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### South African Student Organisation (SASO)

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#### The Origins and formation:

The South African Student Organisation (SASO) was formed in 1968 after some members of the University of Natal's Black Campus SRC (Student Representative Council) decided to break away from the **National Union of South African Students (NUSAS)**. NUSAS was a liberal organisation dominated by White students. When it was formed in 1924, it was an exclusively White student body that represented student interests. In the 1960s White members became sympathetic to the Black students cause. As a result, Black students membership began to increase. Many of these students, the majority of whom were based at the University of Natal, became increasingly dissatisfied with the inability of NUSAS to tackle deep racist structures and

policies of both the government and universities.

One incident in particular, sparked the break away. In the period 1967-68 **Steve Biko**, a medical student at Natal University, was one of the students who began to analyze and criticise the unhealthy political situation in the country. At Wentworth, Natal University's medical school for Blacks, Biko was elected to the Student's Representative Council (SRC), and in 1967, attended a conference of students that was critical of the government. Primarily because NUSAS was dominated by whites, Rhodes University, the conference host, refused to allow mixed-race accommodation or eating facilities. Reacting angrily to the incident, Biko slated the incomplete integration of student politics under the existing system and dismissed talk of liberalism as an empty gesture by Whites who really wished to maintain the status quo and keep Blacks as second-rate citizens.

The formation of SASO was preceded and influenced by the formation of the **University Christian Movement (UCM)** in 1967. UCM was an inter-denominational religious movement that allowed students from different universities to meet on a regular basis. It was influenced by Black Theology that taught religion from an oppressed person's perspective. Liberation theology sought to transform society into a just and fraternal society. The aim of black theology was to inspire Black people to realise equality with White people and that their Blackness and inferiority was not a punishment nor a condition created by God. The UCM accepted these teachings as relevant for Black South Africans and important for their liberation. Despite its orientation towards Black Theology, Steve Biko and his circle of associates were not content with the UCM. They observed that the UCM was reinforcing the inferior status of Black people by having a large number of White people in their leadership structures, even though the majority of its members were Black.

Subsequently, in 1968 during a UCM meeting, Black students formed a black caucus that resolved that there was a need to form an exclusively Black student organisation. The caucus then decided that a conference for Black students should be organised. The conference, which was attended by thirty members from various SRCs from Black universities, was held at Marianhill, Natal. The conference saw the birth of SASO. The following year in July 1969 SASO had its inaugural conference which was held at the University of the North near Pietersburg (now Polokwane). At this conference Steve Biko was elected its first President and students from the University of Natal played a pivotal role in the formation of this student structure.

The decision to break away from NUSAS was also motivated largely by the emergence of Black Consciousness (BC) - founded by Steve Biko. BC was a new philosophy influenced by the development of "Black Theology" among the University of Natal Black students. The **Black Consciousness Movement** that Biko founded rejected the notion that whites could play a role in the liberation of Blacks. "The main thing was to get black people to articulate their own struggle and reject the white liberal establishment from prescribing to people," said Barney Pityana (Biko's friend).

Biko and his colleagues felt Blacks needed to learn to speak for themselves. In fact, as Pityana recalled, for white students, "NUSAS was a nice friendly club, another game you played while at university. Then you grew out of it," but for Biko and other black students, NUSAS was not militant enough. Other liberal organisations like some churches were not open to blacks either. For Example, at a non-racial church conference, which Biko attended, white participants discouraged blacks from defying restrictions of the Group Areas Act, which limited Blacks to 72 hours in a white area. Being told how students should act annoyed Biko very much. It also underlined the extent to which Black South Africans were isolated even in the churches.

#### SASO and NUSAS: Conflicting opinions

SASO adopted a conciliatory tone towards NUSAS stating that its objective was to promote contact between Black students in different universities as well as contact between White and Black students. SASO was deeply concerned that breaking away from NUSAS would



alienate it from those Black students who were strongly committed to working within and with NUSAS. One such student was Ben Ngubane. Ngubane was of the opinion that Black politics should not grow outside the liberal fold on the grounds that White liberals had also suffered from state abuse and humiliation and they deserved support, respect and the freedom to love Black South Africans. He was further concerned that breaking away from a national body like NUSAS to form an additional national body would weaken the liberation movement. Another student concerned with the formation of SASO was Aubrey Mokoape. Mokoape was an Africanist and former member of the **Pan Africanist Congress (PAC)** since his high school days. He was against the inclusion of "Coloureds" and "Indians" in the Black Consciousness Movement on the grounds that they were neither Black nor Africans. Faced with these conflicting perspectives it became essential for SASO to adopt a cautious approach lest it alienated the bulk of students sympathetic to its cause because so many held different views.

Towards the middle of 1970s SASO began to assert its ideological stance and political objectives. The organization had grown in confidence because of increased student support and assertiveness of the independent political organisation. As a result, during the first SASO General Student Council (GSC), the 'conservative' first preamble was amended to assert Black Consciousness and the independence of Black students to act according to their own free will in response to Apartheid and racism in general. In July 1972 to encourage adult participation and promote their broad objectives, SASO leaders and representatives from some twenty-seven black organizations established an adult wing of their organisation, the Black People's Convention (BPC) under the Presidency of Winnie Kgware.

#### A watershed period for SASO

The 1970s was a watershed period for SASO. Driven by an assertive spirit SASO introduced community-cum-political projects to spread its ideas about self-reliance and Black Consciousness. These projects were aimed at schools and black communities. Political projects at schools quickly became SASO's most important in the program. The aim of the schools project was to produce a new breed of youth leaders, ready to confront the challenges faced by Black people. Most importantly the 1970s was a period when the organisation began to define itself as a powerful force opposing the state and Apartheid.

SASO also called on homeland leaders to withdraw from Apartheid structures and stop being "ambassadors of oppression" (Badat: 1999, 95). On the subject of education, SASO adopted a more radical and a clear position rejecting the apartheid educational system for black people (Bantu education system). In July 1971, SASO adopted the declaration of student rights which marked a departure from their earlier cautious approach. What made the declaration radical was the inclusion in its clauses of the right to dissent with university instructors. The declaration was preceded by the adoption of a policy manifesto that had divided South Africans into groups of those "*who are part of the solution (Black people)*" and those "*who are part of the problem (White people)*." Following the adoption of these policies, SASO organised an "Education Commission" to study possible ways of making education relevant to Black South Africans. In 1972 SASO rejected a separate development platform and expelled its third president Themba Sono who called for the pragmatic use of separate development platforms to advance the liberation struggle. Sono was only president for one year, from 1971 to 1972. In 1972, the commission tabled a "Black Education Manifesto" to be adopted by the third GSC. The Black Education Manifesto took a different turn in that it rejected racist education and the notion that universities are neutral bodies in the process of acquiring knowledge. SASO saw its role in these years closely tied to the transformation of race relations in South Africa by crafting a political destiny independent from any political organisation and government. Moreover, SASO wanted to revive pride in African culture and knowledge systems to inspire pride in Black identity and Black roots. As Black consciousness became more radical, it acquired the appearance of an alternative society in the making. With this change came increased police surveillance and state repression.

#### The Repression of SASO

On 26 February 1973, the South African Minister of Justice, Mr Pelser issued banning orders to eight SASO leaders. The matter became public on 8 March the same year when it was confirmed in parliament before a shocked opposition. Pelser justified his action by arguing that he was preventing SASO from spreading its message of a 'Black Revolution'. The bannings were received by SASO as an indication that it stood for the 'true' liberation of Black people. From 1973 until 1977 when SASO was banned, state repression increased. In 1974 it was listed as an "affected" organisation under the *Affected Organisation Act* of 1974. This meant that SASO could no longer rely on foreign funding to pursue its objectives. The killing of Onkgopotse Tiro, police harassment, and the banning of SASO leaders undermined the organisation's capacity and removed its effective leadership. After the **June 16, 1976** Soweto and Western Cape school uprisings SASO leaders were served with restrictions and banning orders. Steve Biko was continuously detained and finally beaten up by the Security Branch of the police. He subsequently died in Pretoria Central Prison on 12 September 1977. On 19 October 1977, SASO and its associated BC organisations were banned by the state. It became an illegal organisation and association with it became illegal as well. It appears that there were no attempts to transform the organisation into an underground party. However, its ideologies and political objectives were adopted by successive organisations such as the **Azanian People Organisation (AZAPO)** and **South African National Students' Congress (SANSCO)**. The banning of SASO left Black students broadly radicalised into self-conscious ideas about attaining their own freedom.

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