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LIBERATION WITHOUT DEMOCRACY? RETHINKING THE EXPERIENCES
OF THE SOUTHERN AFRICAN LIBERATION MOVEMENTS

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"Unconventional thought is a force for development. It is wrong to suppress it. The likes of you and I were thrown to the lions in Roman times and burnt at the stake in the Middle Ages as heretics. We would be labelled as dissidents if we lived in Eastern Europe." So the ANC's Ronnie Kasrils quotes Jack Simons ("a legendary figure in our Movement") as once saying to him -- to Kasrils's surprise -- during a discussion, in exile, of the issue of Soviet "dissidents".1 This comment, in turn, prompted further reflection from Kasrils himself, as he recounts in his recent memoirs:

Such a view was seemingly at odds with the basic demands of the Movement. Our life and death struggle demanded unity and vigilance. Again there was the tension between security and personal choice, which mirrored the contradictions in countries attempting to build socialism. Intellectuals like Jack Simons and Ruth First, and to a lesser degree myself, might see the dangers of suppressing independent thinking, but virtually everyone else took what is generally referred to as a "hard line". And this did not stem from the Party, where the role of the intellectuals was considerable. It arose from the intolerable oppression that was the life experience of the black comrades, leaders and rank and file alike. For them the unconventional attitudes espoused by Jack were a luxury of bourgeois society. It was for this reason that many black comrades, particularly workers, continued to sympathise with Stalin's tough practices.2

Kasrils probably underestimates the independent impact of "the Party" (the SACP) in helping underwrite, within the ANC alliance, the "necessity" to validate undemocratic practices in the name of realizing "revolutionary imperatives". Nonetheless, his formulation is an intriguing one since it places on the table an issue that has haunted the process of southern African liberation ever since the "thirty years war" to realize such liberation from white minority rule was first launched across the region in the early 1960s. A practice of "liberation without democracy"? Does this summarize adequately the politics of the thirty years war? Was there a range of significant variation between the
practices of different liberation movements across southern Africa in this respect? And what have been the implications for post-liberation politics of the wedge which was always liable to be forced open between "liberation" and "democracy" in the course of the region's war? These are some of the questions the present paper will seek to address, although it will do so in only a very preliminary manner, prefatory to both a more fully articulated paper by the author and the evolution of a much larger project (a history of, precisely, the "thirty years war" for southern African liberation (1960-1990) on which I am presently engaged).

I. Democracy as a practice within the movements themselves

Namibia, perhaps, provides the worst case scenario with respect to the question we are asking, as Colin Leys and I have sought to document in our recent writing on the history of Swapo. From very early on a culture of unquestioned "presidentialism" and "no questions" was validated by the emergent Swapo leadership and woe-betide any one of attempted to debate in any serious manner the line of march ordained by the leadership. The seven "China-men" who queried Swapo policies at Kongwa in 1968 were quickly turned over to co-operative Tanzanian jailers when they tried to resign from the movement. The China-men, in turn, were precursors of the several thousand "dissidents" — largely youth (many connected to the Swapo Youth League) fresh into exile, in 1974, from the recent heroic struggles inside the country — rounded up by the Zambian army in 1976 at the request of the Swapo leadership because they rebelled, demanding a congress wherein that leadership's activities and the progress of the struggle might be reviewed.

As we have argued, this crisis, sometimes misnamed the "Shipanga crisis", was really Swapo's "democratic crisis" — and was an important moment in exemplifying some of tensions inherent in the politics of liberation during the thirty year's war. Certainly, the resolution of Swapo's contradictions by sheer force de main did nothing to redress the movement's weaknesses or enhance the quality of its leadership, and, indeed, set the stage for its further degeneration in an authoritarian
direction. And this, in turn, culminated in the "mad-dog" activities of Swapo's security apparatus during the 1980's. Then, in a frenzy of torture and killing of innocent Swapo members at its Lubango base, the "securocrats" came very close to destroying the organization on the very eve of the flurry of international horse-trading that would soon produce a transition to independence in Namibia.

There were severe tensions within Mozambique's Frelimo movement as well, coming to a head in the definitive showdown within Frelimo in 1969. Here the internal balances were struck rather differently, in part owing to the quality of leadership displayed by Eduardo Mondlane and, in turn, by the youthful group that crystallized around the person of Samora Machel in the wake of Mondlane's assassination. Confronting elements of a conservative old guard leadership (Uriah Simango principal among them) within the frame of a relatively open congress Mondlane consolidated his position and set the stage for his successor group, one increasingly grounded in an interaction with the Mozambican populace living in the rural areas, to win a subsequent showdown with Simango. One could easily romanticize this achievement, important though it was: the logic of military hierarchization did define much of the movement's internal politics under Machel's leadership, even though the sights of that leadership remained much higher than in some other regional sites of struggle.

The Angola situation was more complicated, although it introduces a dimension into our discussion that was far less salient in either the Namibian or the Mozambican cases. Thus in Angola, the fact that two (eventually three) significant liberation movements gained significant political weight and that these movement's demonstrated a distinct inability to resolve their political differences either by merger or by relatively peaceful coexistence, contributed in its own way to the freezing of an undemocratic ethos. Opinions differ as to the precise weight of such diverse factors as ambition, ideology, ethnicity, regionalism and Cold War calculus in determining this outcome. But there can be little doubt as to the importance of Holden Roberto's aspirations to a kind of exclusive "presidentialism" both within his own movement
(FNLA) and, even more markedly, within his so-called Angolan "government-in-exile" (GRAE) in defining the early tone of (literally) murderous intolerance that came to scar Angola's politics of liberation -- setting the stage for the carnage that, with considerable external facilitation to be sure, continues unabated to the present day.

It would have been difficult enough to develop democratic sensibilities under such circumstances. But the authoritarian ethos that FNLA manifested internally from its very first days -- an ethos that came, by and large, to be reproduced within UNITA once Jonas Savimbi left FNLA to establish a more exclusively Ovimbundu-based political project -- merely added to these difficulties. What of MPLA in this regard? While undoubtedly the bearer of a more positive and expansive definition of liberation than either of its rivals, its internal political practice was also drawn towards a pattern of top-down closure. The cruelty elicited during the period of Viriato da Cruz's early-1960's split from the movement (one comes back to the execution of Matias Miguéis and José Miguel by MPLA officials in 1965 as a particularly pregnant example5) was a poor enough omen early on. But it also bears noting that, in the year or two prior to the Portuguese coup, the MPLA had allowed its inability to resolve internal contradictions -- as manifested in both the "Eastern" (Chipenda) and the "Active" revolts -- in any satisfactory way to substantially neutralize it, at least for the moment, as an active agent of liberation. The fact that such challenges were merely finessed by political sleight of hand helped further to ground an ethos of nationalist high-handedness that growing Stalinist proclivities (under Eastern European influence) were, all too predictably, to reinforce.

In Zimbabwe, too, an extreme version of inter-movement rivalry -- once again, the product of a witch's brew of personal rivalries, ethnicity, ostensible ideological difference and competitive international sponsorship (Russia vs. China) -- interacted with a growing tendency to treat politics inside the two movements themselves as a zero-sum game to produce some very hard-boiled methods, on the part of both ZANU and ZAPU, of resolving differences and dealing with
dissent. One promising initiative designed to ventilate ZAPU politics in a more open manner — the October 11th Movement — was crushed, while the ZIPA attempt of the mid-1970s to ground a new politics of unity around a unified army and a transformed political practice game came unstuck: destroyed by renewed tension between the ZANU and ZAPU armies (the Morogoro and Mgagao altercations) on the one hand and the reassertion of its dominance by the "old guard" within ZANU.6

And when the ZIPA-linked "vashandi" in Mozambique continued with their efforts to open up ZANU to revitalization from below even after the incarceration (with Mozambican government assistance) of the ZIPA leadership, they too were merely crushed by Mugabe, Tongogara and the rest of the old guard. While arguments could be and were presented — premised on the presumed imperatives of security and military considerations — for dealing so expeditiously with "dissent", these do not entirely convincingly rationalize away the extreme harshness of the means adopted by the old guard in reestablishing its authority. True, the ZIPA leadership was not quite the product of an internal upsurge in the way the SWAPO dissidents of 1974-6 were, and, in fact, their project probably carried less of a democratic charge per se (as Moore has emphasized, they seemed open to a degree of mutual elite accommodation with the older leadership if mechanisms were made available for facilitating that). Nonetheless, even that degree the degree of open debate and innovation which they sought within the movement was not to be permitted them: study of the "vashandi" question — as well as of the dynamics of the earlier Nhari rebellion within ZANU and the grim manner in which it was terminated — begins to reveal that something rather close to the Namibian pattern of "dissent-management" was stalking the ZANU government-in-the making from a very early date.

And what of South Africa? Recent revelations, emerging recently even from within the ANC itself, document "serious abuses" of power within the movement's camps and a dramatic suppression of dissent on some occasions.7 Opinions differ as to just how central or marginal these flaws may have been to defining the essence of the ANC, and certainly the internal history of the ANC in exile largely remains to be
written in any very balanced way. There is, however, evidence to suggest that the 1969 Morogoro conference did provide an opportunity to ventilate real grievances, particularly regarding abuses of authority within the military structures. Some see the "African nationalist" faction which jockeyed (unsuccessfully) for position within the organization at that time as also being linked to such abuses and their defeat as quite a positive one from that point of view. More controversy surrounds the 1985 Kabwe conference which did address some of the issues thrown up by the dismal spectacle, early-1980s abuses at Quatro camp, but without hearing from, or even considering in any detail the cases of, those who had paid an extremely heavy price for their querying of the weaknesses of the movement at the time.

On the whole, the worst abuses of power within the ANC did not begin to rival the crimes committed by Swapo in exile. In addition, there is some reason to think that, more often than not, the strong sense of commonality of purpose that existed across the ANC sustained an ethos that anchored most leaders to a sense of high purpose and minimized the need for dissent from below. Of course, this may sound rather too Rousseauian ("the general will" and all that) for many (most?) democrats' comfort. Clearly -- and even more than most subjects in this relatively under-researched area -- this one demands both particularly scrupulous conceptualization and further investigation. For the moment note merely that Albie Sachs, a first-hand observer, has argued the special importance in safeguarding this (relative) openness of the role played by Oliver Tambo. And he has also suggested the importance of certain institutional/constitutional safeguards against abuse that came into effect within the movement during and after the Kabwe conference.8

II Democracy as a practice vis-à-vis the populace

Once again, the case of Namibia is instructive. In a very real sense SWAPO's crushing of the democratic moment in 1976 was an index of the primacy the external leadership's preoccupations -- a complex mix of
diplomatic, military and more self-serving ones — was to exert over the
dynamics of internal struggle. In Zambia at that time the claims of the
vast draft of now-external activists drawn directly from the most
dramatic kinds of participation in the internal struggle were merely
shuffled aside. But a continuing (and often highly questionable)
instrumentalization of the internal front was to continue to be a part
of Swapo politics right up to 1990, as Leys and I have also sought to
document in our recent writing. This probably affected quite negatively
the possibilities of internal mobilization from the late-1970s. And, as
the 1980s wore on, it served to qualify -- though not to stifle
altogether -- the potential (seen in initiatives in southern Namibia
like Bricks and the Women's Voice and also in the resurgent trade union
movement) for the kind of assertive politics of an activated civil
society that marked South Africa resistance during the same period. In
Ovamboland, in the war zone, any above-ground activity was virtually
impossible in any event; here on-again, off-again guerilla incursions
did allow for the forging of ever-closer symbolic links (to some extent
cast in ethnic terms) between movement and populace. But Swapo carried
forward little experience of the institutionalization of a responsive
politics into the post-liberation round -- either from its practice
inside the country or from its practice in exile.

The Mozambican case is very different from the Namibian one, of
course. On the one hand, Frelimo's political practice vis-à-vis the
Mozambican populace was articulated within substantial liberated areas;
on the other, there was no space for any of the legal above-ground
activity beyond the liberated areas that remained a dimension of
Namibian politics (especially in the southern part of the country)
throughout. And the fact is that Frelimo did manage to articulate within
its liberated areas a quasi-democratic practice of popular empowerment
that was real, if somewhat limited (as well being subject to some
romanticization at the time). In short, a link was established between
guerilla and peasant that was real and even two-way to the extent that
liberatory priorities came into congruence. Something of the same quasi-
democratic symbiosis was also created in many parts of the country
beyond the liberated areas in the period immediately after independence
-- via the mechanism of the *grupu dinamizador*, for example. Yet, as noted below, such democracy-in-the-making was never really effectively institutionalized in the new Mozambique and soon, under harsh conditions, much of its promise began to wither.

Although a great deal of further research remains to be done on the precise nature of the practices of the various "liberation movements" on the ground in Angola, there seems to have been far less of the kind of bonding between guerilla movement and populace that Frelimo, at its best, produced in the areas under its control. It is true that a certain notional link to popular aspirations became defined, along primarily ethnic lines, in the case of both the FNLA (with the Bakongo) and UNITA (with the Ovimbundu) -- even if most evidence suggests that such links were primarily manipulated quite parasitically by the leaderships involved. Moreover, even the MPLA, despite the movement's attempts to define a more broad-gauged project, could not avoid the tacit emergence of some kind of ethnic symbiosis (with the Mbundu) as an element within its project.

At the same time, some critics have argued that the highly intellectual, often white and mulatto, leadership of the MPLA were pulled towards an all too vanguardist approach towards "the masses" from quite early on. Moreover, the MPLA, despite some continuing activity in Cabinda and the Dembos forest, found itself largely operating within the bleak and sparsely populated Eastern zones of the country. Some sense of what a popularly-based politics should look like was kept alive within the MPLA during this period, of course, and for a time this helped underpin a progressive thrust to its post-liberation project. But in such a context, and even more than in the Mozambican case, the pull towards the establishment within the movement of a particular kind of political culture -- that which permitted, at best, the establishment of a "left developmental dictatorship" -- was very strong.

The actual military practice of ZANU -- the most important of the military challengers to the Smith regime -- is a much debated topic. Some have claimed for ZANU a very positive guerilla-peasant interaction
as being central to its eventual success, but others (Norma Kriger, for example) have emphasized both the rather heavy-handed role that ZANU guerillas played vis-a-vis the rural populace as well as the degree to which quasi-traditional cults and quasi-traditional notables were often merely incorporated, relatively untransformed, into the project of "liberation". It is interesting that certain of the evidence suggests that the moments when grass-roots democratization of the struggle may have been closest to the surface occurred when ZIPA and not the "old guard" was in charge of military-political operations. But this, too, is a topic that will continue to warrant careful scrutiny.

As noted earlier, the ANC may well have retained, internal to its own politics and despite such "serious abuses" of power as did occur within the movement, a rather greater sense of the need for two-way interaction with its ostensible popular base inside its country than did Swapo. Of course, it really had little choice but to develop this kind of sense, such was both the strength of the mass movement on the ground and the greater need to win a good part of the struggle inside South Africa (in comparison with the less dramatic and, in any case, geographically limited scope of internal resistance within Namibia on the one hand and the even greater saliency there of a possible international/diplomatic sphere [e.g. the United Nations] for advancing the struggle on the other).

In the event, the ANC managed deftly to position itself at the head of the popular movement, as the most recent events have confirmed. It did so in part by means of a kind of symbolic interaction with the mass of the populace, defined by its own historic resonance (and that of the world's most famous prisoner of conscience) as an apparently inescapable point of reference for on-going struggle, but also by its ability to manifest, over time, at least a minimal military presence ("armed propaganda") that was profoundly legitimating. But the ANC also developed institutional links -- by means of its interpenetration with the UDF and its emerging concordance with COSATU -- to mass assertions on the ground, assertions that had genuine democratic import, both real and potential. As a result the ANC returned to South Africa from exile
as merely one element — albeit the central element — within a much broader "mass democratic movement" that must inevitably qualify some of the autocratic ethos that the organization had developed in exile.

III Democracy: the legacy of the struggle

Ironically, in Namibia — where, perhaps, authoritarian practices had reached their apogee within the liberation process — the transition to independence produced a notably democratic constitution and electoral process. To be sure, as Colin Leys and I have written in evaluating this transition, the "democracy" exemplified by this outcome remains a very specific and limited variant of democratic possibility:

What Namibia had was a liberal constitution, rather than a democratic one; or more precisely, a liberal democracy of the specific type familiar in the West to which modern scholars have given names like "pluralism" and "democratic elitism"; or, in the plain words of an American scholar by no means wholly unsympathetic to it, "representative government, ultimately accountable to 'the people' but not really under their control, combined with a fundamentally capitalist economy".10

This is an important emphasis: for the heralding of such democracy has become one of the key ingredients in the whole process of recolonization in southern Africa. At the same time, the fact that even this degree of democracy has been consolidated in Namibia is instructive in and of itself. For, as hinted above, it could not readily have been predicted from Swapo’s record in exile. In fact, as elsewhere in the region, the political aftermath of the liberation process cannot be extrapolated, either readily or exclusively, from that process.

For experience suggests that outcomes in this sphere are over-determined in quite unpredictable ways, and this is not least true of the Namibian case. The whole process of internationalized decolonization in Namibia — occurring as it at the dawn of the post Cold War era and in a context of South Africa’s own rethinking of its future — conspired to draw relatively liberal technocrats, as distinct from the dangerous securocrats, closer to centre stage within Swapo. And their liberalizing
role was probably rendered even more secure when Swapo failed to win a two-thirds majority in the first, constitution-making election. Not that the future of even a liberal democracy in Namibia is fixed: the securocrats still have certain key positions of power within the state and talk still surfaces from time to time of establishing a one-party state should Swapo win two-thirds "next time" (this year!). Here some historical perspective may yet prove to be essential:

... the liberation struggle developed strength and resilience in Swapo, and a tradition of challenge to authority, as well as one of hierarchy and authoritarianism. All we can say is that what prevailed during the struggle was the latter tradition, rather than the former; and that this should not be forgotten or underestimated when the balance sheet of the struggle is drawn up and its implications for the future are assessed".11

"Overdetermination" is the operative word in the Mozambique case as well: currently fashionable attempts to downplay the importance of South African destabilization as the key ingredient in the demise of the Mozambican revolution fail to convince.12 But the weaknesses of Frelimo's own political and economic practice made a significant contribution to this outcome, nonetheless. For the notion of popular empowerment that provided both the theory and, to some degree, the practice of politics in the liberated areas found, in the end, little real purchase within the institutions that came to define the new Frelimo state. True, the leadership remained for some time committed to a popularly-oriented project, even if not subordinated, in any very strong sense, to a structure of democratic accountability vis-à-vis the populace in whose name it acted. But, to an uncomfortable degree, the military hierarchies of the liberation phase were merely given fresh life by the authoritarian premises of a particular, heavily Eastern-European influenced, brand of "socialist" endeavour (one-party state "vanguardism", official "Marxismo-Leninismo" and the like). Whether the Frelimo leadership would have overlooked the requirements of the peasant economy so cavalierly in its economic planning had it felt moved to open up its political system to greater popular involvement is a good question. Had it done so might it also been less vulnerable to South Africa and Renamo clawing away at its base?
We have already noted that Angola's armed struggle provided an even weaker foundation than was true in the Mozambique case for a liberation cast in terms of genuine popular empowerment. Whether some of the destructiveness of the Nito Alves confrontation in the immediate post-liberation period might have been avoided had there existed a more open political process is a subject worthy of further study. An MPLA-led Angola was, in any case, soon overwhelmed by the facts of external intervention, especially by South Africa and the United States (either acting directly and/or through their brutal cat's-paw UNITA). It could well be that the deep inter-movement divisions in Angola would have been impossible, from quite an early stage, to reconcile through any imaginable democratic process. But such intervention continued to feed such divisions and was crucial in producing a social catastrophe in Angola.

Intervention also served to preempt any early chance that MPLA would begin to open up democratic space from within its own project, the presumed imperatives of war merely intensifying militaristic and vanguardist pulls towards greater authoritarianism. And soon, amidst socio-economic decay, the corruption of the leadership became another ingredient of hierarchization of the system and popular demobilization. True, when a form of competitive democracy, characterized in all accounts as free and fair, finally came to Angola, MPLA retained enough credibility to win the election. But UNITA was never really interested in a genuinely democratic resolution of the situation. And so the war grinds on.

Not surprisingly, the aftermath to liberation in Zimbabwe was also far from being a brave new world of popular empowerment. True, Mugabe's threat to create a one-party state never quite materialized. But the actions of the notorious Fifth Brigade in crushing "dissent" in Matabeleland seemed in many ways to represent an all too predictable extrapolation from pre-independence "old guard politics". And an ethos of middle-class comfort came to define most other activities of the new elite. Meanwhile, peasant demands for land reform were slowly but
surely side-lined (and not merely because of the conditions of the Lancaster House agreement) and the instrumentalization of popular constituencies along ethnic and sub-ethnic lines became ever more obviously the stuff of post-liberation petty-bourgeois politics in Zimbabwe.

In South Africa the negotiating process itself has proven to be a very ambiguous vector of "overdetermination" in its own right. As with Swapo in Namibia, the ANC seems to have been drawn -- in the absence of outright victory and via the mechanisms of elite-pacting and judicious international political and economic pressure -- firmly onto the terrain of liberal democracy. Certainly any tendencies towards authoritarianism that the ANC might have carried home from exile will have been sharply qualified by means of this process. More so than in Namibia, however, there has existed in South Africa a much more active and progressive range of actors within "civil society" who came to define, alongside the ANC itself, the "mass democratic movement". These actors -- trade unions, civics, women's organizations, and the like -- might have been expected to keep democratic pressure on the ANC to constantly expand its definition of liberation in a leftward direction. In some ways such actors have been weakened by the electoralization/parliamentarization of the transition process that has just occurred. Still, as I have argued elsewhere, the democratic impulse towards socio-economic transformation has by no means been fully tamed in South Africa. The ANC's Reconstruction and Development Programme -- for all its weaknesses -- becomes a terrain upon which the left can and must struggle to see the sustaining of a genuinely progressive democratic-cum-socialist possibility in the current transition: democracy with liberation!

IV. Conclusion

The above represents a very preliminary sketch of the more finished paper I will eventually write on this theme. In a subsequent draft more time will be spent exploring the concept of "democracy" itself (although I have developed some of the relevant argument in the paper referred to immediately above and the reader may wish to refer to
that work\textsuperscript{15}). More time, too, will be spent not only in elaborating the various country case-studies but also in drawing out more clearly the connections, analytical and actual, between them. In doing so, one particular challenge -- to be only inadequately articulated in this brief concluding remark -- will persist: how to situate the very mixed record -- to put it mildly, in some cases -- of democratic practice within the liberation movements.

Clearly, serious abuses of power cannot be ignored: innocent people, comrades with important contributions to make, have lost their lives arbitrarily to those -- acting in the name of revolution but often with far more dubious motives -- who sought to control dissent and/or limit debate. At the same time, we cannot underestimate the fact that each of these movements -- within which abuses occurred and various undemocratic practices flourished -- made crucial contributions, in the larger scheme of things, to bringing to book the brutal and profoundly undemocratic white minority regimes that they fought against. There are those who will argue, with some apparent plausibility, that undemocratic practices were merely inevitable, even necessary, under the conditions that defined the thirty-years war for southern African liberation; such, they will say, was the logic of the very real military and security imperatives defined by the waging of that war.

The fact that not all experiences of struggle in the region were exactly similar -- that some blended a process of liberation from white-minority rule with fewer abuses and more of the substance of empowerment from below -- suggests this to be too simple and sweeping an approach. Circumstances altered cases, certainly, but so too did political choices made by leaders and populaces alike. However, very refined criteria indeed are required in order to make such distinctions, and also to ground reflection on the moral considerations that must underpin any evaluation of these matters. Only through the process of establishing more firmly my own perspective on the overall pattern of the thirty years war -- a process I reflect upon in a closely related paper\textsuperscript{16} -- will I begin to feel more confident about making such judgements.

Ibid., p. 177.


See the suggestive summary of relevant materials by Ngwabi Bhebe and Terence Ranger in their introductions to both volumes of their edited work, Zimbabwe's Liberation War Volume One: Soldiers; Volume Two: Society (forthcoming); I have read this only in manuscript form.

Leys and Saul, Namibia's Liberation Struggle... (op. cit.), p. 200.

Ibid., p. 203.


15 Ibid.