

Xuma, Alfred Bitini (1893 –1962)

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Alfred Bitini “A. B.” Xuma was a leading African nationalist in South Africa in the 1940s. Born to a Christian peasant family at Manzana, the Transkei, Cape Colony, Xuma was educated in mission schools, led a student strike, and qualified as a teacher in 1911. Two years later, he went to the United States, where he studied at Tuskegee, the University of Minnesota (Minneapolis), Northwestern University (Evanston), and Marquette University and the Lewis Institute (Chicago). He supported himself by working as a laborer and a cleaner.

Qualifying in medicine, Xuma was resident surgeon at several institutions and was admitted to the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons in 1927, returning to South Africa that year. He established a successful practice in the multi-racial freehold township of Sophiatown, Johannesburg, and also worked as a medical officer in the grim Alexandra slum. He was now at the apex of the small, vulnerable African elite. Xuma was not politically active at the time, beyond seeking to promote social reforms by exposing the wretched conditions of the African poor to official commissions and other forums. He turned down nominations to the leadership of the African National Congress (ANC). Many early African nationalists admired the Cape Colony’s qualified franchise system, which enabled some Africans and Coloreds to vote, and which was retained in the Cape when it incorporated as a South African province in 1910.

Hopes that the system would be extended to the northern provinces proved futile. The Fusion government, established in 1934, introduced the 1935 Representation of Natives Bill, which proposed amendments to the Cape franchise system and the establishment of an advisory Natives’ Representative Council (NRC). In December 1935 a range of groups came together to form an All-African Convention (AAC) to oppose the bill and other discriminatory legislation. Xuma was elected vice president. The AAC did not succeed in its aims, and the NRC was established in 1937. It was later incorporated into the Trotskyite-led Non-European Unity Movement.

From 1937 to 1938 Xuma traveled, meeting key African nationalists and anti-colonialists in London. He was very active in the ANC on his return and was elected president-general in 1940. Here he played a key role in reviving and restructuring the rather moribund organization, introducing reforms that, *inter alia*, provided women full membership rights, abolished the “upper house” of chiefs, and fostered the revival of the ANC’s Women’s League (in which his second wife, the African American Madie Beatrice Hall, played a leading role). Besides administrative and financial reforms, Xuma oversaw a clarification and expansion of ANC aims, now encom-

passing peace, the removal of restrictions on African workers (including union rights), colonial independence, and no annexation of new territories by South Africa.

He also promoted cooperation with Indian organizations, signing the “Doctors’ Pact” with Yusuf Dadoo of the Transvaal Indian Congress (a leading communist) and Gagathura Mohambry “Monty” Naicker of the Natal Indian Congress. This committed the organizations to cooperation for equal rights and “full franchise.” In 1946 he joined the South African Indian Congress (SAIC) delegation to the 1946 session of the United Nations. Such links were significant in a context where African–Indian relations were sufficiently fraught to foster anti-Indian riots in 1949.

Despite Xuma’s achievements – during his tenure, ANC membership rose fivefold to over 5,000, it adopted its most radical manifesto to date, and unequivocally rejected the NRC – he was viewed as insufficiently militant by some important elements. ANC’s Youth League (formed in 1944 with Xuma’s blessing and identified with figures like Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo) sought to push the organization into mass mobilization. Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) members of the ANC (like J. B. Marks, and Moses Kotane, the party’s general secretary and a member of the ANC executive from 1946) were also pushing for a definite and radical program.

In 1948 the National Party (NP) came to power on a platform of racial apartheid, Afrikaner nationalism, and anti-communism. The next year, Xuma was ousted from his post and replaced by James Sebe Moroka. The ANC abandoned Xuma’s moderate and constitutional approach and set upon the path that led to the Defiance Campaign of the 1950s. Xuma withdrew from the political spotlight and criticized the ANC’s subsequent campaigns. Yet he organized against the forced removals of people of color from Sophiatown in 1955: he was himself forced to move to Soweto, where he died in 1962. In 2007 Xuma’s Sophiatown residence was purchased by the Johannesburg City Council, to be converted into a museum.

References and Suggested Readings

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