately spoken of a “non-partisan” approach to opposition politics. “Things are

changing now”, he said. “And I think we will see real change in this election. The opposition parties are all talking to one another”.

Among the pseudo-left, Holomisa enjoys the support of former ANC member and labour writer Terry Bell. “Abstention and [ballot] spoiling will not be the way”, Bell cautions.

Addressing himself to those who still dream “of putting the ANC back on track”, Bell asks, “why not vote for the UDM?” Holomisa may have his faults, he declares, but the decisive point is that the ANC “expelled [him] for being honest and exposing corruption, most recently in blowing the whistle on Pansy Tlakula”.

The issue of corruption is a real one, but demagogy over the issue is fairly cheap, and the key question is class orientation and program. Holomisa is the leader of a petty bourgeois clique made up of disgruntled former ANC members who have merely taken their factional battles beyond the mother party. They, like COPE, the EFF and the other parties calling for Tlakula’s head, fully retain their anti-working class agenda.

Playing to “those who wish to signal that a socialist orientation of some sort is necessary”, Bell makes clear that “a vote for the Workers and Socialist Party (WASP) is possible. Ballots can be cast, without illusions, for both these parties”.

WASP is a fake-socialist party that has promoted illusions in the ability of pro-capitalist outfits like the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) to defend workers’ interests. Like some of the black-led opposition parties to which Holomisa is drawing closer, WASP was founded by ex-ANC members, including Liv Shange and Zackie Achmat.

Workers and oppressed people in South Africa must place no confidence in any of these parties. Their aim is to put in place an alternative mechanism of rule for the bourgeoisie in face of the growing opposition to the ANC, thanks to its determined defence of capitalism and imposition of brutal levels of exploitation on the working class.



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