

The Re-Emergence of the National Liberation Movement in South Africa

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“The mineral wealth beneath the soil, the banks and monopoly industry shall be transferred to the ownership of the people as a whole; All other industry and trade shall be controlled to assist the wellbeing of the people;”

(The Freedom Charter, Congress of the People, Kliptown, 26 June 1955)

“You must be vigilant! How many times has a labour movement supported a liberation movement, only to find itself betrayed on the day of liberation? There are many examples of this in Africa. If the ANC does not deliver the goods you must do to it what you did to the apartheid regime.”

(Nelson Mandela at COSATU Special National Congress in 1993)

The history of South Africa is riddled with violence and upheavals. Despite how the ideologists of reaction may want to put it, violence in South Africa is not a random phenomenon driven by the inability of the oppressed to express their concerns in a rational and organized fashion. With the appearance of the Freedom Charter the struggle against racial-based oppression acquired a historical perspective on the basis of unity of the struggle against racism, oppression and for the national liberation of the country. The Freedom Charter became a coalescing and inspiring factor for the liberation of the country, uniting a wide spectrum of political movements towards a defined goal. The Sharpeville and Soweto massacres symbolized turning points in the character and intensity of the struggle. These left deep imprints in the history of South Africa and are regarded by progressive historians as landmarks in its development. August 16th marked the second anniversary of the Marikana massacre. This event has too, arguably, become a sort of turning point for the social consciousness of the oppressed in South Africa. Scepticism and disappointment among the oppressed in South Africa has been a theme of the post-Apartheid era. Discontent due to economic disenfranchisement has often taken the form of service delivery protests and other similar actions. Their intensity, frequency and social impact have increased steadily over the years. But it was the Marikana massacre and its striking similarities with earlier bloody events that have awakened many in the country. Twenty years after the downfall of the apartheid regime many have realized that the economic tasks of the national liberation program remain an outstanding issue. While the political superstructure of the old regime has been formally abolished, the economic relations that it was based upon remain unencumbered or have become more in line with the requirements imposed by neo-liberalism.

Criticism of the government of the ANC is made from the right and from the left. The overwhelming majority of non-blacks, specially whites, and elements of the emerging black middle class rallying around the Democratic Alliance (DA), make emphasis on corruption,

mismanagement, lack of appropriate governance, etc. Needless to say, these are superficial criticisms that incorporate a subliminal racist message in that, allegedly, the blacks are not ready to govern the country, or to lead altogether, for that matter. However embarrassing, this is not really a matter of substance, but rather a legacy that the majority of the whites in South Africa do not seem to be able to overcome. According to the DA, these factors stand in the way between today's state of affairs and a prosperous South Africa, not the neo-liberal model of development that the current government bases its economic policies on. If anything, the DA denounces the government of the ANC for inability to consistently apply these policies. With respect to the government of the ANC, the DA proposes a more aggressive programme for the privatization of state owned companies, including the health care system and other sectors with significant share of state-owned capital. As far as the oppressed of South Africa are concerned the ANC/DA controversy is reminiscent of the political and ideological differences of the tandems democrats/republicans and labour/conservatives in the US and UK, respectively. In the issue of the character of economic development, both parties converge on the neo-liberal model as the baseline, differing on matters of interpretation and how radical economic policies should be in order to implement this model of development.

In contrast, failure to address the tasks of national liberation is understood by many in the left as the chief cause for the failure to curb social inequalities and to provide the economic growth necessary for overcoming the latter. The dividing line between the militant left and the ANC revolves around the concept of nationalization of the land and the main means of production, as advocated by the Freedom Charter of 1955. The Marikana massacre has formalized the rift between the militant labour movement and the government of the ANC. For the first time since the fall of apartheid wide sectors of the labour movement have acted on the threat to break with the tripartite alliance.¹ In the aftermath of the Marikana massacre two large-scale movements that have shown the ability to break with the government of the ANC and to rally the working class and the disenfranchised around a programme critical to the state of affairs established by the post-apartheid regime have emerged:

1. The National Union of Metal Workers of South Africa (NUMSA)
2. The Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF)

NUMSA is the largest union in the country and has become a reference worker's organization. This is driven by its success in recent militant strikes. NUMSA has gained the sympathy of a broad working class base. It is one of the unions responsible for bringing the long-standing strike of platinum workers to completion. Shortly after a deal was reached for platinum workers a nation-wide strike of metal workers was declared and taken into action in due course and threatened to paralyze broad sectors of the economy. The strike ended in victory for the metal workers following a relatively short standoff. These notorious strike movements have exposed the appalling conditions of exploitation of the working class in general, and the black working class in particular. The unfairness of the situation is so glaring that even bourgeois liberal strata have condemned the conditions of exploitation as untenable and rebuffed the aggressive stand of managements together with the passivity of the government and its inability to steer the conflict.

NUMSA and the EFF, although triggered by similar concerns regarding the conditions of exploitation of the black majority, are distinct socio-political organizations. NUMSA is a militant union and sees itself as an organization of the defence of the interests of the poor with emphasis on the working class. The EFF is a political party that gathered over a million votes at the last general elections, surpassing prior expectations. The EFF's leadership is a splinter of the ANC and rallies support of wide spectra of the population, including certain sectors of the petty-bourgeoisie that are disenchanted with the ANC and its policies. The Marikana massacre has played an important role for the establishment and growth of the organization nationwide. Both organizations display some level of adherence to Marxism-Leninism when it comes to class-based analysis and the role of the state in the process of national liberation. That being said, NUMSA declares itself "unashamedly Marxist-Leninist" and are adherents of proletarian internationalism, whereas the EFF considers itself more of a leftist organization that "draws inspiration from the broad Marxist-Leninist tradition and Fanonian² schools of thought". The *modi operandi* of these organizations are distinct. While NUMSA is focused on militant union work the EFF has emerged as a militant parliamentary opposition to the ANC. Concerns have been voiced that the EFF seems more interested in triggering headline-grabbing agitating actions rather than organizing the oppressed masses. Considerable discussion has been documented regarding the possible unification of both forces into some sort of common platform or united front. However, no tangible steps have been taken in that direction in view of significant ideological and tactical differences. That being said, both organizations converge on the criticism of the government of the ANC when it comes to denouncing the neo-liberal economic policies and the perpetuation of the neo-colonial dependence on imperialism.

A very important stabilizing element to the status quo is the appeasing role played by the South African Communist Party (SACP). NUMSA has been vocal with concerns about the inability of the SACP to follow through with its obligations to the working class and the country:

"Instead of uniting the labour movement, the South African Communist Party (SACP) has been the leader of criticizing those who are for an independent and campaigning COSATU, labelling them as counter-revolutionary. Motivating the SACP to launch this attack is the official criticism that COSATU levelled at the Party, arguing that since Party leaders went into government, the SACP has been absent in mass struggles and has become an apologist of the government" (from NUMSA Special National Congress December 17th to 20th, 2013 Declaration).

The SACP today is a political appendage of the ANC. It emphasizes the historical role of the ANC/SACP alliance in the struggle against apartheid as a bond that cannot be compromised under any circumstance. This is despite the obvious inability of the government to deliver promises to the poor, while the rich and the upper-middle class thrive with Western-like, if not lavish, life styles. As a result of the political paralysis that the SACP has immersed itself into, its capacity to act as an independent organization has been seriously eroded in favour of the ANC, on the one hand, and NUMSA/EFF, on the other. This is to the extent that the SACP does not participate in elections as an independent formation and does not take a leading role in the struggle of the oppressed. Allegiance to the tripartite alliance is viewed as a matter of principle and a driver for political statements.³ As a result, the SACP has become an apologist of the government of the ANC.

With regard to the historical role that a Communist Party needs to undertake, NUMSA correctly characterizes the SACP's "South African Road to Socialism" in the main questions:

* "Fails to raise the property question and so fails to deal with how to take ownership of the means of production from white monopoly and imperialist capital; talks of undefined 'socialisation' instead of nationalisation.

* Separates the question of state power from ownership of the means of production and sees that our task is to achieve working class hegemony over the current state apparatus rather than struggling for alternative forms of working class power" (NUMSA Special National Congress December 17th to 20th, 2013 Declaration, Secretariat report, page 16).

This is an important statement and a critical cornerstone for a starting point for a new movement of the oppressed in South Africa. Indeed, the SACP gave up a basic tenet of the struggle for national liberation and the construction of socialism. Without the nationalization of the main means of production with the intention to industrialize, it is not feasible to overcome the economic relations of dependence and, with it, poverty. The anti-Marxist character of the SACP's "Road to Socialism" has been exposed earlier. Indeed, the term socialization has a different meaning with respect to that in Marxism, as correctly pointed out by NUMSA's leadership. A subjective statement, reminiscent of gradualist social-democratic interpretations, replaces the Marxist term.

NUMSA has well summarized the state of affairs in the country and the character of the tripartite alliance's National Democratic Revolution:

"We have always understood the Alliance to be based on a minimum programme which is the FREEDOM CHARTER [their emphasis, our note]. Yet the Freedom Charter has been abandoned and replaced by the neo-liberal National Development Plan" (NUMSA Special National Congress December 17th to 20th, 2013 Declaration, Secretariat report, page 31).

NUMSA has clear ideas with regard to the vision for economic development promulgated by the government of the ANC. In 2011 leading figures of the ANC government released a vision for the development of South Africa in the next decades under the title of "National Development Plan" (NDP). As correctly pointed out in NUMSA documents, the NDP postpones the resolution of poverty and massive unemployment to 2030. In doing so the NDP does not propose any fundamental change to the relations of production that underlie the economic troubles of South Africa. The NDP reduces to over 400 pages of wishful thinking, of what one would like to do ideally, but without proposing structural changes to the economic relations. The cornerstones of the objectives envisioned in the so-called "Vision 2030" are summarized by the authors as follows:

"Achieving full employment, decent work and sustainable livelihoods is the only way to improve living standards and ensure a dignified existence for all South Africans. Rising employment, productivity and incomes are the surest long-term solution to reducing inequality. Similarly active steps to broaden opportunity for people will make a significant impact on both the level of inequality and the efficiency of the economy" (Ibid, page 90).

This sounds as an obvious statement to anyone who is willing to read the text critically. It would appear as some sort of tautology. Indeed economic inequality can only be solved on the basis of job creation and a sustainable economy. This sort of statement does not solve the economic puzzle at stake, nor does it bring any relief to the millions of South Africans overwhelmed by unemployment, poverty and crime. The NDA does not acknowledge that the South African economy is that of a dependent, semi-colonial country. Much to the contrary, it assumes that economic development is sustainable under the current state of affairs. The NDA operates under the assumption that within the relations of dependence the country will gradually evolve into prosperity and that South Africa will eventually overcome the inequality that riddles its society. The assumption is that South Africa's GDP should grow at a sustained pace of at least 5% per year and create 11 million jobs in the process. The economic data accumulated so far seriously undershoots the target growth and job creation rates assumed by the authors of the NDA. Barring that, the authors of the NDA make a simplistic assumption borrowed from neo-liberal doctrine: in order to overcome poverty economic growth needs to take place at rate above a certain threshold, regardless of the structure of this growth. It is assumed that the capitalist class and its financial system require a minimal growth rate, that threshold necessary for the sustainability of capitalism. In other words, one can simplistically argue that under capitalism, the richer are expected to get richer no matter what. It is then believed that the difference between the actual GDP growth and that threshold would be effectively distributed to the bulk of the population in various forms. Essentially, it is postulated that on the basis of a neo-liberal model the bulk of the population could slowly get out of poverty while allowing for capitalist accumulation as the driving force of economic development. The economic reality is that neither sustained constant and positive rates of growth are possible under capitalism nor would these hypothesized constant rates, were they feasible, lead in practice to the sustained reduction of social differences. These tendencies are ever more evident in dependent economies, such as South Africa's.

Note that neo-liberal economic doctrines are not particularly stringent about the structure of the growth for reasons that will become clearer below. One can argue that neo-liberalism leaves the question of the structure of the economic growth to forces of the market to decide with the state having more of a facilitating role rather than being an engine of capital investment. The fact of the matter is that neo-liberalism, much as economists that adhere to what has been known as the "socialism of the XXIst century," do not consider industrialization of the so-called emerging economies as a priority (see below). The NDA is explicit as to its vision in this regard:

"A large percentage of the jobs will be created in domestic-oriented activities and in the service sector. Some 90 percent of jobs will be created in small and expanding firms. The economy will be more enabling of business entry and expansion, with an eye to credit and market access. By 2030, the share of small- and medium-sized firms in output will grow substantially. Regulatory reform and support will boost mass entrepreneurship. Export growth, with appropriate linkages to the domestic economy will be critical in boosting growth and employment, with small- and medium-sized firms the main employment creators" (Ibid, page 93).

This statement leaves clear what is the vision of the government of the ANC today with regard to the long-term economic development and sustainable path towards overcoming poverty. Not much literature is available with regard to the vision for economic transformation of the ANC before taking power other than generic statements regarding exploitation and apartheid. ANC

leaders such as Mandela and Tambo were vocal about connecting the political superstructure of apartheid with economic exploitation. It was always clear in the minds of those engaged in the anti-apartheid movement that apart from ignorance and prejudice, with apartheid the whites were defending the right to exploit and/or to enjoy a position of privilege relative to other ethnicities. The ANC as a whole did adhere to the principles embodied by the Freedom Charter. In fact these still remain a flagship credo among the supporters of the ANC and the SACP.

However, the actual reality is quite far from electoral slogans and catchwords. The above-cited paragraph encapsulates the main thesis behind the so-called Black Economic Empowerment policies with regard to the expansion of a class of black entrepreneurs, as the backbone of economic development and social change. Technically speaking, this vision is reminiscent of a petty-bourgeois outlook on long-term economic development that fits well into neo-liberal economic theories. It is evident that the government of the ANC does not see investment in large industry as the engine of development, but rather the enhancement of the small- and medium-sized enterprise body as the core of the economic development. This attitude presupposes at least two predicaments:

1. Small- and medium-size enterprises operate on the basis that the main means of production are imported. This also applies to materials and goods critical to the manufacturing process, whose production requires a large industrial infrastructure.
2. As a result, South Africa accepts its dependent role with regard to economic relations with countries with advanced heavy industry, technology and financial resources. It is postulated that sustained economic growth is feasible in this framework, regardless of the economic crises of capitalism.

Whether before or after the old regime, the relation of dependence on foreign capital and infrastructure determines the South African economic reality. While the political and economic dependence had gradually shifted from the UK to the US, with China gaining increased influence, the relations of dependence have not changed fundamentally. The collapse of the old regime has not altered the underlying character of this relationship. It has probably become more diversified compared with the old regime. Given the lack of a well-defined economic programme, other than abstract notions of equality and affirmative action, the Government of the ANC undertakes the tasks of liquidating the racist character of the political superstructure of the old regime. This is unquestionably a great achievement attained not without great difficulty and sacrifice. However, it is unable or unwilling to attack the economic tasks of national liberation embodied in the Freedom Charter. The neo-liberal character of the economic reforms becomes more apparent with Thabo Mbeki's Government, and those following after.

There are two main tenets of the economic programme of the ANC, encapsulated in the NDA:

1. The capitalist character of the South African economy, with the State having a subsidiary and facilitating role. The concept of nationalization of the main means of production and financial system, in the spirit of the Freedom Charter, is rejected adamantly, as a question of principle.

2. The dependent character of the South African economy. This is further reinforced by the belief that foreign investment is indispensable for the sustainability of economic development.

The first tenet is captured well in the following paragraph:

“Private investment stimulated by expanding consumer markets, rising profitability, natural resource endowments and leveraging our position on the continent. It will be attracted by improved conditions created as a result of policy certainty, infrastructure delivery, efficiency of public services and the quality of labour” (Ibid, page 106).

Indeed, the ANC never claimed to be a Marxist organization despite its ties to the SACP. However, never before the fall of apartheid did the ANC openly declare that the path towards national liberation lies through the development of capitalist relations of production where the State would have an auxiliary role: governance, legislation, infrastructure development, education (or the so-called “human capital” development), etc. Because the ANC sees economic development on the basis of small- and medium-sized firms, rejecting the idea of state-driven investment in large industry.

Another important tenet of the economic thinking underlying the NDA is the illusion that allegedly foreign direct investment (FDI) is posed to play a significant part in productivity and job creation:

“Foreign investment will have to play a significant role in a context of curbed savings. These investments lead to rising output, incomes and employment growth, savings will rise. Over time, a larger share of investment should be funded domestically, but this will depend on how well resources are used in the short term to raise productivity, incomes and employment” (Ibid, page 106).

It is well known that the illusion that the FDI, free trade, etc. can play a catalysing role in economic development is one of the cornerstones of neo-liberalism. One could argue in favour of the dogmatic character of that statement and how governments take the statement for granted without rigorous substantiation. On the other hand, the economic history of modern South Africa, especially after the fall of the old regime, has demonstrated that FDI has never played a significant role in either job creation or reduction of poverty. When statistics on FDI are given not much emphasis is made of its structure and the implications of the relations of dependence of the so-called emerging countries on international capital. FDI in South Africa has traditionally focused on the mining sector. This led to the super-exploitation of South African miners and the extraction of massive profits from the country. With the growth of the black middle class in Africa⁴ FDI shifts focus to infrastructure necessary for catering to this narrow sector of the population. In this context it is not surprising that South Africa offers excellent service infrastructure for those who can afford it. FDI increased significantly with the fall of apartheid, especially in the 2000s, under Thabo Mbeki. During this period FDI reached multi-billion USD inflows, remaining, however, at the level of 1%-2% of the GDP. In addition, the net capital outflow in South Africa has become essentially zero. This means that the country invests abroad as much as foreign companies invest in the country. While neo-liberal economists are content with positive capital outflows in so-called emerging countries, South African workers should not

be. Investment abroad is essentially capital flow leaving the country and not invested domestically, let alone in heavy industry and large infrastructure. This capital, at best, favours a small minority of South Africans and eventually merges with international capital.

An emblematic example of capital flow from South Africa is SASOL's approved plans to invest over 20 billion USD in gas plants in Louisiana, USA. This constitutes the largest ever single investment project in the State of Louisiana and the largest foreign direct manufacturing in the history of the United States. South Africans are but wondering about the logic behind investing in gas plants in the USA to create high-paying jobs of an average of 80,000 USD a year in the US, while South Africa has vast reserves of gas in the Karoo. If unveiled, the vast gas reserves in the Karoo could liquidate the energy dependence, solving the chronic crisis in electricity supply and soaring prices for energy. The extraction of gas from the Karoo is one of the key elements for the industrialization of the country and with it, the potential for job creation and overcoming poverty. SASOL was originally a state-owned company that was privatized in 1979. Despite privatization, SASOL enjoyed and continues to enjoy strong support from the State in different forms. In the end of the day, it is the South African people who have financed the petrochemical giant that SASOL is today. From the perspective of corporate governance large-scale investment in US gas plants makes a whole lot of sense, as such is the logic behind neo-liberal thinking. In the meantime South African energetic infrastructure is unable to meet the needs of the population, threatens further economic growth, let alone the generation of large infrastructure projects.

It is difficult, whether in practice or in theory, to decouple the capitalist character of the South African economy from its character of dependence on imperialist countries. When it comes to offering an alternative to the neo-liberal economic model one inevitably comes to the realization that it is the capitalist character of economic development that is to be dealt with. The establishment of the socialist mode of production, on the basis of heavy industry and high-end technology, emerges as an economic necessity and hence its inevitability. It is essential to dwell on the discussion on how to articulate the place that national liberation has in the process of the transition to socialism. The industrialization of the country on the basis of state-owned property and with the State as the engine for capital investment and accumulation is essential for the accomplishment of the tasks of national liberation. This provides at the same time the material basis for the construction of the socialist mode of production. The lapse of time for which petty private property of the means of production remains in force depends on the concrete-historical circumstances that underlie the transition to socialism. That said it should be the society as a whole through the state that attains the command of the economy and controls available resources for capital investment leading to massive job creation and the liquidation of poverty. The tasks of national liberation laid down in the Freedom Charter cannot be accomplished on the basis of the neo-liberal model. These cannot be accomplished on the basis of relations of dependence on international capital. The only organized force that can possibly undertake the task of liquidating the relations of dependence without causing economic collapse is the State on the basis of economic planning.

Unfortunately, neither the national large- nor petty-bourgeoisie is capable taking a leading role in undertaking the tasks described above; hence the historical role of the working class. It is the organized working class that is in a position to organize and lead the state on the basis of

alliances with broad sectors of the exploited and disenfranchised masses. This seems to be the rationale behind NUMSA's raising concerns that today's South Africa does not have a political organization of the working class. And indeed this should be a concern for those who genuinely care about the well being of the country and the overwhelming majority of its citizens. NUMSA in its December 2013 declaration makes a clear statement that it seems to be following through: "For the struggle for socialism, the working class needs a political organisation committed in theory and practice to socialism" (from NUMSA Special National Congress December 17th to 20th, 2013 Declaration).

On addressing the question from the media and others in the country on whether NUMSA will constitute or will participate in the formation of a political party, it has been recently stated:

"NUMSA is on record as saying that we shall explore and internationally research the possibility of a Movement for Socialism and report back to our NUMSA Central Committee in March 2015 on the international experience in the struggle for Socialism. This remains our position as taken in the Special National Congress. In a question posed in the media briefing on Sunday 2nd March 2014, NUMSA NOB's did indicate that exploring a Movement For Socialism and the report- back on our international research report to the NUMSA Central Committee of March 2015, shall invariably lead to the establishment of a working class party. The form, shape and content shall be determined in consultation with left and progressive formations in our country. Whether such a working class party contests elections in 2016 or 2019, the NUMSA March 2015 Central Committee shall resolve" (in "NUMSA on the United Front and the possibilities of establishing a movement for Socialism").

We need to welcome this initiative with enthusiasm and encouragement. The generation of a party of the working class void of prejudices summarized above is essential to the future of the country and for any chance that the Freedom Charter come to fruition. In encouraging NUMSA to create an organization of the working class, we need to raise awareness with regard to the influence of ideologies of the so-called "Socialism of the XXIst century" and other forms of petty-bourgeois critiques of neo-liberalism. While the left identifies neo-liberalism as South Africa's number one woe, the materialization of its alternative seems far from obvious. One needs to be aware that international capital and ideologists in imperialist countries have become quite skilled in generating "alternatives" to neo-liberalism. Apart from the so-called "Socialism of the XXIst century," there exists an array of theories and vast literature that exposes the character of "globalization". These theories at times reveal the true nature of capitalism in the era of imperialism with its horrid consequences. However, these never offer a viable alternative to the latter other than abstract schemes and wishful thinking. Even within the so-called "Socialism of the XXIst century" there exist a number of different tendencies. That said, and despite the heterogeneity of petty-bourgeois "anti-capitalist" thinking, there are a few precepts that it will adhere to:

1. Refusal to accept the working class as a vanguard of the exploited. The mere existence of the working class is at times questioned. This also includes rejecting "old" forms of political organization of the working class in favour of more amorphous and spontaneous ones. The latter seems a more "democratic" form of organization. In reality these new emerging organizations are dominated by the pauperized petty-bourgeoisie and not by the working class.

2. Refusal to accept industrialization with emphasis on investment in heavy industry, as a key component to the economic programme for national liberation and socialist construction.
3. Concerns about the role of the state and planning in the development and implementation of economic policy.
4. Refusal to accept the value enclosed in the experience of the construction of socialism in the Soviet Union in the 1930s-50s. This includes ignoring the historical experience pertaining to social and economic transformations in the countries of People's Democracies in the 1940s and 1950s.
5. Failure to understand the interconnection between the movement for National Liberation and the construction of socialism.
6. Understanding socialism from the standpoint of commodity production and commodity-money relations. These are postulated to be transformed under socialism and are rendered instruments for the liquidation of exploitation and sustained economic development. The same effectively applies to the economic model leading to national liberation.

This non-exhaustive list briefly summarizes the tenets of anti-Marxist economic thinking. Anti-Marxist thinking will never desist in trying to penetrate the working class and to prevent it from accomplishing its historical mission.

Endnotes:

1. The tripartite alliance comprises the ANC, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the South African Communist Party (SACP). Each organization has its own constitution, program and membership, but concurs with the political program of the so-called National Democratic Revolution (NDR).
2. Fanonian thought is a form of black nationalism, based on the views of Frantz Fanon.
3. For instance, the SACP refuses to call the events in Marikana a massacre, but rather a tragedy. It is left implicit that Marikana miners were also to blame for the massacre.
4. Official statistics indicate that the black middle class constitutes about 6% of the South African population.