

Completing the Democratic Revolution in our Continent

The centrality of mass mobilisation and participation for a progressive developmental agenda

Blade Nzimande, General Secretary, South African Communist Party

Cde Chairperson, Co-Convenor Cde Eva Bjorklund, Distinguished participants and guests, our Alliance partners, on behalf of the Central Committee and membership of the South African Communist Party, let me welcome all of you to this historic gathering. Let me also express our appreciation to our fraternal party and ally, the Swedish Left Party, for the continuing solidarity and support, as well as chosen to partner with the SACP and host this Conference in South Africa.

Incidentally we are meeting over the same weekend and same city as the SADC Summit. In addition there are common cross-cutting issues being discussed in the two forums, the question of democracy and development.

There are a number of reasons why this conference is so historic and important. Firstly, it is the first time that we hold a conference of this nature where a number of progressive, left forces from different parts of the world are gathered together to discuss matters of common concern. Secondly, the theme of this conference is so important in that there can be no genuine development of our continent without people's participation in the transformation of their own conditions.

A brief overview on some current global developments

Our conference takes place against the background of the growing reality of the failure of capitalism to address the needs facing humanity. We are gathering at a time when there are huge increases in the prices of, amongst others, food and fuel, and the consequent astronomical rise in the cost of living for millions and millions of working and poor peoples of the world.

As the SACP had predicted last year, the global capitalist system is now enmeshed in a deep-seated and systemic crisis. This does not mean that capitalism is about to be destroyed or destroy itself, or that a socialist future will automatically arise. It does mean, however, that more and more capitalism reveals itself as a barbaric system without answers to the challenges of our time.

There are many dimensions to the current crisis, among them the very high but unsustainable consumption levels in the US which have seen US debt (government, corporate and household) soaring to \$48 trillion while US GDP only stands at around \$13trillion. It is these levels of indebted consumption that have helped to sustain record levels of Chinese growth and indeed much of global capitalist growth in general. The "American dream" has been built on the myth of everyone becoming a suburban home-owner and car commuter. The housing mortgage crisis in the US and soaring fuel prices are striking at the heart of the dream.

We are living in a period, possibly a relatively long period, in which the US increasingly loses its dominant economic position within the world capitalist system. It has fallen behind in terms of productivity in virtually all sectors, with the notable exception of military weaponry. And therein lies another grave threat to humanity. More and more the US will be inclined to assert its dominance through armed intervention. This is notably the case in regard to energy.

In 1998 shock waves reverberated through US ruling circles when the country began for the first time to import more than 50% of the petroleum it consumed. At the same time, many analysts and scientists began to confirm what had previously been regarded only as something remote – global oil production was in fact fast approaching a peak. The strategic decision to intensify US military, political and economic hegemony in oil producing regions, particularly the Middle East, was taken.

The September 11 terrorist attacks simply became an excuse for the implementation of a decision already taken - the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq and (possibly a planned attack) on Iran. No less an authority than the former Federal Reserve Bank chairperson, Alan Greenspan has written in his recent memoirs: "I am saddened that it is politically inconvenient to acknowledge what everyone knows: that the Iraq war is largely about oil."

In short the post-1989 capitalist and neo-liberal triumphalism is gone, and we are faced with the stark reality that capitalism and its neo-liberal policies is no solution to the problems facing humanity today.

It is for some of these reasons above that the SACP remains deeply committed to working class international solidarity and the building of a strong, progressive peace movement in the world, opposed to war and plunder of the planet's resources. It is also for these reasons that the SACP remains committed towards the building of a progressive movement for peace, democracy and socialism on the African continent. That is why this conference is so significant and important as one further platform to build such international solidarity.

The contradictory realities of post-colonial Africa

As the SACP we have argued that the fundamental task facing the African continent is that of taking forward and completing the national democratic revolution (NDR), in all its aspects and dimension. The crisis facing Africa remains its deepening marginalisation and impoverishment within the global imperialist system, the failure over many decades of a variety of elite-based neo-colonial agendas on the one hand, and the degeneration and in several cases the collapse of more radical national democratic revolutions led by former liberation movements on the other.

Our view is that at the heart of revitalising the African revolution is the task of creating the conditions (i.e. the social, economic, democratic, and organisational space and capacity) for the key national democratic protagonists – the working class, the peasantry, the mass of urban and rural marginalized (many of them youth), together with patriotic middle strata in the state and civil society – to become the key motive force of re-radicalisation, not just in theory but in practice.

The SACP has also chosen to pose the question of democracy and development in present day Africa within the context of a situation where many former national liberation and other anti-colonial movements are now in power; and the complexities that have arisen, especially now in the post Cold War era.

Indeed it must be said that the end of colonialism in Africa, with the exception of Western Sahara, has seen many positive developments in our continent, including in many cases improved access by our people to many basic services like education and health, that they were deprived of under colonialism. In many instances there has been significant opening of democratic space. However, there is still a deep systemic crisis on our continent.

It goes without saying that the local defeat of colonialism and neo-colonialism in, for instance, an India, China, Cuba, Vietnam, Nicaragua, Zimbabwe, or South Africa does not mark the end of an anti-imperialist struggle. With the winning of state power (whether by capture, elections, negotiations or some combination of these) comes a new set of challenges, and an intensified imperialist struggle against the new reality. This imperialist struggle is obviously designed to prevent the consolidation and advance of political and socio-economic transformation that will give real substance to the newly won political power.

The imperialist agenda assumes many forms – from aggressive destabilisation campaigns, sanctions, the fomenting of civil war, through to more indirect economic leverage (entrapment in structural adjustment programmes or the comprador seduction of the new political elite.). Obviously there may often be a combination of these, or different strategies might be applied at different times to the same post-independence formation.

Linked to all of this, ideologically, there is a campaign designed to sow demoralisation, you either have to conform to a neo-liberal straight-jacket or you are “bound to fail” as a radical national liberation movement. What this message of “inevitable failure” conceals is, of course, the active and persistent role that imperialist undermining plays in ensuring compliance or failure.

But compliance or failure are not inevitable, and where they occur it always has much to do with the objective and subjective factors at play within post-independence liberation movements and their societies. (And much the same can be said of the 20th century history of communist parties in power). The degree to which the imperialist strategy has leverage on a local situation has a great deal to do with the capacity and character of the national liberation movement itself. Central in this is the role of mass struggles, and the relationship between liberation movements in power and mass organisations.

Let's generalise by way of a relatively common (but not predetermined) trajectory. After independence, the broad national front, once united behind a unifying task of defeating colonialism, shows signs of fragmentation – as different class, regional and ethnic interests emerge, each laying claim to its “share” of the post-independence “dividend”. This is particularly noticeable in societies in which the working class is relatively small, or disorganised – with other class strata (the petty bourgeoisie, an emergent comprador elite, or a scattered peasantry) typically lacking the capacity to lead a sustained patriotic struggle. A new governing stratum

may be inclined to actively (or unwittingly) demobilise its mass base (the motive forces of the NDR), because of technocratic illusions (“we are in power, we will deliver to citizen-consumers”), or because the new governing elite’s class interests might be threatened by ongoing militant peasant, or working class, or urban and rural poor struggles.

Externally or internally-inspired destabilisation might at first legitimately justify the need to close ranks, even to temporarily suspend democratic space – but these measures often have a creeping habit of becoming a permanent state of siege which spuriously justifies crack-downs on rivals within the broad liberation movement, or within one’s own party, and the general suppression of popular forces. Politics increasingly becomes the politics of a ruling elite – factional struggles within a ruling party, in which the factions are barely distinguishable from each other in terms of programmatic politics. Politics is about defending or increasing access to statepower for self-accumulation and for elite reproduction by way of building a base (usually ethnic or regional) through patronage distribution.

The terrain of serious transformational politics is further neutralised by the fact that the major decisions are made somewhere else (by the IMF, World Bank, Club of Paris, etc) because you have been entrapped in a structural adjustment programme, or because you have willingly implemented your own SAP that it is beyond democratic debate, that is, beyond democratic political debate or engagement or mass involvement.

The motive forces required for an ongoing NDR are reduced to spectators or fans of this or that factional personality, or become disgruntled, marginalized and despairing (and therefore fodder for mobilisation by contras, imperialist funded pseudo-social movements, or banditry).

These are tendencies. They are not written in stone, but they are also familiar to all of us, and clearly here in South Africa, while we have not remotely deteriorated to this extent, we should also not assume that we are immune.

We have noted the inevitable imperialist (and in our case, indigenous monopoly capital) attempts to smash and/or colonise a post-independence National Liberation Movements. And we have noted tendencies within NLMs after independence to become bureaucratic, aloof from a former mass base, to pirate and undermine the coherence of the state, and generally to lose direction.

There is also a third tendency, in many respects a result and a symptom of the above realities. In many post-colonial situations, there are variants of ultra-leftism that paradoxically arrive at the same conclusions as imperialism about the ‘fate’ of liberation movements in a post colonial context, that they are bound to fail. The main argument of this tendency is that in such liberation movements, the working class has subjugated itself to an “always-already” conservative nationalist agenda, that is always liable to collaboration with imperialism at the expense of the interests of the poor. For these currents, there is an outright rejection of socialist or working class participation in broad national liberation fronts, because, they claim, it is inevitable for working class interests to be submerged in such broad fronts

The SACP has consistently critiqued the three ideological positions – the imperialists’ (and their local mouth-pieces’) “inevitable failure”, of democratic revolutions and the tendency to “blame

all our problems exclusively on imperialism” without a simultaneous internal self-reflection and criticism. We have consistently made this critique, not out of our own ‘habits’, but because these positions are thoroughly undialectical in engaging the historical realities of national liberation movements, especially after independence. They analyse these developments out of a pre-written script.

We would of course not expect imperialism to have any interest other than to undermine any prospects of revolutionary transformations in the world. The end of the Cold War has not lessened the counter-revolutionary onslaught on revolutionary transformations, but has instead intensified them, albeit less through direct occupation or direct colonial control, but through the imposition of a global neo-liberal order. It will be important that we firmly locate our deliberations at against the background of all these realities.

Indeed many of the former national liberation movements have either changed in form or even substance, but we would argue that the underlying vision of a thorough-going democratic revolution are even more relevant today. These tasks are essentially that of liberating and developing our countries by addressing three deeply interrelated contradictions, those of class, national and gender contradictions.

In many ways the fundamental challenge and crises in our SADC region, and indeed in the African continent as a whole, are that these liberation movements, at best, never completed these tasks or at worst, have turned their backs on them!

But... what is to be completed?

Many 20th century national liberation movements, especially in our Southern African region, were guided and informed by perspectives of liberating our people from the twin evils of economic exploitation and political (colonial) oppression.

It was within the context of the above challenges that, amongst others, the concept and revolutionary practice of a national democratic revolution arose and became part of the lexicon of radical national liberation movements, based on the understanding of the deep interconnectedness between economic exploitation and national oppression. In some cases, some of these liberation movements, proclaimed themselves ‘Marxist-Leninist’ (eg MPLA, Frelimo and Zanu), even where the conditions for the entire NLM to convert to a socialist formation did not exist.

Most of these liberation movements understood, amongst others, the following:

- That our revolutions sought to address the class, national and gender contradictions in an interrelated manner. Much as these contradictions could not be mechanically collapsed into each other, but they, at the same time, could not be addressed in isolation from each other
- True liberation could not be attained without a re-arrangement of colonial economic relations – a fundamental transformation of the peripheral, or (in South Africa’s case) semi-peripheral accumulation path into which they were locked and subordinated.

- That the existence of the Soviet Union provided the necessary support and counter-balance to the US-led imperialist order
- That mass participation was central in the democratic revolution

Liberation movements in power

Ascendancy to power by (former) liberation movements has always posed very complex challenges and problems, which seem to have deepened after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Indeed some of the former liberation movements on ascending to power quickly consolidated and proceeded to socialism (China, Cuba, Vietnam, etc). Many others unfortunately deteriorated and even disintegrated (eg Indian Congress, ZANU-PF, etc). There seems to be very little in between these experiences, with the partial exception of left mass movements, not so much liberation movements as we have historically understood them, capturing power currently in Latin America- but essentially pursuing a national (and even regional/bolivarian) democratic revolutionary path in which the key motive forces of ongoing struggle are the working class, the peasantry, the urban and rural poor and the progressive middle strata.

The centrality of mass struggle and mass participation

As the SACP we have over the years debated the issue of experiences of liberation movements, especially in our SADC region. Time does not permit a fuller exposition of our analysis, and therefore will just focus on some of these experiences as they relate to the theme of our conference.

- The character of these movements has undergone significant transformation, principally as a result of ascendancy to state power and the emergence of new (typically comprador and/or parasitic) capitalist strata.
- In a number of cases the relationship between these movements and their mass bases has been transformed into an (at best) electoral, rather than a mobilisational and activist, relationship as was the case prior to liberation
- There is a tension and even conflict between the liberation movements and some of their former constituency, and most significantly the trade union movement. In the Zambian case for example the Kaunda government was removed by a trade union led struggle, unions which were an important component of the national liberation movement. Whilst the Zambian case is that of a trade union movement hijacked by pro-imperialist forces to dislodge the liberation movement from power, this should not be generalised as the case in all instances
- The relationship between the movement and its mass base has more or less exclusively become that of the relationship between government and 'citizens'
- There seems to be a tension between being both a ruling party, and at the same time being at the head of mobilisation of the constituent parts of the liberation movement
- There has been general demobilisation of the liberation movement post independence, and in some instance former liberation movements now in power deliberately seeking to weaken mass mobilisation and seek to deal with all else as government.

- In many cases multi-party democracy has not brought about the intended consequences of deepening democracy, but has tended to be an electoral competition between political parties representing different fractions of the elite.

It is for these reasons that this conference and the theme it is addressing is of such fundamental importance for our country, region and continent.

Socialism is the future, build it now

Let me end by very briefly highlighting some of the key organisational features and challenges of our own movement and the SACP in particular.

In our case, we have a decades old alliance that has consciously sought to forge a progressive agenda for development in our country. Our intention also is for this Alliance to seek to lead broader democratic forces and ensure mass participation of our people. Indeed our Alliance has not been without its own problems and challenges, including the very serious challenge of being simultaneously a ruling movement and at the same time continue to mobilise the people; and the challenge of the relationship of the different components of our Alliance to state power. We will further reflect on these matters during our own input in one of the panels.

Immediately after the first democratic elections in 1994, the SACP, at our 9th Congress in 1995, adopted a strategic and programmatic slogan, 'Socialism is the future, build it now'. This was largely informed by the fact that with the new post-1994 conditions in our country, we needed to strategically and practically rethink the link between the national democratic struggle with our longer term objectives of socialism under these conditions.

We re-affirmed the continued relevance of our Alliance, guided by the Freedom Charter and the RDP, but understood that much as the national democratic revolution is not a socialist struggle, it cannot be deepened in our conditions without socialist-oriented measures, without which we will not transform the embedded colonial features of our capitalist accumulation path which continues to reproduce racialised underdevelopment, poverty and inequality.

One way through which we characterised this was that our revolution was encumbered by the same national, gender and class contradictions it sought to address; and that these cannot be addressed in isolation from each other. At the heart of this is the fact that the South African reality is that of a liberation movement that has acquired political power, but economic power still remains firmly in the hands of the same old white capitalist class, with a tiny emergent black stratum of that capitalist class.

Within this context we re-affirmed the centrality of the ANC in leading our democratic revolution after 1994, but at the same time ensuring that we build power of the working class in society and intensifying the struggle against the capitalist system and its market. Whilst we accept that the national democratic revolution has its distinct features and goals, for us it is simultaneously a terrain for the struggle for socialism; whilst not reducing the NDR into a socialist struggle.

A key factor in our strategic thinking continues to be the fact that the working class must be strengthened in order to act as the main and leading motive force in consolidating and deepening the national democratic revolution. The ANC still remains the best force in taking forward the NDR.

As our contribution towards building people's power in the current period, the SACP has committed itself to building working class and mass power in six key sites of power: the state, the economy, the community, the workplace, ideologically and through international solidarity.

With these words we are looking forward to productive engagements at this conference, and learning from each other's experiences. However, it would also be important to come up with some concrete proposals on how we deepen our solidarity and take forward common views that I am sure will emerge out of this gathering.

Thank you