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**Liberation Movements as Governments:  
Democratic Authoritarianism in  
Former Settler Colonies of Southern Africa**

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# **Liberation Movements as Governments: Democratic Authoritarianism in Former Settler Colonies of Southern Africa<sup>1</sup>**

Henning Melber

(Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation)

*Democracy cannot be build  
with the hands of broken souls.<sup>2</sup>*

Most revolutions have two phases. First comes a struggle for freedom, then a struggle for power. The first makes the human spirit soar and brings out the best in people. The second unleashes the worst: envy, intrigue, greed, suspicion, and the urge for revenge. (Michnik 2007: 27f)

Societies in transition and transformation, especially during radical changes from one system of centralized power and social control to another, show at different times and at different places despite the uniqueness of each and every case often also some noteworthy similarities. These might be more than mere coincidence. The opening quote is therefore deliberately taken from another setting, namely that of an Eastern European country and its experiences during the phases of transition after the collapse of the Soviet controlled bloc. One could also go back to the French revolution and its aftermath, or most other social transformations, especially when the process of change is accompanied by force and the use of violence.

The liberation movements of and in Southern Africa emerging as governments as a result of their successfully conducted anti-colonial resistance against the settler minority regimes are no exception. While also here each of the cases is unique, they also share some commonalities. This paper seeks to focus on some of these. By doing so, it also isolates these aspects of socio-political control as specific forms of governance from any of the relevant external factors, which in the first place at least in the cases of Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa brought self-determination as induced “controlled change”, resulting in “changed control”. The observations and arguments following concentrate on features of domestic policy and mindsets in the execution of the political power seized and do not engage with the external factors contributing to the political, social and economic specificities. By doing so, their influence is certainly not denied. Rather, the local agency and its form are at the center, without claiming that this is the

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<sup>1</sup> Paper presented in the Tuesday Research Seminar in African History of the History Department/University of Basel at the Basler Afrika Bibliographien (BAB) on 8 October 2013. I thank Dag Henrichsen and the BAB team for the generous hospitality during my stay. Parts of the paper benefit from a project proposal, drafted jointly with Eldridge Adolfo. It hence also includes segments of his intellectual property.

<sup>2</sup> Slogan on the web site of the Zimbabwe Solidarity Peace Trust established in South Africa by Zimbabwean scholars and activists (<http://www.solidaritypeacetrust.org/>).

sole and exclusive determining factor. But it is the rule under former liberation movements as governments, which had claimed the emancipation from oppression and exploitation when mobilizing the anti-colonial resistance. Hence those holding and executing political power and claiming this would be a project of emancipation should be measured against the (lack of) achievements in this sphere.

When presenting the opening lecture on 21 September 2012 here in Basel for a conference on “Negotiating the Roles of Liberation Movement and Ruling Party” organized by the university’s Centre for African Studies, Mamphela Ramphele did not mince her words. As she stated, “there is not a single post-liberation movement in Africa, perhaps in the rest of the world that has made the successful transition to democratic governance” (Ramphele 2012: 11). According to her:

opposition to a system does not necessarily signal a commitment to a radically different system of governance.

It is striking how many African countries have replicated the very colonial governance systems they purported to abhor. ... most liberation movements have failed to make the transition into credible democratic governance machines framed by the pursuit of the ideals of social justice that inspired the very struggles for freedom they committed to.

(...)

we underestimated the impact of the authoritarian culture we have all imbibed from our cultural and political history on our ability to challenge authority and hold our leaders accountable in a constitutional democracy.

... our humble beginnings as individuals born in poverty by and large and our lack of experiences of democratic governance and management undermined our capacity to manage the risks of handling power, money and wealth without being corrupted by them. (Ramphele 2012:2f. and 6)

In the famous and often quoted words of Lord Acton: “Power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely”. It is revealing, that this is a process, which seems to infect like a virus those involved. While spending the last few days here in the archives of the Basler Afrika Bibliographien, I came across the following self-critical reflection of Zedekia Ngavirue. Once a co-founder of the first national liberation organisation of Namibia, the South West African National Union (SWANU), and a social worker in Windhoek’s so-called Old Location, after Independence of Namibia as Director-General of the National Planning Commission a member of Cabinet, he retrospectively and after retirement recalled: “It was, indeed, when we owned little that we were prepared to make the greatest sacrifices” (Ngavirue 1997: 11).

Multiparty democracy as a form of electing and holding accountable national leaders as well as governing the state, has become the accepted norm in the sub-region since the ending of the last colonial minority regimes. Independence and self-determination were based on majority rule. Formal “constitutional” democracy has been embraced, which in principle provides a regulated and peaceful change of governments based on elections. Notwithstanding such provisions, the liberation parties in the post-settler colonies of Angola, Mozambique, Namibia, South

Africa and Zimbabwe have all remained in power since independence.<sup>3</sup> The form of democracy practised has been unable to dislodge the liberation parties in any of these countries. Instead, they have formed dominant-party-systems based on a *de facto* one-party rule. A key feature determining the political culture in all these states in various degrees is the consistent use of structural violence to repress and disenfranchise political opponents in order to retain power. Rudebeck (2011: 7–8) makes the distinction between constitutional, “minimalist” democracy “conceptualized as a form of rule characterized by universal suffrage, regular elections and basic civil rights and democracy conceptualized as political equality in actual practice.”

The use of structural violence in the sub-region, however, is undermining the development of democracy as political equality in actual practice. Scholars have been writing on structural violence ever since the pioneering analyses by Johan Galtung (who since the late 1960s pointed out that this kind of rule is by no means a phenomenon of less advanced political engineering, but rather a technique developed and fine-tuned in so-called advanced democracies) in various socio-political settings. They have viewed it as operating behind the façade of formal state institutions. Winter and Leighton (2001) refer to structural violence as

almost always invisible, embedded in ubiquitous social structures, normalized by stable institutions and regular experience. ... Because they are longstanding, structural inequities usually seem ordinary – the way things are and always have been. But structural violence produces suffering and death as often as direct violence does, though the damage is slower, more subtle, more common, and more difficult to repair.

This more sophisticated execution of structural violence is not practised in the Southern African sub-region, where the features of the structurally embedded violence manifests itself much more openly by a lack of checks and balances, weak institutions, practices of exclusion, a rule *by* law (as law of the rulers) rather than the rule *of* law, an absence of an independent judiciary, control over agencies supposedly tasked to act independently from the governing bodies and political authorities and so on.<sup>4</sup>

A recent example to illustrate the point is taken from Namibia, which among the five societies under liberation movements as governments ranks highest in terms of good governance in the annual Mo Ibrahim Index. It is widely considered as a success story in terms of civil liberties and democratic freedom after colonialism despite the fact that the Swapo Party since the

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<sup>3</sup> It should be stressed, however, that their trajectories were far from identical and most similarly mainly in the two cases of Angola and Mozambique, and in the three cases of Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa. This paper focuses mainly on the latter three cases. The continued destabilization by South Africa, to which the MPLA in Angola and the FRELIMO in Mozambique were exposed through the UNITA and RENAMO respectively, puts them – also in terms of the limitations with regard to any kind of democratic political culture – in a somewhat different context (cf. Krampe/Melber 2010). In contrast, the latter three all went through processes of negotiated transition, under which the controlled change ended in changed control.

<sup>4</sup> Again, the different countries display different degrees of these features. The South African judiciary has for example so far remained impressively independent, compared with the other countries, and the Namibian judiciary remains so far also to a large extent independent. Electoral commissions would be in contrast an interesting focus to see to which extent they are truly independent bodies or filled by political appointees.

mid-1990s reigns with a two-third majority. This overwhelming support among the electorate seems to have contributed to the perception of those holding political offices, that the party is the government and the government is the state. Consequently, at the last party congress held in November 2012, the newly elected party secretary general abandoned his previous ministerial rank and promised to devote his full time to the party politics. He subsequently was appointed as a member of cabinet without portfolio by the party president and head of state Hifikepunye Pohamba. The concerns raised by a scholar, at the University of Namibia's Faculty of Law, who doubted that this is in line with the constitution, was dismissed in the column "Zoom In" by the editor of the party's weekly newspaper "Namibia Today" in the following polemical manner:

"Some academics really enjoy obtuse theories. Others simply write for sheer egoism – trying to be seen clever than anybody else. That ego, however, is always driven by an unrestrained lust to provoke academic debates, however shallow such debates are, on issues affecting society. On many occasions, the arguments they advance are preposterously ridiculous and laughable.

In the process, they quite often churn out idealistic antics that send political scientists' heads whirl. Public Law Professor, Nico Horn, had a field day this week attacking President Hifikepunye Pohamba's sense of judgment and casting aspersions on his person as President of SWAPO Party and as Head of State.

He argued in a local English daily this week that President Hifikepunye Pohamba was "confusing the party with the government." The launching pad for his vitriolic attack was President Pohamba's decision to keep SWAPO Party Secretary General, Cde Nangolo Mbumba, as a member of Cabinet.

The President told Cabinet that what informed his decision was the urgent need to coordinate the implementation of government policies and harmonize them with resolutions passed by the SWAPO Party at last year's congress. The President made the announcement at this year's Cabinet meeting last week.

(...)

To cut a long story short, there is nothing scandalous or unconstitutional about Cde Mbumba sitting in Cabinet. The only scandal there is has been Professor Horn's pathetic understanding of the powers of the President as enshrined in the Constitution. He alone is to blame for his poor understanding and lamentable ignorance, not President Pohamba." (Ntinda 2013)

Such understanding of an all-mighty president of party and state, who holds the power of definition over what governance means and how it is best achieved in the interest of the party and its instructions contrasts markedly with the formal structures in place. After all, the five post-settler colonies all have more or less the formal and legal franchises of a democratic state: universal suffrage, regular elections, legal guarantees for national civil and human rights, the right to associate and organise as well as legal protection against the haphazard exercise of power.

However, these states all simultaneously circumvent these formal and legal aspects of the democratic state by using informal and shadow networks that are controlled by the liberation parties and their "party machines" (Southall 2013a) but exercised through the state apparatus to repress opposition to their position of power – a form of authoritarian governance and control, which can be classified as structural violence. This structural violence includes the repression

of individuals' civil and human rights, as well as threats to their personal physical protection in the sense of human security. It is perpetrated in the form of police brutality but under the guise of enforcing law and order<sup>5</sup>; systematic exclusion from economic gains through systems of patronage and corruption; repressive legislation and policy against the media, individuals and limits to political parties right to gather; and excessive presidential powers that overrule the democratic running of the state in favour of the ruling party. These liberation parties all have a symbiotic relationship with the state security apparatus (military, police, prisons, intelligence), and their leading officers.

They also have shifted their strategic alliances according to the changing nature of the operating environment. Originally rooted in popular support, they now are comfortable with parts of the previous privileged (almost exclusively white) elites as long as they are able to enter a pact, which suits their own interests. According to the late, long-time South African ANC and Communist Party militant Lionel "Rusty" Bernstein, in a letter written to John Saul in 2001, the origins of the limits of liberation were rooted in such shift from the emphasis on popular resistance to an agency seeking to obtain political power – and to keep it. This turned political activism "into a career opening to public sector employment and the administrative 'gravey train'" (quoted in Saul 2011: 111).

The hybrid mix of authoritarianism and democracy disguised as specific form of "nationalism and national projects" (Ndlovu-Gatheni/Ndhlovu 2013) has been normalised in the post-colonial settings. In particular Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa, had relatively well-developed infrastructure and economies and relatively well educated populations; they emerged or consolidated at a time when the world order had decidedly become (at least formally) democratic. The notion of "good governance" was coined as the guiding principle issued by the hegemonic Western world (Abrahamsen 2000). None of these liberation movements as governments have been seriously threatened by a *coup d'état*. These countries were better placed than most other African states in their transition to democracies that were claiming to apply political equality in actual practice. Why have they failed to make this transformation more credible and convincing?

A key feature in all these countries – apart from them being hybrid democracies to varying degrees – has been an appetite for more power and private self-enrichment through occupying the political commanding heights of party, government and state. This resulted in the willingness to also resort to the continued use of structural violence. These forms of structural vio-

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<sup>5</sup> Recent scandalous cases include the Marikana massacre in August 2012 near South Africa's mining town of Rustenburg, when the police mercilessly gunned down and killed more than 40 miners engaged in a demonstration related to a wild cat strike, which was termed by a prominent activist "liberation betrayed by bloodshed" (Ndebele 2013); but also the high treason trial against more than 120 accused for a failed secessionist attempt in late 1999 in Namibia's Caprivi region (in 2013 re-named into Zambezi). Imprisoned without a verdict since then and on trial for more than a decade, half of them have in 2013 been released, while more of those accused died in prison than persons killed in the secessionist insurrection (cf. Melber 2009c).



lence began in the colonial period and were perpetuated under newly emerging political rule in the post-colonial period. The “intimate enemy” (Nandy 1983) reproduced old mind-sets and practices in new disguise. The continued authoritarianism is reinforced and matched by an internalized subservient attitude as a disposition created under colonial rule. Let me quote from Ramphele’s lecture again:

The majority of black people suffer from an inferiority complex that is deep seated – both rich and poor are affected. The humiliation of being told in more ways than one that one is inferior is deeply wounding and infuriating. But the lack of self-respect engendered leads to inward direct anger – domestic violence, community vigilantism, public violence and other self-sabotaging behaviour, including looting of public resources and supporting failure of governance. Denial of mistakes and failure is a common feature of woundedness. Wounded people also tend to be subservient to authoritarian leaders and fail to hold them accountable. (Ramphele 2012: 11)

John Saul (2011) calls this somewhat polemically the “recolonization” under the label of “liberation lite”. However, it must be noted that structural violence is used in varying degrees from one country to another. For example, both anecdotal and more systematized evidence suggest that the degrees of structural violence found in Namibia, are significantly lower than those found in say Zimbabwe or Angola, with Mozambique somewhere in between and South Africa also politically engineered in a somewhat more enlightened way, at least relatively speaking and in direct comparison. But all five countries have – with the unequivocal support and camaraderie for each other – fought armed liberation struggles for majoritarian democracy, which has formed a bond between the liberation parties in these countries dating back to the 1960s. In all five countries, the liberation parties have remained in power from as far back as 1975 in the cases of Angola (MPLA) and Mozambique (Frelimo), with Zimbabwe (1980), Namibia (1990) and South Africa (1994) following suit. Thus, dominant liberation party states are an established norm in the sub-region. They are based on the liberation parties’ claim to being the only party to have legitimacy to govern the state, by virtue of its liberation legacy (see i.a. Melber 2003; Adolfo 2009).<sup>6</sup>

The following statement by the former Namibian head of state Sam Nujoma, who was upon retirement bestowed the official title “Founding Father of the Namibian Nation” by the party’s majority in parliament, is rather revealing. When addressing the annual congress of the party’s youth league in 2010 he ended his speech with the appeal:

As Namibian youth, and as Africans, you must therefore be on the full alert and remain vigilant against deceptive attempts by opportunists and unpatriotic elements that attempt to divide you. As the future leaders of our country, you should act with dedication and commitment; to always promote the interests of the SWAPO Party and the national interests before your own. It is only through that manner that the SWAPO Party will grow from strength to strength and continues to rule Namibia for the next ONE THOUSAND YEARS. (Nujoma 2010; capital letters in the original!)

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<sup>6</sup> Based on this common understanding, these former liberation movements have as parties and governments also institutionalised regular consultations and entered a separate agreement within SADC (the sixth partner in this “club” is Tanzania’s governing party). The alliance declares support for each other and meets ahead of the annual SADC Summit.



One does not need to be of any specific origin to react with shivers down the spine to such parole. Not surprisingly in the light of such tones, the literature on democratic development in the sub-region suggests that it has not been implemented beyond what Rudebeck (2002 and 2011) terms “democratic constitutionalism.” He describes it as “rule based on universal suffrage, regular elections, legal guarantees for free discussion and opposition for everybody, the legally recognized right to associate and organize freely, and institutional safeguards against the arbitrary exercise of power” (Rudebeck 2002: 174). He also criticises this “minimalist” form of democracy for not, on its own, being able to achieve the more substantive form of democracy as political equality in actual practice (Rudebeck 2011: 7–8). A variety of scholars echo this point and argue that while many political systems in African states are more democratic today, they lack the “more meaningful processes of democratization that aim not only at securing civil and political rights, but also socio-economic rights and the physical security of African citizens” (Lynch/Crawford 2011: 275; see also Pinkey 2004; Bauer/Taylor 2005; Melber 2009a; Posner/Young 2007).

While political parties are instrumental organisations that are indispensable ingredients for democratic development and modern politics (Bogaards 2000; Lipset 2000; Salih, 2003), analyses on the limits of liberation (i.a. Melber 2003 and 2009a; Southall 2013a) show that liberation parties that fought liberation wars against settler colonies in southern Africa, have tended to emulate their colonial foes once in power and continue to use structural violence as a means of governance (see also Dobell 1998; Chitiyo 2008; Adolfo 2009). Mehler (2007: 196) maintains that “in the case of victorious liberation movements ... ‘violent actors’ are the ones in power and their continuous ability to mobilise means of violence beyond any constitutional restrictions is an integral part of ‘the system’”. Indeed, already Fanon (2001) had in a chapter on the “pitfalls of national consciousness” warned more than half a century ago of the setbacks to proclaimed emancipation through post-colonial authoritarianism.

The particular tension produced by the legitimacy to govern as explained above contrasted with the absence of strong control over the adherence to truly democratic practices and forms of governance, is not – as stressed at the beginning – unique to the sub-region. But here it has produced specific legitimacies and heroic narratives seeking to camouflage or at least to justify the hegemonic rule and has led to the continuous use of structural violence against those that challenge the liberation parties’ legitimacy. The underlying general understanding is that seizing political power after a long struggle signals “the end of history” in as much as any future policy shifts in governance would merely reflect the changing power structures within the governing parties. A general, almost logical political feature as a result of this claim to exclusivity and entitlement is the intolerance to diversity. This can be traced back to the liberation struggles where the parties headed liberation movements with quite diverse members, but enforced a form of conformity by suppressing their differences and arguing that unity was necessary for nation

building once they entered the post-independence period (see i.a. Leys/Saul 1995; Dobell 1998; Salih/Nordlund 2008). Thus, to the liberation parties', used to underground behaviour requiring and demanding strict discipline and absolute loyalty, non-conformity, diversity and even mild criticism was seen as tantamount to betrayal of the "family" and they dealt with it as such by strict punishment of deviating behaviour (Suttner 2008). These continued practices have weakened further already weak opposition parties, who increasingly resemble the liberation parties in the sense that they are waiting to take the reigns of government to practice a similar system of political dominance (Melber 2009a, 2011a and 2011b). As a result, they hardly manage to convince the electorate that they would be a credible alternative for which it would be justified to take any personal risks of being branded as "unpatriotic traitor" or "dissident" promoting regime change for neo-imperialism.

With the exception of South Africa, which has a loud and vociferous opposition party in the Democratic Alliance (DA) and some other newly emerging party configurations, all the other countries do not have viable opposition parties able to challenge the dominance through parliamentary or similar means. The Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in Zimbabwe, while it had forced its way into a coalition government with the liberation party ZANU-PF based on significant (actually majority) support by the people, remains weak and is in decline; it is constantly on the receiving end of both structural violence (such as intimidation, destruction of their supporters homes under the guise of 'cleaning illegal settlements', restrictions to campaigning, exclusion from real executive decision making in government), and direct violence (including arrests, beatings, torture of both members and suspected supporters, kidnappings, murder); and is over reliant on the protest vote against ZANU-PF. Its defeat at the polls at the end of July 2013 in what is widely considered as well prepared election fraud by ZANU-PF has to some extent also been self-inflicted and marks "the end of a road" (Solidarity Peace Trust 2013; see also Moore 2013, Southall 2013b), notwithstanding the generous tolerance most other SADC member states – and in particular the fellow liberation movements as governments – have continuously contributed to the survival of ZANU-PF as government (Pallotti 2013).

There is a diverse but no meaningful opposition in Namibia (Melber 2010), while RENAMO and UNITA have both become relatively insignificant in Mozambique and Angola, respectively (Krampe/Melber 2010). Discontent among the electorate is reflected in the trend of voter apathy in successive elections since independence – to varying degrees – in all five countries. While the facade of a vibrant civil society is retained or fostered in the different countries, the structural violence continues to erode any real meaningful contribution these organisations can make to the democratic process (Melber 2009b). The sub-region is generally marked by the large security apparatus in all of the countries and by the symbiotic relationship between the liberation party and the top security officers.

Nonetheless, one should not ignore that these countries – as already repeatedly mentioned – have important differences. While Angola and Zimbabwe have extremely strong presidents who have personalised the presidency since 1979 and 1980 respectively, presidential succession has been continuous and relatively smooth in Mozambique, Namibia and South Africa (Southall/Melber 2006). Thus, engrained personal rule is not a feature of all these countries. Mozambique, Namibia and Zimbabwe have Presidents who are directly elected, while Angola and South Africa have proportional representative systems and the president comes from the majority party in the elected legislature.<sup>7</sup> The most important feature in terms of political contestation in these countries seems to be the inner-party competition, power struggles, factionalism and rivalry with regard to control over the party machinery. Decisions within the parties over succession and replacements at higher party levels are in most cases decisive also for issues relating to the government and state policies.

As another dimension, linking the socio-economic features with the political ones, the scramble for natural resources plays a significant role in all five countries, and their distinctive features relating to politics and economics. A key feature of the sub-region is that there is a very unequal power structure in which ordinary people are subjected to varying degrees of poverty, high rates of unemployment, particularly amongst the youth, and life in the expanding informal economies, yet they have little or no control over the abundance of resources that could substantially improve their everyday lives in actual practice. Corruption and networks of patronage persist in all of these countries with varying levels of intensity and closely related to the party machines (Southall 2013a).

While there has been a proliferation of research on hybrid regimes, most scholars have focused on its theorisation (cf. Poe/Tate 1994; Lindberg 2006; Bogaards 2009; Regan/Henderson 2010; Coppedge/Gerring 2011). The empirical work on hybrid regimes seeks to explain how they work and not what regime types they constitute, and there has been a focus on the West African region (see Reno 2000; Collier 2009; Taylor 2009; Utas 2012; Adolfo 2013). No real systematic attention has been paid to the empirically complex political practices that are manifested in forms of structural violence and their consequences to attaining democracy as political equality in actual practice, in the sub-region of Southern Africa under former liberation movements as governments. Their equation that the party is the government and the government is the state translates into a specific form of authoritarian rule.

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 favor 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. The late Dennis Brutus, a famous scholar-poet-activist, who in his early 80s lost the battle against cancer in December 2009, had been involved for decades

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<sup>7</sup> Given the dominance of the liberation movement as political party, in the cases of direct presidential elections the party candidates nominated are of course also the almost certain heads of state to be.

in the social struggles against Apartheid and for true emancipation. Already at the turn of the century he shared his disappointment over the policy in the post-Apartheid society. His words (dated August 23, 2000) remind us that the struggle is far from over (Brutus 2005: 87):

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.

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