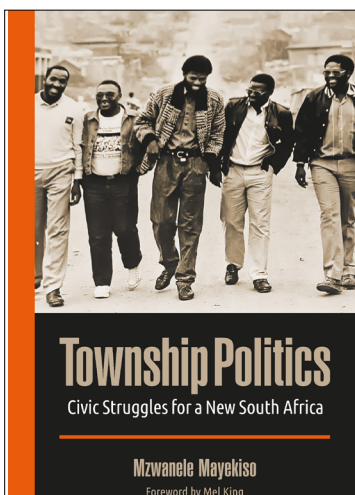


# Township Politics

## Civic Struggles for a New South Africa

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The book has a black and white cover, which is like a sepia-inspired filter. This beautifully captures the era in which the picture was taken and the warmth exuded by the five seemingly happy men walking down a township street. There is a clear juxtaposition between the chosen image conveying happiness and the book title, which highlights struggles.

Mayekiso divides the book into four main parts. Part 1 on a welcome to Alexandra briefly gives us insight into Mayekiso's childhood in the Eastern Cape and how he got involved in student activism. Here, he introduces key role players in his activism, including family members. In part 2: Alexandra at War, he discusses how he got involved in the activism, the tensions and social climate of Alexandra as well as the living conditions he and many others were subjected to, at the hands of the apartheid regime. He goes on to discuss how protests and movements were organised and formed, the relationship with authorities and community members and the events that led to his arrests. He does not shy away from explaining the levels at which mobilisation took place and how they had to work to get members of the community involved, across all ages, genders and social classes. In part 3: Alexandra in the Interregnum, he discusses his transition from prison back into society, the escalations of the rebellion against the apartheid government from protests to wars with the regime as well as the conflicts that arose among the civic groups among each other, and against the apartheid regime while advocating for a better standard of living for the marginalised. The last part of the book, Part 4: Towards and Beyond Liberation, underscores the contributions of women in the liberation struggle, creating sustainable development for people and advocating for a better standard of living for black people both, economically and socially.

The writer takes you down the streets of Alexandra, where you observe and interact with people. He playfully toggles between different styles of narration. Each style evokes a different emotion from the reader. Initially, the intention is to get the reader to imagine themselves in Alexandra, and therefore acts as a tour guide, showing you the surroundings, introducing us to characters and making us alert of our surroundings, as a tour guide naturally would. To aid the tour-guide-style narration, he also includes pictures in the book that make it easier to imagine the conditions. He then seamlessly transitions in a manner that's almost unnoticeable to a dairy-entry-like style of narration, where you can see and hear his thoughts in a way that almost feels invasive, but essential to understand his state of mind.

The author sets the scene in the township of Alexandra, in the 1980's-1990's, highlighting 1986 as the year that contributed the most to his growth and his position as a student leader, and later, an activist. The book offers valuable insights into the civic struggle in townships during apartheid, specifically in the township of Alexandra. It discusses the dynamics that contributed to South

Africa's transition to freedom. Mayekiso not only speaks about the efforts of South Africans but international allies and communities as well in the struggle towards freedom.

Mayekiso begins by delving into the oppressive apartheid state and their treatment of black people which include the appalling living and working conditions of people in townships, providing context for why there was an urgency needed in the people's rebellion against the apartheid government. He seamlessly weaves stories of activists and regular community members alike who all contributed to the civic movements. The more sensitive readers may be brought to tears by the killing of a 17 year old Michael Diradeng by a security guard. Mayekiso explains in detail how that incident fuelled youth groups with rage and stronger will to fight. This subsequently led to the six-day war against authorities during which, many lives were claimed.

As a detour from the established tour-guide and diary-like narrations, the author introduces a debate-like approach in which he critiques multiple scholars on their lack on information, research and bias when writing about, and reporting on the events that occurred during apartheid. Mayekiso defends the civic movements (mainly the AAC) from scholars by establishing timelines and providing in-depth clarifications behind their decisions to contribute towards making South Africa ungovernable and the methods undertaken to do so. He suggests that their writing shows privilege and a general lack of understanding of the events that took place, putting their credibility into question. The book goes on to shed light on the internal challenges faced by the different civic movements, and personal motives of people who also portrayed themselves as allies, while riding the fence for security.

The author succeeds at humanising the activists who suffered and decided to withdraw from the struggle for the sake of their families and their own safety. Where many may have called them cowards and sell-outs, he acknowledges how the traumas inflicted on activists and their families were life-changing and to some, not worth the risk. Mayekiso does not only rely on well-researched accounts of the activities that took place, he has the added advantage of being able to tell us from his experience as a youth activist. He talks about his upbringing and how different environments shaped his ideologies and political participation.

Mayekiso draws parallels between the struggles people in townships faced during apartheid and the struggles people are currently facing and highlights how socio-economic disparities (by design) have continued to negatively affect the lives of South Africans, even after the political transition. Furthermore, in a political landscape where democratic backsliding presents as a threat, Mayekiso's book stresses the importance of movements at the grass-root levels in order to shape the nation's democratic trajectory. This tactic aids the reader in understanding the nature of township struggles and why they are interconnected.

Overall, the book can be read by scholars and non-scholars alike. For scholars, the book serves as a source of information that highlights truths about the struggle that may not have previously been touched on due to a lack of interest in township politics or due to misinformation spread by the apartheid regime. For young people, the book can serve as a minefield of inspiration and insight on how young people through history came together to mobilize to fight for a better future. For everyone else, the book acknowledges the contributions made by regular citizens to push the country forward towards freedom, therefore not only educates us about our history but validates the efforts put in by all those who wanted justice. Although the author succeeds in capturing the intricate dynamics of the civic movements and amplifying the voices of those actors whose contributions have been historically overlooked, readers who are looking for a straightforward recollection of events may encounter challenges with Mayekiso's academic rigour. Nonetheless, the book has something for everyone.

For academics and non-academics alike, Mayekiso manages to explore lesser-known accounts, from his personal experience as an activist and from individuals, whose stories may have been historically overlooked by academics and overshadowed by more popular political figures. The diverse experiences and recollections make it easier to humanise the people who fought and relate to them. He mentions how both parents and children, the employed and the unemployed, the poor and the well-off were all included through yard committees and speaks of the commitment expressed through going to people's houses to teach them individually and explore the different ways community members could contribute to the fight towards freedom. This approach does not simply paint those who fought as angry radicals (even though the anger was valid), but as families, communities, and human beings fighting together for a better future where their skin colour would not determine their quality of life, fighting for political representation and justice.

Ultimately, this is a well-structured book that skilfully combines personal experiences, historical accounts and socio-political analysis that are important to understanding township dynamics and the civic movements that have shaped South Africa. Even with the tragedies in mind, this is a book about hope, community and justice. Apartheid legacies still exist, they affect every fibre of society and will take generations to undo, but Mayekiso ends the book on a positive note, one with hope for a better future for all South Africans.

### **Book information**

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