

National liberation, the NDR and Socialism — resurgence of the Indispensable discussion

Nyiko Floyd Shivambu questions the usefulness of value of the 'National Democratic Revolution' in the current conjuncture

As a means to politically and ideologically assess the route the revolutionary Alliance took in conceptualising national liberation, there is a need for a measured resurgence of the debate of the late 1920s and early 1950s in the SACP on the link between national and class struggles.

The debate on the relations of class and national struggles in South Africa should be reviewed as there consistently emerge tendencies that seek to undermine these components. The resurgence of the debate is necessary, as it helps to clarify the role and immediate tasks of the working class and its vanguard, the SACP in the present conjuncture. It demystifies the question of the SACP's relationship with state power and governance as addressed by the 12th SACP National Congress. This discussion should contribute to the exchange of thoughts on the character of South Africa's revolution.

In the face of an almost divisive move to ally with the African National Congress, the South African Communist Party in the late 1920s consciously sought to "pay particular attention to the embryonic national organisations among the [African majority], such as the African National Congress... [with the] aim to transform the African National Congress into a fighting nationalist revolutionary organisation against the white bour-

geoisie and the British imperialists, based upon the trade unions, peasant organisations, etc". This is derived from the resolution of the Communist International in 1928, and laid a correct basis for the SACP's conscious and deliberate construction of the Alliance with the African National Congress from the late 1920s. There was remarkable internal resistance to an Alliance with a National Liberation Movement, largely premised on the supposition that the class struggle should remain a class struggle.

The major basis of this resolution was the analysis that while national and gender oppression constituted the predominant features of colonial-cum-apartheid capitalism, these could not be de-linked from the exclusively white bourgeoisie oppression as a basis for continued extraction of surplus value out of black workers' labour. The SACP's struggle to end the private ownership of means of production was also linked to the conscious construction of a united, non-racial, non-sexist, democratic and coherent nation. Joe Slovo once said that "for all the overt signs of race as the mechanism of domination, the legal and institutional domination of the white minority over the black majority has its origins in, and is perpetuated by economic exploitation!". These elements continue to find resonance and best expression in the *South African Road to*

Socialism adopted by the 12th National Congress in July 2007.

Colonialism of a Special Type

The SACP understood the obvious reality that there is no qualitative difference between the status of the Africans and Blacks in the Union of South Africa and those elsewhere in Africa, or any other colonial territory. 'Colonial' living standards, deprivation of political rights and constitutional liberties, and deliberate efforts to prevent their economic and cultural development—all these are characteristics of colonialism. The only difference was the reality that South Africa was internally colonised by the white population that had naturalised into the territory South of Africa. This was therefore conceptualised by the SACP as Colonialism of a Special Type (CST). Despite its minimalist approach, the 2007 ANC Draft Strategy and Tactics notes this reality, mainly that the CST was characterised by three interrelated antagonisms, which "found expression in national oppression based on race; class exploitation directed against black workers on the basis of race; and triple oppression of women based on their race, their class and their gender"²⁷.

The SACP's characterisation of South Africa as a CST overwhelmingly influenced the ANC's strategic perspective. The Alliance was premised on the characterisation of South Africa as a CST, and the formulation of the struggle as a National Democratic Revolution intended to dialectically resolve the national, gender, and class contradictions, including through the liberation of Africans in particular and blacks in general. The emphasis of the groups that stood to objectively benefit was in line with the objective analysis of South African society, and not based on some sentimental attachment to Africans, as it came to characterise

the Africanist faction that seceded from the ANC to form the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC).

Certainly, the view that there is a need for a dialectical resolution of the national, gender and class contradictions in South Africa made profound inroads and effectively underpinned the National Liberation Movement in South Africa. The ANC's acceptance that national liberation cannot be de-linked from class liberation formed the basis of the Alliance between the ANC and the SACP. It could be said that the SACP recognition that there is a national component in the class struggle and the ANC recognition that there is class component in the national struggle underpins the Alliance. We should always emphasise that there is a gender component of the struggle that has been progressively raised as a vital component of liberation in South Africa.

Colonial-cum-apartheid capitalism deliberately intensified fragmentation, not only between black and white, but within the black population. In 1920, the year of the Witwatersrand mineworkers' strike, the Native Recruiting Corporation of the Chamber of Mines had expressed the fear that unless conditions on the mines were ameliorated, "the different tribes will become more and more in sympathy with one another, with growing disregard of loyalty to their respective tribal chiefs and a fusion of common interests under the guidance of the educated classes of natives irrespective of tribe or place of origin will result"²⁸. The fragmentation of the African population into various ethnic groups had a contradictory effect on the development of a working class consciousness. While it divided and weakened

1. Joe Slovo, 'South Africa – No Middle Road', *Southern Africa: The New Politics of Revolution*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1976, p. 118

2. ANC, Draft Strategy and Tactics, February 2007

the labour involvement as whole, it strengthened segments of the workforce, for without trade unions to represent their interests; workers often sought political and social solidarity in a shared ethnicity⁴.

The consciously sowed national fragmentation seeds significantly divided the South African working class. In the 1920s, the white working class united against capitalism and class exploitation, yet did not cross the racial Rubicon. They distorted the famous Marxist slogan by adding to "You have nothing to lose, but your chains" the words "for a white South Africa".

A failure to recognise and appreciate the national content of the class struggle in South Africa and vice versa amounts to counter revolution. It is within this basis that the Alliance emerged out of consolidated and practical struggles of the exploited and oppressed groups in South Africa.

The discussion about the SACP contesting state power through elections and active involvement in governance is confused elsewhere with the need to break the Alliance with the ANC, and the disconnection of the class and national struggle. The debate on disconnecting the class and national struggle is somewhat similar to the period of the transition from the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) to the South African Communist Party (SACP) in the early 1950s,

which was not a smooth one. The transition was characterised by a vigorous debate on how communists in South Africa should relate to national liberation movement. David Everrat observes that "contrary to the received wisdom which sees the SACP as an unproblematic continuation of the CPSA underground, the birth of the SACP occasioned a prolonged and intensive debate over the relationship of the class struggle to nationalism"⁵. This was in the face of a transforming African National Congress from its initial character of a middle class pressure group into mass national liberation movement invigorated to recapture "a black man's country", as the first President of the ANC Youth League, Anton Muziwakhe Lambede, emphasised.

National oppression was historically presented as a predominant contradiction, while class exploitation presented as a primary contradiction. Is it correct in the present conjecture with constitutional rights, democracy and civil liberties to claim categorically that the predominant contradiction is national oppression when there is such severe class exploitation? These are the central questions which should be asked as the basis of the Alliance was the recognition that national oppression represented the dominant contradiction and required a resolution, which would address class exploitation as the primary contradiction.

Freedom Charter as strategic vision of NDR

The Freedom Charter is accepted as the clearest articulation of the strategic vision of the NDR. While subjected to a variety of interpretations, the Freedom Charter's vision to build a democratic and non-racial South Africa remains uncontested. The Charter also includes the demand that the country's wealth should be returned to the people as

3. P. Bonner, 'The black mineworkers' strike: a preliminary account', in B. Bozzoli, ed., *Labour, Townships and Protest* (Johannesburg, 1979), pp.287-8

4. P. Harris 'Exclusion, Classification and Internal Colonialism: The emergence of ethnicity among the Tsongaspeakers of South Africa' in Vail, Leroy, ed, *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa*, London: Currey, 1989, page 102.

5. Everrat, D. *Alliance Politics of a Special Type: The Roots of the ANC/SACP Alliance, 1950-1954*, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 18. No. 1, page 20.

a whole, while not entirely abolishing private capital. But the Freedom Charter is not socialist. The SACP viewed it in the 1962 *South African Road to Freedom* as a minimum programme and a basis for socialist transition. The Charter did not seek to restore capitalist profitability, nor aim at consolidation of capitalism. Nelson Mandela observed in 1957:

“The Charter does not advocate the abolition of private enterprise, nor is it suggested that all industries be nationalised or that all trade be controlled by the state... All people shall have the right to trade where they choose, to manufacture and to enter all trades, crafts and professions’, says the Charter. The right to do these things would remain a dead letter without the restoration of the basic wealth of the country to the people, and without that the building of a democratic state is inconceivable”, (Mandela, 1957).

Mandela makes it clear that although the Freedom Charter did not advocate the end of private ownership of the means of production, it maintained that there should be restoration of ownership of the basic wealth to the people. The key demands of the Charter certainly constitute the basis for a socialist transition. The Charter came to be the glue that held the Alliance together, uniting the forces for progressive change.

Cosatu’s response to the 2007 Draft Strategy and Tactics makes clear that any possible substitution of the Freedom Charter as ANC’s strategic objective directly threatens the unity of the Alliance.

Consistent with the assertions of the Freedom Charter, the Strategy and Tactics adopted in the Morogoro Conference stated *inter alia*, “In our country – more than in any other part of the oppressed world – it is inconceivable for liberation to have meaning without a return of the wealth of the

land to the people as a whole. It is therefore a fundamental feature of our strategy that victory must embrace more than formal political democracy. To allow the existing economic forces to retain their interests intact is to feed the root of racial supremacy and does not represent even the shadow of liberation”⁶. The Morogoro S&T further said, “It is historically understandable that the double- oppressed and doubly exploited working class constitutes a distinct and reinforcing layer of our liberation and Socialism and do not stand in conflict with the national interest”⁷. This is certainly consistent with an observation President Mbeki made in 1979: “The charge of traitor might stick if we were to advance a programme of equality between black and white while there remained between these two communities the relations of exploiter and exploited”⁸.

As long as the Freedom Charter remains the strategic objective of the ANC, the suspicion that the SACP wants to turn the ANC into a socialist organisation is unfounded. The SACP does not seek to turn the ANC into a socialist organisation, but consciously struggles to ensure that the ANC achieves its own strategic objectives—addressing the class, gender and national contradictions and building a society envisaged by the Freedom Charter. There certainly is nothing wrong with the SACP, Cosatu and working class forces construing the ANC’s achievement of its goals as a basis of a socialist transition.

Within a socio-political context characterised by such aspects as the hostility of the global balance of forces, triumphalism of a democratic breakthrough and predomi-

6. ANC, Strategy and Tactics, Morogoro Conference, Morogoro, Tanzania, April 25 – May 1 1969

7. *Ibid.*

8. Mbeki, T, *The Historical Injustice*, Sechaba, March 1979

nance of capitalism globally, the SACP's discussions should really interrogate whether there still exists an interconnectedness of class exploitation and national oppression. The Party's basis to align with a national liberation movement was on its analysis of South Africa being a CST.

Colonial character of economy

The SACP historically understood that "the relationship between national (or gender) oppression and class exploitation is not a relationship of "form" to "content". National and gender oppression are not merely formal, they are real in themselves. They have a history, they are institutionalised, and they have a relative autonomy from class exploitation. The one cannot simply be collapsed or explained by the other.

Likewise, one or the other oppression will not simply wither away because another of the oppressions has been overcome. These three realities are deeply interconnected". An emphasis has always been placed that "for this reason, the SACP also believes that the struggle against these oppressions cannot be separated out into different "stages" of struggle. In particular, we must guard against a mechanical, stageist approach to these interconnected challenges. We must reject attempts to confine the present phase of the NDR to a simple

"deracialisation" of capitalism, which seeks to postpone working class struggle against capitalism to some distant "second stage"¹⁰.

SACP General Secretary Blade Nzimande correctly maintains that the economy retains a colonial character. Discussing the motive forces of the NDR, the GS says, "This issue also arose out of the observation that much as our revolution has notched some important victories, including relative stabilisation of our democratic institutions and significant government resource transfers to the poor, the colonial character of our economy remains essentially intact".¹¹ He goes on to state that "One significant manifestation of the colonial character of the South African economy is the fact that despite higher levels of sustained growth, unseen for decades in our country, this is not translating into sustained creation of quality jobs".¹² White monopoly capital, the GS says, is "the single biggest beneficiary from the current growth path is the same old sections of the capitalist class, the white capitalist class, and all indicators point to widening income gap and worsening poverty"¹³.

The question of what should constitute decolonisation of the South African economy remains relevant since an intensification of Black Economic Empowerment and deracialisation of key sectors of the South African economy could be conceptualised and misunderstood as decolonisation of the economy.

Perhaps the clearest feature of the colonial character of South African society is the phenomenon of dependent development. The SACP 12th National Congress observed that South African economy, notwithstanding important changes, preserves the systemic features of its formation and consolidation within a colonial and special colonial framework. This, the SACP Congress notes,

9. South African Communist Party (SACP) > African Communist Journal Extracts > No 149 – Second Quarter 1998 > A socialist approach to the consolidation and deepening of the National Democratic Revolution

10. Ibid.

11. Nzimande, B. The Motive Forces of the National Democratic Revolution, Umsebenzi Online, Volume 6, No. 4, 7 March 2007

11. Nzimande, B. The Motive Forces of the National Democratic Revolution, Umsebenzi Online, Volume 6, No. 4, 7 March 2007

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

is illustrated in the ownership and control of the commanding heights of the economy, which are still in the hands of private monopoly and multi-national capital. The South African economy is based on a dependent capitalist accumulation path which relies heavily on primary product exports, particularly from mining and agriculture, while being excessively dependent on imports of capital and consumption goods, and various commodity goods and services.

This dependent-development path is exceedingly vulnerable to global economic and fiscal fluctuations, especially movements in commodity prices; and it fails to redress the spatial inequalities bequeathed by apartheid. It is also structurally unable to absorb the unemployed, and there are high levels of poverty and starvation, since the provision of basic services remain commodified.

To end the dependent development path, the SACP proposes: building a developmental state, whose role will not be management of class relations and contradictions, but overall development to better the living conditions of the working class and the poor. The developmental state envisaged by the SACP is not a neutral, but a strong and functionally capable state with the capacity to expropriate the means of production for developmental purposes.

Cosatu's discussion document for its fourth Central Committee observes,

"...the proposals in the Freedom Charter, whose clauses on state ownership of the commanding heights of the economy, and control of the private sector for the benefit of the people, made it clear that the NDR in South Africa needed to involve far more than deracialisation of existing structures of ownership, and required the active *breaking up* of inherited power relations which were the legacy of decades, indeed centuries of

national oppression, and colonial domination."¹⁴

Cosatu's observation is certainly revolutionary, yet ignores the reality that the Charter did not explicitly canvass for state ownership, but socialised ownership of the key means of production, which is characteristic of a socialist transition. The Charter says, "The mineral wealth beneath the soil, monopoly industry and banks shall be transferred to the ownership of the people as a whole". While progressive, state ownership is different from ownership by the people as a whole, and this finds practical coherence in the SACP's 12th National Congress proposal that state ownership should be the means towards socialised ownership, through ending private ownership of strategic areas of South Africa's economy, including the production of energy, minerals, metals and iron ore.

Relationship between ANC and SACP

President Mbeki noted in his opening address to the ANC June 2007 National Policy Conference, "The SACP has always understood that it could not delegate its socialist tasks to the ANC, consistent with the fact that the tasks of the socialist revolution could not be delegated to the National Democratic Revolution". Certainly, the SACP will not intend to delegate the tasks of the socialist revolution to the ANC, but will strive to ensure that the NDR's strategic objectives are realised. President Mbeki also said that "the ANC would respect the right and duty of our ally, the South African Communist Party, to lead the struggle for the victory of the socialist revolution.... [as the ANC] never obstructed the SACP in its socialist

14. Cosatu, *The NDR and Socialism, The NDR and Capitalism: Key Strategic Debates*, September 2007, page 2.

objectives, and therefore joined the reactionary anti-communist forces”.

It is true that the ANC never sought to join reactionary anti-communist forces, yet there occasionally appears rogue elements not dissimilar from reactionary anti-communist forces. This is reflected in claims that the NDR has never been and cannot be a basis for socialist transition, and the ultimate realisation of the Freedom Charter cannot and should not be associated with a transition to socialism. This ideological current was identified in SACP’s 2006 discussion document on state power as a “rupture”

The main motive force of the NDR is the working class, and the leader of the Alliance is the ANC. But the ANC’s leadership of the NDR, cannot just be asserted as revolutions are about fundamental change of class relations led by a class, not an outcome of organisational relations and decrees. The ANC matured in the revolutionary struggles to accept that no struggle for national liberation can be class neutral. The revolutionary Alliance recognised that the NDR cannot be about classes whose antagonistic interests would be managed by a democratic movement, not dissimilar to the biblical heaven, where lambs and calves will supposedly graze alongside lions and hyenas.

The SACP’s resolution at the 12th National Congress that there should be a reconfiguration of the Alliance is consistent with the aims of the NDR. Certainly, this resolution should be subjected to discussions at all levels of the Alliance – including through interrogating how a reconfigured Alliance would function. The terrain of the struggle has objectively changed. The democratic breakthrough has presented to the revolutionary movement new platforms to ensure that the aims of the NDR are realised. These include various institutions of

the state, government, parliament, parastatals, etc.

The 12th National Congress mandated its structures and members to discuss the best possible way in which the SACP should independently and actively take part in structures of governance. An emphasis Congress made was that the Alliance should remain the vehicle for the realisation of the NDR’s strategic objectives. The ANC should recognise that it cannot be strategically and tactically correct that mobilisation for elections is collectively and jointly embarked on, yet only the ANC legislates, governs and executes a key part of the NDR. Discussions at the 52nd National Congress should reflect on what could constitute a reconfigured Alliance with the SACP.

Such a discussion should avoid the convergence of counter-revolutionary left and right wing opportunism, which, respectively, emphasises the pre-eminence of class over national struggle and national struggle over class struggle. The realisation of NDR’s objectives does not constitute a postponement of the socialist revolution, and projection of the NDR as a route to socialism does not amount to leftwing opportunism. Lenin said that “the proletariat alone is capable of carrying the democratic revolution to the end ... the main task of the proletariat at the current historical moment is to carry the democratic resolution ... forward to the end ... any minimisation of this task inevitably results in the working class being transformed, from the leader of the people’s revolution into a passive participant in the revolution tailing behind the liberal bourgeoisie.” (Lenin, 1907) ★

Shivambu is the National Coordinator of the SACP’s Policy Development and Research Unit and a National Committee member of the Young Communist League.