

Henning Melber

Beyond settler colonialism is not yet emancipation:
On the limits to liberation in Southern Africa¹

Forgive me, comrades,
if I say something apolitical
and shamefully emotional
but in the dark of night
it is as if my heart is clutched
by a giant iron hand:
“Treachery, treachery” I cry out
thinking of you, comrades
and how you have betrayed
the things we suffered for.

August 23, 2000
*Dennis Brutus*²

Former anticolonial liberation movements have since the more or less legitimate seizure of political power in Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa remained in control over the former settler colonial societies. An international solidarity movement had offered them support for their legitimate demands to obtain national sovereignty, the right to self-determination in independent states and the abolishment of racial discrimination. If solidarity is taken as a living moral, ethical and political obligation, which entails empathy as much as the loyalty to fundamental human values of equality and dignity to which all human beings should be entitled in an undivided manner, solidarity is not confined to a particular era or stage of historical processes. It is an ongoing commitment and engagement. It is from this point of departure and understanding, that the following reflections deal with the limitations of the liberation gospel once implemented into political and social reality in the post-Apartheid era of the Southern African societies.

The limits to liberation

When liberation movements took power, their political office bearers moving into governments were often shaped by military mindsets. The internalized we-they divide categorised people as winners and losers and operated along the lines of command and obedience. These trends have since then been deeply entrenched in the authoritarian political culture, which fell short of living up to expectations created among those, who believed that

¹ This paper is based on earlier overviews of a similar nature (cf. Melber 2006, 2008 and 2009a). It is devoted to the memory of Dennis Brutus, who passed away on 26 December 2009. As his family reminded us in the announcement of a memorial service for this poet activist: “Dennis believed being offered a choice of chains or gold plated shackles, while in reality you are mentally enslaved, is nonsense. Don't accept the illusion of liberation.”

² Dennis Brutus, *leafdrift*. Edited by Lamont B. Steptoe. Camden, N.J.: Whirlwind Press 2005, 87

the struggle against settler colonialism was at the same time a struggle for plural democracy and the respect for human rights and civil liberties. Democratic discourse in search of the common good would look quite different from the socio-political and –economic developments under the former liberation movements.

When analysing the shortcomings of those who obtained political control over societies after a protracted armed struggle against minority settler regimes, however, one also needs to critically reflect upon those, who rendered support. The task should not shy away from the exploration and investigation, how those in solidarity have positioned themselves (if at all) vis-à-vis the new power structures and to which extent and how they are living and practising the erstwhile notion of solidarity in the context of the (not so) new inequalities and injustices in formal democracies, which often fail to respect even the most fundamental principles of true democracy.³

A knee-jerk reaction of the *Tiers-Mondisme* emerging in the 1960s was to show solidarity for the struggle for freedom among the “wretched of the earth”. Sometimes, these struggles were already then supported by means of an unashamedly biased glorification of violence as an act of emancipation and liberation, as was the case back in the 1960s. Frantz Fanon’s book *Les damnés de la terre* was paradigmatic (cf. Fanon 2001). His manifesto became a call to battle for the Algerian resistance movement against France, the colonial power. Much more revealing than Fanon’s battle cry was however the preface by Jean-Paul Sartre, who in a selective interpretation celebrated the revolutionary armed struggle as the ultimate form of claiming humanity by the colonised. His argumentation, tended to glorify violence as an act of emancipation. Indeed, he seemed to see violence as a purifying force that would turn the colonised into full citizens.⁴

In contrast to this uncritical propaganda of “revolutionary violence” as a liberating act (at times indeed echoed in Fanon’s text), Fanon himself in the same book at the same time problematised the effects of violence among both the victims and perpetrators. He also spoke out against excessive post-colonial authoritarianism. In penetrating analyses and withering criticism, he described what he had seen, mainly in West Africa, up to his death in 1961 in the chapter on “the pitfalls of national consciousness” with harsh and blunt words.

Fanon criticised the authoritarian attitudes of the African elite, which usurped young states in the course of decolonisation, and their abuses of power when securing privileges for themselves and turning entire states into instruments of control. His early warnings went largely unheeded, however. Not until the 1990s, when the shortcomings of revolutionary movements could no longer be ignored, did Fanon’s analyses come back into the foreground. Since then, those skeptical of the post-colonial failures and critical of the lack of

³ This limited overview cannot dwell deeper into this aspect. See Köbler/Melber (2006) for a detailed and (self-)critical case study on the solidarity movement with Southern African liberation movements in the then Federal Republic of Germany.

⁴ Sartre’s pseudo-radicalism contrasted with the position of Albert Camus, who was close to the non-violent libertarian convictions and as a result was ridiculed since the early 1950s by the influential intellectual leftist circle around Sartre. Interesting enough, while Sartre has never been actively participating in direct forms of practical resistance with personal risks, Camus had been questioning and adjusting his earlier convictions through his direct involvement and experiences in the French *Résistance* against Nazi occupation and the excessive forms and abuse of violence within the ranks of the underground organization.

achievements have returned to his early insights as relevant also for political realities of today.

The limits to liberation under former liberation movements in Southern Africa, in particular in Namibia and Zimbabwe and to a lesser extent in South Africa, were also the thematic focus of a research project on “Liberation and Democracy in Southern Africa” (LiDeSA) at the Nordic Africa Institute. Established in late 2000, LiDeSA was operational until the end of 2006 and undertook a considerable amount of analytical efforts within a network of scholars mainly from the region to critically explore the features of post-colonial authoritarian tendencies and its root causes.⁵

Wounds old and new

One must bear in mind that armed resistance was part of the solution in the Southern African settler colonies. While liberation did not come as a pure result from the barrel of a gun, the military component was a substantive element to accelerate the process towards self-determination. It led in the latter three cases of Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa to negotiations for transitional arrangements under majority rule. The compromises required from all sides contributed to the transitional periods working out as part of a wider appeasement strategy, which in the cases of Namibia and South Africa were directly linked and a result of the end of the Cold War.⁶ At the same time, a decidedly patriotic form of writing history turned the independence struggle soon thereafter into a myth, upon which the erstwhile liberation movements based their claim to be the sole liberators (see for Namibia Melber 2003c, Saunders 2003 and 2007).

It bears repetition that the unscrupulously violent character of Zimbabwe’s ZANU regime already revealed itself in the early to mid 1980s, when a special unit through atrocities bordering to genocide killed an estimated 20,000 people mainly in Matabeleland, where the opposition ZAPU had most of its support (Phimister 2008). Notably, the only organisation of influence that protested was the local Catholic Church. The rest of the world, including those who had originally shown solidarity, had little to say.

The violence did not stop until the ZAPU agreed to sign a pact with the ruling party. The ZANU basically took them over. None of this hurt the Mugabe government’s bilateral and multilateral standing. When a new opposition party turned out to be a serious competitor, the *Chimurenga* became a permanent institution. Violence became the customary response to political protest. As political power shifted away from Mugabe after he lost a referendum in 2000, his regime only became more violent, bordering to genocidal practices, as in the case of operation *Murambatsvina* (Ndlovu 2008).

The human-rights violations of SWAPO have also been downplayed (Lamb 2001 and 2002). In the 1980s, the organisation imprisoned thousands of its own members in dungeons in southern Angola, accusing them of spying on behalf of South Africa. These people lost their

⁵ Within LiDeSA emerged several volumes and many more individual articles related to the subject, see i.a. Melber (2002, 2003a and 2003b, 2006, as well as Southall/Melber 2006 and Hultström/Kamete/Melber 2007). A summary on the project and its results is accessible on the web site of the Nordic Africa Institute under the following link:

http://www.nai.uu.se/research/areas/archive/liberation_democracy/

⁶ See for a detailed overview on the negotiations preceding Namibian Independence Melber/Saunders (2007).

liberty in spite of never having been proven guilty; indeed, they were not even brought to trial. Many of them did not survive the torture. Those released are scorned even today (Saul/Leys 2003). With the newly established political opposition party RDP coming from inside SWAPO, politically motivated physical violence and hitherto unprecedented forms of hate speech had entered the public sphere ahead of the parliamentary and presidential elections at the end of 2009. The new opposition had been denied the right to campaign freely, since SWAPO declared certain areas in the public sphere as its sole property, where nobody else is entitled to campaign (Melber 2009b).

It could have been different in South Africa. The ANC government's Truth and Reconciliation Commission talked about human-rights violations committed by its own members. But the final report containing these findings was never published in its original form to avoid any public debate. So far, ANC omissions have not been discussed openly. With the internal divisions between the camps of Thabo Mbeki and Jacob Zuma and the subsequent formation of the break away party COPE the authoritarian tendencies have increased despite an election, which resulted in a loss of the two-third majority of the ANC (Southall/Daniel 2009).

Victims as perpetrators

There is nothing new about military movements that are supposedly justified in ethical and moral terms losing their legitimation quickly. Since the French Revolution, liberators have often turned into suppressors, victims into perpetrators. It is not unusual for a new regime to quickly resemble an old one. That has happened again and again all over the world. Revolutionary violence as an act of emancipation has often turned out to be far less liberating than those promoting (and believing) in such acts (and the notion of "just war") believed and tried to make others believe. Again, it is worthwhile to remember the insights presented by Albert Camus as a result of his involvement in the French *Résistance*. Despite his all too early death half a century ago his radical humanism advocating forms of non-violent permanent rebellion continues to offer some intriguing challenge to convenient justifications that violence could be an acceptable engine and alternative to promote a better future.⁷ The Indian psychologist and sociologist Ashis Nandy (1984), discusses how liberators tend to reproduce the past rather than offer true alternatives. In this light, the "anti-imperialist" Robert Mugabe turns out to be merely the final executor of the policies of the racist colonists Cecil Rhodes and Ian Smith. Armed combat merely created new repressive institutions of the state for the dominant group within anti-colonial resistance. Former PLO activist Yezid Sayigh (1977) argued that this was also happening in the Palestinian liberation movement. Such power structures often revolve around individual commanders who act to the benefit of their crony supporters. Resistance movements normally adopt rough survival strategies and techniques while fighting an oppressive regime. That culture, unfortunately, takes root and is permanently nurtured. All summed up, it becomes questionable whether there is a true

⁷ Camus' philosophical reflections on violence and justice in his essays 'Neither Victims nor Executioners' originally appeared serially in the autumn of 1946 in *Combat*, the daily newspaper of the *Résistance*, which Camus helped edit during the Nazi occupation of France and for a short time after the war. It was published in English in the July-August 1947 issue of *Politics* and can be accessed under: http://www.ppu.org/e_publications/camus.html.

difference between the political systems they manage to throw out and what they establish in that place.

In May 1990, Albie Sachs already spoke of this trend in respect to South Africa. In a lecture at the University of the Western Cape, this South African lawyer, who was crippled by a parcel bomb in Mozambique during his 24-year exile, expressed his doubts about ANC activists being ready for freedom. He worried about the habits they had cultivated. As Sachs put it then, the culture and discipline of resistance may have served a survival strategy in the underground, but these skills were certainly not those of free citizens.

Maybe this is why Nelson Mandela became a global icon in his lifetime: The many years he spent in prison kept him away from the daily intrigues and power plays prevalent in an organised liberation movement. Mandela preserved a spirit of human compassion and tolerance that a life of struggle and exile might not have afforded him. This may sound cynical but might be close to reality. After all, it protected him from the internal power struggles, which marred all liberation movements especially in the exile structures and required from its leadership a strong will to maintain control for mere survival.

In contrast, Jacob Zuma as a product of the struggle cultivates a “Zulu warrior culture”. He emerged as a populist alternative to the more intellectual, somewhat aloof Thabo Mbeki. Zuma’s reputation for various allegations of corruption, charges of sexual abuse and martial (if not sexist) rhetoric (his favourite song is “Bring me my machine gun”) did as little prevent him from gaining a popular vote among the majority of South Africans as his demonstrative polygamy justified by Zulu tradition. Disappointed in the limits of the liberation they have experienced, many people are looking for substitute saviours of such dubious calibre.

Fortunately, at the same time the number of those to whom fundamental values of democracy, liberty and human rights matter more than submissive loyalty to an organisation or a new male chauvinist leader maximo is growing.

Raymond Suttner is an example. He used to operate underground in South Africa as a member of the ANC, and spent years in solitary confinement as a political prisoner. As a member of parliament and later as ambassador, he represented the ANC government before returning to the academic world he had come from. He pointed out that ANC ideology and rhetoric do not distinguish between the liberation movement and the people. He thus argues that the liberation movement is a prototype of a state within the state – one that sees itself as the only legitimate source of power (Suttner 2006). But he also carefully seeks to explain how underground structures cloaked individual, independent minded thinking guided by maybe dissenting moral values, under a collective, which used hardly democratic centralism as a guiding principle to ensure maximum discipline and loyalty as a prerequisite for the survival and ultimate victory (Suttner 2008).

His study does not shy away from breaking taboos. As he suggests, the liberation organisation represented a distinct notion of family. There was a general suppression of ‘the personal’ in favour of ‘the collective’. Individual judgment (and thereby autonomy) was substituted by a collective decision from the leadership. Such “warrior culture, the militarist tradition,” according to Suttner (2008: 119) “entailed not only heroic acts but also many cases of abuse and power” – not least over women. As he concludes: “Any involvement in a revolution has an impact on conceptions of the personal. Given the overriding demands for sacrifice and loyalty to something greater than oneself, it leads invariably to a negation of intimacy” (ibid., 138). As so often, women in many instances - as mothers, wives and daughters, but not least also as objects for satisfying sexual desires - had the highest price to pay and to sacrifice most. The limits to liberation and emancipation were maybe best

documented already during the struggle through the gender relations and the abuse of women.

Beyond the “end of history”

As we now know, post-colonial life looks a lot like the colonial era did in respect to day-to-day life. The reason is that socialisation factors and attitudes from the armed struggle have largely shaped the new political leaders’ understanding of politics – and their idea of how to wield power. In governmental office, liberation movements tend to mark an “end of history”. Any political alternative that does not emerge from within them will not be acceptable. This attitude explains the strong sense of camaraderie between the Mugabe regime and the governments of Angola, Mozambique, Namibia and South Africa over many years. Typically, any political alternative cropping up in these countries as a result of disillusionment with post-colonial life will be discredited as part of an imperialist conspiracy designed to sabotage national independence.

These governments never seem to even consider the possibility that their own shortcomings may be the reason why opposition forces are becoming stronger. Instead, they only think along the militaristic dichotomy of friend-foe, leaving no legitimate alternative to their own hegemony. Among each other they have entered regional alliances, which imply the backing of each other in times of challenging political alternatives. The prolonged support to Zimbabwe’s regime under pressure is just the most obvious case in point.

At the same time, the sad truth is that the opposition forces that do stand up against such governments tend to only add to the problem, rather than to provide a solution. All too often, they only want to share the spoils of the state apparatus and its bureaucracy among their cronies once they are strong enough to constitute a true power option. Again, the relevant categories of thought are only winners and losers. Democracy, however, is about something completely different: compromise, and even search for consensus, in pursuit of the public good. To achieve that, one does not need military mindsets, but rather a broad political debate.

As the background note to a concluding workshop for the Nordic Africa Institute’s Documentation Project on the Liberation Struggles in Southern Africa stated: “Documenting the past is indeed important but it also has the potential to inform the future.”⁸ Looking at the history of the anti-colonial liberation struggles in Southern Africa can therefore also open our eyes and sharpen our sensibility, awareness and understanding of the current processes of modified but continued forms of rule, which show clear limitations to the notion of genuine emancipation and liberation. A continued exploration of the legacy of the struggle and its impact on the organisation of the post-colonial societies might provide more insights to reach a better understanding of current forms of dominance and the mindsets guiding these new forms of exclusion.

A (incomplete) set of further research questions finally seeks to offer some proposals for further enquiries based among others on the wealth of information accessible in archives and other resource centres:

⁸ This workshop was held at the University of South Africa campus in Pretoria end of November 2009. For more information see:
<http://www.nai.uu.se/events/conferences/documentation-project-wor-1/>

- Did the words and deeds of national liberation movements match with a democratic agenda?
- How did the supporters (friendly governments, solidarity movement) perceive the liberation movements activities and what was the response?
- What was the role of other international agencies, such as the United Nations and the OAU Liberation Committee?
- What implications had the specific socialisation of the anticolonial activists on their mindsets and practices (social and cultural background, class, exposure to repression and discrimination and other relevant factors)?
- What were the views expressed inside the liberation movements on state, government and transformation and how were these views affected by negotiated, controlled change?
- What was the impact of the controlled change on the institutional and institutionalized transformation?
- How did inter-governmental relations in the SADC region reaffirm “the end of history”?

This provisional catalogue suggests that we should not only critically revisit and examine the declared aims and goals of the liberation struggle and the understanding these represented, but also the mindsets, values, norms and expectations of those in support of such struggles for liberation. Based on such (self-)critical reflections, the notion of solidarity might live on with a similar uncompromising meaning and practice. Loyalty to this notion and previous actions guided by the concept would maybe even require under present conditions support of other organisations and individuals than those, who earlier on deserved such support while fighting against unjust minority rule based on racial discrimination. *A luta continua* as a popular slogan during the “struggle days” would then not translate into “the looting continues” but return to its true meaning. If implemented accordingly, it underlines that there is nothing like the end of history when it comes to social struggles for true emancipation, equality, liberty and justice.

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