

No rainbow yet in sight Southern Africa under liberation movements as governments

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Abstract

This article engages with the limits to liberation in Southern African societies under former liberation movements. As it argues, the policies executed in the new societies are still infected by substantial elements of the old power structures and mindsets claimed to be left behind. The five former anti-colonial movements in Angola (since 1974), Mozambique (since 1975), Zimbabwe (since 1980), Namibia (since 1990) and South Africa (since 1994) exercise as governments continued control over the sovereign states. But the majority of the electorate has outgrown the struggle days. Their expectations are measured against the promises and failures, rather than the expected reward for being “liberated” – which as “born frees” they have never been. This fuels frustration and causes new conflicts, which at the same time tend to reproduce old and new dichotomies and battle lines, blending (and at times confusing) the notions of race and class. Contrasting realities with original hopes, the analysis points to the mission not yet accomplished.

Keywords: Southern Africa, liberation movements, South Africa, Namibia, post-Apartheid

Introduction

Politics in Southern African post-settler-colonial societies under liberation movements as governments have increasingly been referred to as examples for the “limits to liberation”. This seeks to encapsulate the narrow translation of a former anti-colonial movement into an exclusivist apparatus in control over the state. As the anti-colonial struggles against white minority rule claimed, they were not only *against* foreign domination and oppression. They also embraced a vision – or rather promise – to be *for* equality, human dignity and democracy, transforming unjust societies based on institutionalized racism and exploitation into states with equal rights and a decent living for all. These movements could also rely on international solidarity not least because of the expectations that they would leave the old behind and build the new.

As agencies of and for transformation these organisations have claimed to represent the interest of *all* people and thereby justify a total monopoly in advocating the public interest. But sobering post-colonial realities have not met the expectations of those who considered the fight *against* colonialism as a fight *for* the implementation of positive values and norms linked to enhanced socio-economic equality, civil and human rights, democracy, respect for otherness and other individual freedoms. While the early vision by Frantz Fanon - articulated in 1952 - remains valid, it has so far been wishful thinking:

... man is a *yes*. I will never stop reiterating that.

Yes to life. *Yes* to love. *Yes* to generosity.

But man is also a *no*. *No* to scorn of man. *No* to degradation of man. *No* to exploitation of man. *No* to the butchery of what is most human in man: freedom.

(Fanon, 1967, p. 222)

As Fanon observed during the decade following, the sovereign former colonies in West Africa did not live up to such expectations: ‘National consciousness, instead of being the all-embracing crystallization of the innermost hopes of the whole people’, deteriorated for him into ‘an empty shell, a crude and fragile travesty of what it might have been’ (Fanon, 2001, p. 119). – Not by accident, Fanon is among the most quoted sources and recognized thinkers among social movement activists campaigning against the current governments in Southern Africa, though his reception tends at times to be rather selective, as the conclusion suggests.

The struggle legacy

Among those who rather early anticipated similar developments for the Southern African region as Frantz Fanon diagnosed with reference to West Africa is Artur Carlos Maurício Pestana. He published the notes he collected in 1971 during his participation in the guerrilla war of the MPLA in the rainforest (the *mayombe*) of the Cabinda front under his *nom de guerre* Pepetela. This groundbreaking novel offers remarkable insights into the limited mindsets and mentalities produced by a situation of armed resistance against foreign occupation under colonial rule. In a revealing dialogue, the commander of the guerrilla unit *Sem Medo* (“Fearless”) explains to the political commissar *Mundo Novo* (“New World”):

We don't share the same ideals. (...) You are the machine type, one of those who are going to set up the unique, all-powerful Party in Angola. I am the type who could never belong to the machine. (...) One day, in Angola, there will no longer be any need for rigid machines, and that is my aim. (...) what I want you to understand, is that the revolution we are making is half the revolution I want. But it is the possible. I know my limits and the country's limits. My role is to contribute to this half-revolution. (...) I am, in your terminology, adventurer. (...) I am happy when I see a young man decide to build himself a personality, even if politically that signifies individualism. (...) I cannot manipulate men, I respect them too much as individuals. For that reason, I cannot belong to a machine. (Pepetela, 1996, 197 and 198)

This conversation already pointed at the emancipatory constraints for several post-colonial societies in Southern Africa with a history of armed resistance against settler colonialism. There is a growing insight that the armed liberation struggles were not a suitable breeding ground for establishing democratic systems of governance following independence. Insights, which are also confirmed by other cases elsewhere – think of Algeria, Nicaragua, Eritrea and many more.¹ One could in historical perspective also start with the French revolution and its aftermath, or any other forms of violent social transformations. These end not only as liberating but also as repressive and in tendency totalitarian manifestations once the commanding heights of society are under control. In that sense, Southern Africa is not a special case, nor typical for African societies only. ‘War shapes its people’, as the German novelist Christa Wolf had put it in her essay *Kassandra*.

The methods of resistance against totalitarian regimes are with almost no exceptions organized on strictly hierarchical and authoritarian lines. If not, they would hardly have any prospect of success. In this sense, the new societies carry within them essential elements of the old system, which they had fought against. They are infected by earlier forms of social reproduction used to oppress, not to emancipate, at times even bordering to mimicry, dubbed by The Indian sociologist Ashis Nandy (1983) aptly so as *The Intimate Enemy*. Aspects of the colonial system were internalized and reproduced in the struggle for its abolition and subsequently survived in the concepts applied for seemingly new but at a closer look rather to a large extent old forms of rule.

Mahmood Mamdani (1996) shows the continued bifurcation between urban and rural ('traditional') communities after what the South African Apartheid system had euphemistically called 'separate development'. While the segregation under Apartheid was officially dissolved, it was in forms of the political system and citizen rights perpetuated, by maintaining a division between the constitutionally enshrined civil rights and the traditional law executed by tribal leaders. Adam Branch (2015) praises Mamdani's study, for it identifies the contradictory nature of all movements, all struggles, all efforts at reform, whether by state or by society. It shows how those efforts are shaped by the political structures they seek to transform, and so may end up reproducing those structures in the very effort to overcome them.

He might as much as Mamdani be too generous when giving the former anti-colonial movements the benefit of the doubt that they really sought and seek meaningful transformation of social and political structures for all people, that is beyond their own narrow interests as a new elite. Rather, as summarized by Atieno Odhiambo (2000, p. 389):

... the former decentralized despotism was reorganized and centralized so as to unify the "nation." So all regimes became centralized despotisms as radical regimes pursued revolution from above in the name of development. The nature of power never changed.

The experiences captured by Raymond Suttner (2008) as a long-time South African ANC activist tend to confirm and to some extent explain further what Pepetela has characterized in *Mayombe*. He 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. This encapsulates an authoritarian command-and-obey structure, which allows no tolerance for deviating views

or towards any form of political opposition. Suttner seeks to carefully explain how the anti-pluralist factor remained largely unnoticed within the forms of resistance. Under a collective, so-called democratic centralism was proclaimed as the guiding principle. But mainly to ensure maximum discipline and loyalty with the leadership in charge as a prerequisite for survival and ultimate victory. Suttner also engaged with the dominant discourse of the hegemonic rule of the ANC, which since the official end of Apartheid controls and represents - or rather as we know now captured - the South African state. As he observed, a form of applied patriotic history, equates the national liberation movement with the nation emerging. It is an exclusive, all-embracing concept, which defiantly refuses to acknowledge any legitimate opposition. He qualified the dominant narrative as

a language of unity and a language that *tends to represent the unified people as embodied in the liberation movement organisation and then equates them with the people as a whole*. [...] In a sense the liberation movement depicts itself as a proto-state. This notion derives from a framework of ideas in which the seizure of the state was represented as the central issue of the day. (Suttner, 2006, p. 24; original emphasis)

The situational application of militant rhetoric as a tool for inclusion or exclusion in terms of the post-colonial national identity is common practice. It discloses a decidedly exclusivist monopoly on being the one and only liberator. A slogan of the “struggle days” in the ranks of the Namibian anti-colonial movement SWAPO has been ‘SWAPO is the nation, and the nation is SWAPO’. And the organisation’s recognition by the United Nations General Assembly in the mid-1970s as ‘the sole and authentic representative of the Namibian people’ was anything but support for democracy. Being in political power since 1990, SWAPO maintains a narrative, which uses the notion of unity as a form to demand loyalty to the government. At the party’s 59th anniversary celebration in June 2019, SWAPO President and Head of State Hage Geingob ‘called for unity amongst Namibians and urged the country’s citizens to march on as one nation’, since ‘only through remaining united will Namibians emerge victorious in the second phase of the struggle’ (New Era, 2019). Formal self-determination in a sovereign state does not equate individual liberty and freedom – not to speak of social equality in economic terms. The populist rhetoric cultivated is good at making promises but bad at delivery beyond the limited circle of beneficiaries in control over state institutions and their cohorts in the economy. Instead of visible signs to

implement more equality in society beyond such new elite, the so-called liberation from the colonial yoke has shifted the struggle for true emancipation into the post-colonial realities of continued repression by new agencies.

From controlled change to changed control

The social transformation of Southern African societies shaped by a settler colonial brand can at best be characterized as a transition from controlled change to changed control. The result is a new ruling political elite operating from commanding heights, whose foundations are further strengthened by selective heroic narratives and memories related to the war(s) of liberation. These struggle credentials serve as claim to entitlements and create new (to some extent invented) traditions to establish an exclusive post-colonial legitimacy under the sole authority of one particular agency of social forces.

There is a lack of (self-)critical awareness and at best limited willingness to accept divergent opinions, particularly if they are expressed in public. Non-conformist thinking is misinterpreted as disloyalty, if not equated with treason. This marginalisation or elimination of dissent drastically limits the new system's capacity for reform and innovation. A culture of fear, intimidation and silence inhibits the possibilities of renewal at the cost of the public good. In the long term, the rulers are thereby undermining their credibility and legitimacy. Former liberation movements in power are, as Caryn Abrahams (2016, p. 106) suggests

enmeshing social cohesion with nation-building. This discourse reduces social cohesion to a banal form of nationalism that required enactment of certain allegiances – to the symbols and historical narratives of ... liberation.

The reduction of post-colonial governance to historical achievements, used as continued justification of and claim for legitimacy, loses sight of the social compact (and contract), which aims at an all-inclusivity. And it overlooks the socio-political realities. Despite the overwhelming dominance of one political agency only, former settler-colonial societies have been and have so far remained deeply divided societies, in which cohesion cannot do without coercion. Settler-colonial rule of the past and the armed struggle for Independence, both in their own ways, still cast their shadows.

Such 'limits to liberation' have since then been comparatively explored for Southern Africa, mainly with regard to the cases of Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa (see i.a. Melber, 2003; Dorman, 2006; De Jager and Du Toit, 2013; and Southall, 2013). The analyses link to some extent to the recent debates over authoritarian forms of democracy, as promoted by Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way. As they suggested, many regimes have either remained hybrid or moved in an authoritarian direction. It may therefore be time to stop thinking of these cases in terms of transitions to democracy and to begin thinking about the specific types of regimes they actually are. (Levitsky and Way, 2002, p. 51)

In the conclusion of one of their edited volumes, Doorenspleet and Nijzink (2013, p. 202) explain the cases of enduring dominant parties by 'the fact that they continue to be associated with important historical legacies, that they are well organized and deeply rooted political movements, and that they successfully manage leadership change and succession'. Decades into post-colonial governance still to a large extent dominated and controlled by the first or second generation of the liberation struggle's leadership and inner circle activists, Frelimo, SWAPO and the ANC had indeed managed in different degrees – though not always smoothly (just think of South Africa)² - the transfer of power within their organisations while maintaining control over the political commanding heights of the state. Such transfer has finally even been achieved after 39 years in Angola with the hand-over of the presidency from José Eduardo dos Santos to João Lourenço, and after 38 years in Zimbabwe with the soft coup by the military replacing Robert Gabriel Mugabe with his former confidante Emmerson Mnangagwa (notably nicknamed 'the crocodile'). But as pointed out:

Many African countries are marked by long-term governments of a single leader, as was the case in Angola and Zimbabwe. The impact of this absence of alternation in power is notorious, with clear restrictions on democratic freedoms and frequent internal conflicts. The departure of a ruler from power, however, does not necessarily mean change in the conduct of government. (Schutz, 2018, p. 141)

Such kind of transfer rather seeks to secure what Dorman (2006, p. 1097) identified as the need to balance 'the demands of institutional reform with continuity'. At the same time, it promotes complacency, which encourages a lack of delivery. What emerged under such successions is a 'more exclusivist mode of autocratic rule, continuing to draw on tropes of

liberation, development and democracy, but which increasingly appear perverted' (Dorman, 2006, p. 1099). As a result of such a mold, the symbolic narrative based on the struggle credentials superseded, as André du Pisani (2013, p. 136) pointed out for Namibia, 'considerations of uneven delivery in a number of policy domains, and as such resembles a "founding myth" in terms of which the Party and the post-apartheid State share a moral and historical assignation'.

Over time, however, the mismatch between the narrative and the generational divide increases. As the last elections in South Africa in mid-2019 showed, large segments of the younger generations deliberately voted by a non-vote, declaring their non-participation in the elections as a protest vote. As a result, less than half of the population entitled to vote participated in the elections. This is an erosion of "majority rule".

Janus-headed democracy

The hybrid mixture of authoritarianism and partial or cryptic democracy disguised as specific form of 'nationalism and national projects' (Ndlovu-Gathseni and Ndhlovu, 2013) has been normalised in the post-colonial settings. As a comparison of South Africa and Rwanda suggests:

Hybridity is not necessarily a transitory phenomenon, nor does it reflect a permanent political stasis. Rather, these ruling parties actively utilize the liminal space betwixt and between authoritarianism and democracy to sustain support in a context and era in which achieving real economic and social transformation is slow and challenging. (Beresford, Berry and Mann, 2018, p. 1244)

Such hybridity is not necessarily only a pragmatic temporary resort in an environment anything but conducive to socio-economic advancements. A key feature has been an appetite for more power and private self-enrichment through occupying the political commanding heights of party, government and state. – An equation, which knows no separation of power, nor any institutionalised meaningful and respected checks and balances. The party is the government and the government is the state. This includes the willingness to resort to the use of structural violence, which disrespects individuals' civil rights, and is willing to threaten at least their secure material existence if not their personal physical integrity. Other features include the systematic exclusion from economic gains

through systems of patronage and corruption; vendettas against the critical media and individual journalists; naming and shaming individuals with differing opinions; and practising excessive presidential powers that overrule the democratic running of the state in favour of the ruling party. The liberation party has a symbiotic relationship with the state security apparatus (military, police, prisons, intelligence). Its leading officers are mainly securocrats recruited from within the ranks of the liberation movement. Parties that fought liberation wars tended to emulate their colonial foes once in power and continue to use structural violence as a means of governance. As concluded in an edited volume:

The question is whether the violence of the liberation had a lasting impact on the structure and behaviour of these political parties. One obvious assumption is that the military organisation required by the liberation war is difficult to transform into a civil and democratic organisation. One consequence might be a lasting authoritarianism. (Erdmann, Basedau and Mehler, 2007, p. 289)

As suggested, the particular tension produced by the legitimacy to govern contrasts with the absence of strong control over the adherence to truly democratic practices and forms of governance. This tension is not unique to liberation movements as governments in Southern Africa. But here it has produced specific legitimacies and heroic narratives seeking to camouflage and justify the hegemonic rule in combination with specific forms of populism (Melber, 2018). The underlying general understanding is that seizing political power after a long struggle signals “the end of history” in as much as any future policy shifts in governance would merely reflect the changing power structures within the governing party. A general, almost logical political feature as a result of this claim to exclusivity and entitlement is the intolerance to diversity. This can be traced back to the liberation struggle when the liberation movement with quite diverse members enforced a form of conformity by suppressing differences and arguing that unity was necessary for nation building in the post-independence period. Thus, to such liberation parties’, whose members were socialised in and used to underground behaviour requiring and demanding strict discipline and absolute loyalty to the ‘family’ (Suttner 2008). Such repressive familiarity is patriarchal in nature and based on the full obedience to the father figure, which in turn reinforces the old men syndrome.

The empirical work on hybrid regimes seeks to explain how they work and not what regime types they constitute. No real systematic attention has so far been paid to the empirically

complex political practices that are manifested in the sub-region of Southern Africa under former liberation movements as governments. Their trajectory translates into a specific form of authoritarian rule. Levitsky and Way (2010, p. 3) suggest, with reference to Kenya, Mozambique, Zambia and Zimbabwe:

The most durable party-based regimes are those that are organized around non-material sources of cohesion, such as ideology, ethnicity, or bonds of solidarity rooted in a shared experience of violent struggle. In particular, parties whose origins lie in war, violent anti-colonial struggle, revolution, or counter-insurgency are more likely to survive economic crisis, leadership succession, and opposition challenges without suffering debilitating effects.

As they conclude: 'Revolutionary or liberation struggles also tend to produce a generation of leaders ... that possesses the necessary legitimacy to impose discipline during crises'. Hence new ruling parties that emerged from violent struggle, ... appear to be more durable' (Levitsky and Way 2010, pp. 44 and 45). As Gyimah-Boadi (2007, p. 25) reminds us, this is not only a feature of the cases under review. After all, parties in most African countries 'are hardly conceived and developed as mechanisms for representation, conflict resolution, opposition and accountability, or institutionalization of democratic behavior and attitudes'. – But then, after all, where fulfil parties such functions in our times any longer anyway? The Southern African regimes might share some specific trajectories, but are anything but unique in most of their features.

A liberation movement in hegemonic control over government and administration might rely to a large extent on comradely bonds, which produce a lasting continuity. The lack of political contestation in a society, which despite democratic rules and principles fails to produce any meaningful political opposition, might play a role in the reproduction of old networks within the dominant party. It accordingly limits upward mobility while predisposing the party to gerontocracy. It also seems to limit the scope for inducing changes even by a strong president of party and state. The party machinery is not at the president's exclusive disposal but permeated by long-standing and deeply rooted obligations and entitlements. As shown in a comparison between ZANU-PF in Zimbabwe and *Chama cha Mapinduzi* (CCM) in Tanzania,

[t]he "unity" motif of nationalist struggle disguised and smothered diversity, rather than enabling the emergence of representative national identities and state forms.

“Stability” can mask authoritarianism while “instability” can provide new leadership, innovative thinking and immense popular support. (Cameron and Dorman, 2009, p. 15)

No end of history

This article focused mainly on the continued dichotomies in terms of mindsets and mental dispositions, which have not emancipated from the colonial perspectives.³ But despite many similarities there are also considerable differences between the present and the past: such analyses as this one can also be published and discussed at least in some of the countries under review. This is a considerable contrast to the repressive settler-colonial systems. While there are many reasons to voice frustration over what has *not* been achieved, it should not be ignored what *has* been achieved. National sovereignty was finally obtained after long and bitter wars and came at a price. But while this price was high, to remain under colonial oppression, discrimination and exploitation would not have been an alternative to self-determination – even if it means that the majority continues to live with a privileged minority in power.

Part of the heritage, however, are not only the internalised dispositions the critical deliberations focused on. What has shaped and impacted on the post-colonial societies – in as far as they deserve to be qualified as *post*-colonial – are also socio-economic structural constraints and the reproduction of class interests, if only in new or adjusted forms and features. What is needed is an understanding, however, that *a luta continua* (the struggle continues) as the slogan of the struggle days, cannot be misunderstood and accepted in the translation ‘the looting continues’. Rather, the popular struggles of civil society and social movements, more so than other political parties, should move into centre space. Their efforts require a re-definition of the notion of solidarity, which guided support of the erstwhile liberation movements. Their performance as governments demands a re-positioning and a shift in support towards those who engage in the continued search and battle for a society, which allows its members some kind of true emancipation. There remains a need for a society offering its members the human dignity and decency, originally believed to be an integral part of the motivation and desire when fighting against settler-colonial rule.

The dark shadows of violent colonial minority regimes, however, have not yet been replaced by a sun required as a pre-condition to achieve a rainbow nation. Rather, amidst growing frustration over the limits to liberation, new forms of aggression are on the increase. They manifested not least in the militant actions of new movements, which consider the destruction of infrastructure, literature and art as revolutionary acts. Observing the radicalisation of student politics in South Africa in the wake of the 'Rhodes Must Fall' campaign, Wahbie Long (2018) refuses reconciling 'to a theory whose practices would rehumanise some by dehumanising others'. He warns of a process in which 'identity becomes the basis for political mobilisation as the possibility of universal comradeship disintegrates'. Such approach has certain consequences: 'Whether unable or unwilling to frame their struggle in terms of the universal values of dignity, security and equality, protestors have opted for the particulars of white privilege and black pain, practicing a form of identity politics.'

It is in a similar way painful to follow Christopher Hope on his journey back home through his country of birth in search of the new South Africa. Confronted with the counter violence in frustration over a past that is not gone, he reaches the sobering conclusion:

Apartheid had little to do with freedom and everything to do with brute force. It was, in the end, a mad circus that relied on thugs and bullies to keep order. It is not surprising that thugs and bullies, who preach the new religion of race and colour and the manifold sins of the skin, favour force as the way of getting things done. They just come at it from the opposite direction. (Hope, 2019, pp. 289-90)

But then, some reactions to this militant aversion are not much better. As he observes further:

It is self-righteousness mingled with self-pity that reminds me very much of how we were – and how we are, all over again. Because the anticipated escape from the gigantic prison we helped to build has not gone well, blame is heaped on the ex-prisoners. (Hope, 2019, p. 303)

Both sides are a far cry from the humanism, which based on his experiences in post-World-War-II France was articulated by Frantz Fanon (1967, p. 231):

The body of history does not determine a single one of my actions.
I am my own foundation. (...)

The disaster and the inhumanity of the white man lie in the fact that somewhere he has killed man.

And even today they subsist, to organize this dehumanization rationally. But I as a man of color, to the extent that it becomes possible for me to exist absolutely, do not have the right to lock myself into a world of retroactive reparations.

I, the man of color, want only this:

That the tool never possess the man. That the enslavement of man by man cease forever. That is, of one by another. That it be possible for me to discover and to love man, wherever he may be.

The Negro is not. Any more than the white man. (...)

It is through the effort to recapture the self and to scrutinize the self, it is through the lasting tension of their freedom that men will be able to create the ideal conditions of existence for a human world.

Superiority? Inferiority?

Why not the quite simple attempt to touch the other, to feel the other, to explain the other to myself?

It seems appropriate to end with the epilogue of *Mayombe*. It shares the Political Commissioner's thoughts on his fellow combatant *Sem Medo*, who had sacrificed his life in battle to rescue that of *Mundo Novo*:

Fearless settled his basic problem: to maintain his own self, he had to remain there in Mayombe. Was he born too early or too late? In any case, he was out of time, like any tragic hero. (...)

I think, like he did, that the frontier between truth and lies is a track in the desert. Men are divided on the two sides of the frontier. How many are there who know how to find this sandy path through the midst of sand? They exist, however, and I am one of them.

Fearless knew as well. But he insisted that it was a track in the desert. So he laughed at those who said it was a path, cutting clearly through the green of Mayombe.

Today I know there are no yellow tracks in the midst of green. (Pepetela, 1996, p. 215)

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Notes

¹ The same can be said for other countries with similar trajectories on the African continent, such as Uganda under Yoweri Museveni, Rwanda under Paul Kagame, Burundi under Pierre Nkurunziza or the Democratic Republic of the Congo and several others. Due to the lack of space this article is limited to Southern African cases.

² Ironically, except the one-term presidency of Nelson Mandela, no other president of South Africa was since then able to complete his terms in office before being replaced by decisions in the ANC as a result of party-internal power struggles. – One does not need presidents for life-time for enduring party regimes.

³ As important remain of course the socio-economic structural continuities as manifested in property relations and the reproduction of inequalities with a racial bias – despite a new black elite joining the club of the privileged. While these have been more a focus of attention in critical analyses, this article intended to stress the non-material aspects and dispositions in power relations.