

Commentary

Dying to fight

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'Avoid Aids, come inside' read the sign outside the sex shop near the Durban beachfront. Just 100 metres away, 500 Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) activists, from 110 branches across South Africa, were meeting at the second TAC National Congress to plan how to carry on their fight for the roll-out of a comprehensive treatment plan for the five million people living with HIV-AIDS. With the highest national HIV prevalence in the world, AIDS is estimated to have caused 40 per cent of all adult deaths in 2001, as many as 1 000 people a day according to UNAIDS (a figure not challenged by the ANC government). Addressing the Congress on the final day, the historic nature of this campaign was underscored by the UN Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS, Stephen Lewis, who compared the TAC with some of the greatest social movements of the twentieth century and the 'anti-globalisation' movement of the twenty-first.

Straight and gay people (although the majority were black women in their mid-20s) gathered with representatives from the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and other affiliated groups, such as the South African Council of Churches, to elect the TAC leadership, ratify their constitution and perhaps, most importantly, to debate whether to restart a civil disobedience campaign to force the ANC government to sign and implement the framework agreement on a National Prevention and Treatment Plan, negotiated by mandated representatives of government, business, labour and community during October and November 2002.

Over three days, 'positive Muslims', 'health care workers united against AIDS', trade unionists and the unemployed, socialists and priests who make up TAC's united front campaign, hugged, danced, sang, laughed and cried (and broke down sobbing uncontrollably in frustration with the ANC government, as one young woman did) in a congress that unanimously vowed to continue their struggle for treatment and embark, once again, on civil disobedience.

Such was the heady atmosphere that one cannot but help draw comparisons with the liberation movement against apartheid. Although people drew heavily on past struggles by singing popular anti-apartheid tunes they are developing their own songs, dances and symbols built on their experiences and campaigns under an ANC government. Yet from the young poet who skilfully and polemically rapped 'I wonder how it is to walk along the road to peace and democracy without treatment', to the woman who jumped up and screeched out a customary 'praise song', one could be forgiven for thinking it is not the ANC that these young people identify with but the TAC. Despite every delegate, mantra-like, starting a speech with roars of 'Viva TAC Viva!', a seemingly unquenchable response was guaranteed. Amidst songs of 'TAC is the champion since 1998' (its founding year) nobody dared or ever called out 'Viva ANC' (including a rather feeble and apologetic ANC parliamentarian who addressed the congress).

Dare I shatter another sacred cow when I say that Zachie Achmat, the TAC national chairperson (re-elected unopposed, a self-proclaimed socialist arrested and detained five times, who operated underground for ten years during apartheid) has won 'Mandela-esque' adulation and respect among TAC campaigners. Indeed Mandela has praised Achmat as 'a role model whose activism is based on principles that are admired way beyond South Africa's borders'. The special bond between Achmat and TAC activists was further evidenced through a moving song in which hundreds of delegates danced, conga-style, to the front of the hall pointing at Achmat and singing how they would follow him into civil disobedience even if it means getting arrested.

It was not personal pleading from Nelson Mandela that finally persuaded Achmat to give up his principled refusal to take antiretroviral drugs until everyone has affordable access to them but the unanimous vote and pleas by delegates. Without fanfare, it was subtly made apparent on the final day of the congress that Achmat would start taking drugs. Ever the propagandist and with a boyish grin that masks his constant fight against illness, he asked rhetorically why he should allow Thabo Mbeki to kill another person.

In the last three years in Europe I have been fortunate to participate in many anti-capitalist marches and the one million-strong anti-war march at the European Social Forum in Florence in November 2002, but this festival of resistance was a rollercoaster ride of emotions and had a vice-like psychological and spiritual grip on me (and others), the likes of which I

have never experienced before. From the first songs and dances that punctuated proceedings, the mood of the congress was celebratory and frustrated, militant and defiant, yet shrouded in anguish for those that have died and continue to die unnecessarily because the ANC government has so far refused to pay for treatment. No wonder that Mark Heywood, the TAC National Secretary, noted that one of the main challenges facing TAC activists 'is to stay alive'.

And alive they were as amid an uplifting cacophony of cheers, and with a sense of new-found confidence, speaker after speaker refuted the government's claim that AIDS drugs are ineffective and toxic. As if to provide 'living' proof of this, while the votes for the national secretariat were being counted, with almost evangelical zeal in an ecstatic, congratulatory atmosphere, people living with HIV/AIDS spoke out about how antiretroviral drugs have worked for them. To cries of 'Phansi (down with) Thabo Phansi' they condemned the ANC President, of whom they sang 'Thabo Mbeki is going to have to answer in the next life'.

The TAC is an organisation rooted in a popular tradition of resistance. This was a gathering defined by dances, songs and words of struggle and whose bitter experiences have shaped them. Indeed, as Molefe Tsele made clear, 'There is nothing new in what we are doing' for 'we are a people of campaigns, it is who we are'. Building on the victories of the liberation struggle the TAC has utilised the right to protest, the courts, research, the Human Rights Commission, the Competition Commission and new corporate bodies to try to change ANC policy.

Constantly having to dismiss government charges that they are undermining democracy, they have shown that they 'are not slaves of democracy but citizens in a country that will hold its government accountable', as Achmat proudly proclaimed while activists repeatedly called out 'no treatment no vote!' Indeed, it is intriguing to see that those leaders who fought for democracy now find that it is being brandished and used to make them accountable. In the week prior to the TAC congress I attended four grassroots-organised rallies in Durban townships over water cut-offs and rent increases during which people sang 'no water no vote'.

Yet there is much more to the TAC. In past four years they have handed over numerous petitions and memoranda to the government, many of which have gone unanswered. Despite this they have continued to campaign and while calling on other popular forces to work with them to create a 'people's health movement', they have wasted no time in training and

educating a new layer of activists and the general public about HIV/AIDS, their constitutional rights and broader issues such as the power of drug companies in a globalised world. Evidence of this abounded as people relived stories of how they are trying, with few resources in mainly impoverished townships, to inform people about HIV/AIDS and to counter government denials that HIV leads to AIDS so compounding intolerance.

This is a small but growing army of volunteers and activists learning, disbursing information, giving moral support, sometimes at great cost to themselves (only recently in the Chesterville township in Durban a TAC activist openly living with HIV/AIDS was brutally attacked in her house). Often under pressure, not sure if they are always doing the right thing, people told how they are organising workshops, offering practical and tender support and counselling at hospitals, clinics and in people's homes. These are people rightly proud of what they have achieved.

'As I've joined TAC', said a breathless animated older woman from Cape Town, 'I have realised I have got the power to help my community.' Another younger woman, openly living with HIV/AIDS, from one of the poorest areas, Limpopo province, told how a mobile clinic visits her area only once a month. Yet even here the TAC has helped to create a small group of people who at least know to ask the mobile clinics for their emergency drug list to demand that they have relevant drugs on it for those living with HIV/AIDS. It is in this way that many activists could confidently stand up and say that through the TAC literacy campaign the TAC has begun to generate a sense of dignity and defiance.

Yet, in some ways, the TAC is a victim of its own success. One woman who was raped, now having come across the TAC, is confident enough to live openly with HIV, says she cannot cope with the number of people (often in secret) that are coming to her for help and advice on what to do after being diagnosed HIV positive. A farm worker told how through information from TAC comrades he persuaded a (white) doctor from a private practice in a small rural Western Cape town to come and give talks to people about HIV/AIDS, and how, through this, the doctor is now an active member of the TAC. But he left the congress telling me that he needed more support from the TAC.

Although the congress ended with the national anthem, that night TAC supporters protested during a speech by Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, the much despised Health Minister, at the opening of an international conference on HIV/AIDS in Durban. The next day hundreds of protesters marched to

the conference carrying wooden crosses and posters with the names of those who have died from the disease. At the protest rally, as scientists, academics and government bureaucrats pressed up against the conference window to see what all the noise was about, Zackie Achmat said that they were tired of the 'foot-dragging' by government over the implementation of an anti-retroviral treatment plan. 'We have given them enough time to act by suspending our civil disobedience campaign,' he said (during which time over 100 TAC activists have died).

The week that followed the TAC congress was marked by a plethora of vague government statements about a commitment to rolling out treatment – soon. TAC activists have long since tired of these promises and the congress showed that they are still dying to fight for treatment.