
Beyond Settler Colonialism is not yet Emancipation:

On the Limits to Liberation in Southern Africa

Henning Melber

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.

23 August 2000,
*Dennis Brutus*¹

Since coming to political power, the anti-colonial liberation movements in Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa (all former settler colonies) have remained in control over their societies. During their struggles, an international solidarity movement offered them support for their legitimate demands for national sovereignty, the right to self-determination in independent states and the elimination of racial discrimination. This article suggests that solidarity should be understood as a living moral, ethical and political obligation that entails empathy with and loyalty to the fundamental human values of equality and dignity. In this sense, solidarity is not confined to a particular era or stage of historical processes. It is an ongoing commitment and engagement. From this point of departure, the following reflections deal with the limitations of the liberation gospel once it became implemented in post-colonial and post-apartheid Southern African societies.²

The limits to liberation

Over the years of armed struggle, liberation movements internalized an us-them divide that categorised people as winners and losers and operated along the lines of command and obedience. When these liberation movements took power, their leaders in government remained shaped by these military mindsets. Since then, this mindset has become deeply entrenched in an authoritarian political culture that has fallen short of the expectations of those who believed that the struggle against settler colonialism was also a struggle against economic exploitation and for economic redistribution, as well as a struggle for plural democracy and respect for human rights and civil liberties. Democratic discourse in search of the common good would look quite different from socio-political and economic developments under the former liberation movements.

When analysing the shortcomings of those who obtained political control after a protracted armed struggle against minority settler regimes, however, one also needs to critically reflect upon those who rendered them support. It is necessary to investigate how those in solidarity have positioned themselves (if at all) *vis-à-vis* the new power structures and to assess to what extent and how they are practising the erstwhile notion of solidarity in the context of the (not so) new inequalities and injustices in formal democracies that often fail to respect democratic principles and address fundamental social inequalities.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 supported by means of an unashamedly biased glorification of violence as an act of emancipation and liberation. Frantz Fanon’s book *Les damnés de la terre* [*The Wretched of the Earth*] was paradigmatic. 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 means for the colonised to claim humanity. His argument tended to glorify violence as an act of emancipation. Indeed, he saw 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 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, his chapter on ‘the pitfalls

of national consciousness' described in harsh, blunt words what he had seen, mainly in West Africa, up to his death in 1961. Fanon criticised the authoritarian attitudes of the African elite that usurped young states in the course of decolonisation, along with 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 pseudo-revolutionary movements could no longer be ignored, did Fanon's analyses come back into the foreground. Since then, those skeptical of post-colonial failures and critical of the lack of achievements have returned to his early insights as relevant for today's political realities.

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, was 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 late 2006 and, through its network of scholars in the region, undertook a considerable amount of analysis to critically explore the features of post-colonial authoritarianism 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 solely from the barrel of a gun, the military component was a substantive element to accelerate the process towards self-determination. In the cases of Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa, it led 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 history writing soon turned the independence struggle into a myth, upon which the erstwhile liberation movements based their claim to be the sole liberators.⁷

It bears repetition that the unscrupulously violent character of the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) regime had already revealed itself in the early to mid 1980s, when a special unit killed an estimated 20,000 people mainly in Matabeleland, where the opposition Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) had most of its support.⁸ These atrocities bordered on genocide. 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.

This violence did not stop until ZAPU agreed to sign a pact with the ruling party; ZANU basically took ZAPU 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 became more violent, as in the case of Operation *Murambatsvina* [officially, Operation Restore Order, also 'getting rid of the filth'], a mass slum clearance exercise that began in Harare and then swept across the country.⁹

The human rights violations of the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) have also been downplayed.¹⁰ 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 liberty (and often their life) 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.¹¹ With the newly established political opposition party RDP coming from inside SWAPO, politically motivated physical violence and hitherto unprecedented forms of hate speech entered the public sphere ahead of the parliamentary and presidential elections at the end of 2009. The new opposition was denied the right to campaign freely, since SWAPO declared certain public areas as its sole property, where nobody else was entitled to campaign. Based on a campaign guided by coercive intolerance, SWAPO retained its two-third majority in the National Assembly—at the expense of further eroding its credibility as a democratic organisation.¹²

South Africa's trajectory since the first democratic elections is sobering but less depressing. The relative complexity of the socio-political forces as represented by social movements and civil society agencies involved in a vibrant political culture and public discourse signalled a relative openness to rigorous debate. Hence, despite all contradictions and setbacks, the prospects for democracy are slightly more encouraging. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission institutionalised by the government also talked about human-rights violations committed by the ANC, although the final official report containing these findings was never published in its original form due to non-authorisation from President Thabo Mbeki's office. Notwithstanding this selective handling, President Nelson Mandela did not shy away from offering a public apology to the victims of the ANC's failures to respect basic human rights.

With the internal divisions between the camps of Thabo Mbeki and Jacob Zuma and the subsequent formation of the breakaway Congress of the People (COPE), the authoritarian tendencies have increased despite an election that resulted in the ANC losing its two-third majority.¹³ Current conflicts escalating around the ANC Youth League's controversial leader Julius Malema illustrate the tensions and rivalries within the party as much as the recent rumours that former president Thabo Mbeki should not have any coverage in the state-controlled South African Broadcasting Corporation. While these are signs of the internal power struggles, they are at the same time evidence of a publicly contested discourse within the ANC-controlled political sphere. This in itself is a marked difference to other countries under the political control of former liberation movements, which tend to keep a firm grip over such arenas.

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 oppressors, 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 (along with the notion of 'just war') has often turned out to be far less liberating than those promoting such acts believed and tried to persuade others of. It is worthwhile remembering the insights offered 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 of violence as an acceptable engine and alternative to promote a better future.¹⁴

The Indian psychologist and sociologist Ashis Nandy 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 colonialists 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 argued that this was also happening in the Palestinian liberation movement.¹⁵

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 how much of a difference in nature there is between the political systems they managed to overthrow and what they established in their place.

In May 1990, the South African lawyer and activist Albie Sachs spoke of this trend in respect to South Africa. In a lecture at the University of the Western Cape, Sachs expressed doubts that ANC activists were 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 as a survival strategy in the underground, but these skills were certainly not those of free citizens.¹⁶ Perhaps this is why Nelson Mandela became a global icon in his lifetime: His many years 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 it might be close to reality. After all, Mandela's imprisonment protected him from the internal power struggles that marred all liberation movements, especially their exile structures, and that required from their 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'. Zuma emerged as a populist alternative to the more intellectual, somewhat aloof Thabo Mbeki. His reputation, clouded by 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 to 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 the fundamental values of social equality, democracy, liberty and human rights matter more than submissive loyalty to an organisation or a new male chauvinist leader *maximo* is growing.

Raymond Suttner's work offers an example. Suttner worked as an underground ANC operative in South Africa 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. Suttner points 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. He also

carefully seeks to explain how underground structures cloaked individual, independent-minded thinking guided by dissenting moral values with a collective that used hardly-democratic centralism as a guiding principle to ensure maximum discipline and loyalty. This was seen as a prerequisite for survival and ultimate victory.¹⁷

Suttner's study does not shy away from breaking taboos. He suggests that the liberation organisation represented a distinct notion of family. During the struggle 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 a 'warrior culture, the militarist tradition', according to Suttner, '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.'¹⁸ 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 best documented during the struggle through unequal gender relations and the abuse of women.

Beyond the 'end of history'

As we now know, post-colonial life looks very much like that of the colonial era in respect to day-to-day living. One reason for this is that socialisation and attitudes from the armed struggle have 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 consider the possibility that their own shortcomings may be the reason why opposition forces are becoming stronger. Instead, they continue to think along the militaristic dichotomy of friend-foe, leaving no legitimate alternative to their own hegemony. They have entered regional alliances with each other, which imply their support

for each other's regimes in times of challenging political alternatives. The prolonged support of 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 add to the problem, rather than provide a solution. All too often, they 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 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 a concluding workshop of 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.'¹⁹ 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 that show clear limitations for genuine emancipation and liberation. A continued exploration of the legacies of these liberation struggles and their impact on the organisation of the post-colonial societies might provide more insights to reach a better understanding of current forms of dominance and of the mindsets guiding these new forms of exclusion.

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

- Did the national liberation movements develop democratic agendas, and was this reflected in their actions?
- How did supporters of these movements (friendly governments, solidarity movements) perceive their activities, and how did they respond?
- What was the role of international agencies such as the United Nations and the OAU Liberation Committee in the liberation struggles?
- What implications did the socialisation of anticolonial activists (including social and cultural background, class, exposure to repression and discrimination and other relevant factors) have on their mindsets and practices?
- What views were expressed inside liberation movements on state, government and transformation, and how were these views affected by negotiated and controlled change?

- What was the impact of negotiated and controlled change on institutional and institutionalized transformation?
- How do inter-governmental relations in the Southern African Development Community reaffirm ‘the end of history’?

This provisional catalogue suggests that we should not only critically revisit and examine the declared aims and goals of liberation struggles and the ways in which these were understood, but also the mindsets, values, norms and expectations of those who supported these struggles. Based on such (self-)critical reflections, the notion of solidarity might live on with a similar uncompromising meaning and practice. Under present conditions, the notion of solidarity might even require support for organisations and individuals other than those who earlier on deserved such support while fighting against minority rule and 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 no end of history when it comes to social struggles for true emancipation, equality, liberty and justice.

Notes

1. Dennis Brutus, *leafdrift*, Lamont B. Steptoe (ed.) (Camden, NJ: Whirlwind Press, 2005), p.87. Dennis Brutus passed away on 26 December 2009. As his family reminded us: ‘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.’ This essay is devoted to his memory.
2. Originally drafted as a contribution to the proceedings of a workshop organised by the Nordic Africa Institute, this article is a revised version of earlier overviews. See Henning Melber, ‘Liberation movements as movements: The unfinished business of decolonisation’, in Jeanette Minnie (ed.), *Outside the Ballot Box. Preconditions for elections in Southern Africa 2005/6* (Windhoek: Media Institute for Southern Africa, 2006), pp.19–31; Henning Melber, ‘Post-independence authoritarianism’, *Development and Cooperation*, 35, 10 (October 2008), pp.378–81; Henning Melber, ‘Southern African liberation movements as governments and the limits to liberation’, *Review of African Political Economy*, 121 (September 2009), pp.453–61. I thank Allison Drew for sharing some sensible observations and helpful comments in this process.
3. This limited overview cannot dwell deeper into this aspect. For a case study of the solidarity movement with Southern African liberation movements in the former Federal Republic of Germany, see Reinhart Kössler and Henning Melber, ‘The West German solidarity movement with the liberation struggles in Southern Africa. A (self-) critical retrospective’, in Ulf Engel/Robert Kappel (eds), *Germany’s Africa Policy Revisited. Interests, images and incrementalism* 2nd revised

- edition, (Berlin: LIT 2006), pp.101–23.
4. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* [1961] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2001). 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 from the early 1950s by the influential intellectual leftist circle around Sartre. Interestingly, while Sartre never actively participated in direct forms of practical resistance that entailed personal risks, Camus had questioned and adjusted his earlier convictions through his direct involvement and experiences in the French *Résistance* against Nazi occupation.
 5. Within LiDeSA emerged several volumes and many more individual articles related to the subject. See Henning Melber (ed.), *Zimbabwe's Presidential Elections 2002. Evidence, lessons and implications*, NAI Discussion Paper no. 14 (Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute, 2002); Henning Melber (ed.), *Re-examining Liberation in Namibia. Political culture since independence* (Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute 2003); Henning Melber (ed.), *Limits to Liberation in Southern Africa. The unfinished business of democratic consolidation* (Cape Town: HSRC, 2003); Melber, 'Liberation movements as movements'; Roger Southall and Henning Melber (eds), *Legacies of power: Leadership change and former presidents in African politics* (Cape Town: HSRC and Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute, 2006); Katarina Hulterström, Amin Kamete and Henning Melber, *Political Opposition in African Countries: The cases of Kenya, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe*, NAI Discussion Paper no. 37 (Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute, 2007). A summary of 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. For a detailed overview on the negotiations preceding Namibian independence see Henning Melber and Christopher Saunders, 'Conflict mediation in decolonisation: Namibia's transition to Independence', *Africa Spectrum*, 42, 1 (2007), pp.73-94.
 7. On Namibia see Henning Melber, "'Namibia, land of the brave": Selective memories on war and violence within nation building', in Jon Abbink/Mirjam de Bruijn/Klaas van Walraven (eds), *Rethinking Resistance: Revolt and violence in African history* (Leiden and Boston: Brill 2003), pp.305-27; Christopher Saunders, 'Liberation and Democracy: A critical reading of Sam Nujoma's "Autobiography"', in Henning Melber (ed.), *Re-examining Liberation in Namibia. Political culture since independence* (Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute, 2003), pp.87-98; Christopher Saunders, 'History and the armed struggle. From anti-colonial propaganda to "patriotic history"?' in Henning Melber (ed.), *Transitions in Namibia. Which changes for whom?* (Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute, 2007), pp.13-28.
 8. Ian Phimister, 'The making and meanings of the massacres in Matabeleland', *Development Dialogue*, 50 (December 2008), pp.197-214.
 9. Mary E. Ndlovu, 'Mass violence in Zimbabwe 2005—Murambatsvina', *Development Dialogue*, 50 (December 2008), pp.217-37.
 10. Guy Lamb, 'Putting belligerents in context. The cases of Namibia and Angola', in Simon Chesterman (ed.), *Civilians in War* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2001),

- pp.25-39; Guy Lamb, 'Debasing democracy: Security forces and human rights Abuses in post-liberation Namibia and South Africa', in Yul Derek Davids, Christiaan Keulder, Guy Lamb, Joao Perreira and Dirk Spilker, *Measuring Democracy and Human Rights in Southern Africa*, NAI Discussion Paper no.18 (Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute, 2002), pp.30-49.
11. John S. Saul and Colin Leys, 'Truth, Reconciliation, Amnesia. The "ex-detainees" fight for justice', in Henning Melber (ed.), *Re-examining Liberation in Namibia. Political Culture Since Independence* (Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute, 2003), pp.69-86.
 12. Henning Melber, 'Governance, political culture and civil society under a civil liberation movement in power: the case of Namibia', in Nuno Vidal with Patrick Chabal (eds), *Southern Africa: Civil society, politics and donor strategies. Angola and its neighbours* (Luanda and Lisbon: Media XXI & Firmamento 2009), pp.199-212; Henning Melber, 'Namibia's national assembly and presidential elections 2009: Did democracy win?', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 28, 2 (2010), pp.203-14.
 13. Roger Southall and John Daniel (eds), *Zunami! The 2009 South African elections* (Auckland Park: Jacana, 2009).
 14. Camus's 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 at http://www.ppu.org.uk/e_publications/camus.html.
 15. Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy. Loss and recovery of self under colonialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984); Yezid Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State. The Palestinian national movement, 1949-1993* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).
 16. Albie Sachs is another positive example speaking in favour of the relative permissiveness of South African political culture. He was appointed by Nelson Mandela in 1994 as a judge to the Constitutional Court. Until his retirement in October 2009 he passed several non-conformist, spectacular judgments with far reaching impact on South Africa's legal system in support of civil rights.
 17. Raymond Suttner, 'Talking to the ancestors: national heritage, the Freedom Charter and nation-building in South Africa in 2005', *Development Southern Africa*, 23, 1 (2006), pp.3-27; Raymond Suttner, *The ANC Underground in South Africa to 1976. A social and historical study* (Auckland Park: Jacana, 2008).
 18. Suttner, *ANC Underground*, pp.119, 138.
 19. The workshop was held at University of South Africa, Pretoria in November 2009, See <http://www.nai.uu.se/events/archives/conferences/documentation-project-wor-1/>