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Authoritarian Populism under Former Liberation Movements in Southern Africa

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Former liberation movements, who replaced white minority regimes in Southern Africa with the support of an international solidarity movement, have in retrospective failed to meet the expectations, also measured against what they had promised. The transition towards majority rule paved the way for a new elite project, with less benefits for the ordinary people than originally hoped for. This article takes critically stock of what can be considered as the limits to liberation. It seeks to explain the context and legacy of the struggle for self-determination when it comes to the failures of true emancipation.

Keywords: Angola, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Zimbabwe, liberation movements, Southern Africa

Populismo autoritário sob os antigos movimentos de libertação na África Austral

Os movimentos de libertação que substituíram regimes de minoria branca na África Austral, com o apoio de um movimento de solidariedade internacional, têm, retrospetivamente, falhado em cumprir com as expectativas que outrora prometeram. A transição rumo à governação pela maioria abriu caminho a um novo projeto de elite, com menos benefícios para a população comum do que aquilo que originalmente se esperava. Este artigo analisa criticamente aquilo que pode ser considerado como os limites para a libertação, procurando explicar o contexto e legado da luta pela autodeterminação no que concerne aos fracassos de uma verdadeira emancipação.

Palavras-chave: Angola, Moçambique, Namíbia, África do Sul, Zimbabué, movimentos de libertação, África Austral

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Angola, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe are, as Southern African states, among the special cases of National Liberation Movements (NLMs) as governments (Bereketeab, 2018). This article takes critical stock of their track record. It analyses the enduring importance of socio-political and -cultural ideologies formed in exile during the liberation struggle. It assesses the extent to which new elites have occupied the political commanding heights in replacement of former elites under the "white" minority regimes, and how a patriotic history as heroic narrative has been constructed and used to justify the continued execution of power.[1] The decolonization processes in the sub-region, which was to a large extent characterised by settler-colonial minority rule, resulted in the Independence of Angola and Mozambique in 1975, Zimbabwe in 1980, Namibia in 1990 and the democratic elections in South Africa in 1994. Since then, the Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA), the Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (Frelimo), the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU/ZANU-PF), the South-West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO of Namibia) and the African National Congress (ANC of South Africa) have remained in government, with differing degrees of support in general elections.

Since the transfer of power, the former NLMs have promoted and cultivated a political culture, which has authoritarianism and populism as substantial ingredients. Surprisingly so, their track record has – with the exemption of a solid comparative analysis of South Africa, Namibia and Zimbabwe by a South African based author (Southall, 2013) and one of the first efforts to critically reflect on the "limits to liberation" (Melber, 2003) – not featured very prominently in international debates. A volume with 14 chapters on Southern case studies on global authoritarianism (International Research Group on Authoritarianism and Counter-Strategies, 2022) has just two African chapters, with a case study on urban authoritarianism in South Africa and one on neoliberalism and authoritarianism in Southern Africa. Meanwhile, former NLMs as governments in Southern Africa have shifted their rhetoric from revolutionary anti-colonial sloganeering to populist narratives of authoritarian regimes posing as liberators. Shortcomings in their democratic cultures are covered by claims to militantly defend the achievements of self-determination. Such rhetoric distracts from and covers up the self-enrichment strategies of a new elite, originally moulded within the higher echelons of the anti-colonial movement claiming to bring about a better future for all. At a closer look, this variant of self-determination served as

[1] This article is the considerably revised and expanded version of a keynote presented at the Conference "Pluralism: Democratisation and Electoral Integrity in Angola and Mozambique" at ISCTE – University Institute of Lisbon, on 14 December 2022 (www.pdeiam.com) and partly based on several previous analyses by the author.

scaffolding to legitimize their continuance in power. In social, political, and economic reality this translated into forms of self-determination of the new rulers. Significant participation in shaping the new society under majority rule remains a privilege of those who have replaced those previously in power. New elites moved into the governing space previously occupied by white settler communities.

> Over time, the perception of legitimacy evolves into a feeling of entitlement. In the minds of its supporters, the liberation movement is a lifelong mission. Power is viewed as a means of fulfilling that mission. (Nantulya, 2017)

Since being in power their governance offers sobering results. The track record shows at best a highly skewed level playing field in terms of democratic political competition, a socio-economic transformation benefitting self-enrichment but hardly reducing poverty levels of the majority population in any decisive way, while paying lip service to civil and civic rights without any meaningful empowerment of citizens. While many of the features under the rule of NLMs are often still blamed by them on the legacies of white minority rule, after decades of self-determination this sounds like an increasingly hollow excuse seeking to distract from the new elites' own failures. Despite promises of social transition towards an inclusive society for all, the formal civil rights offered to the majority of people in combination with meaningful material improvements of life by most if not all remained just promises. A fundamental socio-economic transformation got stuck in an elite project, which showed hardly any meaningful "trickle down" effects. A kind of de-racialised economic transformation was not followed by more social justice with less of a class character. Under the banner of black economic empowerment and affirmative action a co-optation by a new elite into the existing system of exploitation took place. What happened was a mere modification of a marked we-they divide between haves and haves not of a settler-colonial minority rule much determined by a combination of race and class. Social classes – now structured along more "colour blind" lines – remained with minor modifications in place, with a new elite securing material privilege based on political control over the state and its agencies. The relative wealth of natural resources was never used for investments into the well-being and social uplifting of the ordinary people but exploited for the benefit of locally few in a rent-seeking strategy. As summed up in the editorial of a Namibian daily newspaper:

> Even a cursory look at the former liberation movements that eventually ascended to political power in southern Africa reveals their evolution into parties that have

> vacuumed resources meant for the benefit of the poor and still disadvantaged. (Namibian Sun, 2023)

But time is running out: "Long used to unchallenged dominance, liberation movements have significant adjustments to make to rise to the challenge of a new era" (Vandome, 2019). Their dismal track record since in office as governments is a sobering reminder that "liberation talk" is a currency in decline if the words are not followed by evidence of delivery. And the record is at best mixed, with the appeal of liberation dramatically waning. Even SWAPO in Namibia, which during the first 30 years as government performed best among the former NLMs in terms of consolidation of democratically legitimised political power, in 2019 and 2020 respectively, came at a crossroad with the first drastic decline in electoral support (Allison, 2019; Melber, 2020, 2021a and 2021b), facing the same erosion of popular support as the other NLMs in government before. Such warning lights "nurture serious doubts whether the former liberators are the ones to successfully lead the continent in a new ideological struggle to drive sustainable economic development that would benefit all citizens" (Louw-Vaudran, 2017). The views expressed in a Namibian opinion article capture well the current feelings among many of the citizens in the sub-region witnessing the performances of former NLMs with growing frustration: "During election campaigns, political leaders spend their time pretending – visiting poor people, overnighting in informal settlements, and cooking for vulnerable elders. However, once elected, they park all those concerns until the next campaign" (Shikukutu, 2022).

The data in the Human Development Report for 2021/22 speak for themselves: Out of 191 countries ranked in the Human Development Index (HDI), South Africa is the only one at the end of the countries listed with a high human development at position 109; Namibia (139), Zimbabwe (146) and Angola (148) rank in the medium human development category, with Mozambique (185) with low human development trailing even further behind (UNDP, 2022, pp. 272-274). The inequality adjusted HDI puts South Africa in 22 and Namibia 10 ranks lower (UNDP, 2022, p. 282f.). Both are competing for the top position among the world's most unequal societies with the highest Gini coefficients measuring the differences in income among the citizens of a country. Based on World Bank data for 2014 and 2015, South Africa (63.0) and Namibia (59.1) top the ranks, followed on position eight by Mozambique (54.0), with Angola (51.3) and Zimbabwe (50.3) among the higher scores too.[2]

[2] https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/gini-coefficient-by-country

In terms of political and civil rights, as measured annually by the Freedom House Index[3], South Africa and Namibia scored in 2022 with 79 and 77 highest and were classified as free, followed by Mozambique (43) as partly free, and Angola (30) and Zimbabwe (28) as not free. In the 2021 ranking of 180 countries in the Transparency International Corruption Perception Index,[4] Namibia (58) and South Africa (70) rank again best, with Angola (136), Mozambique (147) and Zimbabwe (157) trailing behind. The achievements under former NLMs, both concerning civil liberties and even more so in terms of the lack of material improvements for most people are in sobering contrast to the promises and expectations what "liberation" from white minority rule would offer.

The social transformation of Southern African societies shaped by a settler colonial brand can therefore, in the light of such track record, at best, be characterised as a transition from controlled change to changed control. The result is a new ruling political elite operating from commanding heights, legitimized as the sole agency of the people by selective narratives and memories related to the war(s) of liberation. These create new (to some extent invented) traditions to establish an exclusive post-colonial entitlement under the sole authority of one exclusive agency of social forces. Politically correct identity is defined by those in power along narrow lines of (self-)definition and (self-)understanding. As observed in the case of Zimbabwe:

> whilst power relations had changed, *perceptions* of power had *not* changed. The layers of understanding regarding power relations, framed by socialisation and memory, continue[d] to operate. … [Although] actors had changed ... the way in which the new actors executed power in relation to opposition had not, [because] their mental framework remained in the colonial setting. Patterns from colonial rule of 'citizens' ruling the 'subjects' [were] repeated and reproduced. (Yap, 2001, pp. 312-313; original emphasis)

War shapes its people

The five former NLMs as governments had, as anti-colonial movements, taken control of the state machinery and reorganised as political parties. Their legitimacy was rooted in the decolonisation process. The heroic narratives of a patriotic history unfolding tend in all cases to emphasise a liberation through the barrel of the gun. But the turning point for Angola and Mozambique was the Carnation Revolution of 25 April 1974 in Portugal. This was also to some extent a result of

[3] https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores

[4] https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021/index/can

the colonial wars (Henriksen, 1976). It triggered not only the end of dictatorship, but also paved the way towards independence of the colonies.

But the "new beginning" was no peaceful transition into a prosperous society. Not only did the retreating Portuguese settlers left behind a path of infrastructural destruction. In Angola, civil war between the governing MPLA and UNITA paralysed any civil developments. Only the death of Savimbi in 2002 brought some relative peace – in the sense of absence of war, at least for most. Similarly, with the creation of Renamo in Mozambique[5] as part of South Africa's regional destabilisation strategy, Frelimo was for decades embroiled in armed domestic conflict. In both countries there was no fertile ground to foster democracy and good governance. Remarkably so, both UNITA and Renamo since then reinvented themselves as parties, competing for political rule by mainly non-violent means.

In Zimbabwe, Namibia, and South Africa the legitimacy to govern by the NLMs ZANU, SWAPO and ANC was secured through general elections as the result of negotiated transfers of political power. However, the role of violence and the armed struggle in the fights for self-determination under majority rule were not a suitable midwife for a peaceful cohabitation among competing political agencies. In Zimbabwe ZANU-PF soon coerced through genocide-like massacres in Matabeleland the rival ZAPU into a union at the cost of more than 20,000 civilian lives. Known as *Gukurahundi*, it has remained a festering wound until today (Alexander, 2021). In South Africa, the end of formal apartheid minority rule was rocked by deadly encounters between followers of the ANC and Inkatha (Rueedi, 2020). The violent heritage has left its marks and lives on. This is a sobering reminder that "war shapes its people" – as the German novelist Christa Wolf once put it in her essay "Kassandra".

The general assumption was to a large extent, at least among those in support of the anti-colonial struggles, particularly in the global anti-apartheid movement (Brock et al., 2014) and liberal White local supporters of Black majority rule (Lipton, 2000), that the NLMs were fighting for self-determination to achieve democracy, human rights, the rule of law and socio-economic transformation for the material benefit of the hitherto marginalised – to serve the masses, so to say. But this was a projection, which was blurred by romanticism of a revolutionary wishful thinking unaware of realities shaping mindsets for building a new society largely based on the old one rather than abandoning it. As Soler-Crespo summarises: "these movements where at its core a group of rebel fighters … reinforcing an organizational structure where hierarchy was more important

[5] Initially set up as Resistência Nacional Moçambicana (MNR) in 1976 by Rhodesian intelligence.

than respect for the opinion of others". Majority rule under their command and control "was not to establish a liberal multiparty democracy, but to arrive to state institutions" (Soler-Crespo, 2019, p. 29).

Artur Carlos Maurício Pestana had seen this coming. In the early 1970s he participated in the guerrilla war of the MPLA in the rainforest of Cabinda – the *mayombe*. This is the title of his epic novel, published under his nom de guerre Pepetela. In a revealing dialogue, the commander of the guerrilla unit *Sem Medo* ("Fearless") explains to the political commissar *Mundo Novo* ("New World"):

> We don't share the same ideals. […] You are the machine type, one of those who are going to set up the unique, all-powerful Party in Angola. I am the type who could never belong to the machine. […] One day, in Angola, there will no longer be any need for rigid machines, and that is my aim. […] what I want you to understand, is that the revolution we are making is half the revolution I want. But it is the possible. I know my limits and the country's limits. My role is to contribute to this half-revolution. […] I am, in your terminology, adventurist. I should like the discipline of war to be established in terms of man and not the political objective. My guerrillas are not a group of men deployed to destroy the enemy, but a gathering of different, individual beings, each with his subjective reasons to struggle and who, moreover, behave as such. […] I am happy when I see a young man decide to build himself a personality, even if politically that signifies individualism. […] I cannot manipulate men, I respect them too much as individuals. For that reason, I cannot belong to a machine. (Pepetela, 1996, pp. 197 and 198)

Resistance movements normally adopt survival strategies and techniques, which resemble oppressive elements for internal control while fighting an oppressive regime. That culture, unfortunately, took root and was nurtured by continued suspicion if not elimination – by exclusion or even by assassination – of all dissenting voices even after the liberation struggle ended. All summed up, the political systems NLMs established fell short of a credible and full embracement of civil liberties, democracy and human rights based on tolerance and respect for other opinions. The justification for the legitimacy of the new regime lies primarily not in being democratically elected but in having fought the armed struggle, which liberated the masses.

For South Africa, Suttner (2006 and 2008)[6] thus argues that the liberation movement is a prototype of a state within the state – one that sees itself as the only legitimate source of power, which includes intolerance to any form of po-

[6] Suttner was an underground ANC operative in South Africa and spent years in solitary confinement as a political prisoner. As a member of parliament and later as ambassador, he represented the ANC and South Africa's democratic state before returning to the academic world and turning a back on the ANC.

litical opposition. He also carefully seeks to explain how the anti-pluralist factor remained largely unnoticed by a wider public, while fierce contestations – often with brutal violent clashes – took place in exile or within the underground structures. These cloaked individual, independent minded thinking guided by dissenting moral values, under a collective, which used Marxist-Leninist "democratic centralism" as a guiding principle to ensure maximum discipline and loyalty as a prerequisite for the survival and ultimate victory. As he suggests, the liberation organisation represented a distinct notion of family. There was a general suppression of "the personal" in favour of "the collective". Individual judgment (and thereby autonomy) was substituted by a collective decision from the leadership. Such "warrior culture, the militarist tradition", according to Suttner (2008, p. 119), "entailed not only heroic acts but also many cases of abuse and power".

Suttner also delivered the prestigious Harold Wolpe Memorial Lecture in early November 2005 at academic centres in Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town, during which he admitted: "I have said things in this paper I would not have said 20 years ago or, in some cases, until very recently" (Suttner, 2006, p. 26). Among these were his (self-)critical reflections on unity and pluralism within the dominant discourse of the hegemonic rule of the former anti-colonial organisation (the ANC) now controlling and representing the state. As he observes, this form of applied "patriotic history", which defiantly refuses to acknowledge any meaningful and legitimate opposition, equates the "national liberation movement" with the emerging nation. It is an exclusive, all-embracing concept. Suttner qualified the dominant narrative as

> a language of unity and a language that *tends to represent the unified people as embodied in the liberation movement organisation and then equates them with the people as a whole*. […] In a sense the liberation movement depicts itself as a proto-state. This notion derives from a framework of ideas in which the seizure of the state was represented as the central issue of the day. (Suttner, 2006, p. 24, original emphasis)

He maintained that:

> it is important, as part of the nation we are building, to acknowledge without qualification that people have the right to organise in a variety of sectors, linked to or in opposition to the government of the day. No political organisation can represent every sectoral interest and it is important that such sectoral organisations exist. No one should be discouraged from becoming involved in such activity or depicted as disloyal for doing so. (Suttner, 2006, p. 25)

The anti-democratic legacy of violence

Post-colonial politics often show a blatant lack of democratic awareness and take forms of neo-patrimonial systems. A case study of Mozambique suggested that regular elections "have not been accompanied by a steady institutionalisation and 'Moçambicanisation' of democratic values, norms, and rules" (Braathen & Orre, 2001, p. 200). Since then, Mozambique continued its march to authoritarianism with new forms of entrenched undemocratic rule under the current President Nyusi (Nhamirre, 2022).

The unabated exploitation of Angola's oil wealth by a powerful oligarchy within the MPLA, when the country's population remains among the most destitute in the world, is one of the biggest scandals on the continent. Elections in Angola were postponed time and again, using the delays to manufacture control over the electoral process to guarantee victory. In such circumstances, constitutionalism and the rule of law are absent from the political system (Southall, 2014; Vidal with Chabal, 2009). Instead, those in government and state take over civil society (Messiant, 2001) and turn the country into a corporate business (Marques de Morais, 2010). The continued decline has since then opened windows of opportunity for a stronger opposition (Pearce, 2023), with the MPLA,

> unable to reconfigure state-society relations in ways that reconciled greater political freedoms with its continued hegemony, attesting to the growing disconnect between its governance methods and the country's changing sociopolitical composition and economic needs. Unlike in the past, war is now unavailable as an alibi for poor governance, while declining oil wealth cannot provide a backstop for the distributive pressures to which the government is subjected. (Lippolis, 2022)

Structures and policies that foster autocratic rule and towards the subordination of the state under the party, as well as politically motivated social and material favours as a reward system for loyalty or disadvantages as a form of coercion in cases of dissent, are common techniques also in Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa. The political rulers' penchant for self-enrichment with the help of a rent – or sinecure – capitalism goes hand in hand with the exercise of comprehensive controls to secure the continuance of their rule. Accordingly, the term "national interest" means solely what *they* say it means: "Liberation movements came to represent so much the people's will that they ended believing they actually where the people, excluding anyone who didn't support their rule as traitors to the nation" (Soler-Crespo, 2019, p. 29).

Based on the rulers' (self-)perception, individuals and groups are allowed to participate in, or are excluded from, nation-building. The "national interest"

justifies authoritarian practice. Any group that resists the power of the ruling elite is either "anti-national" or "unpatriotic", if not accused of acting as a fifth column for "regime change" deployed by foreign Western imperialist interests. In response to growing pressure for policy changes, both domestically and internationally, the former NLMs closed ranks and "ignored governance issues by focusing more on regime survival" (Panganayi & Marovah, 2020, p. 165). Such retention of power had little to do with democratic principles but much with the commando structures that emerged during the liberation struggle. As the late South African political activist Rhoda Kadalie observed in an interview:

> Many of my former comrades have become loyal to a party rather than to principles of justice. […] Unfortunately, it is true that those who have been oppressed make the worst democrats. There are recurring patterns in the behaviour of liberation parties – when they come to power, they uphold the most undemocratic practices. (Kadalie, 2001)

De Jager and Steenekamp (2016, pp. 928 and 930) diagnosed a "liberation movement syndrome" for the ANC. They identified a self-conception of the party "as the leader, voice and embodiment of the people". It governs with a "pre-eminence of a liberationist culture, where group rather than individual responsibility is important". Those in power are at best prepared to be accountable only to themselves (Good, 2002). There is a lack of (self-)critical awareness and extremely limited willingness to accept divergent opinions, particularly if they are expressed in public. This drastically limited the capacity for reform in the interest of good governance. A culture of fear, intimidation and silence inhibits the possibilities of durable renewal at the cost of the public good.

Such tendencies are not new. Witnessing the emergence of sovereign governments and their policies in West African states during the late 1950s, Frantz Fanon presented in 1961 a scathing criticism of the rule of "liberators". In chapter three of his manifesto *The Wretched of the Earth*, he characterized the performances as "The Pitfalls of National Consciousness". For Fanon the new state, instead of conveying a sense of security, trust and stability foists itself on the people, using mistreatment, intimidation, and harassment as domesticating tools. The party in power "controls the masses […] to remind them constantly that the government expects from them obedience and discipline" (Fanon, 2001, p. 146f.).

In Southern Africa, the end of white minority rule was accompanied by the belief that the seizure of political power translates into "the end of history" in the sense that governance under former NLMs is pre-determined once and for all: as from now on, there cannot exist any legitimate alternative, and changes

in political control over the respective countries can only happen within those movements turned parties. As Clapham warned, they,

> regard themselves as the embodiment of the very state they sought to establish through struggle. In their own minds, they are permanently entitled to govern, and – far from recognising internal splits and domestic opposition as signals that they have outlived their welcome – treat them instead as challenges to the rightful order they themselves represent, and consequently as pretexts for remaining in power. Yet the liberation credit is a finite one, and is characteristically exhausted in the minds of much of the population much sooner than leaders recognise. The moment soon arrives when the regime is judged not by its promises but by its performance, and if it has merely entrenched itself in positions of privilege reminiscent of its ousted predecessor, that judgement is likely to be a harsh one. (Clapham, 2013, p. 56)

The militant resistance to overthrow white minority rule was combined with a promise for a better future. But the transfer of power and subsequent transformation was limited to handing over administration and governance to the erstwhile liberation movement. A new elite occupied the commanding heights of the state. It secured a similar status to those who under the old system were the privileged few. As succinctly put by Malyn Newitt in his paper in this same volume, "the new man was a close cousin of the old *assimilado*". This showed the narrow "limits to liberation" (Melber, 2003). It is not by coincidence that this has contributed to a renaissance in engaging with the writings of Fanon, with frequent references to the said chapter on "The Pitfalls of National Consciousness".

Forms of democracy resembling features of a one-party dominance, were classified by Levitsky and Way (2002 and 2010) as "competitive authoritarianism". As they argue, parties whose origins lie in war, violent anti-colonial struggle, revolution, or counterinsurgency, appear to be more durable. Their concept of democracy is also based on the misunderstanding that a majority rule equates democracy. As pointed out by Southall:

> The struggle for liberation was one far more for majority rule and national self-determination than for liberal democracy. Whereas liberal democracy envisages the principle of majority decision-making as being constrained by respect for the rights of individuals and minorities, there was (and is) a tendency embedded in national liberation thought which equates majoritarianism with democracy. (Southall, 2014, p. 85)

In Southern Africa, current populist discourses rely on heroic narratives to create continued identification with a past to legitimize the present. While gov-

ernments need more than only an electoral majority based on (increasingly dubious) numbers combined with a populist rhetoric, such appeals have been an integral part of post-settler-colonial narratives in the region.

Populism as a dominant feature

This draws attention to a specific form of populism (Melber, 2018, 2022a). Engagement with this phenomenon had in the past mainly focused on the context of established democracies in which populists mobilize against an establishment and appeal to sentiments suspicious of those democrats in government, rallying "against both the established structure of power and the dominant ideas and values of the society" (Canovan, 1999, p. 3). Populism, as a "universal mode of expression for unique national, cultural, class, ethnic, or racial identities of 'the people'" (Halisi, 1998, p. 424) came as a handy tool. But the times when leaders of the dominant parties could claim to be the alternative to the establishment are over. After all, they are the establishment. Their appeals to populist reminiscences of a bygone era of the "struggle days" have become increasingly less convincing. While populism continues to appeal to identification with the continued struggle against foreign domination, marketing oneself as the only true alternative and promise of a better future becomes increasingly hollow. It is a kind of retrospectively applied populism vis-à-vis a colonial dominance that has been replaced by a governing party perpetuating colonial features. The claim of an ongoing struggle led by the former liberation movement as the sole legitimate authority to represent the people freed from the colonial oppression is an effort of fending off any domestic political opposition. But the times when leaders of the dominant parties could claim to be the alternative to the establishment are over. After all, they are the establishment.

Under such governments, there is no level playing field. The equation that the party is the government, and the government is the state has been firmly anchored in practices and mindsets. This does not mean that the voters have no choices. They officially have. But making use of these is not necessarily reflected in the official election results. Angola, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe are the obvious cases. In blatant dismissal of voters' choices, Zimbabwe's ZANU-PF as well as President Mugabe remained in power since 2002 (Melber, 2002) based on sheer violence and fabricated results. Their closest allies in SADC – the four other NLMs as governments – willingly and consciously accepted the fraud and closed eyes and ears concerning the systematic oppression and violence since the mid-1980s. As Soler-Crespo points out, former NLMs,

> still believe legitimacy is bestowed upon them by their struggle and not by the ballot, in such manner that if they lose elections, they are ready to turn to repression, coercion and violence to stay in power [...] By turning a blind eye on ZANU-PF's flagrant violations on human rights, liberation movements in Southern Africa show that brotherhood and collaboration between former struggle fighters is ahead of their respect for democracy. (Soler-Crespo, 2019, p. 29)

But cohesion through coercion based on state terror is not sustainable nation-building. One should consider the warning expressed by Stanley:

> Authoritarian societies […] mimic many of the characteristics of socially cohesive societies. They coordinate action of members in a way which looks like willing cooperation (but which always has a coercive component). […] they succeed in achieving these characteristics at the price of coercion and exclusion. (Stanley, 2003, p. 9)

Most of the political parties claiming to be an alternative are not, when inspected more closely. Most of these have no fundamentally different agenda from seeking access to power and privileges. Their internal factionalism in many cases replicates what is happening in the power struggles within the former liberation movement. The sobering conclusion by Gasnolar for South Africa applies to all the cases in different nuances and degrees:

> South Africans battle against machinery and systems that are currently wielded without their participation. Power that has been eroded from the people. Power that has been wrapped up in process and reshaped towards politics of ego and the stomach.
>
> In this vicious cycle and cesspool presenting itself as democracy, South Africans are both the victims and losers of a system that has been designed to prop up party political structures.
>
> In the vacuum of civic participation programmes, efforts to deepen/strengthen democracy and real commitment to supporting citizen-led processes and engagement, we will continue to be poorly served by our political system. After all, those systems are not about service to people, those systems are not about commitment to the Constitution, but rather they are about power (and its absolute pursuit) and securing the futures of those in its structures. The role of party-political structures will continue to dominate our economic, social and political realities as long as we tolerate this broken system. (Gasnolar, 2022)

As once summed up in the popular song "The system is a joke" by the Namibian artist Elemotho G. R. Mosimane on his first CD released in 2000:

"Don't you see, the system is a joke, all they feed us is Coke. Please don't bother your soul, we're moving in circles, such, such a circus".

Liberation struggles as struggles of appropriation

As observed by Roger Southall (2013, pp. 247 and 330f.), while "liberation movements espoused ideologies prioritizing 'the capture of state power' as the means to transform societies structurally skewed", they created inevitable tensions between the values of liberal democracy and transformation. The result was – in line with the specific trajectory of each of the societies – a party-state, which "was simultaneously a 'party machine', a vehicle for the upward mobility of party elites and for material accumulation justified ideologically by reference to the historical rightness of transformation". Put more bluntly: struggle veterans were convinced that their sacrifices justify that now the time has come for them to eat.

Moeletsi Mbeki, brother of democratic South Africa's second President, ended his critical deliberations on the post-apartheid "architects of poverty" with the conclusion, that the emerging African elites are with few exceptions a parasitic class. They,

> have no sense of ownership of their country and are not interested in its development. They view the country primarily as a cash cow that enables them to live extravagantly […] as they attempt to mimic the lifestyles of the colonialists. […] With the lack of ownership goes the pillaging of resources, neglect of the welfare of the people, corruption, capital flight and, ultimately, brutality against dissenting voices. (Mbeki, 2009, p. 174)

A speech by the former leader of the ANC Youth League Julius Malema, now heading the Economic Freedom Fighters, of 3 April 2010 in Harare, confirms the point:

> We want the mines. They have been exploiting our minerals for a long time. Now it's our turn to also enjoy from these minerals. They are so bright, they are colourful, we refer to them as white people, maybe their colour came as a result of exploiting our minerals and perhaps if some of us can get opportunities in these minerals we can develop some nice colour like them. (Sunday Times, 2010)

Such pseudo-radical populist rhetoric seeks to detract from the fact that nationalisation of this kind is merely a disguise for the class interest of those in control over the state with the intention to privatise the assets. As the South African Communist Party cadre Dominic Tweedie comments:

> Malema is a true demagogue. He claimed to be more communist than the communists, while wearing a R250,000 Breitling watch. […] He is talking of nationalising the mines, but admits that what he really means is a "public-private" partnership – a socialism for the capitalists. [...] We have a struggle against fascism in this country [...] The fascists we have to fear are young, and black, very arrogant and very foolish. (Tweedie, 2010)

The social movement activist Mphutlane wa Bofelo pointed out that when a new elite, claiming to be in direct descent of the struggle aristocracy, sings the songs of the past, this,

> is not a reflection of how attached they are to the struggle, but an attempt to locate the struggle literally in the past. They want us to believe that the struggle is over, that all we have is remnants of the old order against whom our anger should be vented. In this way, the political elite sidetracks us from singing about the current dislocation of water and electricity, the ruthless and violent eviction of shack dwellers […], the vicious police attack on service delivery protesters, the financial exclusion of students, the kleptomaniac proclivities of the new political and economic elite, the advent of black colonialists, attacks on the freedom of media, the massive acts of de-politicisation, de-historicisation of our struggle and concerted efforts towards de-memorialisation. (Wa Bofelo, 2010)

Engaging with the democracy deficit of NLMs as governments in the region, Gumede (2017) lists the following elements as limiting factors: one-partyism; centralisation of decision- and policy-making; discouraging competitive leadership elections; cult of the leader; domination of a small clique; playing ethnic politics; fusion of party and state; dismissal of opposition; fractured and irrelevant opposition parties; stifling of civil society; abuses of liberation and independence rhetoric; ambivalence to democracy; intolerance to dissent; culture of secrecy; cult of violence; internalization of the culture of undemocratic colonial governments; unchallenged acting as vanguard; entitlement to permanent rule; and moral bankruptcy of movements and leaders. As he concludes: "African independence and liberation movements turned governments have often become obstacles to building lasting democracies. Their internal organisational cultures, leaders and the way they exercise power have more often … undermined democracy" (Gumede, 2017, p. 44).

As the cases under scrutiny suggest, the blending of party, government and state under former NLMs testifies to a constellation based on the use of force to gain liberation from the undemocratic, repressive conditions that prevailed in the colonial societies of Southern Africa. These were hardly favourable for the cre-

ation and durable strengthening of human rights, civil liberties and democratic norms based on transparency and accountability of governance. While abolishing anachronistic and degrading systems of racist minority rule, new challenges emerged on the difficult path to establishing sound and robust egalitarian structures and institutions, particularly in relation to the promotion of democratic societies and the strengthening of civil society (Vidal with Chabal, 2009). What remains is unfinished business. After all, independence without democracy is still far from being liberation.

It is of little comfort, that much of what can be critically observed concerning former NLMs now as parties in government, applies as characteristics to many political opposition parties too (Teshome, 2009), who often reproduce very similar limitations in terms of internalized values. Their notion of democracy tends to be related to the mere desire for holding power, instead of being a true alternative in terms of power sharing. This reduces political competition to a mere struggle for access to government and privileges, with the lack of true democracy as the collateral damage.

The limits to liberation

While abolishing anachronistic and degrading systems of racist minority rule, new challenges emerged on the difficult path to establishing sound and robust egalitarian structures and institutions, particularly in relation to the promotion of democracy and the strengthening of civil society. The inherent contradictions were aptly summarised by Southall:

> Liberation movements represent a heritage of struggle which is simultaneously emancipatory (seeking to free oppressed peoples from the chains of the past and from the social and economic deprivations of the present) and repressive (in that liberation elites claim for themselves the right to interpret the will of the people). If constitutional rule is to survive and advance in Southern Africa, it will need the support of counter-elites and wider society to contest the repressive components of liberation movement culture in order to secure the freedoms for which the liberation movements themselves claim to have fought. (Southall, 2014, p. 97)

What remains is unfinished business. After all, independence without emancipation, through rights, social uplifting, and civil liberties of the *povo* is still far from being liberation. The times when leaders of the dominant parties could claim to be the alternative to the establishment are over. They are the established system. Their appeals to populist reminiscences of a bygone era of the "struggle days" sound increasingly hollow. Being escorted in the latest models of European

limousines by motor cavalcades and flying in presidential jets to wine and dine with other leaders in the world are a mismatch with the liberation gospel.

Former liberators are increasingly measured against the lack of delivery in governance, while the mystification of the struggle is fading away with the veterans. Demographically, the born frees by now – even in the next elections in Namibia and South Africa – are a decisive number of voters. The younger generation's middle classes, initially beneficiaries in their social ascendancy due to their affinity to the new political and administrative structures, realise that their upward mobility has stagnated. With other political formations making inroads, the liberation gospel is not any longer good enough to remain in power. Observations presented about Windhoek (Melber, 2022b), resonate to some extent also with assessments for younger generations' middle class (re-)positioning in Luanda (Schubert, 2016) and even more so Maputo (Nielsen & Jenkins, 2021; Sumich, 2018). Political trends among segments in the younger urban black middle class in South Africa as the "born free" generation seem – as suggested by Oyedemi (2021) – to replicate similar shifts.

Soler-Crespo diagnoses some "grave errors" contributing to the "slow death of liberation movements", as follows:

> From abandoning their socialist agenda to focusing on state capture through political deployment of party members and engaging in dubious nepotist activities with white-owned large-capital, liberation movements have abandoned the ones who they fought for, sidelining its youth and the majority black population who suffer similar income inequalities and unemployment rates as they did in apartheid times. Inter-party fights between members craving for power indicate that liberation movements have forgotten why and who they fought for and now instead fight between them for the same privileges they once fought against. (Soler-Crespo, 2019, p. 16)

In the light of the limited socio-economic and -political emancipation for and empowerment of the majority of the people, it seems a sad irony that the Museum of African Liberation is of all places under construction in Zimbabwe's capital Harare – since late 2022 (!) with the support of the Russian Federation (Staff Reporter, 2022). As a reminder: under Robert Mugabe the country was turned into an electoral kleptocracy ruthlessly ruled by an autocrat, whose securocrats in military and police were eliminating any meaningful opposition by brutal force. The deterioration into a police state had devastating consequences for the ordinary people. Despite Mugabe's forced retirement in a hardly concealed military coup, "Mugabeism" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015) lived on under his succes-

sor and erstwhile closest confidante Emmerson Mnangagwa. He is nicknamed "the crocodile". This moniker reminds of his role being in a responsible position for the execution of the *Gukurahundi* (Phimister, 2008). Mnangagwa's governing track record has been appalling (Mhaka, 2021). On the basis of its highly chequered economic performance, poor public service delivery, systematic politically motivated violence, repressive legislation, and the manipulation of the electoral system and electoral results, Zimbabwe is among the saddest examples how former liberators turned into perpetrators, betraying the declared noble goals.

One should however also not lose sight of what the alternative to the NLMs seizing power and capturing the independent state might have been. Fighting settler-colonial regimes came with a high price not only in terms of human sacrifices but also of sacrificing human rights and human lives. But continued settler-colonial rule would have come as a high price for those at the receiving end too. The right to self-determination and – if only formal – civil rights for the ordinary people remain achievements, even if they are in reality a far cry from human dignity for all. They are a point of departure for the continued relevance of the slogan created in the anti-colonial movements, that the struggle continues (*a luta continua*), which since then unfortunately translated too often into "the looting continues".

The late South African poet and activist Dennis Brutus (2005, p. 87) articulated his frustration over this betrayal in 2000 through the following lines:

Forgive me, comrades,
if I say something apolitical
and shamefully emotional
but in the dark of night
it is as if my heart is clutched
by a giant iron hand:
"Treachery, treachery" I cry out
thinking of you, comrades
and how you have betrayed
the things we suffered for.

While the challenge today is not to overthrow legitimate political systems and structures by illegitimate means, the task at hand is to improve society in favour of more justice, equality and humanity. There is wide scope in any given society of this world for such efforts – not least among those in Southern Africa.

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