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75 years since the Nakba, the catastrophe for Palestinians

By Usuf Chikte

The Israeli regime is rarely described for what it is: a settler, colonial state that practices apartheid against Palestinians. Palestinians have been saying this for decades. Human rights organisations, such as Al Haq, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and B'Tselem attest to it.

The Nakba

During and prior to 1948, Zionist militias ethnically cleansed Palestinians from their native lands in the Nakba (catastrophe). They did this in accordance with their strategy to create a Jewish state with a Jewish majority, at

The upheaval resulted in the displacement of 750,000 Palestinians, destruction of 531 villages, and more than 70 recorded massacres against innocent civilians. More than fifteen thousand Palestinians were killed between 1947 and 1949.

The legacy of the Nakba is that about two-thirds of Palestinians became refugees. A quarter of those who remained within historic Palestine were internally displaced and denied their right to return to their villages, towns, and cities of origin. The Nakba of yesterday is the ongoing reality of today.

The Nakba is not a memory;

It is a continuous uprooting.

Mahmoud Darwish

Outpost of imperialism.

Israel was, from its inception, set up as an outpost of Western imperialism. Britain's military governor of Jerusalem captured this when he said Israel was to be a "loyal Jewish Ulster in a sea of potentially hostile Arabism". The creation of a Jewish colony in Palestine was seen, in part, as a way of solving the "problem" of Jewish refugees seeking sanctuary in Britain. At the same time it colonised Palestine at a time of growing anti-colonial (Arab) opposition to the British empire in the region. For the British, Zionist colonisation of Palestine became an important adjunct of British imperial strategy in the Near East. It bolstered their strategic influence and enhanced colonial plunder in the area.

The control of the Middle East was necessary for the imperialist powers to secure an important trade route and get a

hold over the sources of raw materials, such as oil and gas. It also ensured an important market for manufactured goods, a field for capital investment and a lucrative arms trade. In 1956, the Israeli military played a key role in the Anglo-French military operation to regain control of the Suez Canal, after it was nationalised by Egypt.

Military aid to Israel today is estimated at nearly \$4 billion per year. Describing Israel as a "strategic asset", Ronald Reagan commented, "if there were no Israel with [its military] force, we'd have to supply ... our own, so this isn't just altruism on our part". Joe Biden summarised the importance of Israel to the west when he said, "Israel is the best \$3 billion investment America makes", and "if Israel didn't exist, we'd have to invent one."

Acting as a garrison state, Israel has intervened on behalf of imperialism militarily in neighbouring Arab countries numerous times. It has also acted as a conduit for the US to sell weapons to countries and forces the US couldn't openly be seen to support, including apartheid South Africa, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. Although Israel acts in its own self-interest (as the sub-imperial power in the region), that self-interest is inherently bound up with the interests of the USA, EU, UK, and other imperialist powers. That's why it is characterised as a policeman in the area.

Israel launched repeated airstrikes in Syria and provides cover for the US and its allies who loot an average of 66,000 barrels of oil per day in that country. That's about 80 percent of Syria's oil production. This reinforces Israel's local sub-imperial credentials and emphasises its continuing relevance to the US as a watchdog state for imperialism in the Middle East.

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There is no shortage of politicians from the US, EU, UK, and their allies to describe Israel as the “only democracy” in the Middle East, “sharing Western values that make it a beacon of progressive politics”, in an otherwise despotic, authoritarian region.

Israel has indeed been a relatively vibrant democracy for its Jewish colonial settlers. But at the same time it has maintained a brutal regime of oppression over the indigenous Palestinian Arabs, including refugees. It is a “herrenvolk democracy”, for colonial settlers, according to Pappe, and a system of colonial fascism for the Palestinians.

Last year, Israelis elected their most brazen, racist, right-wing, authoritarian, sexist, openly corrupt government in history. This is not an aberration or an outlier. The myth of the liberal, progressive, democratic society is now shattered. Israel now has become a byword, internationally, for apartheid and Jewish supremacy.

Israeli government minister, Bezalel Smotrich, a self-declared “fascist,” supported the recent pogrom by fascist Jewish-Israeli militias against Palestinians in Huwara near Nablus: “I think Huwara needs to be erased. The state should be the one to do that.” Smotrich follows of course in the footsteps of David Ben Gurion, former Israeli Prime Minister, who supported the “wiping out” of Palestinian villages during the 1948 Nakba.

While Israeli apartheid is more ruthless and defiant of international law than ever, it has yet to be held accountable. In the EU and UK, the governments remain loyally pro-Israel, while criticism of Israeli apartheid is almost taboo. In the US, Democratic Party politicians find it increasingly difficult to square support for Israel with “liberal, progressive values.” Yet still they manage to endorse military aid and arms deals between the US and Israel. Like apartheid South Africa before it, apartheid Israel derives its power and impunity from the US and Europe.

At the same time, major cities around the world have witnessed demonstrations of support for the Palestinian cause and a clear repudiation of the actions of the terrorist state of Israel. The Palestinian resistance continues to expand throughout the Palestinian territories, including in the West Bank and areas assigned to Israel in 1948.

The weekly protests

There is also a significant internal crisis brewing within Israeli society that has intensified with the formation of a far-right government, led by corrupt Benjamin Netanyahu and fascist ministers. The draconian authoritarianism has far-reaching plans for judicial, social, and cultural “reforms” affecting Jewish Israeli society. This has caused outrage among many Jewish Israelis, who have taken to the streets in weekly protests. The protesters however appear oblivious that the real, overarching goal of this Israeli government is to entrench settler colonialism by accelerating the annexation of more of the occupied Palestinian territory.

These attacks on a sitting Israeli government from within the Israeli establishment reflect genuine fear that its “irrational” and “irresponsible” plans may expose the

foundations of Israel’s regime of settler-colonialism, apartheid, and military occupation to wider audiences worldwide.

The judicial reforms are also a matter of grave concern for the protestors who say they will severely undermine the country’s democracy by weakening the judicial system. This is the only source of checks and balances on the government’s use of its power. As far as the Palestinians are concerned, Israel’s Supreme Court has consistently been a pillar of the settler-colonial system that provides an indispensable “legal iron dome” shielding Israeli war criminals from international arrest. For instance, the High Court in 2021 upheld the 2018 Jewish nation state law, which declared that “the right to exercise national self-determination” in Israel is “unique to the Jewish people”. In 2022, the High Court greenlighted the forced expulsion of 1,000 Palestinians from their homes in Masafer Yatta in the occupied West Bank.

Investigate and dismantle Apartheid

In these times, given our own history of apartheid, South Africa has a political, ethical, and moral duty to stand with the people of Palestine who are having to face Israeli State terror on a daily basis. As was the case in South Africa during the Apartheid era, it is also our duty to stand with the Palestinian resistance against Israeli settler-colonialism.

In January 2023, a call was made for a Global Front to Dismantle Israel’s Regime of Settler-Colonialism and Apartheid. Launched by Palestinian civil society organizations and supported internationally, this global Palestinian-led anti-apartheid effort is directed towards activating UN mechanisms to investigate and dismantle Israel’s apartheid regime by mobilizing grassroots efforts.

Palestinians are now facing the worst onslaught of violence and ethnic cleansing under this extremist Israeli government. It is time to put these reports into action, to heed the Palestinian call and mobilise for a global Anti-Apartheid Movement, as we have called on the international community to do, in support of our struggle against apartheid.

A South African Steering Committee, consisting of representatives of Palestine solidarity groups, faith communities and the labour movement, among many others, has been established under the leadership of Reverend Frank Chikane and is working towards a launch Conference.

Let us heed this call for solidarity and action with the Palestinian people’s liberation struggle.

THE PRIMACY OF CLASS STRUGGLE

Struggle against domination and oppression takes many forms.

What has become known as “non-transformational struggles” refer to non-revolutionary struggles within the system of oppression in order to resist or overturn harmful or unjust acts of aggression on the part of the ruling class and their agents. A good example of a non-transformational form of struggle would be that of trade union efforts to improve working conditions or to defend existing worker rights, such as the right to strike.

A historical precedent from the era of the slave trade comes to mind. The record of the American and Caribbean slave trade tells us that “Distinct African ethnicities came together at an unprecedented scale within the New South’s plantation machine.”

. . . enslaved people . . . were brought from West and Central Africa, two of the most genetically, ethnically, and linguistically diverse regions of the globe.

Yet, these differences did not divide the enslaved people. On the contrary, “They made new families together and developed new identities.” Their bondage united them. As a manifestation of the culture of the poor and downtrodden worldwide, and throughout the epochs, they asserted their humanity in many ways; they

. . . organized their own internal economies of subsistence crops, which they grew on their plots and sold in their Sunday markets. A service economy also emerged whereby black people sold services such as herbalists, healers, musicians, folk artists, and artisans and banked their money in informal financial associations . . .

In addition to outright acts of rebellion, there were the more “strategic acts of deception and duplicity,” such as withholding their labour and dragging their feet, and finding subtle ways of damaging slaveholders’ property.

Two key features of living under oppression emerge, here. Firstly, the term “culture of oppression or poverty.” This refers largely to how people trapped within an oppressive system find ways to survive, to assert their own identities and humanity, and to undermine that system of oppression. The second feature refers to the concept of “reciprocity” – which “creates mutual recognition, mutual trust, mutual gratification, and mutual protection.”

June Bam’s book “Ausi Told Me,” is a paean to communities on the Cape Flats who asserted their own identities in the face of the crushing suppression exerted on local culture by (settler) colonialism. The book exams questions of how colonialism intervened between pre-colonial pasts and “indigenous identities in an integrated South African present.” Despite the invisibilising impact of colonialism, indigeneity (though bruised and battered) continues to assert itself in many ways today, and has become part of the “groundswell of the world indigenous rights movement.”

Insofar as indigeneity is a challenge to existing power structures, it is part of the freedom struggle in much the way that struggles for national liberation, gender emancipation, and human rights

(including the struggle against global warming practices) are struggles for deep, enduring social change. That is to say, they have a potential to bring about revolutionary outcomes.

But this is not automatically the case. As history has also shown us, these separate strands of resistance could as easily be diverted into reactionary backwaters; one need only think of how fascism and xenophobia, for example, are also expressions of social protest arising from discontent within the ranks of working people.

In the case of South Africa, we know that “identitarianism” has been a weapon used by segregationist and apartheid regimes of the past to divide and rule, and, that current-day politicians have no reservations about invoking similar sentiments for their own narrow purposes. One need only consider the utterances of a Gayton McKenzie who crudely remarked that he would not “hesitate to switch off a foreign national’s oxygen to save a South African.”

As American left-wing academic, Adolph Reed has observed: “If you are a non-racist but not at the same time a socialist, you are on the left-wing of neoliberalism.” In other words, you are not part of the anti-capitalist struggle, and are seeking to achieve your aims within what is arguably the most fundamental cause of oppression and injustice in the current era.

It would not be unusual to find dissenting views within the ranks of the oppressed about the goals, direction and priorities of struggle of disparate but equally oppressed groups. An example of such dissension is touched upon by June Bam in her book. She notes that the Unity Movement, “while dismissing the racist *herrenvolk* ideology and tribalism . . . created by colonialism, also pushed for a non-racial discourse that distanced itself from the indigenous discourse, with the use of the term ‘primitive’ in their publications being quite ubiquitous.” She does not elaborate further, but it is well-known that the Unity Movement’s uncompromising drive was to elevate notions of self beyond narrow group or ethnic limits to that of universalism. It was an unflinching effort to counter divide and rule, and to promote a universal humanist identity as a core ideal in the anti-apartheid struggle.

It might not be an exaggeration to say that, today, group identity has reasserted itself in the popular mind at the expense of universalism. Unless a critical mass of working class people across-the world see themselves as part of a class *for itself* – that is, as a class which prioritises class struggle over identitarian forms of

struggle – for so long will the struggle for a socialist transformation of society be on the back foot.

And, whatever their differences might be, our capitalist overlords and their hangers-on will have cause to rejoice.

NOTES

The section of the article dealing with slavery is largely based on issues discussed in Kris Manjapra's *Black Ghost of Empire: The Long Death of Slavery and the Failure of Emancipation*. (2022). Penguin.

Details of June Bam's book are as follows: *Ausi Told Me: Why Cape Herstorographies Matter*. (2021). Jacana Media.

SACOS and NON-COLLABORATION

It is fifty years since the formation of SACOS on 17 March 1973. In the decades particularly of the 1970s and 1980s SACOS played a seminal role in galvanising communities of the oppressed under the iconic banner of *No normal sport in an abnormal society*.

This year also marks fifty years since the massive strike-wave in Durban, when in excess of 60 000 workers across a range of industries embarked on protest action that led to the growth of a powerful independent trade union movement in South Africa.

The decades of the 70s and 80s were a period of great anti-apartheid turbulence, noted for the sustained pressure exerted by autonomous, self-organised people's movements, including bodies such as SACOS and the independent workers' movement. It was an era in which the weapon of non-collaboration came into its own, in which quisling elements such as the various tribal authorities and those who participated in the tri-cameral parliamentary structures faced massive boycotts.

This was an era in which the apartheid regime was recklessly going ahead and implementing its vision of a balkanised South Africa via its racist Bantustan policy. At their core, Bantuisation, Colouredisation and Indianisation were strategies for buying time for continued capitalist domination of the state under white supremacist rule. White supremacy was unworkable without the active collaboration of a quisling/sell-out layer to "work the machinery of their own oppression." The laughable notion of fighting for equality by accepting inferiority was rejected by the mass of South Africans, who demanded nothing less than total equality in a single non-racial democratic South Africa.

It is a matter of the historical record that for the ruling class, winning over the then-banned ANC was decisive in ensuring a "smooth transition" to a "new" South Africa. With the support of international capital and its propaganda machinery, the rulers were able to sell the fiction that the ANC were the true liberators, and that figures such as Nelson Mandela were to be lauded. Smelling access to the levers of power, the ANC and its allies were ever-ready to negotiate a deal heavily biased in their favour. However, for the

scheme to work, it was necessary to be rid of SACOS. As Mac Maharaj and Pallo Jordan say in their book, "Breakthrough"

Discontent with SACOS's stance eventually led to the formation of the National Sports Congress in the late eighties and a break with SANROC.

This opened the way for readmission to international competition for multiple SA sport codes, all of which had adopted cosmetic changes by way of concession to notions of multi-racialism (read BEE in the sphere of sport) in order to appear compliant.

Now, some thirty years later, the devastating impact of ANC-rule has been laid bare. The country has seen rocketing wealth for the few and spiralling poverty for the many. At the level of sport, specifically, we see that organised sport has become the preserve of the elite, while it has effectively been destroyed at a local, community-based level. Under SACOS, sport was autonomously organised through collective effort *by the people for the people*. In this era (misnamed by its apologists as the "democratic" era) what sport there is for underprivileged youth happens largely via sponsorships by attention-seeking businesses, such as KFC and the corporate social responsibility funding they are putting into youth cricket development.

In broad terms, a lesson which the whole sorry transition to this "new, democratic" South Africa endorses is that liberation administered from above and on behalf of the people is no liberation at all; such liberation's major aim is to preserve power in the hands of the elite. As Kris Manjapra in his book "Black Ghost of Empire" says, if emancipation is going to mean liberation, then it has to be *self-emancipation*, not the kind which was crafted at Codesa. In fact, he abhors the term "emancipation," since the governments of Europe and North America, "even as they eventually implemented abolition [of slavery], adopted measures

friendly to slave-owners and called these measures “emancipation.”

How different is our own “emancipation?” As in the case of Haiti, which Manjapra describes, we have been burdened with a huge debt, not incurred by ourselves – the people of South Africa – but by the former administration: an odious debt, which it should be remembered, was readily accepted by the incoming ANC administration. In order to repay this debt (and, as a Daily Maverick article commented: “in order to win the trust of global financial markets”) as early into its rule as 1996, the ANC government condemned us to auster-

ity measures under its neoliberal GEAR plan.

This is the result of collaboration: a satisfied layer of imperialist fat cats, a corrupt state for the ruling elite and their tenderpreneurial cronies to strip bare, and a pauperised under-class. In short, our constitutional democracy sanctions the plunder of the state by imperialist as well as domestic capitalist class interests. To seek an accommodation with them would be tantamount to assisting them in the perpetuation of these class interests – in other words, against the interests of the working class masses.

Here comes the sun (Its alright)

**Conversely
Its our time to chow
(I see a line like this
on morning television)**

**Here comes the sun
a new generation
we are next in line
to improve the performance
Of the ruling elite at the polls**

**Here comes the sun
its our time to eat**

**The time is now
We see a cash cow
Its our time to chow
Party faithful take a bow**

**Here comes the sun
Its alright**

**An old song goes to pot, as the
ruling party's youth bow down.**

**David Kapp
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Address all correspondence to the secretariat PO Box 27561 Greenacres 6057

Michael Steenveld

071 645 1590

mikesteenveld2020@gmail.com

Visit us at: www.newunitymovement.org.za