

Abahlali baseMjondolo Replies to Bandile Mdlalose¹

We first became aware of the article in *Politikon* titled *The rise and fall of Abahlali baseMjondolo, a South African Social Movement* on the 23rd of December via an email sent out to our entire mailing list, and a long list of academics, from Bandile Mdlalose's email address. This email included the article as an attachment. In the text of the email it was implied that we were responsible for the murder of a man called Dutch Faku. However as the *The Daily News* reported Faku was killed, in a purely criminal attack while on duty as a security guard (*Daily News*, 24 December 2014). When we read the article we saw that it contained numerous statements that in our view are plainly malicious and numerous statements that in our view are simply and demonstrably untrue. We are of the view the credibility that *Politikon* enjoys as an academic journal has been misused to defame our organisation.

It is important to place this article in a wider political context. Since 2006 we have been subject to a number of (mostly self-published) attacks on our movement that we find to be unfair, untrue and defamatory. We are of the view that this hostility to our movement can be traced to 2006, when we and the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign walked out of an NGO controlled meeting hosted by the Centre for Civil Society (CCS) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and then staged a protest against NGO domination of grassroots movements at the university (*Mail and Guardian*, 6 December 2006). These defamatory attacks on our movement have all been written by people with documented connections to CCS. Read together they assert that we, as impoverished black people, do not have any real politics of our own, that we are really under the control of white men and that our entire movement is some kind of giant conspiracy involving ourselves and a large network of other people that rely on what is constructed as a fraudulent website as well as extensive academic and journalistic fraud and is really aimed at making money and advancing the careers of a few individuals.¹ In our view the *Politikon* article has been written with the intention of appearing to confirm these defamatory attacks. It is essential that readers of *Politikon* are made aware that Bandile Mdlalose is now closely associated with CCS.

Politikon has not allowed us to offer a full response to all the statements in the article that we believe to be untrue and malicious, or to offer a full account of what we believe to be the context in which the article was produced. We therefore wish to place on record that although we have only been given a very limited right of reply, and that demands have been imposed on us in terms of the provision of evidence² and the need to write in an academic format, that were not imposed on the original article, we reject the *Politikon* article in its entirety. Nonetheless, within the serious constraints that have been imposed on our right to reply, we would like to note the following.

Firstly, there is documented evidence that shows that the claim that Mdlalose resigned from our movement as a result of our decision to offer a tactical vote for Democratic Alliance (DA) in the 2014 General Elections is untrue. Mdlalose was in fact expelled from our

¹ They can be found in the archive of the 'Debate' list. <http://lists.fahamu.org/pipermail/debate-list/>

² We wish to note that some of the demands for evidence have been issued in such a manner that prevents us from telling the truth about our experiences. For instance we have been disallowed from describing the murder of Thuli Ndlovu as an assassination by the ANC on the grounds that the ANC have not found it to be an assassination.

movement on the 6th of April 2014 after being found guilty of serious impropriety relating to membership fees.² However the decision to make a tactical vote for the DA was made on the 1st of May 2014. The decision-making process only began on the 25th of April 2014 and no one knew what the outcome would be until the 1st of May 2014 (Abahlali baseMjondolo, 6 May 2014).

We also dispute the presentation of the rationale for the decision to vote for the DA. The decision was not taken unilaterally by S’bu Zikode, but was the outcome of long, inclusive and democratic discussions held on two separate occasions.³ Our members arrived at this decision through a collective and democratic process. This decision was taken with the aim of putting pressure on the African National Congress, following a series of documented murders, arrests and assaults against our members. (Abahlali baseMjondolo, 6 May 2014; Moore, 2013; Patel 2013). We did not join a political party, and as such, we see no basis for claiming that this decision was in contradiction with our organisation’s constitution.

In our view the claim that “what happened to AbM was that we slowly transformed from a movement into an NGO. Once we operated from the community, but now we began operating out of offices in town” (Mdlalose, 2014 p. 351) is a malicious and a deliberate attempt to mislead the readers of *Politikon*. It is true that between 2005 and 2009 our movement had its office in the Kennedy Road shack settlement in Clare Estate and that we moved our office to central Durban in 2010. But the *Politikon* article does not explain the reason for this. The reason why we moved our office from Kennedy Road is that in 2009 we were attacked in the Kennedy Road settlement. People were injured, killed, arrested, detained and tortured, and many of our leaders’ homes were destroyed, there were open death threats against our leaders and our office was ransacked and turned into an ANC office (Chance, 2009; Socio-economic Rights Institute of South Africa 2009 & 2011; Tolsi, 2009; Vartak, 2009). This attack did serious damage to our movement. Some of our comrades are still traumatised by what happened to them and their families. After this attack many of our leaders were left homeless, some had to go underground and for a while every meeting was held in a different location. In 2010 we received church support to rent modest offices in town. The decision to re-open our office in town was taken because it we felt this was a necessary action to guarantee our safety. In many respects the move to a central location has been good for us. We now have more reliable access to electricity, better access to the internet, there is no longer a risk that the movement will be seen as being closer to one particular settlement than others and, for most of our members, it is now much easier to get to and from our offices. Having an office in town does not make us an NGO.

There is the same disregard for the truth in the various statements in the article about bodyguards. There is a difference between hiring a bodyguard because you want to look like a big man and a movement taking a collective decision that it is necessary to have security in certain particular situations where there is clearly serious danger. We never had security before 2013. At some events we will be accompanied by religious leaders who often dress in suits while the rest of us are in red shirts. Some middle class people have previously confused pastors with security guards but this is a completely mistaken impression. The reason why we started to ensure that we had security at some meetings in certain areas was because death threats were being made against our leaders and our leaders were being murdered. In 2013 we fought a huge struggle in support of the Marikana Land Occupation in Cato Crest. Three

people were murdered during this struggle.³ In 2014 Thuli Ndlovu, our chairperson in KwaNdengezi, was murdered.⁴ The murder came after a number of death threats against our members in the area and so we decided that security would be required at the memorial which we held in the community. To deliberately leave out this context of serious repression when discussing the question of security is a serious misrepresentation of the reality of our situation. A movement has no choice but to take security seriously when it faces violent and at times fatal repression.

Mdlalose also states that “in 2012, the protests we undertook were less about real anger or real resistance. They became more about impressing funders” (2014, p. 346). This is not true and we cannot see any logic or truth in this statement. In 2012 we organised some legal protests, as we have always done since 2005, on community driven issues and there were also road blockades in various parts of Durban including KwaNdengezi, Shallcross, KwaMashu, Clare Estate, Puntan’s Hill. If we were trying to impress funders, we would take up issues like climate change, human rights and freedom of expression and we would accept direction from the NGOs. We continue to organise around the demands of our members and to organise autonomously from NGOs. Our press statements are on our website.⁴ They speak for themselves. The function of our press statements is maliciously misrepresented in the *Politikon* article.

There is also an implication in this article that our leaders now live in suburbs. The ANC has said the same things (Hans & Manda, 2014). All our leaders live in modest homes in poor and working class black communities⁵. It is true that some of our leaders, including Bandile Mdlalose, have been temporarily accommodated in safe houses, with the support of Amnesty International, when an independent risk assessment has found that their lives are at serious and immediate risk. We make no apologies for this. We make every effort to keep our members safe.

There are various allegations about funding in this article. The ANC has made similar allegations (Hans & Manda, 2014) and we have responded to these in some detail. Our response is on our website. In the limited space that we have here we would merely like to note that we have always been completely open about the funding that we do accept, that we do not accept funding from any organisation that would like to restrict our autonomy and that has never been any suggestion of any impropriety from any of the people that have supported us. We have an external bookkeeper and are subject to audit.

It is true that when Mdlalose was a member of our movement three members were paid a modest stipend, mostly via church support, for full time movement work. Our well known

³ The first person to be killed in this struggle, Thembinkosi Qumbelo had been well known to us for some years but was not a member of our movement. Nene, Nkululeko ‘Cato Crest community leader gunned down’, Daily News, 18 March 2013 <http://www.iol.co.za/news/crime-courts/cato-crest-community-leader-gunned-down-1.1488319#.VOb6CfmUdxg>. Nkululeko Gwala was murdered on the 26th of June 2013 and Nqobile Nzuza was shot dead by the police on a protest organised by our members on the 30th of September 2013. These murders are both widely documented. See, for instance, Moore, Nikki ‘KZN: Anatomy of an Assassination’, The Daily Maverick, 31 July 2013 <http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2013-07-31-kzn-anatomy-of-an-assassination/#.VOb1yPmUdxh>; Patel, Khadija ‘In Durban's Cato Manor: Death by protest, death by dissent’, The Daily Maverick, 1 October 2013, <http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2013-10-01-in-durbans-cato-manor-death-by-protest-death-by-dissent#.VOb1dfmUdxg>

⁴ Our website can be found at <http://www.abahlali.org>

members are often unable to find or hold onto jobs. We have lost many of our best comrades because they need to make a living. We therefore decided through a democratic process that individuals who hold certain positions within the organisation will be entitled to a stipend. These stipends are all significantly less than the wage of a skilled worker in a unionised factory. Offering people who are doing full time movement work a stipend is an important way of allowing people to remain politically committed without failing in their obligations to their families. This is not unique to our movement. In fact we are not aware of a sustained grassroots movement anywhere in the world that does not try and secure some sort of income for people doing fulltime work for the movement over many years.

International connections have been very important for us, especially in times of repression. They have been of huge help in keeping us safe. Often the media will take a protest against repression at the South African embassy in New York or London far more seriously than a protest in Durban. International connections have also been an important way of sharing ideas. The *Politikon* article misrepresents these international connections in a manner that we feel is plainly malicious. We have always mandated and rotated comrades tasked with the responsibility of travel and we have always extended the same welcome that we have received to comrades visiting our country. These trips are not holidays. They are important and often exhausting political work that involves sleeping in a different house most nights and travelling and speaking most days. Comrades doing this work are mostly hosted by other grassroots organisations including community organisations, tenant's associations, trade unions and political organisations. In most cases they will be hosted in the homes of comrades in the countries that they are visiting. To describe this as living 'the high life', is, we feel, grossly unfair⁶.

Soon after our movement was formed it became clear to us that it was often assumed that we as Africans should receive solidarity but that we should not give solidarity. We rejected this from the beginning as racist and as disrespectful to our dignity as human beings and we have always stuck to the principle that solidarity should be based on equality. The *Politikon* article claims that our support for our comrades in Turkey was imposed on us by a white academic. It states that "the AbM statement supporting the students in Turkey was all his work. People in Turkey could mistakenly think that they were on the agenda of SA shack-dwellers, when they were not concerned but the academic was" (2014, p. 347). In fact our movement has a long relationship with activists in Turkey, who have hosted our members in Turkey and regularly supported us in various ways. This is well documented on our website as are our other international alliances that are, in our view, egregiously misrepresented in this article.

Our website primarily contains our press statements as well as articles written on our movement in newspapers and other publications. Occasionally we will publish other kinds of documents, such as statements from other organisations. Nothing ever goes onto our website without it being approved by the movement. Every press statement that we issue is open to scrutiny by anyone. We have often taken position and actions, like land occupations and road blockades, to which the ruling party and elite society in general is hostile. We believe one reason why we have won the respect that we have in the media, and in other spaces, is because we always strive to issue statements that are as factually accurate as is possible. Effective communication with the media has been one of the real strengths of our movement and it is vital for protecting us against repression and for us to communicate our struggle clearly so that we can win more allies to our side. We have often, although not always,

invited university trained comrades to participate in this process. In some cases the role of a university trained comrade will just be to offer assistance with grammar and spelling. In other cases we have invited a trusted university trained comrade to participate in the discussion and formulation of ideas. There are some people who think that the politics of poor black people is only authentic when it takes the form of a riot. In our view these people are part of the system of oppression that wants to confine us to the dark corners to which oppression has assigned us. We have the same right as anyone else in this society to form alliances with whomever we choose, and to engage different terrains of struggle, and to do so on our own terms.

We have written evidence to show that the claim that we do not have the password to our website (p.347) is simply not true. We have been very pleased to have *pro bono* technical support with our website. There is nothing strange about this. Most organisations separate the editorial and technical functions with regard to their websites.

This article also claims that we have not been forthright about the size of our membership (p.351). The first point to make here is that it is the Secretary General's responsibility to present an audit of the numbers at the AGM. Mdlalose failed to do this when she held this position with the result that various people in and out of our movement came up with their own figures for membership and support. Membership has to be renewed annually, for individuals and branches, but membership and support are not the same thing, and some people take membership and then don't participate in the movement while others don't have a membership card and participate regularly in meetings, gatherings and protest actions. If you count the number of people living in settlements affiliated to our movement you will get one figure. If you count the people that actively support the movement by attending meetings you will get another figure. If you could count the number of people willing to participate in protest actions you will get another figure. If you count the number of people that hold membership cards you will get a different figure. We currently have twenty two branches in good standing in KwaZulu-Natal, and one in Cape Town, and just over 11 000 individual members in good standing.

We are equally disturbed at the way that our white comrade has been grossly and maliciously misrepresented throughout this article. This language of 'outsiders' is not our language. We recognise this language from CCS. This comrade is one of us. He has been struggling with us in the shacks since before our movement was launched. Whatever he does in our struggle he does as a comrade with a mandate. We make no apology for our position that the work of the intellectual is with the people in the struggle. We have been shocked at the implication that he did not discuss his PhD with us. It is true that Mdlalose was not at the meeting where he first discussed his PhD work with us because it happened in 2008, before she joined our movement. She was also not at the meeting at which he presented us with a copy of his PhD for our library and discussed the work with us because it happened after her expulsion.⁷ However Mdlalose is well aware that this comrade has never written anything about our movement, whether in academic journals, websites or newspapers, without first discussing it with us and without sharing the work with us when it is published. Therefore it is clear to us that the implication that he did not discuss his academic work with us is malicious.

The article claims that things started to go seriously wrong in our 2013 AGM, but we did not hold an AGM that year due to serious repression. Tensions emerged in our movement in late

2013 and continued into early 2014, the year we held an AGM. There were also tensions in 2010 AGM. In both cases these tensions followed serious repression. We reject the account given by Mdlalose. In our view it is both untrue and malicious. We have never denied that we have faced some real problems in our movement, particularly in 2010 and in late 2013 and early 2014. In fact we invited the media to both AGMs although we knew that there would be tensions. We have always welcomed an honest discussion of the way forward.

We find it very interesting that this article makes the claim that our movement was being used to fight academic battles that “shack-dwellers had no knowledge in and I feel I must add, no interest in” (2014, p. 347). This statement is made in relation to the Middlesex issue where in fact the movement had a real and urgent interest in sustaining a vitally important relationship of solidarity.⁵ Anyone who goes through all our press statements, all archived on our website, will see that less than one percent of our statements make any reference at all to academic matters. However it is clear to us that most of this articles, as well as a very large proportion of what has been said in various emails in Mdlalose’s name since her expulsion (including both public emails and the many private emails sent to a long list of academics), is clearly an attempt to settle academic scores. All of us who have worked closely with Mdlalose know her as a person who never had any interest at all in academic matters. Since her expulsion and her development of a close relationship with CCS the statements issued in her name have shown an obsessive interest in academic matters

On our understanding the *Politikon* article is, just like the self-published attacks on our movement since 2006, saying that we as impoverished black people should not have a website, we should not be in solidarity with comrades in other countries, we should not have comrades in the university, we should not take our own ideas seriously, we should not engage the media carefully and effectively and we should not take precautions with our security when we are facing assassination. The demand that is being issued here is that we must remain the dark corners to which oppression has assigned us. We must always be people who live without names and ideas, people who never step out from behind a burning tyre, people that can be killed with impunity, while other people speak for us and represent us and travel the world in our name without a mandate. This is the logic of oppression. It is also a racist logic and we reject it without apology.

Some of the NGOs are always saying that we don’t have political direction as if we don’t have brains to think. Our politic and our philosophy comes from our daily lives and it has allowed us to build a real movement that has survived very serious repression. We note that despite all the money that the NGOs have they have never succeeded to build a sustained movement with a mass base.

Notes

¹ The final version of the article was approved by our movement on the 20th of February

² As noted above this process was carefully documented and we have been willing to make this documentation available.

⁵ This is documented on our website.

³ The discussion and process of voting was recorded on video by a staff member of the Church Land Programme and can be made available.

⁴ Abahlali baseMjondolo, 'Thuli Ndlovu Was Assassinated Last Night', 30 September 2014 <http://abahlali.org/node/14311/>; Asmal, Fatima 'Tensions flare after 'hit' on shack official', *Mail & Guardian*, 3 October 2014 <http://mg.co.za/article/2014-10-02-tensions-flare-after-hit-on-shack-official/>

⁵ We don't publicly disclose where people living under the threat of death are living but would, for instance, be happy for interested parties to visit the homes of any of our leaders as long as there was an agreement that the location of their homes would not be disclosed.

⁶ Often the people that have invited us to visit them have raised money by organising events rather than by going to donors. Organisations that have hosted our members in other countries include Picture the Homeless in New York, the Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign in Chicago, Global Peace & Justice in Auckland, the tenants' association in Wuppertal and many others,

⁷ The PhD was presented at a meeting held at the Hindu Surat Hall in Prince Edward Street in Durban on the 24th and 25th of May 2014. There were about two hundred comrades present and lots of people took photographs and recorded parts of the meeting on their phones.

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