

# Struggle for SA's liberation

## Success and failure

One of the ways to make sense of South Africa's liberation is to invoke Franz Fanon's concept of 'false liberation' in which the ruling elite were 'intermediaries' of capital, writes **John S Saul**.

### FREEDOM CHARTER

The launch of the Freedom Charter occurred in June, 1955, and the anniversary occurred a month ago. But since I wasn't here a month ago to sample the full range of opinion expressed, I felt free to harken back to an earlier occasion, precisely 30 years ago to be exact - to the moment of the 30th anniversary of the Freedom Charter and to a book of the time, one edited by Raymond Suttner and Jeremy Cronin, that marked that event. In that book was a text by Steve Tshwete, a Robben Island graduate and an African National Congress (ANC) National Executive Committee (NEC) member who died in 2002. This important text, although it is little noted now, was titled 'Understanding the Charter Clause by Clause,' and it is one that can help me to bridge from the Charter to the present moment of possible recasting of the politics of a new South Africa. For Tshwete, speaking of the Freedom Charter, pointedly wrote:

'This is a document of minimum and maximum demands - maximum for the progressive bourgeoisie ... and minimum for the working class [and the poor?]. In other words, the bourgeoisie would not strive for more than is contained in the Charter, while the working class will have sufficient cause to aspire beyond its demands.

What happens after the implementation of the people's charter - whether there is a socialist democracy or not - will certainly depend on the strength of the working class itself in the class alliance that we call a people's democracy.

If the working class is strong enough, then a transition to a working class democracy will be easily effected. At that point in time there will be realignment of forces. Mobilisation will be on a purely class basis and the working class ideology will constitute the engine of transition.

But if, on the other hand, the working class has not been prepared for this historical role and is thus weak in the people's democracy, the bourgeoisie will turn the tables. There will be a relapse to pure capitalist relations of production. The Freedom Charter takes the working class a step nearer to its historical goal, while it does not tamper much with the bourgeois order.'

I also found a further quote to my purpose from no less an authority than Thabo Mbeki - as cited by William Gumede in his book entitled *Thabo Mbeki and the Battle for the Soul of the ANC*:

'Thus as early as the late-1980s' writes Gumede, Mbeki could be found 'privately telling friends

that he believed the ANC alliance with the South African Communist Party (SACP) would have to be broken at some point, especially if the ANC gained power in a post-apartheid South Africa ... [T]he ANC would govern as a centre-left party, keeping some remnants of trade union and SACP support, while the bulk of the alliance would form a left-wing workers' party!'

Let me suggest then: Is this not, in South Africa, precisely the moment, anticipated by both Tshwete and Mbeki (although they would not have phrased the point quite as I do), when the country must choose between, on the one hand, the 'exhausted' and, for many intents and purposes, 'failed' nationalism of the ANC and, on the other, and however unclear its precise outlines may still be, the broad and inchoate movement-cum-party-in-the-making that is seeking to grope its way forward towards focusing the new and much more radical politics of South Africa's proletariat and precariat (what the Democratic Left Front (DLF), for one, is always careful to term, precisely, the politics of 'the working class and the poor'.

In short, I feel compelled, in talking about South Africa, to step outside the Freedom Charter. For far more promising of producing a deeper understanding of just what



*Democratic Left Front: One of the groups fighting for socialism in SA.*

happened here was to invoke the names and writings of militants from the sixties, in particular those of Cabral and Nyerere. Recall, for starters, Fanon's perspective on apparent African independence, an 'independence' that in his mind had merely produced a 'false decolonisation.' For he found that little had changed, with the new African elites comfortably stepping into privileged positions as mere 'intermediaries,' acting in their own class interests but also on behalf of capital:

'The national middle class discovers its historic mission: that of intermediary. Seen through its eyes, its mission has nothing to do with transforming the nation; it consists, prosaically, of being the transmission lines between the nation and a capitalism, rampant though camouflaged, which today puts on the masque of neo-colonialism. The national bourgeoisie will be quite content with the role of the Western bourgeoisie's business agent, and it will play its part without any complexes in a most dignified manner. But the same lucrative role, this cheap-jack's function, this meanness of outlook and this

absence of all ambition symbolise the incapability of the national middle class to fulfil its historic role as a bourgeoisie.'

Indeed that, in Fanon's eyes, is why decolonisation came so quickly in the end in Africa north of the Zambezi: '[A] veritable panic takes hold of the colonialist governments in turn. Their purpose is to capture the vanguard, to turn the movement of liberation to the right and disarm the people: quick, quick, let's decolonise. Decolonise the Congo before it turns into another Algeria. Vote the constitutional framework for all Africa, create the French Communauté, renovate that same Communauté, but for God's sake let's decolonise quick.'

On this model, one might hypothesise, that when a capitalist-friendly ANC was beckoned, as Fanon had once said, to 'settle the problem' around 'the green baize table before any regrettable act has been performed or irreparable gesture made,' the stage was also being set for just such eventual accession by the ANC to formal power.

For consider also Cabral's scepticism about many if not

most national liberation struggles themselves. Indeed, he went so far as to wonder whether, in the form it took, the 'national liberation struggle [was] not [in fact] an imperialist initiative,' suggesting that '... there is something wrong with the simple interpretation of the national liberation movement as a revolutionary trend. The objective of the imperialist countries was to prevent the enlargement of the socialist countries, to liberate the reactionary forces in our country which were being stifled by colonialism, and to enable these forces to ally themselves with the international bourgeoisie.'

Moreover, I also once heard Julius Nyerere make the following very Fanonist statement (as summarised in the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU) newspaper, *The Nationalist*, of the time) at a large outdoor meeting in Dar es Salaam: in 1967 in invoking TANU's new Arusha Declaration, itself designed to begin to chart a socialist future for Tanzania, 'Nyerere called on the people of Tanzania to have great confidence in themselves and to safeguard the nation's hard-won freedom. Mwalimu [Nyerere] warned that the people should

not allow their freedom to be pawned as most of their leaders were purchasable. He warned further that in running the affairs of the nation the people should not look on their leaders as saints and prophets.

The President stated that the attainment of freedom in many cases resulted merely in the change of colours, white faces to black faces without ending exploitation and injustices, and above all without the betterment of the life of the masses. He said that while struggling for freedom the objective was clear but it was another thing to remove your own people from the position of exploiters.'

### STEVE BIKO AND BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS

Are such images of a presumed African liberation north of the Zambezi not also more accurate about what has actually happened in South and Southern Africa than anything to be found in the Freedom Charter. Indeed, one could start to paint a clearer picture of the liberation struggle and its outcome in South Africa not with the Freedom Charter but with something once said by – this time by a South African – Steve Biko, the key intellectual force behind the Black Consciousness Movement here in the 1970s.

Thus, in an interview of the time, Biko was asked to identify 'what trends or factors in it ... you feel are working towards the fulfilment of the long term ends of blacks,' and he responded that the regime's deep commitment to a racial hierarchy had actually acted as 'a great leveler' of class formation amongst the black population and dictated 'a sort of similarity in the community' – such that the 'constant jarring effect of the [apartheid] system' produced a 'common identification' on the part of the people. In contrast, he suggested that in the more liberal system envisaged by the

Progressive Party of the time, 'you would get stratification creeping in, with your masses remaining where they are or getting poorer, and the cream of your leadership, which is invariably derived from the so-called educated people, beginning to enter bourgeois ranks, admitted into town, able to vote, developing new attitudes and new friends ... a completely different tone.'

For South Africa is, he continued, 'one country where it would be possible to create a capitalist black society. If the whites were intelligent. If the Nationalists were intelligent. And that capitalist black society, black middle-class, would be very effective at an important stage. Primarily because a hell of a lot of blacks have got a bit of education – I'm talking comparatively speaking to the so-called rest of Africa – and a hell of a lot of them could compete favourably with whites in the fields of industry, commerce and professions. And South Africa could succeed to put across to the world a pretty convincing integrated picture with still 70% of the population being underdogs.'

Indeed, it was precisely because the whites were so 'terribly afraid of this' that South Africa represented, to Biko, 'the best economic system for revolution'. For 'the evils of it are so pointed and so clear, and therefore make teaching of alternative methods, more meaningful methods, more indigenous methods even, much easier under the present sort of setup.'

Yet it is of crucial importance to note here that Biko was both correct and incorrect at the same time. 'Apartheid' did not in fact stay in place so firmly or so long as to teach the black population that 'black consciousness' would be, had to be, a necessary vector of transformation in South Africa. At the same time, he was correct in seeing that the one way open to

the dominant classes was that of defusing black anger and growing resistance in South Africa by dumping apartheid and opting for a free-standing capitalist system of colour-blind class distinction. Then, and in line with Cabral's worst nightmares, they could even move to invite the ANC inside the tent of a new post-apartheid system of class power and distinction. Of course, on Biko's analysis, they quite simply could not follow such a course, of that he was confident. And yet, pace Biko, this is precisely the transition that did occur. In the end there were numerous complications, especially between 1990 and 1994 – as many whites of the Far Right of the National Party (including even De Klerk), the Freedom Front, and the AWB remained slow to accept the new logic of any settlement on capital's new terms. Nonetheless, up to a point, this process did produce a successful transition beyond apartheid and a step forward: I would be the last to argue otherwise. But what occurred, simultaneously, was a recolonisation of South Africa by capital, with the ANC/SACP acting as the crucial intermediaries in guaranteeing such an outcome and here the vast mass of the South African population are the real losers.

How else to explain the feeble result that the transition away from apartheid has produced in South Africa? How else, indeed, could we interpret it? Note on this latter subject the attempted explanation of no less a militant than Ronnie Kasrils. Thus Kasrils has written of the ANC and the SACP having 'chickened out,' identifying the period 1991–96, what he labels as having been the ANC's 'Faustian moment,' a moment when 'the battle for the ANC's soul got under way, and was eventually lost to corporate power; we were entrapped by the neo-liberal economy – or, as some today cry, we 'sold our people down the river.'

'[W]hat I call our Faustian moment came when we took an IMF loan on the eve of our first democratic election. That loan, with strings attached that precluded a radical economic agenda, was considered a necessary evil, as were concessions to keep negotiations on track and take delivery of the promised land for our people. Doubt had come to reign supreme: we believed, wrongly, there was no other option; that we had to be cautious ... [In fact, however], we chickened out. The ANC leadership needed to remain true to its commitment of serving the people. This would have given it the hegemony it required not only over the entrenched capitalist class but over emergent elitists, many of whom would seek wealth through black economic empowerment, corrupt practices and selling political influence ... [For] the balance of power was [then] with the ANC, and conditions were favourable for more radical change at the negotiating table than we ultimately accepted. It is by no means certain that the old order, apart from isolated rightist extremists, had the will or capability to resort to the bloody repression [anticipated] by Mandela's leadership. If we had held our nerve, we could have pressed forward without making the concessions we did.'

### PRISONER OF CAPITAL

The ANC 'lost its nerve'? 'Chickened out'? That's one explanation then. Meanwhile, an even more shaky explanation of the form South Africa's transition took is that offered by Canadian writer-activist Naomi Klein: ANC lost any accurate sense of just what was going on, and became, she suggests, the prisoner of capital; it was, in fact, short-sighted and naïve as regards the severe dangers of the capitalist entanglements it was taking on. She even summons up some strong South African voices to support

this analysis. For example, she cites economist Vishnu Padayachee as arguing that 'none of this happened because of some grand betrayal on the part of the ANC leaders but simply because they were outmanoeuvred on a series of issues that seemed less than crucial at the time – but turned out to hold South Africa's lasting liberation in the balance.'

Similarly, William Gumede's view, as directly quoted by Klein, is that, 'If people had felt [the political negotiations] weren't going well there would be mass protests. But when the economic negotiators would report back, people thought it was technical.'

This perception was encouraged by Mbeki, who portrayed the talks as 'administrative' and as being of no popular concern. As a result, Klein says, Gumede told her, 'with great exasperation, 'We missed it! We missed the real story ... I was focusing on politics – mass action, going to Bisho ... But that was not the real struggle – the real struggle was over economics'.

True, Klein further notes, Gumede did 'come to understand that it was at those 'technical' meetings that the true future of his country was being decided – though few understood it at the time. But she herself can still register apparent surprise that 'as the new government attempted to make tangible the dreams of the Freedom Charter, it discovered that the power was elsewhere.' Really? But surely here one can be permitted to ask: had Padayachee, Gumede, and even Klein not read their Fanon? For it is, in fact, impossible to think that the ANC leadership, having sought assiduously to will just such an outcome, such a 'false decolonization,' from at least the mid-1980s, could itself have 'missed it' – missed, that is, the main point as to what was happening to South Africa.

'We missed it!' Not quite good enough, then, and certainly not

as an explanation of the ANC's own actions. But take one further example, that of long-time SACP and ANC activist (and a minister in the present Zuma government), Jeremy Cronin. Thus, in a 2013 speech titled 'How we misread the situation in the 1990s,' Cronin presents a markedly weaker argument about the 'errors' of the 1990s than Klein, even though it does, nonetheless, bear a strong resemblance to hers. For naïveté is again presented as being the key, Cronin also seeing the ANC as merely having taken its eye off the ball – albeit for 19 years! His variant of this argument: 'In particular, we vastly overestimated the patriotic credentials of South African monopoly capitalism (and its soon to emerge narrow BEE [Black Economic Empowerment] hangers on)'; these advised us 'to open all our doors and windows to attract inward investment flows.'

The result: 'Almost the exact opposite has occurred. Surplus generated inside South Africa, the sweat and toil of South African workers, has flown out of the open windows and open doors. Between 20% and 25% of GDP has been disinvested out of the country since 1994. Trade liberalisation in the first decade of democracy blew a cold wind through our textile and clothing sector, through our agriculture and agro-processing sector and by 2001 a million formal sector jobs had been lost.'

As for the 19 years just mentioned, it is actually Cronin himself who raises this spectre, asking precisely 'Why had it taken us nearly 19 years to appreciate the need for a second, radical phase of our democratic transition?' But he really gives no answer to his own question nor makes any attempt to explain two decades of what, on his analysis, must have been an extraordinary level of official naïveté as to the progressive propensities of 'South African monopoly capitalism.' Why indeed?

Thus, for Kasrils, the ANC/SACP

lost its nerve, for Klein, the ANC was 'short-sighted,' and for Cronin the ANC simply 'misread' (for 19 years!) the situation ... while waiting, no doubt, for the much discussed second phase of the 'national democratic revolution' to kick into action!

But surely a more straight-forward explanation in terms of class dynamics is the more potent one: a new class, politically victorious as centered and represented by the ANC, gained power on the back of the liberation struggle broadly defined (a struggle that took place both outside and, principally, inside the country) and used that power in both its own interest and in the interests of global capitalism. Thus veteran ANC/SACP hand and former MP Ben Turok can admit that he is driven to 'the irresistible conclusion ... that the ANC government has lost a great deal of its earlier focus on the fundamental transformation of the inherited social system,' and to the assertion that 'much depends on whether enough momentum can be built to overcome the caution that has marked the ANC government since 1994. This in turn depends on whether the determination to achieve an equitable society can be revived.' Cautiously phrased perhaps, but an important point. A second long-time ANC/SACP loyalist, Rusty Bernstein, was however - in writing to me not long before his own death in 2002 - prepared to go even further, asserting that:

'The drive towards power has corrupted the political equation in various ways. In the late 1980s, when popular resistance revived again inside the country led by the UDF, it led the ANC to see the UDF as an undesirable factor in the struggle for power, and to fatally undermine it as a rival focus for mass mobilisation. It has undermined the ANC's adherence to the path of mass resistance as a way to liberation, and substituted instead a reliance on manipulation

of the levers of administrative power. It has paved the way to a steady decline of a mass-membership ANC as an organiser of the people, and turned it into a career opening to public sector employment and the administrative 'grave train'. It has reduced the tripartite ANC-Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu)-SACP alliance from the centrifugal centre of national political mobilisation to an electoral pact between parties who are constantly constrained to subordinate their constituents' fundamental interests to the overriding purpose of holding on to administrative power. It has impoverished the soil in which ideas leaning towards socialist solutions once flourished and allowed the weed of "free market" ideology to take hold.'

Buried in this statement is one about the transition, of course: why and how was the United Democratic Front (UDF) persuaded merely to fold its tent and disappear? It was by no means a straightforward occurrence, even though for Jeremy Seekings, an important historian of the UDF, it's a no-brainer. Quoting Peter Mokaba, then president of the South African Youth Congress, as stating: 'Now that the ANC can operate legally, the UDF is redundant.' Seekings then argues that such willed demobilisation of the popular factor in the political equation occurred simply because it had become 'apparent that the UDF [actually] had no choice but to disband in the aftermath of the ANC's unbanning.' Indeed, he calls it 'a logical, unavoidable, even unremarkable event'.

But was it? It was certainly not that for Bernstein, as quoted. And in fact many voices were raised in disagreement at the UDF's final conference that voted for the dissolution of the UDF. Indeed, as Ineke Van Kessel notes, the marked support - if, nonetheless, that of a minority - that existed in

the meeting for the retention of the UDF as an effective organ of 'people's power.'

'Proponents of this view [she writes] envisaged the UDF's role as one of watching over the government, [and] remaining prepared to activate mass action if the need should arrive. Many leaders and activists emphasized that the preservation of the UDF was imperative to ensure that participatory, rather than merely representative, democracy prevailed in South Africa.'

She also records the very tangible 'demobilising effect' of the UDF's demise - with the ANC doing little or nothing, in the longer run, to sustain people's waning spirit of active militancy. She quotes Alan Boesak as making a sharp distinction 'between the UDF years and the early 1990s': 'He noted a widespread nostalgia for the UDF years. That was a period of mass involvement, a period when people took a clear stand. That had a moral appeal. Now it is difficult to get used to compromises ... Many people in the Western Cape now say that 'the morality in politics has gone.' The 1980s, that was "clean politics", morally upright, no compromises, with a clear goal.'

In sum, we have 'mass involvement' trumped by knee-jerk vanguardism. For vanguardism (also known as residual Stalinism) doesn't sit comfortably with genuine active popular democracy from below. Nor need it come as a great surprise that the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa) and others name their challenging new political initiative the United Front and actually name check the UDF in doing so, promising to '... lead in the establishment of a new United Front [UF] that will coordinate struggles in the workplace and in communities, in a way similar to the UDF of the 1980s. The task of this front will be to fight for the implementation of the Freedom

Charter and be an organisational weapon against neoliberal policies such as the National Development Plan (NDP):

More generally, might it actually be just as simple as Rusty Bernstein suggests. For what Bernstein has offered us is some pretty tough stuff – tough Fanonist stuff. Indeed, if his insights are taken as seriously as they must be neither historians nor politicians can easily get away with merely absolving the ANC for its key role in the defeat of the liberation struggle – even though the collapse of the Soviet bloc, the strength of South Africa's pre-existent, indigenous, and primarily white capitalist class, and the power of global capitalism must also be given their proper weight within the explanatory equation. But don't forget for a moment the 1985 statement by Gavin Relly, the chairman of Anglo-American, after his meeting in Lusaka with the likes of Oliver Tambo, Thabo Mbeki, Chris Hani, Pallo Jordan, and Mac Maharaj that 'he had the impression the ANC was not 'too keen' to be seen as 'Marxist' and that he felt they had a good understanding 'of the need for free enterprise.' Time was to demonstrate fully just how perceptive was Relly's 1985 reading of the ANC top brass's own emerging mind-set even at that early date.

No, the fact is that Fanon is closer to the mark than anyone else in interpreting, albeit *avant la lettre*, developments in Southern Africa: The national middle class-in-the-making, the nationalist elite, did indeed discover its historic mission: that of intermediary. And, in the end, as seen through its eyes its mission has had very little to do with transforming the nation; instead, it has consisted, prosaically, of being the transmission lines between the nation and a capitalism, rampant though camouflaged, which today puts on the masque of neo-colonialism and, indeed, of recolonisation.



*United Front: bringing together unions and social movements.*

### WHAT NEXT?

As for what next? Assuming no one would disagree with what I've said so far (but I'm obviously not so naïve as to really assume that) the next question must be: what will Biko's 70% – left out, left behind – do about it?

Will they stick, on balance – in declining numbers, with clearly diminishing enthusiasm and for want of an as yet convincing alternative – with the ANC: the party of Mandela and, ostensibly, of liberation. Or will more of them begin to drift even further to the right, to the increasingly black-appearing and possibly more competent-seeming DA. Or will they increasingly be enveloped in the demobilising folds of xenophobia, right-wing evangelical religions, and the like with incalculable continuing costs to the country.

Or, on the other hand, many may continue to veer left. Here one can allude to the dramatic sustaining of the 'rebellion of the poor' in South Africa; to the further radicalisation of some segments of the labour movement (epitomised, notably, by the break of South Africa's largest union, the Numsa, from any affiliation whatsoever with either the ANC or the SACPI!); to the chaos (itself perhaps promising, in and of itself, of new possibilities)

that Cosatu itself has become; to the first signs of electoral success that have greeted Julius Malema's quite unapologetically populist Economic Freedom Front; to the seeds of a new feminism implied in such actions as the 'RhodesMustFall' initiative in Cape Town in 2015; and to the initial stirrings of the 'United Front', first instigated by Numsa but with a broad appeal to other workers and to civil society activists.

Of course, it remains far too early to predict with absolute confidence that such initiatives will continue to flourish and even cohere into an effective and politically viable counter-hegemony to the ANC's present grip on power. And yet the game is clearly afoot as at no other time since 1994 as, slowly but surely, the struggle for a more equal and more genuinely liberated South Africa continues. But to turn left? Some have, more will, many, eventually, might. Let's see. <sup>LB</sup>

*John S Saul is Professor Emeritus of Political Science at York University and is author of A Flawed Freedom: Rethinking Southern African Liberation. This article was presented as a paper at a seminar at the University of Johannesburg.*