



“We have got to move away from the concept of race and colour because that is what apartheid is. We cannot end apartheid if we retain these concepts.”



Oliver Reginald (O.R.) Tambo, an illustrious son of South Africa, would have turned 100 years old this year. This selfless patriot dedicated his life to the tireless pursuit of South Africa's liberation. He left a lasting legacy for not only his organisation, the African National Congress (ANC), but also all South Africans.

In his honour, 2017 has been declared the Year of Oliver Reginald Tambo. It is the year of unity in action by all South Africans and our international partners as we move South Africa forward, together.





“We all belong to South Africa, and South Africa belongs to us all.”

Born in Mbizana in the Eastern Cape on 27 October 1917, O.R. Tambo began his formal education at the Ludeke Methodist School. He then went on to attend high school in Johannesburg at St Peter's College in Rossettenville. It was here that he joined the choir, developing what would be a lifelong passion for choral music.

In November 1936, O.R. Tambo was one of the few black students allowed to write his Junior Certificate (JC) examination in what was then known as the Transvaal (now Gauteng).

This was no mean feat as it was the first time in history that two black students, one being Tambo, passed the JC examination with a first class. As a result of his outstanding academic achievements, the Transkei Bhunga, which was an assembly of Chiefs from the Transkei area, awarded him a five-year scholarship. In addition to this accomplishment, the University of South Africa (UNISA) awarded him a two-year scholarship.

Tambo became actively involved in politics at the University of Fort Hare where he graduated with a BSc degree in Mathematics and Physics. He then enrolled for a diploma in Higher Education.

While studying towards his BSc Honours, O.R. led a class boycott to demand a democratically elected Student Representative Council, which resulted in his expulsion. With no prospect to further his studies as a result of his political activity, he returned to St Peter's College as a Mathematics and Physics teacher in 1942.



By 1948, Tambo was serving his law articles at Max Kramer and Tuch, a white law firm. One of his first cases at this company was a dispute among the Bafokeng people over land rights in Rustenburg, Western Transvaal (now North West province). His sound knowledge of customary law helped to successfully conclude the case.

On 24 July 1951, Tambo qualified as an attorney. Nelson Mandela, who he had met at the University of Fort Hare was also a qualified lawyer, and approached him to join in a partnership. They set up offices in Chancellor House, Johannesburg, as the legal firm of Mandela and Tambo.

As the firm became well known, people travelled long distances from around the country to seek its services. When Mandela was banned in 1951, Tambo continued to carry the workload on his own.

“There is no way a spirit of resistance that has sunk so deep in the population can be repressed.”



While teaching in Johannesburg, he continued his political activities, becoming the first national secretary of the ANC Youth League (ANCYL) in 1944. Tambo was instrumental in its formation. He went on to be promoted to president of the Transvaal ANCYL in 1948 and national vice-president of the organisation in 1949.

In 1948, he and Walter Sisulu were elected to the National Executive Committee (NEC) of the ANC. This resulted in a huge shift in the organisation, which had previously largely targeted the African elite of South Africa and did not have a real mass-based following. It was Tambo, Sisulu and other members of the ANCYL's influence that saw the ANC grow into the movement that it is today. They realised that in order to attain freedom for South Africa, it was essential that the struggle included the masses of uneducated and unskilled black workers.

At the 1954 ANC Congress, Tambo was elected Secretary General. That same year, Tambo received a banning order from the apartheid state. Despite this, he remained actively involved, working as a member of the National Action Committee which drafted the Freedom Charter.

The charter was adopted at the Congress of the People in June 1956. Tambo could not attend due to the restrictions placed on

him and observed the proceedings from a hiding place at Stanley Lollan's residence in Kliptown, overlooking the square where the congress was taking place.

In 1955, Tambo became engaged to Adelaide Frances Tsukhudu, a nurse employed at Baragwanath Hospital.

Their wedding was set for 22 December 1956, but it was nearly put off as Tambo was detained on treason charges on 5 December 1956. After all the accused were granted bail, the wedding took place as scheduled. Adelaide Tsukhudu went on to be a huge influence in his life and an immeasurable source of strength and inspiration to him. She stood by his side throughout all of his trials and tribulations, which included his numerous arrests, detentions, court cases and 30 years in exile.

In 1956, 155 members of the ANC were charged in what became known as the Treason Trial. This was an attempt by the State to destroy the resistance movement broadly. Those arrested consisted of prominent activist leaders from a number of organisations and across many races. These included people such as Helen Joseph, Ahmed Kathrada, Albert Luthuli, Nelson Mandela, Billy Nair, Lilian Ngoyi, Walter Sisulu, Joe Slovo and Ben Turok. They were all acquitted in March 1961. In 1957, Tambo was elected Deputy President of the ANC.

‘It was always my desire to strike new ground and help to lend weight where it was most required.’

With the majority of the liberation movements leaders either incarcerated or having been murdered, the calls for freedom in South Africa became increasingly desperate.

This was further impacted by the Sharpeville Massacre on 21 March 1960 where over 69 peaceful protestors were shot by apartheid police. This caused a global outcry and not long after, Tambo embarked on a “Mission in Exile” to gain international support for the South African liberation movement. At the same time, arrangements were made for Adelaide and his children, Thembi, Dali and Tselane, to travel to Swaziland and from there to Ghana and then on to London. The family eventually arrived in London on 15 September 1960.

On 27 March 1960, Tambo went into exile across the Bechuanaland (now Botswana) border. While in Bechuanaland, telegrams that Tambo sent to the United Nations (UN) were intercepted and passed on to the South African



authorities. Tambo's stay in Bechuanaland became perilous and haunted by the constant fear of being abducted and returned to South Africa.

Yusuf Dadoo, the leader of the South African Communist Party (SACP) was also in Bechuanaland, having fled into exile. Frene Ginwala arranged travel documents and transport for Tambo, Dadoo and Ronald Segal from the Indian Consul in Kenya to travel to Kenya through Dar es Salaam to Tanganyika (now Tanzania). Tambo first met Julius Nyerere in Tanzania.

After that, Tambo flew from Tanganyika to Nairobi, where he was issued with further travel documents by the Indian Government. The next day, Tambo left for Tunisia where he was invited by the

General Secretary of the World Assembly Youth, David Wirmark. It was here that he delivered his first speech outside the country. This was the first of many speeches that O.R. Tambo delivered in countries across the globe in a bid to secure equality for black South Africans and the freedom of his comrades such as Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Ahmed Kathrada and scores more who had been sentenced to life imprisonment on Robben Island.

He also met President Habib Bourgiba of Tunisia and was able to explain the ANC's position to him. From here, he went to Ghana where he had an audience with Kwame Nkrumah and explained the situation in South Africa. Tambo's first visit to northern Europe was when he went to Denmark at the invitation of the Prime Minister on 1 May 1960. He addressed meetings in Copenhagen



and Aarhus outlining the history of South Africa and called for trade unions to help the ANC's boycott call. From here, he flew to London where he was met by his friends, Father Trevor Huddleston and Canon Collins. In London, he had meetings with ANC exiles, Dadoo and representatives of the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC). His intention was to try to bring together representatives of the liberation movements fighting the South African regime.

Thereafter, he flew to Egypt to enlist the support of the Egyptian leader, Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser. Following this, he flew to Ethiopia where he met with the Non-European United Front, a body made up of ANC and PAC exiles, that was set up to work together with a common purpose. While in Ethiopia, he also addressed the first conference of African Heads of State.

In October 1962, a consultative meeting chaired by Govan Mbeki, was held in Lobatse, Botswana. It was to confirm the ANC's NEC mandate, namely, that Tambo was to head the ANC's diplomatic mission and to communicate to the world the situation in South Africa.

As head of the ANC's Mission in Exile, he had to oversee the growing number of ANC exiles, the uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK) military camps (the armed wing of the ANC), fundraising, the

setting up of ANC offices around the world, seeing that the welfare of ANC cadres in exile were well taken care of and to lobby with the international community. His use of consensus and collective decision-making helped tremendously.

When Chief Luthuli was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1961, Tambo accompanied him and his wife to Stockholm, Sweden, for the ceremony. In January 1962, Tambo met Mandela and Joe Matthews in Dar es Salaam. Mandela, who had slipped out of the country, explained to him the details of the decision to launch MK and armed operations, and the ANC's need to cooperate closely with the SACP in this process. Mandela and Tambo then worked out a programme for the External Mission under the new circumstances whereby the latter had to develop diplomatic support for MK.

Mandela and Tambo travelled to a number of countries in North Africa. Together, they returned to London where Mandela met with important British officials and politicians. During this period, Tambo also led an ANC delegation to the formation of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in Ethiopia in May 1963. In July 1963, the bulk of the MK High Command were arrested.

With the incarceration of the Rivonia trialists, it fell upon Tambo to take up leadership of MK. In 1963, he visited the former Union

of Soviet Socialist Republics and China, hoping to gain support from these two countries. In 1964, Tambo arrived in Dar es Salaam to take up his post as head of MK and the ANC. He shared a guesthouse with other members from the ANC office.

During 1963 and 1964, Tambo made a number of high-profile speeches to present the ANC to the world, the most prominent being one made to the UN in October 1963. This speech inspired



the UN Resolution XVIII of 11 October 1963, calling on the South African government to release all political prisoners. Tambo addressed the UN where his passionate plea for the release of political prisoners received a standing ovation.

Support for the ANC's cause abroad also came from the British Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM). In 1964, Ronald Segal together with the AAM and Tambo's involvement organised an International Conference on Economic Sanctions against South Africa.

Following the Rivonia Trial, Tambo called a consultative meeting of ANC representatives from around the world, in Lusaka on 8 January 1965, as it was becoming difficult to meet with the increasing number of branches being set up internationally. That same year, he also negotiated with the OAU, now the African Union, and the Tanzanian Government for land to set up a military camp in Dar es Salaam. In 1965, he also set up another camp in newly independent Zambia.

Formally elected president of the ANC after the death of Chief Albert Luthuli in 1967, Tambo is credited as being the glue that kept the organisation together. He was in short, a sort of de facto international president of the movement, many of whom had by that time gone into exile. This was a mammoth task but

O.R. Tambo was able to successfully fulfil this mandate. Those who knew him well insist that it was his extraordinary characteristics, including patriotism, integrity, humility and passion, which allowed him to do so.

Tambo remained acutely aware of the need to make and keep contact with both the civil and the corporate world. Already by the 1980s, he had met with American multinationals in order to explain the ANC's position to them. While Tambo was expanding the ANC's network on a diplomatic, corporate, cultural and sporting level, the South African regime was becoming increasingly repressive and was engaging in more cross-border raids in neighbouring countries that supported the ANC.

8 January 1985 was a watershed moment in the fight against apartheid, when Tambo delivered a speech, calling on people to "Render South Africa Ungovernable". With social unrest increasing and the apartheid government under pressure, following the July 1985 State of Emergency, he appealed to all South Africans, black and white, to make apartheid unworkable and the country ungovernable.

In October 1985, Tambo was asked to give evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee of the House of Commons in London, where he had to field difficult and sometimes hostile questioners.

The result was that the following year, the United Kingdom, as part of the Commonwealth, sent an Eminent Persons Group to investigate the situation in the country. In 1987, Tambo appointed a high-powered Commission of ANC legal people to draw up a constitution to reflect the kind of country that the ANC wanted for the future. He also sat in on these meetings, often guiding them. Tambo had consistently advocated support for a multiparty democracy and an entrenched Bill of Rights. Also in 1987, Tambo together with others, conceived and headed a top-secret covert mission by MK known as Operation Vula. Tambo chose the operatives to infiltrate into the country to work underground, establishing networks and arms caches.

In 1988, Tambo appointed a President's Team on Negotiations to draw up the ANC's position and approach to the negotiations drawing from viewpoints from the exiles and the Mass Democratic Movement in the country. In the meantime, the apartheid government was secretly making moves to approach the ANC for negotiations through exploratory meetings. On 31 May 1989, Thabo Mbeki set up a meeting between the ANC and the South African National Intelligence Service.

Following extensive discussions with the leaders of the frontline states (Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe), Tambo led and worked closely

with the ANC team which drafted the Harare Declaration. The declaration acknowledged that there might be an opportunity for negotiations with the South African regime with the end of apartheid in mind. It explained the climate and principles, which had to be created, before negotiations could begin.

Pressure and exhaustion took its toll on Tambo and in 1989, he suffered a severe stroke that resulted in him losing his speech. Tambo continued his punishing work schedule, travelling on ANC business.

Unable to withstand the pressure for much longer, the apartheid government announced the unbanning of the ANC and other political organisations in February 1990 and the beginning of the process of transition. O.R. Tambo and his family flew back to South Africa in December 1990, a few months shy of the release of his comrade, friend and associate and the man whose release he had fought so hard to secure, Nelson Mandela, on Sunday, 11 February 1990, after 27 years in prison.

The unbanning of the ANC was by no small measure due to the enormous efforts of O.R. Tambo who managed to galvanise international solidarity and turn apartheid South Africa into a pariah state. The international community shunned South Africa and called continuously for its banning from international organisations and bodies, which included:



- In 1961, South Africa withdrew from the Commonwealth after it is criticised by many members for its apartheid policies. South Africa rejoined the Commonwealth following the end of apartheid in 1994.
- In 1964, the International Olympic Committee barred South Africa from competing in the Summer Olympics because of the segregationist policies of its apartheid regime.
- In 1974, the UN General Assembly suspended South Africa from participating in its work, due to international opposition to the policy of apartheid. South Africa was re-admitted to the UN in 1994 following its transition into a democracy.

All of these took place while O.R.Tambo was at the helm of the ANC in exile. Furthermore he was instrumental in the staging of the Nelson Mandela 70th birthday concert, which was held at Wembley Stadium, London, in 1988. It was broadcast to 67 countries and an audience of 600 million people.

The ANC, enjoying popular recognition and legitimacy as the foremost liberation organisation, was increasingly regarded as a government-in-waiting. At the ANC Conference in Durban in 1991, Tambo declined to stand for any position.

The position of National Chairman was created in his honour. Nelson Mandela was elected President of the organisation. Despite his illness, Tambo came to the ANC office in Johannesburg every day and still addressed public meetings of organisations. He suffered another stroke in 1991 while undergoing medical treatment in Sweden.

During the early hours of the morning of 24 April 1993, Oliver Reginald Tambo passed away from a heart attack. The years of working tirelessly took its toll on this gentle giant and he sadly did not live to see the day that South Africans were finally free. He did, however, live to see the birth of a transitional government and the release of his comrades from what had initially been a life sentence. The first-ever democratic elections

took place on 27 April 1994, almost a year to the day after the death of O.R.Tambo. The historic event resulted in the inauguration of Nelson Mandela as South Africa's first democratically elected and black President.

Tambo was honoured with a state funeral on 2 May 1993 where scores of friends, supporters, colleagues and heads of state bade him farewell. In his address, Mandela said:

Dear brother:

You set yourself a task which only the brave would dare. Somewhere in the mystery of your essence, you heard the call that you must devote your life to the creation of a new South African nation.

And having heard that call, you did not hesitate to act.

Go well, my brother and farewell, dear friend.

As you instructed, we will bring peace to our tormented land.

As you directed, we will bring freedom to the oppressed and liberation to the oppressor.

As you strived, we will restore the dignity of the dehumanised.

As you commanded, we will defend the option of a peaceful resolution of our problems.

As you prayed, we will respond to the cries of the wretched of the Earth. As you loved them, we will, always, stretch out a hand of endearment to those who are your flesh and blood.

In all this, we will not fail you.



The role that O.R.Tambo played in the attainment of the liberation and birth of South Africa can in no way be underestimated. He fought and in many ways died, to ensure the freedom of his people. Freedom from the shackles of oppression and injustice. A freedom that we celebrate to this day.

O.R.Tambo brought the friends of South Africa together throughout the world in a continuous and sustained mobilisation of the international community in support of a free and democratic South Africa. During his time abroad, he was instrumental in the

establishment of ANC missions globally – 27 countries in total by 1990. He helped lobby support for the ANC and raised the international reputation of the ANC to one of great prestige. His epitaph, reads, in his own words:

It is our responsibility to break down barriers of division and create a country where there will be neither whites nor blacks, just South Africans, free and united in diversity.

Acknowledgements:

www.tambofoundation.org.za

www.sahistory.org.za



“O.R. didn’t see himself a big leader because he had been in exile and had led the ANC from outside. No, he always saw himself as a follower, even a follower of his own people. Anyone who worked with him will always remember working with a man who never considered you to be beneath him.”

– Ruth Mompati



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