

From the frontline of the liberation struggle to a listing on the JSE, it's been no easy walk to economic empowerment for South Africa's newest media mogul.



HAMMER AND NAIL

Gus Silber talks to Nthato Motlana.

The doctor is out. Third confirmed appointment this week, and he's nowhere to be seen. To make things worse, he's not even answering his cellular phone. His secretary, almost distraught with apology, brandishes a dog-eared, Tippex-smearred, ink-stained and exclamation-marked diary as evidence: the doctor is a busy man.

So busy, that at the age of 70, he's finally been forced to concede that his working day no longer leaves a gap for the practice of medicine. So busy, acquiring capital, building empires, creating wealth and empowering his people, that it is something of a shock when the security buzzer sounds and Dr Nthato Motlana strides into his office, announcing his arrival with a dazzling flash of teeth and a greeting in rich, rolling Afrikaans.

The executive chairman of New Africa Investments Ltd (Nail), the R7-billion, black-owned-and-controlled conglomerate at the helm of South Africa's biggest daily newspaper — Sowetan — takes his seat at the boardroom table, and I remind him that he was on television just the other night.

He was wearing an ethno-print shirt and a grim expression, and he was rousing a rally with a Black Power salute and the message that "there is nothing more powerful than an idea whose time has come". The time was 1976, the idea was socialism. The doctor's shoulders shake with mirth. He gets that little sound-bite thrown in his face all the time.

It's proof that he's abandoned the cause, sold out, become a fatcat. But really, nothing's changed. He still lives in Soweto, where he was a much-banned and detained activist, founder of the Soweto Civic Association and the Committee of Ten, in the days when the other NM was still behind bars.

He's still, at least on the surface, a lean and wiry cat. He still believes in Black Power. Only these days, he calls it "Economic Empowerment". A world away from the clenched fist salute, he weighs the air with his hands and borrows a slogan from the Soweto Black Housewives' League. "We lift as we rise." It sounds like a recipe for making bread. It is.

With a reflex born of more than 30 years as a general practitioner, Motlana uncaps a pen and scrawls something illegible on an executive jotter. "I know among some of my socialist-Marxist friends," he says, "the word 'profit' is anathema. So let's not even use that word. Let's just say..." He completes the prescription with a flourish "...excess of income over expenditure". If you don't have that, you're broke. I mean, even a Socialist can understand that."

He's almost weeping with laughter now, but the truth is, Nthato Motlana has been in business almost as long as he's been in politics. With a portfolio of ventures ranging from the manufacture of children's clothing to the establishment of Soweto's first private clinic, he scowls at the notion that his rise up the corporate ladder — he was one of the Sunday Times' top five businessmen last year — is purely a function of "affirmative action" by such white-owned corporations as the Argus group.

Nevertheless, it was Argus's 1993 decision to liberate Sowetan from its bundle that finally fulfilled a long-standing business and personal dream for Motlana. In the Seventies, angered by white control of the South African press, he led an unsuccessful attempt to launch a newspaper for, about, and run by blacks. Based in Pietermaritzburg, it was to have been called The Black Voice, with Motlana as chairman and Harry Mashabela as editor.

But the plan fell through when proposed funding from the World Council of Churches was diverted to a short-lived ecumenical publication called The Voice. Still, the dream lived on, and when Argus approached Motlana and a number of other "eminent persons" with a view to selling its black flagship to a commu-

nity-based trust, his reaction was characteristically to-the-point.

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Today, aside from interests in insurance (Metlife) and cellular communication (MTN), Nail owns 52.5 percent of Sowetan, which gives Motlana more than enough right to express an opinion on the paper's shortcomings.

"The problem with Sowetan is that it is aimed at a Standard Four reader. So anyone with Standard Six, or a Junior Certificate, or a degree, found nothing to relate to in its pages. We know that people want to read about how Orlando Pirates beat Sundowns over the weekend, or what Brenda Fassie is doing, but we are also beginning to cater for people who aren't interested in that kind of thing."

Not that Motlana has any intention of imposing his feelings on editorial policy, of course. "One of the first things we did," he affirms, "was sign a charter saying that we, the new owners, would not interfere with the editorial staff. They must do what they know best. But clearly, we are going to use our influence, without leaning too heavily on them, to ensure that the paper has a proper balance."

It doesn't even bother Motlana, as a staunch ANC supporter, that the paper has a reputation for leaning towards the Pan Africanist and Black Consciousness points of view. "I don't know how true it is, but I believe that 95 percent of Sowetan's staff are PAC or BC," he shrugs. Not all readers are so tolerant. During the election campaign, Motlana was berated for an issue that led with a report of a 5 000-strong meeting

addressed by the PAC's Clarence Makwethu, while a mass rally addressed by President-in-waiting Nelson Mandela only made it to Page Four.

"I mean, that is absolute nonsense," agrees Motlana. "It's just not on." The complainant, Mandela himself. Although he is no longer the President's personal physician, a function since usurped by the Surgeon-General, Motlana still mans the complaints

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hotline when a Sowetan report or editorial incurs Mandela's disfavour. "But", he hastens to add, "he never suggests or implies that I should do anything about it. He's just pointing it out to me, as the Chairman."

This brings the subject of Press Freedom to the table, and Motlana is happy to add his commitment to that of the ruling party. At the same time, he can

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understand why people like Deputy President Thabo Mbeki and PWV Premier Tokyo Sexwale are sometimes less enthusiastic about the practice of Press Freedom than they are about the principle.

"I can understand why they react as they do," he says. "I mean, the mainstream press, the handmaidens of Apartheid, after all the blabby crap they wrote during the Nationalist years ... when they suddenly start acting holier-than-thou, you just want to say, 'Hey, who the hell are you?'"

"I'm not saying certain things don't need to be said. Even Aggrey Klaaste, editor of Sowetan, is sometimes so damn aggressive towards the ANC, that it makes me cringe. But I support his right to say it. All I'm asking, as Thabo did, is that it is seen to be fair, and not just carping."

Motlana leans forward in his chair, his voice a conspiratorial whisper. The way he sees it, press criticism of the ANC, its ministers and officials, often seems mired in the residue of old-style South African racism.

"You get the impression," he says, "that some of the things they say about Mandela, about Thabo, about Tokyo, wouldn't be said if these guys were white. Or at least, the remarks would be tempered with prudence. It's a case of 'Man, wat weet die kaffers? Wat kan hulle maak?'"

At the same time, Motlana's own run-ins with the press have tended to be with publications reflecting

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the "black voice" of South African society. His particular nemesis is City Press, whose front pages have trumpeted Motlana's business setbacks and Nail's less-than-spectacular attempts to lure black investors to the Johannesburg Stock Exchange. Motlana still fumes over a City Press exclusive that claimed more than R6-million had "gone missing" from his much-vaunted Lesedi Clinic in Soweto.

"I will never forgive the young man who wrote that story," he says. "In truth, we had lost about R200 000. But people believe what they read in the papers. My staff would come to me time and time again, toy-toying and holding up placards: 'Dr Motlana, You Are Starving Us'. When these things happen, you have to ask yourself, is this what they mean by Freedom of the Press?"

As for black investment in Nail and its associated companies, Motlana concedes there is still some way to go before the idea takes root. Of 140-million shares up for offer earlier this year, only 11-million went to black investors, despite the heavily-discounted price of R1 a share. Motlana puts the blame partly on the

lingering perception that capitalism is not a good thing for "the community".

"There's a feeling," he says, "and I even find it among American Blacks, that it is not acceptable that a black man should get rich. If one man gets rich, everyone should get rich. But it doesn't work like that. Someone has to get the ball rolling. In any case, if some of us do get rich, we are bound to raise the level of richness of the whole black community. Because we do create wealth. We do create jobs."

With Nail poised to become one of South Africa's biggest industrial and publishing empires — plans include the expansion of Sowetan as a national daily, the launch of a range of magazine titles, and the establishment of a television and radio station — it looks as if Nthato Motlana is determined to live up to his current media image as "the black Harry Oppenheimer". He laughs it off.

"I'm reading the biography of the Rockefellers at the moment," he says, "and I keep thinking to myself,

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I just don't have that streak of ruthlessness. I come from a different mindset. I like to see myself as a train-driver, taking my people on a journey of economic empowerment. I'd like to serve as a role-model, so that instead of people saying, 'That man's too rich', they'll say: 'Dr Motlana, you were born in a rural village of peasant farmers. Tell me, how did you do it?'"

With that, the doctor smiles, taps his watch, and makes his way jauntily to his next appointment, leaving the answer unspoken but loudly evident in the tailored cut of his pin-stripe suit and the unostentatious surroundings of his corporate headquarters. There is only one thing more powerful than an idea whose time has come. And that's a better idea.

Nthato Harrison Motlana was born in Marapyane near Pretoria in 1925. He obtained a BSc from Fort Hare and graduated in 1954 from the Wits Medical School. As secretary general of the ANC Youth League he stood trial with Mr Nelson Mandela and others in 1952 for his role in the Defiance Campaign. He has been banned twice, detained without trial twice, and convicted twice for "offences against the security of the state", resulting in imprisonment. He was not permitted to leave South Africa for 32 years.

In the 1970s he became chairman of the Soweto Committee of Ten and was the founder of the Soweto Civic association. He serves on the boards of Putco, The Rand Water Board, the Adcock Ingram Group and Sasol. He is chairman of MTN which was awarded one of two licences to operate a cellular network. Currently chairman of Metropolitan Life, he was last year recognised by the Sunday Times as one of its top five businessmen of 1993.

He has succeeded as chairman of the Corporate Africa Group in controlling South Africa's largest black-led business group, New Africa Investments Limited (Nail).

Dr Motlana is a long-time friend of President Mandela and has accompanied him overseas on several visits since 1990.

