

NAMIBIA: THE SOCIALIST DILEMMA

Note: What follows is the slightly shortened text of a talk given to a Joint meeting of the Royal African Society and the Royal Commonwealth Society in April 1982. The full text was first published in the journal **African Affairs**. The main burden of the talk retains its relevance for our understanding of Namibia and other African countries.

I have arrived at the title of this talk by making two assumptions. The first is that there will be a settlement in Namibia. The second is that SWAPO would win the independence elections and become the government. I am reasonably certain about the second assumption: if there are free and fair one-man-one-vote elections, SWAPO will win them. But I am not so sure about the first assumption, that there will be a settlement.

(After a discussion of various interpretations of the South African government's intentions that it was possible to make during the first half of 1982, Mr Uys turned to his main topic: 'the socialist dilemma in Namibia').

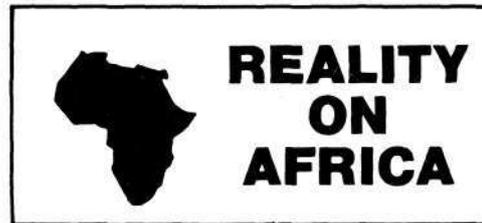
I am not going to discuss the merits of socialism in Africa — a subject in itself — but the dilemma of the African socialist whose country comes to independence and then finds that it is so tied in to the western economic system, so severely hedged in by what it can and cannot do, that it feels it is not a fully sovereign country. This was also the despairing conclusion reached by Mr Vassilev Solodovnikov, former director of the Africa Institute in Moscow and former Russian ambassador to Zambia, who said in 1976: 'A specific feature of the development of the socialist-orientated countries in Africa is that even after their choice of the non-capitalist way they are still in the orbit of the world capitalist economic system'.

To understand the dilemma of the socialist in Africa it is necessary to recognize the premises of African socialism, which is that capitalism is the system Africans knew under colonialism, and it is the system that, in their experience, failed them. They have looked for a new system and believe they have found it in socialism. One does not have to be a socialist to understand and have sympathy for the African socialist in his dilemma.

Political independence in itself cannot resolve economic dependence. As President Machel said at his country's independence: 'The first day of our political independence is the first day of the longer and harder struggle for economic independence'. The late Sir Seretse Khama, then President of Botswana, pointed out that where there are no options for a government, the process of decision-making is an empty one. The extent to which economic dependence derogates from sovereign independence, therefore, is the extent to which the pride and dignity of a people and their leaders are diminished. Nowhere is this truer than in Southern Africa where the economic dependence of a whole region on a single country, South Africa,

is so pronounced. South Africa does not make it easy for its black neighbours either: it has sought to institutionalize their dependence in the Constellation of States of Southern Africa. They in turn have responded by creating SADCC (the Southern African Development Co-ordination Conference) to achieve the opposite and to lessen their dependence upon South Africa.

Too often the motives of South Africa's black neighbours have been misunderstood. Where they have tried solely to guarantee their independence, or to meet the aspirations of their people, they have been accused of showing 'the ugly face of African tyranny', or of allowing themselves to become 'Soviet puppets'. They have been told they have 'let the mask slip'.



INFLUENCING FACTORS

This shows ignorance of the factors that influence a newly independent African country. In the first place, many of them have a commitment to socialism. Now this may be a good thing or a bad thing, but it is *their* commitment. To achieve socialism, in *their* opinion, is to achieve some kind of justice, the justice they believe they were denied under colonialism and capitalism. Second, they are exposed to remorseless pressure from both the masses and from activists for political independence to be translated into economic benefits. It is Africa's familiar crisis of expectations. If these expectations cannot be met, a new government is threatened with instability. This is where the dilemma arises: expectations cannot be met within a reasonable time-span within the economic framework inherited by the new government, but when the new government begins to restructure the framework, it frightens off those very whites, in and outside the country, on whom it depends for productivity, skills, administration, investment and so forth. Governing a newly independent state with a significant white population is like walking a tight-rope: only the very clever and very fortunate ones manage to keep their balance.

Take the example of Zimbabwe. Under colonialism, the land was divided almost equally between whites and blacks with the result that a black population of about seven million, four million of them peasants, today live on 41 million acres, while 180,000 whites (4,700 of them farmers) occupy the remaining 39 million acres.

The most urgent problem in Zimbabwe, therefore, is the redistribution of the land. The government hopes to re-settle 165,000 black families within the next five or six years, but so far fewer than 6,000 families have been re-settled, partly because it is such a formidable administrative task. How is large-scale redistribution of land to be achieved without frightening off white farmers and disturbing the sensitive mechanism of agricultural productivity? As it is, there is a continuing exodus of whites, mainly to South Africa, taking their skills with them. Here is another example: Mugabe's government raised minimum wages, by 23.5 per cent for commercial and industrial workers and 66 per cent for agricultural and domestic workers, in one fell swoop. Some white employers felt that this was asking too much of them and dismissed some workers. The government retaliated by bringing in a law to provide for fines of up to \$21,000, or three months' imprisonment, for unauthorised dismissals. At the other end of the scale, executive salaries and prices of goods were frozen. This correction of the 'capitalist imbalance' causes a lot of heartache among whites.

In spite of everything, though, whites still have most of the best jobs, the best salaries and the best houses, and it is hardly surprising that blacks are left wondering what independence is all about. Then, as political instability increases, it becomes necessary for black governments to restate, ever more vigorously, their commitment to African socialism.

Mugabe, for example, has found it necessary to deny that he has gone soft on capitalism. He has reaffirmed his unswerving commitment to socialism, and 1982 was declared the Year of National Transformation in Zimbabwe. To many white Zimbabweans this is very hairy stuff. The situation may well deteriorate even further and democracy in Zimbabwe may well fall on even worse times, but I remain convinced that Mugabe has tried genuinely to be both moderate and democratic, and that if in the future he is unable to be either, this is not the way he wanted it to be.

Before Mugabe took over in Zimbabwe, the state already owned the airline, television, radio, the railways, the telephone service, the iron and steel works, and several marketing agencies. Since then it has bought a controlling interest in a commercial bank, a pharmaceutical manufacturing firm, the Argus newspaper group and a film production company. Now Mugabe says he wants to buy a controlling interest in selected mines, farms, factories and businesses, and that the shares will be turned over to the workers. But if one looks at some of the statements Mugabe and his Ministers have made which have caused alarm among whites, it is noteworthy how often the statements subsequently were toned down. They were uttered for black consumption, and then the explanations had to follow for white consumption. There is nothing unusual or sinister or even devious about this: it is part of walking the tightrope.

ON THE DOORSTEP

The phenomenon of economic constraints acting on political decision-making is familiar in Africa, but Southern Africa is unique in what might be called the metropolitan power, South Africa, is not thousands of miles away in Western Europe, but on the doorstep; and South Africa has a vested political interest — deriving from its internal poli-

tics and the need to ensure the survival of apartheid — in maintaining and extending the entire region's economic dependence on its own powerful economy. Namibia is more dependent on South Africa than any other member of SADCC because it has been administered as a fifth province of South Africa's for more than 60 years. South Africa's grip on Namibia has been described by SWAPO's own publication, *To be Born a Nation*, as a stranglehold. South Africa owns the rail transport system, the airline, the entire communications network and the only viable port, Walvis Bay. It supplies the territory's oil and coal. Of the 110,000 whites in Namibia an estimated 55,000 are South African expatriates, many of them in key positions as civil servants and farmers. If they were to leave, Namibia would be in trouble. Namibia is knitted into the Rand Monetary Area and the Customs Union with South Africa. Namibia's dependence on South Africa for food is critical. Whites have 38 million hectares of the best agricultural and ranching land, and blacks 33 million hectares of largely arid and sandy soils unsuitable for very productive cultivation.

In 1979, out of a GDP of R1,425 million, a little less than R30 million was spreading among 250,000 black subsistence farmers and their families. This meagre income was supplemented by contract wage labour, but the total income of blacks, who form nine-tenths of the population was only 12 per cent of GDP, compared with 24 per cent for whites, the rest going to businesses or the state. According to a UNIN estimate in 1977, R425 million, or 36 per cent of Namibia's GDP, was being remitted abroad. Mining in Namibia contributes 52 per cent of GDP, and much of this comes from two mines, Rössing Uranium Mine and CDM. Some 17 companies, all foreign-based, hold the major and usually complete ownership in the 18 or so significant mines in Namibia. Ten are American based transnational corporations, three are Rand-based mining houses founded on British and South African capital, and two are South African parastatals, IDC and Iscor. Farming, fishing and mining are almost wholly in white hands and account for 97 per cent of commercial primary production. Ruinous over-fishing by the South Africans, Russians, Spanish and others have almost wrecked the fishing industry. Manufacturing has been badly neglected, because goods have been imported so easily from South Africa. Ninety-five per cent of everything consumed or invested in Namibia is imported. Eighty per cent of cattle exports are live by rail to RSA and karakul pelts are shipped in their raw state. Meat, frozen or canned for export, is handled by two Afrikaner companies in RSA. Of R1,800 million invested in the means of production in mining, agriculture and fishing, and related processing and suppliers, not more than R40 million is owned by specifically local interests, and hardly any of this by black Namibians.

COMPOUNDING FACTORS

Other factors compound Namibia's dependence on South Africa. The international recession has caused prices to fall for Namibia's uranium, diamonds and base metals. There has also been a prolonged and devastating drought, the worst since 1933, which has caused huge stock losses. There is the further problem, that for as long as Namibia is occupied by what the UN has branded the illegal South African regime, neither foreign governments nor transnational corporations feel they can offer aid or investment.



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South Africa's hostility towards its neighbours is an important factor. The leaders of Angola, Zambia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Lesotho have all accused South Africa of trying to destabilize their regimes. Namibia under SWAPO would ask itself why it should be the exception. South African government spokesmen have hinted, too, that they may insist on punitive compensation for South Africa's assets in Namibia. It is to be hoped that they will not carry out this threat.

Under these economic and political constraints, a SWAPO government would be trying to achieve two things. First, as its 1976 *Programme of Action* states, it will be seeking to build a 'classless, non-exploitative society based on the ideals and principles of scientific socialism'. What is called 'capitalist exploitation' will be transformed into 'a genuine socialist democracy'. There will be control of the means of production; black peasants will be brought into co-operatives or collectives; the state will buy ranches and crop farms; and controls will be imposed on the big capitalist corporations which are seen as 'the very core of imperialism.' At least, these are the aims.

Second, SWAPO will want Namibia to become part of the African ethos: to join SADCC and the OAU, to become non-aligned, to admit embassies and advisers from the Communist bloc, and to trade with the Communist bloc.

All these intentions and aspirations, though, would be seen by Pretoria as a threat to South Africa's interests. It would be naive to expect that Pretoria would refrain from using its economic levers to obstruct SWAPO in carrying out these policies.

This situation has produced in the West the expectation that a SWAPO government will adopt a 'pragmatic' course in Namibia, and I have no doubt that this will happen. A SWAPO government will have no choice. One of the SADCC papers admits that South Africa is in a position to strike 'crippling blows' at the Namibian economy. According to this paper, if there is not to be immediate chaos there will need to be no more than a gradual switch of connections away from the Republic of South Africa.

The constraints that would operate on a SWAPO government would not only be economic. For example, SWAPO has already given an assurance that it will not allow the ANC to establish guerilla bases in the territory. But it may feel obliged to allow the ANC to establish a presence in Namibia in the form of an office. The trouble is that Pretoria makes little distinction between a base and a presence. Pretoria almost certainly would take measures to ensure that an ANC presence in Namibia did not present a threat to South Africa. Political or military constraints might be imposed.

COMPROMISE

Circumstances, then, will *impel* SWAPO towards compromise, towards the kind of 'pragmatic' decisions that white South Africans, white investors and white governments in Western Europe expect it to make. Already, a pattern is taking shape: from what SWAPO itself states in publications like its 1976 *Programme of Action* and its *To Be Born a Nation* (1981), there will be no nationalization of major industries, although the transnational corporations may have to surrender a majority share of their equity; productive white farmers and competent white civil servants will be allowed to get on with the job, provided they obey the laws of the country; the land, minerals and fish will be regarded as the property of the nation, but this will not exclude private occupancy, use and development; there will be no confiscation of smaller businesses, and so forth.

To most whites this is an admirable way to resolve the problem; it is the sensible option, the commonsense thing to do. This is what we call 'pragmatism'. Now it may well be true that this is just what Namibia needs, that compromise of this kind will be in the best interests of the country and its people, considering that there is a conflict of interests here, and that the whites have the levers to protect their interests. But, let us not delude ourselves that this will be a meeting of minds. SWAPO would see it as putting socialism on the shelf, as postponing the redistribution of wealth. It would be surprising if this did not produce tensions within SWAPO. Its more militant members do not think pragmatism is anything to be proud of, since it means they cannot meet the aspirations of their people in the way they would like to meet them. Here we have the dilemma of the socialist in Africa.

As I remarked, I am not discussing the merits of socialism or the redistribution of wealth. It is argued, for example, that a simple redistribution of wealth would soon be dissipated and that what is important is not how wealth is distributed but how it is generated. Be that as it may. But if we want to understand what is happening in newly independent African countries — and Namibia will be the last classic colony in Black Africa — it is necessary to understand the strength of the commitment to socialism or, to put it in another way, the strength of the emotional rejection of capitalism as experienced under colonialism.

LABELS AND TRAPPINGS

I would like to refer to a comment made recently by Mr David Rockefeller, retired chairman of Chase Manhattan Bank, at the end of a 10-country tour of Africa. Asked about Marxism in Africa just after he had visited Zimbabwe, Mr Rockefeller said: 'The more I've seen of countries which are allegedly Marxist in Africa, the more I have a feeling it is more labels and trappings than reality'. The primary interest of the leaders of these countries, he said,

'is to improve the lot of their people and strengthen the economies of their countries. They are willing to accept help from any source to achieve it'. Mr Rockefeller said that dealing with Socialist or Marxist countries 'really does not cause us any problem at all. We do business with at least 125 countries in the world, governments ranging over the whole political spectrum'. He added that Chase Manhattan was the first Western Bank in Moscow and Peking. 'I don't think an international bank such as ours ought to try to set itself up as a judge of what kind of government a country wishes to have. We have found we can deal with just about any kind of government, provided they are orderly and responsible'. Chase Manhattan of course also has banks in South Africa and gives loans to the private sector there, and Mr Rockefeller defends this as he is also opposed to sanctions against South Africa. 'We don't feel our activities in South Africa are inconsistent with our sense of social responsibility', he said. There are two ways of looking at this. One is to see capitalism, and banks in particular, as cynical and concerned only with profits. The other is to recognize the contribution they are making to international stability by having all these cross-cutting links. In this sense, there is nothing wrong with the phrase, business is business. But Mr Rockefeller, I suggest, could have been a little more tactful to his hosts. To tell them that their socialism and Marxism are just labels and trappings is a little insensitive, to say the least. There is no need to rub salt into the wound.

Against this kind of perspective, it is possible, I suggest, to understand what is happening when leaders of newly independent black states talk about giving the land back to the tillers, restoring the mineral wealth to the nation, controlling the means of production, giving workers a share of the profits, all the phrases which we hear so often from black leaders and which strike such fear into the hearts of whites. When we look at the failure of new black countries to meet the expectations of their people, many of whom think political independence is some kind of magic wand that brings in the economic millennium, and we see the tensions and disunity that this failure creates in a new nation, and the way it reinforces old tribal divisions, then it is also possible to understand, although without excusing it, the immense pressures that build up on a black government to go over to a one-party state.

The problem whites face is to try not to overreact but to ride out the storm. This of course may not be possible — the storm may be too fierce — but once whites understand, sympathetically, the pressures that operate on black leaders, and the factors that motivate them to say the things they say and do the things they do, then they can see an historical process at work, and not panic as easily. There would be nothing heroic about another trek of whites back to the Cape Province. The whites should try to stick it out in Namibia and help build a nation, and they can do this if they have a more sympathetic understanding of the facts, rather than reacting so readily to the rhetoric. □