

REFLECTING ON THE STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRACY

A REPLY TO JOHN SAUL

By Ben Turok

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When noted Canadian academic/activist John Saul spoke about the “success or failure” of the South African liberation struggle at the University of Johannesburg recently, the invited respondents were Ben Turok and Albie Sachs

THE ARGUMENT

John Saul is well known for his many writings on the liberation movements of southern Africa. In recent years, he has focused on South Africa and particularly the African National Congress (ANC). He is a sharp and persistent critic with a significant following in academic circles.

His paper, “The struggle for South Africa’s liberation: Success or failure?”¹ asked if our current situation was “precisely the moment for South Africa ... to choose between ... the ‘exhausted’ ... and ‘failed’ nationalism of the ANC



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and ... the politics of ‘the working class and the poor’”. His argument developed the following points:

- that prior to 1994, the stage was set for “a capitalist-friendly ANC” to “settle the problem” of colonial apartheid through a negotiated accession to formal power – despite the belief of some that South Africa was ripe for revolution. He quoted Ronnie Kasrils’ assertion that, “[i]f we had held our nerve, we could have pressed forward without making the concessions we did”
- that the ANC and the South African Communist Party (SACP) were entrapped in negotiations and became crucial in guaranteeing a new post-

apartheid system of class power. Saul makes reference to Frantz Fanon’s view of former leaders of liberation struggles who became “intermediaries” acting “in their own class interests but also on behalf of capital”.

Saul’s main case is that a “new class” – “the national middle-class-in-the-making, the nationalist elite” – “represented by the ANC” gained power “on the back of the liberation struggle”.

TUROK’S RESPONSE

Many of us have been mulling over the transition to democracy for some time. I do not agree that the transition can be considered either a success or a failure. It was both. The liberation movement won some of its objectives – the replacement of the apartheid regime by a democratically elected government in a unitary state and a constitutional order based in equal rights for all – but it did not win others. Even on the main count of political power, the ANC modestly speaks only of “a democratic breakthrough”. I believe it was bigger than that, and even Saul acknowledges

that “overthrowing apartheid was a remarkable step forward”.

But the struggle had two main components: political power and socioeconomic transformation as set out in the Freedom Charter, especially (but by no means only) in its economic clause. There is now abundant evidence of a slippage on economic issues in the discussions that Thabo Mbeki and others held with representatives of the apartheid regime in the 1980s. I recall a meeting of the ANC branch in London where we were briefed on a proposed bill of rights for the Constitutional Guidelines document. The omission of socioeconomic rights was obvious.

This downplay of economic issues was in contradiction to the ANC’s 1969 Morogoro Consultative Conference view that the broad purpose of the struggle was “the complete political and economic emancipation of all our people and the constitution of a society which accords with the basic provisions of our programme – the Freedom Charter”. It was also against the position of the SACP (e.g. Slovo’s “South Africa: No middle road”), despite its strong presence in the ANC national executive of the time. So why did the ANC soft-pedal economic issues during the transition period?

The answer has yet to be developed clearly. It is hoped that ongoing research by Vishnu Padayachee [see his article in this issue] and Rob van Niekerk will provide the evidence once and for all. However, Saul’s suggestion that it was due to a “nationalist elite” acting as “intermediary” for capital is not persuasive. The leadership of the ANC in exile was far from an elite. It included working-class communists such as Moses Kotane, JB Marks and Joe Slovo and many other leaders who came from African township or rural backgrounds.

There was a negotiated settlement; that is a fact. But was it arranged between a conniving regime and a “capitalist-friendly” ANC? Or was it due to the threat of an impending

civil war that neither side could win or escape without huge cost? It is too easy to forget the crisis in the country in the late 1980s. In his 1985 Rubicon speech, state president PW Botha had insisted they would never give in to black demands. The following year, he declared a national state of emergency that was renewed in 1988.



I find Saul’s formulation of a political choice between “a failed nationalism” and “the working class and poor” unsatisfactory, but there is undoubtedly an urgent need to address the question of change.

Political organisations and progressive newspapers were banned, and activists faced indefinite detention, torture and death. While South Africa’s “border war” continued in Namibia (then South-West Africa) and Angola, the South African Defence Force now moved in into the townships. The regime also attacked ANC and MK locations in Swaziland and Mozambique – Albie Sachs almost lost his life in a car bombing in Maputo in 1988 – and the frontline states were forced to reconsider their support. Inkatha (with links to the regime) and the ANC were caught up in a brutal civil war in Natal. In the face of all of this,

popular resistance grew. It was met by even greater levels of repression and suffering. At the same time, the armed struggle lost an important mainstay with the collapse of the Soviet Union. A negotiated settlement had to come, and its terms were the subject of long and difficult debates.

There were also people in the regime who knew that this situation couldn’t go on. In his recent *Secret Revolution: Memoirs of a Spy Boss* (Tafelberg), Niel Barnard, former head of the National Intelligence Service, recalls his realisation that, since the police could not keep order and their political and military approach “offered nothing in the way of a permanent solution”, a negotiated settlement “was the best possible way”. And with the success of the ANC’s campaign to isolate South Africa internationally, Barnard concluded that “we should not hesitate any longer, because the scales were tipping against us.”

Both sides appreciated that an intensification of the struggle was not a feasible option. Was the move towards a negotiated political transition a sell-out by an intermediary elite? A failure of revolutionary nerve? Given the context, such claims seem ungenerous at best.

NEW MINDSET NEEDED

The argument about concessions on economic transformation is more interesting. Evidence is accumulating that in the early discussions between Mbeki and people like Willie Esterhuizen who were clearly flying kites for the ruling class, an economic transition was not on the agenda. This position seems to have persisted even at the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (Codesa) negotiating forum, where the property and sunset clauses were a guarantee against radical economic measures.

As the transfer of political power loomed, other cautionary pressures came from the Bretton Woods institutions and foreign capital. ➤



Photo: Yunus Mohamed

The ANC leadership was continually fed alarming data on the country's financial accounts. In his 2009 biography *Thabo Mbeki: The Dream Deferred* (Jonathan Ball), Mark Gevisser reports that Mbeki felt a "profound disempowerment" upon taking office. The new government was forced to acquiesce to the Washington Consensus on macroeconomic policy when it implemented the controversial Growth, Employment and Redistribution (Gear) programme in 1996. "Financial prudence" became the watchword of Treasury policy, and it has remained so ever since.

So what now? The ANC has been in power for two decades and is still the dominant force in the country. It controls parliament, the cabinet, the public service, the army and police, state-owned enterprises and many other institutions. I find Saul's formulation of a political choice between "a failed nationalism" and "the working class and poor" unsatisfactory, but there is undoubtedly an urgent need to address the question of change.

We live in a world where capitalism



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has shown remarkable resilience, and countries like China and even Cuba are diluting the role of the state to allow for the expansion of private enterprise. In South Africa, we have a private sector that dwarfs the state sector, large as it is. To overcome the apartheid legacy, the state will have to exercise its powers to intervene in the cause of transformation. (But we should also recall what Marx said

about the capitalist capacity to grow the means of production.) We specifically need to grow our productive sectors to create employment and generate taxes to realise the dreams of the Freedom Charter.

This requires a new mindset about the present conjuncture. References to the legacy of "colonialism of a special type" are wholly inadequate to guide us through. The need to transform remaining pockets of colonial relations and racism cannot override the need for a proper characterisation of the present economic system and its contradictions. Kgalema Motlanthe has offered the idea that the principle contradiction now is between the political power of the liberation movement and the huge inequalities in society. This seems a good point of departure, but it needs a rigorous formulation that will also be a guide to action. There is much theoretical work to be done.

I wish to conclude with some remarks about sources. Saul quotes extensively from cadres who withdrew from the struggle disappointed and discouraged and who may be tempted to review their experiences in a negative light. Such anecdotal views amount to "cooking the rice out of the pot" and their evidence should be located in historical fact to test their merit. [NA](#)

NOTE

1. John Saul (York University) presented "The struggle for South Africa's liberation: Success or failure?" to the UJ Sociology, Anthropology and Development Studies Wednesday Seminar on 5 August 2015. The full paper is available online at <http://www.uj.ac.za/EN/Faculties/humanities/departments/sociology/seminar/Documents/Seminar%20papers/Saul%202015%20Freedom%20Charter.pdf>

