CHAPTER FOUR

GOVAN MBEKI’S THE PEASANTS’ REVOLT:
A CRITICAL EXAMINATION

Allison Drew

Unusually among activists of the African National Congress (ANC) and South African Communist Party (SACP), Govan Archibald Mvuyelwa Mbeki dedicated much attention to rural conditions and struggles. Mbeki’s research on the 1960 Phondo Revolt culminated in a book published in 1964 called *The Peasants’ Revolt*. Much of the book was written while the revolt was ongoing and thus reflects a reciprocal dynamic between Mbeki the writer and the rapidly evolving conditions that were tantamount to war. In this respect the book is part of a tradition of engaged writing about social and political unrest that takes place contemporaneously with that unrest. This chapter examines Mbeki’s analysis of the Phondo revolt and discusses its impact on Congress leaders during the early stage of armed struggle, suggesting that its influence on their thinking during this critical period has been underestimated.

Born on 8 July 1910 at Mpukane Location in the Nqamakwe district of the Transkei, Mbeki was the youngest child of moderately well-to-do Christian parents who stressed the importance of education. Mbeki excelled at his studies, won a bursary to Fort Hare University College and graduated with a BA and a diploma in education. He began teaching at Clarkebury High School in the Engcobo district and a year later joined the staff at Taylor Street Secondary School in Durban. There he became friendly with one of his colleagues, Nomaka Epainette Moerane, who was the second African woman to join the Communist Party and who influenced Mbeki politically. Mbeki turned to writing and in 1938 became editor of *Territorial Magazine*. The next year he published a short book called *The Transkei in the Making* that signalled his

---

1 My thanks to Phyllis Ntantala Jordan, Thembela Kepe, Lungisile Ntsebeza and two anonymous referees for their comments.

Mbeki and Moerane married on 8 January 1940, returned to the Transkei and set up a cooperative shop in Mbewuleni near Idutywa. Mbeki became active in the Transkei African Voters’ Association (TAVA) and the Transkei Organized Bodies (TOB) and in 1943 was elected to a four-year term to represent Idutywa in the Bhunga, a council of elected and nominated members. In 1955 he moved to Port Elizabeth to work as a full-time ANC activist and as editor-reporter of the Communist-aligned New Age; his wife remained at Mbewuleni. In the late 1950s the space for open democratic politics was shrinking; in 1956 meetings of more than ten Africans were banned throughout the Port Elizabeth magisterial district. Mbeki concentrated on building an underground ANC structure in Port Elizabeth (Bundy 1984: 22–23; Jordan 2009a).²

Mbeki began working on the manuscript that became The Peasants’ Revolt around 1959–60. He intended to produce a training manual on Transkei politics for ANC organizers and members – a signal that the ANC hoped to expand its work in the region. But over time, Mbeki’s vision of his writing project changed. The book he eventually produced was a searing exposition of the Bantustan scheme imposed by the apartheid state in the late 1950s and 1960s and an account of the Phondoland uprising.

This uprising was launched in Bizana in March 1960, the very month that South African police massacred unarmed Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) demonstrators at Sharpeville. A State of Emergency was declared on 30 March, and the ANC and PAC banned on 8 April. Most of Mbeki’s draft was finished by then, but police raids meant that the final work was repeatedly disrupted. He somehow finished the manuscript while on the run from police, writing much of it on the kitchen tables of homes in Port Elizabeth’s African townships. ‘The work goes on’, he wrote from Port Elizabeth, ‘but always under the noses of the police and I am forced to move too often’ (First 1964: 10). Over the next few years he gave much thought to the Phondoland revolt and its unusually intense and organized character.

² The TOB was a federal organization affiliated to the All African Convention, and the TAVA in turn was affiliated to the TOB.