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The Linkage Between African Americans and the South African Black Immigrant Community

By Chris Nteta

An understanding of the South African immigrant experience in the United States requires placing it within a context of linkages and alliances between transported South African blacks and the African American community. Like many other nationalities, South African black immigration to this country resulted from people fleeing the murderous apartheid regime whose national constitution and laws enshrined a racist ideology buttressed by a myriad of draconian practices. In this respect, South African immigrants were predominantly refugees and exiles on a quest for asylum. On the other hand, this group exhibits distinctive political tendencies which sets it apart from other such groups in the U.S., particularly those from “independent” Africa.

The confluence in the United States of this culture of resistance with that of African Americans, both sharing a commonality of oppression under racial capitalism, provided a terrain of united struggle and a foundation for a coalition of forces. This mutuality of experience and struggle between South African blacks and African Americans, I submit, constitutes one of the distinguishing features of the South African black immigrant experience in the U.S. It defines the close relationship and strong bonds that tie the two groups together. Born in adversity and nurtured over three decades of joint struggle, this struggle is the theater where the South African immigrant experience has taken place. The focus of this essay is to chronicle, briefly, the ways in which South African exiles forged links with their African American counterparts to mount a campaign to combat the U.S.-South African government axis, as well as to advance the cause of the fight for freedom and justice for blacks in America.

The “wind of change”¹ that decolonized and gave independence to African states in the post-World War II era and blew foreign rule out, nevertheless left the Southern Africa region in the throes of white minority rule. It is this struggle against the remaining ramparts of European imperialism in the decades of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s which shaped the experiences, engaged the energies, and focused the political attention of the immigrant South African community in the U.S. Coupled with the complementary nature of this struggle and giving it added impetus and reinforcement was the United States’ multifaceted support of the apartheid regime, consisting of



economic, military, diplomatic, technological assistance, and even ideological comfort. Corporate America’s contribution, consisting of four hundred U.S. companies in South Africa, was a critical pillar of support, perpetuating the economic viability of the apartheid regime.²

In South Africa the Sharpeville massacre in 1960, where 69 blacks were killed and 186 wounded, provided the catalyst for an increased flight of political activists.³ The declaration of a state of emergency lasting for months, the banning of the people’s organs of resistance, and the arrest and incarceration of hundreds of militants created such a hostile and dangerous environment that many left the country. It is important to note that this massacre plunged the country into a massive economic crisis. The stock market fell and foreign exchange holdings dropped while foreign corporations withdrew vast sums of capital.⁴ To stem the tide of this financial hemorrhage and rescue the faltering economy, some U.S. corporations increased their investments, immediately by \$23 million, while a consortium of ten U.S. banks led by Chase Manhattan and National City banks of New York provided a \$40 million revolving credit to South Africa. This was corporate America’s direct response to the Sharpeville massacre.

A critical development around this period in the U.S., and one which crystallized the alliance of African Americans and the South African immigrant community was the policy formulation of “constructive engagement.” A secret National Security Memorandum (NSSM 39), authored by National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, revealed the deep ideological ties existing between the U.S. and South Africa, a policy that condoned and secretly supported apartheid. It urged the U.S. to relax political isolation and economic restrictions on the white states (of Southern Africa), declaring, “...that the whites are here to stay and the only way that constructive change can come about is through them. There is no hope for

blacks to gain the political rights they seek through violence which will only led to chaos and increased opportunities for the Communists.”⁵ It was this flagrantly racist U.S. policy that greatly facilitated the emergence of a united front of South Africans and African Americans.

Initially the anti-apartheid movement in the U.S. was led and dominated by white, liberal groups such as the American Committee on Africa (ACOA). However, it was later rooted in the black community because African Americans decided to operationalize a principle enunciated by Frederick Douglass that: “The man who suffered the wrong is the man to demand redress—that the man STRUCK is the man to CRY OUT—and that he who has endured the cruel pangs of Slavery is the man to advocate Liberty. It is evident that we must be our own representatives and advocates, not exclusively but peculiarly—not distinct from, but in connection with our white friends.”⁶ This stance was critical for African Americans to adopt in order to work closely and effectively with blacks in South Africa. (White, liberal leadership would not have been effective in making this linkage.) This is a lesson that must be repeated today as Americans seek to develop ties with black organizations in Africa.

This is a lesson that must be repeated today as Americans seek to develop ties with black organizations in Africa.

There is a good example of the collaborative efforts of South African blacks and African Americans regarding this issue. The Polaroid Revolutionary Workers Movement and the Pan-African Liberation Committee (PALC) were two organizations that worked together for the liberation of South Africa, and reflect the bridges that were built. The former represents the Disinvestment Campaign, while the latter embodies the beginning of the Divestment Movement.

The Polaroid Revolutionary Workers Movement⁷

One of the most dramatic expressions of unity in action between black America and South African immigrants occurred in Cambridge, Massachusetts beginning in October 1970. IBM and Polaroid were two U.S. corporations alleged to be implicated in the notorious Pass System in South Africa by supplying the technology that made passes tamper-proof. A group of black employees at Polaroid exposed the fact that Polaroid had links with South Africa since 1938. This group, Polaroid Revolutionary Workers Movement, initiated a campaign against Polaroid by issuing a leaflet with three demands: 1) that Polaroid should disengage from South Africa; 2) that it should make a public statement in both South Africa and the U.S. confirming its position with regard to apartheid; and, 3) that it should contribute its profits to

recognized liberation movements in South Africa. Despite challenges by employees in the past, Polaroid had blithely continued to operate a lucrative foreign market that profited from the gross exploitation of black workers. Joining forces with South Africans and risking their careers and livelihood, these workers launched an international boycott that forced the company eventually to terminate its operations. This action had vast repercussions for other multinational corporations as they too, came under close scrutiny for their support of a regime that was fast becoming a pariah in the international community. Among some of the notable actions spurred by this campaign were the hearings conducted by the United Nations Special Committee On The Policies of Apartheid.⁸ The ANC and PAC endorsed this action, while the black community in Boston, in an unprecedented act of solidarity, donated a \$10,000 gift from Polaroid to the liberation movements in South Africa.⁹ And the staff of a key community-based organization, Roxbury Multi-Services Center, persuaded its board to return a grant from Polaroid, electing to take a pay cut instead.

The joint campaigns by African Americans and South African immigrants against Polaroid ushered a new phase of the struggle against apartheid and represented a quantum leap in a campaign, which by early 1984, resulted in fifty-one U.S. corporations withdrawing from South Africa. The galvanized black community in Massachusetts was to play a major role in such future campaigns as the Krugerrand campaign and the passage of the first-ever state disinvestment law prohibiting the investment of public pension funding in firms doing business in South Africa.

The Pan-African Liberation Committee

In the mid-1980s, nineteen states, seventy cities and counties, along with colleges and universities in the United States enacted policies of divestment against South Africa. The divestment movement targeted U.S. entities holding stock portfolios in companies doing business with South Africa. One of the largest of the educational institutions to vote to divest was the University of California system with \$3.1 billion in South African-related stock holdings.

The genesis of this movement can be traced to the Pan-African Liberation Committee (PALC) formed in 1971. The nucleus of this group was African American and African students at Harvard University who spearheaded a campaign to pressure the University to divest its vast holdings in companies doing business in Southern Africa, in general, and Angola, in particular. The Gulf Oil Corporation became the focus of this group. According to the Pan-African Liberation Committee, “Through its investment policies, Harvard University has exhibited a complete disregard for the human rights of African people by its continued economic support of the Republic of South Africa and the Portuguese colonialism in Angola and Mozambique.”¹⁰

In Spring 1972 the PALC engaged in a series of public activities designed to build support and raise public awareness of the University's investment policies and its complicity in the exploitation of blacks in Southern Africa. Among the most dramatic of these was an one-hour occupation of the first floor of University Hall on February 24 and the planting of 500 black crosses in Harvard Yard on March 6, symbolizing Portugal's killing of Africans in Angola. These activities culminated in a six-day occupation of Massachusetts Hall by some forty black students. The support and endorsement of PALC's act by the Harvard-Radcliffe Association of African and African American students and the black faculty, fellows, and administrators at Harvard was further evidence of the symbiotic relationship of African American and South African immigrants. These dramatic events captured national attention and triggered the beginning of what eventually became an avalanche of support for the South African cause: from divestment campaigns on campuses across the country to selective purchasing and procurement legislation at state and local levels, which banned goods and service contracts with companies with ties to South Africa to legislation prohibiting public pension funds invested in financial institutions with South African interests. The high point of this national effort was the passage by the United States Congress of selective and mandatory sanctions against the apartheid regime, contributing to its eventual fall.

Conclusion

This brief overview is obviously highly-selective in its profile of groups and campaigns illustrative of this joint venture of African Americans and South African immigrants. It is also limited, in large measure, to Massachusetts. The central theme however, remains one which we can never overemphasize. The presence of South African immigrants in the United States, their close embracing of the struggle of fellow African Americans and vice versa, created the conditions for the birth of a new society in Africa; and ultimately, the destruction of

the last outpost of white hegemony on that continent. In the same spirit of cooperative effort and continued solidarity, it is incumbent upon the new South Africa to use its good offices and to spare no effort in striving for the elimination of all remaining vestiges of racial oppression and exploitation of blacks in the U.S. To do any less would be gross dereliction of responsibility and a betrayal of trust.

Notes

¹Former British Prime Minister Harold McMillan, "Remarks in South African Parliament," February 3, 1960 in Peter Calvocoressi, *South Africa and World Opinion* (Cambridge, England: Oxford University Press, 1961), 45ff.

²"Apartheid and Imperialism: A Study of U.S. Corporate Involvement in South Africa," *Africa Today*, vol. 17, no. 5 (September/October 1970).

³Thomas Karis and Gwendolen M. Carter (Eds.), *From Protest to Challenge: A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa, 1822-1964* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1977), 332-344.

⁴*African Research Group, Race To Power: The Struggle for Southern Africa* (Doubleday: Anchor Press, 1974), 117. Also see "Partners in Apartheid: U.S. Policy on South Africa," *Africa Today*, vol. 11, no. 3 (March 1964).

⁵"The Secret U.S. Plan for Southern Africa," *Black Scholar*, vol.6, no.4 (December 1974): 44.

⁶Lerone Bennett, Jr., "Frederick Douglass: Father of the Protest Movement," *Ebony*, vol. viii, issue 11 (September 1963). See also the first editorial of *Freedom's Journal* (1827), first black newspaper in the U.S. which stated: "We wish to plead our own cause. Too long have others spoken for us. Too long has the public been deceived by misrepresentations in things which concern us dearly," in Lerone Bennett, Jr., *Before the Mayflower: A History of the Negro in America 1619-1964* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1970), 174.

⁷Chris Nteta, "The Polaroid Saga: An Experiment on Blacks in South Africa," *Southern Africa*, vol. iv, no. 3 (March 1971).

⁸"Special Committee on Apartheid Holds Hearings on 'Polaroid Experiment'," UN no. 6/71, (New York: United Nations, 1971).

⁹Another \$10,000 donation from Polaroid was sent to the United Front of Cairo, Illinois to help in its struggle against white merchants and law enforcement authorities. As Benjamin Scott, Chairman of the Boston United Black Appeal stated: "The meeting said that the quarantine of South Africa should begin now and that the Boston black community is willing to sacrifice in order to help get that started...This gift triggered an involvement of the Boston Black community in the plight of the Blacks of South Africa and incidentally the plight of a world that permits apartheid without resistance and civil war in Cairo without notice." See *Bay State Banner* (January 7, 1971).

¹⁰See Pan African Liberation Committee: "Harvard's Investments in Southern Africa," *Black Scholar*, vol. 3, issue 5 (January 1972): 28.

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