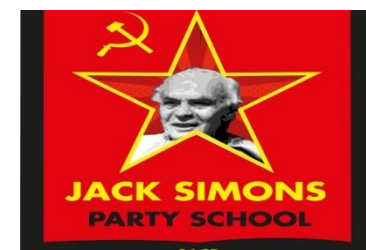




# REFLECTING ON THE STATE OF AFRICA AND 100 YEARS OF SACP SOLIDARITY - 30 MAY 2021

*“Put People before Profits”*



# INTRODUCTION

**In contemporary Africa, many political systems have become mature and display a large measure of resilience. Democracy has become entrenched and free and fair elections take place across the continent. Despite these positive developments, elements of inequality, dominance, discrimination and marginalisation remain. These have been greatly exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which still has the world in its grip, and on which I will reflect briefly.**

**I have been requested this afternoon to elaborate on the state of Africa and I want to attempt this by looking individually at various dimensions of African society: the political, the economic, the security, the social and the technological. In each instance, I want to shine a light on the challenges and constraints, but also on the potential and opportunities locked up in each of these societal spheres.**

**Thereafter I want to talk briefly about the way forward – about African solutions to African problems.**

# THE IMPACT OF COVID-19



All aspects of society have been touched by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. These include:

- That the COVID-19 pandemic is an event equal if not larger in importance than the fall of the Berlin Wall, the events of 9/11 or the economic meltdown of 2008/2009.
- That a good understanding of the short-term health implications of COVID-19 exists, but that the medium to long-term political, economic, social and security ramifications are not yet fully understood.
- That the pandemic is an event which will invalidate many projections made and scenarios created – this is ongoing amidst new waves of the pandemic.
- That crises of this magnitude make and break political careers, unsettle bureaucracies and shape organisational destinies.
- That the health and economic imperatives are situated on opposite sides of the spectrum. Whilst (in the health context) the best results in combating the disease is obtained by means of a complete societal lockdown, this is (in the economic context) highly problematic since a complete lockdown shuts down an entire economy. The longer the lockdown is enforced, the greater the economic damage.
- That the globe has become profoundly interdependent and interconnected; “mutual vulnerability” is now the touchstone of the debate surrounding national security.
- That sectors of society such as the health and technology sectors have now become active geopolitical battlegrounds. Going forward, national health will, for example, be a key economic resource, similar to a nation’s natural resources.

# THE POLITICAL DIMENSION

In total, fourteen presidential or legislative elections were scheduled in Africa for 2021. Many of these new leaders will face heightened public agitation against COVID-19 restrictions and new lockdowns, coupled with the challenge to address growing poverty levels.

Africa's resource endowments and mineral wealth continue to lead to competition and conflict over access and spheres of influence on the continent. Included in Africa's share of the world's mineral reserves are 22 of the 33 mineral commodities which the US deems as "critical" for its economy and national security.

A lively debate rages at both the academic and the policy levels regarding the possibility of a sub-Saharan spring, akin to the "Arab Spring", in the aftermath of COVID-19. The year 2011 witnessed the collapse of several regimes in North Africa that were once thought to be unshakeable. It was clear that although Governments have an important role to play, they will be removed if they do not represent the will of the people - no matter how powerful they seem.

The role of social media and of mobile communication may again prove to be decisive. The most effective formula to stave off these kinds of events is Governments' ability to create and sustain an environment in which their citizens have access to resources and the basic necessities of life, and inhabit an environment which is not detrimental to their health and well-being. The concept of "the national interest" should translate as equity and prosperity for all citizens.

The blockade of the Suez Canal by the super tanker "Ever Given" and events on the Afungi peninsula has elevated the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean region, the Cape of Good Hope sea route and the Mozambique Channel, sometimes described as "the forgotten chokepoint".

# THE ECONOMIC DIMENSION

**The legacy of the Berlin Conference of 1884 which led to a realignment and re-parcelling of the continent lingers on. Many African countries remain in the sphere of influence of their former colonial masters.**

**In terms of either formal agreements which were signed or in terms of informal networks of patronage many of these former colonizers retain preferential access to African' countries economies and to their mineral wealth. The need for new players to access raw materials and new markets must also be factored in at this point.**

**Africa's economic development also remains heavily driven by extra-African donor influences and interests. African countries are, in many instances, "donorised" entities whose policy processes are susceptible to hijacking by external interests.**

**When looking at the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) there is a misalignment in terms of their levels of development and integration which renders continental economic cooperation ineffective. This also makes African countries susceptible to influencing by former colonial masters or by emerging players on the African continent.**

**Numerous reports indicate that otherwise legitimate companies have engaged in questionable business deals with corrupt and repressive groupings which abscond with natural wealth and perpetrate human rights violations, often in the context of conflict. Companies are also dealing in what has been dubbed "booty futures" , that is the direct company financing of rebel groups in return for future exploitation rights once military victory is achieved.**

**As COVID-19 and fears of food shortages demonstrated Africa's over-reliance on global supply chains, impetus is growing to strengthen value chains on the continent. After some delays, the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) came into force on 1 January 2021. Bringing together 1.3 billion people in a USD 3.4 trillion economic bloc, the AfCFTA is set to become the world's largest free trade area since the establishment of the World Trade Organization in 1995.**

# THE SECURITY DIMENSION

**A situation remains where more than 90% of the budget for AU programmes is being financed from outside. This also touches on the AU's peace and security architecture.**

**Foreign countries such as France remain militarily involved in African countries - such as Mali and the Central African Republic (CAR) – where they have economic interests such as uranium mines.**

**In pursuance of its “global war on terror” the US is expanding its AFRICOM initiative on the continent. The US has bases and has conducted military operations with at least 17 African countries. There, however, seems to be a clear correlation between the increase of US “stability operations” in Africa and an increase in militancy, a proliferation of insurgent groups and a “terror diaspora” across the continent.**

**Many armed conflicts on the continent have become self-financing, as rebel groups, criminal networks and mercenaries increasingly rely on natural resources and more accessible global markets to fund military activity.**

**In 2021, countering Islamist-linked terrorism increasingly dominates Africa's security agenda, from established networks such as al-Shabab in Somalia and Boko Haram in West Africa to widening threats in the Sahel and the emboldened Islamic State-affiliated efforts in northern Mozambique, also now spilling over into Tanzania. Meanwhile, long-standing violence between nomadic herders and sedentary farmers in West Africa and the Sahel continues to be largely overlooked.**

# THE SOCIAL DIMENSION

We should not lose sight of the fact that natural resources are inherently good; they can generate wealth and contribute to peace and development, and serve as the engine for sustainable socio-economic development. Under positive conditions diamonds, for example, become a springboard from which many African producer countries can launch initiatives to expand and diversify the productive capacity of their economies, creating much-needed jobs in the process. More successful revenue collection also facilitates investment in social development projects in the education, health and related sectors.

Unfortunately, private actors, including private citizenry and ethnic groups who inhabit regions with natural resources deposits, sometimes engage in conflict on the strength of their perceived ownership of such resources. This should, however, not come as a surprise if local populations are continuously being marginalised and see no tangible benefits as a result of natural resources being extracted from their direct environment – often by foreign entities.

The social impact of climate change must also be mentioned. It is generally acknowledged that Africa will be the continent most negatively affected by the vagaries of climate change. Due to the fact that 95% of Africa's agriculture is rain-dependent, the already fragile agricultural sector is very vulnerable to climate change. The rule of thumb among crop ecologists is that for every one degree Celsius rise in temperature above the growing season optimum, farmers can expect a ten percent decline in grain yields - devastating for African agriculture.

In Africa, as in other parts of the world, the post COVID-19 epoch may well become the "Age of Anger" – a phrase coined by Pankaj Mishra in 2017. The COVID-19 pandemic has sharply brought fault-lines in societies such as income inequality and race to the surface. The peak of social, economic and political anger is most likely still to come as civil unrest, linked to public spending cuts, increases. The initial emotion of fear is being overtaken by the emotion of anger. Diminished livelihoods, escalating public dissatisfaction and heightened distrust in the authorities can all feed into one another to realise this scenario. The COVID-19 generation is unlikely to be a passive spectator in the new era.

# THE TECHNOLOGICAL DIMENSION

The COVID pandemic has highlighted the exponential influence which technology plays and the rise of the so-called 4<sup>th</sup> Industrial Revolution. The Fourth Industrial Revolution signifies a period in human history in which rapid transformation takes place, driven by advances in science, technology, engineering and applied mathematics (STEM). Concretely, this involves technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), block-chain technology, Big Data and the Internet of Things (IoT).

Across Africa, the innovations emanating from these developments is reshaping industries, distorting geographical borders, challenging existing regulatory frameworks and fundamentally redefining the nature of societies. New threats have the potential to flourish in this environment. This can, for example, take the form of asymmetrical warfare by radical and terrorist groupings, via their easy access to technology such as drones and 3D printing.

On the positive side, and with its young population, Africa is emerging as the new technological frontier. Continentally, Africa is the biggest user and champion of mobile money services. Mobile money delivers services to unbanked populations, disrupting traditional banking and retailing models. A total of nineteen African markets have more mobile money accounts than bank accounts. Almost 50% of global mobile money services, services clients on the African continent.

After a remarkable year of growth in which it eased the disruption caused by COVID-19, African tech has plenty of solid achievements to build on in 2021. Improvements in connectivity have enhanced prospects for the tech ecosystem. The combination of faster broadband and new habits from the pandemic will drive digital innovation across all sectors of the economy. E-commerce platforms have gained consumer trust and will continue to grow in capital cities as the virus remains in circulation.

# THE WAY FORWARD

## **SELF-SUFFICIENCY**

African Governments must reach a point where they effectively manage their own budgets and extract, add value and market their natural resources without outside assistance. Self-sufficiency (insofar as defence and security are concerned) is equally important. This will form the basis for addressing African Governments' economic and social concerns effectively.

## **REGIONAL INTEGRATION**

Regional integration must be strengthened further as an integral part of the AU's continental development agenda. Structural shifts in the international political economy require joint, collective responses if the best interest of all are to be served.

## **INTRA-AFRICAN TRADE**

The focus here should not only be on sectors where the continent has a strong comparative advantage such as energy, mineral resources and agriculture but also on new sectors such as health and vaccine production. There is similar scope for growth in terms of manufactured products including television sets and computer equipment.

## **ICT CONNECTIVITY**

Increased ICT connectivity allows Africa to leapfrog forward, with the mobile telephone revolution giving more access to information and lowering the cost of doing business. Farmers in remote rural areas are now able to instantly access information concerning prices and agricultural conditions.

## **INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT**

Although good progress is being made, the AfDB estimates the African infrastructure funding gap to stand at USD 50 billion per year for the next ten years, depriving the continent of an estimated 2% of additional economic growth per year.

## **TAPPING INTO THE POWER OF SOCIAL FORCES**

Social forces such as trade unions and civil society must become agents of cooperation. Agents of cooperation assist to effectively reframe issues and to mobilise publics around key issues. Only if this is done will the global rise in racism and the trend of progressive forces losing elections to right-wing parties or right-wing coalitions be halted.

# CONCLUSION

South Africa's foreign policy perspectives are not new, but have emerged from the crucible of our own struggle for liberation. A critical ingredient of this remains the SACP's solidarity with countries such as Cuba and Venezuela, but especially with countries on the continent, such as the Western Sahara, which continues to resist occupation by Morocco.

In conclusion, the following thoughts may be useful to guide our future engagement with the continent:

- Policies should be framed from a more strategic and long-term perspective to factor in the impact of phenomena such as climate change.
- It should be recognized that Africa must act energetically to shape dynamic, uncertain global trends, or it will be shaped unfavourably by them.
- African countries should pursue collaborative forms of leadership through deepening current alliances and interacting more effectively with a diverse set of non-state global actors.
- There should be a continuous reinforcement of a capable state able to drive development, instil ethics, fight corruption, serve the citizenry and engage effectively beyond the country's own borders.

The SACP, guided by its centenary theme, "Put People Before Profits", has a critical role to play as Africa embarks on an economic reset post COVID-19.

**THANK YOU**