

We meet in a "safe" house in Mamelodi, one of several where activists can talk privately or, if things are "hot", avoid the night dodging the police perhaps even the ubiquitous Molotov cocktails and hand grenades.

The young people gather quietly. Across the street, a saxophone haunts the night.

There are five of them, all committee members of Mayo, the Mamelodi Youth Organisation, which its members say is the embodiment of "people's power".

For two hours they talk of their work of people's courts, street and section committees, education and re-education programmes.

Later, in a different house, activists from the Mamelodi Civic Association (MCA) — the older generation — complete the picture.

They sketch a vision of what amounts to a new reality, of which most whites in nearby Pretoria know little.

"We are not speaking of revolution. We call it democratic change," says Mike Seoane, 26, Mayo's general secretary.

"Revolution implies armed struggle. That would be suicide for us at this stage — the police and army are too strong."

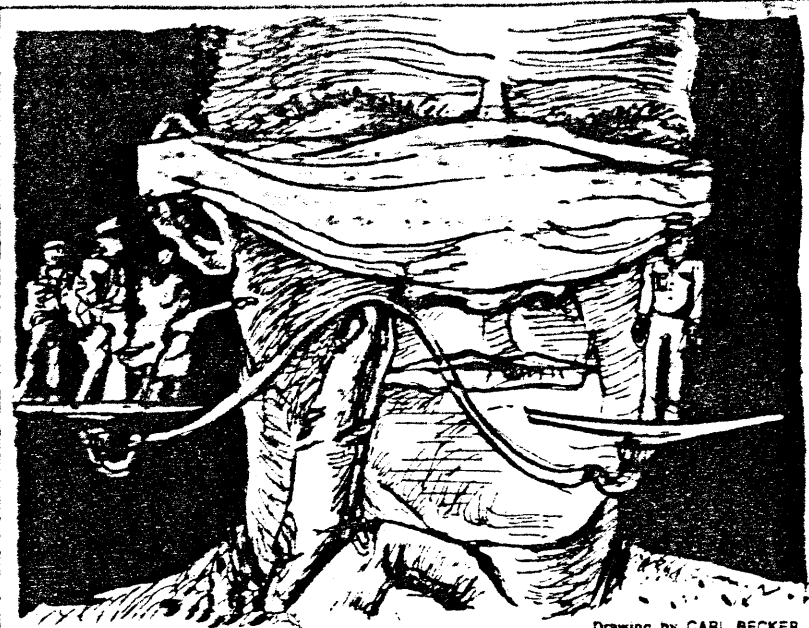
"But the time will come when the balance of power is on our side, and then the people will say 'enough is enough'."

Mayo is a child of the students' revolt, as are most township youth groups. It was launched in August, 1983, after the national student association, Cosas, realised that young "talent" was being lost, as schoolgoing activists graduated out of the classrooms.

The banning of Cosas last year thrust the youth organisations into a more pivotal role. Being more diffuse and community-oriented than a national body, they are also more difficult to suppress.

Mayo and related political organisations succeeded to a large degree in challenging and discrediting the government-backed town councils. Councilors were forced to resign. Militant activity and violence against individuals working within the "system" became legion.

Last June Mayo moved to fill the



Drawing by CARL BECKER

Street committees: People power or kangaroo courts?

There's a new unofficial power in the townships: people's courts and street committees. They are accused of "necklacing" their enemies, a charge they deny. PETER HONEY reports

leadership vacuum it had created. It launched "operation clean-up", a campaign to root out crime as well as hooliganism being committed in the name of "the struggle".

Activists say it also exposed "agent provocateurs", who were being used to spread dissension within anti-government groups.

Mayo organised the community's own garbage collection and encouraged community service, such as the building of the small grassy parks and rockeries which feature in virtually every open space in the township.

You could call it recreation in the name of the struggle. Here is "Mandela Park", "Tambo Place", "Unity is Strength" and "Comrades Centre", even the more facile "Lovers Lane".

They are decorated with old tyres, rocks and wood — even old motor car parts, brightly painted. A feature of Mamelodi is the "cannon", an old vehicle axle with prop shaft pointing to the horizon as if ready to fire.

One of these faces the police station; if there is innocence, it is deadly serious.

Many of these young people have

been detained after voicing their views. The police know all about them, but that knowledge does not mean they can stop them.

"We have actually rendered the police ineffective," says one member.

Most residents, he explains, are discouraged, even prevented from reporting township crime to the police. The activists have created "disciplinary committees" and "people's courts" to handle such matters.

Their functions include controlling crime, politicising residents against the local authorities and educating

them about the broader political struggle.

The courts, or "forums" as they are called, can be held at any time, whenever there is a plaintiff and an accused.

"The main aim is rehabilitating, to re-educate the wrongdoer and make him a better person," he says.

Petty thieves could expect to be sentenced to community tasks, such as painting and watering the parks.

But corporal punishment is steered out. A rapist, for example, can expect 25 or 30 lashes with a sjambok.

"The punishment is carried out on the spot," says a young woman member who does not want to be identified.

"You have to see this from our point of view. The community must be the judge and must see that justice is done."

It has reaped tremendous rewards. Many people who opposed us have been converted and now work with us — even policemen.

"There we do not concern ourselves with legal technicalities," says 32-year-old Strike, Mayo's oldest member, "like in the Magistrate's Courts where, if you have a good lawyer, you can get off."

But he rejects any suggestion that these are simply "kangaroo courts", designed to eliminate dissenters.

People who have never been to a township often associate people's courts with "necklacing", the terrible execution of suspected informers.

"This might have happened in some townships, but no court in Mamelodi has ever sentenced anyone to the necklace," says another member.

The court, he says, must hear each side of a story before reaching its verdict, and appeals are allowed — heard by a special court that convenes once a week.

Malpractices have occurred, admits Mike, but these are discouraged as much as crime itself, because they could rebound on the struggle.

"We do not intend to destroy people," he says.

"They must gain confidence in what we are doing, so that they can break away totally from government structures. The government must become irrelevant to their lives."

In making it so, they wage a war of nerves against the police. Black policemen are isolated socially, made to feel outcasts.

Inevitably, there is violence. The homes of activists are bombed with Molotov cocktails, or even hand grenades. The police deny complicity, but in some cases residents claim to have recognised the attackers. Policemen's homes are bombed in retaliation.

Mamelodi, claims an MCA member, has had more of these attacks than any other centre in the country.

"We know who is doing it, but we cannot prove it in court," he says.

The activists deny complicity in attacks on police. They attribute them to "circumstances", and admit they are unable to control people who take the law into their own hands.

"But I will say this: in Mamelodi there is not a single policeman who has given trouble who is not dead."

"The conditions force people to be violent. Sometimes they use every instrument they can to fight the system, which is in itself violent," says Mike.

"But our organisations cannot now resort to violence. The stage has now come."

For the moment, at least, the fight is centred mainly on the black townships.

But the time has come, says an MCA member, for blacks to begin meeting more regularly with whites, to get them to start questioning what the government tells them.

"The government needs white unity more than anything, and we need to divide that unity," he says.

It is essential for the government itself to be isolated. They must be forced to say: "we cannot govern."

The black struggle, he says, has moved away from a "paper struggle" into a grassroots movement, "and these roots must spread into every corner of the land."

FILLING THE VOID LEFT BY THE COUNCILS' COLLAPSE

The formation of street committees in several townships throughout the country is seen as the first step towards replacing official administrative structures.

Apart from having left a void in the running of the townships, the collapse of the much-hated community councils and local authorities has paved the way for a new trend whereby people govern themselves.

"More and more people are shying away from reporting their cases at local police stations or at the homes of councillors. This has resulted in residents setting up their own courts," says Mike Seoane, general secretary of the Mamelodi Youth Congress (Mayo).

Although there was no official State of Emergency in Pretoria, residents still found it impossible to hold meetings, making communication impossible.

"There was an undeclared State of Emergency in Mamelodi with authorities banning meetings or Security Forces disrupting gatherings."

"It was at this time that some unruly element 'hijacked the struggle for their own ends', demanding money from businessmen in the name of Cosas (the banned Congress of South African Students)."

"We decided to launch an operation clean-up in June last year to weed out criminals and hooligans using the political struggle for their own ends."

After the November 21 shootings outside the Mamelodi administration offices, residents went on a widespread rent boycott. This prompted the authorities to suspend all garbage collection in the township.

"It was then that we included

in Mamelodi hooligans 'hijacked' political causes, extorting money in the name of the struggle. Then a youth group launched its own drive to clear up the township. SEFAKO NYAKA reports

garbage collection in the clean-up operation and soon we engaged in a house-to-house campaign to get people to isolate the police and the administration. We tried to persuade people not to pay rent or lay any charge at the police station."

"This resulted in the formation of 'people's courts to deal with petty crime. But then this also led to other elements using the courts to settle personal feuds."

"People would come to us claiming that their neighbours or whoever had insulted them or assaulted their child. In some cases the disciplinary courts would try the person *in absentia* without caring to listen to the other side of the story."

"Some people took advantage of this type of undemocratic procedure and would fabricate charges against people they had a dislike for," Seoane said.

"In some cases a person would go to a committee in a different street to report an incident that allegedly happened in the street in which he lived."

The offending party would then be fetched and punished. This led to people reporting incidents that had occurred several months, or even years ago.

"It was then that we hit on the idea of setting up street committees to deal with problems affecting a particular street."

Street committees, which meet

about once a week, deal with domestic problems such as a husband deserting his family and moving in with a girlfriend.

Usually the man is fetched and brought to the court to say what led to his walkout. Several marriages have been saved in this way.

At times a young man spends all his money at the shebeen without supporting his parents. He appears before court and after being shown the folly of his ways, he is usually given five lashes with a cane.

Despite police claims that some people have been sentenced to death by "necklace" or given more than 40 lashes, no evidence of this could be obtained.

There are also instances of the courts having punished rebellious children, students who play truant and generally behave anti-socially.

Street committees also made it easy to communicate decisions across a broad spectrum of the community.

The executives of street committees come together to form a section committee and the section committees and five delegates of all other progressive organisations operating in the township together form an area committee.

The area committee then formed a civic association.

It is still too early to gauge the effectiveness of the street committees but recently when police disrupted the launch of the civic association in the township, a highly successful three-day stayaway was called.

"It was remarkable how quickly and efficiently information filtered through to individuals."

Street committees decentralise civic associations making them more

approachable.

This has resulted in decisions emanating from the people themselves rather than from the executives of an organisation.

Recently a street committee in Mamelodi decided that shebeens had to operate until 10pm.

This was a decision affecting a particular street and other streets wishing to impose similar restrictions had to discuss the matter with the inhabitants of that street together with the shebeen owner.

Every resident living in a particular street becomes a member of a particular street committee. The only people excluded from membership are councillors, police and others who are openly collaborating with the system.

It usually happens that a member of a street committee affected by a certain decision feels unhappy about a proposal. If after a lengthy debate he still feels dissatisfied, the matter is referred to the block committee.

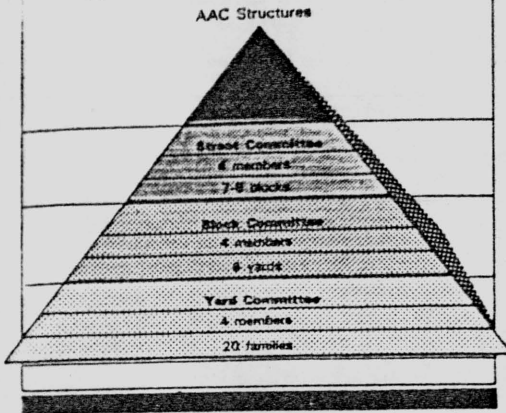
The matter can be taken to the highest level, the civic association, and if no accord is then reached, the matter is put to a vote.

"If a decision likely to affect the whole of Mamelodi is taken at street committee level, then it will have to be taken to the section committee which will pass it on to the area committee and the civic association before a final decision is taken."

In Mamelodi there are separate committees for adults and the youth because of the peculiarity of their experiences and their needs.

But they come together at the civic level and this eliminates possibilities of friction and conflict of interest.

RULING ALEXANDRA



member Siphon Kubheka is employed by the Paper, Wood and Allied Workers' Union. And Mayekiso points out that Alexandra is a highly unionised township. He estimates that between 30% and 40% of working residents are union members — far above the national average. Many shop stewards also serve on the various AAC sub-committees.

According to Mayekiso, the AAC has managed to organise about 60% of Alexandra. The major inhibiting factor is the heavy

security force presence in the township, which makes it difficult to hold public meetings.

The most widely publicised and controversial function of the AAC committees is their role as "peoples' courts" (see box). Right now, their other main function appears to be the politicisation of the community. Says Mayekiso: "We see ourselves as part and parcel of the national liberation struggle and are educating people to play their part."

But many of the residents' grievances, although certainly not all, relate to the state of the township's essential services, and rentals. At this level, however, the AAC has not come very far in formulating its role. Until its collapse, Sam Buti's town council was responsible for township administration and the AAC does not wish to take over the council's mantle. Such is the level of polarisation in Alexandra that it would take a great deal to convince the AAC to have any contact at all with officialdom — even if the authorities were prepared to deal with it.

But the irony that government and its agencies will continue to administer these services for the people of Alexandra does not escape Mayekiso and he acknowledges that his committee will have to come up with some answers.

PEOPLES' JUSTICE

Around the country the phrase "peoples' court" has become synonymous with the dreaded "necklace." However, says Alexandra Action Committee (AAC) chairman Moses Mayekiso, in Alexandra the peoples' court has not sentenced anyone to death. Nor does it mete out corporal punishment.

"The court's intention is to educate, not punish," he says. He claims that more justice is found in it than in SA's official system of justice.

This factor, and a general fear of the police, means that the peoples' courts have gained wide acceptance in the community.

An important function of the court, Mayekiso says, is to mediate in family conflicts and to adjudicate in cases of public nuisance — like noise, street fights and property disputes.

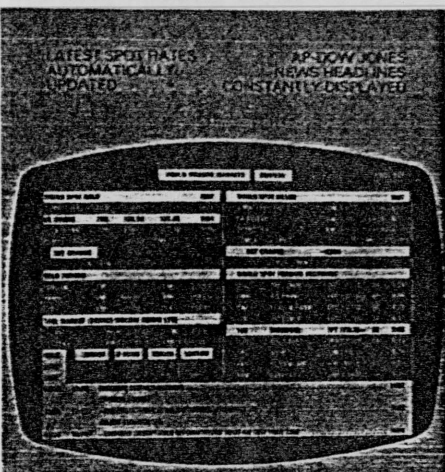
The court also deals with crime, mainly petty theft and assault. Stolen property is returned to its rightful owner. The only other sanction is to convince offenders of the wrongfulness of their ways through a process of political education.

Says Mayekiso: "The court teaches offenders that they have been manipulated by the system. We understand how poverty drives people to steal, but we encourage the offender to look for a job instead. In addition, he is assisted by employed residents who are asked to look out for job opportunities on his behalf."

Mayekiso, who does not personally act as a court official, claims the system is extremely successful. He does not know of a single case of recidivism. He adds that it has also led to a reduction of crime in the township. The Alexandra Clinic says it keeps statistics on victims of violent crime, but a doctor there says the general impression is that there has been a reduction in the number of criminal assault victims.

Mayekiso says the court has not had to "try" any serious cases, such as one involving murder or a police informer. He insists, however, that even then the emphasis would be on education. "Informers are sick," he says. "You can not heal them by killing them. People inform either because they are hungry, or are pressurised by the police after being arrested."

The courts operate through the AAC structures, beginning at yard committee level. There are no formal procedures. "We would rather use our wisdom and natural sense," says Mayekiso. Nevertheless, there is a due process of a sort. Charges, he says, are properly investigated, and while people are encouraged to settle cases at the lowest possible level, accused have the right to appeal against findings through the block and street committee structures. The final word rests with five AAC members who have been nominated to do the job.



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For a demonstration or more information contact:
AP-DOW JONES-TELERATE
P O Box 261271 Excom 2023
Phone: (011)29-1616
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DBA 2834/2