

Zondeni Veronica Sobukwe: Mother of Azania



Zondeni Veronica Sobukwe, was an icon of struggle for African power and justice in South Africa, and also the widow of late president of the Pan Africanist Congress, Mangaliso Robert Sobukwe. In April, Zondeni, affectionately known as the “Mother of Azania”, was awarded the Order of Luthuli. She was born on July 27, 1927, in Hlobane, KwaZulu-Natal, she and her husband met in the struggle and their story was that of “love at first sight”, as Zondeni said

some years ago. At the time, 1949, Mangaliso Sobukwe was the president of the Student Representative Council at Fort Hare University while Zondeni was a trainee nurse at Victoria Hospital in Lovedale. The nurses at the hospital had been involved in a labour dispute with hospital management at the time and Zondeni was one of the leaders in that strike which caught the attention of Sobukwe and other student leaders. Owing to her involvement in that strike, Zondeni was expelled from Lovedale College and she and her friend Thandiwe Moletsane (later Mrs Makiwane) went to Joburg after being sent by the then Fort Hare ANC Youth League to deliver a letter to Walter Sisulu to bring to his attention the plight of the nurses in Alice. It was during those trying times that the bond between them grew and they tied the knot in 1950. Zondeni supported her husband throughout, including praying together on March 21, 1960, when Sobukwe handed himself over for arrest in protest against the pass laws. He was sentenced to three years in prison for incitement, but the apartheid government refused to release him after his jail term ended.

The government instead enacted a “Sobukwe Clause” which allowed it to keep Sobukwe in jail for as long as it wanted. He was taken to Robben Island in 1963 and kept away from other prisoners as the apartheid government considered him very dangerous. Twenty-one years ago Zondeni recounted the pain of being separated from her husband and the effect it had on their children. She also revealed the ill-treatment and humiliation suffered by Sobukwe while he was in jail. All these gory details were made public when Zondeni appeared before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) on May 12, 1997, in her bid to find the truth about the cause of her husband’s death. Commissioners and members of the public listened in awe as Zondeni told them how the apartheid authorities refused her husband access to proper and independent medical examination.

In 1964, Mangaliso Sobukwe's health deteriorated and Parliament was forced to discuss his release, but it refused. They refused to allow Mangaliso to go overseas to receive treatment for cancer. They also refused him a passport to leave the country after he was offered a lectureship at the University of Wisconsin in the US. Zondeni also had this to say at the TRC hearings about her husband's death and commitment to the struggle: "Nothing came to my surprise or shock, because from the day I met him he was in the struggle and he died in the struggle. Everything was to be expected. I was not too aggrieved, in the sense that I expected this to happen."

Zondeni and Sobukwe were blessed with four children, Miliswa, Dinilesizwe, Dalinyebo and Dedanizizwe.



Zondeni Veronica Sobukwe and Mangaliso Robert Sobukwe.