

South Africa's role in Africa

An anarchist perspective

South Africa's role in Africa can be described as capitalist, imperialist, expansionist and opportunistic. This makes it impossible to build cross-class alliances against global imperialism, writes **Shawn Hattingh**.



SA supermarket chains are investing in Africa.

It is common knowledge that South African private and state-owned companies loom large across Africa. They have even become one of the largest sources of foreign direct investment, sometimes exceeding investment from the United States (US), China and Britain. Due to this, a debate has taken place over the last decade around what role post-apartheid South Africa has been playing in the rest of Africa, including whose interests it has been serving. Using an anarchist analysis this article revisits this debate by looking at two arguments: the 'sub-imperialist' and 'just a victim.'

VIEWS OF SA'S ROLE

The most common view is that South Africa's role in Africa is sub-imperialist. As such it has been argued that the South African capitalist class, and its representatives in the state, have chosen to be sheriff of Britain and the US in Africa. In doing so South Africa largely pushes the interests of these powers. Evidence used to back up this argument are the close ties that the state has with the US military, and the role that South Africa played - along with the US and World Bank - in developing the New Partnership for Africa's Development (Nepad).

According to the sub-imperialist argument, although South Africa has a capitalist class that is expansionist in Africa, it does this on behalf of the US and European Union (EU). Those supporting this argument, believe that the working class in South Africa and the region should struggle to ensure the emergence of more progressive governments, which could use state power to undertake regional development based on solidarity that favours the working class.

A counter argument, popular amongst some non-governmental organisations, is that South Africa cannot even be considered sub-imperialist as it is completely dominated by the US and EU and very much a victim of Northern imperialism as any other African country. South African-based corporations are either subsidiaries of US and EU corporations or dominated by financiers from the Global North.

The expansion of such corporations into Africa via South Africa is viewed as part of US and EU imperialism; not South African sub-imperialism. To stop this situation, it is sometimes argued that a cross-class alliance, including workers, peasants and the black petit bourgeoisie is needed to defeat Northern imperialism.

ARE THESE EXPLANATIONS ADEQUATE?

Both arguments make important points. Notably, they highlight how US imperialism has been a destructive force within Southern Africa, including South Africa. Although the arguments rightfully view US and British imperialism as powerful forces, they fail to realise that they are *not* all that powerful.

Sections of the South African elite can and do sometimes act against the wishes of the US, Britain and EU, when it suits them. For example, shortly after the Zuma's government signed an oil exploration deal with the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in 2009, the DRC state took

away oil concessions from British-based multinational, Tullow Oil. Under the influence of the South African state, these oil concessions were handed over to a South African-linked company owned by Jacob Zuma's nephew; much to the annoyance of the British state and Tullow Oil. Neither of the arguments can adequately explain such independent actions by South Africa's elite, especially when they have been directed at Britain or the US.

Nonetheless, it is also clear that the elite do often work with powers such as the EU and US. The dominant arguments on South Africa's role in Africa have been quite correct in pointing this out, but have perhaps fallen short on explaining adequately why this happens. A good example of elites working together is found in Illovo Sugar, where British and South African capital own 50% each.

The question though is why are elite South Africans forming such partnerships with other capitalists? Is it because they are dominated or they wish to serve the interests of others as sub-imperialists? In looking at companies like Illovo Sugar, both the sub-imperialist and South Africa only as a victim argument, tend to gloss over the fact that elites still have shares and senior positions within such companies, including those who are African National Congress (ANC)-linked.

What past arguments fail to fully grasp is that when South African capital forms such partnerships with 'Northern capital', they are doing this to increase their own wealth and power. This means they are not victims but opportunists. When South African capitalists expand into Africa, alone or in partnership with other capitalists, they conduct themselves as extreme opportunists. They don't expand into Africa or look for partners because they were told to do so. Rather, they do it to make money through exploiting the working class and destroying the environment. By so doing they act as imperialists.

IMPERIALIST STATE

Dominant arguments also possibly fail to take into account the actions of the South African state, which is seeking to expand its influence and power. This derives from the fact that in both arguments the state is viewed as being controlled solely by the capitalist class – whether in South Africa or the Global North. They, therefore, fail to see that high-ranking state officials are a distinct part of the ruling class.

Even though state officials don't own the means of production directly (but can through the state), they do have control over the means of force and administration.

Anarchists have long pointed out that class is not just about relations of production, but also relations of domination. High-ranking state officials, through their positions, are able to use the state to control persons and territories in ways that are not exclusively about exploitation, but domination. This makes high-ranking state officials powerful.

State managers have similar interests to capitalists under capitalism. Although managers do not get much of their wealth and power from the income generated through capitalist exploitation they also have their interests. These include using the state to increase their own wealth and power, even in some cases to the detriment of capitalists. Linked to this, states – like different capitalists – also compete with one another to increase their power.

As Bakunin pointed out, 'The supreme law of the State is self-preservation at any cost. And since all States... have been condemned to perpetual struggle... a struggle against all foreign States, every one of which can be strong only if others are weak – and since States cannot hold their own in this struggle unless they constantly keep on augmenting their power against their own subjects as well as against the neighbourhood States – it follows that the supreme law of the State

is the augmentation of its power to the detriment of internal liberty and external justice.'

This means that within states there is always a hidden expansionist ambition. Although not all states can be imperialists, because they lack the power to fulfill their expansionist desires, powerful states are always imperialist. This competition between states also creates a situation where there is a hierarchy of states, in which states are either dominant or dominated.

In order not to be dominated they have to strive to increase their power by expanding their influence sometimes at the expense of other states. Most past arguments failed to see the possibility that the South African state has been manoeuvring for its own interests to expand influence and power in the region.

For example, the post-apartheid state has signed trade and investment agreements and established Bi-National Commissions with the ruling elite in many African countries, which overall favour the South African ruling class. The state itself, through its state-owned corporations, has become a major economic player in Africa. For instance, the state-owned Industrial Development Corporation has invested billions; Eskom has interests in 33 African countries and PetroSA has been expanding into Africa to ensure the state's future oil supplies. None of these deals were done on behalf of the US or EU; they were initiatives undertaken by the South African state, and ruling class, for their own benefit.

Worryingly, the New Growth Path (NGP) promotes the expansion of exports and investment into Africa. This has been identified as vital for the future growth of the *domestic* economy. Within this, state-owned companies are seen as having a central role. The fact that this expansionist agenda has been put into a domestic economic policy speaks volumes about the nature of the South African state's behaviour



SA supermarket chains are notorious for low wages.

in Africa: it's not a victim, nor is it strictly sub-imperialist; it is rather an expansionist force.

The behaviour of South African state officials within forums, such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC), has also become infamous. They often dominate proceedings and dismiss the viewpoints of neighbouring delegations. In doing this, they are demonstrating who the boss is. The post-apartheid state has also deployed its military on the continent. In reality this has been a projection of power by the state. It is, therefore, clear that South Africa's ruling class is acting as imperialists, and central to this has been the state.

ROAD TO FREEDOM?

Although the elite in neighbouring states are sometimes annoyed by the behaviour of the South African ruling class, few have openly challenged it as it is not in their interests to do so. The elite in Africa happily collaborate with various imperialisms, whether British, Chinese, American, or South African, because they benefit from it. It also increases their wealth and power. Even if they were to challenge the South African elite, or other imperialist powers, it would not mean an end to the oppression of the working class.

The ruling classes in Southern Africa owe their positions to exploiting and dominating their own

'citizens'. Thus, workers and the poor can't rely on local ruling classes or states – with top-down pillars of minority rule – to bring about freedom. The ruling classes won't give people freedom. If they did, they would lose their privileged positions, which history tells us they are not willing to do. Therefore, trying to form cross-class alliances are a dead end.

Indeed, workers across the world have more in common with one another than they do with anyone in the ruling class; be it a boss, bureaucrat or politician. Workers and the poor across Southern Africa and internationally, therefore, need to begin forging unity against their common enemies: foreign and local ruling elites. In the case of South African imperialism, the country's workers too need to unite with their brothers and sisters in neighbouring countries to face the common enemies.

It is on this basis of unity – and organising against and outside of the state – that workers and the poor will begin to take charge of their struggles. Through this, they can build a counter-power that can challenge imperialism, capitalism, racism, nationalism, and patriarchy. ^{LB}

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