

Mhlabunzima Joseph Maphumulo *(1950–1991)*

His parents named him Mhlabunzima. Translated loosely it means ‘we live in troubled times’. Could they then have foreseen what a full, interesting, but troubled life their infant son would live?

At the young age of 24 Mhlabunzima Maphumulo became hereditary Chief of the Maphumulo Tribe. His jurisdiction extended over a vast area of land surrounding Table Mountain to the north-east of Pietermaritzburg. Thirty five thousand people resided in it and owed allegiance to him.

His early years as Chief were devoted to tribal matters and were relatively uncontroversial. But he rose to prominence when the civil violence began in the Pietermaritzburg area in 1986. While violence raged in Imbali, Edendale and Slangspruit, his area was calm. By Easter 1989 more than ten thousand people who had fled their homes in those areas took up temporary residence there. The miserable plight of these refugees and the tens of thousands of other sufferers moved him deeply. He became a mediator and peacemaker. He sought the counsel and opinions of others. The chaos and lawlessness moved him in that year to petition the then State President, P. W. Botha, to establish a Judicial Commission of Enquiry into the violence. His request was granted by Botha’s successor three years later.

In the meantime Maphumulo had become President of Contralesa (Congress



Chief Mhlabunzima Joseph Maphumulo

(Photograph: Natal Witness)

of Traditional Leaders of South Africa). Before he assumed office this organization had been neutral politically, but under his leadership and in the context of a shifting political climate, it soon aligned itself with the ANC. Maphumulo's stature grew and so did people's sentiments about him. He became dearly loved by followers and sympathizers, and deeply hated by opponents. So fierce was this hatred that his tribal home was burnt down and he and his family had to flee for safety. He acquired a small home in Pietermaritzburg. In December 1990 a motorcade of vehicles travelling to Maphumulo was ambushed and shot. Three people died and several were injured. The ambush was aimed at him. He, however, was not travelling in any of the vehicles at the time. These attacks did not deter him, but spurred him on to serve his people with greater vigour and determination. He raised funds to conduct a private investigation into the violence and participated fully in it. But his enemies lay in waiting.

He was shot and killed by assassins' bullets at his home on 25 February 1991. News of his death was received with shock and disbelief. His funeral, at Wadley Stadium, was attended by some 30 000 mourners. But who had shot him? Nobody knew. Nobody, that is, but those who had done the deed.

Following dramatic claims by one Sipho Madlala that a hit squad under the direction of members of the Security Forces had assassinated him, a Judicial Inquest was appointed which, at the time of going to print, is still in session. Mhlabunzima was a kind gentle man with an easy smile. He was devoted to his people and the betterment of their lives. His shocking death has left South Africa and its people poorer.

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