

## **The forgotten people: Political banishment under apartheid**

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### **Reviewed by Heather MacDonald**

School of Built Environment, University of Technology, Sydney,  
P.O. Box 123, Australia

*The forgotten people: Political banishment under apartheid* makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of the variety of repressive strategies adopted by the apartheid state. While the number of people banished between 1948 and 1982 (the period studied in this book) is quite small (160), it represented an important strand of the state's efforts to suppress rural 'unrest'. Banishment, banning (restricting a person to their home and forbidding them from attending meetings), endorsement (cancelling their permission to remain and work in an urban area), and deportation (removing a person to the nominally independent Bantustan to which they 'belonged'), and detention (imprisonment without trial), made up a set of extra-legal strategies of political suppression and punishment that, while not unique to apartheid South Africa, reflected its peculiarly Kafkaesque quality. All five strategies, one could argue, were based on a distinctive concept of space as an instrument to dislocate and reconstruct societies according to the visions of apartheid's architects, echoing the much larger-scale removals of entire communities.

Earlier uses of banishment (internationally, and before the establishment of the apartheid state in 1948) are discussed very briefly in the initial chapter. The bulk of the book is devoted to a series of detailed case studies of resistance and its leaders in specific places, organised within a loose chronology. More detailed individual stories are presented where the record (in the form of memoirs, interviews or biographies) allows, and the text is illustrated with poignant photographs of the banished, many contributed by the Ernest Cole Family Trust. The book is dedicated to Helen Joseph, who, along with Lilian Ngoyi, Amina Cachalia and others, established the Human Rights Welfare Committee in 1959, to advocate for the basic rights of the banished, and to support them materially, where possible.

Dr. Badat, the author, explains the evolution of banishment from colonial statutes to the 1927 *Native Administration Act* and its 1956 amendments, under which the Minister for Native Affairs could order a person accused (or suspected) of endangering the 'peace, order, and good government of natives' (p. 247), to leave their home and move to a designated location until further notice. As an administrative rather than a court order, those banished were rarely able to discover the precise reasons for the action (disclosing reasons could conveniently be ruled as harmful to the public interest) and, more disturbingly, they had no idea when such banishment might end. They could not appeal banishment orders through the courts either – only Ministers could revoke the order, usually on condition of the subject refraining from further

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political activity (defined both broadly and vaguely). As the Bantustans began to play a more central role in implementing the apartheid vision, the power to banish people was extended to the homeland rulers. In some cases, banishment was used very effectively in the power struggles among factions of traditional ruling families (notably, this was how Mangosuthu Buthelezi deposed his older sibling, Mceleli Buthelezi, from the leadership of Kwazulu).

Perhaps, most importantly, banishment was a strategy that could compensate for the limitations of the formal justice system, offering an administrative solution where the evidence was inadequate for conviction, and a way to control former political prisoners once their jail term was concluded. It became much less important once parliament had rewritten laws (in the *Terrorism Act* of 1967 and the *Internal Security Act* of 1976) to expand the state's ability to detain and punish opponents on much flimsier grounds. While banishment was often represented as a less draconian response to political agitators than imprisonment, Dr. Badat's carefully documented story of the experiences of individuals provides compelling evidence of the inhumanity of a strategy that he likens to being marooned on a desert island. Their rights to receive medical attention; travel costs for their families to visit or join them; and basic needs for food, clothing and shelter (in extremely inhospitable environments), were fragile. The banished were isolated by language and frequently by distance (one place of banishment, Frenchdale, was 19km from the nearest shop). In a chapter focused on the conditions in which the banished lived, Dr. Badat argues that the 'social death' it represented was more inhumane than imprisonment:

Imprisonment on Robben Island was a preferable alternative to banishment in a distant, desolate, foreign area. Prisoners on the Island constituted a community that intermingled and debated political issues. There was easier access to the basic necessities of food, shelter and medical care; greater opportunity for further education; and, unless sentenced to life imprisonment, there was a defined period of incarceration. (p. 220)

Banishment was predominately used to suppress rural resistance; only 11 per cent of those banished between 1948 and the repeal of the legislation in 1986 were from urban areas. Dr. Badat argues that this reflects the assumption that rural opponents were less likely to be part of national organisations, and thus less likely to organise within the communities they were moved to:

... there were fewer political activists schooled in the art of political mobilisation and organisation in the rural areas. In these circumstances, and without adequate evidence to charge and imprison activists, the banishment of key individuals was an effective means of smothering popular resistance and paving the way for the imposition of state policies. (p. 285)

Opposition to state efforts to modernise agricultural practices (so-called 'betterment' planning), conflict around the legitimacy of traditional leaders, and the extension of the hated pass system to women, were key points of resistance.

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Dr. Badat argues in the book's conclusion for a reassessment of rural resistance, questioning whether it was as parochial and marginalised as several later histories have claimed. One could make a more explicit argument for the link between these issues and some of the underlying purposes of the apartheid state – to rationalise the consequences of dispossession (by imposing more intensive agricultural practices through betterment planning) and of disenfranchisement (by imposing a simulacrum of 'traditional' authority, backed by an effective control on labour flows). As he points out, banishment was not directly addressed in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and he argues that this reflects the marginal role assigned to rural resistance in the emerging narrative of struggle in postapartheid South Africa. The book's detailed archival research and focus on the experiences of those banished thus represents an important addition to the historical record.

One flaw, however, is the substantial repetition of quotations among chapters; two of the concluding integrative chapters read as if they might have been separate publications, as they draw heavily on the same material used in the detailed case study chapters. More careful editing would have resolved this problem. But, overall, *The forgotten people* exemplifies the role good history can play in reassigning dignity to those marginalised in master narratives of political change and social revolution.

### Biographical note

Associate Professor **Heather MacDonald** is Head of the School of Built Environment at the University of Technology, Sydney, where she teaches in the Master of Planning programme. Her recent research has focused on discrimination in rental housing, the impacts of planning regulations on housing affordability, and governance problems associated with metropolitan planning reform. A long time ago, she graduated from the Master of Town and Regional Planning programme at the University of Natal, Durban.