Uzbekistan Chess Olympiad Reflections (10) by Dr Lyndon Bouah

Greetings family, friends, colleagues and the broader chess community from Uzbekistan.

The 2026 Chess Olympiad is being held in Samarkand in Uzbekistan. 200 countries from across the world have gathered to play in this prestigious event. Uzbekistan is in Central Asia, in the heart of the ancient Silk Road region.



Figure 1: Map of Uzbekistan

One of the stories that I often tell visitors and friends is that Chess was played at Robben Island during the incarceration of leaders such as Nelson Mandela. Let me tell you that story dear reader.



Figure 2: Map of Robben Island in relation to Cape Town



Figure 3: Robben Island aerial view

In late December 2009 I received an invitation to attend a day long activity relating to the Commonwealth Games. The Commonwealth Games would be held in Delhi, India in October 2010.The Commonwealth Baton was passing through all Commonwealth countries as it has been since 1958. The Baton contained a message from the Queen of England which would be read at the opening ceremony of the Games. An interesting feature of the Commonwealth Baton was that it changed colours depending on the country it was in to reflect the colours on the flag of the country.

I met the baton at the airport and proceeded to travel in the bus with the then Minister of Cultural Affairs and Sport, Mr. Sakkie Jenner. Stops were made along the way in Gugulethu where the local schoolchildren entertained the Minister with singing and dancing. The group then proceeded to Heideveld where they were entertained by the local Cape Minstrels troupe. The lunch stop was at the Castle in central Cape Town. Here the group was met by the members of the South African Rugby Sevens team. The entire party now proceeded to the Waterfront. Robben Island would be the final stop.

Robben Island is a World Heritage site today but in the past few centuries was used for a variety of purposes. Its most famous was that of a prison for anti-apartheid activists including Nelson Mandela. Bringing the Commonwealth Baton to Robben Island was symbolic. The Baton had never been to Robben Island and by bringing it here, it signified a triumph of the world to recapture the spirit that embodied the steely determination that the prisoners possessed to overcome the harsh conditions of their incarceration.

Charlene Smith has described Robben Island in the following terms:

> "*In its small, wave-beaten boundaries, Robben Island holds the memories of a nation and the legends of the greatest and weakest of South Africans. The Island has been the subject of books, plays, poems, and a vast oral mythology. Better known as "Esiquithini" (the Island) to the three generations of political prisoners who occupied it in the second half of the 20th century, it carries the scars of four centuries of human suffering and triumph. Its 12-kilometre circumference is like a small heart cut from the mainland bosom that*

for years monitored and regulated the pulse of a nation." (Smith in Robben Island, 1997 Struik publishers, p5)

Smith starts the introduction of her book *Robben Island* with a paragraph from an earlier author: "Who can be unmoved on first hearing of its inhabitants -the Lawbreakers, the Lunatics and the Lepers! Few places so small and insignificant looking can boast of having played so important a part in the history of a vast multitude of people. I make no apology, therefore for calling the attention of the reading public to the Island's early history, I claim for it more than a momentary passing attention; I call for respectful and reverential regard. (The Early History of Robben Island" by G.F. Gresley – Cape Illustrated Magazine 1895, quoted by Smith in Robben Island, 1997 Struik publishers, page 5)

The American authors Korr and Close in their delightful book "More than just a game,"view Robben Island as, *"A windswept lump of rock 7 miles off the coast of Cape Town, Robben Island was known as South Africa's Alcatraz (the infamous island prison off San Francisco and had for hundreds of years been the place where successive regimes banished the unwanted. The Island was battered by harsh Atlantic currents, and the seabed nearby was littered with shipwrecks. Over the centuries, many sailors had lost their lives in the turbulent, shark-infested waters.*

"The Dutch used the island as a makeshift prison for army deserters and criminals until 1795, when the British seized the tip of Africa. For the next century, Robben Island was a hell hole. Lepers, the mentally ill, and prostitutes suffering from syphilis were all forcibly extradited to the Island to live in squalor.

The British set a precedent for the island by using it as a prison for political opponents. It was here that the great African general Makana was incarcerated. His tribe, the Xhosa, went to war with the British after the colonial power stole their cattle, and Makana was captured and banished to Robben Island.

The island was cleared of its inhabitants in the Thirties, all dispersed to prisons and hospitals to the South African mainland. The military took possession of the island, burned down the ramshackle old buildings and began to turn it into a fortified sea defence, complete with gun emplacements and underground

workings. In the early Sixties Cape Town's first line of wartime defence was to become South Africa's first line of attack on men who opposed its apartheid regime. The security force requisitioned the island from the military and erected 20-foot-high razor wire defences to mark out the perimeters of a new high-security prison, a vast institution that would house well over two thousand men".

(Korr and Close, More than Just a Game, 2008, Harper Collins Publishers, pages 22-23)

Smith however points out that the Dutch brought political prisoners from Malaysia, India, Sri Lanka and Indonesia to the Cape. These prisoners were either brought to the Island or forced into slavery. In 1969, a kramat was erected on Robben Island over the grave of Sayed Abdurahman Moturu, the prince of Madura who died on Robben Island in 1754. (Smith, page 14.)

We were met by guides who took the party on a tour of Robben Island. The guide then tweaked the tour to make it very different to my previous and subsequent tours of the Island. He proceeded to conduct a sport tour of the Island. The guide started off by showing us the soccer fields where teams used to play matches against other prisoner teams. The importance of sport was recognised by prisoners.

"*Before arriving on Robben Island, Nelson Mandela was hardly a keen soccer fan, but as he became increasingly interested in what the game meant to the men in prison, it began to teach him important lessons about unifying nature of sport. He became acutely aware, through smuggled information, just how much sport–obsessed Afrikaners were wounded by a succession of sport boycotts that effectively isolated South Africa from the rest of the world."* (Korr and Close, More than Just a Game, 2008, Harper Collins Publishers, pxii,)

We then proceeded to the inside of the prison where the guide explained to us how the prisoners organised themselves into clubs and later a Recreation Committee and proceeded to organise various games. As a keen chess player, I was now very intrigued. Was chess played on Robben Island? I needed to know this as I used to remember stories of chess being played by prisoners across the world.

The book 'More than Just a Game' referred to above gave me a hint that chess was indeed played on Robben Island. *"Yet studying and correspondence courses were not the only pastimes in the Prison. Most of the prisoners were young and learned to find their fun where they could. Their ingenuity knew no bounds. They made dice from stolen pieces of soap, playing cards from scraps of paper, and chess pieces from lumps of driftwood salvaged from the shingle beach next to the quarry. Men from the Eastern Cape such as Marcus showed their fellow inmates how to play draughts, while inmates from the Transvaal introduced the game of Ludo." (p41)*

The guide regaled the touring party with stories about the 1972 Robben Island Summer Olympic Games that was organised by the prisoners. "Our Olympics was the most emotional and happy day of the year". Vusumzi Mcongo, Prisoner 93/78 (Korr and Close, More than Just a Game, 2008, Harper Collins Publishers, p183).

Within two years, the Summer Games was such a hit with the prisoners that Sedick Isaacs, who was one of the main organisers of the Summer Games, had to expand it to include several indoor games. There were four divisions of draughts, three each of dominoes, chess, and bridge and three each of both singles and doubles table tennis.

(Korr and Close, More than Just a Game, 2008, Harper Collins Publishers, p189)

We now know from the above references that chess was indeed played and in fact competitively played at the Robben Island Summer Games.

The organiser of the Robben Island Summer Games, Sedick Isaacs, in his autobiography related that chess was played on Robben Island. *"We also started playing chess. The red and blue soap that could not lather in the seawater found a use. We made crude chess pieces from the soap. During a chess match we would whisper the moves to one another and each player would replicate both his and his opponent's moves on his chess board".* (Sedick Isaacs, Surviving in the Apartheid Prison, Flashbacks of an earlier life, XLibris, 2010, p157)

Isaacs in a discussion on sport and recreation stated, *"The need for human recreation is innate and must be fairly basic in a hierarchical list of human*

needs if there is indeed such a hierarchy. Indoor games evolved fairly early during our stay on Robben Island. Ludo and draughts were drawn using soap on blankets and shells and stones were used as pieces. The Dice were made from pieces of soap and later by grinding and rubbing blue stones into squares. Some of these handmade dice were unwittingly loaded or biased and it was interesting to try and determine the bias of the die. The dice were confiscated whenever there were cell searches, but we always started again. Mzwai was a good dice maker and the way he played Ludo, his supplication to the dice when tossing it and his exclamations and expressions of joy or disappointments when the die landed was entertaining enough to watch. Chess was also played using cardboard pieces with the relevant pictures of the king, knights, pawns etc. drawn on it and this too confiscated when found. We also played chess in the culukoet (isolation cells. Editor) with twin chess boards in each cell whispering moves to one another whenever it was safe to do so. (Sedick Isaacs, Surviving in the Apartheid Prison, Flashbacks of an earlier life, XLibris, 2010, p198)

In 2012 former prisoners released a book entitled "The Lighter Side of Robben Island". In the book they recounted various episodes. Gugu Kunene recounts an episode, "Shortly afterwards, Sphithiphithi approached Sfiso's commander in the MK (Umkhonto we Sizwe) underground in Nongoma, Mfundisi Dumisa, known by his *nom de guerre* of "Mugabe", proposing that they play chess.

Sfiso remarks:

"You could tell Sphithiphithi was the challenger as he took the lead setting the pieces on the chess board. Mugabe realized this man was a novice, and he took over the board game, accusing Sphithiphithi: "You can't even get your pieces right, yet you want to play with me." The outcome of that game is anybody's guess. It was clear Sphithiphithi could not play chess properly. (Khumalo et al. The lighter side of life on Robben Island, Makana Investment Corporation, 2012, p90-91)

In various interviews held with former prisoners the issue of chess was addressed. In an interview with the late Neville Alexander, John Carlin asked Alexander if the late Nelson Mandela played chess.

Alexander responded "*Well, chess and draughts were the two games which were the oldest on the island in a way. Draughts, partly because we could play*

them without a board. Chess, eventually when we did get a board. It became a favourite game, and he was one of those who knew the game quite well. My personal recollection is that in both draughts and chess Nelson's attitude was that of real attrition. That was his stance. He would take time with every move; he would consider it carefully. He would sort of mislead the other person by pointing things, this way, that way, the other and then making the move that wasn't expected and so on. But more than that, when he did make a really good move, then he would crow and make the other person feel really small." (Interview conducted on 25 Wednesday 2007 http:// susanpolgar.blogspot.com/2007/07/nelsonmandela-and-chess-by john.carlin.html}

Former fellow Robben Island prisoner Ahmed Kathrada in an interview with John Mulholland spoke about Mandela's dignity and unselfishness in jail. "*Mr Mandela's qualities stand out. His courage, his foresight, his tenacity, his thoroughness, his loyalty. Everything he does, he does it after thinking, after studying. From simple things. For example, when he learned to play chess in prison, he ordered chess books. When we had our little garden, he ordered books on gardening. When we resorted to the armed struggle he got books. He's very thorough in everything he does. So, he's got these qualities.* (The interview was conducted in 2011 and reprinted in the Observer on Saturday 7 December 2013).

In March 2014 the late Chessa President Eldo Smart released an article in which he confirmed that Mr. Mandela personally told him over dinner with University of the Western Cape students in 1996, that he played chess on Robben Island. Smart writes "*He told us that he played chess in prison and always took very long to complete his games. Sometimes days would pass, whilst his opponent would be waiting for him to make his move. Chess as well as draughts, was popular amongst the prisoners. This proves to us that the world's most admired and respected icon played chess in prison and loved it. It was used to keep his mind sharp".*

In 2010 then President Jacob Zuma became the patron of the Moves for Life chess programme. At the gala dinner President Zuma stated that chess is very close to his heart and he regards the game highly both as a player and spectator. He further confirmed in his speech "*I learned to play chess under*

unfavourable conditions while on Robben Island serving a ten year prison sentence. Political prisoners used to sustain and strengthen themselves during incarceration through sports like soccer, rugby, table tennis, mrabaraba, bridge, patience and casino card games and chess. We used to make chessboards from thin cardboard and chess pieces from corks. Given the opportunity, I would have loved to learn how to play at an earlier stage of my life. (htttp://en.chessbase.com/post/moves-forlife-program-in-south-africa)

At the Closing ceremony of the 2013 Commonwealth Chess Championships held in the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan in July 2013, President Zuma again referred to chess at Robben Island. He stated, *"On Robben Island chess provided a solace to us that we needed in those conditions of isolation and deprivation. It propelled our minds beyond the confines of the prison walls and allowed us to reflect and to position our thoughts strategically to fight the regime. Many comrades made chess sets out of soap and driftwood that allowed us to continue to play this noble and great game. We improvised with makeshift chess boards, but we enjoyed the fullness of the game"*. (http://www.chessdom/south-african-president-jacob-zuma-at-the Commonwealth-and South African open chess championship-2013).

At the University of the Western Cape, the archives of Robben Island are kept at the Mayibuye Centre based at the library. I found the following very interesting. On 15 August 1973 two clubs, one called Ilembe Chess Club from House H and the other called Dotts Chess Club from House B played a match against each other. The names were listed in the document. Let's have a look.

August 1973, Robben Island

Game	Ilembe Chess Club House H	Dotts Chess Club House B
1	M. Khahla	T. Jobo
2	M. Mapumule	J. Mathi
3	S. Mabuse	M. Ramogkadi
4	M. Solomon	M. Shabalala

5	G. Ngoyi	T. Dyantyi
6	M. Masemola	G. Zuma
7	L.Dwaba	D. Mmutle
8	M. Mangqangwano	K. Nyobo
9	P. Ndabane	K. Roxo
10.	V. Tole	S. Nqgela
11	J. Kuzasayo	E. Bahuta
12	S. Brander	M. Makalima
13.	L. Mene	L. Mbatho
14.	A. Chiloane	P. Sello
15.	J. Maroo	D. Kistein
16.	M. Buyaphi	J. Ndzuzo
17.	A. Suze	P. Matthews
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Conclusion

It is thus clear from the above that chess was played at Robben Island. Both former presidents Mandela and Zuma have referred to the playing of chess on Robben Island. Chess was included in the Summer Games of 1972. Former political prisoners all corroborated the various stories related to chess on Robben Island.

In the Open section today, Grenada played Dominica. The team won 3.5 to 0.5. The team played hard against Dominica and is trying for two match victories in the last two rounds! They play Equatorial Guinea tomorrow.

Bo.	198	Grenada (GRN)	Rtg	-	190	Dominica (DMA)	Rtg	3½: ½
		(c) Lyndon Bouah				(c) Phadke Sohan		
96.1		□ Renniel, Gilbert	1848	-	CM	■ Francis, Nigel	1770	½ - ½
96.2		■ Roberts, Gennard	1564	-		□ Bridet, Robert	1679	1 - 0
96.3		□ Pope, Omario	1431	-		■ Thomas, Larry	1710	1 - 0
96.4		■ Mendez, Vladimir	1651	-		□ Laudat, Romel	1470	1 - 0

In the Women's section Grenada played the British Virgin Islands. The Women's team lost 3 to 1 against the British Virgin Islands. The team plays South Sudan tomorrow.

Bo.	172	Grenada (GRN)	Rtg	-	179	British Virgin Islands (IVB)	Rtg	1 : 3
		(c) Denise Bouah				(c) Angela Franco Valencia		
88.1		□ Rhonda, J Lambert	1577	-		■ Scatliffe, Tiandra	0	1 - 0
88.2		■ Achazia, N.A.Lewis	0	-		□ Fergus, Makalia	0	0 - 1
88.3		□ Naziyah, S.A.James	0	-		■ Chin, Chane-Ann	0	0 - 1
88.4		■ Tehalyani, Kenishka	0	-		□ Phillip, Kiara	0	0 - 1

SA in the Open section played against Pakistan. SA outrated Pakistan on all boards. This 3-1 victory set them up for a big match in round 11 against North Macedonia.

Bo.	77	South Africa (RSA)	Rtg	-	124	Pakistan (PAK)	Rtg	3 : 1
		(c) Henry Robert Steel				(c) Raja Gauhar		
48.1	IM	□ Karsten, Jan	2386	-	FM	■ Amer, Karim	2147	1 - 0
48.2	IM	■ Levitan, Caleb Levi	2316	-	CM	□ Mafaaz, Khalid	2057	1 - 0
48.3		□ Mnyasta, Charlton	2236	-		■ Zaman, Sohail	1935	1 - 0
48.4		■ Dinham, James	2124	-		□ Zorez, Shabkhez	1933	0 - 1

In the Women's section SA played against Slovakia. The team lost 0.5 to 3.5. The team plays the hosts Uzbekistan 3 tomorrow.

Bo.	86	South Africa (RSA)	Rtg	-	37	Slovakia (SVK)	Rtg	½ :3½
		(c) Kenneth Terence Solomon				(c) Igor Stohl		
28.1	WFM	□ Badenhorst, Chloe	1997	-	IM	■ Repkova, Eva	2316	½ - ½
28.2	WIM	■ Laubscher, Anzel	1817	-	WIM	□ Sucikova, Svetlana	2166	0 - 1
28.3	WCM	□ Nel, Hayley	1864	-	WFM	■ Nadzamova, Viktoria	2145	0 - 1
28.4		■ Masango, Sizakele	1880	-	WFM	□ Walter, Ema	2105	0 - 1

We are set for a tight finish as we are playing at 10h00am tomorrow since the closing ceremony is at 18h00pm tomorrow.

Regards,

Dr Lyndon Bouah

Reporting live from Uzbekistan