

Chapter 7

Patrick Ramaano Mphephu: from Chief Minister to Life President

The appointment of Patrick Mphephu as the Chief Minister of Venda in 1973 showed a remarkable rise of the traditional leader from being a *thovhele* of a small Vhailafuri clan to the most powerful politician and a *khosikhulu* in Venda. His election as Chief Minister catapulted him into a status above every *thovhele* and ordinary citizen of Venda. It is clear that Mphephu was very ambitious, a visionary and a very radical man. The short period he had worked with the white men in the Johannesburg City Council separated his ideologies about where he wanted the *vuhosivhuhulu* of Venda to go in the twentieth century from the ideologies of his predecessors. It also helped him realise that for *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity to survive it had to adapt to modernity and evolve with the times. It was for this reason that Mphephu saw apartheid policies as an advantage rather than an evil act to the Venda people. One can argue that he saw Verwoerd's policies as a means to restore the *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Ramabulana to its previous status of being senior traditional rulers of the Venda polity. He knew that as a Chief Minister of Venda he had the power to convince other *mahosi* to see him as *khosikhulu*.

In this case we see politics supersede tradition; it was politics which helped to reawaken the fading status of the Ramabulana as *mahosimahulu* of the Venda polity. Soon after being elected Chief Minister, Mphephu formed a cabinet as the constitution mandated him to do so. Venda started self-governing with the following departments: Chief Minister and Finance, Interior, Works, Education, Justice, and Agriculture and Forestry. The Legislative Assembly House was in Sibasa. In 1978, Proclamation R12 of 1973 was amended to increase the number of seats in the Legislative Assembly from 18 to 42.¹ The amended Proclamation gave 12 elected seats to the electoral division of Sibasa, 11 each to Vuwani and Dzanani and 8 to Mutale, and a new division was created out of Sibasa. This implied that the total number of Legislative Assembly members

¹ Anon, *The Republic of Venda*, Chris van Rensburg Publications, Johannesburg, 1979, p. 72.

went up from 60 to 84 and half of the members were to be elected. The remaining 42 came from *mahosi, magota* and appointed members.²

The Second Venda General Elections, with *Thovhele* Mphephu as Chief Minister of Venda

The composition of the new Venda government was a clear demonstration that the South African government wanted to entrench traditional hegemony in the homeland's government. By the time the second Venda general election came on 5 and 6 July 1978, the political scene in Venda had changed drastically. P.R. Mphephu had realised that, in order to sustain his dominance of the Venda political and traditional landscape, he had to form a political party to counter the Venda Independent People's Party (VIPP). With that in mind Mphephu convinced the traditional leaders to form their own political party just prior to the 1978 elections and the party was named the Venda National Party (VNP).³

It is clear that the similarity of Mphephu's party to the National Party (NP) of the South African government was not a coincidence. One can reach a conclusion that Mphephu might have been advised by the South African government to form a political party using the name of the more illustrious NP. The VIPP also changed their name to the Venda Independent Party (VIP) prior to the elections. They also changed their party symbol to a symbol reflecting love and peace, removing the torch flame which Mphephu and his supporters alleged was similar to SWAPO's. Mphephu also claimed that the torch of flames was inciting violence in schools around Venda. Mphephu did not like the VIP manifesto for the election and the slogan "the best amongst us should rule". The VIP's aim was to promote identity, pride and unity of Venda people as a nation. The VIP believed in a democratic system of government where Venda citizens would have a say in the running of their government through their elected representatives. It also dismissed group domination and discrimination on the basis of colour, creed or race.⁴

2 N.M. Makhari, A Biography of President Patrick Ramaano Mphephu, BA Hons, University of Venda, 1991, p. 39.

3 Anon, *Republic of Venda*, Chris van Rensburg Publications, Johannesburg. 1979, p. 72.

4 M. Nevondo, A Political Study of Chief P.R. Mphephu of Venda, 1925-1988 "The Great Elephant of Africa", MA dissertation, University of Fort Hare, 2000, p. 67.

The VIP manifesto was more inclusive of all races living in Venda and it was radical and more revolutionary. The manifesto was a clear attack on apartheid policy. It was also an attack on the entrenchment of a constitutional monarchy in Venda in another form. The VIP did not see traditional leaders having a role to play in a modern democratic constitutional government. Mphephu viewed this as a serious challenge to his quest for absolute power in Venda. The VIP was deemed a major threat to Mphephu's ambitions. To make things complicated for Mphephu and the VNP their rivals had support within and outside of Venda. The majority of Venda migrant labourers in the Witwatersrand area and other parts of South Africa were VIP members. The VIP rallies were held both within the Venda borders and urban areas of South Africa. They also made some inroads into some VNP strongholds recruiting some of *mahosi*, *magota* and *vhothovhele*, which irritated Mphephu even more.⁵

Educated people like teachers, nurses, doctors, lawyers and clerks also tended to support the VIP and the party also had the backing of clergymen and businessmen. The 1978 election came at a time when the National Party had a new leader, Pieter Willem Botha, popularly known as P.W. Botha or *Die Groot Krokodil*.⁶ Botha, unlike his predecessors, was a pragmatic leader. After his appointment as a Prime Minister, Botha managed to relax some aspects of the segregation policy. By making concessions towards political reform he implemented a federal system of government which allowed greater "self-rule" for black homelands while maintaining white central government supremacy. It was not surprising that shortly after the 1978 Venda elections; P.R. Mphephu entered into negotiations with the South African government with the intention to get sovereign independence for Venda. The beginning of Botha's rule coincided with the second Venda elections before independence.⁷ The 1978 Venda elections were marked by intimidation of voters by the members of Mphephu's VNP and the whites who instructed their farm workers either to vote for the VNP or lose their jobs and get expelled from

5 M. Nevondo, A Political Study of Chief P.R. Mphephu of Venda, 1925-1988 "The Great Elephant of Africa", MA dissertation, University of Fort Hare, 2000, pp. 68.

6 *Ibid.*

7 Anon, *The Republic of Venda*, Chris van Rensburg Publications, Johannesburg, 1979, p. 72.

the farms. The elderly were threatened that they would not get the R60 old age pension; others were told that a vote for the VIP meant that they would forfeit their rights to their land; businessmen were told that their businesses would be taken from them; and *magota* and *vhothovhele* were threatened with dethronement.⁸

That the VIP won the 1978 election just like they did in 1973, was inconsequential, because it did not change anything in the Venda administration. Neither Mphephu nor any other traditional leaders were removed from power. Mphephu was still the Chief Minister of Venda and the *vhothovhele* were still cabinet ministers. VIP representatives remained ordinary members of parliament with no say in the running of the Venda government. The prevalence of autocracy in Venda was visible soon after the 1978 election. Mphephu started to rule Venda as a tyrant and no one dared to oppose him.

The newspapers which released the election results were banned immediately after the election. Mphephu and his party made a proclamation that no radio station or newspaper should report the VIP victory. The Proclamation R12 of 1973 gave Mphephu and *vhothovhele* leverage over the VIP. It stipulated that both the Chief Minister and cabinet ministers should be *vhothovhele* and *vhothovhele* were automatic members of the Legislative Assembly. Mphephu did not see anything wrong with appointing a cabinet full of *vhothovhele* supporting VNP. Not a single member of his cabinet was from the victorious VIP. His action was contravening the R12 Proclamation of 1973. However, this was not viewed by Mphephu as something wrong because no one would ask him to account for his failure to adhere to the proclamation. After all was said and done, Mphephu's masters, the South African government led by P.W. Botha, did not mind as long as the traditional leadership was entrenched in the Venda government. Baldwin Mudau and his VIP leadership had been regarded as outlaws by Botha's government as well. Therefore, there was no one supporting the VIP when they challenged the election results.⁹

8 M. Nevondo, A Political Study of Chief P.R. Mphephu of Venda, 1925-1988 "The Great Elephant of Africa", MA dissertation, University of Fort Hare, 2000, p. 73.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 75.

The 1978 election reaffirmed Mphephu's status of supremacy both as political and traditional leader of Venda. Soon after his appointment as a Chief Minister, Mphephu was installed as *khosikhulu* of the Venda community on 30 August 1979 by the South African Minister of Manpower. The move was intended to consolidate Mphephu's tribal and political dominance.¹⁰ This appointment confirmed Mphephu as *khosikhulu* of Venda and all *magota* and *vhotovhele* we expected to report to him because his status was elevated to the highest level and no single *gota* or *thovhele* was now above Mphephu.

However, one can argue without taking anything away from the heredity status of *vuhosivhuhulu* of Mphephu, that his appointment as *khosikhulu* was politically influenced. The argument is backed by the fact that the status of the Ramabulana royal house and that of the other houses like the Tshivhase, Mphaphuli, Manenzhe and other *vhothovhele* of the Venda polity was on the same level prior to Mphephu's self-elevation endorsed by *vhothovhele* in his cabinet. It is also hard to believe that Tshivhase, Mphaphuli, Manenzhe and the other prominent *vhothovhele* of the Venda polity were all part of Mphephu's cabinet. In essence it means *vhothovhele* agreed that Mphephu was the *khosikhulu* of the Venda polity.

After Mphephu was elevated to the status of the *khosikhulu* his next move was to attain the independence of Venda from South Africa; this was the VNP election goal if they were to win the elections. The Venda National Party with *Khosikhulu* Mphephu as its leader had expressed itself in favour of obtaining independence if returned to power.¹¹ The VNP officials and Mphephu knew that they would definitely return to power whether they won or not, as they had the strong backing of the South African government.

The 1978 election had Mphephu and his party more threatened because the VIP would be close to forming a government had they got support from 12 of the nominated members of the 42 in the Assembly. Knowing that his power hanged in the balance, Mphephu and his party used more intimidation tactics before the sitting of the National Assembly. The VIP members and

10 B. Rogers, *Divide & Rule. South Africa's Bantustans*, International Defence & Aid Fund, Paris, 1980, p. 32.

11 Benso/Rau, *The Independent Venda*, Benso, Pretoria, 1979, p. 44.

officials were arrested and this resulted in the Party boycotting the sitting of the Assembly. The VIP alleged truthfully that the government was not properly elected. This was after 41 of the 42 nominated members had voted in favour of the ruling party. It was through the efforts of the South African Minister of Cooperation and Development that the VIP was convinced to participate in Venda politics again, despite the torture their members were suffering from Mphephu and his police.¹²

Venda Becomes an Independent State, 1979

Venda was given independence by the South African government in terms of the Status of Venda Act No 107 of 1979. The Act stated that the territory known as Venda consisted of Sibasa, Vuwani, Mutale and Dzanani districts and that this territory was a sovereign and independent state. *Khosikhulu* Mphephu was declared first Venda State President on the day of independence.¹³ His appointment as a State President closed the final step in his rise to power from his days as just a mere *Vhailafuri thovhele* to the President and *khosikhulu* of the Venda polity. This was a remarkable rise to power for one man to the position of highest authority in Venda.

The title of the President came with other titles for Mphephu because he also became Commander in Chief of the Venda Defence Force and the leader of the Executive Council. The new power made *Khosikhulu* Mphephu to unleash terror on his opponents. The conduct of Mphephu prompted the leader of the VIP, Mr. Baldwin Mudau to launch a motion of no-confidence against Mphephu and his cabinet. He wanted Mphephu to dismiss his entire cabinet and appoint a new one with VIP members. Mr. Mudau's proposal was to have a government of national unity; a proposal made during the parliament session of 1980.¹⁴

12 Benso/Rau, *The Independent Venda*, Benso, Pretoria, 1979, p. 45.

13 M. Nevondo, *A Political Study of Chief P.R. Mphephu of Venda, 1925-1988 "The Great Elephant of Africa"*, MA dissertation, University of Fort Hare, 2000, p. 77.

14 N.M. Makhari, *A Biography of President Patrick Ramaano Mphephu*, BA Hons, University of Venda, 1991, p. 42.

The motion of no-confidence in Mphephu and his cabinet was dismissed with a counter motion of full confidence in Mphephu and his cabinet made by Minister of Education, Gota¹⁵ E.R.B. Nesengani. Nesengani was one of the few educated ministers in Mphephu's cabinet and his motion was to protect the interest of *vhothovhele* although he was just a mere *gota*. I have to highlight that *Gota* Nesengani's level of education was not known but growing up as a high school pupil in the mid-1980s I was aware that *Gota* Nesengani was one of the most intelligent Ministers in the Venda cabinet. Nesengani's motion thus protected the *status quo* and the cabinet regarded Mudau's motion as his own and the VIP's and not as a reflection of the will of the people of Venda.¹⁶ In my view the assumption of Mphephu and his cabinet about Mudau's motion cannot be substantiated by facts. In reality the Venda people must have been scared of intimidation and the prospect of death opposing the authority of Mphephu and *vhothovhele* in his cabinet. It is my view that the majority of Venda people would have easily supported the VIP motion if a referendum on the matter was to be called. However, as it was the case with Venda parliamentary elections, the outcome of the referendum was going to be easily rigged by Mphephu and VNP.

Mphephu defended his decision to request Venda's independence from South Africa as a very wise decision. He held the view that independence would improve the lives of the Venda people in the sense that they would be able to practice their own culture and traditions. To add to that he emphasized that Venda people would be able to speak their own language without any hindrance from other people who were not Venda. Mphephu's ideological thinking was to promote nationalism through tyrannical rule. Mphephu's concern was to ban opposition in Venda and make the homeland a one-party state to complete his dictatorial ambition. For his plan to be successful, he started arresting VIP members for no apparent reason.¹⁷

15 M. Nevondo, *A Political Study of Chief P.R. Mphephu of Venda, 1925-1988 "The Great Elephant of Africa"*, MA dissertation, University of Fort Hare, 2000, p. 78.

16 *Ibid.*

17 *Ibid.*

Soon after the 1978 election, Mphephu gave instructions to the police to detain students from Lwenzhe High School in the Vuwani District for campaigning for the VIP and helping the opposition to win all eleven seats contested in the district.¹⁸ To make his oppressive politics to work, Mphephu introduced strong security measures to deal with any opposition to his government. He introduced the Internal Security Branch, and also employed the Venda Police and Venda Defence Force for this purpose. The Internal Security Branch was tasked with the sole responsibility of preventing 'terrorism' in Venda. Yet it was them who unleashed terror in Venda and were feared by ordinary citizens. People who were suspected to be involved with the VIP, ANC, PAC and AZAPO were arrested by this unit.¹⁹ The persistent purging of the oppositions made people to see that Mphephu had become a tyrant. The signs of Mphephu being a dictator were there for everyone to see. Even before Venda gained her independence, in 1976, sixty-five students fled Venda to neighboring African States such as Zimbabwe, Malawi and Zambia because of Mphephu's tyrannical rule. After independence there was no freedom of speech or of the press in Venda. People were fed government propaganda through the Thohoyadou Newspaper.²⁰

The most notable case of Mphephu's reign of terror in Venda was the death of Tshifhiwa Isaack Muofhe in police detention on 12 November 1981. Muofhe was a Lutheran church pastor and a farmer from Sibasa. The Venda police abducted Muofhe from his home in Sibasa on 10 November 1981 for questioning as a suspect for the bombing of the Sibasa police station. The police and Mphephu believed that Muofhe was a member of AZAPO, but his wife Lilian rejected those claims as baseless. However, she admitted that Muofhe was a friend of some of the AZAPO leaders.²¹

Muofhe was found dead sitting in the toilet in the Sibasa police station. His family was informed of his death two days later, on 14 November 1981. The pathologist's report indicated that

18 N.M. Makhari, *A Biography of President Patrick Ramaano Mphephu*, BA Hons, University of Venda, 1991, p. 40.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 53.

20 M. Nevondo, *A Political Study of Chief P.R. Mphephu of Venda, 1925-1988 "The Great Elephant of Africa"*, MA dissertation, University of Fort Hare, 2000, p. 83.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 84.

Muofhe died from severe bruising and internal bleeding.²² Two policemen were implicated in Muofhe's death, namely a Captain Ramaligela and a Constable Managa. Captain Ramaligela was notoriously known as the most ruthless policeman in Venda, feared by everyone. Before the arrest of Muofhe the police detained another Pastor of the Lutheran Church, Dean Simon Tshenuwani Farisani. He was tortured with electric shocks by Captain Ramaligela and a white policeman whose name was not mentioned. Dean Farisani was forced to implicate Muofhe in the Sibasa police station bombing. He had to implicate his friend to save his own life.

Farisani left Venda for Germany after his release and later went to America, where the Venda government sent him a letter not to set foot in Venda again. The death of Muofhe in detention sent shock waves around Venda and people became very resentful towards Mphephu and his government. The death of Muofhe in police custody and the torture of Dean Farisani highlighted that Mphephu was not different to infamous dictators like Idi Amin Dada, the third President of Uganda who ruled from 1971 to 1979. Amin used to crush the opposition by killing them.

Mphephu's insecurities as a Venda leader made him to take tyranny to another level. It was a big irony that Mphephu, who was hailed by many as *khosikhulu* of the people, had turned into something else, causing more pain to his people than what was expected of him. It is important to note that those responsible for Muofhe's death were arrested and released later after they were found not guilty. This was after Captain Ramaligela had testified that Muofhe attempted suicide on the way to the police station while he was sitting on the back of an open police bakkie down the dusty roads of Sibasa on the night of 11 November 1981. Ramaligela alleged that Muofhe was not handcuffed when he attempted to jump off the Datsun 280L bakkie. Captain Ramaligela further claimed that he pulled Mr Muofhe back onto the bakkie with his right leg and a struggle ensued. Muofhe ended up landing heavily on his side inside the bakkie.²³

²² *Rand Daily Mail*, 20 July 1982.

²³ *Rand Daily Mail*, 16 February 1983.

Medical reports also showed that Muofhe had lost more than a litre of blood and suffered severe injuries to his scrotum and on his head, back and kidneys. The magistrate presiding over the case, Mr. S. Stainer, found that Captain Ramaligela and Sergeant Managa had lied in their testimony about what had happened to Muofhe before he died on 12 November 1981. The magistrate argued that the two policemen gave contrasting evidence about the same incident. The verdict of magistrate Stainer was praised as courageous by the well-known Law Professor of the University of the Witwatersrad, John Dugard. He further called for the prosecution of the two policemen responsible for the death of Muofhe.²⁴

The death of Muofhe draws similarities with a miserable and lonely death of Black Consciousness leader, Steve Biko, on a mat on a stone floor in a prison cell in Pretoria on 12 September 1977.²⁵ Dugard viewed the Muofhe judgment as courageous because the circumstances leading to his death were similar to those of Biko's, although in his case a different judgment was given. AZAPO leader Mr. George Wauchope commented after the Muofhe verdict:

The findings of the inquest have confirmed our fears that the Security Police in these banana republics would emulate, if not outdo their masters in ruthlessness. We hope that justice will take its course and the culprit will be punished for the sins they have committed.²⁶

Prof. Dugard, who was also Director of Applied Legal Studies, indicated that the findings in the Muofhe inquest exposed the way in which Security Laws were being abused. He further gave some rare credit to Mphhephu's autocratic government which gave the court the opportunity to go through the matter thoroughly and produce such a condemning finding.²⁷ It is my view that the credit given to Mphhephu's regime was very strange considering the fact that Mphhephu demonstrated in his reign of terror that he had no compassion for his enemies.

24 S. Mabe, *Sowetan*, 21 July 1982.

25 X. Mangcu, *Biko: A Biography*, Tafelberg, Cape Town, 2013, p. 262.

26 S. Mabe, *Sowetan*, 21 July 1982.

27 *Ibid.*

In the meanwhile, Mphephu's mission of getting rid of opposition was gaining momentum. On New Year's Day 1982 the leader of the opposition VIP, Mr. Baldwin Mudau, died in Kalafong Hospital in Atteridgeville, Pretoria, from coronary complications.²⁸ The spokesman for Kalafong Hospital said Mudau died of heart ailment within 24 hours of his admission to the hospital at 8 am on Friday, which was New Year's Day. Mudau's heart problems were confirmed to the *Sowetan* from Mudau's house in Dube, Soweto, by one of his relatives, Mr. Alfred Tshivhase, who alleged that he was the deceased leader's cousin.²⁹ There were various stories around the death of Mudau. Some people in Venda claimed that the government used a woman to poison him and others said he was beaten before his death.

As expected, these claims were refuted by the government. Mphephu's government issued a statement indicating that Mudau died of natural causes. One can argue that the claims by the Venda people, that Mphephu's government was responsible for the death of the VIP leader, cannot be dismissed by the thesis as baseless. I hold the view that Mphephu's government might have had an opportunity to get rid of Mphephu's strongest rival while he was in hospital outside Venda. I think for Mphephu and his regime Mudau's admission to hospital was the only time when Mudau was vulnerable enough to be eliminated. Mudau's death sparked massive riots all over Venda and many people were arrested.

Mudau, aged 51, secured a niche for himself in South African electoral history before his death. He led the VIP to convincing victories in Venda's elections in 1973 and again in 1978, but on both occasions, he was denied the right to power by Mphephu.³⁰ The VNP assumed power each time because they had support from the nominated *vhothovhele* and that decided the results in the Venda National Assembly. As explained by Khonou, the traditional leaders seemed to be used as barriers against democracy.³¹ Khonou did not come out clearly on the issue of who was

28 *The Star*, 4 January 1982

29 S. Mabe, *Sowetan*, 4 January 1982.

30 *Rand Daily Mail*, 5 January 1982.

31 S.F. Khonou, Traditional Leadership and Independent Bantustans of South Africa: some milestones of Transformation Constitutionalism beyond Apartheid, *Potchefstroomse Elektroniese Regsblad* 12, 4, 2009, p. 84.

using the traditional leaders, but he was probably referring to *Khosikhulu* Mphephu, who himself was a traditional leader.

Baldwin Mudau had also made history as the only man in the “black homelands” to have led an opposition party to victory against the governing party. The irony of Mudau’s life in politics was that he was a sophisticated sociologist and he hardly qualified as a radical. He was respected amongst the opposition’s rank and file. However, at some stage, one of his lieutenants, Mr. Esroma Nethononda, claimed that Mudau was persuaded by the South African government to regard independence as an acceptable option for Venda. Nethononda made the claims after Mudau had conspicuously refrained from adopting a critical stance on the decision to opt for independence at the inaugural session of the Venda National Assembly, at which *Khosikhulu* Mphephu was elected President.³² This revelation about Mudau illustrates that he also had a weakness as a leader and dispels the myth that he fought VNP to liberate Venda. I hold the view that he also wanted power and he wouldn’t have minded had Mphephu agreed to power-sharing.

Soon after the situation stabilized, Mr. Gilbert Bakane replaced Mudau as a new VIP leader. He became a leader at the time when Mphephu had directed brutal force and intimidation at VIP members. Bakane won the largest majority of votes from the 27 members of the VIP in the Venda National Assembly at a special meeting on Saturday, 9 January 1982, the day Mudau was buried. The new leader promised to keep the legacy of the late VIP leader alive and he promised to win the 1984 general elections. However, Bakane was interested in forming a coalition with the VNP of Mphephu. He ruled out the VIP contesting the 1984 general election if they could agree to work together with the VNP. The VIP Chief Whip, Mr. Gilbert Ligege, was elected Deputy Leader of the party.³³

The death of Mudau left a huge void in the VIP leadership and the new leader, Bakane, looked inexperienced and weak compared to his predecessor. The unfortunate death of Mudau and

³² *Rand Daily Mail*, 5 January 1982.

³³ *Rand Daily Mail*, 14 January 1982.

the weakness of Bakane helped Mphephu to start a process to destroy the VIP for good. It was clear that Bakane was more interested in a position in Mphephu's government than in pursuing the ideals of the late VIP leader, who never entertained any prospects of the VIP having a close working relationship with Mphephu and his government. It is my view that Bakane's ideas were a betrayal of the biggest order to the legacy left behind by the late Mr. Baldwin Mudau.

Mphephu started dethroning *magota* and *vhothovhele* who were VIP sympathizers, handing their titles to his loyal supporters. All *magota* and *vhothovhele* opposing his government and supporting the VIP were replaced, even by people who traditionally were not *magota* or *vhothovhele* and were not from royal families, as long as they showed allegiance to him.³⁴ At HaMaelula in Dzanani, *Gota* Edward Maelula Ramabulana was a leader of the VIP in that village and because of his affiliation to the opposition; he was removed as *gota* by Mphephu. *Vhugota* was given to Timothy Ramabulana, who was the leader of the VNP. The fathers of Edward and Timothy were brothers but *vhugota* was in the house of Edward.³⁵ It is important to note that *vhugota* of Maelula had been restored to Edward's house after 1994 to undo the injustice caused by the autocratic government of Mphephu. The crowning of Timothy Ramabulana as the new *gota* of Maelula was a bad omen for the VIP members in the village. The new *gota* and his members took a resolution to harass the VIP members at a two-day braai meeting to celebrate his new status. The harassment led some of the VIP members in Maelula to leave the village in fear of being killed by Timothy Ramabulana and his members.

Mphephu did not like communism and he blamed it for terrorist attacks in Venda. It is imperative for me to emphasize that Venda independence was just a smoke screen because the South African government was involved with everything in the homeland; from legislature, police and internal security to the defence force. It was not surprising that at some stage both the heads of the police and the defence force were deployed by the South African government. The alliance between Venda and their apartheid masters was so strong that Mphephu had to

³⁴ M. Nevondo, A Political Study of Chief P.R. Mphephu of Venda, 1925-1988 "The Great elephant of Africa", MA dissertation, University of Fort Hare, 2000, p. 93.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

send the Venda army to help his masters in their military campaign against SWAPO in South West Africa (now Namibia).³⁶

Life Presidency

In his attempt to get rid of the opposition once and for all, Mphephu convinced the legislature to declare him the Life President of Venda in May 1983 in terms of an amendment to the constitution of the Republic of Venda. The Act before amendment limited the term of the president to five years. The amended bill, called the Republic of Venda Amendment Bill of 1983, provided that the first President of the Republic of Venda should be declared President for life. The Bill was presented in the Venda Legislature by the honorable *Thovhele* A.M. Madzivhandila, Minister of Foreign Affairs.³⁷

As expected, the opposition, the VIP under Gilbert Bakane, was shocked by the proposal which was aimed at strengthening dictatorship in Venda and therefore they opposed the Bill. They requested that the matter be tested in a referendum before the Bill could be passed and they also proposed that Mphephu be made *khosikhulu* of Venda and resign from active politics. The VIP proposal was dismissed by Minister Madzivhandila. He argued that President Mphephu had led Venda into different government transitions. He also emphasized that there was prosperity and comfort in Venda because of the President's dedication and unselfish service. The Bill was passed by the House to declare *Khosikhulu* Mphephu as a Life President of Venda in May 1983. The opposition party did not let the decision pass without a fight. On 28 May 1983, shortly after the Bill had been passed, they held a rally at the Thohoyandou Stadium. The VIP also invited President Mphephu to attend their rally which was the first by the opposition party since Venda had attained her independence in 1979.³⁸ It must be concluded that the invitation by the VIP to

36 M. Nevondo, A Political Study of Chief P.R. Mphephu of Venda, 1925-1988 "The Great elephant of Africa", MA dissertation, University of Fort Hare, 2000, p. 113.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 81.

38 *Sowetan*, 25 May 1983.

Mphephu to join the rally was just to scorn him and evidently Mphephu did not attend the VIP rally held against him.

Bakane stressed that the leadership of Mphephu was rejected by the people of Venda twice: in the 1973 and the 1978 general elections which the VIP emerged victorious in both. And yet Mphephu still remained in power.³⁹ It is important to indicate that the rally of the VIP against Mphephu did not bring the desired results because Mphephu's status as Life President of Venda did not change after the rally. Bakane told journalists of the South African newspaper the *Sowetan* that his party rejected the motion to make Mphephu Life President. He further claimed that *Khosikhulu* Mphephu was imposed on the people of Venda by Pretoria. It is important to highlight how soon it was that Mphephu wanted to become Life President; after just one term as a President after independence. The arguments of the Foreign Minister, Madzivhandila, for the Bill to be passed showed that Venda was never a democratic homeland, but a one man show where Mphephu was above everybody else.

After the general election of June 1984, Bakane claimed that the VIP had won, but that Mphephu and his party had rigged the elections in their favour. Election results showed that the VNP had won the elections with a landslide and that the VIP managed to win only three seats in the Legislature. However, it is important to highlight that the 1984 elections, like those of 1978, were neither free nor fair. A number of intimidation cases were reported by the VIP against the VNP, but that did not stop Mphephu from claiming victory. The VIP defeat was the first for the Venda opposition since Venda had become a self-governing state and it was the first and the last they contested after the death of Mr. Baldwin Mudau, the former leader. In protest against the rigging of the elections by Mphephu and the VNP, the three VIP members who had won the seats in the Legislature resigned and gave up their seats. This action would pave the way for Mphephu and his party to pass a Bill which proclaimed Venda as a one-party

³⁹ *Sowetan*, 25 May 1983.

state with no opposition (See next section). This resulted in Bakane calling Mphephu and the VNP leaders criminals and thugs to describe their ruthlessness in dealing with the opposition.⁴⁰

With Gilbert Bakane passing away after three years as VIP leader, the death knell was also sounded for opposition politics in Venda. Bakane's dreams of forming a coalition with Mphephu's VNP and to win the 1984 general election ended as just wishful thinking. He died having failed to achieve any of his ambitions and by the time of his death, the VIP was already dying a slow death as some top VIP leaders had joined Mphephu's VNP.

But still the Venda government did not stop their assaults on people opposed to President Mphephu. The priests from the Lutheran Church in Venda were the main targets of Mphephu. On 1 February 1986, the Venda police detained several Lutheran Church priests and other people. Those who were detained were Mr. Gabriel Malaka, Mr. Mbeu Mukhesi, Mr. Edward Lambani, Mr. Lusani Nevhotalu, Mr. Winnet Mamphaga, Mr. George Phadagi, Mr. Bick Ralushai, and Mr. Daniel Masingani. Three of the detainees, Malaka, Mukhesi and Lambani, went on hunger strike in May 1986 and Malaka was hospitalized for nearly two months, suffering from what hospital sources described as malnutrition and mental breakdown. However, this was dismissed by Venda Chief of Security Police, Brigadier Gerson Ramabulana who claimed that Malaka was suffering from typhoid. He also disclosed that the detainees could not be charged or released as some of them were still to be interrogated.⁴¹

It is clear that Mphephu's government arrested innocent people and failed to charge them while they were being interrogated in the police cells. The statement from the police about the detained Lutheran Church priests was nothing but a cover-up for a very dangerous government. Brigadier Ramabulana later confirmed the release of some of the Lutheran Church detainees by the Venda police on the weekend of Saturday 8 and Sunday 9 May 1986.⁴²

40 S. Mabe, *Sowetan*, 25 April 1986.

41 M. Tsedu, *Sowetan*, 12 May 1986.

42 *Sowetan*, 13 May 1986.

One Party State in Venda

In a sitting on 1 August 1986 the Venda National Assembly supported the Bill introduced by President Mphhephu which provided that Venda should have one political party. The reasons given by Mphhephu as a motivation for the Bill was that one party would make debates in the House to be more constructive. This was a ridiculous reason given because it was clear that debates in the House were going to be one sided with no dissenting voices. To add to the Bill for a one-party state, the Venda Constitution Amendment Bill, whose purpose was to amend the Constitution Act, also provided for new powers for President Mphhephu to act without consulting his government, thus giving him an iron grip on his government and the Venda Republic.⁴³ Mphhephu's conduct was a total abuse of power using his traditional position to justify his dictatorial tendencies.

The VIP was opposed to the new Bills which outlawed them and they claimed that Mphhephu and his VNP did not have the support of the majority of the people, despite Mphhephu and the VNP's election victory in 1984.⁴⁴ The VIP claims cannot be dismissed as baseless because intimidation and the death of opposition members in police detention were well publicized over the last seven years in the Venda homeland. It is important to note that Venda people, if they were allowed to vote in a referendum for the infamous one-party Bill, without fear of being intimidated by Mphhephu's Venda police force, would have voted against the Bill. The arguments presented by the Mphhephu government for one party state was that the Western-style democracy was inappropriate in an African country that already enjoyed the leadership of Life President Mphhephu. The government Director-General of Information and Broadcasting, Mr. P. Vele, also stated that the Bill was in line with laws in other African states, where no opposition was tolerated.⁴⁵ It was sarcastic of Vele to make a reference to laws in other African states, as Venda was not even recognized as a state anywhere in the world.

⁴³ *Daily Dispatch*, 2 August 1986.

⁴⁴ *The Star*, 8 August 1986.

⁴⁵ *The Star*, 11 August 1986.

It is my view that Mphephu abused and misused tradition to entrench his autocratic style of government. I presume this essentializing of notions of authenticity and tradition was what made it possible for white functionaries to play along so easily. As long as they told themselves: "These blacks are not like us; "Blacks are like that: It is the blacks' tradition to do things that way." It is noted that since it was mainly the traditional leaders who ruled Venda, they perpetrated oppressive violations of human rights and therefore became unpopular in Venda. They became enemies of the people and servants of apartheid.⁴⁶

With Venda becoming a one-party state the VIP's role as opposition party in Venda was played out. It is important to mention that President Mphephu had the backing of the Venda Constitution which, as alleged, was drafted by the South African government. The Venda Constitution was designed in such a way that Mphephu and his party would remain in power no matter what the outcome at the polls. *Khosikhulu* Mphephu became the most feared man in Venda and he ruled the homeland with an iron fist. He had the last say in everything in Venda down to the decision to employ or dismiss a junior clerk.⁴⁷

People who worked closely with *Khosikhulu* Mphephu believed that he was not his own man; they alleged that he was getting instructions from Pretoria. However, these allegations cannot be taken seriously because some of the evil things Mphephu did was even worse than what one can imagine his Pretoria masters could have done during the apartheid years. In a bizarre move in 1986, Mphephu instructed that all uncircumcised Venda males should be rounded up by the police and put up in circumcision schools for six weeks.⁴⁸ This move was very embarrassing to fathers and old men who had to be circumcised with their sons and grandsons.

The detention of political opponents by Mphephu without charges continued until his death in 1988. From 1986 to 1987 the numbers of political detainees in Venda exceeded twenty. Amongst the detainees was Dean Tshenuwani Farisani who was arrested on 22 November

46 S.F. Khunou, *Traditional Leadership and Independent Bantustans of South Africa*, ... p. 87.

47 *Sowetan*, 25 April 1986.

48 *The Star*, 11 August 1986.

1986. Farisani's detention was brought about by his visit with a group of clergies to Lusaka, Zambia, to meet with the banned ANC.⁴⁹ This was the second time the Lutheran Church Reverend was detained. As previously discussed, he was first detained in November 1981 and after his release he was told not to set foot in Venda again. Dean Farisani seemed to be Mphephu's enemy number one and he was not bothered by persistent torturing by the Venda police despite offers for him and his family to leave Venda. It was alleged by Dean Farisani's wife Reginah Mudzunga Farisani that her husband was on hunger strike from 1 January 1987. She was concerned about his life because she said he wouldn't eat until he was released.⁵⁰ The Dean's wife and the Lutheran Church were concerned that he may have been in hospital.⁵¹ These claims, as expected, were dismissed by the Venda government through the Venda Police Commissioner, Major-General T.R. Mulaudzi. The police claimed that Dean Farisani was detained for interrogation and investigation based on certain information the police had involving the Lutheran Church Reverend and they needed clarity from him. The Police also denied that Dean Farisani was on a hunger striker and they alleged that his loss of weight was based on stress because of detention. The Police Commissioner told the world that the Lutheran Church Reverend was eating.⁵² Mulaudzi told Sapa in a telephone interview that it was the Venda Police's policy that "a person under questioning" should be seen regularly by a doctor. He said the Reverend was seen by the doctor when he was arrested on 22 November 1986 and had been seen by one nearly every week since then.⁵³

The detention of Dean Tshenuwani Farisani was condemned locally and internationally and there were calls that the Venda government should charge or release the Reverend. Priests and evangelists of Devhula/Lebowa circuit marched to the Sibasa police Station on Monday morning 26 January 1987 to demand the release of Dean Farisani.⁵⁴

49 *Weekly Mail*, 16 January 1987.

50 *Weekly Mail*, 30 January, 1987.

51 *City Press*, 25 January 1987.

52 *Weekly Mail*, 30 January, 1987.

53 *City Press*, 25 January 1987.

54 M. Tsedu, *Sowetan*, 26 January 1987.

It is clear that the Venda Police were covering up the atrocities committed under the leadership of President Mphhephu. Amnesty International sent a member of their executive, lawyer Peter Duffy from London, to Venda in the middle of January 1987 to secure the release of Dean Farisani.⁵⁵ In the United States (US), religious leaders, the Minnesota Lawyers and International Human Rights Committee all called for the release of Dean Farisani with immediate effect. US Attorney General Hubert H. Humphey called the detention of Dean Farisani “barbaric and unconscionable” because a person not knowing what he was charged with, could not be detained and denied right to counsel. These US religious and civil rights groups handed more than seven hundred signed post cards protesting Dean Farisani’s detention to the office of their Attorney General with instructions that the postcards had to be forwarded to South African government.⁵⁶ They were forwarded to the South African government because the Venda state was not recognized by the international community. The pressure locally and internationally might have forced the Venda government to release Dean Farisani. It is not clear when, but he was eventually released by the Venda government, probably because of pressure from the South African government, which also succumbed to the international pressure.

With the potential threats from what the Mphhephu government viewed as terrorists, Mphhephu instructed the police and the army to deal ruthlessly with opponents of his government. Outsiders were also not safe in Venda as the relatives of a Natal doctor, Dr. C.H. Mngadi, found out. Mngadi was visiting his relatives in Venda and he was stopped at a roadblock by Venda police who realized that he was in possession of a firearm without a license. He was arrested despite telling the police that he had left the license at home by mistake. The Venda police did not make any efforts to call his relatives to bring the license to Venda so that Mngadi could be released. They did the opposite, which was torturing the poor doctor to his death in detention in what Mphhephu and his cronies believed was “foreign” land to Mngadi.⁵⁷ Dr. Mngadi added new statics to the detainees who died in the Venda police cells under Mphhephu’s rule.

55 *Weekly Mail*, 16 January 1987.

56 *Sowetan*, 15 January 1987.

57 *Sowetan*, 25 April 1986.

The death of Dr. Mngadi could have posed a major challenge to the South African government's attempt to maintain peace and cooperation in the homelands. Kwazulu, led by *Enkosi* Gatsha Buthelezi, could have easily declared a war on Mphephu and Venda to retaliate the death of Dr. Mngadi, who happened to have been a citizen of the Kwazulu homeland. It is my view that the possibility of that situation happening was almost zero since both Venda and Kwazulu were puppets of the South African government. Pretoria was also not going to allow the war between the two homelands as it would have disrupted their divide and rule plan. To thwart terrorism, Mphephu's government embarked on an expensive project to train youths as informers. It was alleged that the Venda government was taking youths on government tours and they were asked to become police informers. This was disclosed by one of the youths who had been on one of the tours. The youth, whose name was not mentioned, alleged that they were lectured on how to use military weapons by the army instructors of the Venda Defence Force (VDF). There was another group of 32 youths and eight teachers who went for military training by the VDF from 29 March 1987 to 3 April 1987. The group was from eight schools in the Thohoyandou circuit and they were housed at the Lupepe Picnic Centre near Masisi military base close to the South African border with Zimbabwe.⁵⁸

The militarization of the Venda youths was condemned by various banned political organizations including AZAPO and their student movement AZASM, and they called for the end of this desperate practice by the Mphephu government. One can conclude from the militarization of the youths by Mphephu that his government was prepared to go to any length to protect and sustain the sham republic.

The death of Mphephu and the end of *vuhosivuhulu* in Venda

President Mphephu started the year 1988 as a very healthy person carrying on his duties as the Head of State of the Republic of Venda. Early in January he signed an agreement with the South African government to provide R25 million development aid to his state. The agreement was

⁵⁸ *Sowetan*, 1 April 1987

signed in Thohoyandou on Tuesday, 26 January 1988 by President Mphephu and the South African ambassador to Venda, Mr. J.S.S. Weideman.⁵⁹ This was indicative that Mphephu, despite his dictatorial rule, had ambitions for great development in Venda. Soon after this agreement, Mphephu officially opened the University of Venda's R1.3 million sports stadium at its new-look campus in Thohoyandou. The stadium was opened on Saturday, 30 January 1988.⁶⁰ It is imperative to note that these developments did not make Venda people happy with Mphephu, because he had not stopped torturing his opponents. As reported by the *Sowetan* in March 1988, a decision to release or prosecute nineteen detainees held by the Venda government since May 1987 was not expected any time soon. The Attorney-General, Mr D.J. van Wyk, explained that the detainees could be expected to appear in court only at the end of June 1988, because he was still studying the fairly big dockets of the case.⁶¹

The political landscape was to change in Venda on Sunday, 17 April 1988, when the man who was loved by few but hated by many Venda people, President Mphephu died mysteriously of undisclosed illness at the Little Company of Mary Hospital in Pretoria, aged 63. According to a Venda government spokesperson, Mphephu was taken to the hospital in Pretoria after he suddenly took ill on the night of Saturday, 16 April 1988.⁶² The causes of Mphephu's death are not known even today despite speculations then that he was poisoned by his friends in the VNP. These allegations were not proven with substantial evidence. The death of Mphephu brought the entire Venda public service to a halt on the Monday the news of his unexpected passing started spreading in the homeland. Schools and government departments closed from 12 noon on Monday, 18 April 1988 to give people a chance to mourn a man most would love to hate.⁶³ Mphephu's death shocked many in Venda, including his enemies. As a young high school student in Standard 8 at that time, I was also shocked by Mphephu's untimely death, more so because he had a wife in my village, the late *Mutanuni* Elisa Mudimeli-Mphephu. The whole

⁵⁹ *Business Day*, 27 January 1988.

⁶⁰ *The Star*, 1 February 1988.

⁶¹ *Sowetan*, 3 March 1988.

⁶² *Sowetan*, 19 April 1988.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

village was in a state of mourning, not because he was a good man, but out of respect because he was a *khosikhulu*.

Condolences for the death of President Mphephu were sent from all over South Africa. The most notable tribute came from the South African Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Pik Botha. In his tribute to the late Venda Chief and President, he said from Cape Town on Monday, 18 April 1988:

The President of Venda, Mr Khosikhulu P.R. Mphephu, would be remembered as a loyal friend of South Africa who believed in co-operation rather than confrontation and who took a firm stand against terrorism.⁶⁴

Botha's statement confirms that Mphephu was a real puppet of the apartheid government in South Africa, and it justified the point that Venda was just an extension of the apartheid state. It was used to fight enemies of apartheid like the ANC, AZAPO and the PAC as it was strategically placed, sandwiched between the borders of Botswana in the West, Zimbabwe in the North and Mozambique in the East.

Botha's tribute had a bit of irony in it because to the people in Venda Mphephu was not co-operative, but confrontational. His opponents in Venda, more so the VIP leaders and the Lutheran Church priests would have disagreed with the sentiments of Mr. Pik Botha about Mphephu. However, it is important to note that in the eyes of the apartheid government of South Africa, Mphephu was marvelously co-operative. It is my view that Mr. Pik Botha was trying to live up to the Venda saying that: "*A u ambi zwivhi nga vhotuwaho*"⁶⁵. The State President of South Africa, Mr. P.W. Botha, also sent his condolences to the Venda government on Monday 18 April 1988. President Lennox Sebe of the homeland, Ciskei on the same day also paid his tribute to his friend P.R. Mphephu. He said President Mphephu was a great friend of the Ciskei and a lover of his own Venda people. He ended by sending his condolences to Mphephu's family and the people of Venda.⁶⁶ Still on Monday, 18 April 1988, the Venda cabinet

⁶⁴ *The Star*, 19 April 1988.

⁶⁵ *A u ambi zwivhi nga vhotuwaho* is a Tshivenda idiom which means, you don't talk bad things about dead people.

⁶⁶ *Daily Dispatch*, 19 April 1988.

appointed Minister of Finance, *Gota* Frank Ndwakhulu Ravele, as Acting-President of the Venda Republic.⁶⁷

Mphephu was buried on Friday, 22 April 1988 at Songozwi near Louis Trichardt in what was then South African soil. The funeral ceremony started at Thohoyandou Stadium where the South African State President was expected to be the main speaker. However, instead he was represented by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Pik Botha. The homeland, Transkei was represented by President Tutor Ndamase, Brigadier Rodney Keswa and four other officials, and Ciskei was represented by a delegation of eight, led by their Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. W.B. Blie. The homeland, Bophuthatswana was represented by its Acting President, Mr. Solly Rathebe and the homeland, Gazankulu was represented by its Chief Minister, Hudson Ntswanwisi. The main opposition party in the South African government, the Conservative Party, was represented by its leader for Soutpansberg, Mr. Tom Langley.⁶⁸ The funeral was also attended by many other dignitaries from other homelands and businessmen from all over South Africa, who were not mentioned by name. Dr. F.N. Ravele, the Acting Venda President, told the 15 000 mourners in the stadium that the words of the late President were “Let there be unity among the people of Venda”. Ravele appealed to the Venda people not to ignore the words of the deceased and he also appealed to the traditional leaders, the police and the army to co-operate to sustain the peace and stability which existed when President Mphephu was still alive.⁶⁹ However, to say there was peace and co-operation during the period of Mphephu’s rule would be an exaggeration.

It is important to emphasise that Songozwi, where Mphephu was buried, was a traditional burial place for *mahosimahulu* of the Singo community, specifically the Ramabulana. Historically the place belonged to the Singo people and that was where their first *pfamo* was established after they had migrated to the South from Matongoni. The place was taken by the South African government after Mphephu I’s defeat in late 1800s and it was never returned to

⁶⁷ *Daily Dispatch*, 19 April 1988.

⁶⁸ *Daily Dispatch*, 22 April 1988.

⁶⁹ *Sowetan*, 26 April 1988.

mahosimahulu of Venda until after 1994. The burial of President Mphephu cleared the way for his successor to be appointed within thirty days of his death by the 92-member National Assembly. *Khosikhulu* Mphephu did not groom an obvious successor but the Acting President and the late Mphephu's cousin, Frank Ndwakhulu Ravele, was the favorite contender.⁷⁰

The death of Mphephu was seen by many Venda people as a solution to many problems in the homeland. It was the view of many that his death would solve *vhuhosivhuhulu* disputes which were caused by Mphephu dethroning legitimate *magota* and *vhothovhele* and replacing them with his supporters. Hopes were high after Mphephu's death that two young *thovhele* deprived of their birthright to the thrones would be reinstated. It was believed that *Thovhele* Kennedy Tshivhase and *Thovhele* Peter Kutama would ascend to their thrones after Mphephu had denied them their birthright for political reasons. The new Presidential designate, Dr. F.N. Ravele, was described in royal circles as a very good man and it was expected that he would be sympathetic to the young men's cause.⁷¹

It is ironic that it was President Mphephu who had installed Kennedy Tshivhase as *thovhele* in 1970 when Kennedy was still young. Kennedy Tshivhase's father, Prince, had died in 1966 and three years thereafter, in 1969, Prince's brother, Alidzuli Alfred Tshivhase, appointed himself as the new *thovhele* of Tshivhase in Mukumbani. The Tshivhase family (aided by the South African government) deposed A.A. Tshivhase, and he was banished to Zululand. With A.A. Tshivhase gone, Mphephu installed Kennedy Tshivhase to sit on his father's throne, but because he was a minor, his uncle Shavhani Tshivhase was appointed to act on his behalf. In 1973 A.A. Tshivhase returned from exile and he was appointed secretary of the Tshivhase Tribal Authority, a move which started the problems for Kennedy. Attempts by Kennedy to regain his throne were dashed by claims that he could not lead his people because, although his parents were legally married, he was born outside Mukumbani. Some people in Mukumbani dismissed these claims as nonsense and they were surprised that President Mphephu was siding with the anti-Kennedy group. They emphasised that Kennedy was the legal son of *mutahabvu Thovhele* Prince

⁷⁰ *The Star*, 22 April 1988.

⁷¹ *City Press*, 8 May 1988, p. 8.

Tshivhase; he was *mulaifa* and his father had left him the throne when he died. It was therefore right for him to take the throne and the people of Tshivhase were hopeful that Ravele would reinstate Kennedy to his rightful position.⁷²

The situation in Kutama was similar to that of Tshivhase, the dispute also revolved around an uncle who could not relinquish his acting role. Lesiba Kutama was appointed *thovhele-pfareli* of Kutama after the death of Johannes Kutama, *thovhele* of the Kutama people, in 1959. Johannes's son, Peter, was supposed to ascend to his father's throne after his death. But just like in the case of Kennedy, he was still a minor. The case of Peter was more understandable than that of Kennedy because he was a well-known critic of his cousin, President Mphephu. It was commonly known in Venda that Peter Kutama had several brushes with the Venda government and particularly with his cousin, Mphephu. Mphephu viewed Peter as a member of the VIP and had him detained with members of the party in 1978. The young Kutama spent more than three months in detention and Mphephu finally fired him after ten years in government service.⁷³ It was not surprising that Mphephu did not support Peter Kutama's attempt to take the throne back from Lesiba. The late President supported Lesiba Kutama to remain on the throne because he was loyal to him and he felt that Peter Kutama, being a critic of his rule, might turn the Kutama people against the government. With the death of Mphephu, people in Venda were not only hopeful that Peter Kutama would be reinstated, but also that the political detainees would soon be released.

The hopes of the Venda people were finally raised on Tuesday, 10 May 1988 when the Venda National Assembly voted unanimously that 62-year-old Zion Christian Church (ZCC) member, *Gota* F.N. Ravele be the new President of Venda. The seven minutes election came as no surprise because the outcome was expected. *Gota* F.N. Ravele was nominated by a fellow ZCC member, *Gota* E.R.B. Nesengani, with three members of the Assembly absent, one of them being Mr. T.J. Netshimbupfe, who was in police custody for ritual murder.⁷⁴ *Gota* F.N. Ravele

⁷² *City Press*, 8 May 1988, p. 8.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Sowetan*, 11 May 1988.

was one of the few cabinet members who were educated. He was a Bachelor of Arts student at Unisa and he was a former treasurer of the Mphephu Tribal Authority and his election to the Presidency was unopposed according to the information provided by the Director-General of Information and Broadcasting, Mr. M.D. Nethononda.⁷⁵ Ravele became the second and the last State President of Venda since independence on 13 September 1979.

President Ravele called an early general election on 14 and 15 September 1988. Observers felt that it was Ravele's attempt to consolidate his position as the head of state in Venda. The election was just a formality, as the former opposition party, the VIP, had disappeared in the Venda political landscape.⁷⁶ The September 1988 elections were also marred by some controversy when 21 Venda politicians, all of them former VIP members, claimed the elections were rigged since they were disqualified from standing as candidates. The amended Venda Electoral Act stated that a candidate could only be nominated if, amongst other things, he was a member of the VNP. However, the 21 candidates claimed to have joined the party. The aggrieved members tried to take court action on Friday, 22 July 1988, but their attempts were futile.⁷⁷

The general elections were held and the VNP won a landslide victory, competing alone. President *Gota* F.N. Revele was sworn in as the second Venda President on Thursday, 20 October 1988 by Chief Justice D.J.H. le Roux in a colourful ceremony at the House of Assembly in Thohoyandou. In his crowning moment, Ravele showed that he was not going to depart from the VNP policies and those of his predecessor. It was clear from his speech that torturing of people perceived to be enemies of the state would not stop. Quoting from his speech to support this view:

Venda considered itself part of Africa and the free world, whether it received international recognition or not. Venda would not allow any communist-inspired actions to disrupt its stability.

⁷⁵ *The Star*, 11 May 1988.

⁷⁶ *Sowetan*, 28 June 1988.

⁷⁷ *Sowetan*, 22 July 1988.

These were tough words and a stern warning to people who thought that with Mphephu gone things would normalise in Venda. To demonstrate that President Ravele was not a softie and that he had learnt a lot from his cousin, P.R. Mphephu, political prisoners remained detained. There was also a clamp down on journalists and other people who were critics of the Ravele government. The well-known South African pop star, William Mthethwa, was one of the victims of Ravele's regime when he was *sjambokked* (beaten) with other musicians and revelers by Venda police at the Thohoyandou Stadium on Saturday, 6 August 1988. Mthethwa was performing in a fifteen-hour non-stop Radio Thohoyandou music festival.⁷⁸

The next victim of the new regime was the *Sowetan* reporter, Mr. Mathata Tsedu, who was detained in terms of territory security legislation by the Venda Security Police on Monday, 15 August 1988 and released the same day. Tsedu was detained with pupils from Tshakhuma in Venda. He was the Deputy President of the Media Workers Association of South Africa (Mwasa) and he had been banned by the Venda government in 1981.⁷⁹ The arrest of Tsedu was associated with the Tshakhuma youth protesting against ritual killings in Venda, and Tsedu as a reporter was covering a story. The protests spread all over Thohoyandou in solidarity to the call by the youths of Tshakhuma. The University of Venda Students' Representative Council (SRC) also got involved in the protests.

The students were demanding the immediate dismissal of the Minister of Justice, Mr. Alidzuli Alfred Tshivhase, and the prosecution of those involved in ritual killings. They also called for the release of all the students arrested since the start of the boycott. Amongst those arrested was Mr. Thivhilaeli Mutobvu, who was the secretary of the Zoutpansberg Advice Bureau (ZAB), and Mr. Mpho Tsedu, a member of the University of Venda SRC. Mpho Tsedu happened to have been the son of the reporter Mathata Tsedu. President Ravele acted decisively to end the riots in his homeland by firing Mr. A.A. Tshivhase as Minister of Justice.⁸⁰

78 E. Makhanya, *Sowetan*, 8 August 1988.

79 J. Raboroko, *Sowetan*, 16 August 1988.

80 M. Tsedu, *Sowetan*, 17 August 1988, p. 4. The Minister of Justice was also the Minister of Prison Services, Local Government and the State Services Commission.

Venda did not stabilise after the death of President Mphedu and the Ravele government was unable to suppress the power of the youth. Venda youths became increasingly militant after the death of the feared Mphedu. The youths were the main reason for the downfall of the Ravele government early in 1990. From 1988 to 1990, Ravele and his cabinet were confronted with the serious challenge of controlling youths who were protesting almost every day. Early in 1990 Ravele decided that he could not carry on ruling and decided to hand over power to the Army, led by Brigadier-General Gabriel Mutheiwana Ramushwana. Ravele's decision signaled the end of homeland and *vhuhosi* authority. It is imperative to indicate that the early 1990s was the period of turmoil in South Africa with the release of political prisoners. There was a military coup in the Ciskei where President Lennox Sebe was toppled by Brigadier-General Oupa Qozo and in the Transkei George Mantanzima was toppled by General Bantu Holomisa. In Bophuthatshwana attempts by General Metsing to topple President Lucas Mangope was thwarted by the Bophuthatshwana Defence Force (of course with the aid of South African Defence Force). It is highly probable that there was a coup in Venda as well. Ravele might not have "given up" the control of government voluntarily as it was alleged. The sign of homelands crumbling was there for everyone to see. In the Ciskei and Transkei, the army had already annexed power as indicated above.

In his assessments, Christopher Hill did not give the concept of homelands a chance, particularly in the Northern Transvaal amongst the Venda, Pedi and Shangaan/Tsonga. He argued that there seemed to be no prospect of any economic infrastructure being created to support whatever political edifice might be created. He further argued that before a state could be independent it was obviously desirable that its territory should be unbroken, or at least less fragmented than were most of the reserves out of which the states were constituted.⁸¹ Hill felt that it was possible to think of the Transkei as an eventually independent state.⁸² It turns out that Hill's assessment of the situation in the Northern Transvaal was highly misplaced. The area

81 C.R. Hill, *Bantustans, The Fragmentation of South Africa, (a quote from the Odendaal Report)*, Oxford University Press, London & New York, 1964, p. 103.

82 *Ibid*, p. 102.

is rich in mineral wealth – diamonds, coal, and other minerals are mined in the area. Venda was a success story in terms of development. The problem was that people were oppressed by Mphephu and his successor, Ravele.

The only position of power that remained unresolved after the death of Mphephu was that of *Khosikhulu*. It is important to highlight that the military government of Ramushwana abolished the status of *Khosikhulu* immediately after taking over in 1990. The person who was *mulaifa* to the Ramabulana's crown was not going to be *khosikhulu* but *thovhela* of Vhailafuri. Mphephu was succeeded by *Makhadzi* Phophi Mphephu as *thovhela-pfareli* for seven years until Tshimangadzo Mphephu Ramabulana succeeded his father. Tshimangadzo was crowned *Thovhele* Dimbanyika Thohoyandou Ramabulana II in 1994.⁸³

The next chapter will explain in detail how the status of *khosikhulu* was abolished by the Venda military government through the Mushasha Commission of Inquiry because the Constitution of Venda required the Head of State to be *thovhele*. The Ramushwana military junta did not want two centres of power in Venda. With these changes it implied that *thovhele* Dimbanyika Thohoyandou Ramabulana II was not going to be *Khosikhulu* of Venda as his father was before his death. The installation of Dimbanyika coincidentally came at a time when Venda was integrated into South Africa at the end of 48 years of rule by the National Party in South Africa. *Thovhela* Dimbanyika was not well-known in Venda like his father and he was not a favourite within *nndu ya vuhosivhuhulu* of the Ramabulana. There were some allegations coming from some people within *nndu ya vuhosivhuhulu* of the Ramabulana that *Thovhela* Dimbanyika was a reckless *thovhele* who showed scant regard for tradition and protocol and had no respect for all his subjects, including elders.⁸⁴

83 www.luonde.co.za

84 www.luonde.co.za

Those who were not impressed with Dimbanyika alleged that he did not heed any advice from the Royal Council. However, these claims were dismissed by his royal supporters who countered by saying Dimbanyika did not have a royal council and he was advised by only two people, his *Ndumi*, Toni Mphephu, and *Khadzi*, Mavis Mphephu. His supporters further claimed that the absence of a royal council led to *thovhele* taking wrong decisions. Sadly, Dimbanyika Thohoyandou Ramabulana II did not live long. Three years after his installation he died in a car accident at Tshipise in December 1997, leaving only a baby girl, Masindi, as *mulaifa* to his throne.⁸⁵

It did not take long for the Vhailafuri to crown a new *thovhele* after the death of Dimbanyika. His younger half-brother and his *ndumi*, Peter Toni Mphephu, was installed as the new *thovhele* of Vhailafuri on 28 November 1998 at a ceremony addressed by the former South African State President and the first black man to occupy the position, the late Nelson Mandela.⁸⁶ One thing that was unusual about the crowning of Toni Mphephu was that the Rambulana had thrown tradition and customs out of the window by allowing *ndumi* to be *thovhele* and allowing a son of Matamela Mphephu, the second wife of P.R. Mphephu, but not a “cattle” wife. Dimbanyika was the son of Mphephu’s first “cattle” wife Masindi Mphephu, whose name was taken by Masindi, the daughter of Dimbanyika. Mbulaheni Charles Mphephu, the son of the second “cattle” wife, Doris Mphephu, was surprisingly not considered for the throne by *Makhadzi* Mavis Mphephu.⁸⁷ One other aspect of the crowning of Toni Mphephu that one has to take cognizance of is the continuation by the Ramabulana to invite politicians to crown *vhothovhele*, which was not the case before the time of *Thovhele* Mbulaheni George Ramabulana. Today Toni Mphephu is a disputed *khosikhulu* of the Venda polity after the Nhlapo Commission of Inquiry had restored the status of the Ramabulana as the legitimate *mahosimahulu* of the Venda people.

85 *Limpopo Mirror*.

86 *Extract from President Nelson Mandela’s speech at Toni Peter Mphephu’s coronation*, South African Government Information Website, 28 November 1998.

87 *Limpopo Mirror*.